

Business & Politics in the Muslim World
News Monitoring
Weekly Report
February 5 to 11, 2010
Central Asia
Uzma Siraj

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Azerbaijan

Political Front

- Azerbaijan Court Rejects Lawsuit By President's Uncle Against Journalists
BAKU -- A Baku court has rejected a libel lawsuit by President Ilham Aliyev's uncle against opposition journalists, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

- Azerbaijani MP: Opposition's current approach bodes nothing well for it in parliamentary elections

Chairman of the opposition Great Establishment Party and member of the Azerbaijani parliament Fazil Mustafa says he disapproves of the opposition's inability to unite in advance of parliamentary elections.

Geo Strategic Front

- U.S. Intel Chief Sees Increased Chance Of Karabakh Conflict

U.S. National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair testifies during a hearing before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee on February 2.

- President of Azerbaijan met with Turkish Foreign Minister

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, who is visiting Germany, met with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davudoglu on Friday in Munchen

- Azerbaijani President: The country is ready to contribute to ensuring Europe's energy security

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have given on Thursday a joint press conference at the Chancellor's residence. Mrs. Merkel said she was pleased to once again welcome the President of Azerbaijan to Germany.

- Minsk Group Russian co-chair: Azerbaijan, Armenia have not submitted proposals yet

"Azerbaijan and Armenia have not yet submitted their proposals on uncoordinated points of Madrid principles to the co-chairs", OSCE Minsk Group's Russian Co-chair Yuri Merzlyakov said. Answering the question on co-chairs' visit to the region, the diplomat stated that they were waiting for the proposals of both sides.

- Israeli FM Avigdor Lieberman to arrive in Azerbaijan today

On Monday, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman starts three-day visit to Azerbaijan. Lieberman will meet with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov, Minister of Emergency Situations Kemaladdin Heydarov, Parliament Speaker Ogtay Asadov, members of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan.

- NATO experts to visit Azerbaijan

According to the NATO-Azerbaijan Individual Partnership Action Plan, the Arabic Course will be organized in Abu Dhabi, UAE from Feb. 14 to May 5, 2010, press service of the Azerbaijan Defense Ministry said.

Economic /Energy Front

- Third Caspian energy forum due in Moscow

Third Caspian Energy Forum will take place in Moscow's Center of International Trade on 23 March. The event is to be organized by the ministries of foreign affairs, natural resources and ecology of Russia, trade-industry chamber and Russian academy of sciences, the CIS Executive Committee said. One of the key goals of the Forum is the practical realization of connecting factor of the Caspian Sea in the energy sphere.

- Azerbaijan national oil company lays gas line to Georgian region

The SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-run oil firm, has built a gas pipeline to the Lanchkhuti region of Georgia. The inauguration ceremony was attended by Georgia's Deputy Energy Minister Soso Varsemashvili, Director of the Socar Georgia Gas Anar Mammadov and Governor of Guria region Valeri Chitaishvili.

Social Front

- Azerbaijan Planning To De-Russify Family Names

BAKU -- An Azerbaijani parliamentary committee is preparing a draft law on the de-Russification of Azerbaijani last names, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

- Azerbaijani Journalist Convicted Of Libel

An Azerbaijani court has handed down an 18-month suspended sentence for a newspaper editor convicted of libeling the interior minister, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

- European Court of Human Rights to pass one more decision on Azerbaijan

The European Court of Human Rights will pass one more decision on Azerbaijan on Feb. 11. This case concerns the Azerbaijani authorities' failure to enforce a judgment in the applicant's favour in which an internally displaced family was to be evicted from a flat for which the applicant had been granted occupancy rights.

Kazakastan

Political Front

- Kazakh Newspapers Protest Confiscations

The independent Kazakh publications "Respublika," "Vzglyad," and "Svoboda slova" have officially protested the government's seizure of their newspapers last week, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The newspapers filed complaints with the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Supreme Court in Almaty today.

Geo Strategic Front

- KAZAKHSTAN: FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON YIELDS NO AGREEMENTS

The visit of Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev to Washington in early February failed to produce any agreements on pressing issues, according to US State Department officials. Kazakhstan's top priority for the visit was to gain US support for a summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a meeting that Kazakhstani leaders hope to convene this year in Astana.

- Turkish foreign minister due to Kazakhstan

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is set to pay a visit on February, 10-12 to Kazakhstan as the official guest of his Kazakh counterpart Kanat Saudabayev, Davutoğlu's office said in a statement on Monday.

Economic /Energy Front

- Kazakh government struggles to help airlines off EU blacklist

The relegation of all but one Kazakhstan-registered airline to the EU's air safety blacklist was a blow to national pride as well as a setback for the air transport sector. The government is now working to have Kazakh airlines removed from the list by the end of this year.

- Key risks to Kazakh economic recovery

Reuters - Tuesday, February 9SendIM StoryPrint.ALMATY, Feb 8 - Kazakhstan, the largest economy in Central Asia, is set for recovery after a bumpy 2009 in a process dependent on a number of external and domestic factors.

- First oil from Kashagan not far off, says Kazakh energy minister
ASTANA - Having become one of the largest (16.81%) shareholders in the North-Caspian project (Kashagan field,) Kazakhstan has started paying closer attention to the costs associated with the development of this major and much promising project.

- Kazakh oil companies seek law amendments to avoid double taxation
Astana. February 4. Interfax-Kazakhstan - Kazakh oil producers are addressing the government to make amendments to the Tax Code to avoid double taxation.

"We are facing the situation when a double taxation occurred during the transition from one form of tax legislation to the other.

- **TURKMENISTAN-CHINA GAS PIPELINE BECOMES A REALITY**

By Robert M. Cutler (02/03/2010 issue of the CACI Analyst)

The opening of the first segment of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline last month is only one in a series of recent events in Caspian Sea basin energy developments. It signifies Turkmenistan's first real moves to break its dependence upon Gazprom and the Russian state for international sales of its energy resources.

Social Front

- Kazakh Court Overturns Media-Criticism Ban
(RFE/RL) -- A Kazakh court has struck down a ruling blocking the press from printing potentially damaging material about the president's son-in-law.

- **GLOBALIZING NEW MEDIA IN KAZAKHSTAN**

Established as a firm presence in the information space in Kazakhstan, the new media is increasingly embracing Western-style entertainment and social networking and even Western media content.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- Kyrgyz Activists Demonstrate As Opposition Leader's Appeal Begins
Isakov supporters demonstrate in the southern Alai district on February 9.
GULCHO, Kyrgyzstan -- About 1,000 protesters gathered in the southern Kyrgyz village of Gulcho to demand the release of former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Military office employee arrested for bribery
Financial Police Service of Kyrgyzstan arrested an employee from one of the Chui regional military registration offices.

Geo Strategic Front

- Hizb ut-Tahrir activists detained in Kyrgyzstan
A group of women engaged in recruitment to Hizb ut-Tahrir (a religious-extremist organization) were arrested in Bishkek, press-service of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs reported.

Economic /Energy Front

- Parliament members to protest against mobile companies' actions
Roza Otunbaeva, Member of the Kyrgyz Parliament offered to join the protests actions against mobile companies. The statement was voiced at the parliament meeting on January 5, 2010.

- Uzbekistan cuts off gas import to South Kyrgyzstan"
Uzbekistan cut off natural gas import to the south region of Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzgaz Company informed the news agency 24.kg Friday.

The day before official Tashkent sent a note to Kyrgyzgaz to warn about possible gas cut off due to \$7 million debt as of February 4, 2010.

- Kyrgyzstan increases investment inflow

Kyrgyzstan takes one of the dominant positions among CIS countries, according to investments growth rate into fixed assets, Interstate Statistic Committee of CIS informed. As to the committee, the volume of investments into a fixed capital in Kyrgyzstan has grown up by 19.7% in 2009. Only Uzbekistan can have a higher index due to a 28.3% increase of investments inflow in 2009.

Social Front

- Eurasia to broadcast Kyrgyz TV-channel

One of the Kyrgyz TV-channels will be broadcasted in Eurasia, Kyrgyz television company El TR said.

As to the company, national EL TR broadcasting signal can be received from the orbit satellite starting from February 3, 2010.

Social Front

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Tajikistan

Political Front

- Candidate Registration Ends For Tajik Elections

DUSHANBE -- Registration for Tajikistan's parliamentary elections has ended, with 150 candidates officially allowed to run, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

- CIS election observation mission deployed in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, February 5, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The formal opening of the CIS election observation mission for the February 28 parliamentary elections in Tajikistan was held at the Kokhi Vahdat State Complex in Dushanbe on February 4.

- Registration of candidates for parliament and local legislatures ends today

DUSHANBE, February 8, Asia-Plus -- Registration of candidates for parliament and local legislatures (regional, city and district Majlis) is ending today and according to the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER), 150 candidates to run for the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) in 41 single-mandate constituencies have been registered to this day.

- CCER registers 229 candidates for parliament

DUSHANBE, February 9, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The process of registration of candidates for the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) and local legislatures ended yesterday.

Geo Strategic Front

- Tajikistan Jails Suspected Al-Qaeda Member

DUSHANBE (Reuters) -- Tajikistan's Supreme Court has sentenced a suspected Al-Qaeda member to eight years in jail, it said today, in the latest sign of growing efforts in Central Asia to prevent the spread of Islamist militancy.

- Tajikistan Transfers Prisoners To Afghan Officials

Afghan prisoners in Tajikistan await their transfer.

KABUL -- About 150 Afghans imprisoned in Tajikistan have been transferred to Afghan officials, RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports.

Economic /Energy Front

- Tajik national airline lowers passenger fares on flights to Moscow and St. Petersburg

DUSHANBE, February 6, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Tajik national air carrier, Tajik Air, has lowered passenger fares on some flights by 30 euros. The Tajik national air carrier said the new rates would be in effect on the routes from Dushanbe to Moscow and St. Petersburg only through February.

