

# Encircling Russia: US NATO Military Bases in Eastern Europe

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Last week was an eventful one in Eastern Europe.

The two top foreign policy veterans in the current U.S. administration, Vice President Joseph Biden and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, visited the capitals of Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. Biden was in Warsaw, Prague and Bucharest to recruit all three nations into the new U.S.-led, NATO-wide interceptor missile system and to make arrangements for the deployment of American Patriot missiles and troops to Poland, the first foreign soldiers to be based in that nation since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact eighteen years ago.

Gates was in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, for a two-day meeting of NATO and partner states' defense chiefs which also focused on the establishment of a missile shield to encompass the entire European continent as well as the unparalleled escalation of the U.S.'s and NATO's war in Afghanistan.

A few days earlier the U.S. armed forces publication Stars and Stripes announced that the Pentagon will spend an additional \$110 million to upgrade two of the seven military bases in Bulgaria and Romania it acquired the use of in agreements signed in 2005 and 2006.

The report led to political fallout in the two host countries with Bulgarian and Romanian officials scrambling to qualify the news and pretend that somehow their own subservient governments would retain control over the expanded bases. Sofia and Bucharest have no more say in how the Pentagon and NATO have used and will intensify the use of air fields and other bases in their nations than they do in determining which war zones their nations' troops are deployed to, which of late include Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The NATO defense chiefs meeting in Slovakia on October 22-23 endorsed the demands of the top American and NATO commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, for as many as 85,000 more U.S. troops to be added to the 68,000 American and 38,000 NATO and partner forces already in the South Asian war theater, and Poland immediately pledged 600 more troops with other Alliance states soon to follow. Combined U.S.-NATO troop strength in Afghanistan may reach 200,000.

Even during the peak of the American troop "surge" in Iraq at the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008 there was a total of 186,000 U.S. troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently there are an estimated 130,000 in Iraq and 68,000 in Afghanistan. In all 198,000. There were 34,000 American troops in Afghanistan on January 20th of this year when Barack Obama moved into the White House; there are twice that many now.

The figure of 85,000 additional American troops is what McChrystal reportedly termed his "low-risk" preference, with 40,000 the smallest and "higher risk" number bandied about in recent weeks.

The recently concluded NATO defense ministerial seems to have put to rest that false debate as well as another that has occupied the U.S. press corps in recent days, whether the dramatically expanding war in South Asia, Pakistan as well as Afghanistan, is to concentrate on "counterinsurgency" or "counterterrorism." That is, whether the Pentagon and NATO will limit their military actions to hunting down alleged al-Qaeda survivors or wage full-scale warfare against all insurgent forces identified as Taliban on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

The second option of course would make the 85,000 figure not only likely but unavoidable.

McChrystal delivered a fifteen minute presentation at the NATO meeting and the Alliance's secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said "What we did today was to discuss General McChrystal's overall assessment, his overall approach, and I have noted a broad support from all ministers of this overall counterinsurgency approach." [1]

The Los Angeles Times of October 24 wrote that "America's NATO allies signaled broad support Friday for an ambitious counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, adding to the momentum building for a substantial U.S. troop increase.

"NATO defense ministers meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia, endorsed the strategy put forward by Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the U.S. and allied commander. The alliance rejected competing proposals to narrow the military mission to fighting the remnants of Al Qaeda." [2]

Pentagon chief Robert Gates walked away from the two-day conference assured that "a number of allies...were thinking about increasing their own military or civilian contributions." [3]

As though a war of such monumental proportions was not enough for self-styled 21st Century NATO to manage, its chief Rasmussen delivered an inventory of additional missions while addressing the bloc's new Strategic Concept, including "nuclear matters," "cyber defence," "the difficult economic climate," "the effects of disruption in energy supply" and "perhaps the most global of challenges - climate change." [4]

But his main focus was on two related subjects, both with Russia as prime antagonist. On

the first topic Rasmussen asserted:

“Energy security is [an] emerging challenge. Indeed, many countries...have already felt the effects of disruption in energy supply, and in the next few years, the competition for energy will only get more intense. This means that we need to think about how to protect our supply lines, our transit routes, and our critical infrastructure.”

