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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

The Analyst is an English language global Web journal devoted to analysis of the current issues facing the Central Asia-Caucasus region. It serves to link the business, governmental, journalistic and scholarly communities and is the global voice of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, The Johns Hopkins University-The Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. The Editor of the Analyst solicits most articles and field reports however authors may suggest topics for future issues or submit articles and field reports for consideration. Such articles and field reports cannot have been previously published in any form, must be written in English, and must correspond precisely to the format and style of articles and field reports published in *The Analyst* (www.cacianalyst.org) and described below.

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Analytical articles require a three to four sentence introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples.

Analytical article structure: Ideal length between 1000 and 1200 words.

KEY ISSUE: A short 100-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-400 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.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-400 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

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Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has 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: svante.cornell@pcr.uu.se and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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TROUBLE IN AN UNLIKELY PLACE: STRAINS IN THE RUSSIAN-ARMENIAN RELATIONSHIP

Arman Grigorian

Russia has had a difficult year in its relations with the so-called “near abroad.” The defeat of the Moscow-backed candidate in Ukraine’s presidential elections was, of course, the most serious of Russia’s setbacks, but it was not the only one. Earlier in the year, President Saakashvili of Georgia succeeded in establishing Tbilisi’s authority over de-facto independent Ajaria, which had strong ties to Russia. Perhaps most surprising was the defeat of the Moscow-backed candidate in elections in Abkhazia. Russia has not had any comparable setbacks in Armenia, where Russia’s influence is also usually taken for granted, but the state of Russian-Armenian relations has come under increasing criticism in Armenia as well.

BACKGROUND: Some political groups in Armenia have openly called for breaking with Russia and creating closer ties to the West. Such calls, for instance, were made during the recent congress of the former ruling party, the Armenian National Movement. Even a new oppositional alliance composed of the Liberal Progressive Party of Hovannes Hovannisian, the Republic Party headed by Aram Sarkissian, as well as former minister of foreign affairs Raffi Hovannisian was recently formed with an explicit agenda to move Armenia closer to the West and away from Russia. Other prominent politicians like Vazgen Manukyan and Paruyr Hayrikian have expressed similar views on a number of occasions. The government has been much more cautious in its rhetoric, but Armenia’s official policy has also seen a steady trend of building closer ties with the West reflected in Armenia’s enthusiastic participation in a number of NATO programs and exercises, as well as the decision to join the “coalition of the willing” and send a small contingent of troops to Iraq. Several questions arise, including the nature of the reasons behind this trend, how serious it is, and where exactly this trend is likely to lead?

Growing Armenian discontent over the state of the relationship with Russia can be partially explained by a set of specific events that have taken place over the past two years. The first of these, which had wide public resonance, was the so-called “debt for equity” deal. This deal, which involved handing over several major industrial enterprises in Armenia to Russia in exchange for Russia forgiving Armenia’s \$100 million debt to Russia, caused considerable displeasure in Armenia. It was widely discussed and condemned in the media and in public rallies organized by the opposition. The wide-spread perception was – and remains – that the deal was grotesquely unfair, and that Russia was exploiting Armenia’s weakness and dependence to establish control over the country’s most valuable assets. There were criticisms of this deal in Russia as well, but there critics argued that those enterprises were not worth as much as Armenia’s debt to Russia.

The second important event was the conclusion of Russia’s observer mission to the presidential elections of 2003 that the elections were free and fair. Those who did not support Kocharian saw this as proof of Russia’s willingness to support any

government in Armenia as long as it does its bidding. Public displeasure of was so strong that some demonstrators expressed it by first marching to the Russian embassy in protest, and then marching to the embassies of Western countries that had refused to certify Kocharian's election to express gratitude.

IMPLICATIONS: More recently, Russia decided to close the border with Georgia following the terrorist act in Beslan, which also meant not allowing goods headed to Armenia to cross the border. Armenian pleas to allow these goods to cross the border were ignored, and soon enough the talk in Yerevan was that Russia had joined the Turkish and Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia. A veteran Armenian politician even stated in a private conversation that closing the border with Georgia was retribution for Armenia's decision to send troops to Iraq. Whether or not that is true is irrelevant: what is interesting is the claim itself. Finally, Russia raised objections to building a pipeline through Armenia that would transport Iranian natural gas to Georgia with the possibility of later exporting Iranian gas to Europe. Armenia and Iran seem to have grudgingly acquiesced to the Russian objections, but the episode has not gone unnoticed in Armenia.

These events are the predictable result of excessive dependence on Russia, which some segments of the Armenian political spectrum have always been concerned about. That concern is being articulated with increasing frequency with a growing perception in Armenia that the country's tight relationship with Russia is being taken for granted and exploited by Russia. But that is not the only reason. It seems also that the Armenian political elites are starting to think that a certain adjustment in Armenia's foreign policy orientation is inevitable given the increasingly conflictual tone of U.S.-Russian interaction in the post-Soviet space, combined with a shifting balance of influence that is not in Russia's favor. This was exemplified most vividly by the "orange revolution" in Ukraine, but the Ukrainian events were only the last in a longer chain of similar, if less dramatic,

defeats for Russia. There is a definite, and one might add reasonable, fear at least in some circles in Armenia that maintaining the same relationship with Russia may amount to betting on the wrong horse in the long run.

CONCLUSIONS: How deep are the cracks in the armor of the Russian-Armenian alliance, and will they get deeper? The short answer is that they are likely to get deeper, because the trends that created these cracks in the first place are likely to continue in the foreseeable future. But whether Armenia will be able to carry out a serious readjustment in its foreign policy will ultimately depend on two interrelated things. First, if the concessions the West demands from Armenia for settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are seen there as more costly than continued dependence on Russia, a serious reorientation of Armenia's foreign policy is unlikely. This, of course, assumes that Russia will be able and willing to continue to support the current *status quo* in Karabakh. Second, and even more importantly, Armenia will be able to reorient its policy only if the relationship with Turkey is normalized. As long as the border with Turkey remains closed, and as long as no diplomatic relations between the two countries exist, Armenia will see Turkey as an existential threat and Russia as the most credible protector against that threat. There are almost certainly other important issues that will affect Armenia's long-term foreign policy orientation, but these two issues are definitely the heart of the matter.

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RED, ORANGE, GREEN OR GRAY? SHADES OF POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Gregory Gleason

The graying of the Central Asian political leadership is coloring all contemporary political discourse in Central Asia. Georgia's "Rose Revolution" and Ukraine's orange revolution are casting shadows over the authoritarian states of Central Asia, encouraging proponents of democratic change. Proponents of Islamic doctrines are championing the green banner of Islam. Central Asian presidents continue to reject political alternatives to the current systems of government. Yet the Central Asian political future is clouded by the fact that none of the states has succeeded in establishing an orderly and legitimate procedure for leadership succession. The longer the adoption of an orderly procedure for political succession is postponed, the more likely the succession will involve open conflict.

BACKGROUND: Despite significant headway in macroeconomic reform, none of the countries of Central Asia has solved the problem of establishing an orderly and legitimate procedure for the transfer of power. As the communist-era leadership begins to age and the political dynamics associated with market economies begin to reshape the political landscape of Central Asia, political succession has become the defining issue in Central Asian contemporary political affairs.

More than a decade after the passing of communism, the countries of Central Asia continue to be ruled by the leaders of the pre-independence communist period. Each country has a presidential system, endowing the head of state with exceptionally broad powers and making the authority of the leader the single most important aspect of political life. The concentration of power in the hands of the president means that the system itself is identified with the leader. Leadership changes therefore likely mean changes in the nature of the system itself.

The present Central Asian political leaders all were either the highest state officials at the time of the Soviet collapse or took power shortly afterward. The constitutions adopted in all the Central Asian states after independence described specified terms of office with term limits for the post of president. All the Central Asian states have held regular elections, but none of these presidential elections could be described as free and fair. In all the Central Asian states, through a variety of mechanisms, the presidents have extended their mandates. In Turkmenistan, term limits were altogether dispensed with as the Turkmen parliament amended the constitution to allow for the president to be named "president for life." In Kazakhstan, the country's high court interpreted the 1995 Constitution to mean that previous service of the president was no longer to be counted as applying to the term of office. Hence president Nursultan Nazarbaev, serving since 1990, was elected in 1999 to a first term of office.

But while the presidents have managed to stay in office in the 13 years of independence, the political currents in all the countries have continued to flow. Similar kinds of political changes

undermined the Soviet-era leadership in Georgia and Ukraine. In Georgia, Eduard Shevardnaze's government assumed it would be able to manipulate elections in fall 2003. When observers challenged differences between the reported election returns and independent election exit polls, a national scandal soon escalated into a political crisis that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power as President of Georgia in January 2004. In Ukraine the outgoing government of Leonid Kuchma manipulated elections to assure a friendly successor. Massive demonstrations forced a political crisis that was resolved with a new election that handed power to the challenger, Viktor Yushenko.

