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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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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.

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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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TENGRISM: IN SEARCH FOR CENTRAL ASIA'S SPIRITUAL ROOTS

Marlene Laruelle

The ideological recompositions of the post-Soviet world have led, in some intellectual circles, to a spiritual quest for a “return” to ancient mythical national religions. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (but also in Tatarstan, Buriatia and Mongolia), this religious quest has taken the shape of Tengrism. Tengrism reshapes the identity of the ancient religion of the nomadic Turkish-Mongol peoples who used to pray, before the arrival of Islam, a god called Tengri — a word meaning “God” in most Turkic-Altaic languages. Nowadays, this movement, all at once a religious, philosophical and nationalist movement, develops mostly in Kyrgyzstan and in Tatarstan and mainly affects intellectual circles.

BACKGROUND: The Tengrist movement appeared in the 1990s in Central Asia and in Russia. It particularly developed in Tatarstan, where, since 1997, the only Tengrist periodical, *Bizneng-Yul*, has been published. It later spread throughout Central Asia. However, the movement, which has so far been little institutionalized, starts to organize itself: there is now a Tengrist society in Bishkek, which officially claims almost 500,000 followers (a figure which is obviously excessive and unrealistic), and an international scientific centre of Tengrist studies. Both institutions are run by Dastan Sarygulov, the main theorist of Tengrism in Kyrgyzstan and a member of the Parliament. Publications committed to the subject of Tengrism are more and more frequently published in scientific journals of human sciences in this republic, as well as in Kazakhstan. The partisans of this movement endeavor to influence the political circles, and have in fact succeeded in spreading their concepts into the governing bodies. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, and even more frequently former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev, have several times

mentioned Tengrism as the national and “natural” religion of the Turkic peoples.

Tengrism appears to be a monotheist natural religion whose last traces would be found in shamanism. The followers of Tengrism assert that this religion offers a cosmogony that is perfectly adapted to the contemporary world: it is ecological and calls men to live in harmony with nature. Moreover, it is tolerant and accepts to coexist with other religions. It is individualistic, does not have a holy text, and the religion is without a clergy, without dogma and interdictions, and finally the concept of prayer is unknown. Thus, Tengrism brings together numerous features of new religious movements: the claim to modernity, increased interest in ecology, a call for individualism, and a willingness to take part in globalization by creating new so-called “natural” spiritualities. The current dissemination of Tengrism can probably be accounted for by the legacy of Soviet atheism: a portion of the intellectual elite looking for a strictly national faith have difficulties committing to a Muslim or a Christian message, and are more easily able to make sense of a

so-called religion that demands neither regular ritual observance, nor a theological background, and which is limited in fact to extolling the nation and the Mother Earth.

IMPLICATIONS: If the “followers” of Tengrism are in fact very few, the discourse of rehabilitation of this so-called “national religion” reaches much larger social layers and is spreading through intellectual circles. Tengrism, attempting to rehabilitate the ancient cult of the god Tengri, is also presenting Islam as a faith foreign to the Turkic populations. As such, this movement is mainly found in the nationalistic parties developing in Central Asia. Indeed, by denying the universality of the great monotheist religions and by asserting that Islam aids foreign interests, Tengrism represents the religious version of many Kazakh, Kyrgyz or Tatar nationalist discourses. Thus, the most radical Tengrists do not conceal their political commitment: in Tatarstan, they favor the independence of the republic, while in Kyrgyzstan they favor a “purification” of the country from all foreign influences, whether they come from Russia or the Middle East. Some strains even openly express anti-Semitic ideas (since Islam, disparaged, is considered as a Semitic religion in the same way as Judaism).

Tengrism can thus be analyzed as the Turkic version of Russian neo-paganism, which is already well-established in intellectual circles in Russia. This Slavic neo-paganism can also be found in Ukraine, while other versions of Tengrism are present among the Crimean Karaites. The rehabilitation of Zoroastrianism in Tajikistan stems from the same tradition. This tradition is extremely striking because of its exploitation of the religious element, which is in fact entirely submitted to nationalist sentiment alone. Tengrism can indeed be distinguished by its fierce nationalism. It is not

limited, indeed, to advocating the “return” to a national religion, but also claims to be an ideology of the Turkic community, since it calls on all Turkic-speaking peoples to once again become aware of their unity, to reject their current religious divisions, and to start a religious and cultural process, which will in the long term become a political process of reunification. Tengrism also represents a mode of refusal of the westernization process that has been pronounced in the post-Soviet societies of Central Asia for about fifteen years.

CONCLUSIONS: Tengrism represents a paradoxical but important element of spirituality in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. It partakes of the re-appropriation of a national past which is as much real as it is reconstituted, and of the emphasis on national traditions within which the memories of the ancient religions plays a major part. It also allows, in urbanized and deeply Russified circles, a hope for reconnecting with the past: nomadism, yurts, cattle breeding, the contact with nature, all those elements that form part of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh national imaginative world which people have tried to rehabilitate since the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its ideology. Tengrism also reveals how Islam in limited but influential circles, not considered as being the obvious religious starting point. One can, however, notice the risks of a radicalization of the Tengrist discourse into words tinged with anti-Semitism, anti-western views and xenophobia, which would consequently affect in negative terms a much understandable spiritual quest.

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AZERBAIJAN IN THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN VISE

Ariel Cohen and Conway Irwin

A shared border and unique geopolitical location make Azerbaijan an important stakeholder in the confrontation between the West and Iran over its uranium enrichment program. It is not in Azerbaijan's interest to foster animosity with its powerful neighbor, but at the same time, it is not in its interest to side with rogue regimes, thereby alienating the U.S. and the West. Russia has been aggressively courting Azerbaijan, but widespread Western opposition to Iranian nuclear efforts and Russia's desire to extend the Karabakh conflict for as long as possible will give Azerbaijan room to find a way to stay in Russia's good graces but out of its "sphere of influence."

BACKGROUND: On February 21-22, 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited President Ilham Aliyev in Baku to mark the start of the "Year of Russian Culture" in Azerbaijan. The two presidents discussed economic cooperation, a military-technical commission to facilitate Russian military sales to Azerbaijan, and, presumably, Azerbaijan's position on Iranian nuclear enrichment. Some analysts believe that Putin is pressuring Aliyev to support Russia in opposing UN sanctions against Iran and to weaken U.S. influence in the Southern Caucasus, undoubtedly using as leverage his support for Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party in Azerbaijan's disputed 2005 parliamentary elections.

Putin and Aliyev also discussed Russia's proposal for a Caspian Sea security entity - "Caspian Defense Initiative," or CASFOR. CASFOR's stated goals are the prevention of terrorism and drug/WMD smuggling across borders, as well as protection of the economic interests of the five proposed signatories - Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

Such cooperation is inconsistent with the historically complicated relationships between Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan has long suspected both countries of clandestine support for Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, including Russian provision of troops to the Armenian side. Recent negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have yielded some progress on the issue, but a solution remains elusive given recent Armenian backtracking. There is some

speculation that Russia encouraged Armenian President Robert Kocharyan to harden his position in peace negotiations in February 2006, derailing a much-expected framework agreement. If true, this could be a signal to Baku that independent statehood does not free Azerbaijan from Russian meddling in its traditional sphere of influence.

Despite lingering mistrust, Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan have announced the synchronization of their energy systems, with a Russian-Iranian-Azerbaijani power corridor to be completed in 2009. Increasing Western indifference to Azerbaijan, or pressure regarding its political system as well as aggressive moves by Russia to court Azerbaijan may push Azerbaijani President Aliyev further into the Russian-Iranian camp, distancing him from the West.

