



NCSEJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
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Vandalism in Nikolaev
Reported by Ilya Bezruchko, NCSEJ Representative in Kyiv
December 15, 2016

We have learned about another act of vandalism against at the memorial sign to the victims of the Holocaust in Nikolaev (Southern Ukraine). This was announced on the Facebook page of the chairman of the Mykolayiv Jewish community Michael Goldenberg. Vandals desecrated the memorial sign with black paint.

The monument was built by the Jewish community of Nikolaev in December of 2011, later in June of 2013, it was transferred to the municipal ownership of the city.

Earlier, the memorial sign was repeatedly desecrated during a number of anti-Semitic attacks. Acts of vandalism took place in September of 2012, March, October and December of 2013, June and July of 2014. No one was imprisoned for these number of attacks.

Netanyahu set to embark on rare trip to Muslim countries
By Raphael Ahren

Times of Israel, December 12, 2016

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-set-to-embark-on-rare-trip-to-muslim-countries/>

In an effort to reach out to moderate Muslim countries, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is slated Tuesday morning to take off for a historic two-day visit to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. He will thus become the first sitting Israeli prime minister to visit the region in almost 25 years of diplomatic relations between Jerusalem and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia.

Both countries are important allies. Azerbaijan, which has a long border with Iran, is a secular state that has long had warm relations with Israel. Nearly 98 percent of its 10 million citizens are Muslim, the vast majority of them Shiites. Baku is one of Israel's main trading partners, buying weapons systems and providing the Jewish state with the lion's share of its oil. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan is said to be significantly higher than with France, for example.

Baku is reportedly [interested in acquiring Israel's Iron Dome](#) missile defense system, a deal that is likely to be discussed during this week's visit.

Kazakhstan, where Netanyahu and his delegation will spend two nights, is interested in Israeli counterterrorism know-how and in doing business with Israel's high-tech sector, a means of diversifying its economy, which is currently dominated by exports of hydrocarbons.

Some 70% of the country's 18 million residents are Muslim. Starting January 1, Kazakhstan — the ninth-largest country in the world — will assume a two-year position as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It traditionally follows the lead of its top ally, Russia, in supporting pro-Palestinian resolutions, something Netanyahu is expected to try to revert.

Visits by Israeli leaders to non-Arab Muslim-majority countries are rare.

Netanyahu briefly visited Azerbaijan in 1997, during his first term as prime minister, becoming the first Israeli leader to visit the country. No sitting prime minister has ever been to Kazakhstan.

In 2009, then-president Shimon Peres went to both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, becoming the first Israeli head of state to visit those countries since Jerusalem established diplomatic relations with them. In 1993, then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin visited Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population.

On Tuesday, Netanyahu will meet with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev at Baku's Zagulba Palace, where officials from both countries will sign bilateral agreements and make statements. After lunch with Aliyev, Netanyahu will lay a wreath at Şəhidlər Xiyabanı, or Martyrs Lane, a memorial dedicated to Azeris killed by the Soviets during the 1990 January Massacre and the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which lasted from 1988 to 1994.

Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia have warred for years over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but ruled by Armenian separatists. Fighting between the two sides flared up earlier this year. Armenian forces claimed Baku deployed Israeli-made kamikaze drones in a battle against Armenian "volunteers."

"We certainly support the people of Azerbaijan," Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman reportedly said at the time. "Azerbaijani leadership behaves in a balanced manner."

After his visit at Martyrs Lane, the prime minister will visit the Ohr Avner Jewish educational complex, operated by the Chabad movement, where he is scheduled to meet with representatives of Azerbaijan's Jewish community.

It is estimated that more than 20,000 Jews live in Azerbaijan. Most of them reside in the capital, while smaller communities exist in the Guba region and elsewhere. Most famous among these is Krasnaya Sloboda (Red Town), which used to be thought of as the largest Jewish locality outside Israel with 18,000 residents, but currently only about 1,000 Jews live there.

On Tuesday evening, Netanyahu will leave Azerbaijan and head to Astana, where on Wednesday morning he is set to meet with Kazakhstan's longtime leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, at the iconic Akorda presidential palace. The two leaders will hold a working meeting and then attend a bilateral business forum.

Netanyahu will then meet the chairman of Kazakhstan's Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, before heading to the Astana's new Great Synagogue for a meeting with the local Jewish community.

It is estimated that between 12,000 and 30,000 Jews live in Kazakhstan. Most of them reside in country's former capital Almaty.

Netanyahu, who will be accompanied by Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze'ev Elkin, will conclude his visit Wednesday with a business forum in Astana before heading home Thursday morning.

"Apart from expanding ties with the moderate part of the Muslim world, the visit will provide a unique opportunity to upscale the whole spectrum of bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and to move from mutual interests and cooperation 'ad hoc' to strategic partnership in the political and economic spheres," Israel's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Michael Brodsky, wrote in the Astana Times last week.

In the early 1990s, Israel rushed to recognize the newly independent states in Central Asia in a bid to make friends in the Muslim world, to reconnect with the region's Jewish communities and to "create alternatives for our energy market," Brodsky wrote. "However, much of the potential, especially in the economic field, has remained largely undiscovered.

Low oil prices and a declining demand for hydrocarbons are worrying Astana, which could use “Israeli expertise and technologies” to boost the country’s economic growth and to further Nazarbayev’s efforts to diversify the economy, the Israeli diplomat noted.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan and recently been the target of terror attacks, which triggered the government’s increased interest in Israel’s counterterrorism expertise. “Israel can potentially become a training hub for security and counterterrorism units from Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries, which are facing growing activities by ISIS and other terrorist groups on their territory and are struggling to prevent infiltration of extremists from neighboring Afghanistan,” Brodsky wrote.

Azerbaijan reveals arms purchases from Israel reach nearly \$5b

Times of Israel, December 13, 2016

http://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/azerbaijan-reveals-arms-purchases-from-israel-reach-nearly-5b/

Azerbaijan’s president today hailed his country’s military cooperation with Israel, revealing that it is buying Israeli defense system to the tune of nearly \$5 billion.

“We actively cooperate in the area of defense industries. This cooperation lasts already for many years,” President Ilham Aliyev says at a joint appearance before the press with visiting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“To give you one figure to illustrate how broad this cooperation is, so far the contracts between Azerbaijani and Israeli companies with respect to purchasing of defense equipment is close to \$5 billion. To be more precise, \$4.85 billion.”

Most of these contracts have already been executed but there is more to be done, he adds.

“We’re very satisfied with the level of this cooperation,” he says, addressing Israeli and Azerbaijani reporters at Baku’s Zagulba Palace.

Two Israeli officials say they are surprised that the Azerbaijani chose to reveal exact figures regarding his country’s defense deals with Israel

Azerbaijan, which has a long border with Iran, is a secular state that has long-had warm relations with Israel.

Nearly 98 percent of its 10 million inhabitants are Muslim, the vast majority of them Shiites. Baku is one of Israel’s main trading partners, buying Israelis weapons systems and providing the Jewish state with a lion share of its oil. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan is said to be significantly higher than trade with France.

Baku is reportedly interested in acquiring Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system, a deal that is likely to be discussed during this week’s visit.

Netanyahu, Nazarbaev Discuss Israel-Kazakhstan Ties In Astana

RFE/RL, December 14, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-israel-netanyahu-nazarbaev-meeting/28175485.html>

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev has held talks with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Astana.

The two leaders discussed economic, medical, and trade cooperation, bilateral investments, and the fight against terrorism, Nazarbaev said after the talks on December 14.

Several documents related to visa-free travel, aviation communications, agricultural cooperation, anticorruption efforts, and other issues, were signed after the discussions.

Netanyahu and Nazarbaev are expected to take part in a Kazakh-Israeli business forum.

Netanyahu was on his first visit to Kazakhstan as Israel's prime minister, an office he has held since 2009 and also from 1996 to 1999.

He arrived in the Kazakh capital on December 13 from Baku, Azerbaijan, where he discussed bilateral ties with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.

PM and Wife Sara Visit Great Synagogue of Astana in Historic Visit

By Hana Levi Julian

Jewish Press, December 14, 2016

<http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/pm-and-wife-sara-visit-great-synagogue-of-astana-in-historic-visit/2016/12/14/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara visited the Great Synagogue of Astana, in the capital of Kazakhstan, attending an event together with members of the Jewish community and the local Chabad House.

“Israel receives a strong standing among the nations not with a bowed head, but by being steadfast and proud,” the prime minister told those gathered. “And I say this here, in Central Asia, in an Islamic country that respects Israel, that honors coexistence and tolerance, and constitutes a model of what needs to happen – and can happen – in our region as well.

“Perhaps the most dramatic change, which the Lubavitcher Rebbe could not have foreseen, is what is happening between us and the Arab world but I will tell you about that another time. Great changes have come in the spirit of that first meeting when he said ‘Light the candle of truth, do not be afraid, be strong and of good courage.’

“So here, in this synagogue, in the spirit of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on this historic visit, I tell you together with the people in my delegation and together with my wife: ‘The Glory of Israel will not lie [I Samuel 15:29]’.

“A Happy Hanukkah to you all.”

In Central Asia, Netanyahu scores diplomatic home run in Iran’s backyard

By Cnaan Liphshiz

JTA, December 15, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/12/15/news-opinion/world/in-central-asia-netanyahu-scores-diplomatic-home-run-in-irans-backyard>

You wouldn’t know it from the front pages of newspapers in Israel, but its prime minister has completed a landmark visit to two of the world’s wealthiest Muslim nations.

