



NCSEJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. April 7, 2017

Benefit program for Holocaust survivors launched in Serbia

AP, April 4, 2017

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/benefit-program-holocaust-survivors-launched-serbia-114920594.html>

A program to provide direct funds to Serbian Holocaust survivors all over the world has been launched in Serbia, an international Jewish group said Tuesday.

The program results from laws passed last year in Serbia allowing for the restitution of heirless and unclaimed Jewish property seized during the Holocaust to the Jewish community, The World Jewish Restitution Organization said in a statement.

The statement said the law envisages the government paying 950,000 euros per year (\$1 million) for 25 years to the Federation of Jewish Communities in the country. For at least the first ten years, one-fifth of the funds will be set aside for direct payments to Holocaust survivors, the group said.

"This is a historic step to provide compassion and a measure of justice to Serbian Holocaust survivors more than 70 years after the Nazis declared Serbia free of Jews," said Gideon Taylor, WJRO Chair of Operations.

"We urge other countries to follow Serbia's lead and return heirless Jewish property so that Holocaust survivors in need may benefit during their lifetimes," he added.

The group adds that letters are being sent to 1,000 former Serbian Holocaust survivors in 27 countries throughout the world, including Serbia. The survivors can apply by the end of July.

Tens of thousands of Serbian Jews perished during World War II Nazi occupation. Some 3,000 Jews live in Serbia today.

Scores help reach out to elderly, needy Jews in Ukraine

By Tamara Zieve

Jerusalem Post, April 3, 2017

<http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Scores-help-reach-out-to-elderly-needy-Jews-in-Ukraine-485971>

Ahead of Passover this year, the American Joint Distribution Committee is distributing matzot to elderly Jews in Odessa, Ukraine, at the Beit Grand Jewish Cultural Center's Hesed Shaarei Tzion Welfare organization.

The organization is delivering more than 50,000 boxes of matza to needy Jews throughout the former Soviet Union, as well as offering seder meals, volunteer opportunities, cooking workshops and cultural performances.

The matza operation is a joint effort of scores of volunteers; the JDC; the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews; and the Claims Conference, which works to secure compensation and restitution for survivors of the Holocaust and heirs of victims.

“For generations, JDC has proudly helped Jewish communities celebrate Passover’s enduring message of freedom in the face of oppression,” said the group’s CEO David Schizer.

“Most poignantly, the Jews of the former Soviet Union, whose Jewish identity was almost extinguished, are now observing Passover with enormous vigor, innovative cultural fare, and a focus on ensuring their neediest fellow Jews share in the holiday.”

Navigating High-Stakes Chess Between Israel, Russia and Syria

By Yaakov Lappin

Algemeiner/JNS, April 4, 2017

<https://www.algemeiner.com/2017/04/04/navigating-high-stakes-chess-between-israel-russia-and-syria/>

Just a single day had passed since Israel’s new ambassador to Russia, Gary Koren, presented his credentials to President Vladimir Putin before Koren was called in by the Russian government for a “[clarification](#)” meeting.

The unusual diplomatic event occurred after the Israeli Air Force struck a target deep in northern Syria, likely involving weapons destined for the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah. On their return flight, the jets were [targeted](#) by the Bashar al-Assad regime’s surface-to-air SA-5 missiles, which missed their targets. But as the Syrian missiles fell back to the ground, they were picked up by Israeli air defense radars because one of the Syrian missiles was projected to fall on Israeli territory. In the middle of the night on March 17, residents of the Jordan Valley awoke to a sound they were not used to hearing: air raid sirens.

Israel fired an Arrow 2 interceptor missile to shoot down the Syrian threat — the interceptor’s first-ever operational use — and Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman later [issued](#) a stern warning to the Assad regime, saying a repeat attempt to fire on Israeli jets would result in the destruction of Syria’s air defense batteries.

It was at this point that Koren was invited by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov for a meeting in Moscow, during which Bogdanov reportedly expressed “concern” over recent developments.

Such is the convoluted, high-stakes game of chess being played between Israel, Russia and Syria.

But what does it all mean?

The meeting between Koren and Bogdanov should not be seen in too dramatic a light, said Zvi Magen, the former Israeli ambassador to Russia and a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

“Suddenly, Russia and Syria learned that Israel has good interception abilities. The Russians conducted a diplomatic maneuver, and went for the most minor of options,” Magen told JNS.org, adding that this was a “relatively moderate” way for Moscow to send the message “take our interests into account.”