The Russian language press, which continues to be the main source of information in the Central Asian states, at first depicted the Rose Revolution as a tragic accident in which Russia's historical influence in the Caucasus was supplanted by American influence. Later the Russian language press developed an interpretation that the Revolution had been manipulated through financing from George Soros to undermine the Shevardnaze government and establish a pro-American government. The Russian language press was much more aggressive in interpreting Ukraine's Orange Revolution as a case of western subversion intended to split Ukraine from Russia. The reverberations in Central Asia were fairly swift. In spring 2004 the Soros Foundation in Uzbekistan was denied registration by the Uzbek Ministry of Justice and ceased operation. In December 2004, the Soros Foundation in Kazakhstan was formally charged with criminal violations of tax law. Questions were raised whether the Foundation would be able to continue operations.

IMPLICATIONS: Avoiding anything similar to Georgia's "Rose Revolution" and Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in Central Asia is now a primary goal of Central Asian political leaders. Widespread public outcries in Central Asia are

seen by the political leadership as potentially leading to uncontrollable consequences. Elections are typically the political instrument for channeling public participation. But none of the Central Asian political leaders has confidence in elections to promote the agenda of bringing about peaceful, progressive secular political change in the region. Consequently, the electoral process in all the states is managed by the government to achieve state goals rather than to reflect the will of the public.

Parliamentary elections were held in September 2004 in Kazakhstan and in December 2004 in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but these elections were far from free and fair. Governments took extensive steps to legitimize the elections through engaging a stable of compliant election observers who dutifully proclaimed the elections to be fair and authoritative. This was seen as a way of calling into question the critical assessments of such international organizations as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that routinely conducts election observation. But such stratagems have only limited utility. In the relatively most open and democratic of the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, independent election observers from Russia pronounced the September parliamentary elections to be legitimate only to be embarrassed a short time later by the resignation of Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, the Speaker of the Kazakhstan parliament. Tuyakbai, one of the country's leading politicians a high official in the dominant political party, Otan, announced his resignation on October 18, 2004, denouncing "crude violations" of electoral process and deliberate falsification by the government of the election figures.

From the point of view of the political leadership, even more important than controlling the outcome of the elections is controlling how the future leaders deal with the legacy of the past. This is not just a question of historical legacy but

a much more practical question of immunity from future prosecution. For instance, Uzbek President Islam Karimov has taken formal steps toward an exit strategy. On April 25, 2003, the Uzbek parliament adopted legislation giving former presidents immunity from prosecution for acts done in an official capacity, including freedom from being required to testify and freedom from being searched. The legislation is also intended to guarantee the president and members of his family security protection for life.

CONCLUSIONS: The failure of the governments to solve the succession problem presents the single most serious threat to political stability in Central Asia today. Political succession may be delayed for a period but a change of leadership is ultimately inevitable. The longer the adoption of an orderly procedure for political succession is postponed, the more likely the succession will involve open conflict. Once

one of the Central Asian leaders leaves office, either from natural causes or political upheaval, the resulting shock waves could reverberate throughout the region.

The political processes of the Central Asian countries are characterized by a relatively small number of closely knit, often closely related decision makers working in the context of a political culture that rewards conformity and personal loyalty. In Central Asia these cultural factors are particularly important because the formal decision making rules are often less significant than informal rules. As a consequence, political succession in these countries is apt to be decided outside of a competitive democratic process.

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GEORGIA'S CABINET CAROUSEL: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Robert L. Larsson

Once again, President Mikheil Saakashvili has reshuffled the power and security structures in the Georgian government. Georgia's latest cabinet reshuffle puts focus on how President Saakashvili organizes his security structures. This time it codifies what has been suspected, namely that loyalty is top priority and that a rift within the government may be up-coming. However, it also has far-reaching implications that may well add inertia to the process of reform. What goes around comes around.

BACKGROUND: When Mikhail Saakashvili took office in January 2004, he appointed a cabinet of young, western-educated and reform-minded disciples to tackle Georgia's numerous problems. However, by June 2004, Saakashvili had made his first major reshuffle. Within the security sphere,

General Prosecutor Irakli Okruashvili became Interior Minister, Interior Minister Giorgi Baramidze became Defense Minister, the Head of the National Security Council (NSC) Vano Merabishvili became Security Minister, Defense Minister Gela Bezhuashvili became Head of the

NSC, and Security Minister Zurab Adeishvili took over as General Prosecutor. In December 2004, it was time for the third reshuffling. As a consequence, Okruashvili became Defense Minister, Baramidze became Minister for EU integration, and Merabishvili became Minister of Police and Public Security as the Ministries of Security and Interior merged.

This merger can be seen as a way of revitalizing old-style sentiments within the security apparatus as the structure reminds of the NKVD or the KGB. In addition, purges and prosecutions of high-ranking officials, allegedly for embezzlement and misappropriation within the security structures, have so far been a trademark of Saakashvili's first year as president. Yet, unless he has a well-hidden agenda of bringing the Soviet bureaucracy back from the dead, nothing points in the direction of KGB resurrection. In fact, streamlining the security bureaucracies and ousting institutional and personnel redundancies is what Georgia needs on its way to democracy. Thus there is no need to cry 'wolf'.

At a time when the bonds between the troika consisting of Saakashvili, Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, and Chairwoman of Parliament Nino Burjanadze are dissolving, both reshuffles should be seen as a cheap way for Saakashvili to consolidate loyalty within the highest echelons of power while any emerging powerbase, created by Zhvania or Burjanadze, is contained. By January 2005, the rift took such proportions that Saakashvili felt the need to go public with his warnings to Okruashvili and Baramidze by commanding obedience. Yet, Saakashvili's method of "divide and conquer", under the pretext of reform, is a double-edged sword that may have far-reaching and long-term consequences that contradict his more sober undertakings. It bears both structural and policy implications.

IMPLICATIONS: Firstly, Saakashvili's cabinet does not have any substantial experience in

governing a country. Ivy League education and a good heart do only so much and youth is not a substitute for experience. As Shevardnadze's state structures were left in tatters, the current administration, for better or worse, has no institutional base to rely on. Creation of institutional stability and competence is therefore of utmost importance if long-term stability and smooth transitions are sought after. Few things could be more counter-productive than reshuffling a cabinet several times a year.

Secondly, by using cabinet posts as rewards for loyalty to the President or for thwarting other political ambitions, development of political parties are hindered. The reshuffle, therefore, runs the risk of impeding commitment to reform and results. At the same time, this issue brings along an opportunity for Saakashvili to show that his democratic agenda is genuine and secure him a place in Georgian history books.

Thirdly, there are several reasons to believe that Georgia's security policy during the last year has been formed mainly the President, Okruashvili and Merabishvili, with assistance from foreign expertise. Only recently have the two latter been given posts that reflect their actual influence and ties to the President. Merabishvili is still found at the center of gravity. The reshuffle, moreover, shows that Baramidze, who is considered to be Zhvania's protégé, has been completely sidelined. Burjanadze, who is not part of the government, has wisely kept a distance, biding her time. Despite being competent and appreciated by the international community, Foreign Minister Salome Zurbishvili also remains outside the real security establishment. When it comes to foreign relations, her role is to face Europe while the inner circle takes on the Russian bear and sets out to reestablish Georgia's territorial integrity.

Finally, as analysts often point out, Okruashvili is by many seen as a hawk favoring the use of military force, making him extensively unpopular in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His coercive

manner is nonetheless admired in other parts of Georgia. According to Saakashvili, Okruashvili will stay in office until Georgia's territorial integrity is regained. The time frame for this is said to be three years, but few things could be more unpredictable. Unfortunately, there is a risk that his trouble-shooting skills, and Saakashvili's renowned impatience, might work against a peaceful solution of the remaining conflicts in these break-away regions. It must be recalled that Okruashvili was one of the responsible for failed raids in South Ossetia that lead to armed clashes in 2004. However, having Okruashvili as Defense Minister is a good move when it comes to boosting reform of the Armed Forces and preparing for NATO integration. Well-respected and decisive as he is, he has the ability to gain momentum and implement reform given he is provided the resources. However, there are few signs of NATO admitting Georgia by 2006, as Tbilisi wishes.

CONCLUSIONS: Three conclusions can be deduced from Georgia's cabinet carousel. Firstly, it underscores who and what posts will be the most important in the coming year. The office of the Prosecutor General will hardly regain the status it had during the reign of Merabishvili and the future role of the NSC is yet to be determined.