Largely eclipsed in the Israeli media by sexual harassment scandals, the Knesset dress code and the impending evacuation of the Amona outpost in the West Bank, Benjamin Netanyahu’s state visit this week to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan nonetheless represents a diplomatic coup against Iran. It also underlines Israel’s ability in recent years to punch holes in the former taboo in the Muslim world on openly embracing the Jewish state, experts on the relevant countries said.

“The media apparently missed the historic visit that I’m making to two Muslim nations that simply admire Israel, with whom we are pursuing closer ties,” Netanyahu wrote Wednesday on his [Facebook page](#). Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, he added in a video message, “are nurturing coexistence and fraternity between Jews and Muslims. This is where we are making the future.”

The visit to Azerbaijan, an oil-rich Shiite nation with a border and tense relations with Israel’s archenemy Iran, is Netanyahu’s second. He visited in 1997, during his first stint as prime minister. His visit to Kazakhstan, the world’s ninth-largest country and Central Asia’s undisputed economic powerhouse, is the first by an Israeli prime minister to that mineral-rich land.

And while Netanyahu’s remarks about the visits may be somewhat hyperbolic, they are essentially on the money, according to Guy Bechor, a former lecturer on Islam and the Middle East at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya.

The [halving](#) of oil prices since 2014, Bechor said, has “deeply hurt Iran’s economy, which is further burdened by military conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere.” The same developments have also weakened the Arab Gulf states, which in the past have played key roles in imposing boycotts against Israel among Muslim nations with weaker economies.

“So countries that are drawn to the innovation and technology of the Israeli startup nation have stopped caring about the boycott directive,” he said.

In recent years, Israel has been strengthening ties as well with non-Muslim countries — notably [India](#), [Japan](#), South Korea and China — that had abstained from appearing close to Israel for fear of angering Iran and the Arab League.

And while Arab and Iranian economies languished, Israel’s has experienced a meteoric leap. Its gross domestic product per capita rose to \$38,127 in 2015 – higher than Spain, Italy and even France, [according](#) to the Economist — after averaging \$20,318 from 1960 until last year.

Disregard for Iran’s hostility for Israel was particularly striking in Azerbaijan. During the Netanyahu visit, President Ilham Aliyev for the first time [quantified](#) the extent of his country’s military cooperation with Israel.

Azerbaijan has bought nearly \$5 billion worth of military equipment from Israel since 1997 – the year of Netanyahu’s first visit there as prime minister. The openness of Aliyev’s remark stunned even longtime observers of his nation’s largely clandestine alliance with Israel. The revelation followed the 2013 [disclosure](#) that about one-third of Israel’s gas comes from Azerbaijan.

“This is cooperation on a massive scale,” said Roman Bronfman, a former Israeli lawmaker and well-known commentator about Israel’s relations with former Soviet states. “The volume of trade is enough to persuade the Azeris to defy the Iranians and receive Netanyahu.”

However, Azerbaijan has, under Iranian pressure, declined to open an embassy in Israel, as Israel did in Azerbaijan in 1992.

During his visit, Netanyahu praised the treatment of the country’s Jews — a population of about 16,000, according to the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress — by their government. Azerbaijan’s diplomats, in deflecting criticism over major human rights violations, often [insist](#) that they come from a country that “has no anti-Semitism.”

A case in point is [Krasnaiya Sloboda](#), a Jewish town of a few thousand residents in northern Azerbaijan. Hundreds of years of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Muslims have led to so much interfaith cross-fertilization that some Muslim shop owners there today separate dairy and meat for their Jewish clients — who in turn pray in a carpeted synagogue that the men, like Muslim worshippers, enter barefoot.

Perhaps out of consideration for Azerbaijan’s diplomatic position, Netanyahu made no references to Iran during his visit to Baku, the capital, which is located just 160 miles from the Iranian city of Parsabad. Perhaps his mere presence there, amid talk of security cooperation, was powerful enough.

But the Israeli leader addressed the Iranian issue during his visit the following day to Kazakhstan.

In a meeting with Nursultan Nazarbayev, the nation's authoritarian ruler since 1989, Netanyahu said that "if Iran attacks Israel, it will put itself at risk," [according](#) to The Times of Israel.

Asked by Nazarbayev, who has visited Iran five times, what message he should convey to Iran's president, Netanyahu replied, "Ask him why Iran continues to threaten us with annihilation. Don't you understand: We're not a rabbit. We're a tiger."

While the visit to Azerbaijan "seems to have gone well and is likely to deliver positive result, Netanyahu's reference to Iran in Kazakhstan was a diplomatic blunder, an insult and the reason Netanyahu's first visit to Kazakhstan will also be his last," said Bronfman, who used to represent the left-wing Meretz party in the Israeli Knesset.

But Bechor, who is considered right wing, dismissed the claims by Bronfman.

"In fact, Netanyahu also said that Israel will leave Iran alone if Iran leaves Israel alone, so the tone was actually quite tame, but the media played it up," Bechor said.

But they and other experts agree that part of Israel's ability to forge strong alliances in the Muslim nations of Central Asia is the region's strong tradition of religious tolerance, which sets it apart from many other Muslim countries.

The reasons for such tolerance are complex and rooted both in the region's history under Soviet rule and in the fact that the countries are ruled by dictators who are quick to ruthlessly uproot any sign of religious radicalism that they view as a threat to their countries' stability – and that of their own authoritarian rule, said Giora Pozailov, a historian at Bar-Ilan University in Israel who specialized in Central Asia's Jewish communities.

"The Soviet years, the anti-religious oppression of communism, has generated a kinship of religions in Central Asia that exists in few other places," Pozailov said. And while that trait is "grass roots," he said, there is also vigorous top-to-bottom action to prevent Islamists from changing the relatively secular nature of the society of these Muslim nations."

Chaim Chesler, the founder of Limmud FSU, a Jewish learning organization, said the relative tolerance of Central Asian Muslims is on display each year at his organization's annual conference in Kazan, the capital city of the predominantly Muslim Russian state of Tatarstan. The event is part of the city's annual Jewish festival, which includes street celebrations by hundreds of Jews flying Israel flags who convene in the center of the city safely with little to no security arrangements.

"I regularly put my tefillin on while waiting for the subway in the morning," Gershon Ilianski, a 16-year-old from Kazan, recently [told](#) JTA. "I know they have problems with Muslims in Western Europe, but I never worried anyone would bother me here."

Chesler says it's a different kind of Islam than the one practiced in Arab countries, "but one that extremists would happily subvert and destroy if not for the vigilance of moderate rulers."

Conference of Presidents, Embassy of Azerbaijan Host Chanukah Party for Diverse Group of Diplomats, American Jewish Organizations and Honored Guests Tribute Given to Nations Who Provided Firefighting Aid to Israel

Press Release, December 15, 2016

<http://www.conferenceofpresidents.org/news/press/2016/dec15/conference-presidents-embassy-azerbaijan-host-chanukah-party-diverse-group>

New York, NY - - On December 14, 2016 the Conference of Presidents and the Embassy of Azerbaijan co-hosted nearly two hundred guests who filled the room for a reception in Washington, DC to celebrate the upcoming Chanukah holiday and honor those countries and others that provided crucial firefighting personnel and equipment to assist Israel in battling the devastating fires last month.

The event was attended by the ambassadors representing the diverse group of nations and others who aided Israel, leaders from many important American Jewish organizations, Ambassador Ron Dermer of Israel and other honored guests, including members of Congress. Joining Ambassador Suleymanov of Azerbaijan were ambassadors and diplomats from Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Egypt, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, the PLO, Romania, Russia, Tajikistan and Turkey.

The event also followed by one day the visit to Azerbaijan of Prime Minister Netanyahu for meetings with President *Ilham Aliyev* which resulted in stronger ties between the two countries.

Stephen M. Greenberg, Chairman and Malcolm Hoenlein, Executive Vice Chairman and CEO said, "Last night, in a spirit of celebration, mutual respect and gratitude, we brought together a full house of guests from many different faiths, cultures and countries who joined together with us to reaffirm our common humanity."

In his address to the capacity crowd, Ambassador Suleymanov stressed the value Azerbaijani society has historically placed on acceptance and respect for religious diversity and saying "it is who we are as a people and a nation." He added that the centuries old Jewish community is and has always been an integral part of Azerbaijan.

Mr. Greenberg in his welcoming remarks noted there has been a significant Jewish presence in Azerbaijan for many centuries. Originally part of the Jewish population in the Caucasus known as "Mountain Jews", the Azerbaijan Jewish community today continues to enjoy full acceptance in Azerbaijani society and to freely and publicly express their Jewish religious identity. He said, "A large delegation of leaders of the Conference of Presidents had a remarkable visit to Baku and experienced firsthand the open acceptance of Jews as a part of the Azerbaijani people. It is a model for nations everywhere to emulate."

Ambassador Dermer also spoke, noting that the diverse array of guests represented the essence of Chanukah as a public celebration of religious freedom and expression, noting that Israel is a country founded on the principle of protecting the rights of religious minorities and is committed to maintaining and preserving the holy sites of all religions under its protection. Ambassador Dermer also stressed the importance of finding more opportunities like the event last night to reinforce the common values and interests and nurture the relationships among the varied participants. Turning to the assistance Israel received in fighting the fires, he said, "Chanukah is a holiday of lighting flames to illuminate the world. Tonight we have lit those flames together and we have shown we can douse the flames of destruction together. Together, we must continue to do both."