- Tajikistan-EDB agreement comes into effect

DUSHANBE, February 9, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The Eurasian Development Bank has received an official notification from Tajikistan's MFA that an agreement signed between the Government of Tajikistan and EDB on Bank's presence in Tajikistan came into effect, according to the EDB press service.

- ADB completes microfinance project in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE, February 11, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has completed its microfinance systems development program in Tajikistan, facilitating the development of a vibrant and growing microfinance industry in the country, press release issued by the ADB Tajikistan Resident Mission (TJRM) says.

Social Front

- Tajik Court Suspends Baptist Church's Activities

DUSHANBE -- The activities of a Baptist Church in Tajikistan were suspended by a Dushanbe court today, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Tajik Culture Ministry official Nazira Dodikhudoeva told RFE/RL that the church did not apply for reregistration despite being urged to do so by Tajik authorities.

- Issues related to legal protection of journalists discussed in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, February 5, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Increasing cases of filing lawsuits against independent media in Tajikistan may affect the freedom of speech situation in the country and cause self-censorship among journalists, head of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (Nansmit), Nouriddin Qarshiboyev, remarked at a roundtable meeting in Dushanbe on February 5.

Turkmenistan

Political Front

- Minister of Communications of Turkmenistan severely reprimanded

President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a decree severely reprimanding Minister of Communications Ovlyaguly Dzhumagulyev for "unsatisfactory performance of official duties, poor management of subordinate agencies and enterprises, as well as poor work on developing the sphere of communication."

Geo Strategic Front

- Turkmen Leader Visits France Amid Criticism From Rights Groups

French President Nicolas Sarkozy (right) welcomes his Turkmen counterpart, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, prior to a working lunch today at the Elysee Palace in Paris.

Economic /Energy Front

- Turkmenistan, UAE agree on trade, economic and technical cooperation

President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan confirmed willingness of both countries to pursue a "full-scale intergovernmental dialogue based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit, and taking into account new opportunities and realities of the modern time." The meeting was held in Abu Dhabi, where the Turkmen leader arrived on a two-day official visit.

- Trade turnover between Turkmenistan and Russia amounted to US \$ 1.2 billion in 2009

In 2009, trade turnover between Turkmenistan and Russia amounted to US \$ 1,247 billion (excluding deliveries of natural gas), including exports to Russia totaling U.S. \$ 51 million, and imports to Turkmenistan totaling US \$ 196 million. The growth in trade turnover (excluding exports of natural gas in 2008-2009) amounted to 24,4 percent. This data was cited by Russia's ambassador to Turkmenistan Igor Blatov in his statement published in "Neutral Turkmenistan" newspaper.

- Ashgabat hosted meeting of Turkmen-Indian commission on cooperation

The delegation of representatives of government agencies and large companies of India led by Indian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ms. Preneet Kaur attended a regular meeting of the intergovernmental Turkmen-Indian commission for trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation in Ashgabat.

Social Front

Uzbekistan

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- Uzbek President leaves for Seoul

President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov left for Seoul, Korea, on 10 February with a state visit on invitation of his Korean counterpart Lee Myung-bak.

Economic /Energy Front

- Korea pledges US\$12 million in aid to Uzbekistan

Korea will provide US\$12 million in aid to Uzbekistan this year in line with its effort to boost the two countries' strategic partnership, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade said.

Social Front

- Muscovites Rally For Uzbek Photographer Convicted Of Libel

MOSCOW -- Some 20 supporters of an award-winning Uzbek photographer found guilty of defamation held a rally outside the Uzbek Embassy in Moscow today, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports.

- Uzbek Photographer To Appeal Guilty Verdict

TASHKENT -- Uzbek photographer Umida Ahmedova said today she would appeal the guilty verdict against her for defamation, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Ahmedova, 54, was found guilty by a Tashkent court of portraying her country as "backward" for a collection of photographs and a documentary depicting the daily struggles of people in rural Uzbekistan. Uzbek officials had ruled the photographs and documentary were "insulting" and "damaging to the country's image."

- Uzbek Photographer Convicted, Amnestied For Libel

Umida Ahmedova (center) waits for the verdict in front of the court building in Tashkent. An Uzbek court has convicted an award-winning photographer for defaming Uzbekistan with her pictures about the daily struggles of ordinary people, but then immediately annested her.

- **Photographer On Trial For Showing Uzbekistan's Unglamorous Side**

A photo from Umida Ahmedova's "Woman and Man: From Dawn till Night"

(RFE/RL) -- A prominent Uzbek photographer and film director has gone on trial in Tashkent for her work, deemed by the Uzbek authorities to be "insulting" and "damaging to the country's image."

Detailed Report

Azerbaijan

Political Front

- **Azerbaijan Court Rejects Lawsuit By President's Uncle Against Journalists**

BAKU -- A Baku court has rejected a libel lawsuit by President Ilham Aliyev's uncle against opposition journalists, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. Jalal Aliyev, an academic and parliament member, accused "Yeni Musavat" editor in chief Azer Aykhan and correspondent Qoshqar Aliyev of libel on February 2 for publishing an article claiming that Aliyev owns several unfinished buildings in Baku, and that no one complains about the buildings' condition because he is the president's uncle.

Jalal Aliyev, 82, said the report is false and that he was offended by it. He is demanding that the two journalists be arrested. Elchin Sadiqov, a lawyer for the journalists, told the court on February 10 that Aliyev's case should be rejected.

It's the second time a court has dismissed a lawsuit by Jalal Aliyev against journalists. Azerbaijani and international media groups are calling for a defamation bill to be adopted in order to prevent more journalists from being charged with libel for writing articles deemed critical by authorities.

There are currently two newspaper editors in jail for writing articles that were critical of officials. But members of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party have said the country is not ready for such a bill and that Azerbaijan should not adopt legislation simply because it exists in Western Europe.

- **Azerbaijani MP: Opposition's current approach bodes nothing well for it in parliamentary elections**

Chairman of the opposition Great Establishment Party and member of the Azerbaijani parliament Fazil Mustafa says he disapproves of the opposition's inability to unite in advance of parliamentary elections.

"It would be better if the opposition forces have decided on future plans. The disputes should reveal the truth. But, unfortunately, we did not see it. In my opinion, this is due to lack of novelty," the MP said.

According to the opposition party chairman, the novelty should imply a change in the approach and new programs in accordance with the current situation." "What productive policy can opposition with 15-year-old base lead?" Mustafa added.

"In my opinion, the policy of unification of opposition forces is wrong. They should act individually through which we can demonstrate our differences," he said.

"The year 2010 has already begun. The process of unification was to complete by that time. But this did not happen, and it shows that the situation saw no major changes after 5 to 6 months," the GEP chairman noted.

"It is impossible to achieve a successful outcome with this approach and the parliamentary election bode nothing well for opposition. It will rather lose," the party chairman said. Azerbaijan will hold parliamentary elections this fall. The previous parliamentary elections were held in 2005. The elections are held by the majority system in 125 electoral districts in Azerbaijan.

Geo Strategic Front

- U.S. Intel Chief Sees Increased Chance Of Karabakh Conflict

U.S. National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair testifies during a hearing before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee on February 2.

YEREVAN -- The top U.S. intelligence official says the likelihood of another Armenian-Azerbaijani war for Nagorno-Karabakh has increased because of the U.S.-backed rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair warned in written testimony to a U.S. Senate committee late on February 2 that "although there has been progress in the past year toward Turkey-Armenia rapprochement, this has affected the delicate relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and increases the risk of a renewed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh." The United States has strongly supported and at times mediated in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement that began nearly two years ago and led to the signing in October of two protocols envisaging the normalization of relations between the two historical foes. Azerbaijan has condemned the agreements, saying an open border with Turkey would only discourage Armenia from seeking a compromise solution to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijani leaders have also continued to threaten to win back Karabakh and surrounding Armenian-occupied territory by force. The authorities in Armenia and Karabakh have dismissed the war threats. Until recently at least, U.S. diplomats had expressed confidence that the chances were slim of renewed large-scale fighting in Karabakh.

- President of Azerbaijan met with Turkish Foreign Minister

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, who is visiting Germany, met with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davudoglu on Friday in Munchen.

During the meeting, the high level of political relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey was stressed. Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, regional and other issues were discussed there as well.

- Azerbaijani President: The country is ready to contribute to ensuring Europe's energy security

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have given on Thursday a joint press conference at the Chancellor's residence. Mrs. Merkel said she was pleased to once again welcome the President of Azerbaijan to Germany.

The Chancellor praised the two countries' economic relations, stressing the importance of using "our big potential" to boost the bilateral cooperation. Mrs. Merkel offered Germany's assistance to Azerbaijan in variety of spheres.

She described Azerbaijan as an important oil and gas producer and "a significant partner" to Germany. President Ilham Aliyev thanked the German Chancellor for inviting him to

visit her country. The Azerbaijani leader said the two countries' relations saw "rapid development since my last visit here three years ago".

He in particular hailed the political relations and economic cooperation. The President said about 100 German firms operated in Azerbaijan, adding there was a great demand for German technologies in his country. The Azerbaijani leader expressed his country's readiness to contribute to ensuring Europe's energy security. The President said Azerbaijan's joining the European Union's Eastern Partnership Program would allow the country conduct reforms in a variety of spheres.

- Minsk Group Russian co-chair: Azerbaijan, Armenia have not submitted proposals yet

"Azerbaijan and Armenia have not yet submitted their proposals on uncoordinated points of Madrid principles to the co-chairs", OSCE Minsk Group's Russian Co-chair Yuri Merzlyakov said. Answering the question on co-chairs' visit to the region, the diplomat stated that they were waiting for the proposals of both sides.

