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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

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Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

Those interested in joining *The Analyst's* pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: <scornell@jhu.edu> and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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NEW STRATEGIC REALTIES IN BLACK SEA/CASPIAN REGION

Mamuka Tsereteli

The recent developments in the Black Sea/Caspian region indicate a dramatic shift in the geopolitical environment of the region. The reduced strategic ties between regional actors; diminishing U.S. interest and capacity to enforce strategic access to Central Asia through the Caucasus; and increased pressure from Russia on the entire region could ultimately lead to a different strategic picture of the region in the next decade. The new geopolitical realities have a profound impact on the development of energy infrastructure in the region, and more importantly, on the prospects of integrating the region in broader Euro-Atlantic security and economic system.

BACKGROUND: Several recent developments have substantially changed the strategic picture of the Black Sea/Caspian region. First of all, the region has been greatly impacted by the new policy of the United States towards Russia. The U.S. strategy towards Russia under President Obama appears directed towards greater engagement and collaboration on issues of mutual interests with the ultimate goal of more coordinated relationships and responsible policies between both countries. Russia's willingness to allow military cargos to be delivered to Afghanistan and Central Asia via its territory is seen as a success of the new policy. The direct flights over the North Pole from the U.S. to Central Asia may shorten the distance and time of delivery of cargoes. This development is seen as a factor that reduces U.S. interest in the alternative access to the Central Asia via the Caucasus.

Secondly, Turkey is progressing towards building its own center of strategic gravity around its periphery. This development was long expected considering the uncertainty of European policies towards Turkey's EU membership. The strained relationships between U.S. and Turkey during and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq also encouraged Turkey to

search for alternative strategies. Economic ties between Turkey and Russia are deepening, and several large scale energy projects are under way that will further increase trade turnover between the two countries, already reaching \$40 billion on annual basis. Interdependency between Turkey and Russia leads towards more coordinated foreign policy strategies that are not always in line with the interests of the EU, the U.S., or the smaller and relatively weaker and vulnerable states of the region. As Turkey is no longer willing to act as a security deterrent to Russian power in the region, these regional actors feel greater pressure from the Russian Federation to limit Western interest and presence in the region.

Finally, the major shift in the strategic picture of the region is the larger and more aggressive Russian military presence in Georgia after the war in August of 2008. Russian occupation of Georgian territories, including areas in very close proximity to the capital Tbilisi, creates an oppressive environment under constant threat of follow-up military aggression that also undermines the stability of entire region. Georgia's limited defense capabilities are no match to Russian power in the region, and the EU monitoring mission has very limited



capability to ensure the security in the areas adjacent to Russian military units. The events of August 2008 demonstrated that Russia is willing to use force against its neighbors, while the West is unprepared to provide active military support to its allies – going so far as to implement a *de facto* arms embargo on Georgia, while supplying Russia with state-of-the-art naval vessels.

IMPLICATIONS: These strategic shifts are impacting political dynamics in the region and facilitate the emergence of more moderate or even pro-Russian forces on the political arena of some pro-Western countries of the region. This trend is already visible in Ukraine.

New realities are also significantly impacting energy developments and have potential implications for European energy security. The current trends are not serving the energy security interests or integration purposes for either the region or the West. Responding to the Turkish delay on a natural gas deal,

Azerbaijan has signed an initial agreement with Russia's Gazprom on the sale of 500 million cubic meters of natural gas in 2010, and later adjusted volumes to 1 billion cubic meters (bcm) for 2010. Gazprom plans to buy 2 bcm in 2011, or as much as Azerbaijan is ready to supply, thus making sure that Gazprom's monopoly on supply of natural gas from Caspian region is maintained. Azerbaijan is a key potential supplier for alternative pipeline options for the so-called Southern Corridor for natural gas, but the lag in finalizing the supply agreement with Turkey is causing delays in the development of the gas fields and their delivery infrastructure. As a result, European dependency on natural gas coming from the Russian pipeline system will only increase.

Another dramatic development in the region with long term consequences is the opening of the two new natural gas pipelines from Turkmenistan: one going East to China, and the other going South, to Iran. The

commissioning of these two pipelines substantially diminished the chances for the Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and to serve as another key supply source for Nabucco. With existing commitments to Russia and plans to send 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China and 20 bcm of gas to Iran, it is difficult to see how an additional pipeline from Turkmenistan across the disputed areas of the Caspian Sea can be justified and commercially supported. The only chance for the Trans-Caspian pipeline to progress will be if the U.S. and/or EU decide to commit public financing to its implementation, but this is hard to expect in the current financial environment.

We are witnessing the weakening of the strategic ties between the regional actors in the Black Sea-Caspian region that have been built for more than decade around the energy and transportation infrastructure. These loosened ties between the regional actors are weakening the security and transportation system that connects the region to the West. The current commitment to soft power on the part of both the EU and the U.S. cannot match the assertive political-military and energy policy of the Russian Federation in the region. Turkey's new regional policy and the downgraded strategic interests of the United States in the region have allowed Russia to have a larger say in regional affairs.

CONCLUSIONS: The United States needs to reestablish its strategic interest in accessing Central Asia through Caucasus. The security, nuclear and trafficking problems of the wider region and America's ongoing military operations in Afghanistan should make this region a policy priority. The U.S. and Western allies can only at their own peril rely only on Russia for access to Central Asia.

It is also essential for the regional states to conceptualize the new geopolitical realities and adjust their strategies accordingly. In current geopolitical environment, no individual country of the region can attract enough attention from Western powers to receive guarantees for their security. A higher degree of regional cooperation and a coordinated policy towards key regional issues, as well as moving forward with plans for accelerated democratic, economic and military reforms to meet NATO and EU standards could be the way to attract more attention and support to the region. Under the new geopolitical realities, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Black Sea/Caspian region has turned into a long-term strategic project that can only be built on responsible policies and commitment to Western values of liberal democracy – a challenge that not all the regional actors are ready to meet.

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RECONCILING WITH THE TALIBAN: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

Richard Weitz

The main topic of discussion at the January 28 London conference on Afghanistan was the renewed coalition support for the Afghan government's reintegration and reconciliation initiatives. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other members of the international coalition endorsed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's call for national reconciliation. Seeking to weaken the Taliban insurgents by dividing the group's less committed members from its hard-core supporters makes tactical sense, but the initiatives entail serious risks that must be understood and reduced.

BACKGROUND: In his speech to the conference, Karzai said that "we must reach out to all our countrymen, especially our disenchanting brothers". The president set forth a comprehensive national reconciliation plan that included working with Pakistan and other potential regional mediators as well as convening a *loya jirga*, or council of elders, to promote Afghan reconciliation efforts.

Like many coalition members, Karzai sought to differentiate between reintegration and reconciliation. In the Afghan context, reintegration refers to efforts to induce lower-level Taliban fighters, who might have joined the insurgency to earn money or for other non-ideological reasons, to lay down their arms and rejoin the peaceful political process. Reconciliation entails negotiating peace deals with senior Taliban leaders who, for diverse reasons, might accept a compromise political settlement. Both approaches present various opportunities and problems.

Despite some media criticism to the contrary, reintegration involves more than simply giving Taliban fighters money to stop fighting. If this were the core of the program, then it would be a terrific recruiting tool for the insurgents since almost everyone would join their ranks to get

funded. Rather, the reintegration process involves providing jobs, vocational training, housing, and other benefits that would allow rank-and-file Taliban fighters to make a better living than they do now as hired fighters.

Inducing many rank-and-file insurgents to leave the Taliban is an essential objective since neither the Afghan government nor its foreign backers expect to kill or capture them all. To be successful, it requires overcoming several obstacles to their widespread reintegration. The authorities must be able to protect ex-insurgents, either from their former guerrilla colleagues seeking revenge or from government backers who still consider the ex-fighters their enemy despite their having switched sides. In addition, Afghan institutions, at the local as well as the federal level, need to be more effective since they must convert the foreign funding into Afghan jobs, housing, and the other tools of successful reintegration.

