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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.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 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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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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LESSON FROM KYRGYZSTAN: IS THERE A SHORTCUT TO DEMOCRACY?

Rafis Abazov

On April 26, 2010, the constitutional working group published a draft constitution for the Kyrgyz Republic, and the head of the interim government announced that the new constitution would be finalized on May 19. These developments have deeply divided the public, local experts and politicians. One group welcomes the decision, stating that the new constitution is a step toward stabilizing the political situation in the country. The other group questions the legitimacy of the working group in the absence of the dissolved Constitutional Court and Parliament, and also the lack of contributions from major parties and political groups, arguing that there should be no shortcuts in the introduction of this fundamental document.

BACKGROUND: Over the last few weeks, various political groups in Kyrgyzstan have been heavily involved in heated debates about the draft constitution of the country, and about the future of the country's political system after the overthrow of the deeply unpopular President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Alas, Kyrgyzstan is not new to constitutional reforms as its first constitution of 1993 was introduced in a somewhat similar environment of political confrontation between conservative and liberal groups within Kyrgyz society, and conflicts and uncertainty about the development of political reforms. Then, like today, the main driving idea was to prevent the consolidation of power in the hands of the president, and once and for all to end the dominance of a single party or clan in the political arena.

It seemed at the time that the combination of the liberal-minded presidency of Askar Akayev with a democratically elected parliament would help establish a stable political system with appropriate checks and balances. During the early days of independence, several political parties emerged, forming a vivid multi-party environment with a dynamic free press. These

developments gave Kyrgyzstan a shiny new title: "The Island of Democracy."

But the honeymoon was short-lived, giving way to disagreements over the course of the reforms and unpopular economic measures, along with accusations of corruption. Instead of looking for a compromise, the president decided to introduce a radical solution by dissolving the *Jogorku Kenesh* (parliament) and introducing a small professional bi-cameral parliament through a series of hurriedly set up constitutional and legislative changes and arrangements.

These shortcut actions helped to address some short-term issues such as stabilization of the political environment, but they did not address a number of longer-term fundamental problems in the country. First, not all political parties and interested groups within the population were involved in the discussion and consultation process of changes to the constitution, election law and the law on political parties. Such consultation would likely have slowed down the process of legal debate, but would have helped to garner the support of various crucial groups. If these groups had played a role in the drafting of laws and regulations, they would

likely have had greater respect for those laws. Second, although a multi-party system was indeed established, it turned out to be exclusively an urban exercise: most of the political parties had their base and focused all their activities in the capital city, rarely venturing into rural areas and small towns, where almost 70 percent of the population still lived. As the political parties were unable to organize the rural electorate according to political platforms and ideas, the electorate organized itself along regional and clan lines. Third, political life at the *raion* (district) and *oblast* (province) levels was soon dominated by local elites — who quickly enriched themselves by establishing their domination in business and redistribution of resources, and were more concerned with local and regional issues and interests than with national matters. For example, after the parliamentary elections of February-March 2000, the *Jogorku Kenesh* had 32 members of the bi-cameral parliament representing 12 political parties, and 73 so-called independent MPs, who were mostly from the rural electoral districts. Thus, the parliament was dominated by local and regional interests and rivalries and turned into quite an ineffective and slow national legislative institution.

IMPLICATIONS: The Tulip Revolution of 2005, which overthrew President Akayev and led to the election of Kurmanbek Bakiyev as president in the rashly arranged presidential elections of summer 2005 was a direct outcome of public mistrust in the democratic political process in the country, and the inability of the government to establish law and order. Numerous changes in the constitution (in 1996, 2003, 2006 and 2007) contributed to widely-held beliefs that the government manipulates the constitution and laws to their own advantage

and does not protect the rule of law in the country.

Therefore, attempts to introduce far-reaching legal changes in the current atmosphere of general mistrust without transparent procedures, political consensus and in the face of continued political fragmentation, might have a number of negative consequences. There are at least four major implications of the current attempt at constitutional change. First, a fundamental issue is the legitimacy of the draft constitution in the absence of a Constitutional Court and parliament, as the document was prepared in nontransparent manner and it is going to be finalized by a commission appointed by the unelected and self-appointed interim government.

Second, by ignoring major legal procedures, the draft contributes little to the development of and respect for the rule of law, in spite of the promises given by the interim government to deliver law and order. Third, the process of constitutional change maintains the political fragmentation in the country, in that it excludes significant segments of the population — particularly the southern provinces of the country, the power base of the former president — from discussion of the draft constitution and thus from developing a stake in the most important document of the nation. Fourth, the swiftness of the consultation process — less than a month for the preparation and revision of the entire document — might undermine the quality of the document. The speed of the deliberations leaves almost no time for local and international experts to fine-tune the constitution in the light of international standards.

CONCLUSIONS: In this time of political turmoil, it is important to stabilize the political situation and conduct broad reforms addressing



major political and social problems as quickly as possible. At the same time, it is important to do it right, working meticulously on establishing the foundation for strong institutions and respect of the rule of law, and avoiding achieving short-term goals at the expense of long-term stability and sustainable development in the country. For this purpose, it is important to consider several key steps.

The first of these steps is to extend the public debates and consultations on the draft constitution well beyond the target date of May 19, giving more time and more opportunities for people even in remote districts of Kyrgyzstan to participate and thus widening the support base for the constitution and for legal reforms. The second step is to stop marginalizing the provinces, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan — to find ways of involving them as much as possible in the consultations and signaling that

they are welcome to be part of the national political process.

The third step is to recognize the Constitutional Court as an important institution in legitimizing the new constitution and therefore to reinstate it. Of course, in the past the Court was regularly manipulated and made unpopular decisions; however, this was an issue with the individuals appointed to the Court and not because the institution itself was at fault. The Constitutional Court has an institutional memory of working on constitutional reform, with established procedures and mechanisms that could greatly contribute to more effective discussions and revisions of the draft constitution. The fourth step is to consider turning to the traditional institutions of Kyrgyz society, such as *kurultais* (public congresses of respected leaders) and courts of *aksakals* (the elderly), in legitimizing the consultation and revision process and the referendum itself. While these traditional institutions do not carry much weight in the cosmopolitan and westernized capital Bishkek, in rural areas — especially in remote districts — they are highly respected. Moreover, during the last decade they developed into quite a reputable conflict mediating and law enforcement institution.

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KADYROV'S CONTACTS WITH ISRAEL AND THE JIHADIST THREAT

Dmitry Shlapentokh

A visible increase has taken place in contacts between members of the North Caucasian elite and Israel. Ramzan Kadyrov's recent overtures to Israel, in which he acted as an independent ruler, rather than as a governor of the Russian Federation, should demonstrate that Moscow has little power over his actions. By closing its eyes to such activities on part of the North Caucasian elite, or even possibly encouraging them, the Kremlin wants to increase its contacts with Israel. An even more important reason is the persistent instability in North Caucasus, where Moscow is still unable to find any alternative to Kadyrov.

BACKGROUND: Recently, several members of the North Caucasian elite, all Muslims, visited Israel or expressed their positive attitude toward the country in other ways. The visit of Kabardino-Balkarian president Arsen Kanokov on March 6, 2010, was certainly not the first time a member of the North Caucasian elite visited Israel without prior announcement. On March 16, Nursolta Adaev, chief of Chechnya's Trade-Industrial Chamber arrived in Israel. Adaev is viewed as a close associate of Kadyrov, and met with Israeli businessman and politician Valerii Migirov, who originates in the North Caucasus. Ramzan Kadyrov himself has expressed his warm feelings for Israel. While Israeli newspapers that assessed his views came to the conclusion that Kadyrov is hardly different from a member of the Taliban or any other jihadist, Kadyrov himself emphasized that he was a dedicated Muslim but that this did not stop him from demonstrating his fascination with Israel and the Israelis. He seemed especially fond of Israeli soccer players and decided to hire one for almost half a million US\$. Approximately the same amount was transferred to the club to which the soccer player belonged. The player later stated "I met him (Kadyrov) during my first training

exercise. He approached me warmly, embraced me. It was quite a warm encounter". Israeli businessmen have also been active in forging commercial and personal ties in the area including with the increasingly radicalized Dagestan.