"First, we should receive the proposals of both parties, and then we will think about the visit." Following the trilateral meeting between Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian presidents in Sochi on Jan. 25, the co-chairs noted that Baku and Yerevan should submit proposals on uncoordinated points of Madrid document within 2 weeks, thereafter the co-chairs will again visit the region.

- Israeli FM Avigdor Lieberman to arrive in Azerbaijan today

On Monday, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman starts three-day visit to Azerbaijan. Lieberman will meet with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov, Minister of Emergency Situations Kemaladdin Heydarov, Parliament Speaker Ogtay Asadov, members of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan. The issues of international policy and security will be discussed at the meeting. The visit will end on Feb. 11.

- NATO experts to visit Azerbaijan

According to the NATO-Azerbaijan Individual Partnership Action Plan, the Arabic Course will be organized in Abu Dhabi, UAE from Feb. 14 to May 5, 2010, press service of the Azerbaijan Defense Ministry said. NATO expert group on training of ensigns will be on a visit to Azerbaijan on Feb. 17-22. The experts will also realize examination visit to the Baku Ground Troops Training School and contact line units on Feb. 17-21.

According to the bilateral cooperation plan signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey, the course of improved explosive installation will be held in Istanbul, Turkey from Feb. 14 to April 4. The course of military and civil cooperation will be organized in Bucharest, Romania on Feb. 15-26 within the Azerbaijan-Romania bilateral cooperation plan.

Economic /Energy Front

- Third Caspian energy forum due in Moscow

Third Caspian Energy Forum will take place in Moscow's Center of International Trade on 23 March. The event is to be organized by the ministries of foreign affairs, natural resources and ecology of Russia, trade-industry chamber and Russian academy of sciences, the CIS Executive Committee said. One of the key goals of the Forum is the practical realization of connecting factor of the Caspian Sea in the energy sphere.

To this end, special attention in the forthcoming forum will be given to the questions of development of the atomic and renewable energy resources of the Caspian region, development and realization of joint exploration programs, expansion of cooperation and

partnership in development of energy resources, construction and modernization of the gas transport infrastructures, oil-gas production and processing facilities.

Forum's program includes consideration of proposals on development of adjacent spheres of economy of the Caspian region on the base of realization of prospective ideas, technology and application of advanced equipment, including measures on preservation of bio-diversity of flora and fauna of the Caspian.

- Azerbaijan national oil company lays gas line to Georgian region

The SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-run oil firm, has built a gas pipeline to the Lanchkhuti region of Georgia. The inauguration ceremony was attended by Georgia's Deputy Energy Minister Soso Varsemashvili, Director of the Socar Georgia Gas Anar Mammadov and Governor of Guria region Valeri Chitaishvili.

“SOCAR makes every effort to expand its presence in the Georgia’s energy market,” said Mammadov. Deputy Minister Varsemashvili thanked Azerbaijani government for the assistance in supplying Georgia with gas.

Social Front

- Azerbaijan Planning To De-Russify Family Names

BAKU -- An Azerbaijani parliamentary committee is preparing a draft law on the de-Russification of Azerbaijani last names, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

Culture Committee Chairman Nizami Jafarov told journalists in Baku on February 5 that a commission from the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences spent six months developing the concept behind the draft legislation. Jafarov said the plan has been sent to the presidential administration for further discussion and he expects either a presidential decree or a new law to follow that would begin changing the endings of Azerbaijanis' last names to remove the Russian element. He said the name changes would begin with obligatory changes for all newborns and that others who wanted to change their names would be encouraged to do so. Jafarov said it still has not been determined what ending Azerbaijani names should have under the new legislation. Most Azerbaijani surnames currently have a Russian ending of "ov" or "ev" for males and "ova" or "eva" for females, a legacy from the decades under which Azerbaijan was ruled by Russia and later as part of the Soviet Union.

Since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991, many Azerbaijanis have nationalized their names by either removing the Russian endings (for example Ismayilova would be shortened to Ismayil) or by changing the "ov" or "ev" to "ly". Ali Hasanov, the head of the social-political department of President Ilham Aliyev's administration, has suggested that the Russian endings on people's names be changed to "az" because it is Azerbaijan's domain on the Internet and also the first two letters of the name of the country.

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon changed his name from Rakhmonov a few years ago to remove the Russification of his family name.

- Azerbaijani Journalist Convicted Of Libel

An Azerbaijani court has handed down an 18-month suspended sentence for a newspaper editor convicted of libeling the interior minister, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

The court on Wednesday also ordered that the salary of Ayyub Karimov, editor in chief of the newspaper "Femida 007," be garnished by 15 percent for the length of his sentence. Azerbaijani Interior Minister Ramil Usubov filed the libel lawsuit against Karimov in January, claiming that some of Karimov's articles printed in the "Azadlyg" and "Femida 007" newspapers were inaccurate and damaged his dignity and honor.

Karimov pleaded not guilty and vowed to appeal the verdict.

- European Court of Human Rights to pass one more decision on Azerbaijan

The European Court of Human Rights will pass one more decision on Azerbaijan on Feb. 11. This case concerns the Azerbaijani authorities' failure to enforce a judgment in the applicant's favour in which an internally displaced family was to be evicted from a flat for which the applicant had been granted occupancy rights. The applicant relies on Article 6 § 1 (right to a fair hearing), Article 13 (right to an effective remedy) and Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 (protection of property).

Kazakastan

Political Front

- Kazakh Newspapers Protest Confiscations

The independent Kazakh publications "Respublika," "Vzglyad," and "Svoboda slova" have officially protested the government's seizure of their newspapers last week, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The newspapers filed complaints with the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Supreme Court in Almaty today.

They are protesting a decision by Kazakh officials on February 1 to impound the editions of five opposition and independent newspapers because they contained allegations by former Kazakh banker Mukhtar Ablyazov of serious corruption by Timur Kulibaev, President Nursultan Nazarbaev's son-in-law. Ablyazov, who left Kazakhstan for London last year after his BTA bank was taken over by the government, alleged in statements printed by the newspapers that Kulibaev illegally obtained tens of millions of dollars in a deal with the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation several years ago. Ablyazov announced today on websites that he has sent documents to Kazakhstan's Prosecutor-General's Office, parliament members, and political parties urging them to initiate investigations into his claims about Kulibaev. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's media-freedom representative, Miklos Haraszti, criticized today what he called the "misuse" of libel laws to muzzle the press in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Haraszti specifically mentioned the confiscation of the five newspapers last week.

Geo Strategic Front

- KAZAKHSTAN: FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON YIELDS NO AGREEMENTS

The visit of Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev to Washington in early February failed to produce any agreements on pressing issues, according to US State Department officials. Kazakhstan's top priority for the visit was to gain US support for a summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a meeting that Kazakhstani leaders hope to convene this year in Astana. Saudabayev also aimed to arrange a one-on-one meeting between US President Barack Obama and Kazakhstani chief executive Nursultan Nazarbayev in April. The United States, in return, was seeking to pressure Kazakhstan to implement some concrete measures on human rights, including a review of the controversial sentence of a human rights activist, Yevgeny Zhovtis. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Saudabayev's visit occurred under the auspices as OSCE chairman-in-office. Astana holds the OSCE chair in 2010. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Despite expectations that the two sides would be able agree on US support for an OSCE summit, that didn't happen. There was no official announcement made after Saudabayev met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and no press conference. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Kazakhstan was not "at a decision point" on any of the specific measures that Washington wants to see, said a State Department official familiar with the discussions. The official spoke to EurasiaNet on condition of anonymity. Still, the official said there were "positive discussions" and "they didn't say no to anything."

In particular, Kazakhstan appears willing to address the Zhovtis case, the official said. "Saudabayev wasn't as hardline on this as they [Kazakh officials] were a couple of months ago, when they were saying 'We're just following the law.' But there's a growing realization that their own law wasn't applied well, there were flaws in the whole legal process," said the official. "They recognize that it's an issue and they need to deal with it." In part, Saudabayev was unable to deliver any concrete promises because the Zhovtis case remains in the appeal phase in the Kazakhstan court system. "We're not telling them to break their own laws. We want them to figure this out within their own system," the US diplomat said.

"We emphasize that it's a stain on their reputation, and that they need to undo the mistakes that their legal system made," the official added. But Zhovtis's appeal is not expected to be decided before May, after the nuclear security summit. "If they want to deliver something before that on Zhovtis, they'll have to speed things up a little bit."

Similarly, while Saudabayev said he supported a US request for Kazakhstan to open new air routes to help speed the shipment military cargo to Afghanistan, he indicated that Astana's consent would require parliamentary approval. In the past, similar agreements have been implemented before being approved by the Kazakhstani legislature. But in this case, Washington is supportive of the notion of Kazakhstan's executive branch working with the parliament. "We don't want to discourage that, it's a little bit rare in that neighborhood," the State Department official said.

- Turkish foreign minister due to Kazakhstan

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is set to pay a visit on February, 10-12 to Kazakhstan as the official guest of his Kazakh counterpart Kanat Saudabayev, Davutoğlu's office said in a statement on Monday. The two top diplomats are expected to discuss bilateral relations as well as regional and international issues and developments.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited Turkey in October last year, which saw the signing of a strategic partnership deal between the two countries.

Turkey is scheduled to takeover in June from Kazakhstan the rotating presidency of a conference designed to promote cooperation and build confidence among Asian countries.

Economic /Energy Front

- Kazakh government struggles to help airlines off EU blacklist

The relegation of all but one Kazakhstan-registered airline to the EU's air safety blacklist was a blow to national pride as well as a setback for the air transport sector. The government is now working to have Kazakh airlines removed from the list by the end of this year.

The decision was based on an audit from the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). Published in April 2009, it revealed serious deficiencies in Kazakhstan's air safety practices. Despite a series of meetings between Kazakh and EU officials in the following months, in July 2009 all Kazakhstan-registered airlines with the exception of Air Astana were placed on the list of airlines banned within the EU.