The problem is that Afghan institutions lack these capabilities. The Afghan National Army and Police are incapable of defending its citizens without foreign military support. In addition, Afghan civilian institutions, whether in Kabul or in many provinces, lack the resources and other capabilities to ensure that

essential public services are delivered. Karzai also acknowledges that public corruption remains a major problem. Citing these weaknesses, foreign donors tend to bypass Afghan government institutions and deal directly with local tribal leaders or other extra-governmental structures, which compounds the problem by limiting their contributions to building Afghan state capacity.

The issue of promoting an enduring reconciliation between the Afghan government and influential members of the Taliban is more controversial. The intent is to exploit the fact that the Taliban leadership is not a cohesive group; some might accept a settlement whereas others are too close to al-Qaeda. Karzai and Western leaders have repeatedly insisted that their reconciliation offer does not extend to al-Qaeda terrorists.

Although al-Qaeda and the Taliban are united in their desire to expel Western troops from Afghanistan and reestablish a strict Islamic government there, the two groups probably have different long-term goals. A Taliban government would not necessarily support Islamic insurgencies in other countries or engage in distant terrorist attacks in Western countries, whereas al-Qaeda would. The uncertainty is whether a Taliban government would give al-Qaeda free reign to engage in these activities from their training, logistics, and headquarter facilities in Afghanistan or would exercise more restraint than they did before 9/11.

The UN Security Council recently followed Karzai's wishes and removed five individuals from its international terrorist blacklist. All five had withdrawn from the battlefield years ago and therefore probably lack much influence with the current Taliban leadership. The plan now is to remove more names, but the problem

of ensuring the protection and profitable employment of anyone who defects from the Taliban still exists.

IMPLICATIONS: The mainstream Taliban leadership has publicly rejected the current overtures, as it has done with earlier initiatives. Shortly after the London conference, Taliban representatives demanded that all Western troops leave Afghanistan before they will engage in direct talks with the Kabul government. Karzai has sought to finesse the issue by noting that a peace agreement that ended militancy would bring about the withdrawal of all foreign military forces.

Another obstacle is the Taliban's refusal to accept Afghanistan's current constitution, which was adopted after the Taliban lost power. It embodies many liberal democratic principles that most Taliban leaders consider objectionable. The guarantee of equal rights for women is considered a major point in dispute. Many women's groups oppose negotiating with the Taliban for fear of sacrificing schooling for girls and other rights. At the conference, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled a Women's Action Plan for Afghanistan that sought to improve health and other opportunities for Afghan women and girls.

The Taliban could also imitate the North Vietnamese strategy of professing to accept a peace settlement and democratic principles in order to secure a withdrawal of foreign troops, and then resume their offensive knowing that NATO governments would not have the stomach to order the troops back.

Wavering Western will is already causing problems for several options. On the one hand, the unwillingness of Western publics to support an enduring military commitment in Afghanistan comparable to that provided South

Korea and Germany is sustaining interest in a negotiated settlement. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel announced an increase in the number of German soldiers assigned to Afghanistan, many European governments have publicly announced sharp reductions in their military commitments in coming years to appease their publics.

On the other hand, a lack of strong Western backing contributed to the failure of past reintegration and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. Support for reintegration antagonizes family members of Western soldiers who died in Afghanistan, while backing reconciliation initiatives upsets the victims of 9/11 who were killed by terrorists enjoying sanctuary in then Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Either move could also mislead Western publics into expecting an imminent peace. They will then become further disillusioned and impatient if no settlement is realized.

Coalition members have expressed greater support for Karzai's peace efforts as their military situation has deteriorated. At London, they pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to his new Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund. Yet, the patent Western war wariness has convinced many Taliban leaders that all they need do is sustain their military pressure for a few more years and NATO forces will leave, allowing the Taliban to overwhelm the weak Afghan National Army.

The risk exists that appearing too eager to secure a negotiated settlement could deepen doubts about Western willingness to stay the

course in Afghanistan, both among the Afghan people and in neighboring countries such as Pakistan. The Taliban has long sought to convey the message to Afghans and Pakistanis that they should not resist them because they will eventually prevail once Western troops invariably leave movement.

CONCLUSION: Breaking this vicious circle requires turning the tide on the battlefield. Coalition forces must apply more pressure on the Taliban to induce their members to defect and their leaders to negotiate. In addition, the enhanced number of NATO ground troops will reduce civilian casualties by decreasing the need for air strikes, which are often the cause of civilian casualties. Finally, the troop increase can establish the benign environment essential for promoting the social, economic, and other initiatives needed to strengthen Afghan state institutions. These programs range from the planned increase in Afghan security forces to 300,000 by the end of 2011, which will require extensive Western training and subsidies, to projects to create additional vocational and educational opportunities in unstable regions. The key issue then becomes who will win the race between the tenacity of the insurgents and the sustainability of Western military and financial commitment to the Afghan government.

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UKRAINIAN ELECTIONS COMPLICATE SOUTHERN ENERGY CORRIDOR

Robert M. Cutler

Viktor Yanukovich came first in the presidential elections in Ukraine, but Yuliya Tymoshenko has instructed lawyers to bring to the courts evidence of voting irregularities to put Yanukovich's margin of victory under question. Even if the latter is able to muster a negative majority to oust her from office and form his own parliamentary majority, he may be forced to call new parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, he has already moved on the energy front through floating new proposals, if not yet able to offer them formally for legislative consideration. The elections in Ukraine change the odds also for other projects in the east-west energy corridor from Central Asia and the Caucasus to Europe.

BACKGROUND: An international energy conference was held in Batumi, Georgia, in mid-January, originally planned as a high-level summit. However, the timing ended up putting it just before the first round of presidential elections in Ukraine, and very late in the game President Viktor Yushchenko decided not to attend, in order to pursue his ill-fated campaign. Other heads of state subsequently cancelled for protocol reasons, and the meeting went ahead as a preparatory conference for the postponed, yet to be rescheduled, high-level summit. This conference identified two priority projects for further promotion: the reversal of the Odessa-Brody Pipeline for oil (OBP, sometimes now called Sarmatia) back to its originally intended southeast-to-northwest direction inside Ukraine, and the international White Stream natural gas pipeline. The results of the elections in Ukraine and the current situation hold implications for both these projects, as well as for the Russian-sponsored Nord Stream and especially South Stream natural gas pipelines.

The White Stream gas pipeline proposes a way for Caspian Sea basin natural gas that passes neither through Russia nor through Turkey on its way to Europe. It seeks to route the gas across Azerbaijan and Georgia to Supsa, then

under the Black Sea, for delivery to the Balkan member-states of the EU, notably Romania (at the port of Constanta), and then from there further westwards. In particular, the EU feasibility study of White Stream projects that the gas pipeline, after making landfall in the Balkans, would extend overland to Italy along the route of the Pan-European Oil Pipeline. It would be possible for Azerbaijan alone to supply the 8 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) called for in White Stream's first stage: construction could begin in 2012 and the pipeline could enter into service in 2015.

The other project discussed at Batumi is the reversal of the OBP and its extension into Poland to the port of Gdansk for export by way of the refinery at Plock. At the time of its conception, the OBP was intended to receive oil from Kazakhstan through the Georgian ports of Batumi and Kulevi to the Ukrainian port of Kherson. The decision was taken to pursue construction in the absence of supply guarantees; the pipeline lay empty from its completion in 2001 until 2004, when another decision was taken to reverse the intended flow so as to take Russian oil from the southern branch of the Druzhba pipeline towards the southeast inside Ukraine. This pipeline inside

Ukraine was integrated into the Euro-Asian Oil Transportation Corridor (EAOTC) agreed among Azerbaijan, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine in May 2008. Under the concept endorsed in Batumi, the EAOTC would be implemented by sending oil through the Druzhba pipeline to the Kralupy refinery in the Czech Republic while the work was under way to extend the OBP through Poland. That oil (like the first gas for White Stream) would come first of all from Azerbaijan, as President Ilham Aliyev three years ago indicated its readiness to supply the crude necessary for the EAOTC project, including the reversal (or, actually, re-reversal) of OBP.