His allusion was to collective NATO-U.S.-EU efforts to “lessen Europe’s energy dependency” on Russia and to continue developing alternative routes for Caspian Sea and Middle East oil to enter Europe by circumventing Russia (and Iran). What, if the situation were reversed, would be condemned in Western capitals as an energy war.

In mentioning “the meaning of Article 5,” Rasmussen affirmed that “NATO’s core task was, is, and will remain, the defence of our territory and our populations. For our Alliance to endure, all members must feel that they are safe and secure. NATO has never failed in this respect.”

There is only one nation on earth against whom NATO can “defend its territory”: Russia.

His comments concerning “the challenge of cyber-attacks – which, as we saw in Estonia two years ago, can seriously destabilise a country” made the point even more indisputable.

Rasmussen’s address, finally, rehashed the 1989 George H.W. Bush speech A Europe Whole and Free [5] with the pledge that “our new Strategic Concept must reaffirm a long-standing NATO objective: to help complete the consolidation of Europe as a continent that is whole, free and at peace. NATO’s open door policy will continue. It will continue because it contributes to Euro-Atlantic security, and it provides a strong incentive, for aspirants, to get their house in order.”

The small and diminishing handful of nations in Europe not already in NATO supplying troops and military equipment for the war in Afghanistan and the three countries in the South Caucasus – Armenia’s defense minister was at the NATO meeting to offer troops – are to be dragged into the Alliance, Russian apprehensions and objections notwithstanding.

What being fully integrated into NATO portends for the countries so affected and for their neighbors has been indicated and will be explored in greater depth later with the cases of Bulgaria and Romania.

What it has meant for three other nations recruited into the bloc in the same year, 2004, as Bulgaria and Romania – the former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – was demonstrated earlier in the week when Rasmussen called for “a clear, visible NATO presence in the Baltic states” and said he “would not exclude military exercises in the future” to assert the Alliance’s “visible presence” in the Baltics on and near Russia’s borders. [6]

Recently U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon – formerly of the Brookings Institution, International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and German Society for Foreign Affairs in Bonn and who was “instrumental in developing and coordinating NATO policy in the run-up to the Alliance’s 50th Anniversary summit in Washington, D.C.” [7] – was in Estonia where he met with Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, who “called for Georgia, Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to be included in NATO’s Membership Action Plan, a program of assistance to countries seeking to join NATO...” [8]

Nothing on this level of geopolitics – absorbing former Soviet republics and Russian neighbors like Georgia and Ukraine into a U.S.-controlled military bloc – is coincidental. The Estonian foreign minister’s statement was seconded with precise fidelity by Senator John Kerry shortly after his recent tour of inspection of the Afghan war front. Kerry said “[W]hile the world has changed, we are still dealing with some of the same geostrategic and ideological concerns that brought NATO into being in particular, a deep and durable commitment by like-minded democracies to cooperate closely and deter aggression with a promise to rise up in defense of any NATO member under attack.

“I hope we can...address the prospects for future NATO enlargement to include Balkan nations, Georgia, and Ukraine.” [9]

As was repeatedly stated at the NATO meeting in Slovakia, although the bloc is increasingly conducting military operations outside its area of responsibility in the Balkans, South Asia, Northeast and Central Africa and the entire perimeter of the Mediterranean Sea, its “core,” fundamental role remains what it has been for sixty years, confronting Russia.