In remarks before presenting each of the diplomats with a traditional chanukiah (candle holder) used during Chanukah to Mr. Hoenlein expressed the gratitude of the Conference of Presidents for the help to Israel provided by their countries. He said, "We were moved by Ambassador Suleymanov's suggestion to hold this event. It represents an essential part of who the Jewish people are to publicly mark the Chanukah holiday, to express our respect for other religions by joining with Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, Christians and every other faith tradition and to promote understanding by focusing on what we have in common rather than what separates and divides us. The outpouring of assistance to Israel from so many different countries, in its time of dire need, is something Israel is always prepared to do for others and should be the model for international cooperation."

New Polish Property Restitution Law Slams Door on Jewish Heirs, Expert Says

By Ofer Aderet

Haaretz, December 12, 2016

<http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium-1.758433>

Despite initial positive reports concerning a new Polish law for restitution payments for Jews who lost property during the Holocaust, the law does not necessarily bear good news. In fact, it might make it just about impossible to restore Jewish property in Warsaw, a Polish real estate expert says.

In September, the new restitution law took effect in Poland. Its main purpose was to stop private claims for property in Warsaw that were filed after World War Two and have been since pending. Only if the property owners or their heirs reassert their claims within six months of the law's passage will they be given another three months to prove their claims. This is not a realistic timeframe for completing the proceedings, says Mariola Hawel-Tocker, a Polish and Israeli lawyer who specializes in restitution of Holocaust-era property.

Hawel-Tocker told Haaretz the Israeli media completely misinterpreted the new law, and presented it as an act of good will on the part of the Polish government to make sure compensation is paid out. But that is not true, she says.

Hawel-Tocker says that the way the new law works will prevent the heirs from receiving the property because the timetable involved is "impossible." She says her telephone in the office and her email never stop after the Israeli press got the story backwards, "and presented something bad as something wonderful." The real meaning of the new law is "the door has closed on the possibility for restitution of property," says Hawel-Tocker.

The new law does not allow the filing of new claims, and only claims filed by December 1988 are valid - and even these claims are now constrained.

After World War Two, all property in Warsaw, which lay in ruins at the end of the war, was confiscated by the Communist government for reconstruction. Later the government rejected most of the property claims by Jews, or bogged the claims in red tape and in the courts.

Since 1989, after the fall of Communism in Poland, thousands of homes have been restored to the Jewish heirs, who had to file specific claims in Polish courts over each individual property.

In recent years, the Polish media has frequently reported on corruption tied to the restitution of Holocaust-era property, in which criminal rackets have taken control of properties that once belonged to Jews. This is one of the main reasons the Polish government decided to deal with the issue and finally put an end to the suits over properties in Warsaw.

Now, as the new law is being implemented, Warsaw has released a list of 2,600 addresses that still have outstanding claims against them. The heirs to these properties are now required to "reactivate their claims," starting once the city publishes a specific announcement concerning their property in the Polish press; and then they have to prove their claim to the property. Otherwise, according to the new law, the property will become the property of the city of Warsaw or the Polish finance ministry.

To help those who have previously filed claims in Warsaw, before the end of 1988, the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) has launched a new database of the properties in Warsaw along with the names of their previous owners (<http://warsawproperty.org>).

The WJRO says their website was launched as a service to Holocaust survivors and their heirs so they can "identify their property so they can reactivate their claims before the Polish government takes final possession." The WJRO database matches the historic property registrations in Warsaw with the names of their previous owners.

Other countries, such as Germany, have enacted specific laws on the restitution of property to Holocaust survivors and their families. Poland has no such law and the new right-wing government has no intention to enact such a law, as Poland considers itself a country that was occupied, exploited and suffered at the hands of the Nazis and Communists - and because such restitution could have a major impact on the Polish economy.

“Poland is the only country in the European Union that has failed to pass a national law to address private property wrongfully taken during the Holocaust or nationalized thereafter,” says the WJRO's head of operations, Gideon Taylor. “We call on the government of Poland to do the just and compassionate thing now, and provide restitution or compensation for survivors and their heirs, and other Jewish and non-Jewish property owners.”

Warsaw museum to offer high-tech posthumous talks with Poles who saved Jews

JTA, December 11, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/12/11/news-opinion/world/museum-to-use-software-for-posthumous-talks-with-oles-who-saved-jews>

Polish and Israeli officials announced the future opening of an innovative museum honoring non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust.

The museum, which will feature interactive 3D videos of saviors of Jews, is slated to open in 2018 in the center of Warsaw under the auspices of the TSKZ cultural association of Polish Jewry and the commemoration group From the Depths.

The two groups made the announcement in a statement following a ceremony in Warsaw last month featuring the signing of a letter of intent about the new museum's establishment.

The event was attended by Poland's Secretary of State Anna Maria Anders, the deputy speakers of the Israeli parliament and the Polish senate, Yehiel Bar and Adam Bielan, respectively, TSKZ Director Arthur Hoffman and From the Depths founder Jonny Daniels.

Visitors to the museum, which will occupy two rooms inside what will be the new seat of the TSKZ building, will be able to interact with 3D video recordings of the Righteous Among the Nations — a title conferred on Holocaust saviors by Israel — using so-called intelligent software, Daniels said. The questions will be put vocally to microphones and analyzed by voice recognition software that will play the relevant recorded answer.

The software, which is currently in development, will have a bank of dozens of answers to some questions from which visitors can choose.

“As both the righteous and the people they saved leave this world, we are using technology to allow also future generations the privilege of talking to these people, to hear firsthand of the terrible risks they undertook and how they felt about it,” Daniels said.

In March, Polish President Andrzej Duda attended the opening of a museum for saviors of Jews in Markowa, a village in southeastern Poland.

It was the latest in a series of efforts to celebrate this heroism by Duda's right-wing government. Critics of these efforts, including the Poland-born, American historian Jan Gross, have argued they are excessive and designed to dominate the narrative about the Polish population's checkered record of action on the Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland.

Gross is currently the subject of a criminal investigation for allegedly insulting the honor of the Polish nation, a felony in Poland, by telling a German paper that during World War II, Poles killed more Jews than Poles killed Germans.

The author of 2001 book entitled "Neighbors," Gross triggered a debate about Polish complicity against Jews during the Holocaust by chronicling in that book the massacre of dozens of Jews by their non-Jewish Polish neighbors in the town of Jedwabne.

Polish nationalists are arguing for an exhumation of the victims' bodies, citing theories, which are not supported by witness testimonies, of German participation in the massacre.

Only 10 percent of Poland's Jewish population of 3.3 million people survived the Holocaust, in which only a very small minority of Jews were killed by Poles.

Poland has the world's highest number of Righteous Among the Nations: Some 6,620 have been recognized as such by the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

The country with the second-highest number of righteous is the Netherlands, with some 5,516. German Nazis and Dutch collaborators killed 75 percent of Holland's Jewish population of 140,000 during World War II.

If Poland had the Netherlands' ratio of saviors per Jews in 1940, there would have been nearly 120,000 Polish Righteous Among the Nations.

New Exhibition Shows Poland Using Jewish Gravestones to Build Walls, Sidewalks, Playgrounds Jewish Press, December 13, 2016

<http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/new-exhibition-shows-poland-using-jewish-gravestones-to-build-walls-sidewalks-playgrounds/2016/12/13/>

As numerous signs suggest the current Polish government is attempting to rewrite its role in World War II and the Holocaust, the Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM) announced the North American premiere of a [photo exhibition](#) that documents in black and white the lengths that have been taken to wipe out traces of Jewish history and culture in Poland.

Recently, the NY Times [reported](#) that, after nearly a decade of planning and five years of construction at a cost of \$114 million, the new Polish government may be backing away from its commitment to fund the Museum of the Second World War. The museum was scheduled to open in January but continued funding is now in question.

Last year, the JewishPress.com [reported](#) that the Polish government is threatening to prosecute Polish-born American historian Jan Gross for claiming that Poles killed more Jews than Germans during World War II. Gross, a renowned Holocaust scholar and professor at Princeton University, who received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland for outstanding achievement in scholarship in 1996, is now accused of "publicly insulting a nation" and faces up to three years in prison if convicted.

The FHM's exhibition, Matzevot (gravestones) for Everyday Use by photographer Łukasz Baksik (a non-Jew), documents the ways in which Jewish gravestones in Poland have been stolen and reappropriated. The tombstones are now part of Polish fences, pavements, toolsheds and cowsheds. Some have been recycled as Catholic gravestones, others were used to patch roadways and walls. They have even been to build a wall for a basketball court and an elementary school's sandbox.

"The gravestones that were turned into everyday objects were still being used as such from 2008 to 2012 when I photographed them," said Baksik, who traveled across his home country of Poland for four years to illuminate the ways "people have gone to wipe out traces of Jewish culture." He added, "There are still sidewalks and courtyards paved with matzevot; walls, buildings and tools that were made of Jewish gravestones are still being used in public view."

“There was no shortage of ordinary stones in Poland,” said FHM’s Executive Director, Elizabeth Gelman. “The sole goal of the Nazis during the war was to erase all traces of Jewish culture and Jewish history. The practice has been documented as continuing among the local populations for decades.”

The exhibition Matzevot for Everyday Use has been shown in Warsaw and Krakow, Poland and in Minsk, Belarus. Now North American audiences can see it. The exhibition is sponsored by The Gemunder Family Foundation, with additional support from The Jewish Federation of Pinellas and Pasco Counties. It will remain on display at the FHM until January 29, 2017.

Hezbollah denies it promised Russia no attacks on Israel

By Zack Pyzer

Jerusalem Post, December 12, 2016

<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Hezbollah-denies-it-promised-Russia-no-attacks-on-Israel-474924>

Hezbollah said on Friday that there is no truth to reports it assured Russia there would be no military response to the alleged Israeli strikes on its forces in Syria on Wednesday, according to a Hezbollah statement read out on its Al-Manar TV station.

