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Russia, Iran, Syria Ministers To Discuss Military Cooperation

RFE/RL, June 9, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-syria-iran-defense-ministers/27788365.html>

The defense ministers from Russia, Iran, and Syria are due to meet in Tehran on June 9 for talks on the Syrian conflict.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the ministers -- Sergei Shoigu, Hossein Dehghan, and Fahd Jassem al-Freij -- will discuss ways to enhance their cooperation in fighting the Islamic State (IS) extremist group and the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front.

Moscow and Tehran are Damascus's main international backers, providing the regime with military and financial support.

Russia launched its bombing campaign in Syria in September, significantly improving the position of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Russian forces are now backing a push by government troops to capture IS-held territory in the Euphrates Valley.

Moscow has also pledged to step up its air strikes in and around the northern city of Aleppo, accusing rebel forces of failing to deliver on a February cease-fire pledge to break ranks with Al-Nusra.

Russia to Pay to \$83M to Israeli Pensioners in 2017

Moscow Times, June 8, 2016

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/news/article/russia-to-pay-to-83m-to-israeli-pensioners-in-2017/571479.html>

Russia is to pay 5.4 billion rubles (\$83 million) in pensions to former Soviet Union citizens now living in Israel in 2017, the Labour Ministry announced in a statement Thursday.

The new policy follows a social security agreement signed during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's latest visit to Moscow, which began on June 6.

The agreement, which comes into force in 2017, will give former residents of the Soviet Union the right to receive payments from Russian government if they moved to Israel before 1992.

Payments will be made to roughly 100,000 people, including pensioners, disabled people, and other at-risk groups, the Labour Ministry document said.

The announcement was followed by a wave of comments on the social media. Many Russians referred to a recent statement by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who told a Crimean woman in May 2016 that there was "just no money" to increase pensions, and to "hang on in there."

Following Moscow, a Jewish Quarter to appear in Kaliningrad

Interfax, June 3, 2016

<http://www.interfax.ru/russia/511625>

Kaliningrad will become the second city in Russia after Moscow where the so-called Jewish Quarter appears, the president of the country's Federation of Jewish Communities Alexander Boroda said on Friday, quoted by his press office.

“Up to this day, we saw a kind of a Jewish Quarter only in Moscow, in the vicinity of Marina Roscha where there is a vast complex of buildings of the Jewish community. We are going to create something similar by organization and infrastructure in Kaliningrad,” said Boroda.

He explained that historically this approach is not something innovative: the Jews traditionally settled near the synagogues, and the objects of Jewish infrastructure – schools and kosher shops – always located next to the synagogues.

It is expected that the synagogue will be opened in Kaliningrad in 2017. The building will be designed for two thousand people. According to the authors of the project, the facade will be copied from the synagogue of Königsberg, built before the WWII.

Thousands of items belonging to Auschwitz victims newly uncovered

JTA, June 7, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/06/07/news-opinion/world/thousands-of-items-belonging-to-auschwitz-victims-newly-uncovered>

The Auschwitz Museum says it has rescued from storage 16,000 personal items belonging to Jews killed at the Nazi death camp.

Museum officials said Tuesday that Poland's former Communist government stored the items — including empty medicine bottles, shoes, jewelry and watches — and then neglected them, Agence France Press reported.

“In most cases, these are the last personal belongings of the Jews led to death in the gas chambers upon selection at the ramp,” the museum said in a statement.

The items were first discovered in 1967 in the ruins of the camp's crematorium and gas chamber, then stored — and almost forgotten — in cardboard boxes in a building at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

The museum, which had 1.72 million visitors last year, recently searched for and found the boxes.

“I can only try to imagine why the lost objects were deposited in these boxes just after digging up. ...

Presumably, they were supposed to be analyzed and studied,” the museum's director, Piotr Cywinski, said in the statement.

But “a few months later, there was a political turnabout in 1968 and the communist authority took a clearly anti-Semitic course,” he added.

“Perhaps that is why they did not hurry with the implementation and closure of this project. The times then were difficult for topics related to the Holocaust.”

In a separate development last month, the museum found a gold ring hidden in a false bottom of one of the cups on display in the main exhibition.

One million European Jews and more than 100,000 others died at Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945.

Cemeteries initiative has preserved 70 Eastern European graveyards

JTA, June 9, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/06/08/news-opinion/world/cemeteries-initiative-has-preserved-70-eastern-european-graveyards>

A German-funded pilot program for protecting Eastern European Jewish cemeteries has helped preserve at least 70 graveyards since 2015, the effort's initiators told Council of Europe delegates.

The briefing Wednesday in Strasbourg about the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative, or ESJF, came two years after its inception with an initial budget of \$1.35 million, Yossi Beilin, a former justice minister of Israel and a member of ESJF's advisory board, told JTA.

The briefing at the Council of Europe, a body of 47 member states that aims to encourage pan-European cooperation and dialogue, was partly intended to help "find more resources for the next steps" and make ESJF into a permanently functioning body with core funding, Beilin said.

The initiative has restored cemeteries in Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Serbia and Moldova, Beilin said.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: French Senate Urges Lifting Sanctions Against Kremlin In Sign Of Crumbling EU

By Lydia Tomkiw
International Business Times, June 9, 2016

<http://www.ibtimes.com/russia-ukraine-conflict-french-senate-urges-lifting-sanctions-against-kremlin-sign-2380039>

In another sign of crumbling European resolve over Ukraine, the French Senate voted Wednesday to urge its government to gradually dismantle economic sanctions on Russia, a move welcomed by the Kremlin. The vote came as politicians across the European Union have hinted at wanting to reduce sanctions ahead of renewal talks this month.

Passed by a 302-16 vote, the French Senate's resolution calls for "gradually and partially" lifting sanctions, the Associated Press reported. German officials have also made statements in recent weeks indicating their backing of gradually lifting sanctions as long as progress is shown toward implementing the Minsk peace agreements.

"I consider this decision to be positive," Sergey Naryshkin, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, told the state news agency Tass Thursday. "The resolution is advisory, but the government cannot ignore [the] parliamentarians' opinion, the more so since France is a state governed by the rule of law. In a law-governed country, it is impossible to defy the opinion of lawmakers."

The 28-member European Union and the U.S. imposed sanctions on Russia after what they considered its illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. They extended the sanctions after the beginning of a civil war in eastern Ukraine the following month. The ongoing conflict has left more than 9,300 people dead, about 21,000 wounded and over 1.4 million displaced, the United Nations reported.

Hundreds Protest Naming St. Petersburg Bridge After Chechen Leader

RFE/RL, June 7, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/content/hundreds-protests-naming-st-petersburg-bridge-after-chechen-leader-kadyrov/27783593.html>

Several hundred demonstrators in St. Petersburg have protested against a proposal to name a new bridge after the late Chechen President Akhmad-hadzhi Kadyrov.

Protesters in the city center on June 6 complained that Kadyrov had no connection to Russia's second-largest city.

Kadyrov, father of Chechnya's current Kremlin-backed strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, died in a bomb attack in 2004. Human rights groups have alleged that both leaders' terms in office were marked by torture, abductions, and extrajudicial executions.

The committee that suggests names for St. Petersburg's public places last month proposed the bridge be named for the elder Kadyrov. An online petition against the proposal has gathered some 70,000 signatures.

Ilya Yashin, a prominent opposition leader, said the proposal brings "shame" not only to St. Petersburg but to all of Russia.

U.S. Sends Envoy To Urge Europe To Maintain Russian Sanctions

RFE/RL, June 4, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/content/us-treasury-sends-szubin-europe-urge-maintain-russian-sanctions-iran-nuclear-deal-implementation/27778918.html>

The United States is dispatching an envoy to Paris and Berlin on June 7 and 8 to try to convince European allies "of the importance of maintaining sanctions pressure on Russia," the U.S. Treasury said on June 3.

The Treasury's Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Adam J. Szubin will meet with senior government officials from European foreign, financial, and economic ministries, as well as private European banks and financial institutions.