Secondly, it is evident that Saakashvili is confident in the success of reforms as he does not see a need of utilizing a power balancing

technique within the security structures. This is a clear break with the Soviet legacy and an important step forward when it comes to preparing for Western integration. GORBI polls show that he still enjoys great support for his policies and that no one has the ability to threaten his position. Therefore, unpopular but necessary reforms, initiated under his auspices, come at a perfect time. If the economic and political reforms, and attempts to reestablish territorial integrity, are carried out in a democratic, peaceful and sustainable way, people will have patience with promised results.

Finally, loyalty is Saakashvili's beacon and the security institutions have almost been optimized in this aspect, with just a few issues within the intelligence community left to be dealt with. After Baramidze and Okruashvili started to call each other names, and Saakashvili subsequently took action, it became clear that the President fears an imminent rift within the troika of the Rose Revolution. His precautions, as outlined above, might yet impact beyond what can be seen today.

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NEXT REVOLUTION: KYRGYZSTAN?

Nazgul Baktybekova

200 opposition protestors have taken to the streets in Kyrgyzstan since 8 January, after the Election Commission revoked the registration of Roza Otunbaeva, co-leader of the opposition Ata-Zhurt movement, to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections. All wearing a symbolic yellow scarf, the protesters demand from the authorities to allow the opposition leader to run for Parliament and free and fair elections. The intensification of the political situation has reinforced already existing speculations about Kyrgyzstan being the next post-Soviet state to experience a possible Ukrainian or Georgian type of revolution.

BACKGROUND: On 6 January a District Election Commission in Bishkek officially registered Kyrgyz opposition figure Roza Otunbaeva as a candidate for parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 February. However, a few hours later members of the same District Election Commission were called for an extraordinary meeting where they overturned their previously accepted decision. The cancellation of opposition figure's registration was explained by absence of a quorum at the initial meeting. As the Chairman of the Central Election Commission Sulaiman Imanbaev explained, the District Election Commission's decision lacked legal force as the approval of eight of the total fifteen members is required for registration of a candidate, whereas in the case of Otunbaeva only seven people out of eleven present voted in her favor. However, Roza Otunbaeva and other opposition figures condemned the Election Commission's decision as illegal and politically motivated. According to the law on elections, only the Central Election Commission or a court has the right to reverse a decision of the District Election Commission. The registration of Roza Otunbaeva, formerly Minister of Foreign Affairs and ambassador, was a politically "dangerous" decision, as it would set a precedent among former ambassadors. In November, the CEC decided not to register former ambassadors, who had not lived in the

country for a full five years before an election, as candidates for parliamentary elections. The decision has since been widely interpreted as a tool to sideline unwanted political figures critical of the current regime. The ruling has been fiercely criticized by opposition forces who believe that it is of a purely political nature and meant to disqualify politicians critical of government such as Medetkan Sherimkulov, Mambetjunus Abylov, Usen Sydykov, who in the past served as ambassadors in various countries and who might sympathize with the opposition if elected to Parliament. The three have since appealed relevant courts to overturn the Central Election Commission's decision including the Constitutional Court. However, no positive ruling has been made and the latter court refused to consider the cases due to the absence of the fact of violation of law. The registration of Otunbaeva, a former diplomat with prolonged residence outside the country would have opened the way for the potential registration of other diplomats critical of government. Besides, if registered, Otunbaeva would pose a challenge to Bermet Akaeva, President Askar Akaev's daughter, reportedly also planning to run for Parliament in the same district. The Election Commission's decision denying the opposition candidate's registration sparked immediate demonstrations in Bishkek. Demonstrators made up of representatives of Kyrgyz opposition parties

and movements as well as some deputies demanded the reversal of the Election Commission's decision and the permission to register former ambassadors as candidates for parliamentary elections. Demonstrators wearing a trademark yellow scarf to symbolize change also demanded the resignation of President Akaev and Central Election Chairman Sulaiman Imanbaev.

IMPLICATIONS: The opposition protest actions have sent alarming signals to the Kyrgyz leadership, which lately has been repeatedly rejecting the possibility of any kind of revolution in the country. In the light of recent political developments and ahead of two national elections this year, Kyrgyzstan has been named as the next potential spot for a revolution similar to the Georgian "Rose revolution" and the Ukrainian "Orange revolution". Hence the Kyrgyz leadership is facing the serious challenge of preventing the political situation from acquiring a Ukrainian or Georgian style.

Although Kyrgyzstan shares some similarities with the two revolutionary post-Soviet states, it has different political preconditions and lacks certain prerequisites to become the third one.

Kyrgyzstan, with a population of around five million, has more than forty political parties and the Kyrgyz opposition is fragmented and rather weak. On the threshold of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, the Kyrgyz opposition as expected became more active and some developments have taken place within the opposition bloc. A number of political forces and coalitions emerged such as the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Civic Union For Fair Elections and Jany Bagyt (New Direction), which united several opposition political parties and consist of quite popular figures. On 29 December five opposition coalitions – the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan represented by former Prime-Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev, Jany Bagyt represented by Muratbek Imanaliev, the Social-Democratic party represented by Almaz

Atambaev and Atazhurt (Fatherland) represented by Roza Otunbaeva signed a memorandum of understanding pledging to work together to ensure that the parliamentary elections are held strictly in accordance with the constitution and international standards. The same day 300 civic and public organizations united into a civic solidarity For Free and Fair Elections. The initiative, which was signed by the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, also aims at preventing any fraud during the parliamentary elections. Hence, the opposition forces are seen as more or less united, but the major problem about Kyrgyz opposition is the absence of a "Yuschenko" type of opposition leader, capable of enjoying the support of the majority of population. Many of the opposition figures are former high-ranking government officials from the President's circle, who now appear to some to take the opposition's side only because of personal ambitions.

Even the formation of a strong opposition is unlikely to lead to revolution. The Kyrgyz authorities will certainly act more harshly than Eduard Shevarnadze in Georgia or Leonid Kuchma with Victor Yanukovich in Ukraine. It has already taken measures against mass demonstrations. President Akaev has been harshly condemning the revolution scenarios in Ukraine and Georgia, and repeatedly urged the government as well the general public to prevent any provocations relating to the upcoming elections and called upon them to learn a lesson from Ukraine and Georgia, which as a result of confrontations were about on the edge of a civil war. "I want to call on the entire nation to counter the exporters of revolution and the provocateurs," the President said in his appeal to the people and government on 11 January.

The President argues that the opposition receives funds from foreign sources and use "dirty political techniques" to get into power. Meanwhile, the government has already created a

tool to rebuff any revolutionary-like movements: Prime-Minister Nikolai Tanaev the same day said that the government is concerned about possible public disorder during parliamentary elections, and an anti-terrorist commission and a special group which is tasked to protect political stability and prevent mass unrest were formed under the government. These new formations could severely limit citizens' rights.

CONCLUSIONS: President Akaev has been in power for fourteen years and has repeatedly declared that he will not go against the Constitution and run for president this year. As Akaev is set to step down, the current regime tries to sustain the status quo and keep power in the hands of loyalists. The new Parliament is key in

this strategy, and it is in the interest of the current regime to have as few opposition-minded deputies there as possible. The Election Commission's recent decisions meet the regime's general strategic goals, even if they provoke opposition protests. Although the current political situation has thrown a challenge to the government, it is unlikely to sow the seeds of a colorful revolution. Yellow might not necessarily become a symbol of change for Kyrgyzstan just yet, and the country could witness numerous similar events in the course of the coming election season.

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FIELD REPORTS

RULING REGIME IN KAZAKHSTAN STEMS UKRAINIAN TIDE

Marat Yermukanov

There are many reasons to believe that political developments in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections in Kazakhstan will repeat neither the Ukrainian nor the Georgian patterns of velvet revolution. The unfailing trump cards in the hands of the present regime are the indisputable economic achievements and relatively higher standard of living coupled with the glossy democratic image of the country. Yet the recent onslaught on the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party indicates that higher echelons of power are haunted by Ukrainian paranoia.

The Ukrainian “orange revolution”, as the pro-Yushchenko demonstrations in Kiev were baptized, went almost unnoticed in Kazakhstan, except for sketchy TV reports. But messages from Kiev were echoed by the leading opposition forces, the Democratic Choice of Kazakstan (DCK) and Ak Zhol Democratic Party. A recent issue of the Azat paper, mouthpiece of the DCK, carried challenging headlines printed in large letters: “Georgia yesterday, Ukraine today, Kazakhstan tomorrow?” Apparently these words were the last drops that filled the cup of the authorities’ patience.