Which is how Russia and its then president Vladimir Putin and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov reacted to the U.S. takeover of seven military bases in Bulgaria and Romania. In 2007 the first stated “[A] new base in Bulgaria, another in Romania, a site in Poland, radar in the Czech Republic. What are we supposed to do? We cannot just observe all this.” [10]

Shortly afterward the second, Lavrov, stated “Russia finds it hard to understand some decisions of NATO like, for example, the deployment of US military facilities in Bulgaria and Romania.” [11]

Regarding the recent disclosure that the Pentagon is going to allot \$110 million to modernize and expand military bases in both countries – “a \$50 million military base in Romania that could house 1,600 U.S. troops, and another \$60 million facility for 2,500 troops in Bulgaria” [12] – no small sum in the impoverished nations, James Robbins, a senior fellow in national security affairs with the Washington-based American Foreign Policy Council think tank, said “the U.S. efforts in Romania and Bulgaria are part of a global redeployment strategy started in the early years of the Bush administration to shift U.S. forces out of Germany and move them eastward.” [13]

The same news source also reported that “the U.S. intends to deploy troops to Poland at some point in the near future,” according to the State Department’s undersecretary of state for arms control and international security Ellen Tauscher. [14]

Bulgaria’s investment in turning its military bases over to the Pentagon and NATO is a bad one, though. While the U.S. is to spend \$60 million expanding one of its military bases, the country’s Defense Minister Nikolay Mladenov announced earlier this week that “Afghanistan is Bulgaria’s largest military mission, costing taxpayers about BGN 90 million (about USD 68.7 million) each year.” [15] A net loss of \$8.7 million. More if Mladenov delivers on a recent promise to increase his nation’s troop contingent in Afghanistan.

The Bulgarian base that will soon house 2,000 U.S. troops is the Novo Selo Military Training Ground and will be upgraded “so that it could accommodate more rangers and be used for military exercises conducted by several countries, not just US and Bulgarian forces.” [16]

That is, it will be used for multinational NATO combat instruction for current wars, that in

Afghanistan in particular, and for potential use elsewhere in the Broader Middle East, in the former Soviet Union and in Africa.

It will especially focus on the integration of expeditionary forces from nations arising from the ruins of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Earlier this month Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov escorted high-ranking U.S. military officers to the Novo Selo base and on the occasion stated “Bulgaria would continue its military cooperation with the USA, and that Serbia and Ukraine had also expressed interest in joint drills.” [17]

During a meeting of the Southeastern Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) on October 22 in Bulgaria Defense Minister Mladenov “offered his counterparts from neighboring countries to use the joint Bulgarian-U.S. military training facilities in Novo Selo....The annual meeting was attended by the defense ministers of all countries which have the status of observers – Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia.” [18] Montenegro and Serbia were incorporated as full members of the SEDM during the meeting which was also attended by “representatives of NATO Allied Joint Force Command, Naples, and NATO Allied Joint Force Command, Brunssum, as well as the General Manager of NATO Consultation, Command and Control Agency,” according to the NATO Partnership for Peace website. [19]

This year’s meeting of SEDM, which overlaps with other NATO transitional programs like the Adriatic Charter and the Partnership for Peace, also established a Multilateral Peace Force Southeastern Europe. The twelve previous full members of the SEDM are the United States, Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine.

The nations Bulgarian officials listed as ones invited to be trained by the Pentagon’s Joint Task Force – East, about which more later, were mentioned again recently by U.S. Vice President Biden in Romania on October 22, as they were at the same time by Biden’s former Senate colleague John Kerry, in the latter case as future NATO members.

Biden stated in Bucharest, “As President Obama has said, there are no old members, there are no new members of NATO; there are just members. Under Article 5, an attack on one is an attack against all” [20] and “Our military serve together in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in the West Balkans zone....” [21]

A Romanian news source quoted the American vice president as also saying, “We share a desire that Romania’s neighbors including Moldova will continue along the path to democracy and...that they will be integrated into European institutions when they are ready. That’s why we have to sustain this bid to economically stabilize Moldova.” [22]

Moldova was the scene of a so-called Twitter Revolution in April of this year, one modeled after earlier “color” uprisings in Yugoslavia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan from 2000-2005, and now has a new government ready to merge with Romania, which would mean dragging the former Soviet republic into NATO.

