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ANALYTICAL ARTICLES:

RUSSIAN QUASI-FEDERALISM AND
GEORGIA'S NON-EXISTENT TERRITORIAL
INTEGRITY

Pavel K. Baev

RUMBLES IN THE TURKMEN ELITE

Slavomir Horak

RESTORING THE GEORGIA-RUSSIA RAILWAY
CONNECTION: GOOD OR BAD IDEA?

George Katcharava

ENVIRONMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE
RUSSIAN WAR ON CHECHNYA

Murad Batal al-Shishani

FIELD REPORTS:

A RALLY FOR DEMOCRACY IN
KYRGYZSTAN

Nurshat Ababakirov

ASTANA SEEKS EQUAL FOOTING IN PART-
NERSHIP WITH BEIJING

Marat Yermukanov

GEORGIA PONDERES CONSEQUENCES OF
RUSSIA'S WINE BAN

Kakjha Jibladze

ANOTHER GAS EXPORT DREAM: HOW FAR
IS THE TURKMEN CHINA GAS PROJECT
FROM REALIZATION?

Muhammad Tahir

NEWS DIGEST



Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program

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Contents

Analytical Articles

- RUSSIAN QUASI-FEDERALISM AND GEORGIA'S
NON-EXISTENT TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY** 3
Pavel K. Baev
- RUMBLES IN THE TURKMEN ELITE** 5
Slavomir Horak
- RESTORING THE GEORGIA-RUSSIA RAILWAY CONNECTION: GOOD OR BAD IDEA?** 7
George Katcharava
- ENVIRONMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON CHECHNYA** 10
Murad Batal al-Shishani

Field Reports

- A RALLY FOR DEMOCRACY IN KYRGYZSTAN** 12
Nurshat Ababakirov
- ASTANA SEEKS EQUAL FOOTING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH BEIJING** 13
Marat Yermukanov
- GEORGIA PONDERES CONSEQUENCES OF RUSSIA'S WINE BAN** 15
Kakjha Jibladze
- ANOTHER GAS EXPORT DREAM: HOW FAR IS THE TURKMEN CHINA
GAS PROJECT FROM REALIZATION?** 16
Muhammad Tahir

- News Digest** 19

THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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

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.

Field Reports: 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: scornell@jhu.edu and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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RUSSIAN QUASI-FEDERALISM AND GEORGIA'S NON-EXISTENT TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Pavel K. Baev

Georgia has found itself on the receiving end of various pressure levers applied by Moscow: From visa restrictions to propaganda campaigns in the state-controlled media to bans on import of Georgian wines and even mineral water. This series of deliberately discriminating steps implies more than irritation: the relationship has acquired a truly antagonistic character, and Moscow perceives the removal of President Mikhail Saakashvili as a non-negotiable proposition. As there is no pro-Russian opposition in Georgia, the Russian leadership could only aim at a chaotic destabilization of Georgia similar to the violent warlordism of the early 1990s. The smoldering – not ‘frozen’ – conflict with South Ossetia could be used as a trigger for such a spontaneous dislocation, and the format of this conflict could be usefully reshaped through an extension of regional mergers currently performed inside the Russian Federation.

BACKGROUND: On April 16, a referendum on merger was conducted in the Irkutsk oblast and Ust-Orda Buryat autonomous okrug, and in both regions the overwhelming majority of voters approved the proposal. The result is hardly surprising since this political technology was already successfully tested in Perm, Krasnoyarsk and Kamchatka that all confidently incorporated smaller autonomous okrugs. What was surprising was the amount of political resources invested by the federal center in advancing these projects, including high-level visits and such generous ‘presidential gifts’ as a new bridge across Angara and an oncology clinic. It is clear that the next in line is the Chita oblast that seeks to integrate the Aga Buryat autonomous okrug, and the local elites have already prepared their ‘wish-lists’ for the event that is accorded such a pronounced priority by Moscow.

The sixth planned merger could, however, turn out to be more complicated. Krasnodar kray is ready to swallow the small republic of Adygeya situated entirely inside it and populated mostly by Russians. The Adygs, while making up less than a quarter of the population, are strongly against this merger that would deny them many tangible political privileges and find support in Karachaevo-Cherkessia and other North Caucasian republics. In early April, Khazret Sovmen,

President of Adygeya since 2002, made a risky and emotional move announcing his resignation at the session of the bitterly divided republican parliament. Demonstrations in Maikop strengthened his hand in the tense bargaining in the Kremlin and he was granted the opportunity to stay in the post until the expiration of his mandate next February, while the plan for merger was apparently put on hold.

That does not mean that Adygeya is ‘safe’ but only that Putin’s plenipotentiary envoy in the Southern district Dmitry Kozak would have to give the issue more attention. Kozak has recently conducted several complicated intrigues with change of leaders in North Caucasian republics, including North Ossetia and Dagestan, and is perfectly capable to make Sovmen an offer he couldn’t refuse. Seeking to anticipate Moscow’s wishes, the speaker of the Chechen parliament has recently suggested merging Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan into one region, but that obviously is not what the Kremlin has in mind. If the ‘What Adygeya?’ plan is set on track during autumn, by winter a project for ‘re-unification’ of North and South Ossetia could be launched.

IMPLICATIONS: This is certainly a far more complicated undertaking than any of the regional mergers accomplished so far since South Ossetia is

formally a part of Georgia and Russia is on the record with the unconditional recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity. However, South Ossetia de facto seceded back in 1990 and so to all intents and purposes was never a part of the Georgian state that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991. The history of the conflict is certainly subject to all sorts of mutually exclusive interpretations and even mythologies but Moscow could avoid involvement in deadlocked debates and opt instead for a 'democratic' solution. It can make a plausible pretence that a referendum in both Ossetias is a local initiative and that it simply cannot ignore the strongly expressed popular will. The outcome of the referendum would never be in doubt even if several Georgian villages in South Ossetia would definitely refuse to participate.

It would not even be necessary for Moscow to immediately grant full legitimacy to such a controversial 're-unification'; it could show reasonable doubt and implicitly encourage broad public 'demand'. Delay may even be a part of the plan, since Russia is reasonably certain that the EU cannot postpone indefinitely the decision on the status on Kosovo. And however inventive Brussels could be in formulating this decision, it would inevitably involve essential separation of ties between Serbia and its mutinous province. The plain fact of European security life is that nobody could invent a model solution for half a dozen secessionist conflicts, but time is generally on the side of the unrecognized quasi-states that are busy proving their viability. Moscow could provide reassurances that the Ossetian case would not be reproduced in Abkhazia, which is much more independence-oriented and angered Putin's courtiers in autumn 2004 by electing a president of its own choice. Russia could even show some 'flexibility' in Transdnistria, which it has no realistic chance to incorporate or keep as a 'protectorate'. In any case, the real aim in the Kremlin would be not to 'annex' a desperately poor chunk of mountainous terrain of no strategic importance but to push Georgia to the brink of failure.

CONCLUSIONS: Reprehensible as this sort of political behavior undoubtedly is, it is essential to remember that the Georgian leadership has been

deliberately playing on tensions with Russia seeking to secure every bit of Western attention and aid. Nino Burjanadze, the speaker of Georgian parliament, is able to bring some elegance to this game, which she showed for instance addressing the 'jubilee' session of the Russian parliament in St. Petersburg on April 27, marking 100 years of the first Russian Duma. Others push it more blatantly, so that the economic stagnation aggravated by the haphazard pattern of reforms is blamed squarely on Russia and even the multiplying splits inside Saakashvili's shrinking team are explained away as chiseled by the Kremlin's 'long hand'. Moscow could safely count on every kind of emotional and fundamentally inadequate response from Tbilisi to its sequence of simple steps in Ossetia. One such step that was tested last winter and could be reproduced in the next one, is a series of explosions on the gas pipeline supplying Georgia – and Tbilisi does not yet have a defense against this 'energy weapon'.

Saakashvili is inclined to think that the ripening initiative to invite Ukraine to join NATO already in 2008 could open a 'fast-track' for Georgia as well, providing he portrays a sufficiently convincing 'Russian threat'. The gamble might succeed, but he is racing not only against time but also, paradoxically, against himself. For NATO, there are clear risks involved in extending an invitation to this troubled state. For Georgia to overcome its weakness and traumas, a sustained commitment is necessary. A half-hearted engagement, on the other hand, could initiate a chain reaction of unintended consequences and become another factor of failure.