The prosecutor’s office of Almaty therefore brought a lawsuit against the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party demanding its closure. Appearing on national television, the prosecutor’s spokesman said in a few confused words that DCK was instigating interethnic strife and urging people to civil disobedience and calling the existing regime illegitimate. On January 5 the specialized district economic court of Almaty held its first preliminary hearing of the case, but the court session was not attended by the main incriminated figure, the chairman of the DCK Asylbek Kozhakhmetov, who

was reportedly ill. Nevertheless a large crowd of DCK members, who carried orange bands pinned on their coats and distributed leaflets of the same color, gathered outside the courthouse. The leaflets, among other things, mentioned the long-standing story of “Kazakhgate”, the top-level corruption scandal involving improper contracts with foreign oil companies.

Civil rights activist Yevgeniy Zhovtis told journalists that the very fact that the economic court decided to consider the case, which should have been considered by an administrative court, was a violation of the law. He added that any court ruling passed in absentia behind the backs of the chairman of the party Asylbek Kozhakhmetov would be illegitimate. The coordinating committee of opposition forces of Kazakhstan, of which DCK is part, released a statement condemning the “persecution’ of public and political organizations. The Ak Zhol party came up with a similar statement noting that the lawsuit against the DCK ran counter to Article 5 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan which allows ideological and political pluralism in the country.

The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan is not alone in its distress. A month ago the financial police of Almaty filed a criminal case against the internationally prominent charity fund Soros Kazakhstan charging the organization with tax evasion. The charge was rejected by Soros Kazakhstan as totally unsubstantiated. Opposition observers regarded the lawsuit against Soros Kazakhstan as an attempt of the authorities to squeeze this organization, known for its active support of independent press, out of the country.

These events support the opposition's argument that the authorities fear the Ukrainian scenario in the upcoming presidential elections. Maksat Muratov, Columnist of the Soz newspaper, writes that Russia will do everything to shape presidential elections in Kazakhstan as it desires and to get a man loyal to the Kremlin elected. Some, including Muratov, believe Moscow will stop at nothing to achieve this. "Ukraine was saved from such a fate by the European Union and the .U.S., but nobody knows who will save us", concludes Muratov.

According to Bigeldy Gabdullin, formerly a prominent opposition figure who spent many years in the U.S. and is now an ardent supporter of the current political and economic policy of the state, the Ukrainian scenario is ruled out in Kazakhstan for a number of reasons. First, the opposition in

Kazakhstan does not enjoy wide international support and financial aid. Second, opposition forces have no clearly defined political objectives. Third, the opposition has only limited access to media.

Perhaps the most saddening point is that opposition forces are drifting away from down-to earth social problems which would appeal to the wider public. DCK has been seriously weakened by internal strife within its ranks. In recent months many popular figures like Gulzhan Yergalieva, Petr Svoik, Karlygash Zhakiyanova (wife of the imprisoned DCK leader Galymzhan Zhakiyanov) and others left the party. In this circumstance the DCK is nothing more than a paper tiger to the authorities – and increasingly a shapeless group of power-hunger political adventurers.

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN SHOW COMPLETE VOTER INDIFFERENCE

Anar Kerimov

On December 19 Azerbaijani voters cast their votes in municipal elections, held for the second time in the post-Soviet history of the country. Unlike the last presidential elections, this time voters did not line up for hours to wait for their turn to cast their ballot. Neither did they go to courts to add their names to voter's lists, in places where their names were omitted from them. Instead, one could hardly see anyone coming to the polling stations. Harsh weather conditions and low awareness of municipalities' work have created a great deal of apathy among voters.

Official statistics from the Central Election Commission released a day after the voting indicated that more than 46% of the total voting population visited polling stations, yet many local observers doubted that number.

Close to 38,000 candidates contested 21,622 seats in 2,732 local governance bodies. Major opposition parties, such as the Musavat, Democratic and Popular Front parties boycotted the race and withdraw the names of their registered candidates from the ballots, citing numerous problems with the

electoral process in the country. Specifically, they noted the biased work of election commissions, where the majority of members come from the ruling party YAP, and various administrative obstacles during the registration of the candidates. "In an environment where we can not freely conduct an election campaign and the registration of our candidates is hindered, there is no other option for us but to boycott these elections," said Hasan Karimov, the Popular Front party's secretary for organizational issues. No opposition rallies have been allowed in the country since violence broke out in the opposition demonstrations following the October 2003 presidential elections.

The representatives of the Central Election Commission and YAP refuted these accusations, saying that the boycott is a good excuse for the opposition parties, which have been unable to gather significant public support to seriously contests the race. CEC stated that only 1231 persons were denied registration for various reasons.

Indeed, the opposition parties in the country continue finding themselves in a weakened position

after their defeat in the October 2003 presidential elections. The National Independence party and a number of small opposition parties, such as Civil Solidarity and Adalat (Justice) parties nevertheless participated.

Meanwhile, international and local observers who monitored the municipal elections noted a number of irregularities in the electoral process. "Many of these irregularities were serious and could have affected the outcome in the municipalities concerned. These included observed cases of ballot stuffing, protocol falsification, voter list tampering and voters being pressured. Less serious but common irregularities included multiple voting, pre-marking and clipping of ballots, and the acceptance of inadmissible identification documents" read the statement of the OSCE following the elections. The U.S. embassy in Baku also assessed the election process negatively.

Local observers from the Election Monitoring Center, a coalition of NGOs, also witnessed many irregularities during the voting and tabulation processes. The National Independence, Adalat and Civil Solidarity parties refused to recognize the legitimacy of the elections.

At the same time, international organizations noted the good organization of the polling stations and

safe conditions for the voters. "Observers reported that the process was conducted in a friendly and calm atmosphere," said the OSCE report. The Central Election Commission has also noted irregularities in a number of polling stations. The results of the elections were cancelled in more than 300 precincts and more than a dozen precinct election commissions were dismantled for their poor performance.

Overall, the municipal elections showed a complete distrust on the part of voters for these newly established institutions. Since their foundation in 1999, municipalities failed to turn into independent self-governing bodies, caring for the needs and problems of local residents. Instead, municipalities fell into dependence on the local executive powers and limited their activity to minor construction works and charity activities. The majority of Azerbaijan still remains unaware of the functions of municipalities.

International organizations including the Council of Europe, have already suggested the Azerbaijani government to amend the law on the status of the municipalities and allow them broader powers at the local level. The suggestion is yet to be considered.

ARE KYRGYZSTAN'S SECURITY SERVICES BECOMING DISCREDITED?

Aijan Baltabaeva

The Recent disappearance of human rights defender Tursunbek Akun and the ensuing accusations addressed at the security services turned out to be a signal that public trust in the National Security Service (NSS) as well as in law enforcement in general has fallen to rock bottom in Kyrgyzstan.

The disappearance of Tursunbek Akun caused international and Kyrgyz non-governmental human rights organizations to appeal to the Kyrgyz Government to facilitate and support the search for their colleague. However, Akun's followers, led by his wife Gulmira Japarova, believe that the National Security Service (NSS) played a key role in his

disappearance. The same story was repeated by Akun when he appeared after two weeks. Despite statements by law enforcement bodies, doubts about the participation of officers of the security services have not dissipated.

The National Security Service on November 22, 2004 celebrated the 80th anniversary of the service, and the results of its activity in the fourteen years of Kyrgyz sovereignty. In accordance with tradition, officers put wreaths at the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of the feared Soviet Secret Police that fought the counterrevolution during the first decades of the Soviet Union. The celebration

was stained by a fatal event in Osh at midnight on November 19, 2004. Four suspected extremists were arrested by security services, and one of the four detonated a hand grenade while being taken to the Interior Ministry headquarters. As a result, one officer and the suspected militant were killed, while the remaining three suspects managed to escape.

The Security services only declared that those arrested had been involved in the Tashkent terrorist act of 1999 and were planning another terrorist act on Kyrgyzstan's territory.

In the past year, 27 unsolved contract killings were registered in Kyrgyzstan. The most dramatic event was the murder in May 2004 of the Head of the Directorate of Malfeasance of the Interior Ministry, Colonel Chynybek Aliev. So far an investigation into the case continues, but the crime has not been resolved.

An increasing number of observers assess that the NSS has lost its capacity to carry out the orders of the government. The NSS nevertheless plans to further intensify its activity in the next year, ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections. The NSS's Head declared on October 27 that extremists will take advantage of election year to accomplish "their criminal plans".

The Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HUT) religious movement is perceived by the ruling regime as a real threat to the government and state. Therefore, an order has been given to track and suppress the activities of the organization. Hizb-ut-Tahrir adherents intend to overthrow the ruling authorities and establish a Caliphate, initially on the territory of the Ferghana Valley and then across Central Asia. HUT's ideas

are gaining increasing popularity among the poorest layers of society that remain unsatisfied with the reforms conducted by the ruling regime. According to international organizations, over 60% of population is estimated by international organizations to live below the poverty line.