IMPLICATIONS: By joining CASFOR and further increasing political and economic cooperation with Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan risks unwittingly positioning itself on the wrong side of the debate over Iranian nuclear aspirations. Just like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has been for its members, CASFOR may become a trap for Azerbaijan, as it stands to be used as a means for Russia to expand its influence in the Caspian region and continue its efforts to turn Azerbaijan into a client state. Furthermore, Azerbaijan is not looking to align itself with Iran amidst a brewing crisis over the Iranian nuclear program, and create tensions with the U.S. Russia is likely to seek to avoid sanctions against Iran, given

that Iran is a major importer of Russian arms and nuclear technology . However, as G8 President, unequivocal support for Iran would damage Russia's international legitimacy. Russia will continue to seek a diplomatic solution to the Iranian problem, which only prolongs the crisis, but if the rest of the G8 agrees that sanctions are necessary, Russia and Iran are unlikely to win this battle, and Azerbaijan will be facing the choice: defining its image in the West as a reliable partner or as a Russian-Iranian vassal.

To encourage Azerbaijan to support the Western position on Iran, it is crucial for the European Union to support Azerbaijan's efforts to expand cooperation with the EU, while the U.S. should be willing to provide Baku with necessary security guarantees and expanded military assistance. Moreover, as Russia may be mulling escalation tensions in the Caucasus, the U.S. needs to talk to Azerbaijan and Turkey about coordinating security cooperation, such as joint airspace control.

The worst development which can happen for the West is for Azerbaijan to become disillusioned with its Euro-Atlantic orientation and follow the examples of Uzbekistan and Belarus, seeking political patronage in Moscow, Tehran or even Beijing.

Azerbaijan has strong incentives to expand economic ties with Europe. Azerbaijan is the EU's largest trading partner in the Caucasus, and development of the TRACECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor) and Most Favored Nation (MFN) status with the EU will be cornerstones for expansion of Azerbaijani trade and investment. A firm partnership with the EU could also strengthen Azerbaijan's economic institutions. Cooperation with Western advisors could help Azerbaijan enact reforms to tackle the weak regulatory framework, corruption, and potential for armed conflict that have stymied economic growth and foreign and domestic investment, and to diversify into sectors other than oil and gas. Such reforms would enhance economic growth and stability.

Systemic reform will also improve Azerbaijan's external security. A pluralistic, democratic Azerbaijan – a secular Shi'i state – can set an example for other majority-Muslim states in the region, making it an invaluable ally for the West. Engaging with the West politically, cooperating on multilateral issues and observing Western standards of government accountability, democracy, pluralism, and human rights will contribute to domestic stability in Azerbaijan and improve the likelihood of Western backing on energy and security issues. As the country becomes more transparent and develops the rule of law and better-functioning institution of governance and economic coordination, Western investments are likely to flow beyond the oil and gas sectors. A thriving secular, but culturally Muslim democracy will be increasingly secure as Russia moves to reassert power in its “near abroad”.

CONCLUSIONS: Azerbaijan's strategic challenge is to stave off choosing between Russia and the West. Economic cooperation with the U.S. and EU can inject much-needed capital, technology, and managerial expertise into the Azerbaijani economy. Security cooperation with Western partners can ease pressure from Russia and Iran in the Caspian region and provide Azerbaijan with the backing of strong allies. Azerbaijan should take into account the dangers of Russian hegemony in its “backyard” and the implications of a nuclear Iran, and concentrate on its long-term national interests. With the political, military and economic support of Western partners and genuine efforts at growth and reform, Azerbaijan may develop the capacity to maintain a relationship with Russia based not on clientelism, but on mutual interests.

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FIGHTING CORRUPTION IN KYRGYZSTAN

Talaimbek Koichumanov

Kyrgyzstan has developed its own anticorruption strategy that emphasizes a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach. However, this strategy and programs are insufficient. An effective and comprehensive struggle against corruption requires strong political will of governmental officials on all levels and sectors. It also requires both official and independent system of monitoring and evaluation. Many difficulties and obstacles exist, but a number of effective measures to overcome them could also be devised, in the institutional, political and other realms.

BACKGROUND: International experience demonstrates that higher income, investment and growth rates as well as higher life expectancy are evident in those countries that have efficient and fair governmental institutions, where job promotion is based on the personal merits of the candidate for promotion and clear and efficient regulations are available. In these countries, everyone is subjected to the law and the state is not captured by elite groups who pursue their personal interests. Moreover, in these states civil society and mass media have an independent voice, strengthening the accountability of the Government.

At present, the most important objective in both Kyrgyzstan and other post-communist countries is to continue the process of reform. The slowing down of the process of change with the parallel accumulation of foreign debt has posed serious risks, and resulted in the growth of poverty. Analyses of the socio-economic situation in Kyrgyzstan conducted by international experts highlights that the key barrier to reforms is inefficient public administration, the result of which has been the growth of the shadow economy and corruption. Fighting corruption in particular has become a major problem.

In spite of political declarations of the Akayev government, efforts to fight corruption in Kyrgyzstan were imperceptible during his time in power. In fact, the level of corruption increased

substantially, although no specific numeric data is available. Neither reliable indicators or methods of assessment of corruption were available, and the environment was not conducive to such work. The problem of corruption and the effectiveness of public administration was discussed in the “Comprehensive Development Framework of the Kyrgyz Republic till 2010”, developed in 2001. The Council for Good Governance, headed by the Prime Minister, was established, and there were attempts to involve civil society in the development of anti-corruption policy. Yet overall, the approach was based on a top-down model, and did not yield positive results. Recently an anti-corruption agency has established, but its activities and the development of a comprehensive program are still being discussed.

After the events of March 24, 2005, the country’s new political top management put forward the concept of anti-corruption as one of its priorities. For the time being, however, it is difficult to judge whether these statements have been met with deeds. Indeed, problems in the struggle against corruption continue to abound: First, there are numerous statements but fewer concrete actions, especially of a comprehensive and preventive type. Second, no procedures or norms exist regarding the accountability of the branches of power. Third, the authorities and responsibilities of the President and government are not clearly divided. Fourth, the danger of a “capture” of the state by informal

groups of politicians remains. Fifth, there is no system of monitoring and evaluating that would permit the tracking of successes or failures of reforms. Sixth, the electoral system and the parliament remain weak. These factors all impact on the quality of legislation, which directly influences the regulatory basis containing possibilities for conflict of interests and corruption. There is still no institution of preventively assessing bills presented to parliament from a corruption standpoint.

In terms of the reform of economic policy, numerous problem areas also remain. The process of deregulation of the economy is being weakened; the tax code is outdated and includes complicated tax administration procedures; a lack of transparency in budgeting remains, and finally, procedures for decision-making are unclear.

IMPLICATIONS: This overview makes it clear that it is high time to continue the deregulation process that was started several years ago. A decrease of state regulatory and control functions in the business sphere should minimize the opportunities for state bureaucrats to engage in corruption. A simplified and clearer tax code with transparent taxation procedures needs to be adopted. In terms of budget transparency, the recently started practice of holding budget hearings on a continuous basis holds some promise.

The main problem nevertheless lies in conducting institutional reforms. In many respects, for example in the notoriously corrupt customs system, reform is basically related to external structural changes. Laws which were adopted are frequently not working in practice. Local self-government institutions practically have no resources or power to carry out their functions. The centralization of the distribution of means ensures a low level of control on the part the local communities over the distribution of resources.

The reform of state governance and public service is still fraught with problems, including outdated organizational and administrative structures, the remaining system of executive power, low salaries

of civil servants, and the absence of a merit-based system of selection of civil servants.

In terms of reorganizing ministries and administrative departments, significant steps have been taken in the past few years with the support of international organizations. Functional reviews led most of the ministries to reconsider their tasks and functions, leading to recommendations on the elimination of unnecessary and duplicating functions and the elimination of conflicts of interests. But in the absence of a monitoring and evaluation system, it was impossible to track the implementation of the recommendations provided. Provided political will is present, such a system could easily and speedily be introduced.