(Reuters)

IMPLICATIONS: During the run-up to the election, Yanukovich promised to seek ways for Ukraine to “participate” in the Russian-based Nord Stream (Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea) and South Stream (Russia to Bulgaria under the Black Sea) natural gas pipeline projects. This was, among other things, a reference to orders for pipeline production either by enterprises of the Interpipe Group (connected with his close associate Viktor Pinchuk) or, still more likely, the Khartsyzsk Pipe Plant (now part of the Metinvest Group, itself the major part of Rinat Akhmetov’s wholly-owned holding company System

Capital Management). It was implicitly part of the deal with Germany that German industry would receive an order for the manufacture of the Nord Stream pipeline (Germany also becomes Russia’s monopsonistic gas distributor in northern Europe), but the Khartsyzsk plant is also close to state-of-the-art, its pipes having been used for the Blue Stream gas pipeline under the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey.

Yet observers suggest that Yanukovich would not wish to see South Stream built, because this would decrease the throughput of gas from Russia to Europe. But it is designed to transit the Turkish rather than the Ukrainian sectors of the Black Sea, so he cannot stop it on that account. Therefore he has in the last few days revived the idea of making Gazprom co-owner of the Ukrainian gas-transport system, perhaps inducing Russia to decrease the market prices that Ukraine is now forced to pay, and also seeking to induce it to help modernize the country’s system. Given that Gazprom has little capital to invest even in its own modernization, however, this does not seem a reasonable hope. Perhaps for that reason, he does not also exclude the participation of European companies in a consortium still to be defined. (In order to do any of this, it would be necessary to amend 2006 legislation written by Tymoshenko as prime minister, and for which his Party of Regions voted at the time.)

Yushchenko signed a decree in May 2009 to implement the reversal of the OBP back to its originally planned southeast-to-northwest direction. In December that year, in the run-up to the first round of the election, Yanukovich predicted that the EAOTC would lie dormant, without the OBP being reversed, if either Tymoshenko or Yanukovich was elected. This

is probably so. Although the Pryvat Group behind the OBP supported Yushchenko and Tymoshenko together during the Orange Revolution, its principals fell out with the latter in 2008. Ukraine's original 2004 decision to reverse the flow of oil to west-to-east came only three days after a visit to Moscow by Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, but in November 2006 the latter publicly endorsed Yushchenko's new proposal for an extension to Kralupy in the Czech Republic, as a first stage towards realizing the Plock-Gdansk flow. Today, however, Yanukovich has no apparent reason to favor the (re)reversal of the OBP when the Adria pipeline (running from Croatia's port of Omisalj on the Adriatic Sea to Hungary) is itself a candidate for reversal to an east-to-west direction, giving the southern Druzba pipeline (running through Ukraine and from which OBP at present descends) a new export outlet on the Adriatic Sea.

CONCLUSIONS: In this fluid context, White Stream seems to be the major project in the EU's Southern Corridor strategy that has the best prospect for (relatively) unhindered development. One variant of this project includes the pipeline's interconnection with the domestic Ukrainian pipeline system en route to the Balkans. Yanukovich's presidency would make this variant unlikely; the project could nevertheless proceed. By the time Azerbaijan's gas begins to reach Romania, development of gas resources from Turkmenistan (offshore or onshore sites to be identified) and/or Kazakhstan (offshore Kashagan deposit) could make it feasible to consider additional White Stream strings bringing the project up to 24-32 bcm/y later in the decade, not excluding still further expansion in the further future. Its

advantage is that it crosses neither through Turkey nor Russia, removing both potential geo-economic bottlenecks. It is worth noting that the White Stream project was included in May 2009 (Prague Summit) as part of the EU's Southern Corridor strategy along with the Nabucco pipeline and the Italy-Turkey-Greece Interconnector (ITGI).

Competing with White Stream are various liquefied natural gas (LNG) and compressed natural gas (CNG) projects for crossing the Black Sea from Georgia. Indeed, Azerbaijan already last year signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Bulgaria for the export of 1 bcm/y as from 2011 with an eventual target of 8 bcm/y. CNG technology has not been used for such large-scale transportation before and its tankers are more expensive than those for LNG. But CNG does not require expensive gasification and de-gasification infrastructure. The Batumi energy conference in January discussed specific projects for construction of CNG terminals although not LNG. Industry analysts are currently at work calculating and verifying costs of transport, which will likely govern which technology may be chosen in the long run. In view of Europe's long-term growth in demand for natural gas, it is not to be excluded that more than one technology and more than one route are developed and implemented as time goes by.

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MOSCOW APPOINTS COMPROMISE CANDIDATE TO LEAD TROUBLED DAGESTAN

Kevin Daniel Leahy

The Kremlin has sprung something of a surprise by re-embracing the influential Magomedov clan in its efforts to bring stability to the republic of Dagestan. The head of this clan, Magomedali Magomedov, steered Dagestan through a difficult post-Soviet transition phase before finally being replaced in 2006. It is not entirely clear what lies behind the Kremlin's change of heart regarding the utility of the Magomedov clan. It seems likely, however, that this sudden volte face is related somehow to the Kremlin's failure to convince Dagestan's truculent political elite as to the merits of its preferred candidate: Magomed Abdullayev.

BACKGROUND: On February 8 the Kremlin took many observers by surprise by announcing Magomedislam Magomedov as its nominee to lead the republic of Dagestan. Magomedov's candidacy was duly confirmed by Dagestan's People's Assembly on February 10. Magomedislam Magomedov is the son of Magomedali Magomedov who led the republic from 1987 until 2006. The Kremlin would appear to be gambling that the younger Magomedov will be as politically astute as his father who earned a reputation as a conciliator and a discreet behind-the-scenes operator during his near-twenty year tenure.

The decision to appoint Magomedov signalled an end to a protracted presidential vetting process in Moscow. In November 2009 President Dmitri Medvedev was presented by Boris Gryzlov, a leading figure in the United Russia party, with a list of five candidates, including Magomedislam Magomedov. Of the five names on this list, most media attention centred on Magomed Abdullayev, a deputy prime minister in Dagestan's government. When Abdullayev was dispatched to Makhachkala last autumn to advise President Mukhu Aliyev, numerous observers speculated that he was being groomed by Medvedev to

replace Aliyev. Medvedev and Abdullayev are known to one another from their time as students in the faculty of law in St. Petersburg University in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Medvedev's chief of staff, Sergei Naryshkin, was reportedly a strong advocate of Abdullayev's candidacy.

Abdullayev's supporters highlighted his independence from the clan system that underpins Dagestan's political structure. As an 'outsider', it was argued, Abdullayev would be well positioned to mediate among Dagestan's competing clans as an honest broker. Other political commentators cast doubt on the suitability of Abdullayev's candidacy, however, pointing out that a career spent entirely in the cloistered world of academia did not in any way prepare him for the ruthless nature of Dagestani politics.

Ultimately, it was this lack of managerial experience, not any deficit of high-level political support in Moscow, which caused him to be overlooked in favor of Magomedov. Mukhu Aliyev was also on Gryzlov's list but was evidently not the Kremlin's preferred choice. Aliyev, it would seem, had damaged his prospects of securing a second term by resisting Moscow's appointment of an ethnic Russian as

the republic's chief tax inspector early last year. Aliyev had also reportedly quarrelled with a senior member of the Russian cabinet and had failed to prevent the embarrassing debacle surrounding the municipal elections in Derbent last October. Even so, there was speculation that the Kremlin, concerned about Abdullayev's inexperience, might turn to Aliyev as a compromise candidate. Instead, Medvedev opted for another compromise candidate, Magomedshah Magomedov, holder of a PhD in Economics and a former speaker of Dagestan's Peoples Assembly. But how strong are Magomedov's credentials for this post and what challenges will he face in his capacity as president?

IMPLICATIONS: Magomedov's appointment will affect the ethno-political balance of Dagestan's political system. Whereas Aliyev was an ethnic Avar, Dagestan's largest ethnic group, the 45-year old Magomedov is an ethnic Dargin. Under Aliyev, the role of chairman of the People's Assembly was given to a Dargin, while the post of prime minister was delegated to an ethnic Kumyk. Because it would be unacceptable to other ethnic constituencies to have representatives of the Dargin community occupying the two senior-most political positions in the republic, the role of parliamentary speaker will be assigned to a politician of a different ethnic heritage, most likely an Avar.