It is that process Biden is bent on completing.

Moldova also has an unresolved, “frozen,” conflict with Transdniestria where Russia deployed peacekeepers in 1992 after thousands were killed and injured in fighting between the two states. There are still 365 Russian troops in the republic and last week a

Transdniester official requested more Russian forces in anticipation of increased tensions with Moldova's new pro-NATO government.

Were Moldova to join NATO, either in its own right or as part of an expanded Romania, the Alliance would be in a de facto state of war with Transdniester, which is supported by Russia. Romania is a NATO member and if it intervened on behalf of Moldova against its neighbor could invoke NATO's Article 5 against Transdniester - where, again, Russian troops are based.

Addressing his Romanian hosts on October 22, Biden said, "In Eastern Europe, there are countries still struggling to establish fully functioning democracies and vibrant market economies. You can help guide Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine along the path to stability and prosperity...There is much work to be done in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus." [23]

The six nations he mentioned are exactly those targeted by the European Union's Eastern Partnership program to be weaned from the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States and integrated into the EU and NATO.

Biden also touched on the main subject of his preceding visits to Poland and the Czech Republic: The European wing of the U.S.'s new global missile shield system.

His comments on that score at Bucharest University included:

"I really appreciate your government's embrace of the new missile defense architecture we are bringing into Europe. It is a better architecture. It has the benefit of protecting you physically, as well as the United States." [24]

He further touted a "new missile defense architecture" that "will protect all NATO allies, including all central European NATO members" and would provide "stronger, smarter and swifter defenses." [25] (Central Europe is the term now used in the West for most of the area referred to as Eastern Europe during the Cold War. The new designation is political and not geographical.)

That Biden laid such particular stress on this topic in Romania indicates that the U.S. has plans to extend its interceptor missile system into the Black Sea region.

The day after the American vice president left Romania a U.S. military official spoke of the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base - where the \$50 million investment is to occur and which has been used for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - near the port city of Constanta on the Black Sea and said that it "will become a permanent facility in the spring and be jointly used with Romanian forces." [26]

The progressively more aggressive U.S. and NATO military penetration of the Black Sea region has been examined in previous articles in this series [27]. A Russian report of October 23 included this background information:

"Over 4,000 US military men are expected to serve at the two bases: 1,600 in Romania and 2,500 in Bulgaria. The authorities of the two nations expect that the US military men will settle there for a long time.

"It goes along with the Pentagon's intention to cut its 55,000-strong group in Germany and redeploy a part of the troops in several countries of Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria and

Romania.”

The same source quoted a Russian analyst:

“The number of US military men at the two bases is not going to be large, but who can say that it will not be doubled, tripped or quadrupled in the future? Furthermore, the appearance of NATO bases on the Black Sea coast will come as an addition to the US military [deployments] in the Baltic region. As a result, Russia will find itself trapped.” [28]

The relocation of American combat and expeditionary forces from Germany and Italy to Romania and Bulgaria has been underway for the past two years.

In June of 2007 a Bulgarian news agency revealed that “The Bezmer military airport...will be transformed into one of the six new strategic airbases outside US borders.” [29]

Slightly afterwards another Bulgarian source announced that “NATO will move aircraft from the US air base in Aviano, northeastern Italy, to Bulgaria’s Graf Ignatievo air base....” [30]

A year before a third news site in the nation detailed that “[T]he new land, sea and airbases along the Black Sea will provide much improved contingency access for deployments into Central Asia, parts of the Middle East and Southwest Asia.” [31]

Beginning in 2007 the Pentagon’s new Joint Task Force – East (JTF-East), during its formative stage known as the Eastern Europe Task Force, started operating in Bulgaria and Romania and last year established its headquarters at the Mihail Kogalniceanu base in Romania.

Its main purpose is to conduct joint combat training with U.S., Bulgarian and Romanian troops for the war in Afghanistan and for others in the future.