The problems stemmed mainly from a lack of investment in the sector. Despite efforts by the Kazakh government to grow the air transport sector, the Civil Aviation Committee's regulations and oversight rules had changed little since the end of the Soviet era. Low salaries also meant it was difficult to attract skilled personnel.

The decision was an embarrassment for the government, which aims to establish Kazakhstan as a regional financial centre and business hub. Good air transport links are a key part of the project. "Kazakhstan - a rapidly developing country - and suddenly the blacklist," lamented Prime Minister Karim Massimov at a meeting at the Transport and Communications Ministry, Kazinfom reported. Telling Transport Minister Abelgazy Kusainova that 2009 was "not the brightest day" for Kazakhstan's airline sector, he instructed the ministry to make the removal of Kazakhstani airlines from the list by the end of 2010 a priority.

- Key risks to Kazakh economic recovery

Reuters - Tuesday, February 9SendIM StoryPrint.ALMATY, Feb 8 - Kazakhstan, the largest economy in Central Asia, is set for recovery after a bumpy 2009 in a process dependent on a number of external and domestic factors.

Below are key factors that could either drive or hinder economic growth in the former Soviet republic.

COMMODITY PRICES

Kazakhstan's primary exports are crude oil and metals including steel, copper, zinc, ferroalloys and gold.

Economic recessions in 2009 and 1998 both followed rapid decreases in global oil prices. Kazakhstan has set up its rainy day oil fund -- known as the National Fund -- which is replenished by oil revenues to shield its budget from commodity price fluctuations.

Even so, global prices for key commodities still affect the balance of payments and overall economic growth.

BANKING SYSTEM HEALTH

Four Kazakh banks went into default last year citing asset quality problems and, in some cases, management fraud. All are now in different stages of debt restructuring talks.

The largest of those, BTA <BTAS.KZ>, said in December it would seek to finalise a detailed agreement with creditors by Jan. 31 but has yet to announce a deal, a worry for investors closely watching the case.

Analysts say other banks are also under stress from mounting bad loans, although those are likely to stabilise and peak this year

INVESTOR RELATIONS

Kazakhstan has attracted over \$90 billion in foreign direct investment since gaining independence from Soviet rule in 1991, mostly in the dominant oil and gas sector.

But the government has sought to raise its role in the industry in the last few years, engaging in disputes with investors and tightening regulations in what analysts saw as part of a global trend of resource nationalism.

In the latest step criticised by investors, the government said last month it would strip foreign firms of tax exemptions given to them by production sharing agreements signed in the 1990s. [ID:nLDE6141LY]

CUSTOMS UNION

Ex-Soviet nations Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus are setting up a customs union this year to boost trade and investment across their mutual borders.

However, some Kazakh business figures fear that local industries such as manufacturing would stagnate as companies find themselves unable to compete with larger Russian producers.

Other critics of the union say it delays the more important process of joining the World Trade Organisation which would be more beneficial for the economy.

- First oil from Kashagan not far off, says Kazakh energy minister

ASTANA - Having become one of the largest (16.81%) shareholders in the North-Caspian project (Kashagan field,) Kazakhstan has started paying closer attention to the costs associated with the development of this major and much promising project. Kazakhstan's Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Sauat Mynbayev, in an interview with New Europe's Kazakhstan correspondent Kulpash Konyrova, said that accurate calculation is required, as exceeding the Kashagan project development budget will automatically increase the country's budget spending. He said this year's spending on the project is expected to be cut by \$3 billion.

Mynbayev also talked about the oil pipeline Eskene-Kuryk and the Trans-Caspian project. Last fall, during an official visit of French President Nicolas Sarkozy to Kazakhstan, the national company KazMunaiGas and a French company SPIKAPAG signed a memorandum of understanding. KazMunaiGas also signed a memorandum with two other French companies, one of which would supply pipes for the oil pipeline Eskene-Kuryk, and the other would install the pipes and provide technical support. The oil pipeline Eskene – Kuryk is expected to connect Kazakhstan's oil fields Tengiz and Kashagan with Baku, from where crude will go by the oil pipeline Baku-Ceyhan to the ports of the Black Sea. Eskene–Kuryk is planned to be about 950 kilometers long, including the connecting pipeline from the oil field Tengiz. The oil pipeline is expected to move 56 to 80 million tons a year.

- Kazakh oil companies seek law amendments to avoid double taxation

Astana. February 4. Interfax-Kazakhstan - Kazakh oil producers are addressing the government to make amendments to the Tax Code to avoid double taxation.

"We are facing the situation when a double taxation occurred during the transition from one form of tax legislation to the other. A double tax is not the norm, we want to convey this idea to the government," said KazEnergy Association General Director Djambulat Sarsenov at a press briefing on Thursday in Astana. PriceWaterHouseCoopers tax director Almas Nakipov clarified that during the transition from the old Tax Code to the new one, the same oil production volume was subject to export duty in late 2008 and then to rent tax in early 2009. "As a result, the three types of taxes (export customs duties, rent tax and income taxes – "IF-K") accounted for 98% of the oil companies' revenues. This is an unfair approach. Oil companies hope that by amending the Tax Code a fair approach will be found. We hope to see the result in the months to come," said PriceWaterHouseCoopers tax director Almas Nakipov

- TURKMENISTAN-CHINA GAS PIPELINE BECOMES A REALITY

By Robert M. Cutler (02/03/2010 issue of the CACI Analyst)

The opening of the first segment of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline last month is only one in a series of recent events in Caspian Sea basin energy developments. It signifies Turkmenistan's first real moves to break its dependence upon Gazprom and the Russian state for international sales of its energy resources. These developments are to the detriment of Europe, which remains dependent upon Russia and Turkey as transit countries and has been unable to push forward the implementation of its Nabucco pipeline project.

BACKGROUND: The idea of building a pipeline from Turkmenistan to China goes back to the early 1990s, when international energy companies began to contemplate prospects for the development of Central Asian resources for export to world markets. At the time, however, a lack of experience in the field, the enormous distance to be covered (it would have to transit both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan en route), doubts about the unproven resources despite rumors of enormous quantities, and the isolation imposed by Turkmenistan's erstwhile president Saparmurad Niyazov all militated against the development of the project. Even the combination of the decline in the country's exports throughout much of the 1990s, its total dependence upon Russia's pipeline system, and the low prices received from Russia relative to commercial world rates did not accelerate Ashgabat's inclination to pursue this project, or indeed to pursue any international pipeline at all (other than one for relatively small volumes to northeastern Iran for domestic consumption there).

As other projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline were realized in the meantime, and the possibility of using third countries for transit became established, the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project was not forgotten. China in the meantime built the West-East Gas Pipeline (WEGP) from Xinjiang to Shanghai, first of all to carry gas from Xinjiang itself, but also to establish the feasibility and the path for subsequent pipelines along the same route. The construction of an oil pipeline from eastern Kazakhstan into Xinjiang (now being extended westward piece by piece to the Caspian Sea basin) established as Beijing's gateway to Central Asian energy resources. The idea of a 4,500-mile pipeline from eastern Turkmenistan to the Chinese coast no longer seemed so outlandish.

In April 2006, Niyazov himself signed a framework cooperation agreement for the project with China's President Hu Jintao in Beijing. He died eight months later in December, but the project did not lack follow-through. By July 2007, Niyazov's successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov had consolidated his power enough to travel to Beijing in order to witness an agreement between the Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) and Turkmengaz for the pipeline's construction.

IMPLICATIONS: One of the reasons why the pipeline project was able to take off so quickly is that it constitutes an add-on to a slightly more modest project, which CNPC had been negotiating with KazMunaiGaz for the import of natural gas from Kazakhstan. Thus the pipeline from Turkmenistan, which was originally planned for a volume of 30 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y), will now be constructed to carry 40 bcm/y (if not still more in later stages), even though China is set to receive only 30 bcm/y from the start. Kazakhstan will generate the other 10 bcm/y and will also consume at least a fraction of that quantity.

Indeed, the first phase of the larger project sets a volume target of 10 bcm/y. Whereas a second stage of the original Kazakhstan-China pipeline was planned to increase Kazakhstan's exports to China to 30 bcm/y, it is now likely that at least some of that gas will go to the populous South Kazakhstan province. In the larger project, the Turkmenistani segment will run 190 kilometers (km) from the Bagtiyarlyk cluster in the eastern part of the country to the border with Uzbekistan, then 520 km across Uzbekistan, and another 1,300 km through Kazakhstan to the Chinese border, then through Xinjiang all the way across the country to Guangdong province and Shanghai. Within China, work on a second WEGP parallel to the first was begun in late 2008 for the purpose of making this project possible.

Chinese geologists estimate that the Bagtiyarlyk fields that will supply the pipeline hold 1.6 trillion cubic meters of gas altogether. The operating fields of Samandeppe and Altyn Asyr will feed the project with 10 bcm/y in the first phase of development and 13 bcm/y when complete. The second phase will add 17 bcm/y to the original 10 bcm/y from deposits that the two sides are developing together in accord with the July 2007 contract, which is structured as a production sharing agreement. The route will involve refurbishing and expanding the Bukhara-Tashkent pipeline inside Uzbekistan and building the route through Almaty to Kazakhstan's border with China, probably to Alashankou, which is where the aforementioned Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline crosses into China. The sale price for Turkmenistani gas to China has not been published, but credible sources report that it is "over US\$100" per thousand cubic meters.

Much of the gas to China from Kazakhstan may come from the latter's Karachaganak deposit, which has not been able to expand volumes until now due to Russia's inability or unwillingness to honor a three-year-old agreement to expand the capacity of the Orenburg gas processing plant in southern Siberia, or later from the offshore Kashagan deposit. It seems likely to come in the first instance from Aqtobe, where the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has been present for the better part of a decade, via Kzyl-Orda and Shymkent to Almaty and Alashankou.