In this context, it should be noted that Magomed Abdullayev is an ethnic Avar; although managing Dagestan's fractious, poly-ethnic parliament is arguably a more burdensome task than fulfilling the role of president. This is not to trivialize the job facing President Magomedov. Apart from Dagestan's underperforming economy, Magomedov is

faced with a rebel insurgency that is becoming increasingly assertive.

On January 6 a suicide bomber killed seven policemen and injured twenty in an attack on a traffic police station in Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital city. 'They should simply be eliminated,' said President Medvedev, referring to the perpetrators of such attacks, 'it [the process of elimination] should be done firmly and systematically, that is to say regularly... because underground banditry, unfortunately, still exists.'

Led by the so-called 'Jamaat Sharia', an organization which fights under the banner of Doku Umarov's Caucasus Emirate, rebel forces have consistently targeted representatives of the pro-Moscow administration, including policemen and politicians. Indeed, there has been a marked escalation in rebel activity in recent months as Dagestan's elite found itself preoccupied with the prolonged presidential contest. Magomedov will also be faced with a particularly tense situation in the Caspian port city of Derbent.

In October 2009 an election to choose the mayor of Derbent degenerated into a dangerous standoff between the supporters of two rival candidates amid accusations of intimidation and electoral fraud. The principals in this ongoing controversy are Felix Kaziahmedov, mayor of Derbent since 2000, and Imam Yaraliyev, a former prosecutor general of Dagestan. Both are ethnic Lezgins. Yaraliyev cried foul on the day of the election when electoral officials failed to turn up at fourteen of the thirty-six designated polling stations.

There were also reports of police using intimidation and violence to deter citizens from voting. Although Kaziahmedov was declared the winner, Dagestani courts have annulled the

results of the election – a decision publicly welcomed by Medvedev – and fresh elections are scheduled for October 2010. Resolving this standoff will be a priority for President Magomedov. However, such is the animus between Kaziahmedov and Yaraliyev that the president will be obliged to bring all his reported powers of conciliation to bear in order to defuse this row.

CONCLUSIONS: Magomedsalam Magomedov stands at the head of one of the most powerful clans in Dagestan. His father's legacy gives him access to an abundance of contacts that extend to representatives of every ethnic constituency at every level of Dagestani politics. These contacts will serve him well in his efforts to preserve the republic's precarious ethno-political balance. However, it is difficult to dispel the impression that Magomedov is not the Kremlin's ideal choice to lead the republic. The rapid political advancement of Magomed Abdullayev since his return to Dagestan in 2009, coupled with the impressive list of

Moscow power-brokers reputed to be well-disposed toward him, suggest that Abdullayev's candidacy was the subject of serious deliberation in the Kremlin.

In the final analysis, it was probably Abdullayev's lack of political experience that militated against him; entrusting this strategically significant republic to someone so inexperienced was deemed to be too great a risk – at least for now. A spell in the speaker's chair, or perhaps in some prominent government post, would raise Abdullayev's profile and broaden his political experience. Come the end of Magomedov's first term, perhaps Abdullayev, still only 48, will represent a more realistic presidential contender in the eyes of his countrymen.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Kevin Daniel Leahy holds a postgraduate degree from University College Cork, Ireland.



New Book:

The Guns of August 2008

Edited By Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr

M.E. Sharpe, New York, June 2009,
290pp

This book is designed to present the facts about the events of August 2008 along with comprehensive coverage of the background to those events. It brings together a wealth of expertise on the South Caucasus and Russian foreign policy, with contributions by Russian, Georgian, European, and American experts on the region.

FIELD REPORTS

FORMER KYRGYZ DEFENSE MINISTER SENTENCED TO EIGHT YEARS IN PRISON

Joldosh Osmonov

On January 11, former Kyrgyz Defense Minister Ismail Isakov was sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment. In addition, he was deprived of his General's rank and obliged to pay a heavy fine. Isakov was found guilty of the illegal transfer of one of the ministry's apartments to his son's ownership while heading the office. At the same time, the Bishkek Military Court freed Isakov on other two charges – the illegal selling of written-off military hardware and embezzlement of budget funds. Isakov has already appealed against the sentence at the Republican Military Court.

The former General denies his guilt and believes that the court's decision is politically motivated. "The prosecution started after I wrote a letter to the President where I pointed out the main problems in the country, such as rising corruption and strengthening authoritarianism, and criticized him for his unwillingness to live up to the people's expectations after the revolution in 2005. With no response from the President, I had no alternative but to resign", Isakov stated.

It is notable that the nine-month trial ensued after Isakov resigned from the post of Security Council Secretary. Shortly after, he joined the opposition and became a harsh critic of President Bakiev.

The ex-minister's lawyers argue that the former minister was not aware that the two-room apartment was given to his son illegally and made him return it after publications on the matter in local newspapers. The apartment was returned to the ministry in 2007, the lawyers say.

Ruslan Isakov, the former minister's son, in turn, claims he was on the list of military officers waiting to be awarded an apartment. "I received the apartment as a captain of the Kyrgyz Army, not because of my father" he stated to the Azattyk (Freedom) News Agency. Ruslan Isakov was discharged from the army after his father's resignation. From abroad, he recently announced the creation of a political movement against the current regime.

Ismail Isakov was among Bakiev's closest allies of for a long time. After the so-called Tulip revolution in March 2005, he was appointed Defense Minister. During his three years as minister he was completely loyal to the existing regime. Many politicians and experts note that during this period, the ex-minister was able to implement significant positive changes in the ministry, improving both the army's fighting capacity and the conditions for military personnel. An opposition leader in exile, Edil Baisalov, has described Isakov as "the best defense minister since the country's independence". In 2008, Isakov became Secretary of the Security Council, but resigned shortly after.

After the court's decision, the United Opposition Movement (UOM) issued a statement saying the charges were trumped-up and politically motivated. The movement called upon the authorities to discharge the former minister and stop the political persecution of other opponents. In an interview, the chairman of the UOM Almazbek Atambaev stated that the judge was ordered to give such a verdict by "the Bakiev family". The leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party in Parliament Roza

Otunbaeva added that “the whole court case with its logical ending” was a “show trial for the regime’s opponents”.

In the meantime, a Committee for the Protection of Isakov was created by his supporters. On January 13, some members of the committee, mostly Isakov’s relatives, announced a political hunger strike demanding the release of the former minister. After more than two weeks, the hunger strikers, whose numbers have changed over time – new people joining and others quitting – are simply ignored by the authorities. The chairman of the committee, opposition leader Topchubek Turgunaliyev claims that if the President continues ignoring their demands, the opposition will be forced to use “other means”. However, he refused to explain what “other means” he referred to.

Moreover, as the verdict was announced, mass protests took place in the ex-minister’s hometown Sopol Korgon in southern Kyrgyzstan, followed by a

blocking of the strategic highway Irkeshtam-Osh, connecting the south of Kyrgyzstan with the Xinjiang province in China. After unsuccessful negotiation attempts with local officials, police dispersed the crowd and opened the highway. Later, police officials informed that criminal proceedings were opened against the protesters under charges of “hooliganism”.

Despite the pressure exerted by the authorities, Isakov’s supporters assure that mass protests and hunger strikes will start in other regions of the country. However, according to political experts, these “methods” will fail to cause serious political unrest in the country. Political analyst Alexander Knyazev stated that such protests in support of a single person are doomed to failure in mobilizing the masses. Nevertheless, Isakov’s imprisonment could become a factor in raising public discontent, the expert concluded.

ARTIST SENTENCED FOR DEFAMING THE UZBEK NATION

Erkin Akhmadov

Umida Ahmedova is a documentary photographer and Uzbekistan’s first camerawoman. In the end of 2009, she was charged with insult and defamation of the Uzbek nation on the basis of some of her works. Ahmedova went through a trial, where she was found guilty on all charges. The incident received wide publicity domestically in Uzbekistan, as well as internationally. This is a likely reason why the artist was granted an amnesty and released.