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RUMBLES IN THE TURKMEN ELITE

Slavomir Horak

On April 10, 2006, a small notice was published in the Turkmen media regarding the alleged “retirement” of Prosecutor General Kurmanbibi Atadjanova. Of course, it is well-known that the regime machinery in Ashgabat does not allow high-ranking officials to leave their functions just for sake of retirement. Hence, the Turkmen public waited for two weeks for the next execution-show that finally took place in prosecution’s office on 24th April and led to another bombastic manifestation of regime “fight against corruption”.

BACKGROUND: Purges in authoritarian regimes such as that of Turkmenistan are a standard tool used for their survival. Except for recurrent deprivation of middle and lower rank officials of their positions, several great waves of high-level purges have been observed in Turkmenistan in the almost fifteen years of its independence. The trials started as early as in 1992, when then-prime minister Khan Ahmedov and his circle were forced to leave their chairs. At that time, the punishments for the senior officials was more or less comparable to the standard for democratic regimes – Ahmedov was sent abroad as an ambassador. Other people subsequently falling into disfavor were usually allowed to emigrate – Avdy Kuliev, Turkmenistan’s first Minister of Foreign Affairs, who fled to Moscow in 1993, was one of the first examples. In the middle of the 1990s, he was followed by Nazar Soyunov, then responsible for the energy sector in the Presidential Council. Approximately at the same time, President Saparmurad Niyazov Turkmenbashi switched to lower positions those regional elites that could challenge his growing power.

Kurmanbibi Atadjanova was appointed to the position of prosecutor general at the very same period, and stayed in this position for more than a decade. Her star grew in November 2002, after the alleged assassination attempt on president Turkmenbashi. Indeed, she was the main architect of the gruesome process targeted at former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, who Atadjanova

accused of being the leading culprit in this plot. Since that event, Atadjanova became Turkmenbashi’s closest ally, and the prosecutor general’s office became the most powerful repressive machine in the country. The President entrusted to her accusations against several other high-ranking officials. Since then, victims of all following purges were silenced completely. Typically, their court processes resulted in long-time sentences, ranging from 20 to 25 years in prison. Former head of the Committee for National Security (KNB) Muhammet Nazarov (in 2002) and former Prime Minister Jelly Gurbanmuradov (in 2005) have been the most important examples of this punishment.

From 2002 onward, the practice of imprisoning not only the person accused, but also most of that person’s relatives and colleagues, was introduced. As could be expected, Atadjanova began to skillfully make use of her role for her own enrichment. Human Rights organizations regularly reported about property expropriation on bogus charges; various atrocities including torture; and the exaction of bribes to Atadjanova’s pocket. Atadjanova also misused her office to cover for the criminal business, often based on narcotics trafficking, of her friends and colleagues. She gradually began to irritate the public with increasingly blatant displays of her wealth and abuse of office. Turkmenbashi was presumably aware of these practices, but he needed a person of Atadjanova’s type in order to

remove other independent figures in his surrounding.

The impressive but mostly fabricated processes gave Atadjanova a lot of enemies, who waited for the right opportunity to unseat her. However, the first attack against her launched in late 2003 was unsuccessful. At that time, both her son and husband were accused of drug trafficking, and the head of the presidential guard Akmurat Redjepov accused her of corruption and of leading a life in luxury. Nevertheless, Kurmanbibi Atadjanova's position was still strong enough to withstand this onslaught.

IMPLICATIONS: Despite her strong power, Kurmanbibi Atadjanova evidently lost her discretion and judgment as to what limits she could afford herself within the regime. She apparently forgot that her office remained merely an executive part of the entire oppressive machine of the regime, centralized in the presidential office. She even challenged the president himself, apparently claiming that she possessed materials compromising him. Evidently, this became the point where president Turkmenbashi decided to dispatch her. Similar compromising documents against herself "appeared" in his hands, originating in all likelihood from her enemies in the state apparatus as well as from business circles.

It is a matter of speculation if this scandal is the result of just another of Turkmenbashi's caprices, pressures from rival forces within the Turkmen elite, or from the prosecutor general's office itself – for example, from Mukhammedkuli Ogshukov, Atadjanova's former first deputy. The combination of all these factors is most probably the explanation. However, as the new prosecutor general, Ogshukov could be carrying on a suicidal mission. Considering the Turkmen political tradition, the purge and prosecution of Atadjanova's relatives and colleagues is to be expected. What is more, even if Ogshukov withstands the present crisis, his turn could come in a few months or years.

With the dismissal and assumed imprisonment of Turkmenistan's "Iron Lady", the system lost one of

the last figures whose career was connected with Niyazov's rise to power. By "silencing" the prosecutor general, Turkmenbashi achieved a state of fear inside the country that enables him to further tighten control over developments in the country and, thus, temporarily strengthen his power. The entire case demonstrates that Turkmenbashi is still quite firm in his control of the country, although the opposition and some international organizations seem to be of the opposite opinion. There are now no potential opponents that could denounce him and his politics. Pressure from the outside world is not a threat to his position, in his eyes, because he is aware of the world's growing need for Turkmen gas.

CONCLUSIONS: As a result of the above-mentioned cadre changes, the new generation, educated in Turkmenbashi's personality cult and later on *Ruhnama*, is gradually coming to power. This process becomes a real threat for future development in Turkmenistan. Since the older generation of the elite was cultivated by the somewhat softer Soviet regime, their mutual accusations (despite all atrocities and fights) were based on court and documentary (compromise) materials, however fabricated they could be. The new cadres will likely prefer to be more loyal to the system, but at the same time, they will be more cynical. Sooner or later, Turkmenbashi is likely to lose control over the situation in the country as the new elite will be strong enough to endanger him seriously. Consequently, the fall of the regime – the later, the worse – could be accompanied with an explosion of violent struggle among several groups attempting to gain control of the country.

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RESTORING THE GEORGIA-RUSSIA RAILWAY CONNECTION: GOOD OR BAD IDEA?

George Katcharava

In May 2006, meetings on the restoration of the railway connecting Russia and Georgia via Abkhazia were scheduled. This old issue gained a lease on life as the new Georgian government and the new de-facto leadership of the breakaway province of Abkhazia came to power in 2003 and 2004. Outside pressure on the issue, together with a willingness to move toward a resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia from its deadly frozen status, is combining to bring this issue to the forefront. Nevertheless, the consequences of an opening of the railway are less than well thought through on Georgia's part.

BACKGROUND: Twelve years after the beginning of the war in Abkhazia, the Georgian and Abkhazian leaderships began to discuss the restoration of the railway connection between Georgia and Russia through the territory of Abkhazia. This issue was first seriously raised during a meeting between Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2003. Notwithstanding these high-level discussions, no official document was signed at the summit, though the results of discussions were stated in the presidents' declarations.

After this event, working groups were formed and a discussion process slowly started. Yet only until a few months ago, no progress was seen on this subject, or for that matter regarding the entire process of resolving the Abkhazia conflict. To the picture should be added the strong affirmation by the Russian government of its interests in regard to the conflict zone in Abkhazia in a manner unseen previously.

In recent months, Russia has been exerting significant pressure on Georgia to restore the railroad connection via Abkhazia, and discussions on this issue have mounted. It remains unclear under which conditions and how Georgian government would implement this project; meanwhile, this prospect raises obvious advantages as well as disadvantages for Georgia's statehood.

For Russia, the restoration of the railroad connecting Russian and Georgia via Abkhazia would significantly decrease the cost of maintaining the existing military bases in Armenia, as well as providing an opportunity to establish direct transportation connections with Russia's only ally in the region. Consequently, the restoration of the railroad connection between Russia and Armenia would increase Russia's influence in the South Caucasus. In addition, the Armenian Ministry of Transportation is discussing, with Iranian and Russian representatives, the possibility of connecting this project with the existing railroad to Iran. In this case, the railroad project would strengthen the Russia-Armenia-Iran geopolitical axis. Given current developments regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the change of leadership in Tehran, and Russia's ambivalent role in this dispute, such a development would not necessarily be in the west's favor.

For Georgia, the implementation of this project is controversial. On the one hand, the restoration of the railroad connection between Georgia and Russia would be economically beneficial for Georgia. It would decrease transportation costs between the two countries as well as to the markets of other former Soviet states. It would also create a favorable environment for the activation of the economic potential of the regions of Western Georgia, in the agricultural as well as in other spheres. Moreover,

taking into account that Russia's only Black Sea port at Novorossiysk freezes during winter, Russia would have the opportunity of using Georgia's Poti and Batumi Ports. This would strengthen Georgia's transit potential and generate additional revenues for the Georgian economy. It could also be a base for constructive negotiations regarding other problematic issues in Georgian-Russian relations, which are currently reaching a low point.