Besides urging allies to keep sanctions on Moscow until its "fulfills the provisions of the Minsk Agreements" outlining a path to peace in Ukraine, Szubin will discuss implementation of the Iran nuclear deal and "continued U.S. efforts to combat Iran's support for terrorism and other destabilizing activity," the Treasury said.

A NAFTA-like deal for Israel and Ukraine?

Ukraine Today, June 9, 2016

<http://uatoday.tv/business/a-nafta-like-deal-for-israel-and-ukraine-669891.html>

Israel opens yet another door to Ukraine. After Tel-Aviv established a visa-free regime with Kyiv, Israel became the frontrunner in providing rehabilitation to Ukrainian soldiers injured during the war in the east. This week, Israel and Ukraine added one more agreement of mutual cooperation. Both sides reached a consensus on the partial labour market liberalisation. Under the terms of the deal, Ukrainian construction workers will soon be able to work legally in Israel. They will be given all the choices provided to local specialists, including social benefits from the government and medical insurance.

The applicant selection process will be conducted by both Ukraine and Israel. Thus far the two countries have agreed upon a quota equaling to about a few thousand people. Although the agreement still has to formally be ratified by the Ukrainian Parliament, officials are already contemplating developing the deal further.

"We are starting with the construction worker field, but I hope, in the future we will sign a few more protocols, which will cover other fields as well," Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Pavlo Klimkin said during the signing ceremony on June 7, 2016, according to UNIAN news agency.

Full liberalization of Israel's labour market is quite an ambitious goal for Ukraine. However, there are plenty of examples of this practice working well in other countries. Similar agreements have existed in the West for years. For instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which also includes labour market integration. It was signed by Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. in 1994 and has been active since then. Deals like this allow the participants to reach their main goal – import human resources, needed in their countries.

"We decided to start with a field, where Israel experiences a lack of workers. At the first stage, we have four occupations, where we are interested in attracting Ukrainian specialists," Israel's ambassador to Ukraine Eliav Belotserkovsky said at the ceremony.

But Israel is not the only beneficiary here. By signing this agreement, Ukraine is effectively advancing to improve its unemployment rate. According to the latest statistics, there were approximately 500,000 unemployed citizens in 2015 (1.9% of the able-to-work population). So if a country can't find jobs for its people within its borders, why not look outside? And since foreign employment is temporary, the workers are bound to return to Ukraine with newly-gained Israeli experience.

Free-trade agreement is a key part of NAFTA, and Tel-Aviv and Kyiv are well on their way towards the implementation of a similar deal. In December 2015, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressing this very topic.

"We have agreed to significantly speed up the signing procedure of the free trade zone agreement. It should happen in the first half of 2016," Poroshenko said after emerging from the meeting, according to Jerusalem Post. He also stated he would like to see a billion dollars of trade each year, as opposed to USD 400 mln in trade between the two countries in 2014.

So far Kyiv and Tel-Aviv haven't advanced past the negotiations of the free trade implementation and the initial terms have shifted. According to Ambassador Belotserkovsky, the third round of consultations is set to take place in July.

"Our relations are developing well, and I hope that the free trade agreement will come into force this year," Pavlo Klimkin said on June 7.

These recent statements seem to indicate that disagreements between the two countries regarding sanctions against Russia are not that much of a problem. In 2015 Israel said it would not support the economic restrictions against Russia. And while Tel-Aviv fully recognizes Crimea as a part of Ukraine and even recommends its citizens not to have any business on the Russian-occupied peninsula, it doesn't want to break its good relations with Moscow.

"We have our own policy regarding Russia. We hope the Donbas conflict resolution will be peaceful, and at this stage we don't think that joining the sanctions will help reach this cause," Belotserkovsky said in an interview with Ukrainian media outlet Focus in 2015.

So now it is up to Ukraine and Israel to work out a delicate situation. They have managed to find common ground so far, and the relations between Israel and Ukraine can only improve in the future. Because according

to Belotserkovsky, "Ukraine is not just another country for Israel. Ukraine is one of our most important partners in this region."

Georgian and Ukrainian officials push for NATO membership

AP, June 9, 2016

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/09/georgian-and-ukrainian-officials-push-for-nato-membership/>

Senior officials from Georgia and Ukraine on Wednesday exhorted Nato members to bring the two nations into the alliance in order to protect them from Russia and cement ties with the West.

Georgia, a small post-Soviet nation in the South Caucasus intensified efforts to join the Western military alliance after it lost control of two breakaway provinces in a 2008 war with Russia.

Ukraine's pro-Western leaders are also pushing for membership after Russia annexed its Crimean peninsula and supported pro-Russian insurgents in a two-year separatist conflict in the east of the country. Russia vehemently opposes both bids as a threat to its security.

Speaking several weeks ahead of a key Nato summit in Warsaw where the alliance will evaluate the two countries' membership prospects, Georgian defence minister Tina Khidasheli said that the United States has a strong interest in helping Georgia join Nato as a way of deterring Russia.

"You need Georgia even more than we need membership in Nato today," Ms Khidasheli said at the Atlantic Council, a think tank. "Why? Because Georgia is an opportunity for you to prove to (the) Russians that they do not have veto power, that they do not guide your policies, they do not make decisions instead of you."

Hanna Hopko, head of the foreign affairs committee in the Ukrainian parliament said that Nato membership would bring security guarantees to her war-scarred country that has already lost more than 9,300 people in the conflict.

"I ask you to think carefully about the real strategy (of) how to protect Ukrainian society from Russian aggression," Hopko said.

The statements came two days after Nato launched its biggest ever joint exercises in Poland amid strong concerns about Russia among eastern European nations.

Created after World War Two to counter the Soviet Union, Nato has absorbed 12 former Communist nations since the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union, strongly irritating Moscow, which says that Nato troops on its eastern borders threaten Russian security.

Putin backs 'just' solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By Raphael Ahren

Times of Israel, June 7, 2016

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-ties-of-great-importance-says-putin-as-he-meets-netanyahu/>

Meeting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday expressed support for a "comprehensive and just" solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Netanyahu, Putin backed the two-state solution and Israel's counter-terrorism efforts.

“We will be partners in the struggle against terrorism,” he said.

Before the press conference, Putin surprised Netanyahu with a private tour of the Kremlin and explained the history of the halls, pointing out some biblical imagery displayed on its walls, a statement from Netanyahu’s office said.

The two leaders later marked 25 years of diplomatic ties at the Bolshoi Theater, where Netanyahu said: “In another 25 years, when they look back, they will remember this evening as a turning point in our ties.”

The president noted the Russian roots of many Israeli artists and writers, and quoted Israeli author Amos Oz on the deep cultural relationship between the two countries.

Earlier, Putin hailed the increasingly cordial ties between the two countries.

“We place great importance on our relationship with Israel,” Putin said, at the beginning of their meeting in the Kremlin, noting that many Russian-speakers live in Israel. More than a million Jews and their relatives from the former Soviet Union moved to Israel when the Iron Curtain fell and travel restrictions were relaxed.

Netanyahu, speaking in Hebrew translated into Russian by Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze’ev Elkin, said he wanted to reinforce Putin’s point and highlighted the fact that two ministers in his government are Russian-speakers. He was apparently referring to Elkin and newly sworn-in Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, and apparently forgot his new immigrant absorption minister, Sofa Landver.

The two leaders then moved to continue their discussion behind closed doors, and were to emerge later for a joint press conference.

Netanyahu headed to Moscow on Monday for a two-day trip during which he was holding his fourth meeting with Putin in less than a year. The two leaders are expected to discuss Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian civil war and its reported delivery of advanced Russian weaponry to Iran.

During their meeting, the two leaders were to continue their ongoing discussion over security coordination between the Russian and the Israeli armies, especially their so-called deconflicting mechanism installed to assure the Israel Defense Forces does not strike Russian jets operating in Syrian airspace.