One of the reasons for Kadyrov's flirtation with Israel and his way of spending money in a royal-type fashion is Kadyrov's increasing tendency to behave as an independent ruler. Installed in 2004 by the Kremlin in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Beslan, Kadyrov was entrusted with the task to Chechenize of the conflict, relieving the Kremlin of its engagement in a bloody open-ended conflict. In exchange for fighting the war and an outward manifestation of loyalty, Kadyrov had received not only large subsidies but also a considerable level of autonomy. Kadyrov eagerly took on the role and demonstrated his skills as not just a dashing semi-criminal warlord but also a skillful Machiavellian politician who set as his goal complete independence from Moscow, if not de jure then at least de facto.

He engaged in the elimination of those Chechen forces that were not directly controlled by him. He also sought to limit the



presence of Russian forces directly controlled by Moscow. He recently proclaimed that Moscow should remove from Chechnya various police and paramilitary units brought there from Russia. While Moscow argued that these forces are needed to ensure an efficient fight against the jihadists, Kadyrov stated that the presence of these forces is not needed, that they induced enormous costs to the Federal treasury, and that the funds would be better spent on people living in abysmal conditions. He does not seem to have changed his mind in this respect, even after the recent spectacular

terrorist attacks, which demonstrated that the resistance is largely alive and well.

Of course, the detachments from the Russian heartland are deployed less for fighting the jihadists than for keeping an eye on Kadyrov; which is largely the reason why Kadyrov wanted them out of Chechnya. Feeling that Moscow could exercise little control over him, he has increasingly embarked on foreign trips and other gestures, not as the governor of a Russian province but more as the ruler of an independent state. His overtures to Israel and his spending of a considerable amount of money on Israeli soccer players should be considered in this context. Moscow is clearly displeased, and one Russian official rebuked Kadyrov that during his visit

to Saudi Arabia he behaved as if the Russian foreign ministry does not exist. Moscow demonstrated its frustration by allowing Geidar Dzhemal, who is known for his radical views, to proclaim on TV that Kadyrov could well become an American puppet.

IMPLICATIONS: A variety of reasons exist for the increasing contacts between Kadyrov and Israel, as well as for Moscow's tolerance toward Kadyrov's independent behavior during foreign trips.

While the Kremlin is rather happy about Kadyrov's promotion of contacts between

Russia and Israel, the most important reason is that the situation in the North Caucasus shows few signs of improvement. The region continues to simmer and jihadism risks spreading to the Russian heartland. A telling example is the case of Said Buriatsky, a young man of mixed origin. One of his parents was Russian, the other Buryat. Neither was Muslim and Buriatsky was originally a Buddhist; however, he later in his life converted to Islam and became a dedicated jihadist. Buriatsky was recently killed together with Amir Seifullakh, another jihadist luminary. Still, hundreds of militants continue to roam the mountains and the Kremlin is aware that the elimination of key targets does not change the situation much. Moreover, the death of some jihadists such as Buriatsky, whose dead body and farewell conversation with fellow jihadists before the final stand with the Russian forces were presented on a jihadist web site, made him a martyr whose death might bring new recruits to the jihadists. The recent splash of terrorist attacks in Russia, including in Moscow, along with Doku Umarov's promise to launch new attacks in the heartland, clearly indicate that the war in the Caucasus is far from over.

All these factors affect Moscow's policy toward Kadyrov. On one hand, it closes its eyes on Kadyrov's continuous desire to clean Chechnya of any forces not directly controlled by him. On the other hand, Moscow seeks to gain benefits from some of Kadyrov's foreign adventures, which they could not prevent anyway.

And how does Israel fit into this design? The major reason why these players engage in mutual flirtation and tolerate each other within certain limits is not only linked to common interests such as the fear of jihadism. Still such considerations play an increasingly important

role not only for Moscow, but also for Israel. The ideological and universalistic anti-Semitism of the jihadists has inspired anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish actions and feelings in new locations, such as the Northern Caucasus, Central Asia and Pakistan. These anti-Israeli forces have also become the enemies of Kadyrov and the Kremlin, which is the main reason for the increasing interaction between these actors, in spite of the ever increasing discord between Kadyrov and Moscow.

CONCLUSIONS: Kadyrov had demonstrated an exceptional friendliness toward Israel and behaves not as Russian governor but increasingly as an independent ruler in these contacts. Moscow seems to have accepted this behavior, for several reasons. One such reason is that the Kremlin feels that the relationship between the U.S. and Israel has soured. The Kremlin is also aware of the large number of Russian Jews in Israel who often harbor quite positive views of Russia. Such factors certainly stimulate the Kremlin to use the North Caucasian elite for establishing additional contacts. However, Moscow is also concerned over the continuous existence and even spread of jihadism and assumes that while Kadyrov's rule is of little help in resolving the jihadist problem, it at least serves to maintain stability in Chechnya. Thus, on the one hand, the Kremlin closes its eyes to Kadyrov's continuous desire to clean Chechnya from any forces not directly controlled by him. On the other hand, it hopes to benefit from Kadyrov's foreign adventures, which it could not have prevented anyway.

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RESUMED DEADLOCK IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AT THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE KARABAKH CEASE-FIRE

Haroutiun Khachatryan

The process of Turkish-Armenian normalization, which could potentially have brought improvements to the regional inter-state political climate in the South Caucasus and helped resolving the current deadlock, is suspended, having encountered serious domestic obstacles to ratification in Turkey. This seemingly puts an end to the international mediation efforts to defuse the explosive situation in the region. As a result, Armenia and Azerbaijan have toughened their positions on Nagorno-Karabakh, and the situation has become increasingly dangerous ahead of the 16th anniversary of the cease-fire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

BACKGROUND: Starting from the cease-fire between Armenia, Azerbaijan and the unrecognized authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh, which entered into force on May 12, 1994, the South Caucasus has remained in a deadlock. The continuing efforts of the conflicting sides to reach consensus over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh have brought few results. These efforts were supported by the mediators of the OSCE Minsk Group and since 1997 by the three co-chairs of this body; the U.S., Russia and France. During these years, trade across most of Armenia's land borders was embargoed from both east and west. Turkey has since 1993 supported Azerbaijan through placing an embargo on Armenia, seeking to isolate it both economically and politically and cutting all diplomatic relations, hoping that this would force Armenia to make concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh. These hopes remained unfulfilled over the following fifteen years, and in 2008 Turkey initiated a new policy for the region, which was supposedly more independent from that of Azerbaijan.

Following the Georgian-Russian war, Turkey put forward the idea of a "security platform" in

the South Caucasus, which could become a reality only if its relations with Armenia were normalized. To that end, Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols on the normalization of bilateral relations on October 10, 2009, the protocols making no reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The implementation of these protocols was intended to relieve the geopolitical deadlock in the entire region, enhancing mutual trust between the countries and peoples. This was the main reason why the normalization on the basis of these protocols was supported by the above-mentioned three great powers, as well as the EU.

However, Turkish officials later returned to their previous positions, stating that the protocols with Yerevan would not be enacted unless Armenia made concessions to Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. This again led the Armenian-Turkish process to a deadlock, which is especially evident by the fact that Armenia, the party with most to gain from the process, suspended its ratification procedure on April 22. The deadlock seems especially serious given the fact that the domestic situation in Turkey is a more important reason



Serzh Sargsyan

for this retreat than the officially voiced concerns over the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

In parallel, Azerbaijan, which has strongly opposed the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, recently reached an agreement with Turkey on gas exports, promising to supply Turkey and the Nabucco pipeline with cheap natural gas on the condition that the Turkish-Armenian normalization would not progress. In addition, Azerbaijan has recently made clear that it is unhappy with Washington's policy, which has allegedly had a very pro-Armenian position in

both the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and its relations with Turkey.