The terror organization said the reports were an "invention." "These reports are a total lie and fabrication," the statement read.

Despite the strong denials, Hezbollah did not explicitly promise an attack, leaving doubt as to whether one will be forthcoming.

The Syrian regime accused Israel of firing surface-to-surface missiles targeting the Mezzeh Air Base near Damascus on Wednesday, causing damage but no casualties.

Hezbollah’s Al-Maydeen television channel said the group “was almost certain” that the Israel Air Force carried out the strikes from Lebanese airspace.

If Hezbollah does strike at Israel, it would not be for the first time since the end of the 2006 Second Lebanon War.

In January 2015, following a reported Israeli air strike on a convoy of Hezbollah and Iranian operatives who were constructing a terrorist base in the Syrian Golan, Hezbollah retaliated, firing a volley of Kornet guided missiles on an IDF convoy, killing a soldier and commander in their D-Max vehicle. The attack was launched from five kilometers away on the Lebanese side of the border with Israel.

Russia is heavily backing the Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War, which relies also on the manpower of the Lebanese terror group, in addition to other foreign allies on the ground such as Iran's Al Quds Force. If true, the rumors that Hezbollah might refrain from attacking Israel would insinuate the giving of orders from Moscow to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to show restraint.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has regularly visited and held telephone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the past year in order to try to secure Israel's interests in the region. With Russia stationing S-300 anti-aircraft missiles in Syria, Israel has been keen to ensure that the system is not used against Israeli planes.

Israel, which usually neither confirms nor denies responsibility for alleged strikes, is “working primarily to protect the security of our citizens, defend our sovereignty, and prevent the smuggling of sophisticated weapons, military equipment and weapons of mass destruction from Syria to Hezbollah,” Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said on Wednesday, following the claims by the Assad regime.

In April, Netanyahu admitted for the first time that the IDF had carried out strikes in Syrian territory.

European Parliament Vote Brings Georgia, Ukraine Closer To Visa-Free EU Travel

By Rikard Jozwiak

RFE/RL, December 15, 2016

<http://www.rferl.org/a/european-parliament-visa-free-travel-georgia-ukraine-travel/28178124.html>

A December 15 vote in the European Parliament has brought the goal of visa-free travel to EU Schengen Zone countries one big step closer to reality for citizens of Ukraine and Georgia.

The parliament approved a mechanism that would allow for the suspension of visa-free regimes with Ukraine and Georgia under certain circumstances once they are in place. The vote was 485 to 132, with 21 abstentions.

The EU lawmakers are now set to vote on the visa liberalization itself for Georgia in January, and it is possible that they will vote on Ukraine in February.

The actual visa-free regimes for both countries will kick in when the suspension mechanism is legally adopted and published in the EU's official journal, which requires translation and other work that is expected to take up to eight weeks.

Both the EU member states and the European Parliament gave the green light for free movement for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens earlier this autumn, but struggled to agree on the suspension-mechanism text that had to be in place before granting visa liberalization.

A compromise was struck last week that will give both individual EU member states and the European Parliament a say in suspending the visa-free regime if the rules are violated.

Visa requirements can be reintroduced temporarily if there is a surge of citizens from a non-EU country like Ukraine or Georgia staying irregularly in EU territory or if nationals from that country are deemed to pose a security threat.

They can also be reintroduced if there is a rise in unfounded asylum applications or a lack of cooperation on returning migrants.

Ukraine and Georgia are seeking greater integration with the West but have been frustrated with the pace of EU moves to bring them closer.

Both former Soviet republics have faced military aggression from Russia in recent years, as well as other efforts by Moscow to increase its influence.

The EU Schengen Area countries are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

E.U. Reaches Compromise With the Netherlands on Closer Ukraine Ties

New York Times/AP, December 15, 2016

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/world/europe/european-union-netherlands-ukraine.html?_r=0

European Union leaders reached a compromise with the Netherlands on Thursday that should allow the bloc to enact an agreement on closer ties with Ukraine, regarded as a landmark deal to counter the influence of Russia.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands said on Thursday that he now had the necessary guarantees to start pushing the agreement through his country's Parliament and to overcome the objections of Dutch voters, who voted against the agreement in a referendum in April.

The Netherlands has been the lone holdout in ratifying the agreement within the European bloc's 28 member nations.

"I am going to fight to get a majority" in Parliament, Mr. Rutte said. "We will have to see. It won't be easy. We'll have to work hard for it."

If it is approved, the deal would allow the European Union to show a unified front against Russia, and to boost trade and cooperation with Ukraine, which has found it difficult to remain out of Moscow's sphere of influence.

"The E.U. can now keep a united front against the destabilizing policies of Russia," Mr. Rutte said.

The agreement between Ukraine and the European Union had looked like a done deal until earlier this year, when the Dutch government was forced into a nonbinding, or advisory, referendum. The rejection by voters had left the bloc in a conundrum because the agreement needed unanimous approval from member countries.

Under the compromise, Mr. Rutte obtained assurances the agreement was not a step toward European Union membership for Ukraine, and that it could not be used as one in the future. The deal does not provide a collective-security guarantee or extra money for Ukraine, and it also requires the Ukrainian government to do more to counter corruption.

The Dutch prime minister said enacting the deal was essential for national and geopolitical reasons, and pointed to Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian conflict and its annexation of Crimea.

The Netherlands will hold national elections on March 15, and the move to sidestep the advisory referendum results with an updated agreement might not play well with an electorate that has been increasingly prone to snubbing the political elite.

In a post on Twitter, Geert Wilders, a lawmaker known for his opposition to Islam, immigration and the European Union, posted a photo of Mr. Rutte with the Dutch words for "Resign and go."

Mr. Rutte also realized the challenge ahead.

"This is not an election-winning point," he said. "It is not a vote winner. But my job is ultimately to make decisions in the interest of the Netherlands and our security."

Canada's House of Commons votes unanimously for free trade with Ukraine Ukraine Today, December 14, 2016

<http://uatoday.tv/politics/canada-s-house-of-commons-votes-unanimously-for-free-trade-with-ukraine-846883.html>

The House of Commons, a lower house of Canadian parliament, has voted unanimously in favour of ratification of Canada-Ukraine free trade zone deal, the UNIAN agency reports.

The comprehensive agreement was signed on July 11 in Kyiv and proposed for ratification to the Ukrainian parliament on November 17. The document provides Ukrainian entrepreneurs with the free access to the most of the Canadian market, and Ukraine steadily opens its own market for Canadian businesses.

After entering in force, the free trade zone agreement is expected to boost trade between the two countries, to reduce prices for consumers and provide the businesses better conditions for producing and marketing in Ukraine and Canada.

Trump nominates David Friedman as ambassador to Israel, where he will 'work from Jerusalem'

By Ron Kampeas

JTA, December 16, 2016

<http://www.jta.org/2016/12/15/news-opinion/politics/trump-nominates-david-friedman-as-ambassador-to-israel-where-he-will-work-from-jerusalem>

President-elect Donald Trump is nominating a top Jewish surrogate, David Friedman, to be ambassador to Israel, with a statement saying Friedman will serve from Jerusalem and describing the city as "Israel's eternal capital."

Friedman, a bankruptcy lawyer who has for years worked for Trump and his real estate development business, was with Jason Greenblatt, another Trump lawyer, and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, one of his main emissaries to the Jewish community. Friedman this week briefed the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on what to expect from a Trump presidency.

The Trump transition team's statement said Friedman – who like the incumbent ambassador, Dan Shapiro, speaks Hebrew – intends "to work tirelessly to strengthen the unbreakable bond between our two countries and advance the cause of peace within the region, and look forward to doing this from the U.S. embassy in Israel's eternal capital, Jerusalem."

Congress recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 1995 and mandated the move of the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but successive presidents have exercised a waiver in the law, citing national security interests. U.S. security officials believe that moving the embassy to Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians and Muslims as well as Jews and claimed by the Palestinians as their capital, would precipitate anti-American violence in the region and beyond.

In what has become a feature of transition statements, the release included a dig at the outgoing Obama administration.

"The bond between Israel and the United States runs deep, and I will ensure there is no daylight between us when I'm President," Trump said in the statement. "As the United States' Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman will maintain the special relationship between our two countries."

President Barack Obama increased U.S.-Israel defense and intelligence sharing, but challenged the practice of his two immediate predecessors – Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – of keeping diplomatic disagreements behind closed doors. Early in his administration, Obama told Jewish leaders the policy of "no daylight" had not advanced peace in the region.

Romania's Social Democrats win national ballot with 221 parliament seats

Reuters, December 15, 2016

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-election-parliament-idUSKBN14410Q>

Romania's leftist Social Democrat Party won the most seats in both houses of parliament after a national election and will have a combined 221 deputies and senators, final results unveiled by the Central Electoral Bureau showed on Thursday.

Together with their long-time ally, the ALDE grouping, the PSD has an outright majority of 250 seats out of parliament's 465-seat assembly, which means they will choose the country's next prime minister to replace outgoing Dacian Cioloș.

Alexei Navalny Challenges Putin With 2018 Russian Presidential Bid **Moscow Times, December 13, 2016**

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/alexei-navalny-challenges-putin-with-2018-russian-presidential-bid-56514>

Opposition activist Alexei Navalny has launched his campaign to run for the Russian presidency in the country's 2018 elections.

The former lawyer made the announcement in an online video statement on Tuesday, presenting a six-point manifesto focused on battling corruption, boosting wages and pensions, and reforming the police and judiciary.