“They will also discuss various regional issues including the global fight against terrorism, the situation in and around Syria and the diplomatic horizon between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as bilateral economic and trade cooperation and the strengthening of cultural and humanitarian ties,” the Prime Minister’s Office said Sunday in a statement.

During Netanyahu’s visit, Jerusalem and Moscow were also to sign a bilateral pensions agreement, which seeks to “correct a historic injustice regarding emigres from the former USSR up to 1992 who lost their eligibility for a Russian pension,” the PMO said.

The agreement, which will only take effect after Russian authorities ratify it, was to be signed by Elkin and Russian Labor and Social Protection Minister Maxim Topilin. Payments to Soviet-born Israelis are expected to commence next year.

Netanyahu and his wife, Sara — who routinely accompanies the prime minister on his foreign trips — were also to visit the armored corps museum in Moscow, which is host to an IDF Magach-3 tank captured during the Battle of Sultan Yacoub in the 1982 Lebanon War. Last month, Israel announced that Putin had agreed to return the tank to Israel.

Netanyahu visited the Russian capital in September 2015 and in April 2016. In addition, the two briefly got together last November on the sidelines of the Paris climate conference. In comparison, in the same time frame, Netanyahu has only met twice with US President Barack Obama.

Netanyahu told Putin — during their last powwow in April — about Israel's "clear red lines" for purposes of self-defense. "First," he said, "we are working to the best of our ability to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry from Iran and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Second, we are working to prevent the establishment of an additional terror front against us on the Golan Heights. These are red lines and we will continue to maintain them."

During the current trip, Netanyahu was also to meet with several local Jewish leaders, including Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar; Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt; and Russian Jewish Congress President Yuri Kanner.

Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel, who also accompanied Netanyahu to Moscow, was scheduled to sign a memorandum of understanding with his Russian counterpart, Alexander Tkachev, on cooperation in agriculture, the dairy industry and advanced dairy technology.

Netanyahu: US-not Moscow-cornerstone of our foreign relations

By Tavah Lazaroff

Jerusalem Post, June 8, 2016

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Netanyahu-US-not-Moscow-cornerstone-of-our-foreign-relations-456285>

The US remains Israel's chief ally and cannot be replaced by Russia, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday before flying home after a two-day visit to Moscow.

"It is not desirable or practical to replace the United States [with Russia]. The US is the cornerstone of our foreign relations," Netanyahu told reporters.

He had visited Moscow for the third time this year, and had held his fourth face-to-face meeting with President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday.

Although the trip was a celebration of 25 years of diplomatic ties, it fueled speculation that Israel is seeking to grow closer to Moscow and to distance itself from Washington, particularly in light of Netanyahu's contentious relationship with President Barack Obama, with whom he has met only once in the past year.

But Netanyahu said that the idea that his frequent trips to Russia were part of a plan to replace Washington with Moscow is "nonsense."

"I'm not looking for an alternative. We have a firm relationship with the US," Netanyahu said, describing it as "steadfast and unwavering."

Israel wants strong ties with as many countries as possible, the prime minister said.

Regional issues have demanded coordination with Russia and this particular meeting took place to mark 25 years of diplomatic relations.

On a separate note he added that he expects a deal to be reached soon with Turkey for the full restoration of diplomatic ties after almost six years.

As Netanyahu readied to leave, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov issued a statement which appeared to imply that Netanyahu had accepted the 2002 Arab Peace Plan, something which Netanyahu's office immediately denied.

"During Mr Putin's talks with Mr Netanyahu yesterday, Israel made no demands to make amendments to the Arab Peace Initiative," Lavrov said in a statement on Twitter.

This was based on statements Lavrov made during a joint press conference with Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riad Malki.

The Arab Peace Plan, also known as the Saudi Initiative, offers Israel normalized relations with the Arab world in exchange for a withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and a resolution on the Palestinian refugee issue.

The Prime Minister's Office said that the issue of the Arab Peace Initiative was not raised during his talks with Putin and that the prime minister has been clear in the past about the fact that the 2002 plan needs to be revised to account for regional changes.

In the last month, to counter French moves to impose on Israel a resolution concerning its conflict with the Palestinians, Netanyahu has spoken publicly of the need for a regional peace process based on a revised version of the Arab Peace Plan.

It is presumed that among the items Netanyahu would want revised is the issue of a two-state solution on the pre- 1967 lines, something he has persistently opposed.

Israel considers a withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines to be suicidal from a security perspective.

The Arab League, which has endorsed the 2002 plan, has already rejected Netanyahu's call for a revision, as have the Palestinians. Both have insisted that the offer of normalized ties rests on Israel's acceptance of the original Arab Peace Plan.

On Wednesday Russia also rejected Netanyahu's drive to revise the plan. Russia plays a critical role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process because it is a member of the Quartet and holds one of five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council.

Lavrov told reporters that the Arab Peace Plan "is integral and embraces the entire set of relations between Israel and the Arab countries, including Palestine of course. There is no need to amend it."

According to a translation of his words by the TASS News Agency, Lavrov said that the initial plan was already universally accepted.

"Saudi Arabia was the first to forward the initiative, which was later joined by the League of Arab States (LAS) and the entire Organization of Islamic Cooperation," Lavrov said according to TASS.

He explained that the next step necessary to move the process forward was a much touted report, analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an attempt to help renew negotiations that have been frozen for the last two years.

"Together with partners in the Quartet we are preparing now a report with the respective recommendations. We expect that this report will become an important contribution toward efforts on reviving the peace process," Lavrov said according to TASS.

But the report which was supposed to be released last month has been delayed due to disagreements about Quartet members, primarily the United States, about its language.

The report "is designed to confirm and update the international legal framework for the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. We hope that our partners in the Quartet will try to finish the work on this report, especially the recommendations contained in it, as soon as possible," Lavrov said according to TASS.

He added that he hoped that moving forward, the Quartet would have a larger role in any future peace process.

Malki visited Moscow just as Netanyahu was wrapping up his visit.

Netanyahu's last visit was in April. PA President Mahmoud Abbas also visited that month, during which time he met with Putin.

On Thursday, Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh will be in Moscow to meet with Lavrov.

Earlier in the day, when meeting with Moscow's Jewish community, Netanyahu spoke about Syria and said he was doubtful that Syrian President Bashar Assad will continue to rule Syria in the future.

He clarified that Israel is not involved in any attempts to unseat Assad and that it is involved in the Syrian conflict only to the extent that is necessary to protect Israeli interests.

This is particularly true with regard to Iran which already operates in Syria.

"We want to ensure that Syria does not become a launching ground for attacks against Israel, not by Syrian forces, not by Iranian forces, not by Hezbollah and not by Islamic forces.

"My policy is to take all steps necessary to prevent this," he said.

"We are standing by our redlines with respect to Israel's security," he said.

Once the Syrian conflict has ended it is unlikely that the country will look the same as it did before the outbreak of its civil war, he said.

"I do not know if we can put the Syrian omelet back in the egg," Netanyahu said.

Syria is not the only country in this situation, he said. Iraq, Libya and Yemen no longer exist the way they used to, so a new order will be needed.

Netanyahu told the Jewish community he has discussed at length this new order with President Vladimir Putin when the two met.

"Its important that they [the former regimes] are replaced in a way that does not generate future tragedies or endanger our state," he said.

Israel has launched dozens of strikes in Syria in April against suspected arms transfers to Lebanon's Hezbollah terrorists.

Israeli leaders have sought assurances from Russia, which sent forces to Syria last year to help Assad, that it would not allow Iran and Hezbollah to be bolstered by the partial military withdrawal that Moscow announced

last month. Israel and Russia have maintained a hotline to prevent any accidental clash between their aircrafts over Syrian territory.

Nuland: Russia Feeling 'Pain' Of U.S. Sanctions

By Mike Eckel

RFE/RL, June 8, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/27785575.html>

A top U.S. official says economic sanctions continue to be the most powerful leverage Washington has over Russia, and that those measures have thwarted potential Russian efforts to seize larger swaths of Ukrainian territory, including the capital.