The NSS has become involved in watching religious leaders, and this has caused massive indignation on the part of the clergy. Parliamentary Ombudsman Tursunbay Bakir Uulu and international human rights organizations have interceded on behalf of the clergy, while the popularity of the NSS was again negatively affected.

On September 21, the security services of Kyrgyzstan reported that they had detained a large container of plutonium-237, a highly radioactive substance used in nuclear technology. In spite of the highly publicized event, the Russian counterparts that studied the given substance concluded that it was not usable for nuclear weapon purposes.

Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akaev has repeatedly criticized law enforcement bodies and especially the NSS for incompetence and corruption. Akaev also called for an active struggle against corruption. However, in spite of this, no criminal cases have been filed against officials for financial fraud or abuse of office. According to Transparency International, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most corrupt states in the world, enjoying a 122nd place out of 146 countries studied. The Special services seem reluctant to bring about change to the present situation in spite of growing criticism from all walks of life, including the President himself.

TURKMENISTAN HOLDS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Chemen Durdiyeva

On December 19, for the first time in five years, parliamentary elections were held in Turkmenistan. According to reports from the Turkmen Central Electoral Commission, the election turnout was over 76% out of roughly 2 million people eligible to cast ballots. However, as the international

community remains skeptical and the population apathetic, these election results are unlikely to bring any meaningful change in de facto political regime.

Turkmenistan's unicameral parliament, the Mejlis, consists of 50 delegates elected every five years.

According to the laws of Turkmenistan, any citizen of Turkmenistan who reached the age of 25 and has been living within the country for the last 10 years can become a candidate in parliamentary elections. For the whole time of its functioning, the Mejlis has nevertheless practically never overruled any executive orders or legislation proposed by the executive branch. It has therefore been viewed by international community as a rubber stamp body that mainly fulfills the undertakings of President Saparmurad Niyazov. Constitutional amendments in 2003 further deprived the Mejlis of major legislative functions. As a part of those amendments, certain prerogatives of the Mejlis, such as making changes into the constitution, were handed over to the People's Council, the major legislative body of elders headed by President Niyazov himself. Although the members of the People's Council are elected by the people from each district, the body does not possess real authority when it comes to making decisions, hence it is referred as 'yes men' in the tongue of Turkmen opposition members abroad.

The elections came a week before the controversial parliamentary elections held in neighboring Uzbekistan on December 26. As opposed to Uzbekistan's noisy and highly contentious elections, the whole election process in Turkmenistan passed without any demonstrations and pickets. This is explained basically by two facts. First, the population of Turkmenistan remains mostly indifferent to the political situation in the country, as it sees no hope for political change. Second, there is a growing fear especially after the alleged coup attempt of 2002 that any attempt to bring political change, or thereby questioning the righteousness of the President's rule, can cause major troubles or even leave one behind bars. As the Russian newspaper *Novoye Izvestia* reported, "organizers of the elections were warned to prevent any 'anti-political' statements and actions by the electorate and to stop any attempt to distribute oppositional leaflets." Moreover, all candidates running for parliamentary deputies were ethnic Turkmen.

The last parliamentary elections were held in 1999 when the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (the former Communist Party) won a landslide victory

of 50 seats in the parliament. This made Turkmenistan a one party state, giving no chance for any other possible parties to exist let alone have a seat in the parliament. As government sources reported, the voters' turnout for the parliamentary elections of 1999 was 99.9 % as opposed to 76% this time. But analysts report that the actual turnout rates were much lower than the official sources reported. The official announcement of election results are expected to be published in state newspapers within two weeks.

The state-owned newspaper outlets advertised the elections and announced the candidates one month prior to election day. At this quick pace, 1,610 polling stations and 50 electoral districts were set up, and 139 candidates competed for 50 seats in the Mejlis. The only election monitors were the representatives of the Turkmen National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights and some other local public organizations. The Central Electoral Commission decided that trusting the monitoring process mainly to this national institute would "give the elections more transparency and make them democratic." Critics commented on these elections as a showcase to give the false images of democracy in the country. As such, the elections were held practically with no participation of international observers. Particularly, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representatives were not granted visas to enter the country. Neither were any other international observers invited. Erika Dailey, director of the Open Society Institute's Turkmenistan Project said "the Turkmen election is much worse than an empty exercise. It is a mockery of the citizenry."

Thus, the parliamentary elections remain nothing but a mere symbolic procedure to legitimize the current iron fist rule in the country. In this context, the newly elected parliamentarians will undoubtedly be as loyal to the president as the previous ones were. When there is no open internal opposition to express the despair of people, the total population remains submissive to idiosyncratic policies being accepted by authorities. Although the president called the opposition abroad to return and create new parties, repression makes their role as feeble as it was years ago.

NEWS DIGEST

MINISTER CALLS FOR CREATION OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE TV CHANNEL

16 December

Speaking at a cabinet meeting devoted to cultural policy, Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref proposed the creation of an international English-language television channel. According to Gref's proposal, the new 24/7 channel would be modeled on the English-language channel of Chinese Central Television (CCTV). "Since the CCTV English-language channel appeared...the popularity of the Chinese reforms [has grown] and [the country has a more] positive image," Gref said. "We have no such channel and Russia's image is not matched by what is happening here." "We should find money for it, as it does not require so much [funding]," Gref concluded. Gref also endorsed the proposal of Oleg Dobrodeev, the general director of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Company (VGTRK), which owns the second national television channel RTR, to extend Russian-language broadcasting in the CIS. (RIA-Novosti)

ABKHAZ PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE REAFFIRMS PRO-RUSSIAN ORIENTATION

16 December

Sergei Bagapsh told journalists in Sochi on 16 December that if he wins the presidential ballot scheduled for 12 January, Abkhazia will not agree to reenter Georgia "for at least 100 years." Bagapsh stressed that Russia "has helped Abkhazia resolve problems peacefully," alluding to the standoff between himself and former Prime Minister Raul Khadjimba. Bagapsh added that Abkhazia's legislation should be brought into line with Russia's to facilitate political and economic integration and Russian investment in the unrecognized republic. (gazeta.ru)

FORMER GEORGIAN PRESIDENT'S SON ASPIRES TO HEAD OPPOSITION

16 December

Konstantine (Koko) Gamsakhurdia, deceased President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's son by his first marriage, has returned to Tbilisi from his home in Geneva. Gamsakhurdia, who heads the Tavisupleba (Freedom) movement, criticized Georgia's new leadership for its alleged incompetence, failure to restore the country's territorial integrity, and repeated amendments to the constitution that have given the president virtually unlimited power while weakening the role of the parliament. He said he considers it his duty to assume the role of leader of the opposition. He also demanded a formal investigation into the circumstances of his father's death. Tavisupleba fielded candidates in the 28 March presidential election but

failed to surmount the 7 percent threshold required to win parliamentary representation. (Caucasus Press)

RUSSIA DEPORTS TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS

17 December

Russia deported 83 Tajik migrant workers from Krasnodar Krai on 15 December for violating residency requirements and failing to have migration cards, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reported on 16 December. Nigina Muhammadjonova, a representative of the International Organization for Migration, told RFE/RL that deportations often involve rights violations because migrant workers are unaware of their rights. Mahmudullo Qurbonov, deputy head of the migration department in Tajikistan's Labor Ministry, said that Tajikistan has opened six centers in Russia to help Tajik migrant workers defend their rights. Qurbonov put the number of Tajik migrant workers in Russia at 420,000, but unofficial estimates suggest that the actual number could be more than 1 million. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ OPPOSITION GROUPS FORM PARTNERSHIP

17 December

The Kyrgyz opposition groups Ata-Jurt and the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan signed a partnership agreement on 16 December unifying their positions on basic political issues, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. The two movements will pursue a coordinated policy in the lead-up to February parliamentary elections in the hope of garnering a majority. The organizations share common positions on the privatization of strategic economic sectors, issues of rights and freedoms, and the country's future course of development. In an interview with Kyrgyzinfo on 16 December, Roza Otunbaeva, the co-chairperson of Ata-Jurt, noted that the political situation in Kyrgyzstan cannot be compared to Georgia, where dissatisfaction over falsified elections felled former President Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003. "The main thing is to conduct honest elections, and people will respond appropriately." Nine political parties formed the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan in early fall; Ata-Jurt emerged recently. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIA WELCOMES EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S STANCE ON TURKEY, EU