IMPLICATIONS: The freezing of the Armenian-Turkish normalization process means that a real opportunity for improving the regional situation has been postponed indefinitely. Beside a failure of the Turkish policy of "zero problems with neighbors", this could potentially lead to a new worsening of the situation in the region. It is unlikely that the consolidated pressure of Turkey and Azerbaijan will force Armenia to make a concession over Nagorno-Karabakh, as this policy has already failed to produce results for seventeen years now. Quite the contrary, concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh by any side, including Armenia, will only be possible if some improvement is achieved in the regional setting, which would result in increasing trust between the countries. Currently Turkey, as a powerful regional state, is the only player capable of initiating such a process. Its solidarity with Azerbaijan, which openly speaks about

the possibility of starting a new war over Nagorno-Karabakh, makes Armenia even less inclined to even minor concessions and increases the risks of a new regional meltdown.

Azerbaijan's increasingly critical position toward U.S. policies in the region seems ill-conceived as Russia, the main rival of the U.S. in the region, is a political and military ally of Armenia and can thus hardly be regarded as an alternative to the U.S. for Azerbaijan. The fact that the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev rejected the Russian invitation to attend an informal CIS summit on May 8 demonstrated



Ilham Aliyev

that Azerbaijan is reluctant to establish excessively friendly relations with Moscow. The reason for Aliyev's reluctance to attend the meeting was that he did not want to meet his Armenian counterpart on that day. On May 8, 1992, the troops of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh occupied Shusha, a major city in Nagorno-Karabakh with Serzh Sargsyan (now the President of Armenia) as Defense Minister of the unrecognized republic. Moreover, Azerbaijan's criticism toward the U.S. is unlikely to bring any benefits to Baku, as the U.S. and Russia have long shared a common position both on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and on supporting the Turkish-Armenian normalization. These positions are shared by France as well, which makes questionable the promise of gas supplies to Europe through the Nabucco pipeline as a

political lever in Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia. As the bellicose rhetoric of Azerbaijan increases, the danger of resumed violence in the region increases.

In short, the situation in the South Caucasus has returned to the deadlock it was in two years ago. The promises of Turkish officials that an improvement in Turkey's relations with Armenia could take place "in months and even weeks" seem increasingly unrealistic as the Turkish government has serious domestic problems and the situation in the South Caucasus is not a priority for it now.

CONCLUSIONS: The failure of the Turkish-Armenian normalization process has extended the tense situation in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has used all available levers on Turkey, ranging from ethnic solidarity to promised gas supplies, to prevent its ally from improving its relations with Armenia. As the domestic problems of Turkey seem to have contributed considerably to these difficulties, the region is returning to a dangerous deadlock. As the cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh enters its seventeenth year, the situation is becoming increasingly tense and the half-hearted international efforts to prevent a resumption of violence seem unlikely to bear fruit.

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MEDVEDEV'S NEW KING-MAKERS IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

Kevin Daniel Leahy

Since his inauguration as Russia's president in May 2008, Dmitri Medvedev has pursued a distinctive cadre policy in respect of the Northern Caucasus. In a little under two years in office, Medvedev has replaced the leaders of three republics – Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, Dagestan – and has even appointed a new envoy-minister to oversee the region. Recent events have given rise to speculation about Medvedev's intentions toward Chechnya's current pro-Moscow political elite, led by Ramzan Kadyrov. Are Medvedev's intentions toward Kadyrov benign or otherwise? Moreover, in what ways has Medvedev's presidency changed the decision making hierarchy established by his predecessor in this critical area of Russia's regional policy?

BACKGROUND: In late March, Chechnya's pro-Moscow parliament issued a statement criticising the newly appointed presidential representative to the North Caucasus Federal District (SKFO), Alexander Khloponin. The parliamentarians complained that Khloponin – appointed by President Medvedev in January – was not acknowledging Chechnya's pre-eminent status among the republics of the Northern Caucasus. They also alluded negatively to rumours that Khloponin was considering appointing Bislan Gantemirov and Akhmed Khasambekov to his staff. Both of these individuals have quarrelled with Kadyrov in the past and are personae non gratae in their homeland. In this instance, as in most others, the Chechen parliament was merely voicing Kadyrov's personal opinions. Kadyrov received Khloponin's initial appointment somewhat reservedly, telling journalists: "If there are intermediaries between the government authorities of the Russian Federation and presidents of the republics, it is already a weakness."

In March, Khloponin criticized Chechen officials – including Kadyrov – for travelling to Middle Eastern countries without coordinating

their activities with the Russian ministry of foreign affairs. However, the prospect of Bislan Gantemirov gaining access to the new envoy-minister seems to have brought matters to a head for Kadyrov and his advisors. Khloponin has not confirmed that he is considering Gantemirov's candidacy for this role, but the very fact that Kadyrov believes that such deliberations are taking place demonstrates an element of uncertainty in his relationship with Khloponin, and by extension, with Medvedev.

There was no such uncertainty in Kadyrov's relationship with Medvedev's predecessor. During Vladimir Putin's time as president, Kadyrov had ready access to him through the office of Vladislav Surkov, then Putin's deputy chief of staff. Putin and Surkov were the key decision makers with respect to Chechnya until Medvedev's election in 2008, and both have remained voices of considerable import in this especially secretive sphere of official decision making. Nevertheless, Medvedev's election has coincided with the broadening – some would say the dichotomization – of Moscow's decision making process with respect to Chechnya and the rest of the Northern Caucasus. Aside from Khloponin, Medvedev has introduced his chief



Alexander Khloponin (Igor Tabakov / MT)

of staff, Sergei Naryshkin, into this process. Indeed, Naryshkin has already made his influence felt, successfully lobbying for Yunus-Bek Yevkurov to be appointed president of Ingushetia. Naryshkin was also reportedly in favor of appointing Magomed Abdullayev as president of Dagestan in February. The fact that Magomedsalam Magomedov was ultimately chosen instead of Abdullayev (who was appointed prime minister) suggests that Naryshkin's influence remains limited. Indeed, the prolonged delay which preceded the announcement of Dagestan's new president suggested a difference of opinion at the federal level between those who supported Abdullayev's candidacy and those who recommended a more seasoned candidate. If the prolonged presidential vetting process in the case of Dagestan was indicative of a slightly less exclusive decision making process at federal level, it also demonstrated how opaque this process continues to be.

IMPLICATIONS: The introduction of Naryshkin and Khloponin (and Medvedev, of course) into this decision making dynamic has affected successive changes of leadership in

Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ingushetia and Dagestan. As yet, there are no indications that Medvedev and his advisors are contemplating regime change in Chechnya. Were such deliberations taking place, however, it is unlikely that Medvedev, Naryshkin and Khloponin would be able to keep their discussions a secret from Surkov, who has stayed on in the Kremlin as Naryshkin's assistant. With Putin's departure for the Russian White House, Surkov is now Kadyrov's sole high-level benefactor in the Kremlin.

The frequency of Kadyrov's contact with Putin has been curtailed in recent years. With Surkov remaining in the Kremlin, the role of liaison between Putin and Kadyrov had apparently devolved onto Sergei Sobyenin, one of Putin's deputies. Kadyrov established a sound, albeit fleeting, relationship with Sobyenin, even speaking of him in the same breath as Surkov and publicly recommending him for the envoy-minister post ultimately filled by Khloponin. In Kadyrov's view, Khloponin's appointment represented an unnecessary complication in his relationship with Moscow. The fact that Khloponin was made a deputy prime minister as well as a presidential envoy was particularly provocative, Kadyrov perceiving it as an attempt to sever his link with Putin via Sobyenin.

Against this unnerving backdrop, Kadyrov succumbed to the mendacity of hearsay, commissioning his agents in Chechnya's parliament to publicly criticize Khloponin for allegedly associating with two of his political enemies. On April 8, Khloponin arrived in Chechnya on an official visit. There was no evidence of any great tension between the two

principals, Kadyrov greeting Khloponin cordially at Grozny airport before conducting him on a tour of his father's gravesite, a visit that has become customary for visiting dignitaries from Moscow.