On the other hand, this scenario has political consequences that are less beneficial to Georgia. Firstly, following the completion of rehabilitation works on the railroad and taking into account the unstable situation in Abkhazia Russia could deploy additional military contingents on the territory of Abkhazia, which would allow Russia to control all existing transport communications and the coastline of the entire territory of Abkhazia. Secondly, since there is currently a lack of qualified workers to fulfill railroad restoration tasks in Abkhazia, Russia will offer to deploy railway troops of the Russian Ministry of Defense in order to restore and subsequently to maintain this railroad – a scenario entirely unacceptable to Georgia.

Once the railway connection is restored, the question of customs control will arise. How can Georgia control goods and tax them if Georgian border guards and customs officers are not able to monitor the Abkhazia section of the internationally recognized Georgia-Russia border? There is a very negative precedent in Moldova concerning the restoration of the railway connection through Transdnietria, another secessionist region in the post-Soviet space. Despite optimistic calculations that it would facilitate economic development and resolution of the conflict, the result was only increased smuggling and empowerment of the separatist regime.

Besides these disadvantages to Georgia, the restoration of the railroad would have a positive effect on economic development of the separatist Abkhazian regime. Clearly, under these conditions of restored railroad connections, the problem of fueling the revival of Abkhazia's tourist industry will be significantly reduced. Hence the separatist

regime would have an opportunity to create certain conditions for the development of other spheres of its economy. Basically, this will facilitate the continuation of the status quo.

The return of Georgian refugees to the entire territory of Abkhazia is a vitally important issue for Georgia. Yet the declaration concerning the restoration of the railroad has been understood by Abkhaz separatists as a tradeoff following which refugees will have rights to return only to the southern Gali district of Abkhazia. On the other hand, the process of refugee return automatically implies the beginning of the process of restoration of Georgian jurisdiction on that territory. Therefore, the railroad restoration project is strongly connected with the issue of refugee return. To the Georgian government, the viability of this proposition depends on a change in the format of peacekeeping operations in the conflict zone: concretely, the internationalization of the peacekeeping operation, including the possibility of European involvement, as well as the spreading of the operation to the inner parts of the conflict zone.

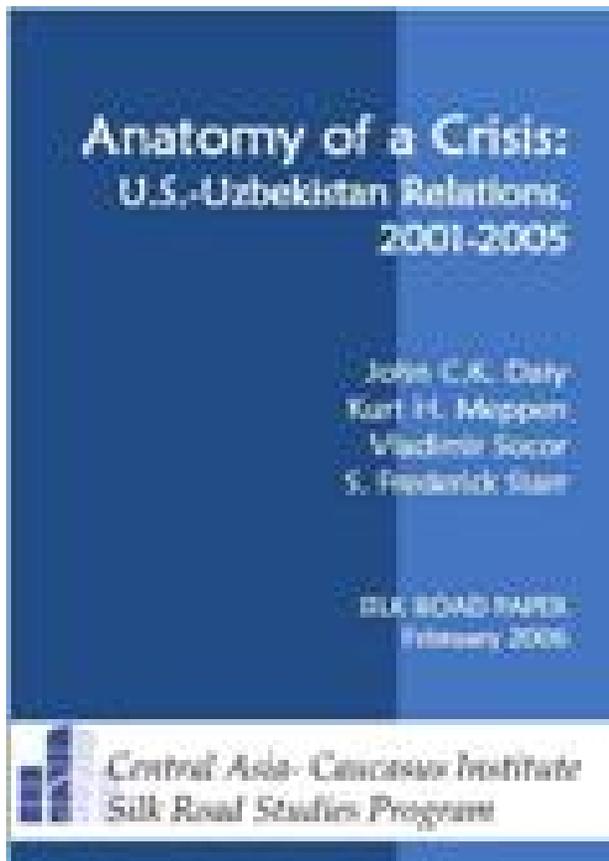
Current developments show that these processes are far from the above-mentioned conditions. Russian "peacekeepers" together with de-facto separatist authorities have begun a process of registration of refugees that have already returned to the Gali district. The aim of the registration process is to prove the effectiveness of the peacekeeping operation, and to show that several thousand refugees have already returned to the Gali district, indicating the positive impact of the activities of Russian peacekeepers. Ironically, it also shows that Georgia, as a state, has little effect in these processes. In fact, the return of refugees was spontaneous and no security guarantees were provided for these destitute people. As a result, spontaneous returnees are suffering from human rights abuse and for most practical purposes compose a population without any enforceable rights.

CONCLUSIONS: The restoration of the railway connection between Georgia and Russia through the territory of Abkhazia is clearly not in the interests

of Georgia under the conditions that the proposal is currently being discussed. In the light of current developments regarding Iran, it also fits badly with the interests of the West. By opening the railway connection with Russia, Georgia would lose a significant bargaining chip, while receiving nothing concrete in return. Given the current status of the Abkhazia dispute and Russia's role in it, Georgia is not in a position to make gestures of good will. The only guarantee for the success of the process can

come from the strengthening of Georgia's statehood, supported by the West, primarily the United States, whose potential for involvement in the process of the settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia has not been utilized so far.

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New Silk Road Paper!

Anatomy of a Crisis: U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005

by John C. K. Daly,
Kurt H. Meppen,
Vladimir Socor
and S. Frederick Starr

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This 110-page paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

ENVIRONMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON CHECHNYA

Murad Batal al-Shishani

On 16 December 2005, the discovery of radioactive waste near the Chechen capital, Grozny, was announced. News indicated that the level of radiation was 58,000 times more than normal levels, and BBC said that it was half the level recorded in the Chernobyl reactor when it collapsed in the mid-1980s. This incident is a wake up call for the impact of the Russian War on Chechnya's environment. The matter is not exactly new, as the negative effects of the war on Chechnya's environment have been observed since the war broke out in 1994.

BACKGROUND: This development calls to mind the policy of the Tsarist General Yermolov, who came to Chechnya and the North Caucasus following his war on Napoleon in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1817, he built the Grozny fortress, from "terror" in Russian, in order to "terrorize" Chechens, and cut and burnt down forests because they were hideouts for Chechen fighters. If that was a huge loss by that era's terms, the environmental situation in Chechnya is catastrophic in modern times, given the qualities and quantities of weaponry used in the present Russian war.

Russia's second war in Chechnya is entering its seventh year, and its effect on the environment is coming close to a real catastrophe. It might in fact eliminate the romantic picture of the Chechen environment which was described with fascination in Russian literature. Experts consider that 30 percent of Chechnya's land is "contaminated" and 40 percent "does not meet environmental conditions for life" as a result of Russia's war on Chechnya since 1994. Some of the gravest risks facing Chechens are radiation and petroleum oil leaks into the ground and the resulting pollution of soil and water, which naturally affects people.

Since 1994, 20,000 tons of oil pollutants leaked into Chechnya's ground, which is significantly more than the level allowed in normal cases. As a result, 40 percent of agricultural land in Chechnya is polluted to the extent that it is no longer arable. In

addition, 1.5-2 million tons of those pollutants have leaked into the ground water, which mostly flows into the two main rivers, Sunzha and Terek, that in turn flow into the Caspian sea, which warns of a regional, if not an international, disaster. Almost 300,000 tons of toxic waste flows into the Caspian sea from Chechnya.

The problem of oil spills is a direct result of Russian bombardment of plants and refineries. The environmental problem was compounded by corruption through approximately 15,000 makeshift refineries, most of which are based on illegal trafficking in oil. There are numerous reports about the involvement of the Russian military in this trafficking. In 2002, there were reports of 500-600 million tons of oil illegally refined in makeshift refineries, compared to 700 million tons of legally refined oil that year. In addition to all the problems related to this practice, it poses serious health issues for those working in the oil industry in this primitive form.

On the other hand, Russian forces have destroyed facilities with "sources of ionizing irradiation", and the radiation in Chechnya has made it a "restricted radioactive area".

Numbers indicate that radiation in some Chechen areas such as Chiri-Yurt, Shali, Vedeno, Gudermes, Argun and Grozny are ten times over normal levels. As a result of the bombardment of chemical plants, Grozny alone is showing more pollution with cesium-137, uranium and cobalt-60 radiation (which

is harmful to people's health) than other areas. It should be noted that rates of radioactive pollution are larger in areas with intensified fighting since 1999, which clearly shows that the types of weapons used by Russian forces against Chechens play a role in this pollution.