JTF-East has just completed an almost three-month-long series of trainings in Bulgaria and Romania which began on August 7 and ended on October 24. It has two heavy brigade combat teams and the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment assigned to it and may acquire the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team currently based in Vicenza, Italy.

The Stryker is the Pentagon’s state-of-the-art 21st Century armored combat vehicle, first tried out in Iraq in 2003 and introduced in Afghanistan earlier this year. Bulgaria and Romania are its testing grounds.

The two Black Sea nations, in hosting the Joint Task Force – East and the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, are the preeminent “forward operating bases” for the war in South Asia and are poised to play a similar role in conflicts that may erupt in the Black Sea area, the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf.

It was reported that as part of the August-October joint military exercises “Soldiers of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment based in Vilseck, Germany, have been training for the past three months in Romania and Bulgaria as part of their preparations for an upcoming deployment to Afghanistan this spring.

“U.S. Soldiers offloaded 30 Stryker combat vehicles in early August at the Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield in eastern Romania and have since been conducting combined training with their host-nation counterparts.

“Soldiers from the 2nd SCR have been rotating every three weeks to Romania and Bulgaria since the second week of August and will continue through the end of October.” [32]

At the aforementioned Novo Selo Training Area in Bulgaria, “Bulgarian Land Forces and U.S. Army troops demonstrated their interoperability and combat skills Oct. 8 during distinguished visitors’ day here. The training exhibition consisted of both militaries engaging an enemy where the coalition neutralized the opposing force.

“Units of both countries deployed...to enhance their troops’ individual combat skills and improve their coalition cooperation.

“Joint Task Force-East, a combined partnership effort of leaders, special staff and logistics support, facilitates select units rotating through training cycles. The JTF-E exercises consist of tactical field and simulation training including, but not limited to: squad- to company-level size attacks; assault rifle, mortar and rocket-propelled grenade live fire; Stryker and BMP-1 armored infantry carrier vehicle movements and combat lifesaver training.” [33]

An American newspaper account of one of the joint exercises added, “Soldiers from all three countries trained together in individual and company-level movements as well as with armored vehicles, a variety of weapons and combat lifesaving skills. They also practiced the coordination needed to go into and clear a hostile urban area.” [34]

A Bulgarian news story mentioned: “The joint Bulgaria-US military exercise at the Novo Selo ground is part of a three-week long practice to include reconnaissance and target shooting.

“Bulgarian and US soldiers on Thursday conducted a joint drill of fighting the enemy in an urban setting at the Novo Selo training ground.

“[The] drill involved combat tactics used in Afghanistan.” [35]

A Bulgarian news site reported in early October that “High ranking officers from both armies are taking part Thursday [October 8] in the Novo Selo VIP Day and are observing tactical demonstrations of the US and Bulgarian land forces, Black Hawk helicopters, Stryker armored vehicles and Bulgarian armored equipment.” [36]

On the day of Joseph Biden’s stay in the country Romania announced that it had signed an Access Agreement with the Pentagon: “According to a release of the Ministry of National Defense, under this Agreement Romania gives U.S. forces access for use of the facilities approved under Law 268/2006, Annex A, often referred to in foreign and Romanian media as ‘American military bases,’ and not as ‘facilities made available to U.S. forces.’”

Attending the discussions on the agreement “on behalf of the United States were representatives of U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) Major Command, the U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAF) and the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest...” [37]

On the same day an international conference on NATO and the New Strategic Concept was held in the Romanian capital. A report of the event stated “Romania wishes the reaffirmation of Article 5 from the North-Atlantic Pact. Another field in which the Romanian side seems to be interested in is energy security.”