In the legal sphere, dependence on executive power; the low salaries of judges, and the absence of reforms in the law enforcement system remain the main problems. To a significant scale, a "capture" of the judicial system has taken place. Judicial bodies face pressure from both political forces and the criminal underworld. Clearly, the eradication of the problems of corruption and state capture in the legal sphere will require serious resources and political will on the part of the government.

No serious system of financial oversight exists in the government. Even such institutions as a system of state purchasing or budget oversight are absent. Corruption in the financial sphere, including in debt servicing, remains large. The further improvement of procedures directed to achieve greater transparency and accountability is necessary.

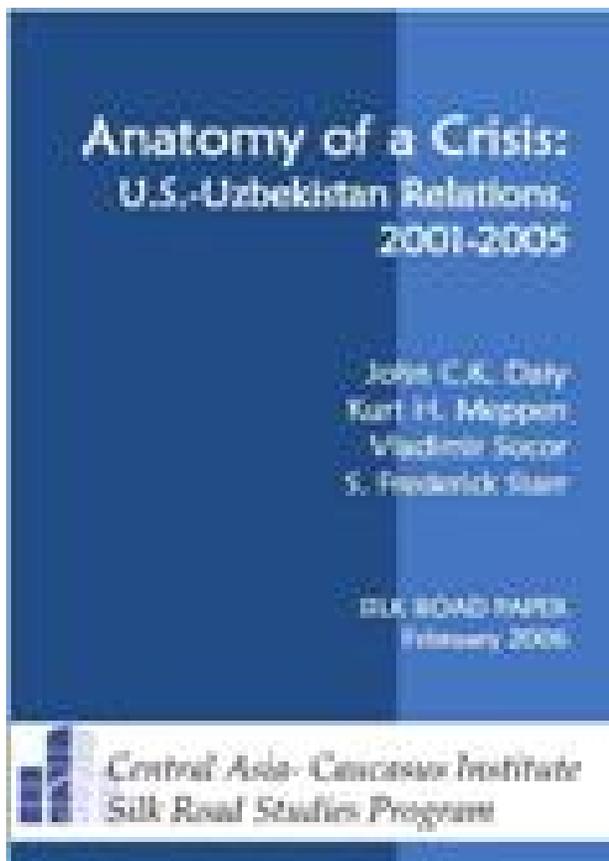
The strongest element in the fight against corruption in Kyrgyzstan is civil society. In fact, all basic elements of civil society participation in the struggle against corruption are present. Civil society groups participate in decision-making, the press is free, access to information is expanding, and at the local level, community involvement and the participation of women can be observed. Yet very often, influence on these processes from authorities has been so significant as to transform civil society participation into a mere formality.

CONCLUSIONS: The successful monitoring of anticorruption measures requires the assessment of resources in several important spheres of anti-corruption efforts. In examining political, institutional, technical, financial and human resources, this researcher found that the most promising direction within the comprehensive approach to fight corruption is the development of civil society institutions. In this sector, there is a high level of readiness, estimated at 80 on a 0-100 scale. The least promising directions are public administration and civil service reform, where readiness is estimated at 45 on the same scale. Other sectors range in between these two – 46 for political reform, 50 for institutional reform, and 67 each for

the legislative, financial oversight and spending policy reforms.

The successful implementation of the above-mentioned anti-corruption measures requires the political will of the leadership to pursue reforms systematically, using administrative and preventive means on various levels. It is important to distribute scarce resources, identify weak spots, and to conduct systematic monitoring of anticorruption measures and their results.

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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

Few, if any, observers anticipated the rapid downward spiral of U.S.-Uzbek relations during the past several years. This *Silk Road Paper* includes two articles and a detailed, annotated chronology, which seeks to identify the causes for the collapse of the strategic partnership, providing a clear understanding of the sequences of events that is necessary for both Washington and Tashkent to look ahead and seek to plot a rational path forward.

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.

UZBEKISTAN'S REVERSIONISM, AMERICA'S REVISIONISM, AND RUSSIA'S REVANCHISM

Farkhad Tolipov

Uzbekistan reverted, and conceded to Russia's embrace. Now the central questions in Central Asian geopolitics are whether the United States will revise its strategy and whether Russia will achieve the geopolitical revanche it has been advancing in Central Asia. The question is crucial to the region's future. Could it mean an 'end of history' on a regional scale, in the sense that the regional order in Central Asia is sentenced to sink into a new status quo?

BACKGROUND: The reversion of Uzbekistan's foreign policy since 2003 was in fact the acknowledgement of an old geopolitical concept, according to which Central Asia is a zone of exclusive Russian dominance. The Russian influence in the region, which had weakened after 1991, is now being rapidly restored. It is very clear that the previously increasing American influence in Central Asia is rapidly melting away. Uzbekistan finds itself at the epicenter of this drama.

The American military presence on Uzbekistan's territory caused a very serious reaction from the traditional geopolitical rivals of the United States. Iran, Russia and China all exerted strong pressure to reverse this situation. It must be noted, however, that it was not so much America's military activity in Central Asia, more precisely in Afghanistan, that caused Russian and Chinese resistance. In fact, from the very beginning of American military operations, it had been very clear that this activity based in the territory of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries posed no threat to these two countries. Indeed, it was not so much America's *military* presence in Central Asia that challenged Russian, Chinese or other powers' interests, as America's *democratic* presence. The reason for all disagreements, discontents, suspicions and disappointments was the fate of democracy in

Central Asia as a whole and in Uzbekistan specifically.

The recent series of events has potentially important implications. At present, America may seem disappointed, Russia may seem triumphant – both because Uzbekistan seems discredited. The sense of triumph in Moscow seems to be fueling revanchism in the Russian policy in Central Asia; meanwhile, disappointment in Washington could cause revisionism in the U.S. attitude towards Uzbekistan. In the end, the discrediting of Uzbekistan's foreign policy could lead to Uzbekistan's reversion to a renewed dependence on Russia that it had so long tried to avoid.

In this context, American revisionism would imply the reconsideration of the basic thinking that has laid the foundation for America's policies toward Central Asia, and specifically Uzbekistan, since independence. This thinking focused on the central role of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, and advocated a close relationship as a cornerstone of U.S. policy. Revisionism would mean that Uzbekistan cease being a key country in U.S. policy toward Central Asia, let alone a strategic partner. Russian revanchism implies that by tying Uzbekistan closer to itself, Russia can (and already does) use an unique opportunity to seal its hegemony over this region for the longer term at the expense of the Central Asian states' relations with the West,

starting with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's reversion would imply that Tashkent decisively abandon its policy of seeking a balanced relationship to the three major powers in the region, preferring alliance with Russia to strategic partnership with the United States – based on its belief in a mythic American threat, and more fundamentally because the U.S. demands something that Tashkent cannot afford, namely democracy.

IMPLICATIONS: These three parallel processes not only challenge U.S. interests in Central Asia. Indeed, the very fact that Russia's goals remain thoroughly unchanged since the collapse of the USSR put into question the primary goals of U.S. policy and its ways of achieving them.

The current Russian-American divergence over the fate of Central Asia is, in fact, a two-fold symptom in the process of the formation of a new post-cold war world order. On the one hand, the old balance of power mode of international relations appeared revitalized when it was expected to wither away. On the other hand, the central question of Russian-American divergence – the question of democracy in Central Asia – revealed that the intervention of geopolitics can not only modify policies of democratization but undermine them.

The mixing of democracy with geopolitics has had very negative results for the region and for the U.S. It is obvious that the only way to overcome both destructive geopolitics of external powers and geopolitical distortions of internal democracy is to correlate constructively external and internal factors. Geopolitics are unavoidable, and eschewing democratization is undesirable. But a 'democratization of geopolitics' in the region is difficult as long as Russia is capitalizing exactly on the infusion of ideology in the region's politics. Nevertheless, to make this more realistic, one could think of a larger internationalization of the issue of democratization. In this sense, the U.S. might promote the concept of democracy in a different light: not as a solely American plan or desire but showing convincingly that this is endorsed by the entire international democratic community.