IMPLICATIONS: The Organization for Threatened Peoples has demanded that the International Atomic Energy Agency conduct an investigation about radioactive waste in Chechnya. The organization claims that it possesses hard evidence that Moscow has buried radioactive radium waste near Argun and that it uses a toxic waste dump, called Radon, to bury radioactive radium waste near Grozny.

Environmental pollution in Chechnya poses a threat to the ecological balance in the region. The survival of certain species of plants and animals depends on their ability to prevail over external factors by adapting to them. Therefore, if a certain species is faced with adverse circumstances and as a result its population decreased, at least a number of that population will survive by adapting to the new environment, and consequently breed again and resume its place in nature. The ecological balance in Chechnya is at risk because even with the war coming to an end, the Chechen environment will need a long time to recuperate, which will undoubtedly affect people and their life in terms of basic activities like eating, drinking and normal life. The same effect may endanger the possibilities of flora and fauna to adapt to the new environmental conditions.

It is not difficult to understand the cause of the growing environmental problem in Chechnya, mainly relating to the weapons Russian forces use in their war against the call for independence in Chechnya. Indeed, it is a fact that the regions with

the greatest environmental damage are the ones that were bombarded and attacked more than the others.

CONCLUSIONS: Chechens are facing an environmental catastrophe that calls for an international effort to prevent the damage to the environment from devastating society, or at least help Chechnya cut its losses. A calamity of this size cannot be handled by one country, i.e. Russia, even if it was willing to do so. The impact of the Russian war does not pose a risk to Chechnya alone, but also the wider societal and political stability in the North Caucasus for years to come. This means that the international community should be concerned with this environmental disaster not simply because of its human ramifications, but because it is a matter of politics and interests. However, the first implications of this situation is an additional powerful reason for Russia to end its brutal war in Chechnya, which would remove the first and primary reason for the disaster. If that does not happen, the places that Russian authors like Tolstoy, Pushkin and Lermontov wrote about will be no more.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Murad Batal Al-Shishani is a Jordanian-Chechen writer who holds an M.A degree in Political Science, specializing in Islamic Movements in Chechnya. He is author of the book "Islamic Movement in Chechnya and the Chechen-Russian Conflict 1990-2000", Amman 2001 (in Arabic).

FIELD REPORTS

A RALLY FOR DEMOCRACY IN KYRGYZSTAN

Nurshat Ababakirov

On April 29, Kyrgyzstan experienced a significant and at the same time unique rally, organized by the burgeoning opposition for fundamental political reforms. This was one of the biggest rallies seen since independence in 1991. In spite of worries that the large protest would deteriorate, the situation, partly owing to heavy rain, proved to be peaceful and well organized.

The rally, which comprised at least 10,000 people on the main square of Bishkek, was according to the organizers supposed to last for several days, until the government fulfilled the demands of the opposition, which consist of a ten-step program towards democracy and the rule of law. However, the rally disbanded after President Kurmanbek Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov came out to the crowd.

The president could hardly finish his speech, because of the roaring noise of the crowd when he called the organizers of the meeting “blind politicians, if they don’t see any changes [in politics]”. The prime minister, known for his quick actions that stopped the overnight lootings on March 24, 2005, in his turn enjoyed a relatively warmer reaction. He assured the people that the government is doing everything to stabilize the situation.

The demonstration, organized by the Union of Democratic Forces, built of about 50 parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), put an ultimatum to the government: unless the president tackles the criminals, finishes constitutional reforms, and fights corruption, they want him to resign.

The main organizers of meeting were the leader of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, Edil Baisalov, the vigorous critic of Kyrgyzstan’s criminal scene, who is recovering from an April 12 criminal assault; Parliamentarian Omurbek Tekebaev, who left the position of Speaker of Parliament in February,

according to some experts because of his personal bad relations with the president.

The rally also included other members of parliament like Kubatbek Baybolov, Temirbek Sariev, and Melis Eshimkanov, ardent members of the opposition. The recently voluntarily resigned Minister of Industry and Tourism, Almazbek Atambaev, also strengthened their line. He explained his action as a protest against the government that fails to check the criminal forces gradually penetrating into politics.

The peaceful rally was said to be as intense as the meeting before the so-called Tulip Revolution; that rally was also thought to be peaceful but eventually culminated in the ouster of the previous president, Askar Akaev. The differences were that the protestors, as Edil Baisalov said, this time did not include marginalized people, bandits, and other people who could lead the crowd to excesses. This time, there were no banners calling for resignation of the president. The law enforcement forces, counting up to 1,500, in contrast tried to protect the crowd from provocateurs rather than the government from the people. Around 400 women police officers distributed flowers to protesters. Finally, the fact that President Kurmanbek Bakiev came out to people, despite what he admitted was worries over his security, somehow eased the determination of the crowd to stay until the government showed some intention to meet their demands.

Even though the top government officials did not say anything about handling criminals and fulfilling their pre-election promises, many rally organizers believe that the meeting reached its objective. Mr. Tekebaev observed that there were not only political objectives, but also moral ones. “The people started believing in their power”, he says. However, he hardly believes that the government goes along with them. Therefore, he

says that the more they postpone, the more demands the people will have.

Nonetheless, the president, engaging in harsh criticism of the opposition, tries to show his accountability before the people. Early in April, he arranged a meeting called “Dialogue” on state television with the opposition and other interested people, where the people could touch on various themes. He argues that he is not a “czar” with unlimited power to change everything overnight. He also emphasized that he is not the only one to blame; he shares power with the executive branch, parliament, and the judiciary.

The opposition does not exclude the possibility that the current president may face the same fate as the previous one. As if the time is up, the civic activists, the part of the opposition, are already embarked upon drafting a list of candidates for the government, which makes the incumbent government nervous.

“If there had not been rain, more people would have come, which would reach 40,000”, said parliamentarian Temir Sariiev. “Although the government’s effort to negatively affect people’s attitudes towards the meeting through state mass media, we had the widespread support of people, which is important”.

ASTANA SEEKS EQUAL FOOTING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH BEIJING

Marat Yermukanov

In the geopolitical game going on in Central Asia, Astana skillfully uses the Chinese card to keep at bay the influence of the U.S. and western states on the one hand, and Russia on the other. More often than not, as critics point out, Kazakhstan makes rash concessions to China at the cost of long-term national interests. The recent visit of Kazakh Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev to Beijing can be regarded as yet another attempt of Kazakh diplomacy to put bilateral relations on an equal footing.

Tokayev had an unusually busy schedule during his April 11-13 visit to Beijing, conducting a wide range of talks with top Chinese officials on energy, transport communication, border trade and, last but not least, trans-border river issues, a long-running sticking point in relations between the two states. Considering the complexity of problems in relations with Beijing despite the invariable protestations of friendship in bilateral summit talks, Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry apparently had good reasons to postpone the visit to China, originally scheduled to take place in late February.

Tokayev sought to prepare a good ground for the upcoming visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Beijing planned for this autumn. According to some observers, Tokayev succeeded in eliminating major hurdles on the way to the Beijing summit. The Kazakh Foreign Minister squeezed from the chairman of the Chinese State Council Weng Ziabao a pledge to work ‘in a constructive manner’ on the settlement of the problems regarding the Irtysh and Ili trans-border rivers “taking into account the long-term interests of the two states and the importance of keeping the ecological balance and rational use of water resources for the benefit of the peoples of the two countries”. For many years, Astana has been nervous about Chinese plans to build dams to divert the waters of the Irtysh for irrigation purposes, threatening to cause a devastating water shortage in three wheat-growing regions along the river in Kazakhstan.

Tokayev and Chinese Foreign Minister Lee Zhaoxin stated that Kazakhstan and China have no divergences in the political sphere, and they take a similar stance on

international issues. A member of the Chinese State Council, Tang Ziixuan, went even further saying that China's policy towards Kazakhstan as a key state in Central Asia is based on long-term Chinese strategic interests and not on ad hoc approach" – perhaps a jibe at other powers.

