



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Military Innovation; Europe; Russia

August 1:

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has urged Russia to provide all parties equal access to the media during upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, set for December 2007 and March 2008, respectively. The human rights body's president, Rene van der Linden, said it will closely monitor the level of access to the media given to the opposition. "It is up to the media and the authorities to ensure that all parties who take part in the elections have the opportunity to express their opinion," van der Linden said.

August 2:

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has said his government will pay back a \$465 million debt to Russia for gas supplies after Moscow threatened to halve gas deliveries starting August 3rd, the Associated Press reports. "We will be left without reserves, but our good friends including Hugo Chávez have promised to provide a credit on favorable terms," Lukashenko said, referring to Venezuela's president. Lukashenko added that Western banks were also prepared to provide money and that the reserves would be replenished in a month.

As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, Belarus last year agreed to pay \$100 per thousand cubic meters of gas this year, more than double the previous price but still far below the European level of about \$260. Russia's state-controlled natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, agreed to allow Minsk to pay only \$50 per thousand cubic meters for the first half of the year, with the remainder payable last month, but talks in Minsk last week on that debt ended without agreement.

A group of Russian explorers and scientists have become the first men to land on the North Pole's seabed, where they planted a Russian flag, the *Financial Times* reports. The men, who were carried in mini-submarines more than 4,261 meters beneath the waves, spent an hour gathering rock and sea water samples that will help researchers establish whether the area, known as the Lomonosov Ridge, is a geological extension of Russia's continental shelf. Canada and Denmark also claim that the Lomonosov Ridge is linked to their territories. Artur Chilingarov, the State Duma vice speaker and Russian Arctic explorer who is masterminding the expedition, told reporters: "We are here to define the outer limit of Russia's territory."

August 3:

The commander of Russia's navy, Admiral Vladimir Masorin, has said that Russia must re-establish a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea, MK.ru reports. Calling the Mediterranean an "operationally important region" for the Black Sea Fleet, Masorin said "a permanent presence of the Russian navy should be restored there" with the help of the Black Sea and Northern fleets. He also said that Russia should give special attention to cooperation with the navies of Ukraine and Turkey. Masorin made his comments while visiting the Black Sea Fleet's base in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, on the Crimean Peninsula.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said he was "amazed" at dismissive comments made by Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay about Russia's expedition to the North Pole seabed. According to Agence France-Presse, MacKay told Canada's CTV television on August 2nd: "Look, this isn't the 15th century. You can't go around the world and plant flags and say, 'We're claiming this territory.'" Similarly, U.S. State Department spokesman Tom Casey said of the expedition: "I'm not sure of whether they've put a metal flag, a rubber flag or a bed sheet on the ocean floor. Either way, it doesn't have any legal standing or effect on this claim." According to AFP, Lavrov responded indignantly, saying: "We're not throwing flags around. We know what we can prove."