It also advocates for greater powers to be given to regional authorities across Russia, better ties with Europe, and an end to Russia's visa-free regime with countries within Central Asia.

"Russia should be a rich, free and strong country," Navalny wrote in his online manifesto. "We have everything we need to make that happen: talented people and natural resources."

"The presidential elections should prompt a discussion about the development of the country," he said. "We need an honest conversation, rather than yet another fake television show. I am ready to prove in a live debate that my manifesto is better than that of my rivals."

Navalny has been barred from holding public office since being found guilty of embezzlement by the Leninsky court in the remote city of Kirov in 2013. He was accused of stealing timber from a state-owned company, Kirovles.

The case, which landed Navalny with a five-year suspended sentence, has been condemned by human rights group as "political" and took place just months after Navalny won 30 percent of the vote in the Moscow mayoral elections.

The Russian Supreme Court overturned the decision in November, opening the way for Navalny's presidential bid. The case now faces a retrial.

And then in Putin's Russia, They Came for the Jews ...

By Paul Goble

Window in Eurasia, December 13, 2016

<http://windowineurasia2.blogspot.com/2016/12/and-then-in-putins-russia-they-came-for.html>

One of the most important warnings to emerge during World War II came from German Pastor Martin Niemöller who said first Hitler's thugs came for the socialists, then the unionists, and then the Jews, but that he didn't say anything because he wasn't one. Then, of course, they came for him and no one was left to say anything.

Putin's thugs are advancing in much the same way, and now they are coming for the Jews, something that the people of Russia should fear and that the apologists for Vladimir Putin and his increasingly vicious regime should be forced to account for now. Because make no mistake, the Putinists are not going to stop there.

On Sunday, as Ekho Moskvyy and various bloggers have reported, activists from the extreme right National Liberation Movement of Russia (NOD) in St. Petersburg beat and denounced as "a kike" David Frenkel who took part in an unsanctioned march in support of gay rights (cursorinfo.co.il/news/xusstr/2016/12/12/neonacisti--policeyskie-i-vrachi-izbili-i-unizili-zhurnalistaevreya-v-rph/ and echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1890432-echo/).

The Russian police did not come to his aid. Instead, in response to his cries for help, they laughed; and then the Russian medical staff at a clinic to which he finally reached on his own treated him with contempt. When he refused to give them the camera he had photographed the NOD meeting with and said they'd get it over his dead body, they replied that was "no problem."

And when Ekho Moskvyy posted its story about this crime, many of those who wrote in to comment said they were on the side of NOD and that Frenkel had simply gotten some of what he deserved. (See a selection of these horrific remarks at echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1890432-echo/comments.html#comments.)

Tragically, the time has come to remember Pastor Niemöller's words. Maybe after all the crimes Putin has committed, those committed to preventing a repetition of the horrors of the 20th century will respond. At least, perhaps, people in Russia and the West will remember the words of another testifier against those evils.

Those words belong to Nadezhda Mandelstam, a Jewish writer who suffered under Stalin. In her memoir, "Hope against Hope," she wrote that "happy is that country in which the despicable is at least despised." Sadly, the number of happy countries seems to be contracting fast.

Those who defend Putin need to be challenged and asked not only how they can do so given the horrific history he seems all too willing to try to bring back and why they think that things like the beating of David Frenkel are is "an isolated incident" they can dismiss. That is what Pastor Niemöller and so many others thought about another dictator.

They were wrong and so too are Putin's admirers and defenders.

Baltic states urge strong U.S. defense commitment to region

Reuters, December 14, 2016

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-baltic-security-usa-trump-idUSKBN14321O>

The defense ministers of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia renewed their call on Wednesday for a strong U.S. engagement in the Baltic region amid concerns over the attitude of the incoming Trump administration.

Donald Trump said during the U.S. presidential campaign that he would consider a country's contribution to the NATO alliance before coming to its defense, rattling many in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia who fear a more assertive Russia.

Estonia meets NATO's defense spending target of two percent of national output, while Latvia and Lithuania say they aim to reach that level in the next few years.

In a statement issued after regular talks on defense cooperation, the defense ministers "expressed the utmost importance of the United States' robust commitment to Baltic states' security".

Latvia's Raimonds Bergmanis, Lithuania's Raimundas Karoblis and Estonia's Margus Tsahkna also urged Washington to ensure "credible deterrence by continuing persistent presence of the United States' forces and pre-positioning in the Baltic states".

In 2015, the United States agreed to pre-position tanks, artillery and other military equipment in eastern and central Europe to speed up an eventual deployment of forces at times of crisis.

In their statement, the three defense ministers said they wanted a long-term allied air and maritime presence in the Baltic Sea region, including the continuation of the enhanced NATO air-policing mission.

The tiny Baltic states, which were ruled by Moscow in communist times, were alarmed by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 and its support for armed pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

EU officials: EU to extend Russia sanctions for 6 months

By RAF CASERT

AP, December 15, 2016

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/eu-officials-eu-extend-russia-171317907.html>

The European Union will extend its sanctions against Russia for six more months to keep pressure on Moscow to respect the fragile peace agreement in Ukraine, EU officials said Thursday.

Two officials said EU nations backed the deal at a summit of EU leaders and the formal decision will be adopted over the next few days. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the decision was not officially made yet.

The extension further underscores the worsening relations between the 28-nation bloc and Russia.

It means restrictive measures targeting Russia's financial, energy and defense sectors, as well as goods that can be used for both civilian and military purposes, remain in force until at least the middle of next year.

The EU imposed sanctions against Russia in July 2014 over Russia's annexation of Crimea and added to them after Russia backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The measure had been widely expected and involves diplomatic measures including canceling top-level meetings, and travel bans and asset freezes on people linked to the annexation of Crimea or believed to be interfering with Ukraine's independence.

The EU leaders on Thursday also strongly criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin for his continued support for Syrian leader Bashar Assad and the air campaign over Aleppo. The sanctions were not linked to this, though.

"I have been talking constantly to Russia, and Russia makes commitments that it is not keeping. Now it is time for us to conclude a cease-fire," French President Francois Hollande told reporters as he arrived in Brussels for the summit.

What Will Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State Mean for Jewish Agenda?

By Ron Kampeas

Forward, December 14, 2016

<http://forward.com/news/breaking-news/356986/what-will-rex-tillerson-as-secretary-of-state-mean-for-jewish-agenda/>

President-elect Donald Trump's pick for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, is the chairman and CEO of Exxon Mobil, an energy company large enough to have its own foreign policy.

It is a policy, however, that doesn't always align with the priorities of Jewish and pro-Israel groups. Oil companies have clashed in the past with the pro-Israel lobby.

"Exxon Mobil has not been a friend to Israel through the years," said Abraham Foxman, the national director emeritus of the Anti-Defamation League, referring to clashes in the 1970s over the Arab boycott of Israel and in the 1990s over the imposition of sanctions on Iran.

Others suggest, however, that fears that Big Oil will tilt U.S. policy against Israel are a thing of the past.

"There was a time that being associated with oil made you automatically deemed hostile when it comes to Israel," said David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "However,

at a time that Israel and Gulf states are quietly pursuing common interests when it comes to enmity toward Iran, the Mideast is no longer zero-sum. Hopefully, oil executives see this shift as much as the Arabs themselves.”

Makovsky recalled how one of President Ronald Reagan’s secretaries of state also had ties to one of the energy industry’s biggest builders of oil, chemical and natural-gas facilities.

“One should recall that when George Shultz came in, people thought his business connection to Bechtel projects in the Gulf made him hostile to Israel, and this did not prove to be the case,” he said. “I think a question Tillerson will be asked at the hearings beyond the focus on Russia is how does someone whose business background made him a skeptic on economic sanctions [against Iran] now be the one who will have to enforce them and even advocate for more in certain instances?”

That focus on Russia will involve scrutiny of Tillerson’s close ties to President Vladimir Putin. Tillerson led the expansion of Exxon’s joint drilling with Russia in recent years and has objected to sanctions imposed on the country over its invasion of Ukraine.

“We are unfamiliar with his larger geopolitical view of the world and America’s place in it,” the American Jewish Committee said in a statement on Tillerson’s nomination late Tuesday. The statement recommended to senators confirming Tillerson six areas of inquiry, including maintaining U.S.-Israel relations, containing Iran, supporting alliances in Europe and Asia confronting radical extremism and supporting human rights.

Morton Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, said his anxiety was allayed to a degree by what he saw as the friendliness to Israel of Trump and his team.

“I had concerns about [Tillerson’s] closeness to Arab countries and to Russia, all of whom have been hostile to Israel,” Klein said. “But then again I wonder because of his close relations and because of President-elect Trump and the pro-Israel people around him, I’m hoping he will use some of these relations and turn their minds around.”

Steve Rosen, the former policy director for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, recalled the 1990s battles with oil companies over sanctioning Iran — but said they were not ideological, and that Tillerson could well change his outlook once he changes jobs.

“It would be a little unnatural if a CEO with a company with material interest in the freedom of his company to engage in profit-making behavior” were to favor sanctions, he said. “Where you stand depends on where you sit.”

As for Trump, his statement Tuesday morning announcing the nomination emphasized Tillerson’s executive skills.

“Guiding operations around the world that include more than 200 offices, Mr. Tillerson knows how to manage a global organization and successfully navigate the complex architecture of world affairs and diverse foreign leaders,” Trump’s statement said. “As Secretary of State, he will be a forceful and clear-eyed advocate for America’s vital national interests, and help reverse years of misguided foreign policies and actions that have weakened America’s security and standing in the world.”