The political setting of Tokayev's visit was carefully arranged. Not long ago, the Ministry of Economy and Mineral Resources of Kazakhstan announced a plan to export electricity to China. Reportedly, China and Kazakhstan are currently contemplating the construction of a hydroelectric power station in the coal-producing town of Yekibastuz in North Kazakhstan on the Irtysh River. The power station, with a projected capacity of 7,200 megawatts of electricity to be delivered to China, is designed to become the most powerful electricity-generating installation in the CIS. Experts fear that the coal-fired power station may turn into an environmental disaster for the region, although the construction is welcomed by the largely foreign-owned coal-producing companies of Yekibastuz. What attracts China seems to be the low transport costs of coal which, however, contains a high level of poisonous substances and produces ash dusts. Yekibastuz, with high rate of cancer diseases, is among the most polluted cities of Kazakhstan. While economic benefits from the power station for Kazakhstan are highly questionable, with its construction the country will acquire another environmental headache.

The decision to export electricity to China comes at a time when Kazakhstan itself is facing the grim prospect of electric power shortages in the western and southern parts of the country within the next five or ten years. The West Kazakhstan and Aktobe regions entirely depend on high-priced Russian supplies of electricity. But Astana is keen on upgrading its power network with Chinese help, disregarding the environmental and political costs of the dubious enterprise. Public movements in Kazakhstan have long voiced concern over the uncontrolled inflow of Chinese into the

country under the guise of labor migration. Some estimates say that over 100,000 Chinese illegal migrants currently live in Kazakhstan, and they seek Kazakh citizenship. China Expert Aisha Kozhabekova believes that it is no longer possible to turn the tide of Chinese migrants, therefore the government must pursue the policy of integrating the Chinese already settled in Kazakhstan into Kazakh society, assimilating them culturally and ethnically, and employing them as a cheap labor force in agriculture and other areas where workforce is scarce.

Migration from China was one of the issues discussed during Tokayev's visit to China. The Foreign Minister expressed concern over the prospect of the Chinese population in regions bordering Kazakhstan reaching 300 million in the next fifteen years. "But despite some fears, there is no alternative to cooperation with China. It is a matter of national security for Kazakhstan", he concluded, talking to journalists in a somewhat evasive way.

China, hungry for new energy resources, places priority on the construction of a gas pipeline from Kazakhstan and an extension of the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline, as well as the planned high-voltage power line from North Kazakhstan. The Kazakh government earmarked 50 billion tenge (ca. US\$400 million) for the reconstruction of the Aktogay-Dostyk railway line on the border with China and mapped out a development program for the Dostyk railway station, which is thought to have strategic importance to increase the volume of cargo shipments to China.

Beijing endlessly lavishes words on "strategic partnership and eternal friendship" with Kazakhstan. Signs of true friendship based on confidence are not in sight yet.

GEORGIA PONDERES CONSEQUENCES OF RUSSIA'S WINE BAN

Kakha Jibladze

Over the past month the Russian government announced an embargo on Georgian wine, as well as threatened to ban the sale of Georgian mineral water in Russia. While officials in Moscow maintain this is merely a part of an ongoing campaign to clean the market of falsified products, Georgian authorities argue the embargo is political. According to Georgian businessmen, the government's strategy is doing more harm than good for those struggling under the embargo.

Moscow's decision to ban all Georgian and Moldovan wine imports in March did nothing to improve the already tense relationship between Russia and Georgia. Coming mere days after the Georgian government refused to support Russia's bid for the World Trade Organization, President Mikheil Saakashvili and his administration attacked the embargo as political blackmail.

As a tool of pressure, the embargo is ingenious. An estimated 60-70 percent of all Georgian wine exports go to Russia, along with over half of all mineral water exports, which were put on the warning list last week. On April 18, Georgian media reported that nearly 10,000 bottles of the Georgian mineral water Nabeghlavi have been confiscated in Moscow. Members of the Georgian government, the Georgian Wine Producers Union, and importers in Russia have all appealed to the Russian government over the embargo, to no avail. According to members of the union, an extended embargo could set the Georgian wine industry back two or three years.

The wine embargo officially started on March 27, days after Georgia refused to support Russia's bid into the WTO. The standoff over the WTO is just the last in a long line of political fighting between Moscow and Tbilisi. In February, relations hit an all-time low when the Georgian parliament passed a resolution against the Russian/CIS peacekeeping

mission in the South Ossetian conflict zone. Prior to that, Georgia was plunged into days of freezing weather with no gas supply after the pipeline carrying Russian gas into the Caucasus was bombed.

According to the Russian government, the process to clean its market from dangerous and falsified products is even-handed and apolitical. On April 17, Mikheil Zurabov, the Russian minister of health and social development, announced that the ban was part of an ongoing effort to encourage countries to use 'permitted fertilizers' in hopes of saving the 35,000 estimated people who reportedly annually die in Russia from alcohol poisoning due to poor quality products.

Even among Russian politicians, the embargo is controversial. According to an editorial published in *The Moscow Times*, several deputies questioned the health ministry's accusations of pesticide use, noting that some of the substances reportedly found have not been used for decades.

Over the past month, the Georgian government has attempted to fight back. President Saakashvili promoted Georgian wine in China during a recent business forum there. He also traveled to Kakheti in March and promised wine and grape producers support during the embargo. The government has also highlighted its own high profile efforts to cleanse Georgian wine production of false and/or dangerous products over the past two years. However, local economists have criticized the administration for not taking additional steps to protect the economy from the embargo.

In addition to the high-level trip to Moscow on April 12-13 – during which the Georgian Minister of Agriculture Mikheil Simonovich was unable to get a single meeting with a high level Russian official – Saakashvili announced that Defense Minister Irakli

Okruashvili would seek out new, international markets for Georgian wine.

Despite the oddity of the appointment, Okruashvili has vowed to bring Georgian wine to new clients. According to the defense minister, Georgian wine producers have not been diligent in marketing and he plans to increase consumer awareness outside of the CIS, as well as improve management.

"Okruashvili has always been successful in everything he has done," Saakashvili was reported as saying during the Georgian-Chinese Business Forum in Beijing, in April. He noted, according to Georgian media reports, that everyone is a 'commercial agent' for the country. Okruashvili's new responsibilities will reportedly last three months.

However, Georgian mineral water producers claim Okruashvili's statements in the press, which have been widely quoted and misquoted in both the Georgian and Russian media, are hurting their efforts to maintain good relations with both their Russian consumers and Russian health officials. According to sources within mineral water producer Borjomi, the company had made serious progress in ensuring the continued sale of the famous mineral water. However, a massive campaign was launched against it in Russia after the defense minister reportedly said 'even feces' could be sold in Russia.

According to industry insiders, it has taken ten years to reinstate the Borjomi brand in the Russian market. While experts maintain that the industry

can withstand an embargo, they noted that it would seriously undermine their success over the past decade. According to their statistics, no more than one percent of Borjomi mineral water sold in Russia is falsified; ten years ago, an estimated 50 percent was falsified. To date, Georgian mineral water is still being sold in Russia although there is no guarantee that an embargo will not be installed.

The Russian wine and mineral water ban could be a potentially serious blow to the Georgian national economy and industry. While the Georgian government is trying innovative ways to lessen the embargo's impact, the country could face a real economic crisis if it continues, especially in the eastern region of Kakheti, which is largely dependent on the wine industry. However, despite the potential for short-term economic hardship, if Georgian wine producers use this opportunity to actively seek new markets, in the long term the embargo could help Georgia free itself from Russia's economic influence.

Regardless of the ultimate outcome of the embargo, the potential economic impact could serve as a powerful lesson for Georgian authorities. Moscow has agreed to remove its military bases, but it is learning to flex its economic muscle with greater effectiveness. The loss of the Russian market could prove to be more serious than previous military threats and saber-rattling.

ANOTHER GAS EXPORT DREAM: HOW FAR IS THE TURKMEN CHINA GAS PROJECT FROM REALIZATION?

Muhammad Tahir

Turkmenistan's President Sapamurat Niyazov made one of his rare trips outside the country in the first week of April, 2006. The beginning of Niyazov's six-day visit to China may have been a bit of a disappointment, since he was welcomed

only by a lowly deputy Foreign Minister. But the next day was much more successful for the Turkmen President, as Ashgabat and Beijing took preliminary steps toward the construction of a pipeline linking the two states.

If all goes according to plan, the pipeline will relieve Ashgabat's dependency on its traditional gas customers, Ukraine and Russia. Under the agreement signed by Niyazov and Chinese President Hu Jintao, Beijing agreed to buy 30 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas annually for a period of more than 30 years, possibly starting in 2009. Niyazov's view is even more ambitious – he believes the pipeline could be in operation one year earlier, delivering 50 billion cubic meters of gas by 2010, and carrying Turkmen gas as far as the Chinese port city of Shanghai.