The opening of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline comes at almost the same time as that of an extension of the existing Turkmenistan-Iran pipeline that will expand existing volumes, and a new agreement with Russia to refurbish the East-West Pipeline running across the south of Turkmenistan as well as the Turkmenistani segment of the Caspian Coastal (sometimes called "Pre-Caspian") Pipeline. Even though skepticism is called for concerning the projects with Russia (earlier similar agreements have had no result), what is clear is that Turkmenistan is moving strongly beyond its dependence on Gazprom.

In that connection, it should be noted that at the end of last month Turkmenistan awarded a US\$9.7 billion contract to a consortium of companies from China, the United Arab Emirates and South Korea for the development of the large South Yolotan gas field. The British auditing firm Gaffney Cline last year estimated that this field holds 6 trillion cubic meters of gas, with a low estimate of 4 trillion and a high estimate of 14 trillion. In connection with the pipeline just opened to China, Beijing agreed to lend Ashgabat US\$4 billion, and three-quarters of this sum will go to developing South Yolotan. Given the speed with which the first Turkmenistan-China pipeline was constructed, there is little reason to doubt that this project will equally see the light of day sooner rather than later.

CONCLUSIONS: Together with the fact that Denmark, Finland, and Sweden have all now granted permits for the Nord Stream (Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea)

pipeline to traverse their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), these most recent developments in Asia underline that Europe continues to miss opportunities to decrease its dependence on Russian sources of natural gas. At the same time, the failure of Turkey to come to terms with Azerbaijan concerning bilateral gas sale arrangements has complicated their negotiations over Nabucco-related matters.

Turkey's favor towards Nabucco's competitor, the Russia-proposed South Stream pipeline (in return for Russia's acquiescence in the construction of a trans-Anatolian pipeline from Samsun on the Black Sea to Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea), means that Ankara now takes lessons from Moscow as to how gas transit countries to Europe should act. Continuing bilateral consultations between the countries at the highest level, one just last week, underline that such an energy entente is real. An alternative is the White Stream gas pipeline project, now included as part of the EU's Southern Corridor Strategy, which would convey Caspian Sea gas across Azerbaijan and Georgia and under the Black Sea directly to the EU, but its full development depends on finding a way to get Turkmenistani gas to Azerbaijan for transshipment

Social Front

- **Kazakh Court Overturns Media-Criticism Ban**
(RFE/RL) -- A Kazakh court has struck down a ruling blocking the press from printing potentially damaging material about the president's son-in-law.

The Medeu district court today also dismissed Timur Kulibaev's lawsuit against five independent and opposition newspapers, which had reported on corruption allegations against him.

Today's move comes a day after sharp criticism from Europe's top security and rights body, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), whose media-freedom representative called the lawsuit a dangerous attempt at censorship.

The same court last week seized the entire print runs of the newspapers and barred media outlets from publishing any information that could damage Kulibaev's reputation. Kulibaev last month filed lawsuits against "Respublika," "Golos respubliki" (Voice of the Republic), "Vzglyad" (Glance), "Kursiv," and "Kursiv-News" after they printed a statement by an exiled Kazakh businessman and politician.

In the statement, Mukhtar Ablyazov alleged that Kulibaev illegally obtained tens of millions of dollars in a deal with the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) several years ago.

Speaking today to journalists in the capital, Astana, Kulibaev refused to comment on the allegations, which Ablyazov also sent to the Prosecutor-General's Office, political parties, and politicians: "Let's not comment on this. The reason is simple: the law enforcement agencies are taking care of it," Kulibaev said. "Once they come up with a conclusion, we can talk about it."

Following today's ruling, representatives of three of the newspapers ("Respublika," "Vzglyad," and "Svoboda slova") said they planned to seek compensation from Kulibaev for the libel lawsuits he filed against them.

- **GLOBALIZING NEW MEDIA IN KAZAKHSTAN**

Established as a firm presence in the information space in Kazakhstan, the new media is increasingly embracing Western-style entertainment and social networking and even Western media content. Though Kazakhstan still lags behind many countries in terms of

the number of internet users per capita, the arrival of smart phones, twitting, and file and photo sharing over the mobile-phone networks has helped to change the media landscape, making new media content accessible even in small cities and towns. These changes have intensified the discourse within the country about the future of the media culture: will Kazakhstan's media be able to compete with the forces of globalization?

BACKGROUND: With the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) literacy, the younger generation of students and professionals in Kazakhstan has begun actively using ICT not only for uncritical adaptation of Western-style entertainment, social networks and Western media content, but also for producing their own cultural and information content using various new media platforms. Many young professionals begin their day by cruising through several national and local newspapers and news portals – very much like their Western colleagues: today almost all newspapers and magazines in Kazakhstan have their own quite sophisticated websites in Kazakh, Russian and occasionally in English. According to the data from Kazakh sources, local netizens have access to more than 2,200 internet newspapers, though only a quarter of these are updated regularly.

This is in sharp contrast to the Iron Curtain era or to the situation just a few years ago. Kazakhstan was a latecomer to the information revolution. As recently as the 1990s, only a very few privileged organizations had access to the Internet and to an electronic mailing system covering less than one percent of the population. Even these privileged users had no access to broadband Internet connection and waited for hours to get a dial-up connection or to download important files. Large-scale investments and international competition in the early 2000s helped to radically change the ICT environment. The development of a modern communication infrastructure during the last decade helped facilitate access to the Internet: according to the State Agency for Information and Communication, about 30 percent of the country's population had access to the Internet (if Internet-capable mobile phones are included) by the end of 2009, up from 14 percent at the end of 2008. During the last decade, the national telecommunication companies finally introduced high speed Internet, charging about 5,000 Tenge (about US\$35) per month, though it is still quite expensive for most of the population. Close proximity to the major ICT manufacturing centers – South Korea and China – has helped to fill the market with the latest gadgets, smart phones and other products. By 2008-2009, most schools and universities across the country had established their own computer centers equipped with the latest generation of computers and good-quality access to the Internet.

“Our usage of the Internet and new media goes well beyond entertainment and news,” explains Dilara Istybayeva, an expert on new media and PhD candidate at the Kazakh National University. “Citizens in our country use the new media for social networking and in everyday life, including the usage of e-governance services.” Indeed, the older generation has discovered the Internet to build up social networks with their classmates and colleagues through the most popular Russian-based website, Odnoklassniki (<http://www.odnoklassniki.ru>), while the younger generation prefers to hang around Moi mir (<http://my.mail.ru>) and VKontakte (<http://vkontakte.ru>). Probably all Kazakh netizens know or use in one way or another Facebook, MySpace and YouTube and their Kazakh cousins - <http://kaztube.kz/>, <http://kiwi.kz> and <http://podkazt.kz>. In fact, YouTube has become one of the most popular platforms for the creation of social networks of Kazakh music fans – practically all of the latest Kazakh music hits can be found there. For

example, when the infamous movie about Borat was not yet accessible to the general public in Kazakhstan, it could be found on YouTube. The blogo-craze has also arrived in Kazakhstan, with thousands of people creating their own platforms, among which Tsentri Tiazhesti (<http://www.ct.kz/>) and Yvision (<http://yvision.kz/>) have become the most popular. This website hosts hundreds of blogo-communities, which discuss virtually everything from buying second-hand cars and makeup lessons to fitness classes, dating tips and poetry translation experiments in the Kazakh or Russian languages.

The netizens also have an opportunity to use ICT in accessing various public services provided by the local and national government agencies over the Internet, from getting legal and administrative information to paying various fees, taxes and bills. Taking the concept of e-governance quite seriously, the government of Kazakhstan has mandated every government agency to establish its presence on the global web. Moreover, Kazakhstan's government even obliged high-ranking government officials to maintain their own blogs and to host regular blogo-conferences. In fact, the country was ranked 81st out of 182 countries in the UN e-government readiness index in 2008.

IMPLICATIONS: The development of new media in Kazakhstan has been particularly robust during the last six or seven years, and despite the global financial crisis continues quite strongly. The development of this sector has a far-reaching impact that affects many aspects of life, including the cultural, social and political development of the country. First, ITC has had the greatest impact on the field of education by enabling citizens to use the Internet in accessing various services and by helping young professionals and school- and university-level students to learn about international standards in governance, public management and civil services. Second, the opening of the national information space to the forces of globalization has exposed Kazakhstan's media outlets to fierce competition for the hearts and minds of the country's netizens. This competition has helped to bring international standards and creativity to various media outlets, so that they are not content to simply copy Western-style cultural content, but make creative use of local and national cultural content to become more appealing to the public. Though the readership of some media outlets has been shrinking steadily, yet other media outlets have found innovative ways to attract the public.

In addition, the Internet has provided an inexpensive platform for launching new niche media outlets and networks, discussing everything from crisis survival strategies to the fate of Kazakh poetry and literature and preserving the cultural heritage of the various ethnic groups living in the country. Third, ICT promotes the development of civil society as hundreds and even thousands of active netizens enthusiastically embrace the new platform in building better governance for their own country, actively participating in public debates on local and national issues, demanding delivery of higher quality public services from government officials and actively discussing various policy programs.

CONCLUSIONS: International experience suggests that globalization is a complex process which, by and large, leads to greater integration of countries and societies into a globalized world. Global competition puts a huge pressure on the local and national media, but at the same time encourages old and new media to use information and communication technologies in innovative ways for the benefit of all citizens. If properly developed and managed, the new media can positively contribute to the economic and social competitiveness of developing countries, but this also requires the development of proactive policies at different levels. The government should use all means to make

access to the Internet, mobile phones and other communication services affordable and accessible for more citizens by encouraging competition among communication providers. It should also invest in building and developing contemporary ICT infrastructure, improving access to the new media technologies and media services including improving e-governance in the country. The government should also refrain from isolating its information space from the forces of globalization by limiting its citizens' access to the global web, as seen in some other Central Asian republics.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- Kyrgyz Activists Demonstrate As Opposition Leader's Appeal Begins

Isakov supporters demonstrate in the southern Alai district on February 9.