Nevertheless, Tillerson faces a tough nomination fight. And while Jewish groups have largely hesitated to critique Trump’s appointments, they will quietly be asking more than a few questions about Tillerson and what he signals about the president-elect’s foreign policy.

Russian reset

Trump wants to reset relations with Russia, saying it would be better to have them alongside the U.S. rather than rivals. The president-elect has boasted of his mutual admiration for Putin. What does that mean for Syria?

Like most of the world, Israel wants the carnage to end. Unlike Russia, it does not want the outcome to include the empowerment of Russia's ally, the Assad regime. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, for one, says Assad must go. Israel also does not want Iran and Hezbollah — Assad's allies and, effectively, Russia's — to come out of the deal strengthened.

Iran sanctions

Tillerson is on the record saying sanctions on Russia were counterproductive. What about Iran?

It's not clear yet whether Trump is committed to scrapping the Iran nuclear deal or enforcing it more strictly than Obama did. And whatever one's objections to the pact, which swapped sanctions relief for a nuclear rollback by Iran, the Obama team has enhanced sanctions in other sectors, with a special focus on targeting Iran's Lebanon proxy, Hezbollah.

Jewish groups will want to know if Tillerson's opposition to sanctions is a matter of principle, or is he against them because it affects his business now. Had he led Exxon Mobil in the 1990s, would he have joined in the oil industry's fierce opposition to Iran sanctions introduced at that time?

Two states?

Trump says he wants to broker a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians. The Republican Party over the summer, in its convention platform, officially became agnostic about a two-state solution and said it would defer to Israel on whether this is the preferred outcome. Trump's aides have said the same thing. The mainstream and left-wing pro-Israel communities, meantime, remain committed to a two-state outcome.

"We expect senators to question him vigorously to determine whether his views are consistent with decades of bipartisan U.S. support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and with upholding our country's international commitments, such as the successful nuclear agreement with Iran," J Street, the liberal Jewish Middle East policy group, said in a statement.

(The centrist American Jewish Committee became the latest mainstream group to reassert support for the two-state solution, issuing a statement Monday calling it the "only realistic resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as established through direct bilateral negotiations between the parties themselves.")

Through his role at Exxon, Tillerson forged deep and friendly ties in the Arab world. How necessary does he believe a two-state outcome is to a lasting peace? Is he ready to relaunch negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians? The last round, in 2014, ended in a war between Israel and the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, and the rumblings of a third intifada in the West Bank.

Netanyahu has said that the common enmity Israel shares with Arab states against Iran has created an opportunity for a simultaneous deal — a broad peace deal with the Arab states that could encompass the Palestinians. Tillerson has had his ear to the ground in that region. Does he agree?

Human rights and climate change

The Trump transition team in its statements Tuesday about the nomination depicted Tillerson as a petroleum executive who worries about climate change and the effect of big business on impoverished nations. It relayed excerpts from an Associated Press profile that dug up a quote in which Tillerson advocates for "sensible strategies that address these risks [of manmade climate change] while not reducing our ability to progress other global priorities such as economic development, poverty eradication and public health."

The American Jewish World Service was not buying, and referred in a statement to Exxon's alleged role in suppressing scientific evidence of manmade climate change.

“Tillerson’s nomination is deeply disturbing, as he is the leader of one of the world’s largest energy corporations — which has polluted the global environment, developed close relationships with dictators, and used its resources over 40 years to suppress climate science,” said AJWS President Robert Bank.

A big change to U.S. broadcasting is coming — and it’s one Putin might admire

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 9, 2016

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-big-change-to-us-broadcasting-is-coming--and-its-one-putin-might-admire/2016/12/09/6c6d5786-bcb7-11e6-91ee-1addfe36cbe_story.html

For years, members of Congress have fumed about what they regard as ineffective U.S. public diplomacy, including the failure of broadcasting operations such as the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to match the reach and apparent influence of networks such as Russia’s RT and Qatar’s al Jazeera. A frequent and arguably fair focus of criticism has been the [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#), the body created to supervise government-funded media outlets while serving as a firewall between them and the political administration of the day.

A radical change to that system is now coming — and it looks like one that Vladimir Putin and Qatar’s emir might well admire. An amendment quietly inserted into the annual National Defense Authorization Act by Republican House leaders would [abolish the broadcasting board](#) and place VOA, RFE/RL and other international news and information operations under the direct control of a chief executive appointed by the president. The new executive would hire and fire senior media personnel and manage their budgets.

With a confirming vote by the GOP-controlled Senate, President-elect Donald Trump will be able to install the editor of Breitbart News or another propagandist of his choice to direct how the United States is presented to the world by VOA, or how Russia is covered by RL. If Congress’s intention was for U.S. broadcasting to rival the Kremlin’s, it may well get its wish.

The damage to U.S. interests could be considerable. The unique attraction for global audiences of RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia and other outlets is not their skill at presenting the U.S. government line, but their journalistic independence. They were created to be “surrogate media,” news organizations that offered accurate and independent coverage of events in countries where citizens could not depend on their own, state-run media. RFE’s coverage of Communist Europe was vital to the growth of the independent political movements that eventually brought down the system. Radio Free Asia strives to serve the same purpose in China, as does Radio y Televisión Martí in Cuba.

The point of board governance was to prevent direct political interference in programming by the White House, State Department or other agencies. It was a guarantee that for decades has helped to attract journalistic talent to the broadcasting organizations, as well as listeners seeking reliable information. The board of governors had serious problems: Its members served part time, and not all took their duties seriously. But the system’s biggest flaw was remedied three years ago with the creation of a chief executive position.

The new reform, driven by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Edward R. Royce (R-Calif.), enhances that executive’s power and makes him answerable to the White House rather than the bipartisan board. A new advisory panel will be created, but it will be toothless: Its members will also be nominated by the president from a pool provided by Congress.

The Obama administration — perhaps anticipating a Hillary Clinton presidency — supported these changes. Now its outgoing public-diplomacy officials will have to hope that Mr. Trump chooses an executive committed to the U.S. broadcasting tradition of independent and reputable journalism rather than a political loyalist or alt-right ideologue. Either way, there is likely to be an exodus of seasoned professionals from the surrogate broadcasters

as well as VOA — meaning that U.S. international broadcasting, whatever its current deficiencies, is likely to get worse.

Lithuania Braces for Putin ... and Trump

BY Emily Tamkin

Foreign Policy, December 9, 2016

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/lithuania-braces-for-putin-and-trump/>

In the immortal words of [Suga Free](#), and, it would seem, in the halls of power of Vilnius, “If you stay ready, you ain’t got to get ready.”

Lithuania, the largest of the three Baltic states, is trying to make sure it can withstand the double-whammy of an aggressive Russia and a new U.S. president whose commitment to America’s European allies has been lukewarm, at best.

On Thursday, Lithuanian Defense Chief Lieutenant General [Jonas Vytautas Zukas](#) said that the Lithuanian army considers hosting a NATO battalion to be a “priority.” On Friday, the Foreign Ministry tweeted out a [quote](#) by Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius meant to shape the battlefield in the looming (dis)information wars: “Most effective way to counter misinformation is to foster independent media environment.”

They are part of a litany of preparations and pushback, large and small, against a big neighbor that has been behaving badly. If such preparations were already underway because of fears of Russia, concern about the incoming administration of Donald Trump has redoubled Vilnius’s desire to stay ready.

In late October, the country of nearly 3 million released its third manual on preparedness in case of invasion, this version focused specifically on Russia (Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that he could take Lithuanian capital Vilnius in two days). Last month, it suspended a Russian state-owned TV channel for three months over anti-American comments. It has banned Russian constitutional court judges from entering its country for a March 2017 summit of constitutional judges because they support Russia’s 2014 Crimea annexation, a ban Putin called “idiotic.” In recent years, with a little help from the United States, Lithuania has shed much of its energy dependence on Russia.

And, importantly, Lithuania’s leaders vow to spend more on defense, with plans to hit 2 percent of GDP by 2018. Agnia Grigas, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, said that Lithuania — as well as Estonia and Latvia — will need to demonstrate “that they can pull their weight ... and demonstrate the relevance of [NATO] to the skeptical Trump administration.”

America aside, Russia has been behaving badly from the Lithuanian perspective. Last year, unidentified hackers broke into a government research center’s computers, planting information that Lithuania’s president, the generally pro-American Dalia Grybauskaitė, had worked as an escort for the KGB. And Lithuania’s military website was hacked so as to say that a NATO exercise was a plan to annex Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave that borders Poland and Lithuania.

Direct military conflict with a NATO member is probably not in the cards for Russia right now, said Grigas. Instead, she said, “indirect threats, destabilization attempts, information warfare, and efforts to divide the Baltic societies are the more immediate and likely Russian threats.”

Still, Lithuania isn’t forgetting the military dimension. Satellite imagery shows Russia moved additional missiles to Kaliningrad, as NPR reported on Thursday.

All would be a bit less concerning if the next leader of the United States, NATO’s most powerful country, hadn’t telegraphed his disdain for the alliance’s traditional mission and mutual obligations. In the run up to and following

the presidential election, Trump has consistently praised Russian President Vladimir Putin, and said that he wants warmer relations with Russia.

He has also suggested that U.S. support for NATO allies should be contingent on them paying their fair share (the U.S. chunk of NATO expenditures, to be fair, has soared in the last fifteen years.) In 2015, Lithuania spent 1.1 percent of its GDP on defense — less than the 2 percent recommended by NATO. The alliance's critical Article 5, which stipulates that an attack on one member is an attack on all, does not make mutual defense contingent on hitting that 2 percent target.