Victoria Nuland, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, also told lawmakers on June 7 that Moscow remained in violation or "out of compliance with" some major arms-control treaties, including the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, known as the INF.

Coming just weeks before an important NATO summit in Warsaw, Nuland's comments before a Senate committee gave some indication of what that summit's agenda will include, with Russian military maneuvers in Eastern Europe and the Middle East likely to take center stage.

That summit will be preceded by a meeting of European Union leaders in Brussels, where officials are expected to renew sanctions against Russia that were imposed alongside analogous U.S. measures following Moscow's forcible annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014.

U.S. and European officials have linked the lifting of those sanctions -- which, together with the drop in world oil prices, have pummeled the Russian economy -- to the implementation of the Minsk cease-fire accords aimed at resolving the conflict between Russia-backed separatists and Kyiv's forces in eastern Ukraine.

"I think the largest piece of leverage that we have on Russia is the sustainment over two years of deep and comprehensive sanctions across the U.S. and the EU countries," Nuland told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"So again this is why we are advocating -- because Minsk is not being implemented -- that the sanctions have to be rolled over again," she added.

Pressed by Senator Marco Rubio (Republican-Florida) about the effectiveness of the sanctions, Nuland insisted that they have impacted Russian policy.

"We have deterred further land grabs in Ukraine, and that was a real risk when we first started with sanctions -- that they would try to run all the way to Kyiv and Kharkiv," she said. "I will tell you now that the Russians are now openly talking about the pain of sanctions, including when we work with them on the Minsk thing. So they know what it's going to take to get these sanctions rolled back."

Michael Carpenter, a top Russia official from the Defense Department who also testified before the committee, warned that Russia was adding more weaponry and military capability to the Black Sea peninsula in an effort to prevent the United States or its allies from operating in the region.

Both Nuland and Carpenter were also pressed by senators on Russian compliance with the INF treaty, as well as with the 2002 Open Skies agreements.

The State Department has charged that Russia is building a ground-launched cruise missile that violates the INF. Moscow has consistently denied those allegations and asserted that a U.S. missile defense system for Eastern Europe violates the treaty.

On the Open Skies treaty, which allows treaty members to conduct aerial inspections of one another's territory to review military facilities and troop positioning, Russia is seeking to conduct a U.S. flight using new high-tech cameras and surveillance equipment.

But some senators and Defense Department officials worry the overflight will reveal too much to the Russians. Moreover, the State Department has alleged Russia is improperly restricting U.S. flights over strategic regions in the Caucasus and over the Baltic Sea exclave of Kaliningrad.

Both Nuland and Carpenter defended the treaty and its procedures for permitting overflights, and noted that a U.S. refusal to allow the requested Russian flight would potentially hurt future U.S. flights.

Nuland also touched on the Kremlin's longstanding accusation that NATO's eastward expansion in the 1990s is to blame for the current tensions in Europe, saying Moscow failed to take advantage of Western offers for greater collaboration.

An article published recently in a Harvard University academic journal, and an accompanying op-ed in the Los Angeles Times, argued that NATO and the United States violated assurances given in the waning days of the Soviet Union that the alliance would not seek to absorb former Warsaw Pact members.

"I completely reject this narrative of grievance that it's somehow our fault," she said.

"I frankly think that Russia did not take advantage of the opportunity that NATO put before it for cooperation," Nuland added. "We really could have gotten to a place with a different attitude in the Kremlin."

Civil Society Gives Ukraine's New Prime Minister Positive Marks

By Josh Cohen

Atlantic Council, June 7, 2016

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/civil-society-gives-ukraine-s-new-prime-minister-positive-marks>

During almost eight weeks in office, Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groisman has inspired largely negative reactions from Western analysts. Noting Groisman's close relationship with President Petro Poroshenko, observers fret the young prime minister will merely function as a yes-man. His appointment was variously described as "same old, same old," "not the best choice," and an indication that the new government "is likely to be less reformist and competent."

While there are legitimate reasons to question the wisdom of Groisman's appointment, one important group does not share that pessimism: civil society activists with the greatest stake in the success of Ukraine's reforms.

"While there have been some questions about Groisman from the international community, based on his previous history the possibility for him to push reforms forward is very real, so overall we are cautiously optimistic," said Olena Halushka, international relations manager at the Reanimation Package of Reforms, on June 6.

According to Inna Borzylo, chief executive officer of the nongovernmental organization Centre UA, less than a week after his appointment, Groisman initiated a meeting with twenty civil society experts to discuss his plans for reforms.

“He clearly understands both the political risks and opportunities of becoming prime minister, and that failure would be a major setback,” said Borzylo.

Groisman’s initial actions provide some support for civil society’s optimistic outlook. Even before he was officially nominated, he fought to appoint a number of allies to cabinet posts, providing an initial sign of independence. In terms of transparency, Borzylo notes Groisman already created a new working model for both ministries and the prime minister’s office mandating regular cooperation with experts and activists.

As prime minister, he moved quickly with two major economic reforms. On April 27, Groisman’s cabinet approved the unification of natural gas prices into a single market for both retail consumers and businesses. Assuming parliament approves the cabinet’s resolution, it provides relief for a national budget burdened by consumer gas subsidies, an incentive for consumers to use energy more efficiently, the potential for an improved balance of trade, and a reduction in Russian gas imports. And perhaps most important, a single gas market ends shadowy intermediaries’ corrupt schemes.

More recently, Groisman’s cabinet approved the privatization of Odesa Portside Plant after years of delay. This would be the third largest privatization in Ukraine’s history, and in a positive move, Groisman announced that the government aimed to maximize the number of bidders for the plant, reducing the possibility of backroom deals. This is the first major privatization since Poroshenko’s election, and if followed by other major sales, it could play a significant role in jump-starting Ukraine’s economy, while also eliminating the corrupt bonds between oligarchs and state-owned companies. However, the IMF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development told Groisman that the sale of the plant fell short of international standards and might deter international investors.

Some observers argue that pressure from the international community, not the Ukrainian government, is the impetus behind the reform drive now.

Groisman’s pragmatism is another factor in his favor. He understands that a closely split Rada will make it difficult for the government to pass significant new legislation. Groisman told activists he would focus instead on implementing existing laws through government regulations and more efficient governance.

This strategy plays to Groisman’s strengths as a doer. He was a successful mayor of Vinnytsia, where he concentrated on the nuts and bolts of governing: developing the city’s infrastructure, repairing roads and parks, setting up new public transportation, and attracting Swiss investment (approximately 170 million hryvnias) to modernize the city’s heating system. Borzylo also argues that as speaker of parliament, Groisman was an effective manager, while remaining open to advice from civil society.

Activists remain cautiously optimistic regarding Groisman, but the new prime minister will ultimately be judged on results—and they have a long list of reforms they want him to push forward.

On the economic front, RPR wants large-scale state enterprise sales accelerated beyond Odesa Portside Plant to include at least three additional major privatizations by the end of the year. To promote foreign investment, meanwhile, activists want the Groisman government to introduce a “regulatory guillotine” that focuses on such items as simplifying foreign exchange regulations, while also making it easier for foreign investors to obtain value-added tax refunds.

Experts also stress the need to implement Ukraine’s revolutionary new civil service law at the central government level. RPR hopes this will result in the formation of a new Committee on Senior Civil Servants, as

well as the appointment of state secretaries to ministries and the Cabinet to better manage the flow of paperwork and ensure continuity. On the personnel front, meanwhile, experts hope Groisman implements the portion of the civil service law calling for salary increases for government employees, in order to reduce the temptation for graft.

Civil society also wants the prime minister to continue devolving more fiscal power to the local level. Last year saw increased fiscal decentralization, resulting in greater local budgetary revenues. To start with, RPR wants the cabinet to quickly adopt a resolution to use the one billion hryvnia already allocated by parliament to support local community infrastructure.