17 December

In a 16 December statement, the Armenian Foreign Ministry hailed the European Parliament's call for Turkey to recognize as genocide the killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and to open its borders with Armenia "as soon as possible," RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Those demands were incorporated in a nonbinding

resolution that the European Parliament adopted the previous day urging the EU to approve the start of membership talks with Turkey. But European Parliament President Joseph Borrell told journalists in Strasbourg on 15 December that those demands do not constitute conditions that Turkey must meet before membership talks begin. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION PARTY CALLS FOR CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

20 December

In a statement published in "Respublika" on 17 December, the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party called for "civil disobedience" to "remove the family clan that has usurped power." Asserting that "2004 parliamentary elections killed the last hope for the possibility of political reforms in the country," the statement lambasted "the ruling clan headed by President [Nursultan] Nazarbaev" for persecuting the opposition with "unconstitutional and illegitimate methods." Dubbing the president and parliament "illegitimate," the opposition party stated: "In our activities we will proceed from how human rights and freedoms are understood in free countries, not from decisions made by thievish governors and corrupt courts. We view these authorities as anti-state, and we are ready only for talks on their removal from power without resorting to any violence, and on their being pardoned for the crimes they have committed." (RFE/RL)

TURKMENISTAN HOLDS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

20 December

Turkmenistan held elections to the country's Mejlis (parliament) on 19 December, Turkmen TV reported. Turkmen government sources reported 76.88 percent turnout in elections that saw 131 candidates competing for 50 seats. Official Turkmen reports hailed a "triumph of democracy," but a preponderance of international opinion has dismissed the elections as a farce. In a representative comment, Erika Dailey, director of the Open Society Institute's Turkmenistan Project, told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) on 15 December, "The Turkmen election is much worse than an empty exercise. It is a mockery of the citizenry." (RFE/RL)

TURKMENISTAN POLL TURNOUT 'LOW'

20 December

The government of Turkmenistan has hailed Sunday's parliamentary elections as a triumph of democracy. But official figures say that 76% of the electorate voted - less than the turnout that would normally be expected. No opposition candidate was standing for membership in what is seen as a powerless parliament. Foreign diplomats have called the election a sham and further evidence of Mr Niyazov's exclusive hold on power. State-run Turkmen television reported jubilant scenes, with voters dancing and folk bands playing in the streets to celebrate what it called "a triumph of true democracy".

There is a holiday atmosphere, it said, with election officials handing gifts to first-time voters, including towels, notebooks and free copies of the Ruknama, a collection of sayings apparently written by Mr Niyazov. "Our first and eternal president", the television called him. But informal reports tell a different story. Residents in the capital, Ashkabad, said they saw few people going to vote. They said there was widespread indifference to a poll in which there were no opposition parties and every single candidate had sworn lifelong loyalty to President Niyazov. The turnout was announced soon after polls had closed - 76 %. That is less than the near 100% figures Turkmenistan usually expects, but few people will take the figure seriously enough to read meaning into the change. The last few years have seen Turkmenistan more and more isolated. Few people have contact with the outside world, with what they see and hear completely controlled by the state. The only window on the world some do have is through satellite television. Not long ago only the elite watched, but now every apartment building is covered with satellite dishes. (BBC)

RUSSIA, U.S. ALLIES IN FIGHTING TERRORISM - PUTIN

23 December

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Russia and the United States are not only partners but also allies in the fight against terrorism. "We are definitely partners in solving a number of acute problems of modern times. This concerns first of all the joint fight against terrorism. As regards this, I would without any exaggeration call our relations with the U.S. not just [relations of] partnership but allies," Putin said at a press conference in Moscow on Thursday. "Russia, along with the U.S., are major nuclear powers, and therefore we are bearing special responsibility in terms of weapon control and nonproliferation of means of mass destruction," he said. (Interfax)

DAGESTANI PROTESTERS AGAIN BLOCK FEDERAL HIGHWAY

23 December

About one hundred residents of Dagestan's Khasavyurt district blocked the federal highway Kavkaz several kilometers south of Khasavyurt on Thursday to protest a series of abductions that have been committed in the district in the past several months. Residents of the communities of Endirei, Novosositli, Aksai, and Khamavyurt blocked the same road last week. They protested against kidnappings of their relatives by unidentified people wearing camouflage uniforms without insignia. The protesters claimed that a total of 8 young men had been kidnapped. (Interfax)

RUSSIA, IRAN TO SIGN SUPPLEMENT TO NUKE FUEL REIMPORT DEAL

24 December

Russia and Iran are very likely to sign a supplement to an agreement on reimports into Russia of spent nuclear fuel from the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, Iran, which Russia is helping build, the head of the Russian Federal Atomic

Energy Agency said on Friday. "At the current moment, the Russian corporation TVEL is agreeing with the Iranian side a contract that would agree the supply of fresh nuclear fuel for the Bushehr nuclear power plant and the return of spent nuclear fuel," Alexander Rumyantsev told a news conference in Moscow. (Interfax)

COMPENSATION CONTROL SAVES OVER 500MLN RUBLES IN CHECHNYA

27 December

The verification of compensation payments to Chechen residents has saved the republic's budget over 500 million rubles in money that would have been distributed to people who do not actually qualify for aid. "More than 19,000 of the 92,000 applications [for compensation], which were verified in January-October 2004, appear to contain false information," says a report from the Russian Interior Ministry, which was posted on the Russian government's website on Monday. "Sixty-one cases were opened on charges of compensation embezzlement. Some of the cases were opened against officials of Chechen district administrations, who abused their office and illegally added people who had no right to compensations to the list of aid recipients," the report reads. "Thus, damages of 513 million rubles to the federal budget was prevented," the report says. (Interfax)

UZBEK PRESIDENT OPPOSES REVOLUTIONS

27 December

Uzbek President Islam Karimov said he favors evolutionary development for his country and opposes revolutions. Uzbekistan should follow an evolutionary path, he told reporters on Sunday, adding that he was "categorically against revolutions, because revolution means violence." Karimov blamed "revolutionary events" on post-Soviet territory on the leadership of post-Soviet republics. "If anything of the sort occurs in Uzbekistan, it will be our fault and should not be blamed on external forces, even if they are powerful and rich, and capable of creating fertile soil for a coup through setting up various non-governmental organizations," Karimov said. (Interfax)

UZBEK 'NO-CHOICE' POLL CONDEMNED

27 December

European election monitors in Uzbekistan have condemned Sunday's parliamentary elections, saying they did not meet international standards. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe said the vote was neither competitive nor transparent. It said the five parties taking part were so similar that voters were deprived of significant choice. All of them supported President Islam Karimov, the powerful leader who has run Uzbekistan for almost 20 years. The OSCE statement gives formal voice to what many Uzbeks say in private. The authorities, it says, "failed to ensure a pluralistic, competitive and transparent election". It also points out that almost two-thirds of potential candidates were not allowed to stand and that the justice ministry refused to let the OSCE see its case files. The

OSCE had only a very small team of monitors here because of Uzbekistan's poor electoral record, so this statement focuses on the big political picture, rather than how the day went at the polls. The OSCE's remarks will come as no surprise to the Uzbek authorities. President Karimov even anticipated them in a speech on Sunday, when he said Europe and Asia were quite different and one should not preach to the other. He pointed out that Uzbekistan is only in the OSCE by historical accident, because it was once a Soviet republic. To pre-empt such criticism, the government invited its own election monitors, most of them guests regarded as friends of Uzbekistan or Russian-led observers from the former Soviet Union. They have given a glowing report of events, the Russian team praising the election as fair, legitimate and transparent. (BBC)

RUSSIAN BORDER GUARDS TO COUNTER EXTREMISTS ABUSING HAJJ

28 December

Russian border guards have been told to remain alert to prevent potential terrorists from using this year's hajj - the pilgrimage to Muslim holy places - as an opportunity to move mercenaries and weapons into Russia, North Caucasus Division Border Guard Service press chief Sergei Livantsov told Interfax on Tuesday. "Border guards will also make it impossible for extremist leaders or wounded militants to leave the country and will prevent the delivery of materiel or finances to illegal militias inside Russia," he said. "Such attempts cannot be ruled out," Livantsov said. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ GROUP SUSPECTS U.S. DIPLOMAT OF PREPARING REVOLUTION

28 December

The Council of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan has criticized the U.S. ambassador in Bishkek, Steven Young, saying his activities can be regarded as preparations for a velvet revolution. His activities can be considered as preparation in Kyrgyzstan of a velvet revolution comparable to the revolution in Georgia which is believed to have been orchestrated by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Lynn Pascoe, says a council statement received by Interfax on Tuesday. The statement quotes Young as saying that it is his objective as ambassador to guarantee the development of Kyrgyzstan into a prosperous, modern, democratic and stable state. (Interfax)