Estonia and Latvia are doing many of the same things — especially talking up NATO — and have faced many of the same pressures as Lithuania. But Vilnius can do more with less domestic risk because it has the smallest ethnic Russian population, meaning a hard line on Russia is less domestically divisive than it is in Estonia or Latvia. Nevertheless, some ethnic Russians in Lithuania are indeed wary of what their country's line might mean for them.

Vladimir Putin tops Forbes 2016 list of most influential people

By Nadia Khomami

Guardian, December 14, 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/vladimir-putin-donald-trump-forbes-2016-list-most-influential-people>

Vladimir Putin has beaten Donald Trump to top Forbes magazine's annual list of the world's most powerful people, taking the number one spot for the third consecutive year.

The Forbes list, now in its eighth year, identifies 74 people – one for every 100 million on the planet – whose actions have the most impact across the world. Factors taken into consideration include the amount of people a person has power over, the financial resources they control, whether they have influence in more than one sphere, and how actively they wield their power to change the world.

This year, 28 members of the list serve as chief executives of major companies. The top ten of those CEOs – all of whom are American – run firms with a combined market capitalisation of \$3tn (£2.4tn), [Forbes reports](#).

Trump's rise to second from number 72 last year is the biggest ever on the list. Other notable entries associated with him include the vice-president-elect, Mike Pence, at number 69, Rex Tillerson, the outgoing ExxonMobil chief who was selected this week as Trump's nominee for secretary of state, at number 24, and the Blackstone Group CEO, Stephen Schwarzman, who has been appointed to Trump's panel of economic advisers, at number 52. Several Trump donors are on the list as well, including Sheldon Adelson, the CEO of Las Vegas Sands, at number 72, and the Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel at 73.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, remains the most powerful woman, at number 3. The British prime minister, Theresa May, is a new addition to the list at number 13, replacing her predecessor David Cameron, who was ranked at number 8 last year. Barack Obama drops to 48.

Khalid al-Falih, the oil minister of Saudi Arabia, is another newcomer at number 49, as is the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, at number 63. Travis Kalanick, the CEO of Uber, who drove the company to become the richest startup in history, is new at number 64, and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg is the youngest person on the list, at number 10.

"Forbes's list this year of the world's most powerful people reflects rapid and profound change happening around the globe," said David Ewalt, Forbes contributing editor. "The biggest trend this year is likely the rise to power of Donald Trump, as well as the increasing power of his supporters and allies."

Unfolding events in the White House, as well as those in Aleppo and Europe, including Britain's vote to leave the European Union, have made 2016 a significant year for Putin, who has helped reshape the global landscape.

Trump, who last week was named Time's person of the year, has continued to stoke concerns over his relationship with the Russian leader, in part by dismissing CIA reports of Russian intervention in the US presidential election.

A number of appointments by the incoming president, including that of Tillerson, have represented significant gains for Moscow, and members of the US intelligence community recently told the Guardian they even feared reprisals from Trump over their previous assessments of Russia's hostile conduct.

Putin, Trump and the West's new ideological alliance

By Ishaan Tharoor

Washington Post, December 14, 2016

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/14/putin-trump-and-the-wests-new-ideological-alliance/?utm_term=.ad6284336a2d

In a year of surreal political developments, a curious flipping of the script is playing out in Washington: Democrats furious about reports of alleged Russian interference in the American electoral process are the main ones banging the drum about Kremlin perfidy; conservatives, once at the vanguard of the Cold War, are now more circumspect in their criticism of Moscow and, in some instances, rushing to its defense.

Even if the CIA's allegations of deliberate Russian meddling in the American election in Trump's favor prove to be flimsy, a profound new reality is reshaping Western politics.

Soon, governments in Washington and Moscow will be both led by figures who embrace a similar brand of right-wing nationalism, one that harps on the primacy of national sovereignty, invokes myths of a greater past, trumpets Christian values and rejects multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Their ideological brethren have also found firm footing in parts of Europe and threaten to rewind decades of liberal integration on the continent.

Russia under its autocratic president, Vladimir Putin, is not pulling all the strings in this vast, rightward turn. But his government has actively pushed for such a realignment. A November report published by the Atlantic Council outlined how, through a network of media affiliates and political alliances in various European countries, Russia "seeks to infiltrate politics, influence policy, and inculcate an alternative, pro-Russian view of the international order."

The examples are legion. Ultranationalist parties across the continent, from Hungary to Sweden, have been courted by Moscow. France's far-right National Front, whose leader, Marine Le Pen, stands a good chance of winning presidential elections next year, received sizable loans from Russian banks. A leading champion of the populist, anti-establishment move toward Brexit — the nickname for Britain's departure from the European Union — appeared regularly on Russia Today, a state-funded international media company.

In various ways, they all articulate a worldview that rejects globalization and liberal values in favor of a more muscular nationalism at home. This is in line with Moscow's thinking. Le Pen has called for an end to European sanctions on Russia and supported Putin's annexation of Crimea. These far-right parties also operate at a moment where declining trust in national governments and establishment media has led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories, sometimes fueled by groups or leaks linked to the Kremlin.

The ultimate goal, wrote the Atlantic Council's Alina Polyakova, "is to weaken NATO and the EU."

Part of this is a function of Russia's resistance to an American-led world order, a continuation of Cold War rivalries updated for a post-Soviet world. It surfaced in Putin's 2014 power play in Ukraine and is on full display in Russia's successful preservation of a Syrian regime that brutalized its own civilians.

Trump has a stated affinity for Putin. A coterie of his former, current and future advisers have links to the Russian government or have expressed sympathy for its agenda. Trump cheered on Brexit, which signaled the greatest crisis yet for the future of the European project, and heaped skepticism on the viability and importance of NATO, a military alliance that guaranteed the security of much of Europe for more than a half-century.

The potential appointment of ExxonMobil chief executive Rex Tillerson, a man with considerable ties to Russia, as secretary of state reinforces the sense that the Trump White House will abandon some of the more idealistic precepts that underlie — if not always guide — American foreign policy.

“This is a clear sign that U.S. foreign policy will move from principles, values and strategic partnerships towards a more transactional approach,” said Vladimir Milov, a Russian opposition politician, in an interview with Britain’s Guardian newspaper.

But this shift is hardly devoid of its own ideology, either. There are real values that may link a future Trump administration to right-wing, populist parties in Europe and Putin’s Moscow. And they present a radical departure from President Obama’s two terms in office.

Some Republicans are alarmed by Trump’s turn toward Moscow, a perennial foe of Washington hawks. “But many civilizational conservatives,” the Atlantic’s Peter Beinart writes, “who once opposed the Soviet Union because of its atheism, now view Putin’s Russia as Christianity’s front line against the new civilizational enemy: Islam.”

The feverish memes of the so-called alt-right — white supremacists and other figures of the American far right who gained a voice during Trump’s election campaign — champion Putin as a hero of the Christian West. The Russian leader has talked tough on Islamist terror at home while linking his own political legitimacy to Russia’s influential Orthodox Church.

Stephen K. Bannon, the alt-right ideologue tapped to be a senior adviser in Trump’s White House, praised Putin’s ethno-nationalism in a 2014 speech.

While not condoning what he deemed was Putin’s “kleptocracy,” Bannon told a gathering of European conservatives that “we, the Judeo-Christian West, really have to look at what [Putin]’s talking about as far as traditionalism goes — particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism.”

In speeches throughout the past year, Trump spoke in the language of a clash of civilizations, hailing the promotion of “Judeo-Christian” values as part of his foreign policy agenda, while rejecting “the false song of globalism.”

Such rhetoric carries direct echoes of remarks made by Putin, not least during a fiery state-of-the-nation address at the end of 2013, where he defended “traditional” values and attacked the cultural mores of a progressive West. He targeted liberalism’s “so-called tolerance,” deeming it “genderless and infertile” and claiming it “asks us to accept without question the equality of good and evil.”

About the same time, a Kremlin-backed think tank issued a report pointing to nationalist constituencies in the West that were hostile to multiculturalism, allergic to feminism and gay rights, and felt marginalized at a moment when the cultural left seemed to be in ascendance. “Against the backdrop of a difficult economic situation,” the think-tank researchers suggested, this constituency could become a potent political force.

The report’s title: “Putin: World Conservatism’s New Leader.”

“Putin may be seeing the future with more clarity than Americans still caught in a Cold War paradigm,” declared American traditionalist Patrick Buchanan in 2013, who went on to argue that the defining struggle of our age was

between “conservatives and traditionalists in every country arrayed against the militant secularism of a multicultural and transnational elite.”

Three years later, Putin has become a convenient foil — a patriotic strongman who rebuffs the feckless globalist elite — for Trump and his fellow travelers in Europe taking aim at all that supposedly defines the status quo in their countries. A new poll found that Putin's popularity among U.S. Republicans is surging.

“Being pro-Moscow, or at least deviating strongly from the establishment in his attitude to Moscow, is a fantastic raspberry to blow at the Beltway,” wrote Soviet-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev in an essay on how Putin became the “Che Guevara” of the West's anti-establishment right. Others are drawing similar Cold War analogies — linking the current moment to the days of the Soviet “Comintern,” when the Kremlin actively sought to extend its global influence through leftist proxies.

“Throughout the Cold War, Moscow subsidized the leftist fringe in Western Europe,” Mike Lofgren, a former veteran Republican congressional aide, writes. “Now it does the same with right-wing parties there — same tactics, different ideological players.” Except now, the Kremlin may have a friend in Washington.