Central Asia is located in undemocratic surroundings. This means that a "zero-sum game" mode of geopolitics has been prevailing overall in Central Asian geopolitics. The countries of the region, as well as external powers, need somehow to pass from the zero-sum framework to a "win-win" model.

The overall relationships between Uzbekistan and the United States, on the one hand, and Uzbekistan and Russia on the other, are asymmetric by nature. Washington can, but only in a longer-term strategy, seek to build on its relations with Tashkent by what has always been on the agenda, namely real internal democratization in Uzbekistan. Regarding the other direction, it is also necessary for Tashkent to index its improved relations with Moscow (not the other way round) on the democratization of Russian geopolitics – meaning, among other things, the admission of other great powers' interests, their presence in the region, and their participation in regional affairs. Of course, the 'democratization' of Russian geopolitics in the short term is very unlikely, but is undoubtedly in both the west's, the region's, and eventually Russia's own interest in the long term.

At the present point, revising its democratic demands would not serve American foreign policy well. But continued focus on this will not work, and only marginalize America, unless it is paralleled by increased pressure on Moscow, in order to engage it in real post-cold-war processes instead of continuing its old cold war-style practice.

A democratic environment is likely to emerge in Central Asia only if two processes occur: first, the interdependence of political processes in the regional countries is recognized, which would reduce the divide-and-rule policies by regional powers. And secondly, the development of regional cooperation mechanisms that are not dominated by foreign powers. This implies, among other, a regional collective security system, which would embrace the Central Asian countries. The restoration by these countries of their *own* regional structure may seem to be against Russia's interests the way Russia defines them, but in the longer term

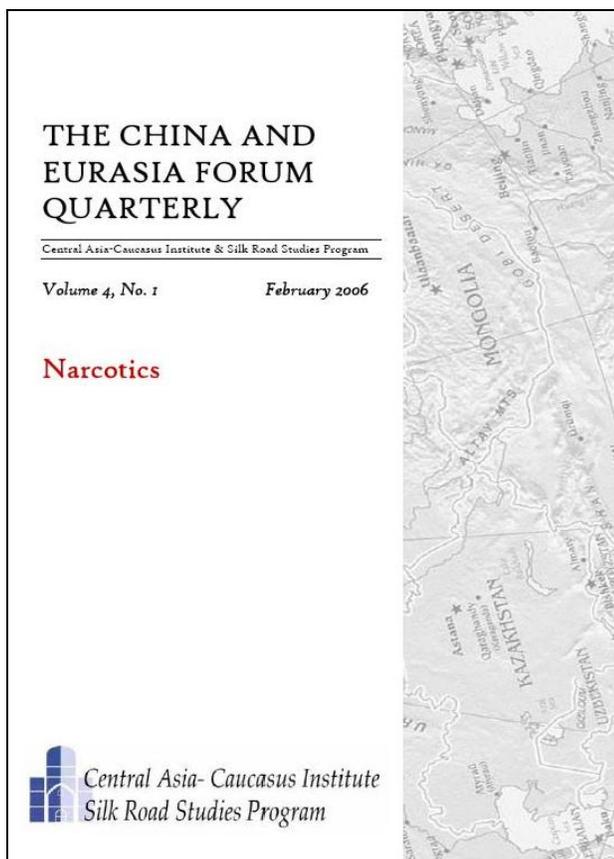
this integrative development would lead to more secure, stable, and more democratic and peaceful Russian southern neighborhood.

CONCLUSIONS: The three tendencies of Uzbekistan's reversion, America's revisionism, and Russia's revanchism are undesirable. All these tendencies, if realized, will serve only to freeze the current status quo in the region whereas it needs to be changed fundamentally, because the existing state of affairs in Central Asia just freezes or perpetuates the old Russian hegemony in its southern "underbelly", whereas the foreign policy diversification of Central Asian states remain the matter of their real independence.

It is also clear that Uzbekistan needs a foreign policy doctrine. Due to the key role of this country in Central Asian affairs, it might reincarnate itself as a motor of regional integration. The dramatic

experience of its isolation from the West must be taken into account in working out a new foreign policy doctrine. It is also necessary for the West, primarily the United States, to demonstrate that it looks at democracy as a noble mission, not as a geopolitical project. The US ambitions need to be shown to be honest, and not subversive; and this implies a US policy that is predictable, long-term, and creates confidence in regional actors in its intentions in general, and regarding democracy specifically. Geopolitics and democratization must be separate and understood as such; the democratic choice of a country cannot be tied to its geopolitical apprehensions.

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FIELD REPORTS

TAJIKISTAN PLANS TO IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE, BECOME A TRANSPORT HUB

Zoya Pylenko

Tajikistan is hoping to become a regional transport hub, with plans for new roads to Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, circumventing Uzbekistan with which relations have generally been bad since independence – and through which most Tajik roads to the outside world go, up until now. Construction of the Anzob tunnel, which is nearing completion and which will provide an all-year round connection between the northern and southern parts of the country, is an important element in this plan.

The road that goes over the mountain range through which the Anzob tunnel passes is closed for transport from November until March, when it is covered with meters of snow. Therefore, northern and southern Tajikistan are pretty much isolated from each other as soon as the bad weather starts. Travel from Dushanbe in the south to Khujand in the north, and vice versa, is only possible by air – which is far from safe, too expensive for many Tajiks and unsuitable for large cargo. This hinders trade. Of course, the easier route used in Soviet time is around the mountains, via Uzbekistan – which thus holds enormous leverage over Tajikistan – but Uzbek visas are hard to get by for Tajiks.

The Anzob tunnel will therefore be of tremendous importance for Tajikistan, making it less dependent on Uzbekistan. Just over 300 meters are left until the tunnel is completed. Completion is expected any time now, in spite of many delays. At the end of this year, in time for next winter, it is expected to be ready for traffic.

Construction of the project started in 2003. The main contractor of the project is an Iranian company, Sobir International, and Iran has invested US\$31 million in it. Tajikistan received US\$10m of this sum as a grant and the other US\$21m as a credit. The total cost of the project is nearly US\$110m.

The Anzob tunnel project has been planned a long time. It was first announced in Soviet times, with research starting in the early 1970s and construction 10 years later. But in 1987 the project was shelved – only to be taken up again by an independent Tajikistan in 1999. By then, it had become even more important to Tajikistan because traveling through Uzbekistan became more and more difficult due to political problems. The Anzob tunnel will now make traveling to and from the various parts of Tajikistan free from Uzbek interference.

However, for its international links, Tajikistan is still extremely dependent on Uzbekistan. But Dushanbe is hoping to diminish this as well, by building alternative transport links around Uzbekistan to the rest of the world. Such an approach is recommended also by international NGOs.

Tajikistan is hoping for the construction of a Jirgatal-Sarytash road, directly leading into Kyrgyzstan and skipping the Uzbek section of the Ferghana Valley through which the current main road from Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan and beyond goes. According to Kyrgyz Prime Minister Felix Kulov in an interview with the Tajik newspaper

“Kuryer” of 16 March, construction of this road has strategic importance for Kyrgyzstan also.

Such a road, together with the Anzob tunnel, makes year-round traveling from Almaty in Kazakhstan through Kyrgyzstan to Dushanbe in Tajikistan possible. And possibilities don’t end here. With American support, a bridge is being built over the border river between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, near the hamlet of Nizhniy Pyanj in Tajikistan and Sher Khan Bandar in Afghanistan. The bridge will be ready for use in mid-2007, allowing, in the words of a February press release from the US embassy in

Dushanbe, for “increased commerce and people-to-people connections between the two countries.”