One of the hosts of the event said, “Romania is one of the [active] states of the energy



security component. For the time being NATO has accepted it and introduced in its final documents specific operations directed to the protection of critical infrastructure on land and water. Currently, some formulas are being planned including other elements of energy security strategy NATO should assume.” [38]

While meeting with Biden the day before, Romania’s President Traian Basescu sounded the same note: “The liquid gas terminal in Constanta is still a common project of Romania and the US, as is the Constanta-Trieste oil pipeline.” [39]

On the eastern end of the Black Sea, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Alexander Vershbow – former American ambassador to NATO and to Russia – was in Georgia earlier this week to discuss “modernization of defense systems, participation of the Georgian military contingent in Afghan peace operations, security in the region and other urgent issues.” [40]

While in the nation Vershbow stated “Georgia’s forward movement towards NATO is very important for us and we are ready to develop a special program to achieve this goal.” [41]

Frequent comments of a similar tenor by the Pentagon official led a Russian new source to recount that “He said the US administration is helping Georgia to build armed forces that would meet the requirements of the day and would be capable of cooperating with NATO.

“Washington has been doing its utmost to this effect. Hundreds of US experts, including marines, are currently in Georgia training Georgian soldiers who are to join the US-led contingent in Afghanistan on President Saakashvili’s orders. A total of 700 Georgian servicemen are expected to be moved to Afghanistan by early next year at a time when coalition losses grow by the day....It looks like President Saakashvili is prepared to go any lengths, up to sacrificing young lives, to please Washington and get into NATO.” [42]

Four days after Vershbow’s departure, on October 24 U.S. Marines in Georgia kicked off a two-week joint military exercise, the latest one to be code-named Immediate Response, which the American embassy in Tbilisi described as “specifically designed to enhance Georgia’s ability to conduct joint counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan together with US forces.”

Immediate Response 2008, which included the largest-ever deployment of U.S. armed forces to Georgia, concluded on September 4, three days before the U.S.-trained Georgian army bombarded and invaded South Ossetia, triggering a war with Russia. Many of the U.S. troops and much of their military equipment stayed behind after the war games.

The current Immediate Response drills are providing Washington’s proxy army with training for aggression against South Ossetia and Abkhazia – and another armed conflict with Russia – as well as for war in Afghanistan.

The true war theater begins in the Balkans and the Black Sea region and stretches along the Russian to the Chinese border. Bulgaria and Romania are key links in that chain.

## Notes

- 1) New York Times, October 23, 2009
- 2) Los Angeles Times, October 24, 2009
- 3) Ibid

- 4) NATO, October 22, 2009
- 5) <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>
- 6) Bloomberg News, October 19, 2009
- 7) U.S. State Department, March 16, 2009
- 8) Interfax, October 17, 2009
- 9) Boston Globe, October 22, 2009
- 10) New Europe [Belgium], Week of June 2, 2007
- 11) Standart News, December 7, 2007
- 12) Stars and Stripes, October 17, 2009
- 13) Ibid
- 14) Ibid
- 15) Focus News Agency, October 19, 2009
- 16) Sofia News Agency, October 8, 2009
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- 19) Partnership for Peace Information Management System, October 23, 2009
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- 22) Nine O'Clock News, October 23, 2009
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- 25) Deutsche Welle, October 22, 2009
- 26) Associated Press, October 23, 2009
- 27) Black Sea: Pentagon's Gateway To Three Continents And The Middle East, Stop NATO, February 21, 2009  
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- 28) Pravda, October 23, 2009
- 29) Standart News, June 6, 2007
- 30) Sofia News Agency, October 6, 2007
- 31) Sofia Echo, November 17, 2006
- 32) United States European Command, October 22, 2009
- 33) United States European Command, October 13, 2009
- 34) Battle Creek Enquirer, October 22, 2009
- 35) Sofia News Agency, September 17, 2009
- 36) Sofia News Agency, October 8, 2009
- 37) Financiarul, October 24, 2009
- 38) Financiarul, October 24, 2009
- 39) Nine O'Clock News, October 23, 2009
- 40) Trend News Agency, October 19, 2009
- 41) Trend News Agency, October 20, 2009
- 42) Voice of Russia, October 16, 2009

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