The two men later fielded questions from journalists, Khloponin declaring himself 'very pleased' with the progress made in rebuilding the republic's infrastructure. The success of Khloponin's visit suggests that his relationship with the Chechen leader will improve over time. Even a superficial analysis of Kadyrov's political career reveals his proneness to overreaction in the face of perceived slights. (Recall, for example, Kadyrov's overreaction to the Mohammed cartoon controversy in February 2006; also Kadyrov's extreme overreaction in April 2006 when he was excluded from a meeting between Chechnya's then-president, Alu Alkhanov, and Sergei Stepashin.) Medvedev's decision to install Khloponin as a bureaucratic umpire governing Kadyrov's access (and that of other leaders in the SKFO) to both branches of the federal government undoubtedly bothered the Chechen president. There is also the fact that in contrast to his two immediate predecessors in the envoy role, Khloponin is a capable, high-profile politician with considerable personal wealth. Kadyrov, who has sound political instincts, has sensed that Khloponin is not an individual who is easily intimidated, manipulated or circumnavigated. As such, the recent demarche issued by Chechnya's parliamentarians is more usefully categorized as a plea for attention and reassurance from Kadyrov rather than as a personality clash between him and Khloponin.

CONCLUSIONS: It was perhaps inevitable that a Medvedev presidency would lead to changes in the pre-existing decision making process regarding Chechnya and the rest of the

North Caucasus. In assessing the current group of decision makers in this sphere – Medvedev, Putin, Naryshkin, Khloponin, Surkov – one must be careful not to divine rivalries where there are none. The dynamics of Moscow's decision making in the North Caucasus cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy such as 'Medvedev's team' versus 'Putin's team'. For instance, the rapid career advancement of Sergei Naryshkin – a politician usually associated with Medvedev – arguably owes more to Vladimir Putin than to anybody else – Naryshkin worked for Putin in the mayor's office in St. Petersburg in the early nineties. He also served an apprenticeship on Putin's staff from 2004. Also, how could such a simplistic formula explain the role of Vladislav Surkov, an influential politician to whom both Putin and Medvedev owe a great deal? Instead, it is best to consider this sphere of decision making as a highly exclusive forum, whose members lobby one another on behalf of respective – or mutual – clients who are political or financial stakeholders in various parts of the Northern Caucasus. Sometimes, with respect to major decisions, a broad consensus is arrived at by all of the participants in this process – the appointment of Yevkurov as president of Ingushetia, for example. On other occasions – the recent selection of a new president of Dagestan, for instance – there is no consensus and the interested parties must bargain and compromise. By making this decision making process slightly less exclusive, Medvedev is automatically reducing the likelihood that consensus will be achieved in respect of any upcoming personnel choices in the region.

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FIELD REPORTS

FORMER PRESIDENT'S SUPPORTERS CALL FOR KYRGYZSTAN'S PARTITION

Joldosh Osmonov

Supporters of the ousted President Bakiyev in southern Kyrgyzstan demand dividing the country into two autonomous states. The Interim Government condemned the initiative pointing at the absurdity of the idea, while law enforcement bodies promise to take “harsh measures within the law” against the instigators. Despite the fact that such a scenario is highly unlikely, it might gain wider support from the public in light of the new government’s failure to stabilize the situation in the southern region, experts say.

The Committee on protecting the ousted former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, which was created right after his escape from the country, demands the creation of a federative state of Kyrgyzstan. According to the proposal, the Kyrgyz Federation should consist of two autonomous states with equal powers – the Southern and Northern Kyrgyz Democratic States. At the same time, the two independent states are to share a single currency and common army, border service, and ministry of emergency situations. As Tolon Diykanbaev, the head of the committee, states, “it is impossible to stabilize the situation in the country without considering and solving this issue”. The separation initiators are planning to address the Interim Government to consider their proposal while discussing the new version of the Constitution, the referendum on which is to be held in a month.

The calls for separation are actively being voiced in the southern regions. Provocative leaflets and CDs that include the former president’s speeches and

statements where Bakiyev accords full responsibility for the bloody April events on the provisional government are being massively distributed in the biggest southern cities such as Osh, Jalalabad and Karasuu. “The leaflets and CDs are thrown at the doors of people’s houses, markets and public places and mostly during nighttime, thus it is hard to catch them”, said Tologon Keldibekov, the deputy head of Osh regional office of the “Ata Meken” political party. These provocative materials are labeled as belonging to the so-called “Opposition People’s Front to the Interim Government.”

The Interim Government has appealed to the public, asking them not to yield to the provocations. Almazbek Atambaev, the deputy head of the Interim Government, stated while answering questions on air that the “idea of creating a southern Kyrgyz state is

absurd – our people will never let it happen”. Nevertheless, despite the impossibility of the idea, the Interim Government realizes that such provocations can destabilize the security situation. Omurbek Tekebaev, another deputy head of the Interim Government called the initiative “a dangerous tendency,” and in light of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, such provocations aimed at destabilizing the country are likely to intensify.

Meanwhile, the security services and police claim that these acts will be harshly suppressed. “We have considered this case at the joint commission of law enforcement bodies. Appropriate measures will be taken against instigators” stated Baktybek

Alymbekov, acting Interior Minister, at the press conference. The head of the State Committee for National Security, Keneshbek Duyshebaev, added that they have enough evidence to prove that former President Bakiyev and his relatives are behind of all these activities.

Agreeing with the earlier statement, former Prime Minister Felix Kulov accused Bakiyev's brothers, who are wanted by the authorities, of subversive activities. "They (Bakiyev's brothers) realize that during periods of instability it is easier to hide and travel around the country", Kulov said in an interview with "Kommersant" news agency.

It is notable that the Kyrgyz General Prosecutor's Office already instituted 23 criminal cases against Bakiyev's family and close allies. Moreover, the new authorities promise monetary rewards (ranging from US\$ 20,000 to US\$ 100,000) for information on the location of these people. In the meantime, the head of the Interim Government, Roza Otunbaeva, signed a special decree on removing the immunity of Bakiev as a former Kyrgyz President and

entrusted the General Prosecutor's Office with working on the former leader's extradition to Kyrgyzstan to face trial.

The north-south division of the country became relevant during and after the Tulip Revolution in 2005 when Bakiyev, a southerner, replaced the northerner Askar Akaev. Political experts claim that the regional disagreements were used by Bakiyev and his clan to gain the support of southerners who comprise more than half the population of the country. Now, the ousted former President and his allies are seeking to mobilize the southern population by playing the "north-south" game, the experts say.

As the experts claim, the creation of a federative state will destroy Kyrgyz statehood in light of existing regional disagreements and ineffective and weak state institutions. A separation is unlikely due to the lack of mass support. However, due to the unstable situation in southern Kyrgyzstan, such radical separatist ideas might win wider sympathy, the experts concluded.

TOLL ROAD INTRODUCED IN TAJIKISTAN

Suhrob Majidov

Tajikistan's first toll road was opened on the route of the Dushanbe-Chanak highway on April 1, 2010. The road connects the capital city Dushanbe with Soghd province in the northern part of Tajikistan and ends at the border between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The tolling mechanism will be implemented by the company "Innovative Road Solution LTD", from which all tolling equipment for the Dushanbe-Chanak road is rented by the Government of Tajikistan.

Tajik media report that from the first day, road tolls stirred resentment from the local population and drew criticism from independent experts and some politicians. Drivers are not happy with the prices and traffic jams on the stations of payment.

Among those most affected by the new toll road is the population of Varzob district. This suburban district is situated at the beginning of the road. Most of the able-bodied population of the district, lacking job opportunities in their mountainous district, works either in Dushanbe or as taxi drivers on the aforementioned road. Therefore, people of the districts around the toll road are outraged by the fact that they have to pay to use the only road connecting their district with Dushanbe, since there are no alternative or bypass roads. Thus the local population believes that the paid road will have a significant impact on their economic situation.