The Uzbek Agency on Publications and Information filed a lawsuit against Ahmedova as part of the criminal cases against all the authors who cooperated with the “Gender Program of the Swiss Embassy” in the end of 2009. The artist’s photo album called “Women and Men: From Sunrise to Dawn” was published in 2007 with the support of the “Gender Program of the Swiss Embassy”, containing 110 photos that reflect

different aspects of people’s lives in Uzbekistan. She also produced a documentary movie called “Burden of Virginity”, which showed the life of Uzbek girls in rural areas of the country.

Ahmedova was charged with crimes under two articles of the Criminal Code: article 139 on “defamation due to mercenary or other vile motives” and article 140 on “insult in printed or otherwise multiplied text or in the mass media”. The former stipulates imprisonment for up to three years, the latter a fine of up to four hundred minimum wages or correctional works for one to two years. The court trial took place on February 9, 2010. The photographer was found guilty under both of the articles. However, as the court took into consideration the fact that Ahmedova is a mother of three children, her marital status and positive characteristics, as well as and the absence of

previous convictions, she was immediately granted amnesty.

In accordance with a statement from the Center for Monitoring in the Sphere of Mass Communications under the Information and Communication Agency of Uzbekistan on May 19, 2009, it was established that the author of the photo collection "Women And Men: From Sunrise to Dawn" together with the authors of documentaries like "Burden of Virgnitiy" and "Women and Men in Customs and Rituals" directed by Ahmedova and her husband, Oleg Karpov, have insulted the Uzbek people with their non-scientific and inappropriate commentaries that contain a hidden subtext directed at discrediting the customs and traditions of the Uzbek people, inappropriate information that may negatively affect the moral values of young people. In light of this, the works of Ahmedova are therefore viewed as expressing a defaming, disdainful and disrespectful attitude to Uzbek traditions.

However, the album mainly contains photos depicting remote regions, rural and mountainous areas of the country. Only some photos show city life. The photos dedicated to gender issues mainly depict women, children, men and elderly people that live in rural areas, with some images of wedding ceremonies, competitions, houses, markets, mountains and fields, common public places and streets.

The Information and Communication Agency apparently did not interpret these images as representing different aspects of life, but as an

attempt by the author to make a series of thematic photos that would be in line with a certain topic. Thus, representatives of the Agency assume that in her works, the artist provided a subjective, distorted view of reality, emphasizing the poor conditions in which people depicted in the photos live.

After Ahmedova's trial on February 11, picketing took place in front of the diplomatic missions of Uzbekistan in Moscow and Paris. In Moscow, the majority of the demonstrators were artists, photographers, film directors and journalists that wanted to express their discontent with Ahmedova's sentence. In Paris, most of the demonstrators were human rights activists.

The international NGO Reporters without Borders called Ahmedova's sentence "hypocritical". The organization's experts note that her verdict could become a very dangerous precedent, if artists can be accused of defamation and insult of a nation. Meanwhile, the photographer's lawyer, Sergey Mayorov, still requests the court to reach a verdict of not guilty for the lack of constituent elements of offence. Together with his client, Mayorov intends to appeal to the Tashkent City Court. The outcome of Ahmedova's case may be considered a fortunate and unfortunate at the same time. On the one hand, she was not imprisoned. On the other, however, one of the most talented artists in Uzbekistan was sentenced for a very serious crime. In broader terms, however, Ahmedova's case may indicate that the state is seeking to control and manipulate a new sphere of human life – that of art.

GEORGIA OFERS ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO AFGHANISTAN

Maka Gurgenzidze

Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili voiced the proposal for Georgia is to become a logistical hub for NATO's Afghanistan mission in a phone interview with the Associated Press on January 29th.

This represents a second attempt on Saakashvili's part to create a corridor via Georgia and Central Asia to Afghanistan for Western military shipments by opening the country's Black Sea ports and airports to NATO warplanes and naval vessels.

The Georgian plan expects NATO ships to cross the Black Sea to its ports, loading their cargo onto trains bound for Azerbaijan, and from there shipped across the Caspian Sea and driven across Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in freight trucks. Tbilisi also offers refueling facilities for NATO cargo planes at its airports. The proposal has not attracted any substantial responses either from Brussels or the Pentagon since it was first voiced in February 2009. For now, Pakistan remains a major supply route, allowing NATO to ship more than 2,000 containers per month into Afghanistan.

The other option envisages transportation of nonlethal cargo by railway, connecting the Baltic States to Afghanistan via Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Though this route is considerably longer, it is also more secure, averting Pakistan's Khyber Pass and potential Taliban attacks.

In addition to these two complementary transit routes, the U.S. last year sealed an agreement with Russia foreseeing the transit of lethal military equipment through Russian airspace to Afghanistan. However, in spite of a predicted 4,000 flights a year, only a few shipments have so far been allowed.

Stemming from this, it could be assumed that the Georgian offer would contribute to the development of new supply lines that do not cross Russia. However, whether Georgia's infrastructure and logistical facilities are capable of carrying the bulk of NATO lethal cargo and how the combination of mixed transport means (seaports, trains and freight trucks) will reflect on expenses, is a different question. At first glance, it does not seem that a route via Georgia would be more viable or cheaper than the already existing Northern routes. Nevertheless, against this argument some Georgian officials and independent analysts claim that a considerable part of NATO shipments has already transited Georgia due to protracted negotiations with Russia over the transit issue and Russian unwillingness to fully comply with previous agreements.

Saakashvili's revival of the transit issue is thus intended to increase the political significance of the

route. But U.S. considerations on this issue are both political and technical. In this regard, the absence of first-class infrastructure in Georgia gives rise to several logistical hurdles, while the mixed means of transportation makes the route expensive and still will not imply the exclusion of Russia from U.S. Afghanistan strategy. Besides, due to the ongoing U.S. "reset policy" with Russia, the U.S. is likely to avoid irritating the Kremlin, hoping that the Northern route will be fully opened for NATO cargo.

What kind of dividends does the Georgian leadership seek by raising the issue, especially if Georgian Seaports and airports have already been open for the Alliance to the extent that Georgian infrastructural capacities allow?

Some experts presume that by revitalizing the question, Saakashvili is seeking to boost Georgia's significance as a NATO partner and its perspectives of future membership. This is obviously connected to Georgia's contribution of about 1,000 troops to Afghanistan, representing the highest per capita-troop contribution to the conflict zone among NATO members and partner countries.

While Georgia's NATO aspirations are essential, its immediate intentions are more straightforward. First, Saakashvili explains Georgia's devotion to the Afghanistan mission by saying that the sooner the terrorist threat is neutralized, the quicker the U.S. will be able to substantially protect Georgia. Second, through raising the transportation issue, Saakashvili seeks to demonstrate that Russia is not interested in a NATO success in Afghanistan, having prolonged the fulfillment of the transit deal. The expectation seems to be that NATO's serious consideration of an alternative transportation route will either push Russia to cooperate with the Alliance or indicate that a reset of U.S.-Russia relations is a waste of time. A third and more important reason for the proposal is that the Georgian government seeks an increased NATO presence on the Black Sea, which it perceives as the easiest and perhaps only way to restrain new Russian interventions in Georgia.

Zurab Nogaideli, former Georgian PM and leader of Movement for Fair Georgia, recently launched open consultations with Russian PM Vladimir Putin, which resulted in a cooperation agreement between Fair Georgia and Russia's ruling party United Russia. While Fair Georgia is a small party, the government is concerned that Russia will seek to destabilize Georgia through utilizing the

country's continuous severe political divisions. In order to reduce the risk of Russian military provocations, Georgia hopes to increase the NATO presence in the region as much as possible. This approach is backed by the government's belief that the U.S. naval presence in Black Sea prevented Russian troops from moving on Tbilisi during the August war in 2008.

TAJIKISTAN-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS FREEZE OVER ROGHUN PROJECT

Suhrob Majidov

On February 3, Tajikistan's Prime Minister Akil Akilov received a letter from his Uzbek counterpart Shavkat Mirziyoev, who requested the Tajik Government to reconsider its construction of the Roghun hydropower station. The Government of Uzbekistan insists that an international and independent assessment of the Roghun construction project should be conducted, and is concerned that the Roghun project may entail disastrous consequences for the entire region.