All is not signed and sealed yet. Both countries have to give their final agreement by the end of this year, and the exact price of the gas has yet to be settled. Other, minor agreements were signed during Niyazov's visit – in telecommunications, transport and the struggle against terrorism. But the gas deal can be considered the major outcome of this long trip, which the Turkmen delegation mostly spent at Chinese holiday resorts.

Niyazov has great expectations from the deal, but many experts consider it unrealistic: bringing it to fruition would require not only a huge amount of money, but the permission of two other states: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Since these are both close allies of another gas-rich country, Russia, the gas project is likely to depend more on Moscow's position than any Sino-Turkmen intentions. Energy-rich Russia's growing interest in the Chinese market has to be taken into account – Moscow would likely not be happy by this agreement, since it will allow China to have direct links with Central Asian countries, which is one of the main source for Russian energy purchases.

Turkmenistan's agreement with China is not just a gas deal, either, as China is increasing its political presence in Central Asia. This also may bring it into confrontation with Russia, as Moscow moves to safeguard its own interest in the region.

Regardless of how the project turns out, many western experts believe the main purpose of the agreement is to increase the two states' leverage in

their respective gas trade talks with Russia. But from a Turkmen point of view, the realization of this project may be more important than any secret game. The lack of any alternative energy gateway means Turkmenistan so far has been completely reliant on Russian pipelines. This in turn means Turkmenistan has been unable to choose its own costumers, let alone demand the price it wants.

In 2005, for instance, Russian gas exports to Western Europe were priced at over \$200 per 1,000 cubic meters, while Turkmen exports were in the \$55-60 range. And Ashgabat's traditional customers, Russia and Ukraine, do not always pay this full price in cash. In this situation, Turkmenistan may simply ignore Moscow's position in its eagerness to have an overland route to a large, liquid market like China.

From a Chinese point of view, meanwhile, Beijing also wants to secure gas supplies to feed its growing energy needs. Turkmen gas may help China reduce its dependency on coal, which so far has been one of the important sources of energy for its economy. The deal is hence important for both countries' economies. Still, outside observers are skeptical, raising doubts not only about the huge investments needed, but also about Turkmenistan's ability to meet additional export commitments and the project's overall feasibility.

For many years, international investors and countries interested in Turkmen gas have spoken of the need for an international and independent assessment of Turkmen gas reserves. But the Turkmen regime long refused, and most international companies are now wary of investing in Turkmenistan's gas fields and in expensive pipelines. Plans to build a pipeline linking Turkmenistan with Afghanistan and Pakistan have been held up for years, and many experts believe the unreliable assessment of Turkmen gas reserves is partly to blame. A pending survey may nevertheless address this issue.

It's not just Russia's position and the uncertainty of reserve estimates that cast doubts on the Turkmen-China project. The pipeline's projected length, at

4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles), also raises questions about its economic feasibility. Russia's press has already started to speculate on this potential obstacle, saying that Niyazov would use his visit to China try to convince Beijing to finance the project.

But according to Roland Goetz, an energy expert with Germany's Institute for International and Security Affairs, political and military factors might

outweigh economic considerations for China. In an interview with the Turkmen opposition web site Gundogar, he also argued that Ashgabat would do everything possible to bring the project to completion, because the new pipeline would give Turkmenistan a measure of independence from Russia.



Central Asia- Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program

NEWS DIGEST

PUTIN WANTS TO EXPAND KYRGYZSTAN BASE

24 April

President Putin said in Moscow on April 24 in conjunction with the visit of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev that Russia intends to improve the air base at Kant in the Central Asian republic. He noted that the base assists "collective rapid deployment forces and contributes to ensuring security and stability, not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in the Central Asian region as a whole." He called the continuing improvement of Kant "one of our priorities. It is a mobile operational component of the collective rapid deployment forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in the Central Asian region, and we are interested in building up its resources." For his part, Bakiev referred to the "importance and timeliness of our cooperation in the framework of the CSTO. This cooperation is especially timely now for the fight against international terrorism, religious extremism, the danger posed by narcotics, and organized crime." (vesti.ru)

KYRGYZ AUTHORITIES DETAIN, THEN RELEASE, DAUGHTER OF FORMER PRESIDENT

24 April

A statement by the Kyrgyz National Security Service on April 24 announced the arrest of Bermet Akaeva, the elder daughter of former Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev. Akaeva was released after several hours of interrogation. National Security Service Deputy Chairman Elmurza Satybaldiev said officers detained Akaeva on the basis of a warrant issued by the Prosecutor-General's Office seeking to compel her to testify in the pending criminal case of her husband, Adil Toigonbaev, and her brother, Aidar Akaev, who face charges of corruption and abuse of power. Akaeva was arrested after returning to Kyrgyzstan from neighboring Kazakhstan, where she sought refuge after losing her parliamentary seat in the wake of her father's ouster and subsequent flight to Moscow in March 2005. (Itar-Tass)

ARMENIA COMMEMORATES ANNIVERSARY OF 1915 GENOCIDE...

25 April

Hundreds of thousands of people commemorated on April 24 the 91st anniversary of the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, silently converging on the monument to the genocide victims outside Yerevan, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Many participants carried Armenian flags and banners denouncing Turkey's long-standing claims that the massacres occurred on a much smaller scale and refusal to recognize the atrocities as genocide. The daylong procession began with a prayer service in memory of the dead led by the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicos Garegin II, in the presence of President Robert Kocharian, members of his government, and other senior officials. A number of foreign diplomats, including U.S. Ambassador John Evans, also presented wreaths at the memorial. In comments marking the anniversary of the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, President Kocharian pledged on April 24 to "continue the struggle" for international recognition of the genocide and to continue raising the issue with Turkey. Kocharian added that Turkey's unrepentant stand on the issue amounts to complicity in the genocide and noted that "Ottoman Turkey and its legal successor bear full responsibility for this crime." (RFE/RL)

IRAN COULD RESPOND TO U.S. OFFENSIVE BY ATTACKING BAKU-CEYHAN PIPELINE — TEHRAN OFFICIAL

25 April

A senior Tehran official accused the United States of using the territory of Iran's neighbor, Azerbaijan, against the Islamic republic, the Regnum news agency reported. "Reconnaissance units are operating in Azerbaijan, and their activity is directed against the Islamic Republic of Iran," the Secretary of Iranian Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani told the Egyptian Al Ahram newspaper. Larijani claimed that U.S. special services were using the territories of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan against Iran. According to him, if a military operation is launched, Iran may respond with an attack on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and oil facilities in Azerbaijan. Chief spokesman for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry, Tair Tagizade, played down the threat. Azerbaijan and Iran maintain peaceful neighborly relations: "Such statements are aimed at breaching bilateral relations between the countries and aggravate tensions." Larijani's statement came shortly after Iranian

Defense Minister Mostafa Muhammad Najjar visited Azerbaijan. Najjar told reporters: "My visit to Azerbaijan is aimed at expanding cooperation on the basis of treaties already signed. Tehran can assist Azerbaijan in developing its defense industry. We can exchange experience in this field. I am going to raise this issue in my talks with the Azerbaijani Minister of Defense." Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev is scheduled to make a three-day visit to the United States beginning Wednesday. Aliyev's visit is a major coup for Azerbaijani diplomacy, as it emphasizes the nation's geostrategic importance in Washington, since it shares a common border with Iran, UPI reported. Aliyev's talks will undoubtedly include high-level discussions on Iran, especially since the last day of Aliyev's visit coincides with the International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohammad ElBaradei presenting his report on Iran's nuclear activities to the United Nations Security Council. (MosNews)

IRAN READY TO SHARE NUKE TECHNOLOGIES WITH MUSLIM STATES - AYATOLLAH ALI HOSEINI-KHAMENEI

25 April

Iran is ready to offer nuclear technologies to other Muslim countries, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei said at a Tuesday meeting with Sudanese President Umar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir. "Nuclear technologies are an example of Iran's scientific achievements. We are ready to share the experience and knowledge of our scientists with others," the Iranian state television quoted Khamenei. Al-Bashir congratulated the Iranian supreme leader on the successful nuclear research and said it was a great achievement of the entire Islamic world. The Sudanese president was the first foreign leader to visit Iran since its announcement of the uranium enrichment success on April 11. Kamal Daneshyar, the head of the Iranian parliamentary energy committee, has made a similar statement, the newspaper Aftab-e Yazd said on Tuesday. "Iranian nuclear specialists may teach their colleagues from Islamic countries to enrich uranium and make nuclear fuel," the lawmaker said. (Itar-Tass)