GULCHO, Kyrgyzstan -- About 1,000 protesters gathered in the southern Kyrgyz village of Gulcho to demand the release of former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

The demonstrators met at a local sports complex after local officials refused to allow the rally to gather at the village's administrative building. Outside the complex, dozens of young supporters of Isakov were on horses guarding the gathering.

Isakov was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to eight years in prison last month. He pleaded not guilty and said that the case against him was politically motivated because of his work with the opposition.

Several of his supporters -- including his 85-year-old mother -- have been on a rotating hunger strike for the past three weeks demanding his release from prison. The hunger strike was suspended on February 9.

- Military office employee arrested for bribery

Financial Police Service of Kyrgyzstan arrested an employee from one of the Chui regional military registration offices.

A man turned to the Regional Finance Police Department with a request to take measures against the employee of Tokmak military registration office, who extorted 18 thousand soms for issue of a military ID.

The officer was caught red-handed at the entrance to a Bishkek trade center. Investigation is ongoing.

Geo Strategic Front

- Hizb ut-Tahrir activists detained in Kyrgyzstan

A group of women engaged in recruitment to Hizb ut-Tahrir (a religious-extremist organization) were arrested in Bishkek, press-service of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs reported.

Reportedly, officers detained a certain J.T. born in 1976, a mentor (mushrif) of the Hizb ut-Tahrir and three other women engaged in training of future extremist members. All arrested came from newly built Kalys-Ordo district.

According to the press-service, they have found the extremist literature: 15 books, 29 brochures, 23 leaflets, 48 compact discs, the newspaper, magazine, abstracts and 23 notebooks with activity of the extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir notes.

A criminal case was initiated according to this fact.

Economic /Energy Front

- Parliament members to protest against mobile companies' actions

Roza Otunbaeva, Member of the Kyrgyz Parliament offered to join the protests actions against mobile companies. The statement was voiced at the parliament meeting on January 5, 2010.

As to her, a group of citizens started an action against mobile operators' decision to impose 0.60 soms surcharge on each connection. "We should not watch from the sidelines. I ask you to drop out your mobile phones at least for one day in protest against the companies. We must prevent such actions," she said

- Uzbekistan cuts off gas import to South Kyrgyzstan"

Uzbekistan cut off natural gas import to the south region of Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzgaz Company informed the news agency 24.kg Friday.

The day before official Tashkent sent a note to Kyrgyzgaz to warn about possible gas cut off due to \$7 million debt as of February 4, 2010.

"The officials have to reduce gas pressure in Osh oblast due to the old gas meters problem. The outdated equipment does not control real fuel consumption and turned off valve on the gas pipeline when supply is terminated that, in its turn, increases the debt. Thus the subscribers continue to use gas, producers can not fix consumed gas amount," Melisbek Myrzakmatov, Mayor of Osh said.

He asks Osh residents for understanding and urges all the consumers to clear their gas bills timely.

Kyrgyzgaz Company gave no official comments yet.

- Kyrgyzstan increases investment inflow

Kyrgyzstan takes one of the dominant positions among CIS countries, according to investments growth rate into fixed assets, Interstate Statistic Committee of CIS informed. As to the committee, the volume of investments into a fixed capital in Kyrgyzstan has grown up by 19.7% in 2009. Only Uzbekistan can have a higher index due to a 28.3% increase of investments inflow in 2009.

Besides Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan the positive dynamics on investments growth have managed to keep Belarus (8.6%) and Kazakhstan (2.1%) in 2009. The average decrease of capital investment volumes by 16% was registered in all other CIS countries.

Social Front

- Eurasia to broadcast Kyrgyz TV-channel

One of the Kyrgyz TV-channels will be broadcasted in Eurasia, Kyrgyz television company El TR said.

As to the company, national EL TR broadcasting signal can be received from the orbit satellite starting from February 3, 2010. People of the Eurasian continent from the North Africa to the eastern coast of China will get an opportunity to learn more about Kyrgyzstan by tuning their antennas to the desired frequency, the report revealed.

El TR is reportedly one of the youngest TV companies with almost 80 per cent Kyrgyz language programs and TV-shows in the republic.

- Kyrgyzstan welcomes the abolition of capital punishment

The Kyrgyz Parliament approved the Second Option protocol of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, aimed to abolish a penalty death. This decision was made at the Parliament session 11 February, 2010.

According to the Justice Minister Kurmantai Abdiev, the document makes provision for complete death penalty abolition, in turn, it will help to develop humanization of a criminal law.

It will be recalled that Kyrgyzstan adhere the Covenant in 1994. The United Nation Organization (U.N.O.) approved Second Option Protocol to this Covenant in 1989. The Protocol obliged a member country to abolish penalty death. At present time, the penalty death was replaced by life imprisonment.

Tajikistan

Political Front

- Candidate Registration Ends For Tajik Elections

DUSHANBE -- Registration for Tajikistan's parliamentary elections has ended, with 150 candidates officially allowed to run, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Central Election Commission Chairman Mirzoali Boltuev told RFE/RL that four people who applied as candidates were not registered by the commission for the February 28 parliamentary elections.

There are 63 seats available in the lower house of parliament, the Majlisi Namoyandagon, and elections will also be held for town and village councils.

An Islamic Renaissance Party leader, Vohidkhon Qosiddinov, said his party's nominees were registered for the parliamentary elections but that "technical problems" -- reportedly due to the improper work of regional election commissions -- led to his party's candidates not being registered for local elections.

Social Democratic Party leader Rahmatullo Zoirov said that despite a pledge from President Emomali Rahmon that the elections would be fair, the ruling-party candidates have been given more opportunities to meet with voters while opposition parties are only allowed to campaign in designated places.

The two opposition parties urged the government to amend the election laws before campaigning is finished and to lower or abolish the candidate registration fee -- which is 7,000 somonis (nearly \$1,600) and unaffordable for many candidates. The fee is only returned to winning candidates.

- CIS election observation mission deployed in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, February 5, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The formal opening of the CIS election observation mission for the February 28 parliamentary elections in Tajikistan was held at the Kokhi Vahdat State Complex in Dushanbe on February 4.

Muhibullo Dadajonov, a spokesman for Tajikistan's Central Commission for Referenda and Elections (CCER), said that the election observation mission is headed by Yevgeny Sloboda, an official with the CIS Executive Committee.

"A group of observers from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will arrive in Dushanbe next week," Dadajonov said.

According to the CCER, some 540-550 international observers from the CIS, SCO and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) are expected to monitor the election process in Tajikistan.

- Registration of candidates for parliament and local legislatures ends today

DUSHANBE, February 8, Asia-Plus -- Registration of candidates for parliament and local legislatures (regional, city and district Majlis) is ending today and according to the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER), 150 candidates to run for the

Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) in 41 single-mandate constituencies have been registered to this day.

Head of CCER's office Muhibullo Dadajonov told Asia-Plus today that according to their estimates, not more than two or three other candidates for the Majlisi Namoyandagon will be registered today.

"The commission endorsed list of candidates that will be elected through a proportional, party list system from a single, countrywide constituency in mid-January already," said the CCER official, "The People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has a party list of 22 candidates, the Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) has a party list of 20 candidates, the Communist Party's (CPT) party list includes 9 candidates, the Social-Democratic Party's (SDPT) party list – 7 candidates, the Agrarian Party's (APT) party list – 6 candidates, the party list of the Party of Economic Reforms includes – 4 candidates, the Socialist Party's (SPT) list – 3 candidates, and the Democratic Party's (DPT) list – 2 candidates."

The Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) has 63 members, who are directly elected for a period of 5 years. 22 are elected through a proportional, party list system from a single, countrywide constituency. To win seats, parties must pass a five percent threshold. The remaining 41 members are elected from single-mandate constituencies under a majoritarian system.

- CCER registers 229 candidates for parliament

DUSHANBE, February 9, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The process of registration of candidates for the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) and local legislatures ended yesterday.

Muhibullo Dadajonov, head of the office of the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER), told Asia-Plus today that 153 candidates had been registered to run for election to the Majlisi Namoyandagon in 41 single-mandate constituencies.

The commission endorsed list of candidates that will be elected through a proportional, party list system from a single, countrywide constituency in mid-January already.

Eight political parties have nominated a total of 73 candidates through the party list system. The People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has a party list of 22 candidates, the Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) has a party list of 20 candidates, the Communist Party's (CPT) party list includes 9 candidates, the Social-Democratic Party's (SDPT) party list – 7 candidates, the Agrarian Party's (APT) party list – 6 candidates, the party list of the Party of Economic Reforms includes – 4 candidates, the Socialist Party's (SPT) list – 3 candidates, and the Democratic Party's (DPT) list – 2 candidates.

We will recall that of 63 seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon, 22 seats come from party lists. To win seat, parties must pass a five percent threshold. The remainder is elected in first-past-the-post races. In the single mandate constituencies, candidates must win an absolute majority of votes to be elected. If none of the contestants manages to win an absolute majority during the first round, a second round of voting is held between the two leading candidates two weeks later. For any of the elections to be valid, there must be at least a 50% voter turnout.

Geo Strategic Front

- Tajikistan Jails Suspected Al-Qaeda Member

DUSHANBE (Reuters) -- Tajikistan's Supreme Court has sentenced a suspected Al-Qaeda member to eight years in jail, it said today, in the latest sign of growing efforts in Central Asia to prevent the spread of Islamist militancy.

Governments in the mainly Muslim region have been keen to show their resolve to assist Western efforts to stop extremism from spilling over from nearby Afghanistan.

The Supreme Court in Tajikistan, which shares a long border with Afghanistan, said in a statement that Makhmadsaid Mirzoev received military training in Afghanistan in the 1990s and was an active member of Al-Qaeda.