Soon after Koren was summoned, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed Israel would continue to respond to Syrian threats to its security.

“We attack if we have information and the operational feasibility,” said Netanyahu.

“This is a diplomatic battle, and Israel is not compromising,” Magen said. “Under the table, it is possible that messages are being exchanged about where each side’s red lines are. Russia is trying to be the central mediator, working with the Iranians, with the Israelis and with other regional powers.”

Since joining in Sept. 2015 an Iranian-led coalition to rescue the Assad regime, mainly through air power, Russia’s role in the region has gained prominence.

“Russia is without doubt a very dominant element in the Middle East. It is the only one that can simultaneously speak to all of the quarreling parties and it can certainly fulfill, if it wishes, a restraining role,” Prof. Uzi Rabi, director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, told JNS.org.

Although Russia is fighting on the same side as Israel’s worst enemies, Moscow and Jerusalem effectively communicate and consider one another’s interests, while ensuring military deconfliction in Syria’s skies.

“Israel must continue to take a decisive position — verbally and through actions — and to hold on to its two big no’s: no to the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, and no to the Iranian presence in the Syrian Golan,” Rabi said. “To that end, Israel must maintain a continuous dialogue with Russia, mainly to clarify what is and is not acceptable, so that the agreements in these issues will be formulated, rather than created through unfortunate accidents.”

Magen said it is impossible to separate Israel’s security interests in Syria from the full picture of actors in the war-torn state.

By getting involved in Syria, Magen explained, Russia added a new global power dimension to a situation already defined by multiple wars: the civil war between rebel organizations and the Assad regime, and the war in desert areas against Islamic State.

A third conflict involves heavyweights in the region — Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Israel — each pursuing their interests in Syria, with a clear alignment of Israeli-Sunni-Gulf interests.

The Syrian Civil War, Magen said, is “approaching an end” thanks to Russia’s “smart use of limited power, which got the rebels to agree to negotiate. Separately, Islamic State is being pushed aside.”

Russia is now hoping to create a federal entity in Syria, while providing each regional power — including Israel — with a portion of influence designed to fulfill their key interests, Magen argued. For example, Russia is likely seeking to meet the Israeli and Jordanian interest in creating an Iranian-free zone in southern Syria, although Moscow cannot eject the Iranians from all of Syria.

Israel’s regional military prowess means Russia has no choice but to take Israeli interests into account, Magen believes. Israel can act as “the great spoiler” of Russia’s plans if Jerusalem’s interests are not cared for, he said.

At the same time, Magen said, Russia is trying to meet the interests of Iran and Turkey, while keenly waiting for the Trump administration to formulate its own position on Syria.

Putin rebukes Netanyahu for blaming Assad regime for chemical attack

JTA, April 6, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/04/06/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/putin-rebuked-netanyahu-for-blaming-assad-regime-for-chemical-attack>

Russian President Vladimir Putin scolded Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for blaming Syria’s Assad regime for a devastating chemical weapons attack on civilians.

Russian media Thursday quoted Putin as saying “it was unacceptable to make groundless accusations against anyone without conducting a detailed and unbiased investigation.” Reports cited a Kremlin statement that said Netanyahu initiated the call to Putin.

The attack earlier this week on a rebel-held village killed at least 72 people, including many children.

President Donald Trump, among others, has blamed Bashar Assad's regime for the attack, but Russia has insisted that no blame should be assigned until the attack is investigated. Russia and Syria routinely frustrate attempts by human rights groups to inspect alleged atrocities in Syria.

Putin's direct reproach to Netanyahu and its mention in the official Kremlin statement suggest that Russia is signaling to Israel that it should not take sides in the conflict.

Israel wants assurances that Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, will not have stakes in southwestern Syria, where the country borders Israel, in a final status agreement. Russia, the Assad regime's ally in a bid to crush the rebellion, would be key to making that happen.

Netanyahu's office confirmed to the Israeli media that the call took place but did not elaborate further.

According to RT, the Kremlin-run broadcaster, Netanyahu initiated the call to discuss bolstering efforts to combat terrorism in the Middle East. Both sides "expressed readiness to expand [cooperation] in the interest of assuring stability and security in the Middle East and, first of all, in Syria," RT quoted the Kremlin as saying.

Netanyahu, when he condemned the attack on Wednesday, did not name Assad, but called again for the removal of chemical weapons from Syria. Putin may have been irked by an interview that Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman gave to Yediot Acharonot on Thursday in which he said the attack was made on Assad's direct orders.