To eliminate the possibility of graft, regional projects funded by the central government need to be awarded on a competitive basis by introducing project scoring on individual performance indicators. Finally, to ensure continued decentralization progress, activists have asked Groisman to make a senior official in each ministry responsible for implementing the decentralization agenda.

On the anti-corruption front, Groisman can provide needed political support for the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NAB) and National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (NAPC). Transparency International Ukraine recently called for NAPC to launch the new Electronic Asset Declaration System; according to Transparency International Ukraine, the Groisman government can assist by providing NAPC with the necessary IT infrastructure and funds to function.

Groisman's recently released 2016 action plan reflects many activists' priorities, and in many places goes well beyond their wish lists. The document emphasizes that Ukrainians must own the reform process, and it focuses heavily on the competent execution of existing legislation. This includes detailed matrices for each reform listing precise steps to be taken by ministries by specific deadlines over the course of the year. By providing such comprehensive information, the new government shows it has no fear of being held accountable for its performance.

It's too soon to judge Groisman's ability to drive reforms, and much could still go wrong. Certainly the split parliament will hinder things, and in certain areas—particularly Groisman's anti-corruption agenda—progress remains unlikely without strong support from others. However, given the new prime minister's promising start and civil society's initial positive assessment, the West should avoid any rush to judgment and give Groisman a chance to prove himself.

Josh Cohen is a former USAID project officer involved in managing economic reform projects in the former Soviet Union. He is a regular columnist at Reuters and also contributes to a number of foreign policy media outlets.

Ukraine Struggles to Shake Off Legacy of Corruption

By Andrew Kramer

New York Times, June 6, 2016

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/world/europe/ukraine-corruption-legacy.html>

The text message to Ukraine's minister of economy and trade was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. The sender, a stranger, wrote that he wanted to be the new deputy minister.

The minister, Aivaras Abromavicius, a former investment banker from Lithuania, had joined the government amid promises by the new Western-backed leaders to clean up the country's corrupt economy. Having no need or desire for a deputy, particularly someone he knew nothing about, Mr. Abromavicius tried to brush off the applicant.

“We don’t have the possibility to create a new position,” he wrote back.

“I think they will make one,” the man replied in another message, this one saved on the phone and released after Mr. Abromavicius resigned, in part over this exchange.

“I got this offer from the team of Petro Oleksiyovych,” the man wrote, referring to the country’s president, Petro O. Poroshenko. “Who specifically?” the minister asked.

Ihor Kononenko — a former army pal and business partner of the president — the applicant replied without hesitation.

This case of possible influence-peddling is under review by Ukraine’s National Anti-Corruption Bureau. But it is hardly the only worrying sign for a government swept into power in 2014 on a wave of popular anger at the egregious corruption of the previous president, Viktor F. Yanukovych, with promises of cleansing Ukraine of its endemic corruption and establishing a modern, Western-oriented democracy.

Ukraine’s problems are not just its own. As a plum in the new Cold War-like struggle between Russia and the West, Ukraine received a four-year, \$40 billion bailout package in 2014 from Western governments and the International Monetary Fund.

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But over the winter, with Kiev, the capital, buzzing with claims of Mr. Poroshenko’s people cutting back-room deals to control state assets, the I.M.F. quietly suspended disbursements. When the fund’s board convenes in Washington this summer, it will have to decide whether to resume the payments. To reopen the financial spigot, it must certify that the money will be used to help Ukraine overhaul its economy, rather than line the pockets of the country’s politicians and the powerful class of ultrawealthy businessmen known as the oligarchs.

The decision will revolve in great part around Mr. Poroshenko and the men around him. Alarmed Western officials, including Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., have traveled to Kiev in recent months to plead with Mr. Poroshenko to stay on track, but few close observers expect significant changes.

“They are like bad students, always saying, ‘Professor, just wait until Monday; I will do better,’” said Tymofiy S. Mylovanov, president of the Kiev School of Economics. “Nothing changed. The same elites are there. The same oligarchs.”

Mr. Poroshenko, he said, had fallen into the old habits of rule through associates and negotiations with the oligarchs. “The disappointment is very widespread,” Mr. Mylovanov said.

Mr. Poroshenko, who took the helm of a country at war and in deep recession, has asked for patience and says he is overhauling the government and the economy. He points to his formation of a capable army as the principal achievement of his tenure.

“Fighting corruption is priority No. 1,” the president’s press office said in a statement. It said that the National Anti-Corruption Bureau planned to train with the F.B.I. and that Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former Danish prime minister and NATO secretary general, was appointed on Friday as a special adviser to the president.

The post-Soviet titans of business have always held sway over state policy in Ukraine through, among other means, the figures known as the smotryaschi, or the watchers. These are loyal politicians and functionaries ostensibly working for the state but in fact keeping an eye on state assets, to ensure that their true bosses win a share of the spoils.

Despite its Western leanings, the Ukrainian government is seeded with these watchers, who hold midlevel positions in Parliament and various ministries, frustrating efforts to overhaul and clean up their practices, which would limit opportunities for payoffs.

Mykola V. Martynenko, for example, who was believed to have been the watcher for energy sector businesses, was forced in December to resign his seat in Parliament and his position as deputy head of the People's Front, the party of the former prime minister, Arseniy P. Yatsenyuk. The resignation came after it emerged that Swiss prosecutors had opened an investigation into whether Mr. Martynenko, while working in government, had helped an equipment supplier win padded contracts from the national nuclear power company Energoatom, in exchange for a \$29 million bribe.

Mr. Abromavicius resigned in February to protest what he characterized as pressure from the man widely understood to be Mr. Poroshenko's watcher, Mr. Kononenko. Mr. Abromavicius and other former officials said in interviews that executives from the president's business empire and allied politicians had quietly been tightening their grip on power this year, while technocrats like Mr. Abromavicius and the former finance minister Natalie A. Jaresko, a Ukrainian-American, have been forced out.

Ukraine's new prime minister, Volodymyr B. Groysman, appointed in April, served previously as mayor of Vinnytsya, home to a major factory of the Roshen Confectionery Corporation, the site of one of the largest candy makers in Eastern Europe and a centerpiece of Mr. Poroshenko's business.

Mr. Kononenko, for his part, is first deputy chairman of Mr. Poroshenko's political faction in Parliament, the BPP group, and was a co-owner, with the president, of a Ukrainian bank.

In 2014, state-owned companies lost about \$9.7 billion, mostly because of energy subsidies but also because of embezzlement and abuse. It was a sum covered by I.M.F. lending and American and European bilateral aid.

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In his resignation letter, Mr. Abromavicius accused Mr. Kononenko of maneuvering to control one such asset, a state-owned ammonia shipping company, Ukrkhimtransamiak.

But critics wonder whether things will ever change, at least under Mr. Poroshenko. Even the simplest and seemingly least divisive step — prosecuting those responsible for theft of state property and other corrupt acts under Mr. Yanukovich, the former president — has never materialized.

Vitaliy V. Kasko, a prominent Kiev lawyer who defended protesters pro bono during the Maidan revolution, was appointed director of the internal affairs bureau in the prosecutor's office, the General Inspectorate, with the task of sorting out why the incumbent prosecutors had shown no interest in pursuing obvious corruption cases. But soon enough, he hit a wall.

The Ukrainian authorities asked the European Union to impose sanctions on 22 Yanukovich-era officials, yet none of them have faced prosecution at home.

"There's an unstated agreement," Mr. Kasko said in an interview at Très Français, a popular lunch spot off Maidan Square, where dozens of protesters were killed in 2014. "The prosecutor will look the other way if it's in the interest of the leadership."

Revealing the criminal origins of these former officials' money, Mr. Kasko said, would inevitably also reveal and destroy lucrative corruption strategies.

“The simplest scheme is to siphon money out of a state company,” he said. “The same schemes used under Yanukovich are used today.”