AFGHANISTAN'S NEW CABINET MEETS

28 December

Hamid Karzai has held the first meeting of his new cabinet following his inauguration as Afghanistan's first elected president. He told ministers to avoid party politics and commit themselves to helping the war-torn country rebuild. He said the Cabinet should direct its loyalty to the Afghan people, not to tribal and regional interests. Mr Karzai said the ministers must focus on the economy, education and security. He emphasised that the fight against drug-trafficking would be a measure of the success of his new

government. In the new cabinet, sworn in last week, some key warlords were replaced with reformers and technocrats. Correspondents say that, while foreign donors are likely to welcome the cabinet changes, some Afghans question the promotion of people who have returned to the country after being educated abroad over those who fought to oust the Taliban. (BBC)

RAMZAN KADYROV NAMED HERO OF RUSSIA

29 December

Russian President Vladimir Putin has issued a decree awarding Chechen Deputy Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov the Hero of Russia award. The presidential press service reported on Wednesday that the medal has been awarded to Kadyrov "for courage and heroism in the line of duty." (Interfax)

SOROS GROUP WARNS OF KAZAKH CLOSE

29 December

The Open Society Institute (OSI), financed by billionaire George Soros, has accused Kazakhstan officials of trying to close down its local office. A demand for unpaid taxes and fines of \$600,000 (£425,000) is politically motivated, the OSI claimed, adding that it paid the money in October. The organisation has found itself in trouble after being accused of helping to topple Georgia's former president. It denies having any role, but offices have had to close across the region. The OSI shut its office in Moscow last year and has withdrawn from Uzbekistan and Belarus. In the Ukraine earlier this year, Mr Soros - who took on the Bank of England in the 1990s - and won, was pelted by protestors. "This legal prosecution can be considered an attempt by the government to force Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan to cease its activities in Kazakhstan and shut its doors for Kazakh citizens and organisations," the OSI said. The OSI aims to promote democratic and open, market-based societies. (BBC)

YOUNG DRAFTEES WILL NO LONGER BE SENT TO CHECHNYA - DEFENSE MINISTER

2 January

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said changeover to contract service in some of the army units was one of the most important events in the armed forces in 2004. "We started implementing a federal program to introduce contract service in individual units last year," Ivanov told Interfax. The changeover was carried out in the 42nd motorized infantry division and other units based in Chechnya, he said, noting that "young draftees no longer serve in Chechnya and will never be sent there again." Ivanov announced that the armed forces and troops were optimized in the strategic directions in 2004. "Following the railway troops' integration with the armed forces, the Russian army has 1.207 million servicemen, plus 876,000 civilian personnel - an optimal figure required to maintain the defense sufficiency level," the Russian defense minister said. He said programs to improve servicemen and their families' social and legal status ranked among the military

leadership's priority tasks. "The Defense Ministry is drafting 17 bills to replace benefits with compensation payments, and change the procedure of financing individual aspects of defense and security operations," he said. He said a law on mortgage lending and saving schemes for servicemen came into force on January 1, 2005. From now on, budget resources will be transferred to and get accumulated on each serviceman's bank account until the sum is large enough for buying housing in any region after 20 years of service," said Ivanov. (Interfax)

422 TAJIKS RETURNED HOME IN COFFINS FROM RUSSIA IN 2004

4 January

A spokesperson for Tajikistan's Interior Ministry told Asia Plus-Blitz on 4 January that the bodies of 422 Tajik citizens were returned to Tajikistan from Russia in 2004. Sixty Tajiks were killed by violence, 46 died in traffic accidents, 181 perished as a result of illness, and 129 were killed in various accidents. The Interior Ministry totals included bodies returned by air and rail, but not buses and cars. Even so, the number represented an increase on 2003 figures. (Asia Plus-Blitz)

FORMER GEORGIAN INTERIOR MINISTER RELEASED FROM PRISON

4 January

Former Georgian Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili was released on bail after paying a fine of 300,000 laris (\$165,000) to "compensate for the financial loss" he is alleged to have caused the Georgian state. Narchemashvili, who was interior minister from November 2001 to November 2003, has been imprisoned for the last 2 1/2 months after his arrest on charges of corruption and abuse of office. He was also charged with "customs violations" for the alleged illegal import of tear gas from Azerbaijan during the anti-Shevardnadze street protests in Tbilisi in November 2003. Although prosecutors are still conducting a formal investigation, Narchemashvili's case will reportedly not proceed to trial. (Caucasus Press)

GEORGIAN AUTHORITIES CONFISCATE NEARLY \$31 MILLION IN ANTICORRUPTION EFFORT

4 January

According to a report compiled by the nongovernmental Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, Georgian authorities have accumulated 55.7 million laris (\$30.9 million) in fines and seized assets as part of their anticorruption program. Based on information from the Georgian Prosecutor-General's Office, the amount only covers the period from January to November 2004 and consists of 20 cases involving 80 individuals. The enforcement effort uses the anticorruption law adopted by parliament in February and allows for the seizure of funds and property belonging to current and former state officials who are unable to certify that they acquired their assets legally. (Civil Georgia)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION COUNCIL CONDEMNS 'POLITICALLY MOTIVATED' ACTIONS BY AUTHORITIES

5 January

The opposition Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces issued a statement on 5 January denouncing a lawsuit by the Almaty Prosecutor's Office seeking the closure of the opposition political party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK). The statement described the case against DVK and recent tax charges against the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation as "politically motivated and coordinated from a single center." Prosecutors are seeking the dissolution of DVK for incitement to civil disobedience; the next hearing in the case is scheduled for 6 January. The Coordinating Council stated that the authorities aim to "define any criticism of the regime as incitement to social discord." The statement concluded, "[This policy] not only runs counter to [the authorities'] official intention to carry out 'further democratization,' but also strengthens political opposition in society." (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

ALMATY COURT AUTHORIZES LIQUIDATION OF OPPOSITION PARTY

6 January

The inter-district economic court of Almaty authorized the liquidation of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan opposition party on Thursday. The court upheld arguments of the Almaty prosecutor's office in support of the party liquidation, an Interfax correspondent reported from the courtroom. The Almaty prosecutor's office asked for the liquidation of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan because of a political statement the party adopted at its congress on December 11, 2004. The statement calls "for resolute public actions, including civil disobedience campaigns, and declares the incumbent authorities anti-people and illegitimate," the prosecutors said. The party was formed last year under the chairmanship of Galymzhan Zhakiyanov. In 2002 Zhakiyanov was sentenced to seven years in custody for the abuse of office in his being the head of the Pavlodar regional administration. He was moved from a penitentiary to a convict settlement in August 2004. The opposition calls Zhakiyanov a political prisoner. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

AZERBAIJANI MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS ANNULLED IN OVER 100 DISTRICTS

6 January

Meeting on 6 January, Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission (MSK) announced the final results of the 17 December municipal elections. MSK Secretary Natic Mamedov said that the results of the ballot have been invalidated in 136 localities due to violations of election legislation. Voter turnout was given as 46.34 percent. MSK Chairman Mazahir Panahov again affirmed that the elections were transparent and democratic. MSK spokesman Azer Saryev rejected Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rapporteur Andreas Gross's criticism of official efforts to prevent the election of opposition candidates; Saryev said it was wrong of Gross to leap to

such a conclusion on the basis of visits to only a few polling stations. (Turan)

AT LEAST 175 CHECHENS ABDUCTED IN 2004 STILL MISSING

6 January

At least 396 Chechen residents were abducted in 2004, and 175 of them are still missing, the Memorial human rights center told Interfax on Thursday. "According to the latest reports, 396 people were abducted in Chechen territory in 2004, and 187 of them were released, 24 found killed, and 175 have gone missing. Another 10 people who were presumed to have been abducted, are currently under investigation," Dmitry Grushkin of Memorial said. Another 293 locals were found killed in Chechnya last year, according to human rights workers, he said. "Among them are 114 civilians, 101 officers from Chechen law enforcement agencies, 7 public officials, and 36 guerillas. Another 35 people have still not been identified," Grushkin said. Memorial workers monitored the observance of human rights on 25% to 30% of Chechen territory in 2004, having no access to the mountainous regions, he said. "Therefore, the real scale of crimes against civilian population can be several times larger," he said. Meanwhile, the Chechen authorities confirmed that the observance of human rights in the republic is not improving as dynamically as it should. "Improvement of the situation surrounding human rights is our priority, but this problem is not being resolved as quickly as we would like it to, in particular, because of the difficulties in the socioeconomic sector that are still in place," Secretary of the Chechen Security Council Rudnik Dudayev earlier told Interfax. Chechen Prime Minister Sergei Abramov earlier stated that, to uproot abductions, anyone involved in them, be it guerillas or law enforcers, must be punished. "We are all talking about this, and even a single case of disappearance of a person is a very serious and alarming occasion for the region. We take all such cases into consideration," Abramov said at a press conference in Moscow in December. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ PRESIDENT BLASTS 'CLANDESTINE INTERNATIONAL'