But if everything goes according to plan, the bridge, which will have brand-new customs and border guard facilities on both sides thanks to a US\$7.75m American grant – will promote wider links between Central and South Asia, unhindered by an increasingly reclusive Uzbekistan. Or in the words of the press release: “The bridge is a key element of the infrastructure that will promote trade and commerce by road from Almaty to the international port at Karachi, Pakistan.”

DISPUTES ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE MARCH 24 EVENTS AIRED IN KYRGYZSTAN

Aida Baltabaeva

Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev signed a decree on the celebration of March 24 as the national revolution day. A year ago, following a popular uprising, opposition leader Bakiev came to power and former president Askar Akayev ran away to Russia. Authorities are now preparing the capital city, Bishkek, and other administrative districts for celebrating this holiday.

Nevertheless, these actions are taking place amid popular dissatisfaction with the results of the so-called “Tulip revolution”. Many experts, foreign and domestic, characterized this event as more of a coup d’etat than a revolution, but the President rejects this viewpoint and threatens to punish all who would spoil the holiday.

Indeed, a year since the upheaval, there is growing dissatisfaction with the outcome of the street protests that swept away former authoritarian president Askar Akayev. People assumed – and opposition mass media outlets supported – the belief that all the social and economic problems were linked with Akayev’s unwillingness to pursue national interests and to combat corruption. The

last drop of public dissatisfaction with Akayev’s regime was the falsified parliamentary elections in early 2005. It was because of these elections that people took to the streets crying “Akayev, out!”, seizing local administration offices in the regions until finally the Government House itself, in the capital, had fallen. From the day of the ‘revolution’ to the present, the country has suffered from land seizures, mass property redistributions, and contract killings of public figures as well as the growth of criminal influence in society. The new authorities continued to apply the economic development strategy instituted by Akayev, and failed to attract new foreign direct investment to the country. The struggle against corruption touched only the allies, relatives and family of former president Akayev, against whom many criminal cases were filed.

Recently, political analyst Aleksander Kniazev published a book called “Coup d’etat: March 24, 2005 in Kyrgyzstan”. The book begins with the statement that “The March events destroyed the most democratic country that ever existed in the Central Asian region”. The 250-page book was

published in Kazakhstan, because local publishing houses were afraid to publish it, fearing possible negative consequences. In an interview to "Beliy Parohod" newspaper, another political analyst, Nur Omarov, said that "there are now many disputes whether what had happened was a public revolution or a coup. I think it was powerful seizure of the authority, and society was convinced by the arguments of the opposition mostly consisted of the people offended by the former power. The main goal of most of them was restoring their personal ambitions of power. Unfortunately, they had no serious program for developing a new social model".

During the revolutionary days, opposition leaders promised to conduct constitutional reform and turn the country into a parliamentary republic. However, after Bakiev's inauguration, talks about a referendum and the work of the constitutional reform commission have slightly calmed down. Later, Bakiev said that Kyrgyzstan "had not lived under the existing constitution long enough to change it again", contradicting the ideas of the revolution. Presently, authorities vow to conduct a

referendum, but its deadlines and terms are still unclear.

Nevertheless, Bakiev recently stated that he disagrees with the idea that the events a year ago were a coup. He said, "the old regime did not withstand the pressure of public anger and crashed down like a rotten tree under the wind. The people stood against the old regime, and this revolution was made by the people".

As for Akayev, he presently teaches physics at Moscow State University, but periodically gives interviews to mass media about the mistakes of the new leadership of Kyrgyzstan. In a recent interview to the Russian "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" newspaper, he commented that "assessments of a 'revolutionary' trait originates basically from sources with vested interests. To confess that what happened was a coup d'état would mean to sign his [Bakiev's] own [political] death verdict".

In the meantime, authorities are preparing for the celebrations of the new national holiday. The day will be marked by a military parade, demonstrations of power, and mass festivities around the country.

POLITICAL REFORM EFFORTS IN KAZAKHSTAN BOG DOWN IN CORRUPTION

Marat Yermukanov

Political reform and democratization of the society are among the permanent issues in the public speeches of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In his message to the nation on March 1, he outlined his program of political renewal of the country in compliance with OSCE and European Union standards. But closer analysis reveals a huge gap between declared good intentions and bitter realities in the domain of democratization of the society.

The most impressive part of Nazarbayev's lengthy speech was the optimistic assessment of the current

economic performance of Kazakhstan and generous social spending planned for the years 2006 and 2007 which, if implemented successfully, should raise the standard of living for vast sections of population. The President promised a 30 percent increase in pay for civil servants in 2007 and social benefits for war veterans will rise to make up 6,000 tenge (\$46). Among other encouraging signs are the planned 30 percent social tax reduction and the introduction of a 10 percent flat income tax rate next year.

Strictly speaking, these and other social benefits do not place much burden on the state budget, and

represent only a drop in the sea of the country's oil revenues. But these promises have great psychological effect in a country brought to the brink of political upheaval in the wake of the hideous murder of one of opposition leaders Altynbek Sarsenbayev on February 12. The already fragile public confidence in authorities and law enforcement bodies was shaken to the roots as the investigation revealed the involvement of five members of Arystan special task squad subordinated to National Security Committee, and of the head of administration of the Senate chamber of parliament Yerzhan Utembayev, in this murder case.

The scandal led to the arrest of Yerzhan Utembayev and resignations of the chief of the National Security Committee Nartay Dutbayev and the commanding officer of Arystan special task squad Serzhan Koybayev. But these spectacular detentions and resignations cannot dispel suspicions that the murder, described by Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev as a "political murder", was masterminded by influential groups in higher echelons of power. The opposition staged rallies in Almaty and demanded from the Prosecutor's Office the questioning of Dariga Nazarbayeva, first deputy foreign minister and son-in-law of the president Rakhat Aliyev, and the first deputy director of the Kazakhstan Temir Zholy national railway company Kairat Satybaldy, as well as the founders of the Eurasian Industrial Group Aleksandr Mashkevich, Patokh Shodiev and Alidzhon Ibragimov.

The opposition bloc demanded the resignation of the speaker of parliament Nurtay Abykayev who is regarded as the main suspect in Sarsenbayev's case and whose name is linked to a corruption scandal at the Khorgos customs checkpoint on the Kazakh-Chinese border, which erupted weeks before the murder of the opposition leader. In mid-January, a gang of bribe takers, high-ranking customs officials at Khorgos, were brought to trial for extortion of large sums of money from shuttle traders and business people. The illegal monthly receipts of the gang, which included the deputy head of the customs office of Almaty region and a head of department at the Prosecutor's Office of Almaty

city, reached \$4 million. Traces of this crime led to the Almaty department of the Interior Ministry where top police officers covered up the crime of the gang. Almost simultaneously, National Security officers arrested the deputy head of security department of the Interior Ministry Mirbolat Shamelyev. He was accused of organizing a criminal gang.

Summoned to parliament by the Aimak (Region) faction of parliament members, Andrei Lukin, the deputy chairman of the Agency for fighting economic crimes and corruption said that last year 1,260 civil servants were arrested on corruption charges, two high-ranking finance police officers among them.

In his address to the nation Nursultan Nazarbayev noted that bribe takers are among the most vociferous critics calling the authorities to root out corruption. He apparently alluded to critics from opposition ranks who demand transparency of the National Fund where oil revenues are accumulated, and accountability of top level officials. Opposition leaders see corruption as one of the stumbling blocks in implementing genuine political reform. President Nazarbayev, in his March 1 speech, routinely expressed his commitment to democratization of the society, but in remarkably ambivalent terms. He said authorities should "defend democracy" disregarding criticism from opposition or from abroad. On the one hand he called non-government organizations to participate actively in implementing social programs; on the other hand he unequivocally warned them not to interfere in political affairs of the state. "Glasnost is a responsibility and not permissiveness" he stressed.