'Tiger' Israel has wary eye on Iran after Syrian rebels lose Aleppo

By Luke Baker

Reuters, December 15, 2016

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-idUSKBN1441Q2>

The fall of Aleppo to Syrian government forces backed by Russia and Iran has heightened alarm in Israel about potential threats to its borders and a wider reshaping of the region.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left no doubt on Wednesday about the depth of Israel's concern about Tehran, whose position and that of its proxies in Syria has been strengthened by the crushing of rebel resistance in Aleppo.

At a meeting in Astana with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Netanyahu was asked whether he had a message for Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who is scheduled to visit Kazakhstan next week.

"Don't threaten us. We are not a rabbit, we are a tiger," the Jerusalem Post newspaper quoted Netanyahu as telling Nazarbayev. "If you threaten us, you endanger yourself."

Asked by Nazarbayev if he seriously believed Iran wanted to destroy Israel, Netanyahu replied: "Yes, I do."

The more than five-year-old civil war in Syria has enabled Iran, whose Supreme leader has called for an end to the Jewish state, to steadily increase its influence across the region.

Whether via its own Revolutionary Guard forces or Shi'ite Muslim proxies, especially Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, Tehran's reach extends from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean Sea.

As well as concerns about an increased flow of arms now Iran has access to a port on the Mediterranean at Tartus, on the southern Syrian coast, Israel worries Hezbollah, emboldened by Iran's patronage, may launch new attacks on its territory.

There have been isolated border incidents in recent months, and Israel and Hezbollah fought a war in 2006 in which more than 1,000 Lebanese and 160 Israelis were killed. Large populations in Israel and Lebanon were displaced and major infrastructure in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut was destroyed.

While Hezbollah's ranks have suffered in the fighting in Syria -- Israeli officials estimate 1,700 fighters have been killed and 7,000 wounded -- the group has restocked its weaponry and retains an arsenal of at least 100,000 rockets, Israeli and independent analysts say.

In recent weeks, unclaimed airstrikes have targeted southern Syria and near Damascus. Syria has pointed the finger at Israel, which has made no comment. But Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman said last week Israel was working "to prevent the smuggling of sophisticated weapons, military equipment and weapons of mass destruction from Syria to Hezbollah."

WARY OF IRAN

Avi Dichter, the chair of Israel's foreign affairs and defence committee and the former head of the Shin Bet intelligence agency, said Iran had tried several times in the past to move forces into the Syrian Golan Heights, next to territory that Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

Those moves were repelled, Dichter told Reuters. But he said that, with Iran flush with cash and confidence after last year's agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program, it was possible further attempts would be made to test Israel's responses.

"Iran has a strategic plan," he said. "It might bring Iranian troops closer to Israel, either Revolutionary Guards, who are pure Iranians, or others, like Hezbollah or the Basij militia, which might be a very good cover for them."

Beyond the threat from Iran and its proxies, Dichter has warned that Israel, widely thought to be the only nuclear capable state in the Middle East despite maintaining a policy of ambiguity, must not put too much confidence in Russia. The Israeli government sees Moscow as an ally but Dichter says it could shift position if its interests are threatened.

Dichter believes Russia has long-term aspirations in the Middle East which could bring fundamental changes to the borders of the region, depending largely on how incoming U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin interact.

"Those two leaders might not just think but act in order to create what we call a new Middle East," Dichter said.

He called Russia the "supreme decider" in Syria but made clear the immediate concerns were Iran and Hezbollah.

"We have no intention to allow Hezbollah to test their sophisticated weapons because there are no other targets in the Middle East except Israel when Hezbollah and Iran think about an offensive initiative," said Dichter. "By all means Israel is going to stop it, never mind whether by alerts or activities or any other tools."

'Never again' has become an empty phrase: Why we must remember the Holocaust's forgotten massacres

By Robert R. Singer

Haaretz, December 15, 2016

<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-1.759158>

Babi Yar. Ponary. Fort IX. Poinitowa. Piaski. Chernovtsy. Mogilev. Rumbula.

There are few events in history recalled as often and in such detail as the Holocaust, in great part due to the vigilance of Jewish communities in ensuring that its tragic lessons not be forgotten and the memories of its victims be honored. And yet the names of the mass killing grounds above – once ordinary cities, forests, or ravines - are often overshadowed by the horrors of the gas chambers and the infamous death camps which housed them.

When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the systematic operation to wipe out the Jews of Eastern Europe began. Over the next 15 months, SS Einsatzgruppen units methodically moved across the region, rounding up local Jews – often with the help of local police and under the guise of relocation – then brutally massacring them before moving on to the next city, town, or village. More than a million Jews were killed in this "Holocaust of Bullets," in the months leading up to and following the Wannsee Conference, at which the Nazis officially decided on what they termed the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question."

Every day is a day of mourning for the victims of these massacres and others, a day of tragedy for the survivors and their descendants. It would be nearly impossible, on a communal or international level, to hold a commemorative event for every gassing, every stabbing, every shooting, every bombing, and every assault that occurred during the Holocaust.

But we also cannot allow ourselves to forget. Consider the tragic massacres that occurred just this week in Aleppo, so horrifically fresh in our consciousness today. In the years and decades to come, they too may be forgotten, overshadowed by other unthinkable tragedies; they too may become days of mourning remembered just by the victims and their relatives.

We owe it to the victims of the Holocaust, and of all massacres and genocides, to remember them and how they died.

In the countries in which the Einsatzgruppen massacres of 1941-1942 were carried out, where local complicity was frighteningly common, it is particularly imperative for the governments of today to publicly remember and accept responsibility.

Across Eastern Europe we are beginning to see meaningful initiatives of the kind – in Kyiv just over two months ago, the Ukrainian president hosted the World Jewish Congress and thousands of other delegates for the largest commemoration of the 1941 Einsatzgruppen massacre at Babi Yar to date.

Last week, we marked 75 years since two non-consecutive "Aktionen" ("actions"), as the Nazis called these operations, were carried out in the Rumbula forest near Riga, the capital of Latvia. In these "actions," 25,000 Jews were shoved into pits dug by Soviet prisoners of war and shot in the head.

The "actions" began on November 29, 1941, when the first round of 1,000 Jews was transported from Berlin to Riga, as part of the move to make Germany "judenrein" ("clean of Jews"). Himmler's order, according to historians, was to collect the Jews of Riga from the ghetto to be shot dead, and then house the deported German Jews in their place. But when the transport arrived early to Riga, no dwellings were yet available. The German Jews were marched into the forest and murdered there, becoming the first victims of the Rumbula massacre. In the days leading up to the massacre, the local Jews had been divided according to age and gender, with able-bodied men separated, and told to pack their belongings up to 20 kilograms. In the frenetic night before dawn on November 30, the terror began. Survivors recall drunk German and Latvian officers bursting through their doors, hunting down residents, and throwing children out of windows, driving columns of people through holes cut in fences, marching them by the hundreds through midday to the forest site, whipping them with their rifle butts to force them to walk, trot, run faster. Dozens perished on the march itself. In her memoir "I survived Rumbuli," Frida Michelson describes the horrific aftermath: "Corpses were scattered all over, rivulets of blood still oozing from the lifeless bodies. They were mostly old people, pregnant women, children, handicapped - all those who could not keep up with the inhuman tempo of the march."

Just one week later, in the night between December 7 and 8, the second "action" began, and this time, the terrified residents knew their tormentors' intentions. Michelson, who was driven along with the masses on this fateful night, writes: "As we came near the forest, we heard shooting again. This was the horrible portent of our future... Nobody had a doubt as to what awaited us. We were all numb with terror and followed orders mechanically. We were incapable of thinking and were submitting to everything like a docile herd of cattle."

Amid the commotion and barking orders of the German and Latvian soldiers, Michelson threw herself face down in a pit, feigning death; of the 12,000 people driven out of the Riga ghetto that day, only she and two others survived. Another 'action' the next morning claimed the lives of 500 more.

This year, the Latvian government played a large role in commemorating the anniversary of these massacres. President Raimonds Vējonis and parliament Speaker Inara Murniece attended the annual memorial, and, in a first, an unofficial candle-lighting vigil initiated by non-Jewish Latvians was organized on Facebook, with some 500-600 people in attendance.

As in Ukraine, these steps of recognition and commemoration are encouraging; so too is the commitment of most Eastern European countries to combat anti-Semitism and protect the small Jewish communities that remain. Latvia, for example, passed a resolution immediately upon regaining independence in 1991 recalling the Holocaust and denouncing anti-Semitism, and the country's first post-Soviet president Karlis Ulmanis spoke at Yad Vashem in Israel, apologizing for Latvian participation in the Holocaust.

But there is still more work to be done across the region. Governments participating in commemorations of massacres perpetrated on their soil must do more than just remember the Holocaust; they must each acknowledge their countries' complicity, and they must prioritize Holocaust education, of well-known and forgotten events alike. They must testify to the atrocities that can emerge from hatred, and do everything in their power to ensure that such crimes are never again perpetrated under their watch, or that of their successors. The sheer scope of the Holocaust and the precision with which it was implemented was unprecedented, and its relevance in addressing the conflicts of today is indisputable. The words "Never Again," reiterated so often over the last seven decades, have become empty as we witness massacre after massacre, even genocides, in so many parts of the world.

If we cannot remember the forgotten massacres of the Holocaust, we will not remember the forgotten massacres ongoing to this day. And if we don't remember each and every one of those, how can we ever prevent another Holocaust from occurring?

Robert R. Singer has served as Chief Executive Officer and Executive Vice President of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), the leading umbrella organization of Jewish communities around the world, since 2013. Prior to that, he was CEO and Director General of World ORT, the largest Jewish education initiative in the world. Singer was born in Ukraine in 1956 and immigrated to Israel at the age of 15.