It should be recalled that the Roghun hydropower station is an incomplete Soviet era construction project on Tajik territory. The project was frozen following the collapse of the Soviet Union due to insufficient funding, but was reinvigorated in 2007. According to the original blueprint, the Roghun station is to become one of the largest in the region with a dam of 335 meters, and a capacity to produce 3.6 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. The station will allow Tajikistan, the poorest country in the region, to overcome its energy deficit and advance its economy. However, to complete the construction, Tajikistan needs complementary funding estimated to be between US\$ 2 and 4 billion.

The Government of Tajikistan recently decided to mobilize its population in financing the construction. In January 2010, the Government launched a campaign of selling shares in the Roghun station to the public, amounting to about US\$1.3

billion in total. To speed up the process and persuade the population to buy shares, the Tajik authorities ran an extensive information campaign. As of today, shares in the JSC "Roghun Hydropower Station" have been sold for a total amount of over US\$150 million, according to the Ministry of Finance.

In a recent open letter, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan demanded that Tajikistan solicit an international assessment of the Roghun project under the aegis of UN and other international institutions. Uzbekistan's position is that the construction of such a "monster" will result in an anthropogenic environmental disaster across Central Asia. According to PM Mirziyoev, the project will at best cause serious shortages of water in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the countries located at the lowest reaches of Central Asia's main rivers.

The Uzbek PM pointed out several threats the Roghun project poses. Among them is the region's ecological balance, which is already delicate due to the ecological disaster in the Aral Sea. Furthermore, Mirziyoev highlights the risks to the "survival of millions of people in the region, who depend directly on the availability of water for drinking and irrigation". Finally, Uzbekistan underlined that the Roghun station is located in a seismic zone and an earthquake could lead to a break of the dam, risking the lives of hundreds of thousands.

In his reply, the Tajik PM in return blamed Uzbekistan for the Aral Sea catastrophe due to the excessive irrigation of Uzbekistan's cotton fields. Akilov pointed to an assessment conducted in 2006 by the German Lahmeyer corporation. The assessment stated that the Roghun project takes into account all risks related to ecological, water balance and anthropogenic issues. The Government of Tajikistan believes the construction of such a facility is the sovereign right of any state, and is in full compliance with international law. Moreover, the Tajik PM emphasized that the project was launched only after Tajikistan mustered support from the World Bank, EBRD and other international institutions.

However, the main reason why Tajikistan decided to resume the Roghun construction is its recurring severe electricity shortages over the last decade. In order to provide the population with the electricity needed for normal existence during the winter

period, Tajikistan must construct the Roghun station. Each year, Tajikistan's government has made a number of efforts to import electricity from neighboring countries, such as Turkmenistan, but has faced obstacles imposed by Uzbekistan, which controls all transport arteries, pipelines and electric power transmission lines leading to Tajikistan. In the absence of other alternatives, Tajikistan believes that constructing the Roghun hydropower station is "the breath of life" and "the only choice".

Experts believe that the current disagreements between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the hydro-energy sphere may result in an escalation of the conflict. Russian analyst Azhdar Kurtov states that the "current situation may lead to dramatic results, including strained diplomatic relationships between the neighboring countries, and even displays of power". Accordingly, last week the press-service of Uzbekistan's Committee on state border protection made a statement blaming Tajikistan for a gross border violation. The

Tajik side replied that its state border guards crossed the interstate border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan only to catch a cow which had run into the neighbor's territory. In light of the escalating tensions between the neighbors, even such minor incidents could well become reasons for further discord.



(RFE/RL)

NEWS DIGEST

IRAN SPENDS LAVISHLY ON GAS INFRASTRUCTURE

3 February

Tehran announced plans to spend roughly \$9 billion to develop its domestic natural gas infrastructure as part of a five-year development plan, officials said. Javad Owji, the head of the National Iranian Gas Co., said there are plans to build thousands of miles of pipelines inside the country, the Petroenergy Information Network in Iran reports. "Construction of 3,000-3,700 miles of gas pipelines and 20-22 pressure control stations is included in the development plan for 2010-2015," he said. Iran sits on some of the largest natural gas deposits in the world, hosting the giant South Pars gas complex in the Persian Gulf. A weak domestic capacity and pressure from economic sanctions over its controversial nuclear program prevents the Islamic republic from realizing its full capacity, however. Nevertheless, Iran has made some progress in expanding its client base, reaching deals with Azerbaijan for natural gas exports through northern arteries. Tehran points to its lucrative gas reserves to make the case for a role in Europe's Nabucco pipeline, though Western powers have said Iran will play no part in the project. Islamabad and Tehran, meanwhile, expect to sign off on a long-delayed pipeline from South Pars as early as next week. (UPI)

AFGHAN BLAST KILLS TWO, WOUNDS 26

5 February

A bomb planted in a motorcycle in southern Afghanistan's most dangerous province has killed two people and wounded at least 26, provincial officials said. The blast took place near a dog fighting match, a traditional pastime where groups of men congregate, in Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand province, said Kamaluddin, a senior provincial police officer who goes only by one name. Earlier, Ahmad Nabi, another senior police official at the scene of the blast, told Reuters two

people had been killed and 12 others, including children, were wounded.

Violence in Afghanistan is at its highest level since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. U.S. and British troops in the province are gearing up for a major offensive on the western outskirts of Lashkar Gah. Last year was the deadliest year for both Afghan civilians and foreign troops. Some 2,400 civilians were killed in 2009 as a result of Taliban attacks and Afghan and Western forces operations, according to the United Nations. More than twice as many U.S. and British troops died in 2009 compared to the previous year. While Taliban insurgents normally target Afghan and foreign troops with suicide and roadside bombs in an attempt to overthrow the government and drive international troops out of the country, most of the victims are ordinary Afghans. There are some 115,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan battling a strengthening Taliban insurgency and Washington has begun sending 30,000 more in a bid to turn the tide. (Reuters)

AFGHAN POLICE KILL SEVEN BOYS COLLECTING FIREWOOD

6 February

Seven Afghan boys were shot dead today by police who mistook them for insurgents, a provincial police official said. The boys were collecting firewood when police opened fire on them in the border town of Spin Boldak, southern Kandahar Province, Abdul Raziq, police commander for the town, said. The police had been detained and were being questioned, he said. Spin Boldak has been an entry point for Pakistani insurgents who infiltrate Afghanistan to stage attacks against the government and international forces. Last year, 2,400 Afghan civilians were killed in Taliban attacks and Afghan and NATO-led operations, according to the United Nations. The killing of civilians is a sensitive issue and President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly warned that civilian deaths sap support for his

administration and for the presence of some 115,000 foreign troops in the country. (Reuters)

ARMENIAN PRESIDENT URGES TURKEY TO ACT ON HISTORIC PROTOCOLS

9 February

Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian today urged Turkey to act on its fence-mending agreements with Yerevan, warning that a continued delay could roll back the "historic" rapprochement between the two countries, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. In a message sent to Turkish President Abdullah Gul, Sarkisian said, "The time has come to manifest determination to take the next major step and leave to future generations a stable and secure region." Sarkisian was referring to the ratification by the Turkish parliament of the two protocols signed in October that commit Ankara and Yerevan to establish diplomatic relations and open the Turkish-Armenian border. The deal has the strong backing of the international community. Turkish leaders have repeatedly made the ratification conditional on a breakthrough in the protracted international efforts to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They also cite a recent Armenian Constitutional Court ruling that invoked the term "genocide" as an obstacle to implementation.

Yerevan, in turn, has accused Turkey of seeking "artificial excuses" to avoid a normalization of bilateral ties.