Nazarbayev's speech signals that the standoff between democratic forces and authorities is entering a new phase. Astana is increasingly reluctant to be lectured by the West on democracy and human rights. Perhaps the most ominous signs are that political murders and the persecution of opposition leaders reached a scale no longer controllable by the president.

CONFLICT BREWS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES IN AZERBAIJAN

Gulnara Ismailova

The latent conflict between the Spiritual Management of Muslims of Caucasus (SMMC) and the State Committee on work with religious formations (SCWRF) of Azerbaijan has erupted again, and the religious situation in the country has once again reached the covers of newspapers.

The Regional office of the SMMC recently brought a court case against the SCWRF Chairman Rafiq Aliyev. Haji Sadi, SMMC representative in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, accused Aliyev of kindling religious intolerance in the southern regions, transforming the "Sheikh Zahid" sanctuary in Lenkoran into a place of pilgrimage, registering religious organizations without informing the SMMC, in violation of laws.

The SMMC is accusing Rafiq Aliyev of making the historical monument of Sheikh Zahid into a place of pilgrimage, in order to transform it into a source of personal income. In addition, he and his deputy Mir Yahya are accused of generating friction between the population and government officials.

The SCWRF retaliated by arguing that SMMC representative in Lenkoran Haji Ahund Gani is obstructing the work of law enforcement bodies. According to the SCWRF press service, Haji Ahund Gani monthly sets up a box for donations labeled "Management of Muslims of the Caucasus" at the site, takes all the collected money without giving anything from these donations to the lawful community of the sanctuary. "The committee has considered the complaint of the religious community and has asked law enforcement bodies to investigate these facts. They accuse Ahund Gani of turning the problem into one of conflict between the state and religion, by blackmailing the State committee.

Rafiq Aliyev refused to comment on the issue for press. "Each legal and physical person has the right

to bring a lawsuit for any reason. I don't know the details and it's difficult for me to tell what the court will rule" Aliyev stated. This is not the first instance of conflict between these two institutions tasked with supervising religious activity in Azerbaijan. The SMMC has met earlier SCWRF initiatives on exerting control over religious education with disapproval, as it has for the Committee's attempts to control the professional certification of ecclesiastics, amend the SMMC's regulations, or make public the financial activity of religious centers and mosques.

According to experts on the religious situation in Azerbaijan, the government used to partially supervise the religious sphere in the country through the SMMC. Only after the creation of the SCWRF in June 2001, the state began to bear the responsibility for the religious needs of the population. Moreover, the SMMC is unable to supervise all religious activity in the country, being responsible only for Muslims. Therefore, the State Committee was established, with greater powers. According to theology specialist Nariman Gasymogly, SMMC and SCWRF have struggled for the expansion of their influence in the religious sphere, a situation intentionally created by authorities with the purpose to have two rivaling tools for the control of religious activity in the country. "At the first stage of this struggle, greater support was given to the State Committee, but when a political necessity to use religion for its interests emerged, the authorities supported the SMMC even though it is not state organization, although it is completely loyal to the government", said Gasymogly.

Gasymogly argues that it is necessary to end the present religious diarchy. "It is necessary to keep the SCWRF as the state, not interfering with the

business of religion, should monitor the observance of laws. The SMMC, by comparison, is not new and it does not meet the interests of believers, and does not stimulate the development of Islamic ideas. The SMMC has no right to publish instructions, and should be abolished”.

Recently, SCWRF Head Rafiq Aliyev expressed doubts regarding the sum which the SMMC demands for the organization of pilgrimages. SMMC leader, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade declared that there are documents

specifying expense for the air flight to the Hajj. He went on to accuse Aliyev of interference with the humanitarian actions of the SMMC.

Both figures publicly expected the other to ‘get wiser with time’, with Aliyev adding that Pashazade’s lifelong position as SMMC Head is “categorically illegal”. Pashazade replied that he was elected to this post at the congress of the SMMC, and this was based on the charter of his organization. The conflict between the two is unlikely to abate, with unpredictable consequences.

NEWS DIGEST

UZBEK PRESIDENT SIGNS LAW ON EURASIAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

9 March

Islam Karimov has signed a law enabling Uzbekistan to join the Eurasian Economic Community. Uzbekistan began the entry process last year and the lower and upper houses of parliament ratified the protocol on entry in February. The Eurasian Economic Community's primary objectives are to coordinate efforts to gain admission to the World Trade Organization, to harmonize customs tariffs, and to develop common border regulations. Eurasian Economic Community members are Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. (Itar-Tass)

FORMER KYRGYZ MINISTER BLASTS GOVERNMENT FAILURES

9 March

Ex-Foreign Minister Roza Otunbaeva told RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service on March 8 that the current government, which came to power after the ouster of President Askar Akaev, "has not been able to get anything done." Otunbaeva, who played an important role in the protests that finally toppled Akaev on March 24, 2005, set the upcoming anniversary as a time for taking stock. "If [the Kyrgyz government] doesn't do anything [by March 24], then we will appeal to the people: 'We're sorry this is the way things are. The current government is not serving the people's interests. That's why we are going to be in opposition to them.'" But Otunbaeva stressed that she and Azimbek Beknazarov, who leads the Asaba Party, are not "preparing any kind of revolution." She dismissed rumors of an uprising planned for March 24. In summation, she urged the government to move quickly to fight corruption and change personnel policy. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA STAYS OPPOSED TO SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

9 March

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said at the United Nations headquarters in New York on March 8 that Moscow remains opposed to sanctions against Iran following the decision by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to forward its report on Iran's nuclear program to the Security Council, news agencies reported. He argued that the international community "should act in a way that would not risk losing the IAEA capacity and possibility to continue to work in Iran, [and] to continue to clarify those questions which relate

to the past Iranian nuclear program. It is very important for the international community and for the [nuclear] nonproliferation regime to get answers to these questions." He repeated Russia's position that "that there is no military solution to this crisis," and added the same is true of the position of the United Kingdom and Germany, "as [has been] publicly stated by their ministers. I don't think sanctions, as a means to solve a crisis, have ever achieved a goal in the recent history." (RFE/RL)

U.S. HIGHLIGHTS RIGHTS ABUSES IN RUSSIA

9 March

The U.S. State Department said on March 8 in its annual report on human rights worldwide that the continued centralization of power under President Putin in 2005 resulted in the erosion of the accountability of government leaders to the people. The study added that Moscow's human rights record in the continuing conflicts in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus remained poor. The report noted what it described as "credible reports" that federal armed forces engaged in unlawful killings in Chechnya, as well as in politically motivated disappearances in Chechnya and Ingushetia. The study said federal and pro-Moscow Chechen forces, as well as Chechen resistance forces, violated the human rights of civilians, inflicting widespread civilian casualties, abductions, and other abuses. On the positive side, the report noted that the judiciary demonstrated greater independence in a number of cases, producing improvements in the criminal justice system. It said Russia also made progress in combating human trafficking. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIANS IN SOUTHERN GEORGIA DEMAND AUTONOMY

10 March

Armenian NGOs in Georgia's predominantly Armenian-populated southern region of Djavakheti have written to President Mikheil Saakashvili asking him to grant the region autonomy within Georgia. Vardan Akopian, who heads the NGO Youth of Djavakheti, told journalists that the request is problematic insofar as the Georgian Constitution does not provide for transforming the country into a federation. But he expressed the hope that the Georgian authorities "will find democratic approaches to the issues of the national minorities," and that the granting of autonomy to Djavakheti will prove to be "the first step towards a new Georgia." (Caucasus Press)

CHECHEN PRIME MINISTER SAYS SPECIAL SERVICES PROTECT BASAYEV...