Experts reiterate that according to the Constitution of Tajikistan, using roads is free of charge. In spite of this, the Parliament of Tajikistan allowed this

tolling mechanism to be implemented by a private company. The issue was discussed during a closed parliamentary meeting almost a year ago. While a few MPs were against it, pointing to the contradiction between the constitution and the planned mechanism, the decision was taken by a majority vote. Shodi Shabdolov, an MP, claims that according to international norms toll roads can be introduced only if there are alternative roads.

Some observers are concerned with the economic implications of the paid road for the local population. The average monthly salary of the local population is about 70-80 somoni (about US\$ 15-18) and the introduction of a toll road will significantly worsen their livelihoods. For instance, a resident of Varzob district, who goes to Dushanbe every day for work and back home, would need to pay about seven somoni per day for the toll road. Furthermore, some experts claim that the introduction of a toll mechanism on the Dushanbe-Chanak road will increase the prices for most consumer goods; since the road is the main road for goods imported to Tajikistan.

Meanwhile, according to a public opinion poll conducted by the local newspaper "Nikokh", 43.4 percent of the interviewees are negative towards the introduction of a toll road while 30 percent have a very negative attitude. Only 15.8 percent support the introduction of a toll road.

Government representatives ask the population for patience and support for the Government's innovations. The Minister of Transport and

Communications of Tajikistan Olimjon Boboev believes that the "government's efforts to develop a public-private partnership will be a drive for further development and improvement of the social-economic situation in our country". The Government claims that the tolling mechanism will ensure that one of the main roads in Tajikistan will be maintained according to international standards, with timely preventive maintenance.

Politicians and experts are not so concerned over the question of introducing toll roads in Tajikistan or not, but rather with where the money collected from the use of the road will go and why the toll contracts were given to the unknown company "Innovative Road Solutions LTD". The company was apparently registered only a year ago with the particular aim to introduce the toll mechanism on the Dushanbe-Chanak road. The company has no experience in such projects and did not take any part in the construction or renovation of the aforementioned road. Finally, the company was chosen without any competition, i.e. no tender was announced.

Media experts believe that all these circumstances, including the fact that the decision to introduce the toll road was passed very quickly through Parliament despite contradictions and public indignation, denotes that some very influential figures from within the Government are behind the company and have their own interest in the road business.

ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK HOLDS ANNUAL MEETING IN UZBEKISTAN

Erkin Akhmadov

On May 1-4, 2010, the 43rd annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) board of governors took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. More than three thousand participants attended the

meeting, including heads of government, chairmen of central banks, ministers of finance, representatives of business and science, and journalists. Tashkent was satisfied with the

outcomes of the meeting in general, as they signed four credit contracts of over US\$ 1.15 billion. In addition to a substantial financial package and in spite of certain controversies with the human rights situation in the country, the ADB authorities showed that they are interested in the stability of Uzbekistan, assuming that this is an essential condition for stability in the whole region.

The ADB is one of the major donors to Uzbekistan's economy, and holds the primary place among all the international financial institutions on investment cooperation with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan started to cooperate with the ADB in 1995. With credit resources of US\$ 1.2 billion provided to the country from 1996, eleven projects have already been implemented and fifteen more are currently under implementation. The ADB has mainly financed projects in the spheres of education, agriculture, modernization of transport infrastructure and the energy sector.

As it was the first time in the ADB's history that the board of governors convened in a Central Asian republic, many observers were puzzled by the bank's decision. The President of the ADB, Mr. Haruhiko Kuroda, however, emphasized that the bank is not a political organization, and the venue for its meeting was chosen on the basis of availability of sufficient infrastructure for the reception of large delegations. In addition, Mr. Kuroda noted the good shape of the Uzbek economy, underlining that Uzbekistan had suffered less from the world crisis than many other states and that the Uzbek authorities took timely measures for expanding investments in economic development, improving financial and tax policies, economic diversification, and for supporting industry, infrastructure and the internal market, as well as the social sphere. As a result of this, Mr. Kuroda believes, Uzbekistan was able to keep its economic growth, which in 2009 amounted to 8.1 percent of GDP.

Some local observers report, however, that Tashkent took several measures to create an image

of positive economic development. For instance, it fudged statistics suddenly by reducing interest rates on deposits by over 50 percent. An absolute deficit of cash was created in order to demonstrate positive inflation rates, implying that the majority of state employees now receive their salaries on plastic cards, from which it is virtually impossible to withdraw any money. Furthermore, some sources report that on the eve of the ADB meeting the Uzbek authorities "pressed" the shadow markets for currency to lower the unofficial rate of the Sum.

Another controversial issue on the eve of the big summit concerned human rights activists. On April 28, a non-governmental organization called "ADB Forum" – a network of 250 civil society organizations that monitors the bank's activities from 1992 – boycotted the ADB meeting in Tashkent. As the NGO's executive director Dr. Avilash Roule stated: "the decision of the ADB to hold its annual meeting in Tashkent is not only non-transparent, but also approves the pressure on human rights and freedom of expression carried out by the Uzbek authorities". Neither the ADB, nor Uzbek authorities reacted to such statements. The boycott was cancelled as representatives of civil society simply were not invited to the event. In fact, it would be impossible to hold any boycotts as Tashkent became a closed city during the days of the meeting.

It should be noted that as a financial institution, the ADB does not address human rights issues as its primary concern. In relation to this, Mr. Kuroda mentioned that "improvement of the human rights situation in Asia can be achieved by fighting poverty and enhancing livelihoods".

All in all, the meeting was a success both for the ADB and for Uzbekistan. As some experts say, in spite of all the controversies the ADB needs Tashkent to promote its power transmission lines, railroad and other infrastructural projects in the whole region. Tashkent, in turn, greatly benefits from investments of the bank for the development of its own infrastructure and banking system.

ARMENIA IS SET TO AMEND ITS DEFAMATION LEGISLATION

Vahagn Muradyan

The ruling coalition parties in Armenia's parliament have started decriminalization of libel and insult provisions in an attempt to regulate relations between media and public officials. The amendments to the Criminal and Civil Codes, passed in the first reading on March 18, abolish criminal liability for defamatory statements and set pecuniary compensation for victims of libel and insult. If passed, Armenia will join only a small number of countries in wider Europe that had decriminalized defamation – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Estonia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the UK. The amendments place the burden of proof on the defendant, stipulating its transfer to the plaintiff if unreasonable efforts are required to prove the truth by the defendant. The highest fine that can be imposed by courts on media outlets for disseminating defamatory information is 2000 times the minimum salary – around US\$ 5,000.

The amendments already received a largely positive assessment from the Council of Europe. A complete decriminalization of libel and repeal of Article 318 of the Criminal Code which sets out the offence of “insulting a representative of the public authorities” has been long demanded by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that monitors democratic reforms in Armenia.

Despite the fact that journalists would be the primary beneficiaries, the amendments have raised concerns among media professionals who fear the authorities are trying to use progressive legislation to tighten control over media. Instituting criminal proceedings against journalists for libel and insult can invite sharp international criticism, the opponents of the amendments argue. Therefore, the authorities may consider civil proceedings as a safer action to silence undesirable media. These arguments were voiced once again at the hearings on April 9 organized at the National Assembly. Main concerns expressed were the lack of clear

mechanisms for implementation, a high degree of discretion given to the courts, the size of fines considered incommensurate with financial capacities of especially the print and internet media, and finally distrust towards the judiciary.

The last point seems to be the most valid concern. The flaws in Armenia's court system once again came to the fore with the release on March 8, 2010, of the OSCE/ODIHR trial monitoring report on the cases of opposition supporters after the post-election violence in Yerevan on March 1-2, 2008. The report revealed serious shortcomings regarding the equality before the law, and the tendency of judges to display “openly friendly attitudes towards the prosecution and openly hostile attitudes towards the defense”.

The concern about disproportionately high fines that can threaten the existence of media outlets, on the other hand, still needs further substantiation. Against the example of recent developments in Kazakhstan where the court imposed a US\$ 400,000 fine on Respublika newspaper, and Tajikistan where libel charges were pressed against three newspapers claiming more than US\$ 1.2 million in damages, Armenia has little experience in civil libel proceedings and lacks a reasonable number of cases that could justify the fear of abuse. Nevertheless, lingering polarization after the March 2008 crisis and highly politicized journalistic practices continue to fuel misgivings about the selective application of justice.