ACCORD ON BUILDING OF AFGHAN ROAD INKED

25 April

The Ministry of Public Works plans to construct a 155 kilometre road from Andkhoy to Almar district bordering Turkmenistan in the northern Faryab province, with an agreement signed on Monday with a

South Korean company. Officials said work on levelling and pavement of the road will start shortly. Deputy Minister for Public Works Dr Wali Muhammad Rasuli said some parts of the road had already been paved by an Afghan company. Speaking to Pajhwok Afghan News, Rasuli said they had allocated US\$55 million from the ministry's budget for the project. The road will be later extended to Qaisar district near Heart. (Pajhwok Afghan News)

ARMENIAN TAX SERVICE RELEASES CORPORATE RANKINGS

26 April

The Armenian State Taxation Service released a report on April 25 ranking the country's top corporate taxpayers, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. The report revealed that three foreign-owned firms head the list of the country's 300 leading corporate taxpayers -- the German-owned Zangezur Copper and Molybdenum Combine, the Greek-owned ArmenTel telecommunications company, and the ArmRosGazprom natural-gas concern, controlled by Russia's Gazprom gas monopoly -- with a combined total payment of 12 billion drams (\$27 million) in taxes and import duties in the first quarter of 2006 alone. Two Armenian-owned companies specializing in fuel imports are in fourth and fifth place, paying slightly less than 2 billion drams each. The Lebanese-owned wireless operator VivaCell, the Russian-owned Armenian electricity-distribution network, and the Medzamor nuclear power plant were also included among the top 10 corporate taxpayers. The State Taxation Service report began disclosing the quarterly corporate-tax filings in 2005 as part of a broader effort to increase greater efficiency and transparency in the tax-collection process. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJAN PRESIDENT BEGINS FIRST VISIT TO US

26 April

Ilham Aliyev is beginning his first visit as Azerbaijan's president to the US. Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov told reporters on Tuesday that the agenda of Aliyev's visit included energy security, the fight of terrorism, settlement of conflicts in the Caucasus and the situation around Iran. The Azerbaijani leader will meet on Wednesday the leaders of Congress. He will also speak in one of the US' most authoritative foreign policy organizations, the Council on Foreign Relations. On Thursday, Aliyev will hold talks with several representatives of the US administration, including

First Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zellick, who is temporarily replacing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her foreign tour. An American-Azerbaijani summit will cap the visit on Friday. Announcing Aliyev's upcoming meeting with US President George Bush, White House press secretary Scott McClellan called Azerbaijan a "key ally" of the United States in a strategically important region of the world and a "valued partner" giving help in Iraq matters. (Itar-Tass)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT BLAMES RUSSIA FOR ELECTRICITY-PRICE RISE

26 April

President Mikheil Saakashvili criticized Russia on April 25 for "creating problems" by sparking a sharp rise in electricity prices due to the increased cost for Russian natural-gas supplies. Speaking at a meeting of the government's Energy Commission, President Saakashvili ordered the introduction of new subsidies to offset the increased price of electricity for the "most vulnerable" citizens. Although the expected increase in electricity tariffs is not yet known, Finance Minister Aleksis Aleksishvili estimated that about 10 million lari (\$5.5 million) would be needed to finance the subsidies. (RFE/RL)

FSB: GROUP OF WOULD-BE BOMBERS CRUSHED IN NORTH CAUCASUS

27 April

All members of a militant group believed to have been planning a bomb attack were destroyed in an armed clash in a village in the Russian North Caucasus republic of Karachayevo-Cherkesia on Thursday by the Federal Security Service (FSB) and police forces, the FSB said. The alleged bombing was to be carried out in Karachayevo-Cherkesia on May 9, a Russian public holiday commemorating the Soviet victory over the Nazis during World War II, the FSB said in a release. "Due to fierce armed resistance, all members of the group were liquidated," the release said. The release said that two policemen had received "light wounds" in the clash and that no civilian had been hurt. "According to preliminary information, an explosive device was being manufactured in a private house in the village of Storozhevaya. Components of an improvised explosive device have been discovered," the release said. (Interfax)

DECISIONS ON IRAN MUST BE COORDINATED - PUTIN

27 April

Coordinated decisions must be made on the Iranian nuclear issue, President Vladimir Putin said. "We will cooperate with all the partners. It would be premature to speculate on what decisions we could make together. Most importantly, these decisions must be coordinated, whatever they are," Putin told a news conference in Tomsk. Russia's position on the issue is well known, he continued. "We oppose the proliferation of nuclear weapons, including by Iran, but think that Iran must have an opportunity to develop modern technology and nuclear power engineering for peaceful purposes," he said. Talks will decide how conditions could be created to enable Iran to develop its peaceful nuclear energy program and how "the world community's concerns could be allayed," Putin said. (Interfax)

LEADERS OF ABKHAZIA, SOUTH OSSETIA TO MEET

27 April

The presidents of the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are due to meet on Friday to explore ways of settling their conflicts with Georgia, the Abkhaz president's office told Interfax. South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity arrived on Thursday evening in the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi, the venue of the meeting. A delegation from the Moldovan breakaway region of Transdniestria is due in Abkhazia within days. The leaders of the three regions are expected to consider joint action. (Interfax)

COURT CLEARS KYRGYZ OFFICIALS ON CASH HANDOVER TO EX-PRESIDENT

27 April

A court in Bishkek ruled on April 26 to acquit former National Bank head Ulan Sarbanov, former Accounting Chamber Chairman Medet Sadyrkulov, former Finance Minister Sultan Mederov, and former Central Treasury Director Anarbek Satybaldiev on charges that they illegally transferred \$420,000 from the state budget to then President Askar Akaev in December 1999. The judge said that their actions were not criminal. The defendants had argued that they gave the money to the president legally to cover the costs of a military operation against an extremist incursion, ferghana.ru reported. Prosecutors said that they intend to appeal the ruling. (RFE/RL)

AZERI SHAKH-DENIZ GAS RESERVES ESTIMATE MAY DOUBLE

28 April

Azerbaijan's Shakh-Deniz gas field may hold up to two times more natural gas than current estimates of 1 trillion cubic metres, an Azeri oil official said on Friday. Khoshtakht Yusifzade, vice president of Azeri state oil firm SOCAR, which is part of the project, said the fourth evaluation drilling was under way in the south-western part of the field. "We believe that this drilling may boost estimates of Shakh-Deniz's reserves by one and a half to two times," Yusifzade told a news conference, referring to the field's recoverable reserves. The first production of gas from the field, operated by Norway's Statoil and Britain's BP Plc, is expected in August this year and Shakh-Deniz may produce 0.85 billion cubic metres (bcm) by the end of 2005, Yusifzade said. In 2007 Shakh-Deniz is expected to produce 5.4 bcm of gas, and output is set to rise to 8.1 bcm in 2008 and 8.4 bcm in 2009, the peak year of the first stage of the project. Gas from the field may be exported to Europe via a \$1 billion pipeline to Turkey and possibly to Greece. Shakh-Deniz's other shareholders are Russia's LUKOIL, France's Total and Iranian and Turkish state oil firms. The second stage will come on stream in 2011 at the earliest, BP said last year. It will largely depend on Turkey's needs for additional gas as well as on the group's ability to ship more gas onwards to Europe. (Reuters)

U.S. PUSHING ASIA POWER GRID**28 April**

Washington is pushing construction of a regional pipeline and utility grid linking Central Asia and India. The project envisions a system from Almaty, Kazakhstan, south to Afghanistan, then Pakistan and on to New Delhi, the Gulf Daily News said Friday. Richard Boucher, the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, told a congressional hearing Thursday that the network would be fed by oil and gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and hydropower from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The electrical portion of the venture entails the establishment of a 500-kilovolt power line. Boucher said that in partnership with multilateral development banks and other donors, the US wanted to help "build new links" among the countries of the broader region and connect them more closely to the rest of the world. "One of our leading objectives is to fund a greatly expanded Afghan power grid, with connections to energy sources in Central Asia. It's a winning solution for both sides, providing much-needed energy to Afghanistan and serving as a major source of future

revenue for countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," he said. (UPI)