Tajikistan, an impoverished ex-Soviet republic, has jailed a total of 11 suspected Al-Qaeda members over the last two years.

Rights groups have often accused Central Asian governments of using the Islamist threat as an excuse to crack down on political dissent in a region where, like in Soviet times, alternative views are often branded as extremist.

Security analysts say, however, that radical groups with possible links to the Taliban are regaining strength in the region, emboldened by people's growing frustration with economic hardship as a result of the global economic slump.

- Tajikistan Transfers Prisoners To Afghan Officials

Afghan prisoners in Tajikistan await their transfer.

KABUL -- About 150 Afghans imprisoned in Tajikistan have been transferred to Afghan officials, RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports.

Afghan Foreign Ministry officials told RFE/RL that the prisoners were released on February 4 after a series of negotiations between Tajik and Afghan officials.

A ministry spokesman indicated that another group of some 100 Afghan prisoners is expected to be released from Tajik jails soon and will be handed over to Afghan officials. Afghan Justice Ministry officials said most of the prisoners who were released will complete their sentences in jails in different parts of Afghanistan. Most of the Afghans were arrested on the Tajik-Afghan border and found guilty of involvement in drug trafficking. Tajikistan is often the first stop for heroin and other drugs on their way to Russia and other European countries.

Economic /Energy Front

- Tajik national airline lowers passenger fares on flights to Moscow and St. Petersburg

DUSHANBE, February 6, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Tajik national air carrier, Tajik Air, has lowered passenger fares on some flights by 30 euros. The Tajik national air carrier said the new rates would be in effect on the routes from Dushanbe to Moscow and St. Petersburg only through February. A ticket for the flight to Moscow, previously €240, now costs €210 and the cost of passenger fare from Moscow to Dushanbe will be €200. A ticket for the flight to St. Petersburg has been lowered to €225 and the cost of passenger fare from St. Petersburg to Dushanbe will be €220.

The source at Tajik Air added that they had launched the twice-weekly service from Qurghon Teppa, the capital of the Khatlon province to Moscow following increase in passenger traffic on this air route. The Qurghon Teppa-Moscow flight will be operated on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

- Tajikistan-EDB agreement comes into effect

DUSHANBE, February 9, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The Eurasian Development Bank has received an official notification from Tajikistan's MFA that an agreement signed between the Government of Tajikistan and EDB on Bank's presence in Tajikistan came into effect, according to the EDB press service.

Under this agreement, the EDB is a subject of international law with international legal capacity, and enjoys the rights of a legal entity in Tajikistan. The Bank has a special legal status which grants it a number of preferences and privileges in Tajikistan, including immunity against any legal process or search, requisition, confiscation or expropriation of property; inviolability of premises and vehicles; exemption from taxes and customs duties; and stability provisions protecting it from losses or risks resulting from changes in laws or banking regulation in Tajikistan.

We will recall that Tajik Minister of Finance Safarali Najmiddinov and Chairman of the EDB Executive Board Igor Finogenov signed the agreement on the terms of presence of the EDB in Tajikistan on October 21, 2009.

Tajikistan paid up its share of \$500,000 in the charter capital of the EDB in June 2009, thus completing the procedures required for joining the Bank, and became its fourth full member. In October 2009, Tajikistan appointed Safarali Najmiddinov, Minister of Finance, its authorized representative in the EDB Council, and Abdughaffor Rahmonov, First Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Investments and State-owned Property Management, his deputy.

- ADB completes microfinance project in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE, February 11, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has completed its microfinance systems development program in Tajikistan, facilitating the development of a vibrant and growing microfinance industry in the country, press release issued by the ADB Tajikistan Resident Mission (TJRM) says.

According to a recently released project completion report, the program achieved its objectives of creating a sound legal and regulatory environment for Tajikistan's microfinance industry; building the capacity of the National Bank of Tajikistan to regulate and supervise microfinance institutions; strengthening the institutional capacity of microfinance institutions; and transforming microcredit non-government organizations into formally licensed and regulated microfinance institutions.

"Overall, the program is a success," said Makoto Ojiro, ADB's Country Director for Tajikistan. A microfinance law and implementing regulations were adopted and changes to the tax code were made. The National Bank of Tajikistan and more than thirty microfinance institutions received capacity building assistance, and more than \$3 million was loaned to 14 microfinance institutions, which used the funds to provide microloans to over 5500 clients. "The program has had positive impact on low-income households by providing institutional sources of credit for creation and expansion of business activities, which helped to increase and diversify their income," said Mr. Ojiro.

ADB provided \$8 million in loans for the program, while the Government of Tajikistan and microfinance institutions contributed \$1.3 million. The National Bank of Tajikistan was the Executing Agency for the program, which was designed in 2002 and approved in 2003.

Social Front

- Tajik Court Suspends Baptist Church's Activities

DUSHANBE -- The activities of a Baptist Church in Tajikistan were suspended by a Dushanbe court today, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Tajik Culture Ministry official Nazira Dodikhudoeva told RFE/RL that the church did not apply for reregistration despite being urged to do so by Tajik authorities. Church spokesman Andrei

Chumachenko, who owns the house used by the Baptist congregation for its church services, told RFE/RL that the Baptists have been operating in Tajikistan since 1961 but never applied for registration as a matter of principle. Chumachenko said the Baptists would seek to officially register if officials from the church's international organization decide they should do so.

He added that despite the court's decision to suspend the church's activities, his congregation will continue gathering at his house for Bible studies and to pray. Chumachenko said there are about 60 members of his congregation and it is made up of Russians, Tajiks, and Uzbeks.

There are 72 non-Muslim religious groups registered in Tajikistan. Four different Baptist churches were banned in Tajikistan after a new law on religion went into effect that required every religious group to reregister by the beginning of the year. Both the Mormon church and the Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan were also banned. Some 97 percent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim.

- Issues related to legal protection of journalists discussed in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, February 5, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Increasing cases of filing lawsuits against independent media in Tajikistan may affect the freedom of speech situation in the country and cause self-censorship among journalists, head of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (Nansmit), Nouriddin Qarshiboyev, remarked at a roundtable meeting in Dushanbe on February 5. Organized by the Office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Dushanbe in cooperation with the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (Nansmit), the meeting, formally titled "Legal Protection of Journalists in Tajikistan," brought together representatives from government institutions, media organizations, journalists as well as a number of international organizations and diplomatic missions to discuss various aspect of legal protection of journalists in the country as this issue is becoming more and more topical against the background of increasing number of lawsuits filed against independent media and the upcoming parliamentary elections in the country.

Concerning the lawsuit filed by judges against the Dushanbe independent weeklies Asia-Plus, Farazh and Ozodagon, Qarshiboyev noted that instead of paying attention to facts mentioned in a statement made by lawyer Solehjon Jurayev, the judges decided to take vengeance on the weeklies for publication of the statement. "I am sure that such lawsuits will affect the freedom of speech situation in the country and cause self-censorship among Tajik journalists and media," he said.

The Tajik media watchdog head added that such lawsuits may undermine Tajikistan's prestige on international arena.

Ms. Nargis Zokirova, director of Tajikistan's Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law (BHR) noted that the Bureau is seriously concerned over the emerged situation. "We have decided to prepare report on this subject and send it to the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights," she said.

Ms. Mahbuba Abdulloyeva, representative form the Delegation of the European Commission to Tajikistan, noted that ambassadors of the European countries and chiefs of EU missions in Tajikistan are holding meeting in Dushanbe today. During the meeting, along with other issues they will also touch upon the situation that emerged around the mentioned newspapers, she noted.

Speaking at the meeting, representative of the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, Charles Martin, expressed concern that such lawsuits may result in newspapers' publication ceasing. According to him, these lawsuits may seriously affect freedom of media in the country. "We trace events and plan to inform the Government of Tajikistan of our concern over this issue," Mr. Martin said.

Tajik Journalists' Union head Akbarali Sattorov noted that the government is already in the know and "we hope the issue will be solved."

We will recall that Tajik officials have brought actions against a number of independent print media.

Thus, a Dushanbe court on January 27 upheld the verdict against the independent weekly newspaper Paykon (Arrowhead). In October 2009, Dushanbe's Firdavsi district court found the weekly guilty of libel and ordered it to pay 300,000 somoni to the state agency Tajikstandart, which monitors the quality of imported goods. Last summer, "Paykon" printed an open letter from a group of Tajik businessmen to President Emomali Rahmon in which they accused Tajikstandart of corruption and hindering the development of trade in Tajikistan. Tajikstandart's management then filed the libel lawsuit.

On January 28, the Ministry of Agriculture brought a libel suit against the newspaper Millat (Nation) in which it is demanding 1 million somoni in damages.

On January 29, two judges from the Supreme Court and a judge from the Dushanbe city court filed lawsuit against three other leading newspapers – Asia-Plus, Ozodagon and Farazh – and lawyer Solehjon Jurayev. Claiming that the newspapers published biased and defamatory articles about them in late January, the judges are asking for a total of 5.5 million somoni in damages. Plaintiffs also requested that the newspapers be closed pending the outcome of the case. The first court hearing is scheduled for February 23.

Turkmenistan

Political Front

- Minister of Communications of Turkmenistan severely reprimanded

President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a decree severely reprimanding Minister of Communications Ovlyaguly Dzhumagulyev for "unsatisfactory performance of official duties, poor management of subordinate agencies and enterprises, as well as poor work on developing the sphere of communication."

The Minister has been warned that if he fails to correct promptly the drawbacks he will be relieved of his post, the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports from Ashgabat quoting the press service of the President of Turkmenistan.

Geo Strategic Front

- Turkmen Leader Visits France Amid Criticism From Rights Groups

French President Nicolas Sarkozy (right) welcomes his Turkmen counterpart, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, prior to a working lunch today at the Elysee Palace in Paris.