However, the few cases recorded so far provide contrary evidence. The most recent and prominent defamation case was filed in April 2009 by the son of former President Robert Kocharyan against the pro-opposition *Haikakan Zhamanak Daily*, which ran an article claiming Kocharyan's son was arrested by police in Dubai after provoking a drunken fight. The court awarded the Kocharyan family 3.6 million

AMD (US\$ 9,600), substantially less than the initially demanded 16 million AMD (US\$ 43,000).

A low level of resort to civil law, as well as concerns about selectiveness, were further stressed in the case of Zaruhi Postanjyan, an MP from the opposition Heritage Party, who demanded a criminal case against the pro-government *Azatamutiun* newspaper, which published offensive content about the deputy. The investigation was quashed by the police and prosecutors. But Postanjyan successfully sought reopening of the case in March 2010.

Under the widely acknowledged European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case law – which Armenia has made part of its domestic legislation and jurisprudence – freedom of expression applies not only to information or ideas that are favorably received, but also to those that “offend, shock or

disturb”. Given the poor record of application of the ECHR case law in courts and political polarization, suspicion about differing perceptions and interpretations by courts nevertheless seems relevant.

In this context, out of court settlement and self-regulation are cited as a possible alternative, to avoid chilling effects. However, the effort in this direction made by the Yerevan Press Club, a leading media NGO, and the Media Ethics Observatory it has set up to monitor compliance still maintains a low profile, and is not viewed as a viable alternative. While the amendments do promise to reshape public relations, they also stress the relevance of developing higher standards of responsible journalism for Armenia’s sensitive political environment.



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.

NEWS DIGEST

GEORGIAN OPPOSITION, ACTIVISTS HOLD PROTESTS IN TBILISI

1 May

Georgian human rights activists and opposition members blocked a major street in central Tbilisi to demand the immediate release of political prisoners, RFE/RL's Echo of the Caucasus reports. The demonstrators first gathered on April 30 in front of the parliament building before blocking Rustaveli Avenue. The action was initiated by the nongovernmental organization Solidarity with Illegal Inmates. Leading political opposition leaders attended the protest, as did Manana Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia, the widow of late President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. She considers her son, Tsotne Gamsakhurdia, to be a political prisoner. He was recently sentenced to prison for attempted murder. Opposition leader Levan Gachechiladze said there were at least 50 people in prison that the opposition considers to be political prisoners. (RFE/RL)

AFGHANS DEMONSTRATE AGAINST IRANIAN EXECUTIONS

2 May

Hundreds of Afghans have staged a protest in front of the Iranian Embassy in Kabul, during which they set ablaze an effigy of Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. The chanting protesters were condemning last month's executions of Afghan prisoners in Iran, and also what they termed as Iran's mistreatment of Afghan refugees living in that country. One of the organizers of the protest, Abdul Mobin, told RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan that their aim is to highlight the importance of Afghan lives. The demonstrators called on the Afghan government to take strong action against the executions. According to recent reports, Iran has executed a number of Afghan prisoners for crimes such as drug smuggling. Radio Free Afghanistan says a spokesman from the Afghan Foreign Ministry, Abdul Zahir Faqiri, confirmed the executions, however, he could not give an exact number of those executed. (RFE/RL)

MILITANT VIDEO SHOWS KIDNAPPED AFGHAN ENVOY

3 May

A previously unknown militant group has released a video apparently showing an Afghan envoy kidnapped in Pakistan a year and a half ago. Abdul Khaliq Farahi was kidnapped in Peshawar in September 2008 before he was due to take up his post as ambassador to Pakistan. In the video, broadcast on local Pakistani TV, Farahi says he has been held captive for 18 months and appeals to Afghan authorities and the international community to save his life. He does not say what his captors are demanding but says they have accused him of working with the "U.S.-sponsored government of Afghanistan," which he says is punishable by death. It was the first such video to have appeared since the envoy's abduction. A previously unknown militant group, Kateeba Salahuddin Ayubi, claimed responsibility for Farahi's kidnapping. A Peshawar-based journalist with "The News International," which was among media outlets to receive the video, told RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal the group claimed to be from Afghanistan and have links with the Afghan Taliban. "Before this, we had no information about this group. This is a new name, and they say they have links with the Taliban in Afghanistan," says Mushtaq Yousufzai, who reports from the tribal areas along the countries' shared border. "But in my view, whenever such things happen, or such a high-profile person is kidnapped, groups which we had not known about before claim responsibility." (RFE/RL)

ATTACK DISRUPTS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN DAGESTAN GAS DISTRIBUTION FACILITIES

3 May

Unidentified assailants attacked and damaged the dispatcher office controlling some of Dagestan's gas distribution facilities early on Monday. "A criminal group of at least ten assailants attacked the

dispatcher office near the village of Kakashura in the Karabadakhken district at 5:30 a.m., Moscow time. The assailants ordered the operator, his wife and child at gunpoint to walk out. The equipment was removed from the building and some of it was damaged with shots, or blown up. The operator's home was burnt," a source in Dagestan's law enforcement services told Interfax. In a separate incident, shots were fired at a mobile phone tower near the gas operator's office, the source said. The attack left the equipment damaged and communication disrupted with eight gas distribution stations in Buinaksk, Karabadakhkent, Dzhingutai and other parts of Dagestan, he said. Police have arrived at the scene. Gas experts are working to restore communication with gas distribution facilities. (Interfax)

U.S. PLEDGES SUPPORT TO NEW KYRGYZ REGIME

4 May

The United States remains positive on the immediate plans to be implemented by Kyrgyzstan's interim government following the violent uprising last month that forced former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to flee the country, U.S. presidential advisor for Russia and Eurasia Michael McFaul told interim leader Roza Otunbayeva on Tuesday, according to the Kyrgyz government's press service. McFaul also pledged U.S. aid to Kyrgyzstan to tackle existing problems. The talks between Otunbayeva and McFaul dealt with ways to stabilize the socio-political and socio-economic situation in the country. Otunbayeva briefed McFaul on measures the interim government is taking and about plans to carry out constitutional reform and hold elections, the press service said. Otunbayeva said that a roadmap for the country's democratic restoration is being drawn up, which takes all aspects of state development into account. The interim leader said that various drafts of a new constitution are being studied. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ LEADER BAKIYEV STRIPPED OF IMMUNITY

4 May

The interim government in Kyrgyzstan said Tuesday it was stripping immunity from Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the ousted president with a \$100,000 bounty for his arrest. The Kyrgyz government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev was overthrown when supporters of an opposition movement clashed with riot police in early April.

The interim government charged Bakiyev with murder and abuse of power April 27. Opposition leader and interim Prime Minister Roza Otunbayeva in a decree stated that Bakiyev had allowed civilians to be killed during the April riots and "and thus deprived himself of the status of ex-president and of immunity," Russia's state-run news agency RIA Novosti reports. Kyrgyzstan gained independence in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Kyrgyzstan's official news agency Kabar said Monday that the interim government was offering a reward of up to \$100,000 for information leading to the arrest of Bakiyev and other top government officials. Bakiyev is taking shelter in Belarus and has refused to resign. The interim government said it would have a constitutional referendum June 27 and parliamentary elections Oct. 10. (UPI)

REPORT: UZBEKISTAN PERSECUTING ANDIJANS

4 May

Uzbekistan's government is harassing relatives of people suspected of participating in anti-government protests in Andijan, human rights advocates allege. Government forces killed hundreds of mostly unarmed people during the protests in May 2005, Human Rights Watch said in a release Tuesday. Since then, the government has continued to persecute the relatives of Andijan survivors seeking to leave the country, said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "There is a climate of fear in Andijan that is still palpable five years after the atrocities," she said, noting school officials humiliate the children of refugees while adults suspected of witnessing the massacre are being beaten, threatened and detained. The European Union and the United States should use the fifth anniversary of the protests to urge the Uzbek government to punish those responsible for the killings and to compensate victims, Cartner said. (UPI)