10 March

Ramzan Kadyrov told journalists in Grozny on March 10 that all Chechen resistance formations have been smashed, and that only a handful of "odious figures" remain active, whose death or capture is "a matter of time." Kadyrov said some 3,000 Interior Ministry personnel are engaged in hunting down field commanders Shamil Basayev, Doku Umarov, and Rappani Khalilov in southern Chechnya. He added that Basayev would have been apprehended long ago but for the fact that "he is under the protection of various special services." (RIA-Novosti)

MINSK GROUP URGES 'VIGOROUS WORK' ON KARABAKH SETTLEMENT

13 March

In a statement (<http://www.osce.org/item/18319.html>) released following talks in Washington on March 7-8, the French, Russian, and U.S. co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group expressed regret at the lack of progress towards resolving the Karabakh conflict "in recent weeks" despite "ample opportunity to do so," a reference to the meeting in Rambouillet last month between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The statement urged both sides to build on progress made towards a settlement during the past year. In an allusion to recent belligerent statements by President Ilham Aliyev and other Azerbaijani officials, they urged both presidents to "take steps with their publics to prepare them for peace, and not for war." The statement reaffirmed the co-chairs' belief that "objective conditions make 2006 a highly favourable year for substantial progress," and they appealed to the Armenian and Azerbaijani government to "work vigorously" to that end. The co-chairs are scheduled to meet again on March 20 in Istanbul, a venue that Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian described to the independent TV company Shant on March 10 as "a bit strange." On March 11, echo-az.com quoted U.S. Ambassador to Baku Reno Harnish as saying that Ambassador Steven Mann, a U.S. Minsk Group co-chairman, will arrive in Baku on March 13 for "consultations" on a new round of Karabakh peace talks. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIAN FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS KARABAKH PEACE DEPENDS ON AZERBAIJAN

13 March

In a March 10 interview with the independent Shant television channel, Vartan Oskanian said that Armenia has already agreed to the maximum possible concessions in the process of negotiating a settlement to the Karabakh conflict. "I think what we have agreed to is the utmost

line beyond which Armenia cannot go," Oskanian said, adding that "Azerbaijan has not yet reached that line. Therefore, a lot now depends on Azerbaijan.... Azerbaijan should make its share of compromises." Oskanian characterized the draft settlement plan currently under discussion as "balanced" and as "providing great opportunities." Oskanian dismissed as intended for domestic consumption threats by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to resolve the conflict by force. "No one will allow Azerbaijan to unleash war against Armenia," Oskanian said. Responding to questions addressed to him at the website of the independent daily "Azg," Oskanian characterized formal recognition by Armenia of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as "a political instrument which...should be used at the right moment." (Noyan Tapan)

WHO CONFIRMS THREE AZERBAIJANIS DIED OF BIRD FLU

13 March

Azerbaijan's Deputy Health Minister Abbas Velibeyov said in Baku on March 13 that tests conducted by the World Health Organization have confirmed that three persons from Azerbaijan's Salyany district have died of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza. A Health Ministry statement said that the diagnosis of bird flu has not been confirmed in six more inhabitants of Salyany suffering from flu-like symptoms. A March 10 statement by the WHO described Azerbaijan's response to the discovery of bird flu as "prompt and efficient, but hampered by the lack of some essential equipment and supplies and inadequate diagnostic capacity." (AP)

INFLUENZA DEATHS TRIGGER PANIC IN GEORGIAN CAPITAL

13 March

Four pupils from a Tbilisi school, and four other people have been hospitalized with suspected influenza following the deaths of two pupils at the same school last week. The patients are reportedly in an isolated ward and are being treated with the drug Tamiflu, which is prescribed in cases of some strains of influenza as well as bird flu in humans. Georgian Health Minister Lado Chipashvili told journalists that an autopsy has revealed that the two girls died of a respiratory infection, not of bird flu, but he nonetheless ordered the school closed for disinfection. The Tbilisi health authorities have similarly reassured the population that the deaths and subsequent cases are part of a seasonal influenza outbreak. They appealed to the population not to go directly to hospitals if they suspect they have contracted influenza, but to consult their doctor first. (Caucasus Press)

PROSECUTOR DETAILS CASES AGAINST AKAEV'S FAMILY

13 March

In a March 10 interview printed in "Slovo Kyrgyzstana," Kyrgyz Deputy Prosecutor-General Abibulla Abdygaparov said that prosecutors have opened 68 criminal cases against the Akaev family. He said that the cases involve real estate and other property. The charitable foundation Meerim, which was run by Akaev's wife, Mairam Akaeva, is the focus of 28 criminal cases. Abdygaparov promised more details, saying, "When the time comes and the facts about the stolen millions and criminal acts are put in order, they'll tell the people about it." Abdygaparov also noted that former Prime Minister Nikolai Tanaev is the focus of several criminal probes, although these have been temporarily halted because Tanaev is ill. Tanaev is in detention in Bishkek after having tried to go to Kazakhstan. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA URGES BAN ON OUTSIDE MILITARIES IN CASPIAN**14 MARCH**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov today called for a ban on any outside military presence in the Caspian Sea, which Russia shares with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. Lavrov said that "preventing the threat posed by the presence of forces of third countries would guarantee that no causes for conflicts will emerge" in the region. He was speaking at a working group meeting on the legal status of the sea. Lavrov recalled Russia's proposal for all five Caspian Sea nations to form a joint naval force. The other states had previously responded cautiously to the proposal. Lavrov also said Russia hoped that negotiations on the legal status of the Caspian Sea will soon be finalized. Iran has insisted that each of the five coastal states get an equal portion of the seabed, while most other countries want the division based on shoreline. (AP)

NO NEW LOANS TO UZBEKISTAN - WORLD BANK**16 March**

The World Bank will not issue any new loans to Uzbekistan, but will continue its financing of global projects and offering of consultative and technical assistance to the Uzbek government, the World Bank's Tashkent office said. The World Bank will develop cooperation with Uzbekistan within the framework of an amended strategy, which is aimed at intensive technical assistance, consultations and research, but excludes new loans, the office said. (Interfax)

BAKU MAY REVIEW PARTICIPATION IN KARABAKH TALKS - ALIYEV**16 March**

Azerbaijan could review its participation in the Karabakh talks if Armenian occupation of Azeri

territories continues, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said. Although a ceasefire has been observed for 12 years, talks on Armenia's position have been ineffective, Aliyev told the 2nd world congress of Azeris in Baku on Thursday. "What is to be done? Consultations are underway in Azerbaijan. If we see that Armenia wants to upset peace and should it succeed in these efforts, Azerbaijan will of course have to review its position on its further participation in the peace process," the Azeri president said. (Interfax-Azerbaijan)

AZERI MILITARY BUDGET TO EQUAL TOTAL ARMENIAN STATE BUDGET - ALIYEV**16 March**

Azerbaijan's military budget will soon equal Armenia's entire state budget, said Azeri President Ilham Aliyev. "Our military budget is currently about \$600 million. I have set the goal that our military expenditure be increased to the size of Armenia's entire state budget in the near future," Aliyev told the second world congress of Azeris in Baku on Thursday. "Armenia will never be able to compete with us. The sooner the Armenian leadership understands this, the more beneficial it will be for them," he said. (Interfax)

CHECHEN BUDGET NOT ENOUGH FOR REBUILDING - LEADERSHIP**17 March**

The funds earmarked for Chechnya in the Russian budget for 2006 are insufficient and they fail to take into account the current situation and do not allow for a solution of even the most trivial tasks, said First Deputy Chairman of the Chechen government Odes Baisultanov. The Chechen leadership is preparing an official address to the federal government asking for a considerable increase in allocations, Baisultanov told Interfax on Friday. On Thursday, the Chechen Popular Assembly refused to pass the republic's 2006 budget, which would rely on 19 billion rubles from the federal budget, he said. "The Chechen republic will need 120-130 billion rubles annually," the assembly's First Deputy Chairman Zambek Zalzeyev told Interfax on Thursday. (Interfax)