(RFE/RL) -- Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov began an official visit to France today with a meeting with his French counterpart at the Elysee Palace. The talks with President Nicolas Sarkozy touched upon bilateral cooperation, relations between Turkmenistan and the European Union, Afghanistan, and the fight against drug trafficking. In a joint statement issued after the meeting, the two leaders said the deepening of bilateral relations contributed to the reinforcement of regional and

international peace, stability, and security. They welcomed the enlargement of cooperation in the energy, infrastructure, tourism, construction, and communications sectors. And they expressed confidence that the creation of a working group on energy between the two countries will deepen cooperation in that field. Business talks were expected to be a dominant part of the agenda of the two-day visit – the first to France by the head of the isolated regime. Turkmenistan's vast natural gas resources are coveted by China, Russia, and the European Union. Ashgabat has promised to open up Turkmenistan to foreign investment and signaled its willingness to engage with the EU over possible energy routes to Europe that bypass Russian territory.

Human Rights 'Dialogue'

Berdymukhammedov has also signaled some improvements on the human rights front following the authoritarian rule of his predecessor, the late Saparmurat Niyazov. In their statement, Berdymukhammedov and Sarkozy expressed satisfaction about the continuing dialogue on human rights issues between the EU and Turkmenistan. This is unlikely to cheer critics of the Turkmen regime, who say such dialogue is bearing little fruit.

Ahead of the visit, the International Federation for Human Rights, the French League for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders said the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, movement, and religion in Turkmenistan are being subject to "draconian restrictions."

The groups called on Sarkozy to use the visit to speak out about Turkmenistan's "abysmal" human rights record and to press his Turkmen counterpart for "concrete improvements." Sacha Koulaeva of the International Federation for Human Rights in Paris tells RFE/RL that Paris has the leverage to do so.

"I do think that France now has quite a number of [levers] that we didn't have before," Koulaeva says. "One of them, of course, is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Another is the gigantic contracts which could be signed during the visit and afterward, [which are] always of great interest for Turkmenistan. So I really think there is a key window of opportunity for France to make things happen." That Partnership and Cooperation Agreement is a European Union accord that would significantly upgrade relations between the EU and Turkmenistan. The accord has been frozen for years over human rights concerns, but Berdymukhammedov's visit comes at a time when the French parliament is considering its ratification. The agreement contains a clause committing both parties to respect human rights and providing for possible suspension if either party violates this principle. It requires ratification by the national parliaments of EU member states, and the rights groups say France and the United Kingdom are the only remaining holdouts. During their meeting, Berdymukhammedov invited Sarkozy to pay an official visit to Turkmenistan; the French president accepted the invitation.

Berdymukhammedov's predecessor, Niyazov, paid a visit to France in 1993, followed by a return visit by French President Francois Mitterand in 1994.

Economic /Energy Front

- Turkmenistan, UAE agree on trade, economic and technical cooperation

President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan confirmed willingness of both countries to pursue a "full-scale intergovernmental dialogue based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit, and taking into account new opportunities

and realities of the modern time." The meeting was held in Abu Dhabi, where the Turkmen leader arrived on a two-day official visit.

At the end of talks, the signing of bilateral documents was held in the presence of the two presidents. These include a Memorandum of Understanding between the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Turkmenistan and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the United Arab Emirates; a Memorandum between the Government of Turkmenistan and the Government of the United Arab Emirates on trade, economic and technical cooperation, as well as an Agreement between Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates on air service.

The sides signed a joint communique on the result of the official visit of the President of Turkmenistan to the UAE.

Today, the President of Turkmenistan will visit the city of Dubai - the largest commercial, financial and tourist center of the Middle East, where a business forum will be held with participation of representatives of trade, financial and tourist businesses of the UAE.

- Trade turnover between Turkmenistan and Russia amounted to US \$ 1.2 billion in 2009

In 2009, trade turnover between Turkmenistan and Russia amounted to US \$ 1,247 billion (excluding deliveries of natural gas), including exports to Russia totaling U.S. \$ 51 million, and imports to Turkmenistan totaling US \$ 196 million. The growth in trade turnover (excluding exports of natural gas in 2008-2009) amounted to 24,4 percent. This data was cited by Russia's ambassador to Turkmenistan Igor Blatov in his statement published in "Neutral Turkmenistan" newspaper.

The ambassador noted that over the past three years the development of mutually advantageous Turkmen-Russia cooperation has entered a qualitatively new phase, and intensity of the political dialogue has reached an unprecedented level in the history of Russian-Turkmen relations. He congratulated President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on the third anniversary of his election to the highest post and the upcoming National Flag Day of Turkmenistan. He also congratulated his Turkmen counterparts on the upcoming Day of the Diplomatic Staff of Turkmenistan.

- Ashgabat hosted meeting of Turkmen-Indian commission on cooperation

The delegation of representatives of government agencies and large companies of India led by Indian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ms. Preneet Kaur attended a regular meeting of the intergovernmental Turkmen-Indian commission for trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation in Ashgabat. The Turkmen delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov was composed of representatives of ministries and departments.

According to the official statement, the Indian businessmen expressed interest in establishing contacts with Turkmen partners in the energy sector, transport and communications, chemical industry, high technology, tourism. Following the meeting, the sides signed a protocol. As part of the meeting, the sides also signed an intergovernmental memorandum on the establishment of the Turkmen-Indian Center of Information Technologies.

During the visit, Preneet Kaur was received by President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. She also held talks at the Mejlis and the number of ministries of Turkmenistan.

Social Front

Uzbekistan

Political Front

Geo Strategic Front

- Uzbek President leaves for Seoul

President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov left for Seoul, Korea, on 10 February with a state visit on invitation of his Korean counterpart Lee Myung-bak.

The sides will discuss issues of expanding and deepening the Uzbek-Korean cooperation, actual regional and international issues of mutual interest, UzA reported. It is planned to sign bilateral documents directed at deepening cooperation between two countries in various sectors.

Economic /Energy Front

- Korea pledges US\$12 million in aid to Uzbekistan

Korea will provide US\$12 million in aid to Uzbekistan this year in line with its effort to boost the two countries' strategic partnership, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade said.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Yu Myung-hwan signed four agreements on economic assistance for the Central Asian nation with the Uzbek Prime Minister Elyer Ganiev at the ministry in Seoul, Wednesday. Uzbek President Islam Karimov arrived in Seoul Wednesday evening for a summit with President Lee Myung-bak, Thursday.

Under the agreements, Seoul will provide US\$8.65 million worth of support and supplies to Uzbekistan on top of its current annual assistance budget of some US\$3 million, Korea Times reported.

Social Front

- Muscovites Rally For Uzbek Photographer Convicted Of Libel

MOSCOW -- Some 20 supporters of an award-winning Uzbek photographer found guilty of defamation held a rally outside the Uzbek Embassy in Moscow today, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports. A Tashkent court on February 10 found Umida Ahmedova, 54, guilty of portraying her nation as "backward" in a collection of photographs and a documentary she made depicting people's lives in rural Uzbekistan.

Uzbek officials called the photographs and documentary "insulting" and "damaging to the country's image." The court granted Ahmedova amnesty after the verdict was announced. She could have been sentenced to six months in prison or up to two years in a labor camp. Ahmedova told RFE/RL that although she left the courtroom a free woman, she did not do anything wrong and will appeal the verdict.

- Uzbek Photographer To Appeal Guilty Verdict

TASHKENT -- Uzbek photographer Umida Ahmedova said today she would appeal the guilty verdict against her for defamation, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Ahmedova, 54, was found guilty by a Tashkent court of portraying her country as "backward" for a collection of photographs and a documentary depicting the daily struggles of people in rural Uzbekistan. Uzbek officials had ruled the photographs and

documentary were "insulting" and "damaging to the country's image." The court granted Ahmedova amnesty after the verdict was announced. She could have been sentenced to six months in prison or up to two years in a labor camp. Ahmedova told RFE/RL that although she left the courtroom a free woman, she did not do anything wrong and will therefore appeal the verdict. An award-winning photographer, Ahmedova's projects were financed by the Swiss Embassy in Tashkent. Ahmedova was initially arrested and charged on December 16. Last month, authorities presented Ahmedova's lawyer with the findings of an Uzbek panel of experts who studied her film and photos. The panel accused Ahmedova of portraying Uzbek people's lives and their traditions in a negative light, giving the impression that Uzbeks are "barbarians" living in the Middle Ages.

- Uzbek Photographer Convicted, Amnestied For Libel

Umida Ahmedova (center) waits for the verdict in front of the court building in Tashkent. An Uzbek court has convicted an award-winning photographer for defaming Uzbekistan with her pictures about the daily struggles of ordinary people, but then immediately amnestied her. Umida Ahmedova, 54, was convicted of portraying people in Uzbekistan as backward and impoverished in a collection of photographs and a documentary film, both financed by the Swiss Embassy in Tashkent.

The charges against her had carried a maximum sentence of two years in a labor camp or six months in jail.

- Photographer On Trial For Showing Uzbekistan's Unglamorous Side

A photo from Umida Ahmedova's "Woman and Man: From Dawn till Night" (RFE/RL) -- A prominent Uzbek photographer and film director has gone on trial in Tashkent for her work, deemed by the Uzbek authorities to be "insulting" and "damaging to the country's image." Umida Ahmedova, 54, has been charged with defamation for her collection of photos, "Woman and Man: From Dawn till Night," documenting the lives and hardships of Uzbek villagers, as well as her documentary film, "The Burden of Virginity," which focuses on Uzbek wedding and marriage customs. If found guilty, Ahmedova faces up to two years in a labor camp or six months in prison. She rejects the charges as "groundless," saying her works merely reflect Uzbekistan's customs and traditions. In Paris, the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) has launched a campaign in her support, calling on the Uzbek authorities to acquit her. The organization's appeal was signed by nearly 1,000 artists, art critics, journalists, and rights activists from around the world.

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