In his message to Turkey's Gul, Sarkisian wrote, "We can achieve results only if there is trust, resolve, and an unfaltering stance." He continued, "A situation when words are not supported by deeds gives rise to mistrust and skepticism, providing ample opportunities to those who oppose the process to act." Sarkisian had earlier threatened to walk away from the agreements if Turkey failed to ratify them within a "reasonable time frame." Some Armenian officials and pro-government politicians have suggested that if Turkey doesn't endorse the protocols by the end of March, Armenia may annul the deal. (RFE/RL)

UZBEK PHOTOGRAPHER CONVICTED, AMNESTIED FOR LIBEL

10 February

An Uzbek court has convicted an award-winning photographer for defaming Uzbekistan with her pictures about the daily struggles of ordinary people, but then immediately amnestied her. Umida Ahmedova, 54, was convicted of portraying people in Uzbekistan as backward and impoverished in a

collection of photographs and a documentary film, both financed by the Swiss Embassy in Tashkent. The charges against her had carried a maximum sentence of two years in a labor camp or six months in jail. (RFE/RL)

INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS WON'T AFFECT IRAN - AMBASSADOR

10 February

Iran's Ambassador to Russia Saeed Mahmoud Reza Sadjadi said fresh sanctions against Iran over its decision to enrich uranium to a higher level on Tuesday would not affect the country's development. "Nothing awful will happen. We have lived quietly for 31 years and we will live well in the future, don't worry," the Iranian ambassador told reporters in Kazan, when asked by Interfax how Iran would respond if new sanctions were imposed on it. Iran has been under European and American sanctions ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, he said. "Precisely due to these sanctions we have become self-sufficient in many areas and achieved a great deal," he said. On Russia's position on sanctions, the ambassador said there is a difference between Russia and the West's positions. "Sanctions have to do exclusively with curbs on the development of Iran's nuclear industry. Precisely this is the difference in how the West and Russia see this problem," the ambassador said. The West, they want to use the issue to overthrow the Iranian Islamic system, he said. "Russia is aware of this and it says that sanctions must be limited to the nuclear program and apply exclusively to it." (Interfax)

GEORGIAN JOURNALIST SEEKS POLITICAL ASYLUM IN SWITZERLAND

10 February

Georgian journalist Vakhtang Komakhidze has said he must leave the country because of "aggressive threats" from the authorities against him and his family and has therefore requested political asylum in Switzerland, RFE/RL's Georgian and Russian services report. Komakhidze said he faces political pressure because of a documentary he made about Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia. In December, Komakhidze and several other human rights activists visited the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and shot a documentary about life there. After his film was shown in Tbilisi, Komakhidze said he started receiving telephone threats that led him to contact the Swiss Embassy and eventually ask for political asylum. Komakhidze, who heads a

video studio called Reporter, is well-known in Georgia for his investigative reports on the death of Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania and his friend Raul Yusupov in February 2005. Komakhidze made a documentary hinting that Zhvania did not die accidentally from carbon-monoxide poisoning, as was officially reported, but that he was assassinated. A Georgian Foreign Ministry spokesperson told RFE/RL that Komakhidze has no reason to request political asylum, but his desire to do so is his own business. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ ACTIVISTS DEMONSTRATE AS OPPOSITION LEADER'S APPEAL BEGINS

11 February

About 1,000 protesters gathered in the southern Kyrgyz village of Gulcho to demand the release of former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. The demonstrators met at a local sports complex after local officials refused to allow the rally to gather at the village's administrative building. Outside the complex, dozens of young supporters of Isakov were on horses guarding the gathering. Isakov was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to eight years in prison last month. He pleaded not guilty and said that the case against him was politically motivated because of his work with the opposition. Several of his supporters -- including his 85-year-old mother -- have been on a rotating hunger strike for the past three weeks demanding his release from prison. The hunger strike was suspended on February 9. A Kyrgyz military court today began hearings into Isakov's appeal. The hunger strikers told RFE/RL that they stopped their action in order "not to be seen as trying to influence the court's decision" on the appeal. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN SHUNS UKRAINE FOR OIL EXPORT

11 February

An oil transit company in Kazakhstan said undisclosed disputes with Kiev forced it to look to Poland as a transport corridor, a company spokesman said. A spokesman for oil transport company KazTransOil announced a decision to transport its oil to the Polish port of Gdansk, Russia's state-owned news agency RIA Novosti reports. "Supplies via Poland are also quite attractive," the spokesman added. KazTransOil said Ukraine broke off its agreement with the company Jan. 26. Ukrainian transport company Ukrtransnafta had pumped oil through the Druzhba

oil pipeline, the longest in the world. The Kazakh company added it would move for a deal with Russia for oil exports. Ukraine's image as a transit nation was sullied in January 2009 when a dispute over gas debt to Moscow forced Russian gas monopoly Gazprom to cut supplies for weeks. That left Europe in the cold as much as 80 percent of all Russian gas bound for European customers travels through Soviet-era pipelines in Ukraine. KazTransOil said Ukrtransnafta did not provide a reason for walking away from the agreement, forcing the company to "look for alternative directions for Kazakh oil exports." (UPI)

UZBEKISTAN PUTS LIMITS ON KYRGYZ CITIZENS' VISITS

12 February

Uzbek officials have introduced new regulations that limit the number of visits Kyrgyz citizens can make to Uzbekistan, RFE/RL's Uzbek and Kyrgyz services report. The new rule restricts citizens of neighboring Kyrgyzstan to only one visit to Uzbekistan per month. No explanation was given by Uzbek officials for the new regulation. The regulation will mainly affect the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks with Kyrgyz passports who reside in southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the Osh region. Many of them have relatives on the other side of the border and travel to Uzbekistan on a regular basis. Kyrgyz border guards at the Dostuk (Friendship) checkpoint along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border confirmed the new regulation adopted by Uzbekistan. Ethnic Uzbeks make up an estimated 15 percent of Kyrgyzstan's 5.5 million people. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN SENDS RICE, OIL TO TAJIKISTAN

12 February

Kazakhstan has sent 17 railcars of rice and 36 railcars of vegetable oil as humanitarian aid to Tajikistan, the Kazakhstan Foreign Ministry said. The humanitarian aid was handed over in Dushanbe on Friday, the ministry said. "The humanitarian cargo consists of 1,000 tonnes of rice (17 railcars) and 1,500 tonnes of vegetable oil (36 railcars)," the ministry said. "Kazakhstan is one of the leading providers of humanitarian aid to the fraternal Tajik people," Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Tajikistan Abutalip Akhmetov said at the handover ceremony. Tajikistan thanked Kazakhstan for the timely provision of the aid. (Interfax)

BAKU WANTS NEW GAS PIPELINE TO IRAN

12 February

The State Oil Co. of the Azerbaijan Republic said it would start construction this year of a 124-mile natural gas pipeline to Iran, gas officials said. Nazim Samadzade, the deputy chief at Azerigas PU, said SOCAR is set to build the Sangachal-Azadkend-Astara pipeline, Azerbaijan's Trend news agency reports. "It is expected that construction of the new pipeline will begin in 2010," he added. Samadzade said the decision was made to expand its pipeline options to Iran because current infrastructure was inadequate for increased gas exports. Iran said the mountainous terrain in its northern provinces prevents transits from energy-rich regions in the south of the country, forcing it to rely on imports. The 916-mile Kazi-Magmoed-Astara gas pipeline delivers 353 billion cubic feet of Azeri gas to northern Iran each year. Existing infrastructure would allow Iran to import more than 17 billion cubic feet of gas from Azerbaijan each year. Both countries hold some of the richest gas deposits in the world, though Iran lacks the infrastructure needed to make full use of its gas. Baku expressed concern recently that U.S. sanctions targeting the Iranian energy sector could undermine its trade relationship with Tehran. (UPI)

INGUSHETIA SECURITY ACTION ACCIDENTALLY CLAIMS FOUR LIVES – SPOKESMAN

13 February

The president of Russia's Ingushetia republic, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, on Saturday visited the families of civilians accidentally killed in the course of a recent security operation in the republic that also claimed the lives of at least 14 militants, the presidential spokesman said. Yevkurov offered the civilian victims' families his condolences and promised them financial support, spokesman Kaloi Akhilgov told Interfax. Akhilgov said four villagers were killed and two others injured during the operation in Sunzha district. About 80 people were evacuated from the operation site. Yevkurov said all of them were picking ramsons, a wild relative of chives, when the operation started. Earlier on Saturday, seven of the slain militants were identified. On Friday, the Ingush president's office said 16 militants had died during the operation. (Interfax)