BUSH PRAISES MUSLIM ALLY**29 April**

President Bush praised Azerbaijan's president Friday despite human rights problems documented by the State Department, and said the country had a "very important role to play" in meeting global energy needs. Bush met in the Oval Office with President Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father 2 1/2 years ago after elections the State Department said suffered from "numerous, serious irregularities." With Aliyev sitting in an armchair next to him, Bush held out Azerbaijan as "a modern Muslim country that is able to provide for its citizens, that understands that democracy is the wave of the future." The meeting reflected the difficulty the administration faces as it seeks to maintain U.S. access to oil and gas supplies from countries that may be unstable or unreliable, often because of corruption or human rights abuses. A year ago, Azerbaijan celebrated the opening of an 1,100-mile pipeline from its capital, Baku, on the Caspian Sea, that runs through Georgia to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean. The event was important enough to the U.S. that Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman attended. The pipeline created a link that bypasses Iran, Russia and neighboring Armenia, and it is expected to carry 1 million barrels of oil a day to Western markets by 2008. Bush expressed his appreciation to Aliyev several times, thanking him for support in the war in Iraq and for his help in achieving "what we all want, which is energy security." Aliyev responded with a broad grin when Bush, at the end of a photo session that concluded their meeting, added a word of congratulations. Bush noted the wedding this weekend of Aliyev's daughter. "It's a major sacrifice for the president to be here during the planning phases of the wedding," Bush said. "And we wish you and the first lady all the best, and more importantly, we wish your daughter all the best." (Los AngelesTimes)

KYRGYZ OPPOSITION RALLIES IN BISHKEK**29 April**

The Kyrgyz opposition held a rally under the motto "For Democratic Reform" in downtown Bishkek for several hours, before halting it due to heavy rain. The square right in front of the House of Government was cordoned off by police, armed with clubs, who allowed passage only to those working in the near vicinity of the government headquarters. Protesters, therefore, had to gather about 500 meters from the building, an

Interfax correspondent reported from the scene. There were about 9,000 protesters at the rally as of 9:00 a.m. Moscow time. Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov met with demonstrators in downtown Bishkek. Kulov, in particular, said, addressing the crowd, that the government would consider all their demands. Bakiyev said, speaking at the same rally, "I am from the people myself, but I can't agree that nothing has been done in the country since the March 24 [2005] revolution." The protesters demanded constitutional and democratic reforms, that criminals not be allowed to infiltrate governmental institutions, a reshuffling of the top echelons of the government, and the dismissal of the presidential chief of staff, the secretary of state and the prosecutor general. After the speeches by the premier and the president, people started leaving the square to shelter from the heavy rain. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ PRESIDENT REJECTS RESIGNATION OF CABINET - VICE PM

2 May

Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev has rejected the resignation of the Cabinet, Deputy Prime Minister Adakhan Madumarov told a Tuesday news conference. "The president did not accept our resignation. All of us remain. The president told us to triple our efforts," he said. "The president believes that the decision of parliament describing the contribution of the majority of Cabinet members as unsatisfactory has no legal force," Madumarov said. "All 17 Cabinet members, except Prime Minister Felix Kulov, submitted their resignations in response to parliament's assessment. He also wanted to resign but we talked him out of it," he said. "There is no crisis in relations between the legislative and executive branches of power in Kyrgyzstan. It is normal for parliament to criticize the government. The government should have the power to defend its honor," Madumarov added. (Interfax)

WITHDRAWAL FROM CIS REQUIRES SERIOUS STUDY - GEORGIAN MINISTER

2 May

Georgia's State Minister Kakha Bendukidze said the issue of Georgia's withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Independent States must be seriously assessed. "It's a very specific issue involving benefits that Georgian citizens and commodities enjoy being in the CIS," Bendukidze told the press on Tuesday. If Georgia withdraws from the CIS Georgian citizens may face serious visa problems in the first place, he said. "Georgia has a visa-free regime

with all of the CIS's member-states except Russia. If it withdraws from the CIS, relevant bilateral agreements will have to be signed," the minister said. (Interfax)

OKRUASHVILI ACCUSES MOSCOW OF ORGANIZING PROVOCATIONS IN AKHALKALAKI

2 May

Russian special forces are planning provocations in Akhalkalaki in order to obstruct the withdrawal of a Russian military base, Georgian Defense Minister Irakly Okruashvili said. "A large-scale protest action is planned for Wednesday, May 3, in Akhalkalaki. The action is aimed at dragging the first stage of withdrawal of the Russian military base from Akhalkalaki, and officers of Russian special services have organized this action," the defense minister said on Imedi TV. Akhalkalaki local citizens protested against the withdrawal of the Russian base last week. (Interfax-AVN)

EU CONCERNED ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN KYRGYZSTAN

2 May

The European Union supports Kyrgyzstan's aspiration to stay on the course of reforms, but it remains concerned about certain aspects of its public and political life, according to a statement published by the German embassy in Bishkek on Tuesday. EU countries are concerned with the fact that circles linked to organized crime are pushing for influence in Kyrgyz political life and state institutions, the statement says. Organized crime can seriously affect not only the political process in general, but also the economic situation in the country, the statement says. The EU recommends that Kyrgyzstan repel such attempts by legal means and decisively and energetically continue to follow its course towards the construction of democracy expressing the will of the Kyrgyz people, the statement says. The statement is in response to the attack this April on Edil Baisalov, a Kyrgyz human rights activist and leader of the For Democracy and Civil Society Coalition. (Interfax)

IRAN CONSIDERS URANIUM ENRICHMENT CONSORTIUM WITH JAPAN

3 May

Iran is considering the possibility of creating a uranium enrichment consortium with Japan, Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki has said. "We shall be prepared to join a consortium with Japan or any other country under the control (of the International Atomic

Energy Agency) for uranium enrichment," the chief Iranian diplomat said. (Itar-Tass)

GEORGIA'S THREATS TO QUIT CIS OVER WINE BAN "CHILDISH" - ZOURABICHVILI

3 May

Georgian leaders are being "childish" when they threaten to withdraw from the CIS in retaliation for Russia's ban on Georgian wine imports, Salome Zourabichvili, leader of the Path of Georgia party and former Georgian foreign minister, told journalists on Wednesday. "We will quit the CIS in retaliation for your embargo on our wine. It is a childish approach and immature behavior which we need to get rid of," she said. Georgia should have quietly withdrawn from the CIS a long time ago, Zourabichvili said. The Russian authorities described the CIS as "a civilized form of divorce for the former Soviet republics," she said. Zourabichvili said she had repeatedly asked the Georgian government to consider terminating the country's membership in the CIS. "I also discussed this issue with [Ukrainian Foreign Minister] Borys Tarasyuk. We agreed that neither Georgia nor Ukraine would be able to join NATO and the EU if they did not quit the CIS," she said. Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS will automatically halt the CIS peacekeeping operation in the breakaway province of Abkhazia, Zourabichvili said. (Interfax)

PLANE CRASHES IN RUSSIA WITH 113 ABOARD

3 May

An Armenian passenger plane crashed in stormy weather early Wednesday off Russia's Black Sea coast as it was headed in for a landing, killing all 113 people

on board, emergency officials said. The Airbus A-320, which belonged to the Armenian airline Armavia, disappeared from radar screens about four miles from the shore and crashed after making a turn toward the Adler airport near the southern Russian city of Sochi, Emergency Situations Ministry spokesman Viktor Beltsov said. Rescue officials in the ministry's southern regional branch said all 113 people aboard the plane, including six children, were killed. Armavia officials said they believed the crash was due to the weather, but Sergei Kubinov, regional head of the Emergency Situations Ministry, said the age of the aircraft and technical problems could have been involved. Investigators did not believe terrorism was a factor. Search and rescue teams had pulled 18 bodies from the water, Kubinov said. None were wearing life jackets, indicating they did not have sufficient warning to prepare for an emergency landing. Rough seas, driving rain and low visibility were hampering the search, Russian news agencies reported. A deep-sea robot was to be used to try to recover the plane's black box. Andrei Agadzhanov, Armavia's deputy commercial director, said the crew had communicated with Sochi ground controllers while the plane was flying over the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The ground controllers reported stormy weather but told the crew the plane could still land, he said. Just before the landing, however, the ground controllers told the plane's pilots to circle again before approaching the airport. Then the plane crashed. Agadzhanov said that the airline's deputy general director, Vyacheslav Yaralov, had been aboard. He said the crew was experienced and that the bad weather was "certainly" the cause. (AP)