Mr. Abromavicius, the minister of economy, had made a priority of cleaning up state companies — of which there are 1,824 in Ukraine, some as small as a single apartment building owned and rented out by the government. To cut down on graft, he created an electronic tender system, called ProZorro, and convened an independent panel to appoint chief executives on merit for every company.

“That is when all my problems started,” he said. He came under intense pressure from the president’s office to have Poroshenko loyalists appointed to key positions in the state companies.

Mr. Kononenko has denied wrongdoing. The applicant, Andriy P. Pasishnik, an executive at the state oil and gas company, later said he did not have the backing of Mr. Poroshenko or Mr. Kononenko, and said he was just bluffing.

“The guy, out of the blue, sends me a text saying, ‘I want to be your new deputy minister,’” Mr. Abromavicius recalled in an interview in Kiev. “I have no reason to believe what this guy said was not true.”

In Krakow, Night of the Synagogues bolsters Jewish pride

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

JTA, June 6, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/06/06/news-opinion/world/in-krakow-night-of-the-synagogues-bolsters-jewish-pride>

For the sixth year in a row, the seven synagogues in Krakow’s historic Jewish district, Kazimierz, opened their doors for 7@Nite – or the Night of the Synagogues, a one-night mini-festival aimed at bolstering Jewish pride and promoting Jewish awareness among the public.

Each synagogue – from the Gothic Old Synagogue, now a Jewish historical museum, to the ornate 19th century Tempel Synagogue, used for both services and cultural events – hosted an exhibit, concert, film or other event illustrating contemporary Jewish culture in Poland and around the world.

“The most important message is that this is an open event, carried out by Jews — for everybody,” said Karina Sokolowska, the Poland director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Organized by the JDC, the Krakow Jewish Community Center and the Krakow Jewish Religious Community, 7@Nite first took place in 2011.

Since then it has become an annual event that begins with an open-air Havdalah ceremony ending Shabbat conducted from the roof of the JCC.

From the conclusion of Havdalah – at around 10:30 p.m. Saturday — until 2:30 a.m. Sunday, thousands of people troop off to visit the synagogues, all of which are located within a few blocks of each other.

Organizers estimated that this year’s Havdalah, on Saturday, drew a record 1,400 people who crowded into the JCC courtyard.

“Go and enjoy the synagogues,” JCC Executive Director Jonathan Ornstein told them. “The Jewish heritage of Krakow does not just belong to the Jews but to all of us. As Cracovians, be proud.”

The event was advertised with posters throughout the city, and a constant flow of people moved in and out of the synagogues throughout the opening hours. The overwhelming majority were young, non-Jewish Cracovians.

With only about 20,000 Jews, Poland has experienced a public fascination with Poland's Jewish heritage, including dozens of Jewish museums and culture festivals often run by non-Jews.

Some said they had made it a point to come to Kazimierz to take part.

"It's the only day of the year that you can see all the synagogues, and I came last year and two years ago, too," said Natalia Giemza, 23, who is not Jewish but said she had taken university courses on Jewish history.

Other visitors made a quick visit to a synagogue or two part of a Saturday night out. In recent years, the Kazimierz district has become the city's liveliest center of youth-oriented nightlife, and pubs, clubs, cafes and restaurants were crowded on a warm night.

"We were just out drinking and thought, why not?" said Mateus, 22, who joined a group of friends visiting the baroque Izaak Synagogue after 1 a.m.

Built in the 17th century, the Izaak has a towering vaulted ceiling and frescoed decoration and is used for regular services. For 7@Nite it hosted an exhibit on Ethiopian Jews with a hummus and pita snack bar in its courtyard.

"I've been in other synagogues, but never the Izaak," Mateus said. One of the reasons he had wanted to visit, he said, was "to gain knowledge about our roots."

"I'm not Jewish or Catholic, but I think there is some Jewish blood in my ancestry," he said. Mateus said he did not, however, plan to join the JCC or take any other steps toward affiliation.

His friend Jakub said he was Catholic, but he and his parents "have always been interested in Jewish things."

The 7@Nite event was staffed by volunteers who managed crowds, handed out kippot to visiting men and kept head counts of visitors. Most were not Jewish and, according to the JDC's Sololowska, some had come from as far as the northwestern city of Szczecin, hundreds of miles away, to take part.

"I'm Catholic and I started volunteering at the JCC two years ago," said graduate student Anna Wilkosz, who said that by midnight well over 1,000 people had visited the Kupa synagogue. "I felt it was urgent to be involved."

Not everyone who turned out for the event, however, demonstrated a positive interest in Jewish and Judaism.

Outside the Tempel Synagogue, where young Poles danced wildly to freestyling by the American Jewish rapper Kosha Dillz, a bald man in his 30s said he was "mad at the Jews."

"I'm mad at the Jews because Jews all say that the Poles killed them in World War II, but I know history — Poles saved them," declared the man, who said he was a tour guide.

His remarks appeared to reflect a campaign in recent months by Poland's new hard-right government to absolve Poles of charges of complicity in the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust.

Much of that campaign centers on the Polish-American historian Jan Gross, the author of several books since 2000 that examine episodes during and after the Holocaust, including the murder of Jews in the village of Jedwabne, in which Poles killed their Jewish neighbors or targeted Jews with violence.

In October, soon after coming to power, the government opened a libel investigation against Gross based on an article he wrote asserting that “Poles killed more Jews during the [Second World] war than they did Germans.” Prosecutors questioned Gross for five hours in April.

The investigation was based on an article in the Criminal Code that punishes those who “insult” Poland.

Yet most visitors seemed to take part in the Night of the Synagogues in a spirit of good will. At midnight, Giemza and a friend entered the 17th-century Kupa Synagogue, which is decorated with colorful frescoes. It hosted a special photo and interview exhibit about contemporary Polish Jewish identity.

They carried hamsas, the hand-shaped Middle Eastern good luck charm, that they had made in an art workshop taking place at another of the synagogues.

“I hope to get to all the synagogues tonight,” Giemza said. “It’s really great for me.”

Ukraine Defies Anti-Semitic Stereotypes

By Alina Polyakova

Atlantic Council, June 7, 2016

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-russia-s-attempt-to-paint-modern-ukraine-as-anti-semitic-failed>

Confronting a difficult history is no easy matter, particularly in Ukraine—a country caught between murderous regimes throughout the twentieth century. In his book *Bloodlands*, Yale historian Timothy Snyder places Ukraine at the center of a region where more than 14 million “non-combatants” were ruthlessly killed by the competing geopolitical goals of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin between 1933 and 1945. This dark period in Ukrainian history included the Holodomor—Stalin’s manufactured famine of 1932-33—in addition to World War II and the Holocaust. Ukrainians, Jews, Poles, and others living in what is now modern day Ukraine suffered unimaginable pain and loss.

Soviet historians went to great measures to whitewash the Soviet regime’s role in these mass murders, especially the Holodomor, which was erased from history books. World War II (or the Great Patriotic War as it is still known in Ukraine and Russia today) became the founding myth of the Soviet regime alongside the Bolshevik revolution, memorialized in museums, public holidays, parades, monuments, school books, and oral histories across the Soviet Union. In this historical narrative, the Soviet Union, which lost over 20 million people in the war, was the ultimate victor, defender of freedom, protector of the Jews and all peoples, and destroyer of fascism.

It is ironic, then, that anti-Semitism was deeply embedded in Soviet institutions and culture—through passports in which “Jewish” was a state-designated ethnic group or in institutions of higher education that had unofficial “Jewish quotas” for certain fields. And despite the resources invested by the Soviet authorities in commemorating their victory over the Nazis, sites of mass graves were hidden or simply left unacknowledged. A minor Soviet memorial to Babi Yar, a mass murder site outside of Kyiv where over 100,000 were killed in 1941 by the Nazis (some two-thirds of them Jews), was only erected in 1976. In total, more than one million Jews were killed in Ukraine during World War II—a crime that the Soviet authorities refused to acknowledge as genocide, choosing to lump all the victims of the war together as Soviet citizens. Through its revisionist policies, the Soviets engaged in propagating collective denial of the darkest moments in Europe’s twentieth-century history.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited an incomplete history of its collective trauma. The legacy of Soviet era anti-Semitism continued to hang over independent Ukraine like a dark shadow. Recently, the manufactured specter of fascism in Ukraine was used by Russian state media and Russian officials to justify the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas. For example, shortly before the so-called referendum on Crimean annexation in March 2014, billboards appeared on the peninsula showing two images of Crimea: one with a red swastika and the other in the colors of the Russian flag. Similar smear campaigns aimed at linking the Maidan Revolution with a fascist coup were common in the Donbas as well.