7 January

President Askar Akaev spoke out on 6 January in Bishkek against foreign funding for domestic political movements. Akaev said, "We are concerned about the existence of made-to-order movements with the financial support of international organizations that specialize in organizing 'velvet' revolutions." He added, "Social movements that have emerged in this country are preparing such revolutions as ordered up by a Clandestine International." Foreign Minister Askar Aitmatov echoed the president's comments, telling official newspaper "Slovo Kyrgyzstana" on 6 January that he is "very afraid of a 'revolutionary' scenario in our country." Aitmatov warned that an attempt to carry out a "velvet" revolution in the spirit of recent events in Ukraine could instead plunge Kyrgyzstan into chaos along the lines of Tajikistan's destructive 1992-97 civil war. With

parliamentary elections scheduled for 14 February and a presidential election in October, Akaev and other high-ranking officials have become increasingly harsh in their criticism of the bloodless revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. (RFE/RL)

FREEDOM HOUSE CALLS FOR INVESTIGATION OF UZBEK TORTURE-DEATH ALLEGATIONS

7 January

The U.S.-based NGO Freedom House has asked the Uzbek government to put together a group that includes human rights defenders to review the case of a prisoner alleged to have died under torture, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported on 6 January, citing Robert Freedman, the senior program officer for Freedom House's Uzbekistan Torture Prevention Project. Human rights groups in Uzbekistan announced on 3 January that Samandar Umarov, a prisoner serving a 17-year sentence for membership in the banned Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, died under torture Uzbek officials have said that Umarov, whose body was delivered to his family on 3 January, died as a result of a stroke. (RFE/RL)

U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT SAYS RUSSIA HAS SERIOUS PROBLEM WITH ANTI-SEMITISM

7 January

The U.S. State Department released on 5 January its annual report on anti-Semitism, citing Russia along with Belarus as countries where "anti-Semitism [remains] a serious problem." According to the report, most anti-Semitic incidents are carried out by ultranationalist and other far-right elements, and the stereotype of Jews as manipulators of the global economy continues "to provide fertile ground for anti-Semitic aggression." The report cited the Anti-Defamation League for reporting that the while the number of anti-Semitic incidents remained stable in 2003, their nature became more violent. Groups of young skinheads are reportedly responsible for most anti-Semitic crimes. Russian officials' response to anti-Semitic violence has been "mixed." Officials often use strong words of condemnation but label the perpetrators as terrorists or hooligans rather than xenophobes or anti-Semites. Human rights observers, according to the State Department, note that Russia has a lot of legislation on the books that bans racist violence and propaganda but it is rarely enforced. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN ECONOMISTS PROTEST GOVERNMENT'S PRIVATIZATION STRATEGY

8 January

A group of economists from Tbilisi State University have written to President Mikheil Saakashvili and the Georgian government warning against plans to privatize several major enterprises, including the Chiatura Manganese Plant, coal mines in Tkibuli, and the Georgian merchant fleet. The economists argued that, rather than selling those enterprises to foreign bidders, which would result in a one-time infusion of funds to the state budget, the government should have transformed them into joint-stock companies in which

the population at large could purchase shares. (Caucasus Press)

UKRAINIAN, KAZAKH PEACEKEEPERS KILLED IN IRAQ EXPLOSION

9 January

Seven Ukrainian peacekeepers and one Kazakh soldier serving in Iraq were killed when one of the aerial bombs Kazakh sapper unit servicemen were transferring from a truck to a depot went off, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry's press service told Interfax. The incident occurred in the province of Wasit on Sunday, the press service said. The explosion injured another seven Ukrainian and four Kazakh peacekeepers. They were taken to a U.S. military hospital in Baghdad. (Interfax)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION FEARS THAT LIQUIDATION RULING SIGNALS NEW CRACKDOWN

10 January

Kazakh opposition figures warned that a 6 January court decision to liquidate the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) political party signifies the start of a political crackdown, even as the party planned to appeal the ruling, agencies and newspapers reported. Yevgenii Zhovtis, director of Kazakhstan's International Bureau for Human Rights and a legal consultant to DVK, told a news conference in Almaty on 7 January, "We shall prove that the judge did not pay attention to all the documents that were submitted and request that the court annul the decision." But in a statement published on 7 January by the opposition newspaper "Navigator," Zhovtis cast doubt on the hope of obtaining a fair decision from a Kazakh court. In a 7 January statement in "Navigator," opposition party Ak Zhol expressed "serious concern" over the decision, calling the court decision part of a "campaign to discredit and destroy not only opposition, but any independent political parties and politicians." A number of articles and interviews with opposition figures in the newspaper "Respublika" on 7 January linked the court decision to recent events in Ukraine, explaining that Kazakh authorities are trying to forestall political change in the country. (RFE/RL)

FORMER TAJIK INMATE RECOUNTS GUANTANAMO ORDEAL

10 January

Tajikistan's "Crime-Info" published an interview on 6 January with a man identified only as Abdurahmon, who recounted his experiences during two years of imprisonment at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Abdurahmon, a Tajik citizen, said that he ended up in Guantanamo after Afghan police turned him over to U.S. forces in Afghanistan for a reward; he claimed to have no ties to either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. Abdurahmon said he was first held in Afghanistan in Bagram and Kandahar, where soldiers abused detainees, humiliating them and forcing them to commit acts contrary to Islam. Prisoners were not beaten, however, he said. Abdurahmon said that

the detention facility at Guantanamo was, "in comparison with our prisons...of course, better. It's clean everywhere. They fed us OK. Detainees had access to various literature, including the Koran." But he said he signed various confessions after being subjected to psychological coercion. He also noted that medical treatment was inconsistent, perhaps intentionally, and many detainees suffered from illness. Abdurahmon, who was part of a group of 11 Tajik citizens eventually released from Guantanamo, said that he now suffers from hepatitis C. (RFE/RL)

PUTIN, TURKISH PRIME MINISTER HOLD MOSCOW SUMMIT

11 January

President Vladimir Putin met in the Kremlin with visiting Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 11 January. Ergodan arrived in Moscow on 10 January for a three-day working visit, primarily to discuss trade and economic relations. At a joint news conference, Putin said that Russia has "consistently ranked as Turkey's second-largest trading partner." He said that bilateral trade was worth \$10 billion in 2004, about \$2 billion more than projected. "We can reach \$15 billion in the near future," Putin predicted. Turkish construction companies have completed about \$12.3 billion in contracts in Russia over the last 15 years and that total Turkish investment in Russia is about \$1.5 billion. Putin visited Ankara in December, a visit that Erdogan described as a pivotal moment in bilateral relations. (ITAR-TASS)

WORKERS APPEAL TO AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION TO CLOSE RANKS

11 January

The independent Union of Workers of Azerbaijan has issued an appeal to the country's various opposition parties to set aside their rivalries and covert overtures to the authorities and close ranks in a Unified Opposition Movement. The appeal accuses the present leadership of being solely preoccupied with retaining power, rather than seeking solutions to the problems the country faces. It argues that those problems can be resolved only after a fair

presidential election, not as a result of parliamentary elections. (zerkalo.az)

OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATION CONTINUES IN KYRGYZ CAPITAL

11 January

Supporters of Roza Otunbaeva, the co-chairwoman of the opposition movement Ata-Jurt who was recently denied registration to run in the 27 February parliamentary elections, continued to demonstrate in Bishkek on 10 January, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. The protestors, who were joined by members of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, numbered 150, and wore yellow to symbolize imminent change. A counterdemonstration of about 200 carried placards condemning Kyrgyzstan's parliament and sported the colors of a pro-presidential party. The two groups exchanged words but remained peaceful. Foreign Minister Askar Aitmatov warned on 10 January that the opposition should not try to put pressure on the authorities and should refrain from calls for civil disobedience. Otunbaeva has stated her intention to appeal the district election commission's decision to deny her registration. (RFE/RL)

PUTIN WELCOMES TURKEY'S INTEREST IN SHANGHAI ORGANIZATION

12 January

Russian President Vladimir Putin has described Turkey's interest in establishing contacts with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a positive sign. "I was very pleased when the Turkish prime minister, during our recent meeting, unexpectedly expressed Turkey's interest in arranging cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This is a positive signal," Putin said before negotiations with his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev in Almaty on Wednesday. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization comprises Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. (Interfax)