MARJAH OFFENSIVE PUTS AFGHAN CIVILIANS ON THE FRONT LINE

15 February

NATO and Afghan forces are pushing deep into the town of Marjah -- a major smuggling hub and Taliban stronghold -- on the third day of a large-scale offensive in Helmand Province. Residents are optimistic that Afghan and NATO troops will bring them security. But locals are also warning troops to do their utmost to avoid civilian casualties in their zeal to take control of the Taliban stronghold. "We want to see you, as you are claiming, bring stability to our region," said one unidentified farmer, speaking to British troops. "We are happy [at the offensive], but we expect you not to harm us or pain and humiliate us. We expect this and will accept this and it will make us happy." The farmer's comments highlighted locals' rising concerns a day after 12 civilians were killed when NATO rockets struck a house in Marjah on February 14. The incident led NATO to issue an immediate apology and to promise an investigation, and prompted Afghan President Hamid Karzai to caution troops to avoid civilian casualties as they take on the Taliban in a populated area. Western and Afghan troops are claiming steady progress in the offensive dubbed "Moshtarak," or "Together." On February 14, a spokesman for Helmand's governor said 12 Taliban fighters were killed in overnight fighting in Marjah, close to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah. Approximately 100,000 people, most of whom remained home in the face of the assault, live in the Marjah and the surrounding area. Following the civilian deaths, the commander of the U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, General Stanly McChrystal, suspended the use of the artillery rocket system that caused the casualties. NATO, wary of angering civilians, acceded to their demands by banning house searches. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN TURNS TO HEATING FUEL AS UZBEKISTAN CUTS GAS SALES

15 February

Kazakhstan, the biggest energy producer in Central Asia, boosted use of heating fuel to fire power generators after neighboring Uzbekistan cut gas supplies as the winter cold raised demand. Pressure has been low in the gas pipeline from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan since Feb. 12, Baurzhan Boribek, a spokesman for Astana-based KazTransGaz, a gas-shipping unit of the nation's energy company, said by phone today. "Uzbekistan usually decreases gas supply every year for a few days without giving

notice, when it becomes colder in winter," Boribek said. Authorities in southern Kazakhstan asked China National Petroleum Corp.'s PetroKazakhstan to load 5,000 tons of heating oil to supply local companies with energy, news service Kazakhstan Today reported citing Berik Ospanov, a deputy governor for southern region of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan supplies its southern regions using Uzbek gas through swaps, shipping the same volume of its own gas to OAO Gazprom, Russia's gas pipeline and export monopoly, across the northern border. Kazakhstan doesn't plan to cut gas deliveries to Russia, Boribek said. "Uzbekistan makes all steps in accordance with contract obligations," Elena Kim, a Tashkent-based spokeswoman for Uzbekistan's energy company Uzbekneftegaz, said by e-mail today. She declined to elaborate. (Bloomberg)

AZERBAIJAN APPROVES IN GENERAL UPDATED KARABAKH SETTLEMENT PRINCIPLES

15 February

Baku mostly approves of the updated Karabakh settlement principles, Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov told a Monday press briefing following negotiations with OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Kazakh State Secretary - Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev. "The updated settlement principles, which the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen put forward in Athens, are acceptable," he said. "We generally acknowledge these principles but there are certain aspects that require further coordination," Mamedyarov said. He said he had recently spoken to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who said that Armenia had not commented on the updated principles yet. The status quo in the Karabakh settlement process is impermissible, Mamedyarov said. "The notions of 'ethnic cleansing' and 'occupied lands' are not acceptable if we develop a normal relationship within the OSCE framework," he said. (

ABKHAZIA DOESN'T AGREE WITH RETURN OF GEORGIAN REFUGEES - BAGAPSH

16 February

Abkhazia will not agree with the return of Georgian refugees because that will lead to a war, Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh told MGIMO university professors and students in Moscow on Tuesday. "A total of 72 nationalities - Abkhazians, Armenians, Georgians, Russians, Estonians and others - live in

Abkhazia now. We received about 55,000 refugees after the war with Georgia, while Georgia received only 5,000. These people are our citizens of full value. They take part in the republic's life, including elections. The return of other refugees is problematic, and we cannot do it right now for fear of a possible war," he said. Bagapsh recalled the Moscow agreement and said that Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili had seceded from that document. Abkhazia will not hold a dialog or cooperate with the incumbent Georgian administration, the president said. "We are open for a dialog with any state, but any dialog or contacts with the incumbent Georgian administration are out of the question," he said. "One must tell the difference between the Georgian authorities and the people of Georgia. There are no bad peoples, but there are some bad authorities. We have negative feelings for these politicians because their hands are bloodstained and they must be tried by an international tribunal," he said. "Abkhazia will negotiate if Georgia understands that the world has changed and new realities have taken shape," Bagapsh said. "It is necessary to recognize Abkhazia and to develop normal relations. It is impossible to build a wall between peoples of Abkhazia and Georgia," he said. Saakashvili "is not a serious politician," Bagapsh said, expressing his sincere sympathy with the people of Georgia. Abkhazia is working on its recognition by a larger number of states, Bagapsh said. "Abkhazia is endlessly thankful to Russia for its courageous position in August 2008," he said. "Abkhazia keeps working on its recognition by a larger number of states, and the Russian Foreign Ministry is helping us a lot," Bagapsh noted. "At the same time, Abkhazia will beg no one for recognition. We will develop the domestic policy and economy in such a way that no one will have any recognition doubts. Obviously, this is not easy, but we are trying," he said. (Itar-Tass)

KAZAKHS SIGN UP TO MOSCOW-BACKED FORCE

17 February

Kazakhstan ratified an accord Wednesday committing it to a NATO-style rapid-reaction force drawn from the armies of former Soviet nations, the Kazakh presidential press office said in a statement. The force will operate under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-backed military bloc that also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as

members. Uzbekistan now remains the only organization member not to sign the rapid reaction force agreement. Uzbekistan, which regards itself as Central Asia's main military power broker, has traditionally been wary of Moscow's attempts to dominate security in the region. The force's stated aim is to combat threats of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, as well as helping to deal with the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and the leaders of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan finalized the creation of the rapid-reaction force in June. Belarus resisted joining for several months amid a trade dispute with Russia, but eventually relented. More than 7,000 troops from five Collective Security Treaty Organization member countries assembled at a training ground in southern Kazakhstan in October for the force's first large-scale exercises. Russia's efforts to increase its clout in Central Asia are widely viewed as an attempt to outmaneuver the United States as it pushes for influence in the strategic region. Moscow clinched a tentative agreement last summer allowing it to significantly boost the number of troops it has deployed in Kyrgyzstan, where the United States also has an important air transit center helping ferry supplies to nearby Afghanistan. So far, no additional Russian troops have been deployed. U.S. forces have used bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to support military operations in Afghanistan. (AP)

FEDERAL FORCES BLAMED FOR CIVILIANS' DEATH

17 February

A Russian regional human rights official said on Tuesday that federal forces killed innocent civilians during an operation to root out insurgents in the north Caucasus. Chechnya's rights ombudsman said four passers-by died along with 18 suspected Islamic militants in a bloody three-day shootout that ended on Saturday in the mountains of Ingushetia, along the border with Chechnya. Ombudsman Nurdi Nukhazhiyev said that he doubted the objectivity of an ongoing investigation by military prosecutors into the killings. 'Our doubts are based on the fact that dozens and hundreds of crimes committed by the (Russian) military against civilians in Chechnya have not been investigated,' Mr Nukhazhiyev said in a statement. Mr Nukhazhiyev heads Chechnya's human rights commission that answers to the region's Kremlin-backed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. The panel rarely criticises the Chechen authorities and lambasts independent rights activists. The independent rights group Memorial Monday made similar allegations regarding the shootout. Rights activists said that four Chechen villagers were killed in the crossfire when they wandered across the Ingush border to gather wild garlic. Rights activists say widespread abuses against civilians by police, including abductions, torture and killings, have helped to swell the ranks of the militants. (AP)