JAILED SON OF FORMER GEORGIAN PRESIDENT ON HUNGER STRIKE

4 May

The jailed son of late Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia has begun a hunger strike to demand his release from jail, RFE/RL's Georgian Service reports. It is the second hunger strike by Tsotne Gamsakhurdia since his arrest in October for allegedly shooting and injuring his neighbor with a

pistol. He was recently sentenced to nine years in jail for attempted murder in that case. But he and his mother, Manana Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia, say the incident was staged by the secret services. In February, Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia and her supporters tried to dig up the remains of her husband to protest the charges against her son. Supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his family have been staging regular protests in front of the parliament building calling for Tsotne's release. But Georgian officials say his verdict can only be changed by a court decision. Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the first democratically elected president of Georgia in 1991. He died under mysterious circumstances on December 31, 1993, at the age of 54 in the Zugdidi region during an unsuccessful attempt to reestablish control over the country. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION SLAMS PROPOSAL TO GIVE PRESIDENT "NATIONAL LEADER" STATUS

5 May

The opposition in Kazakhstan has slammed a proposal by lawmakers to give President Nursultan Nazarbayev the status of national leader. "This is an absolutely wrong idea. Nazarbayev and his entourage are demonstrating that they lack confidence (ahead of the elections). And they want to protect themselves with such a funny law," the co-chairman of the Azat (Freedom) Party, Bulat Abilov told Interfax on Wednesday. Abilov also said he would be monitoring the situation. "Naturally our reaction will follow," he said. Vladimir Kozlov, the leader of the unregistered opposition party Alga (Forward) said a law, giving Nazarbayev the status of national leader, would be too much. "One should not defend the innocent so zealously. This has no sense and should be stopped. As long as the lawmakers keep demanding so insistently that he become immune, they keep confirming the opposite time and time again, don't they," Kozlov told Interfax. Deputies of the lower house of parliament on Wednesday proposed passing two bills, granting Nazarbayev the status of national leader. The debates are expected to be held on June 25. Nazarbayev was first elected president on April 24 1990, when Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union. He was then re-elected in direct elections in 1991, 1999 and 2005. His powers as president were extended in a national referendum in 1995. (Interfax)

KAZAKHSTAN UPS GOLD, FOREX RESERVES 16% IN 4 MONTHS

5 May

Kazakhstan's gold and foreign-exchange reserves, including the National Bank's gross reserves and National Fund's resources, grew 5.2% in April and 16% during the first four months of 2010 to \$55.2 billion, the National Bank said. The National Bank's net reserves rose 8.4% in April and 27.2% in the four months to \$28.8 billion. The National Fund held \$25.8 billion of the total reserves. The National Bank said currency purchases in the domestic market and funds entered on government accounts with the National Bank were offset by a reduction in commercial bank correspondent accounts in foreign currency with the National Bank and by operations to service the government's foreign debt. Net forex reserves grew 8.6% in April, and assets in gold rose 5.9% due to higher prices for the metal. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN OPPOSITION CALLS FORTHCOMING POLICE PARADE "PROVOCATION"

5 May

Alliance For Georgia, an opposition political organization led by former Georgian ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasaniya, has called the parade of the Interior Ministry forces due to be held in Tbilisi on May 6 "a provocation." On Wednesday the Alliance issued a statement condemning a provocation by the authorities on the day when Orthodox Christians celebrate St. George's Day. Also, conducting a parade on the anniversary of the crackdown on a peaceful opposition demonstration is "an irresponsible and defying step," the statement said. "The authorities must remain calm ahead of the elections. The May 6 parade is a clear attempt to intimidate voters," the Alliance said. For her part, Nino Burdzhanaдзе, the leader of the Democratic Movement - United Georgia opposition party, called on police on Wednesday not to take part in the parade. "The attempt by authorities to thwart St. George's Day with a police parade is obvious. I am calling on policemen not to take part in the tomorrow parade," she told journalists. Meanwhile, the parliamentary majority saw "Moscow's hand" behind the opposition statements. "It is obvious whose interests include riots and provocations, as part of the opposition openly cooperates with the enemy - with Russia," one of the parliamentary majority leaders Giorgi Gabashvili told journalists.

Hopefully, everything will go quietly tomorrow, he said. (Interfax)

KYRGYZSTAN DEMANDS TOPPLED LEADER'S EXTRADITION

7 May

Prosecutors said Friday they have asked Belarus to extradite deposed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to Kyrgyzstan to face charges of complicity in murder and abuse of office. The request for Bakiyev's return came as Kyrgyzstan's interim government stepped up efforts to arrest of several of his relatives and former high-ranking officials. Belarus has signed an international extradition accord, so it is obliged to hand over Bakiyev, Kyrgyz General Prosecutor Azimbek Beknazarov said. But extradition appeared unlikely since Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has personally guaranteed Bakiyev refuge. Bakiyev fled Kyrgyzstan last month, more than a week after he was toppled from power amid violent clashes between government forces and demonstrators in which at least 85 people died. On Thursday, the international police agency Interpol placed one of Bakiyev's sons, Maksim, on its wanted list at the request of a Kyrgyz court. He is currently believed to be in the Baltic state of Latvia. Kyrgyz prosecutors said that companies owned by Maksim Bakiyev avoided almost \$80 million in taxes on aviation fuel sold to suppliers to a U.S. air base in the country, a key refueling point for warplanes flying over Afghanistan and a major hub for combat troop movement. The alleged tax evasion dates back to 2005, the year Kurmanbek Bakiyev came to power, prosecutors said. U.S. presidential adviser Michael McFaul visited Kyrgyzstan this week and proposed supplying fuel to the Manas base through Kyrgyz state companies to avoid accusations of financial impropriety. Other senior figures sought by the Kyrgyz authorities include Bakiyev's brother, Zhanybek, who is accused of issuing the order to fire at protesters in the capital, Bishkek, during street clashes April 7. The interim government is offering cash rewards for information leading to the arrest of several of Bakiyev's fugitive colleagues, including former Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov. The rewards of \$20,000 to \$100,000 are colossal in a country where the average monthly salary is \$130. Bakiyev swept to power in 2005 on a wave of street protests, but his public standing collapsed amid corruption allegations, worsening living conditions and repression. (AP)

AZERBAIJAN COMMITS GAS TO NABUCCO

7 May

Despite growing Russian interest in Azeri gas, Baku is ready to deliver half of its natural gas reserves to the Nabucco pipeline for Europe, officials said. Azerbaijan is a gas supplier to Russia, Iran, Turkey and Georgia. Its total recoverable natural gas reserves pass 70 trillion cubic feet. Russian energy giant Gazprom starting in 2010 agreed to buy 35 billion cubic feet of gas from Azerbaijan and around 70 billion cubic feet of gas in 2011, Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti reports. Ali Gazanov, the head of social and political developments for the Azeri government, added that his country was slated to deliver gas to Nabucco. "Azerbaijan attaches great importance to Nabucco," he said. "We are ready to supply 50 percent of Azerbaijani gas via the pipeline. The \$10.5 billion Nabucco pipeline aims to move gas from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and possible Middle East suppliers to Europe. Supplier nations, however, have been slow to commit to the 2,000-mile pipeline. German energy company and Nabucco consortium member RWE said there were delays in agreements for Nabucco with potential supplier nation Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, construction is to start in 2011 with first gas flowing by 2014. (UPI)