BOMB GOES OFF ON RAILROAD IN INGUSHETIA NEAR THE TOWN OF KARABULAK**17 March**

A bomb went off on a railroad near the town of Karabulak in Ingushetia at around 2:00 Moscow time. The blast occurred as a locomotive pulling five-oil tank cars was moving on the railroad. The railway track was damaged in the blast but no one was hurt. The blast occurred not far from the Ingoil oil base. Investigators

are working at the blast scene. Measures are being taken to detain the people linked to the explosion. The blast yield was equivalent to 2.5 kg of TNT. (Itar-Tass)

GEORGIAN PARLIAMENT WANTS TO SUE RUSSIA FOR CONFLICT DAMAGES

17 March

The Georgian parliament has adopted resolutions on setting up a state commission for the assessment of Georgian damages resultant from the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts and announcing an international tender for a legal company to represent Georgia in the European Court of Human Rights in the damages case. Head of the parliamentary commission for reconstruction of the Georgian territorial integrity Shota Malashkhiya presented the draft resolutions at the parliamentary session on Thursday. The resolutions were adopted unanimously. "A lawsuit concerning conflict damages on Georgia will be filed against Russia and Russian companies, which have been acting on territories beyond the Georgian control since the 1990s," he said. "The country that actually controls these territories, Russia, shall bear the responsibility." The damages are preliminary estimated at \$15 billion. Malashkhiya said they had taken into consideration the experience of Baltic countries, including Latvia. "Latvia has set up a state commission estimating damages entailed by the Soviet occupation," he said. (Itar-Tass)

TWENTY-TWO KILLED AT IRAN BORDER

17 March

At least 22 people have been killed by gunmen near Iran's border with Afghanistan, official reports say. Many of those killed were government employees and the governor of the provincial capital, Zahedan, was seriously injured in the attack. Police Commander Gen Esmail Ahmadi-Moqaddam said the gunmen posed as police and closed the Zabol to Zahedan road in Sistan-Baluchistan Province. Gen Ahmadi-Moqaddam said US and British intelligence were behind the attack. Correspondents say the Iran-Afghanistan border area is notorious for drug trafficking and kidnappings. But it is not clear whether those responsible have political aims. Speaking to reporters shortly after landing at Zahedan's airport on Friday morning, Gen Ahmadi-Moqaddam said the gunmen had closed the Zabol-Zahedan road at around 2100 (1730 GMT) on Thursday night. "People thought they were Iranian police," he said. After killing the civilians the attacks had fled across the border to Afghanistan, he added. Gen Ahmadi-Moqaddam said he had information indicating that US and UK intelligence services had held meetings with the gunmen. "The said intelligence services had instructed the local bandits on ways of undermining security in the region," he said. "It seems that they are pursuing the same policy that they

did in the Iraqi town of Samarra, that is, to provoke fighting between Shias and Sunnis." The US and UK have troops stationed in southern Afghanistan as part of a Nato peacekeeping force. (BBC)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION SKEPTICAL ABOUT PROBE INTO HIGH-PROFILE KILLINGS

18 March

A gathering organized by the Kazakh opposition in Almaty on Saturday has expressed its lack of confidence in the official findings of the investigation into the deaths of prominent politicians Zamanbek Nurkadilov and Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly and demanded that the investigation of the case be extended. The rally, which gathered over one thousand, was sanctioned by the Almaty city administration. "We demand that the Interior Ministry reopen the investigation into the assassination of prominent statesman Zamanbek Nurkadilov," reads a resolution adopted at the rally, which was read by Tulegen Zhukeyev, an activist of the opposition bloc For a Fair Kazakhstan. In addition, the protesters demanded that "Interior Ministry investigators re-qualify the criminal case as an abduction and assassination of Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly and his followers and launch an investigation under Article 233 of the Criminal Code dealing with terrorism," the resolution says. "The time has come to demand that the names of the true criminals be made public. The time has come to demand freedom, democracy, and justice," Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, another activist of For a Fair Kazakhstan, said at the rally. The official conclusion holds that Nurkadilov committed suicide in his own house last fall by shooting himself three times. Sarsenbaiuly and two people accompanying him were murdered in February 2006. The crime has triggered a wide public outcry. (Interfax)

AFGHAN FORMER GOVERNOR SHOT DEAD

18 March

Suspected Taleban militants have ambushed and killed an influential pro-government figure in Afghanistan. The former governor of Ghazni province, Mullah Taj Mohammad, also known as Qari Baba, was shot dead near his home in Batta, in the Andar district. Three others in a car with him were also killed. The former governor was a militia chief who fought against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, and later opposed the Taleban government. In a separate incident, the current governor of Ghazni, Hajir Sherlama, survived assassination attempt. Haji Sher Alam told the BBC the Taleban attacked his convoy but they returned fire killing two of the assailants and capturing one man. Correspondents say suspected Taleban militants appear to be targeting prominent pro-government officials, as

they step up their attacks in southern and eastern Afghanistan. (BBC)

KYRGYZSTAN TO BUILD RAILWAY LINK TO CHINA

20 March

Kyrgyzstan has a big stake in launching the construction of a railway link to China. "But before the construction is launched, a decision must be made in principle, a feasibility study drawn up and funding provided," Kyrgyz Prime Minister Felix Kulov told the Cabinet on Monday. "A group of investors are prepared to put money into the project if Kyrgyzstan and China come to terms on when the construction will begin," the prime minister said. "Prior to drawing up a feasibility study, talks must be held with the World Bank to secure a soft credit. And then ways of repaying the credit must be discussed with investors," Kulov said. Transport and Communications Minister Nurlan Sulaimanov said "the construction of a 268-kilometer railway is estimated at some \$1.3 billion and is to last for six years." "To get started, an agreement must be signed with China and a route negotiated. The railway could run through southern Kyrgyzstan and further to Uzbekistan, or through Kyrgyzstan's northern part towards Kazakhstan," Sulaimanov said. (Interfax)

S. OSSETIA TO SEEK RECOGNITION AS PART OF RUSSIA

22 March

South Ossetia is planning to demand through the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation to be recognized as part of Russia on the basis of historic documents, the president of Georgia's breakaway republic Eduard Kokoity said on Wednesday. "There is a document on the entry of Ossetia into the Russian Empire in 1774, and there is no document on the withdrawal of the southern part of Ossetia from Russia,"

Kokoity said. Meanwhile, an official at the chancellery of the supreme body for Constitutional justice in Moscow told Itar-Tass that the Constitutional Court may consider, in principle, South Ossetia's membership bid. Georgian State Minister expressed doubts that Moscow would give serious consideration to the issue of South Ossetia's joining Russia. (Itar-Tass)

'JUDGES TO RULE' ON KABUL CONVERT

22 March

The Afghan government says it is up to the judiciary to decide the fate of a man who could face death for converting to Christianity. Abdul Rahman, 41, is charged with rejecting Islam and could be executed under Sharia law unless he reconverts. But prosecutors, echoing earlier comments by the judge, said questions had been raised about whether he was mentally fit to stand trial. The US and three Nato allies have expressed concern over the case. Khaleeq Ahmed, deputy spokesman for Afghan President Hamid Karzai said: "The judicial system is an independent system. "This is a case that the family of the person brought against him. We are watching it closely and Afghanistan also respects human rights." Mr Rahman converted 16 years ago as an aid worker helping refugees in Pakistan. His estranged family denounced him during a custody dispute over his two children. His mental health was questioned by the judge earlier in the week and on Thursday prosecutor Sarinwal Zamari said there were doubts about whether he was fit to stand trial under Sharia law. The US made a subdued appeal for him to be allowed to practice his faith - but stressed it did not want to interfere. Germany, Italy and Canada, which all have troops in Afghanistan, also voiced concern over Mr Rahman's plight. The Italian foreign ministry said Mr Rahman's plight was incompatible with the defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms. (BBC)



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