But Russia's attempt to paint modern Ukraine as an anti-Semitic society quickly failed, because Ukraine today is far from the anti-Semitic country it was under Soviet rule. First, a volunteer group known as the Jewish hundred formed during the Maidan demonstrations as part of the people's self-defense front. Prominent members of the Ukrainian Jewry wrote a collective letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2014 denying their "need" for Russian protection and stating their support for the Maidan protesters.

Second, thanks to the work of international organizations, such as the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter and the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, and to the Ukrainians themselves, collective memory work is finally underway. Lviv, the picturesque western Ukrainian city that was home to over 250,000 Jews before the war, is taking steps to commemorate its Jewish heritage and educate the public. Other initiatives in smaller towns, such as Rava Ruska in western Ukraine, will erect monuments to commemorate previously unmarked burial sites. The central government plans to spend \$1.2 million in the lead up to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre to memorialize the victims and the Ukrainians who helped save Jews. Lastly, Ukrainian Jews themselves have been a powerful voice in dismantling the stereotype of anti-Semitic Ukraine: Joseph Zissels, the leader of the Vaad organization of Ukrainian Jews and one of the leading spokespersons of the Ukrainian Jewry, has pointed to President Petro Poroshenko's appointment of Volodymyr Groisman, a Ukrainian Jew, as prime minister as further "proof of the absence of serious anti-Semitism in Ukraine."

As is often the case with historical narratives, the full picture of Ukraine's twentieth century experience is far from black and white; rather, it is full of controversial figures, such as Stepan Bandera, the leader of a war time nationalist movement that fought for Ukrainian independence. To some, Bandera is a freedom fighter and hero, and to others he's a Nazi collaborator. A short essay is not the place to offer a comprehensive judgment. Still, the truth is likely somewhere in between. But as Ukraine's Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich said, "No one [in Ukraine] respects nationalists because they killed Jews, but because they fought for independent Ukraine." What Bleich means is that even the adherents of Bandera see anti-Semitism as something worthy of reproach in modern day Ukraine.

Collective memory work is a long and arduous process wrought with debate and controversy, which normally takes decades in any country. But in a country with Ukraine's complex past, it may take many more generations. There will be missteps and contradictions along the way. In Lviv, for example, Stepan Bandera Street is about a mile from the ruins of the Golden Rose Synagogue—one of the oldest Jewish sites in Europe, on which a private developer built a kitsch "Jewish" restaurant. Lviv's city government now aims to restore the site as part of its Jewish heritage initiative. To deal with history's many contradictions, the task for the Ukrainian people is to resist the revisionist strategies of the previous regime and to honestly examine the bright and dark events of their past. It takes strength to face the painful truth of one's history, but it's a sign of weakness to succumb to historical whitewashing.

*Alina Polyakova is the deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and author of *The Dark Side of European Integration*.*

Slovakia's youth flirt with fascism. A failure of education?

By Sara Miller Llana

Christian Science Monitor, June 2, 2016

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2016/0602/Slovakia-s-youth-flirt-with-fascism.-A-failure-of-education>

Roman Balko, a high school teacher in central Slovakia, quit his job last year, but not because he was burnt out from the lessons on civics that he gave for 22 years. He quit because there weren't enough of them – and he couldn't teach the subject the way he wanted.

He says that on paper, a high school education in Slovakia includes human rights. But in practice, it doesn't shape attitudes or values. And he blames that for the hold that the far-right has on youths here today.

"If there was more practical education about democracy and about democratic principles, this would help counter extremism," says Mr. Balko, who in October formed a nongovernmental organization called Teachers for European Union Slovakia (TEUS) to push for better teaching of democracy and European ideals in schools.

The need is clear. In mock elections carried out in February with 6,000 high school students across the country, the extreme right People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) came in second. Catapulted into the national parliament for the first time after March elections with 8 percent of the vote, the party attracted nearly a quarter of first-time voters – becoming the most successful party for those ages 18 to 22.

Youth discontent is spreading across Europe, upending mainstream politics. Frustrated young voters in Austria and Hungary have helped buoy the far-right, while in Spain and Greece, their votes have gone to the far-left fringe. In Slovakia, their vote in the recent election has prompted a wake-up call, and many are pushing to address what is increasingly seen as a black hole when it comes to lessons on democracy – especially in the school system.

"This is leading society to search for what we didn't do properly. These are people who were born in the '90s, we cannot say it's the legacy of the past. This is the outcome of what we are doing within a democratic society," says Slovakian sociologist Olga Gyarfášová. "For the teachers it is a huge challenge."
'People are fed up'

On a recent day, students mill about the drab halls of the Technical University in Zvolen, a town in the region of Banská Bystrica. It is here that L'SNS leader Marian Kotleba stunned the nation when he won the governor's race in 2013 – and then again this spring, when the party won enough votes to become a national force.

Students here say they voted for the L'SNS, which reveres Slovakia's Nazi war state and is virulently anti-Roma and anti-EU, not because they share their extremist positions but as the ultimate protest vote. Many of them feel stymied by lack of opportunity, the prospect that they'll have to move abroad for work, and that politicians seem to do nothing about it.

Marek and Matus, both students in the forestry program who declined to give their last names, say they are against the "stealing and corruption" of Slovakia's political elite – which spurred them to vote for L'SNS.

"We don't like extremism," Matus says. "We are not sympathizers of [Governor] Kotleba," adds Marek. "But I think it's good that [mainstream politicians] are aware that people are fed up."

Across the hall Peter Filip, who is studying to become a homebuilder, says he didn't vote for L'SNS but he's not alarmed by the youth vote that went to Mr. Kotleba, who used to attend rallies in the fascist uniform of the country's Nazi puppet state before his ascent to power. "I don't think he's a neo-Nazi, maybe in the past but not

now,” he says. “There is not going to be a return to the past. People want a normal and calm life. They’d be able to stop it.”

'They take democracy for granted'

Many disagree, worried that young people aren’t conscious of a dangerous path they are taking.

Grigorij Mesežnikov, the head of the Bratislava-based Institute for Public Affairs that helped organize the high school mock elections in February, says that this generation didn’t fight for democracy – neither against communism nor the authoritarianism that emerged during the transition in the '90s. As a result, it doesn’t have its defenses up. “They were not personally involved in the fight. They take democracy for granted,” he says.

That leaves them vulnerable to the simplistic solutions that extremist parties offer, Mr. Mesežnikov says. Kotleba has been especially effective over social media, which is awash in conspiracy theories and historic revisionism. In the wake of the Arab Spring, he says, “there were hopes this kind of mobilization [over social media] would always be in favor of democracy,” he says. “In Slovakia now we see how this model worked in the opposite direction.”

So now many teachers, institutes, and young people themselves are hoping to do that in the classroom. The Institute for Public Affairs has been giving talks in high schools on the threats of extremism.

Rado Sloboda, a 25-year-old in Banská Bystrica, started a new movement, Not In Our Town, to counter the rise of Kotleba. It is inspired by the group that formed in 1995 after hate crimes in Billings, Montana. It organizes events to bring together people from different backgrounds, via film festivals, theater, and talks, all to counter extremism and intolerance.

“I consider myself quite frustrated, too. But I would never vote for Kotleba,” says Mr. Sloboda. “Anti-fascism is a strong value for me. For many youths, human rights and democracy is not part of their values.”