BAKU, ANKARA DISCUSS GAS PRICES

10 May

Officials from Azerbaijan and Turkey met in Baku to discuss terms of Turkish gas purchases from the Shah Deniz gas field, energy executives said Monday. Rovnag Abdullayev, the head of the State Oil Co. of Azerbaijan Republic, said officials from SOCAR met with a delegation from Turkish pipeline company BOTAS to discuss gas price terms. Both sides met to discuss the details of gas prices from the first and second stages of the Shah Deniz gas field. The price for transit of Azeri gas through Turkey was also discussed, the Trend news agency reports. Gas prices are under review as of April 15. Turkey pays \$120 per 1,000 cubic meters of Azeri gas, though consumers pay \$300 per 1,000 cubic meters. Azerbaijan lacks a direct gas pipeline to Europe. Negotiations with Turkey on transit terms led Baku to blame Ankara for transit delays because of price wrangling. Europe aims to bring gas from supplier nations like Azerbaijan through the planned 2,000-mile Nabucco pipeline. Nabucco would pass through Turkish territory once construction starts in 2011. Baku announced last

week that it was ready to deliver half of its natural gas reserves to the Nabucco pipeline. (UPI)

TAJIK NATIONAL SENTENCED FOR DRUG POSSESSION

12 May

The Frunzensky district court in St. Petersburg has sentenced Akbar Muborov, a Tajik national, to eight-and-a-half years in a maximum security prison for storing 127 kilograms of heroin, the regional office of the Federal Drug Control Service said in a statement. Muborov was detained on December 17, 2008. "Around 127 kilograms of heroin was found and seized during a search at his rented apartment at 48 Budapeshtskaya Street within the framework of a criminal case. Drugs packed in 78 plastic bags were stored on the balcony in several holdalls," the statement said. Investigators believe the seized heroin was to be distributed not only in St. Petersburg but also across other Russian regions. The seized heroin has a street value of several million U.S. dollars. (Interfax)

AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, ROMANIA SIGN PROTOCOL ON GAS EXPORTS

12 May

The energy ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Romania signed a protocol in Tbilisi today on forming a joint venture to export liquified natural gas (LNG) to Europe, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. Georgian Energy Minister Aleksandre Khetaguri told reporters the project could prove very profitable. Azerbaijani Energy Minister Natiq Aliyev said the protocol envisages the construction of new Black Sea coast terminals in Romania and Georgia that will be linked to pipelines. "It is a new corridor for Azerbaijan," Aliyev said. "This corridor will enable us to independently deliver our gas to Romania, also to Ukraine and Bulgaria. At the same time, we can cross to the Mediterranean Sea." Aliyev said a feasibility study will be done that will take one year, after which financial issues will be discussed and funding sought. "Companies or participating countries can finance the project," Aliyev said. "European Union organizations can also contribute to financing." (RFE/RL)

POLICE, ALLIES KILL 18 MILITANTS IN SOUTH AFGHANISTAN

11 May

Afghan police, troops and intelligence agents backed by NATO forces killed 18 militants in a joint

operation in Afghanistan's restive southern province of Helmand, the Interior Ministry said Tuesday. Six militants also were arrested during the operation in Helmand's Sangin district, the ministry said. It was one of a string of operations Monday that officials said left at least 30 insurgents dead in southern and eastern Afghanistan. NATO did not provide immediate comment. In the Shah Wali Kot district neighboring Kandahar province, one Afghan man was killed and a woman wounded after insurgents attacked a house Monday evening, deputy provincial police chief Fazel Ahmad Sherzad said. Sherzad said the man was targeted because of dealings with Afghan government officials, and that three insurgents were killed in fighting that occurred after the house was attacked. Thousands of U.S., NATO and Afghan forces are ramping up pressure on Kandahar — the birthplace of the former Taliban regime, whose insurgents have been trying to destabilize the government of President Hamid Karzai. Also Monday, in the Yayakhil district of southeastern Paktika province, allied forces killed three militants, the Interior Ministry said. Mohklis Afghan, a spokesman for Paktika's regional governor, said six Taliban fighters were killed and three others arrested in the Yusuf Khil district. Meanwhile, in the Qarabagh district of eastern Ghazni province, coalition and Afghan forces killed three Taliban fighters and detained four others, said deputy provincial police chief Abdul Ghani. (AP)

U.S. BAKING TERRORISTS, LARIJANI SAYS

11 May

There is evidence that U.S. agencies are supporting the activities of the Pakistani militant group Jundallah, Iranian officials said in Turkey. Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, told delegates at the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Istanbul that U.S. agencies were supporting terrorism in the region. He said Iran was ready to supply Pakistan with such information if necessary. Larijani said Iranian investigators uncovered the evidence following an examination of the February arrest of Jundallah leader Abdolmalek Rigi, Iranian state-funded broadcaster Press TV reports. The Iranians claimed Rigi was captured when Iranian fighter jets forced his flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan to land in Iran. Baluchi Kamal Narui, a spokesman for Jundallah, told London's pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that Rigi was arrested in Kandahar with the help of Israeli spies. Tehran claims the ringleader spoke

with Western officials before his arrest, adding he was carrying an Afghan passport when he was arrested. Larijani said that Washington had double standards in the region regarding its alleged support for terrorist groups. Washington doesn't list Jundallah on its national terrorism database. (UPI)

BAKIYEV'S SUPPORTERS RALLY IN BISHKEK

12 May

Kyrgyzstan's interim government faced its first large public protest Wednesday as supporters of deposed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev rallied in Bishkek to protest the dissolution of the parliament. Hundreds of supporters of Bakiyev's Ak Zhol party and the Communist party allied with it gathered in front of the parliament building, along with hundreds of other people who went there to mourn those killed in the April clashes. "Some of the protesters demanded that the parliament's power is restored," said human rights activist Toktoaim Umetaliyeva. The protest followed a brief detention of Communist leader Iskhak Masaliyev, who was questioned by prosecutors over the April events. (Reuters)

RUSSIA SEALS DEAL FOR TURKEY'S FIRST NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

12 May

Russia on Wednesday signed a 20-billion-dollar (15.8-billion-euro) deal to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant as President Dmitry Medvedev hailed expanding ties with the NATO member. "This agreement opens a new page in our cooperation... Our talks today showed that Turkey and Russia are strategic partners not only in words but in deeds," Medvedev told a joint news conference with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The deal to build and operate the plant at Akkuyu, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, was one of some 20 agreements signed by the two countries which Medvedev said would generate about 25 billion dollars of investment. Erdogan said construction of the plant would begin after both parliaments ratify the accord, and take seven years to complete. Russia has long looked to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant, but a Turkish court last year scrapped a tender won by a Russian-led consortium to build four reactors with a total capacity of 4,800-megawatts at Akkuyu. Wednesday's deal "is a very big contract," Sergei

Kiriyenko, the head of Russian nuclear corporation Rosatom, told reporters. "An approximate price of such a project is around 18-20 billion dollars." Kiriyenko said Russia would own the plant -- the first Russian-owned plant outside the country -- holding "no less than a controlling stake". As the two countries expressed a desire to triple trade volume to 100 billion dollars over the next five years, Medvedev said their national currencies -- the rouble and the lira -- should be used in bilateral trade. "We need to think how to dramatically expand the use of national currencies," he told a business forum, reiterating that both economies were too dependent on global reserve currencies, primarily the US dollar. The idea was floated in a confidential new foreign policy strategy prepared for Medvedev and published by Newsweek Russia this week. The two countries also signed a deal mutually lifting visas for stays of up to 30 days, a major boost to investors and millions of Russians holidaying at Turkey's Mediterranean coast each year. Despite sometimes shaky political ties, economic exchanges between the two countries have boomed since the fall of communism. In 2009, their trade volume stood at 22.9 billion dollars, making Russia one of Turkey's top commercial partners. Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 briefly strained relations with Turkey, which has close ties with the former Soviet republic, its northeastern neighbour. Russia is Turkey's main gas supplier, providing about 60 percent of the country's gas imports. (AFP)

OBAMA: WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN ON TRACK

12 May

President Barack Obama says the U.S. is still on track to begin bringing troops home from Afghanistan in July of next year. Obama says there have been steady signs of progress since he increased the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan late last year. But he said progress takes time and cautioned that the U.S. must commit to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan. Speaking during a joint news conference with Afghan President Hamid Karzai (HAH'-mihd KAR'-zeye), Obama said he is in constant discussions with his commanders in Afghanistan about how to execute the troop withdrawal. Karzai is in Washington for a series of meetings this week. (AP)