And Balko, the former high school teacher, is pushing as head of TEUS for a complete overhaul of the way civics is taught – which he says is sidelined. He says under communism, schools were suffocated by ideology. As a boy growing up, he, like all students, was forced into membership of the communist youth organization Pioneers.

When the nation transitioned to democracy, schools were wiped free of politics, which was liberating, he says, but today it’s left them “politically sterile.” His group passed out an informal questionnaire to the educators who belong to it, and they found that history, values, and principles of the EU, for example, was taught on average for just three hours throughout a student’s entire high school education.

He says that democratic values should be instilled by teachers of every subject, not just civics teachers – an echo of how communist ideology was instilled in the past.

A lack of understanding?

A lack of historic awareness among students has registered in surveys conducted by Ms. Gyarfášová. “Their historical consciousness is very low,” she says. Many youngsters dismiss Kotleba’s support for Slovakia’s Nazi past, focusing instead on his appeal as an outsider. “There is a certain ambivalence in their views,” she says. “This is not a source of shame for them.”

Dagmar Horna, who has been on the forefront of the fight for human rights education in Slovakia since the transition to democracy, organizes an annual “Olympic Games of Human Rights” for high schoolers. But she says there is a long fight ahead – inside and outside the classroom.

She says Slovakia isn't setting an example of democracy for students, amid corruption scandals by the mainstream political parties and xenophobic rhetoric across the political spectrum that has grown amid the refugee crisis. Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico is widely considered among most anti-refugee leaders in Europe.

"Nobody around them speaks or acts in a real democratic [way]. And the youth hear it," she says. "I'm afraid they weakly understand what the essence of democracy is."

Balko agrees the fight must take place outside of school hours, too, and that examples at the top must be set. "When people see nothing changing in this country, they will continue to vote for Kotleba," he says.

Abkhaz Leader Agrees To Opposition's Demand For Referendum

By Liz Fuller

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<http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-report-abkhazia-early-presidential/27788330.html>

Under pressure from opposition forces that have branded his accession to power two years ago illegal and unconstitutional, Raul Khajimba, the de facto president of Georgia's breakaway Republic of Abkhazia, has scheduled for July 10 a referendum on whether or not to hold an early presidential election. Addressing an invited audience on June 1, Khajimba said that although he considered "harmful" the use of a referendum as "an instrument of political struggle," he had agreed to the opposition's demand in the interest of "consolidating society and preserving stability."

Khajimba was elected de facto president in August 2014 in an early vote precipitated by the forced resignation three months earlier of incumbent Aleksandr Ankvab. Abkhazia's opposition parties, in the first instance the Amsakhara (Keep the Home Fires Burning) union of veterans of the 1992-93 war that culminated in the region's de facto independence from Georgia, have steadily intensified their criticism of Khajimba since early last year. They accuse him of failing to deliver on his preelection pledges to unify a polarized society, form a government of national unity, launch constitutional and judicial reform, and use the substantial subsidies Abkhazia receives from Russia (7.7 billion rubles, or \$113.94 million in 2016) to kick-start economic growth and thereby reduce unemployment, which is estimated at 70 percent. (Russia recognized Abkhazia as an independent sovereign state in August 2008; only a handful of other countries have followed suit.)

That litany of complaints largely duplicates the rationale adduced in May 2014 by a loose coalition of opposition parties spearheaded by Khajimba's Forum of National Unity of Abkhazia for ousting Ankvab.

Criticisms of Khajimba's perceived failings, together with allegations of official corruption, incompetence, and mismanagement, figured prominently in resolutions adopted at two successive Amsakhara congresses in May and October 2015. Delegates at the latter congress unequivocally demanded that Khajimba resign.

Khajimba responded to that criticism by establishing a Political Consultative Council in which all political parties were invited to participate. Amsakhara declined to do so, however, on the grounds that the council was powerless to influence policy. So, too, did its partners in the so-called Bloc of Opposition Forces formed in July 2015, including the APRA Fund for Socioeconomic and Political Research headed by Aslan Bzhania, who finished second to Khajimba in the August 2014 presidential race.

But it was a separate 46-person initiative group that in early March 2016 set about collecting signatures in support of its demand for an early presidential election as the only legitimate and constitutional way of replacing Khajimba.

Initially, Khajimba was dismissive of the referendum initiative, declaring that "no referendums or other steps will change anything" he does. But two months later, after the initiative group amassed almost twice the required minimum number of signatures in support of its demand, he backtracked, saying that although he considered the holding of a referendum "inexpedient" and unlikely to contribute to the positive development of the country, he would abide by its results.

Defending His Record

In his June 1 address, Khajimba categorically rejected the opposition's criticisms. As in his annual address to parliament in January he enumerated at length what had been achieved since he was sworn in as national leader. Foremost among those successes he named an 18.8 percent increase in budget revenues in 2015 despite a cutback in Russian economic aid, and the 7.8 percent economic growth registered the same year. He noted the launch or ongoing implementation of reforms in the spheres of the budget, banking, the judiciary, and local government, and stressed that the state media freely reflected various points of view.

He dismissed as unrealistic the opposition's arguments that he could and should have achieved far more, accusing his detractors of "demanding miracles from us in conditions where we are using significant means to correct the mistakes made by the previous leadership."

Khajimba claimed to have promoted consensus and reconciliation from the first day of his tenure, and stressed the importance of the Political Consultative Council. He said that the current political situation was reasonably stable and endangered solely by the opposition's aggressive and single-minded campaign "to remove the current authorities at any price."

At the same time, Khajimba continued, the opposition had not cited any valid and cogent reasons why a new presidential election is essential, except that "the situation has become critical" and "Khajimba and his entourage are incapable of governing the country." Nor, he said, had they explained what they would do if they came to power.

He went on to accuse the opposition of seeking to manipulate public opinion and to use the referendum to sabotage the "positive processes" currently under way and thus discredit the present leadership.

Khajimba further claimed that the referendum demand is at odds with the Abkhaz Constitution, and echoed earlier allegations of pressure and violations during the collection of signatures in support of a referendum that cast doubts on its validity. He nonetheless concluded, somewhat inconsistently, by affirming that even though he believes the referendum "poses a danger to our statehood," he will schedule it in order to preserve stability, given that the opposition would have seized on, and may indeed have been counting on, a refusal to do so as a pretext to destabilize the country.

Khajimba again affirmed that he "does not fear the people's choice," and expressed confidence that voters will opt for the path of continued socioeconomic upswing and strengthening statehood which by implication only he and his team can guarantee.

Why Khajimba should have given the green light to a referendum that could ultimately lead to his removal from power, and the legitimacy of which he has openly questioned, is unclear. It is conceivable that he is confident that the Central Election Commission can be persuaded to ensure the outcome is in his favor.

Alternatively, he may be genuinely confident that popular sentiment is on his side, and the opposition speaks only for a disgruntled minority. It is worth noting that in March, Khajimba went out of his way to curry the favor of Abkhazia's small Muslim minority, for which he promised to allocate a plot of land to build a mosque, and of Abkhazia's 30,000-strong Armenian community.

A third possibility is that the current leadership considers the planned referendum a lesser threat to its survival than the demand launched last month by the political parties A Just Abkhazia and People's Front of Abkhazia for Justice and Development for creating a government of national unity. A mini-opinion poll of 1,292 people conducted by those two parties from May 12-15 found that 61.9 percent of respondents assessed the performance of the current government as "bad," 79.7 percent thought its style of work should change, and 66.7 percent advocated the creation of a government of national unity in which all political parties would be represented.

Creating such a government was one of the pledges enshrined in a declaration that Khajimba and his three rival candidates signed on the eve of the August 2014 presidential ballot. On June 1, Khajimba adduced the presence in the current government of two of those candidates (Interior Minister Leonid Dzapshba and Defense Minister Mirab Kishmaria) as proof he had delivered on that pledge.