Syrian human rights groups say Tuesday's attack in northern Syria killed at least 86 civilians, including 30 children and 20 women. U.S. intelligence, the World Health Organization and Doctors Without Borders all said the attack may have involved a banned nerve agent.

Moscow surprisingly says west Jerusalem is Israel's capital No other country in the world recognizes any part of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

By Herb Keinon

Jerusalem Post, April 6, 2017

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Jpost-Exclusive-Moscow-surprisingly-says-west-Jerusalem-is-Israels-capital-486336>

Russia recognizes west Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated in a surprise announcement on Thursday, obtained exclusively by The Jerusalem Post.

The announcement comes as US President Donald Trump's administration is agonizing over whether to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that would constitute recognizing west Jerusalem as the country's capital. No other country in the world recognizes any part of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry reads, "We reaffirm our commitment to the UN-approved principles for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, which include the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. At the same time, we must state that in this context we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel."

This is a sharp shift in Russian policy, which until now has formally held that Jerusalem should eventually be under a permanent international regime. The statement appears in English on the Russian Foreign Ministry's Russian web site.

While officials in Jerusalem interpreted this to mean that recognition of west Jerusalem as Israel's capital will only come once east Jerusalem becomes the capital of a Palestinian state, The Jerusalem Post has learned that Moscow intends this recognition to go into effect immediately.

Russia's ambassador to Israel will meet with Foreign Ministry officials in the coming days to discuss Moscow's decision and its ramifications. There is currently no intention, however, of moving Russia's embassy to Jerusalem.

Headlined "Foreign Ministry statement regarding Palestinian-Israeli settlement," the statement reads that Moscow "is deeply concerned about the situation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Palestine and Israel have not held political negotiations for nearly three years, and the situation on the ground has been deteriorating."

According to the statement, "The stalling of the Middle East peace process has created conditions for unilateral moves that undermine the potential for an internationally accepted solution to the Palestinian problem, under which two states – Israel and Palestine – could live in peace and security with each other and with their neighbors."

Moscow reaffirmed its "support for the two-state solution as an optimal option that meets the national interests of the Palestinian and Israeli people, both of whom have friendly relations with Russia, and the interests of all other countries in the region and the international community as a whole."

The statement continued that "The concrete parameters of a solution for the entire range of issues regarding the status of Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem, should be coordinated at the direct talks between the parties involved. Using its opportunities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a co-sponsor of the peace process and an active member of the Middle East Quartet of international intermediaries, Russia will continue to provide assistance to the achievement of Israeli-Palestinian agreements."

The statement also said that Moscow will "focus on ensuring free access to Jerusalem's holy places for all believers."

Israel's Foreign Ministry had no immediate reaction to the Russian statement.

One diplomatic official said that timing may be connected to Russia – in the wake of the chemical attacks in Syria – wanting to deflect criticism of being a chief enabler of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Likewise, the official said, it was likely that the statement is Moscow's answer to the apparently rejuvenated US efforts to revive the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process, and a signal that Russia is a relevant party that wants to play an active role in the process.

JDC, partners deliver 10 tons of matzah in former Soviet Union

JTA, April 7, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/04/07/news-opinion/world/jdc-partners-deliver-10-tons-of-matzah-in-former-soviet-union>

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has provided Jews in the former Soviet Union with at least 10 tons of matzah ahead of Passover, the organization said.

JDC has also organized through its various branches and with partners volunteer activities, Seder meals, matzah-baking classes and concerts marking Passover, JDC said in a statement earlier this week.

The matzah deliveries from Kaliningrad near Lithuania to the farthest eastern reaches of Russia are part of an annual partnership between JDC and other groups assisting Jews in the former Soviet space, including the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, or Claims Conference, and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews.

Dozens of volunteers will deliver additional holiday packages and visit homebound elderly as part of JDC's annual Passover preparation, according to the statement.

“The Jews of the former Soviet Union, whose Jewish identity was almost extinguished, are now observing Passover with enormous vigor, innovative cultural fare, and a focus on ensuring their neediest fellow Jews share in the holiday,” said David Schizer, CEO of JDC.

Among the recipients of holiday packages is Nadya B., a 65-year-old in Ukraine with severe heart disease living on a pension of \$44 per month, JDC wrote. The food and medicine support she receives through the Food and Medicine Lifeline program of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. It is delivered by the JDC’s social welfare center in Odessa, where dozens of Jewish seniors in similar circumstances to Nadya will gather to create a community and to celebrate a Seder meal.

The center is part of JDC’s network of offices belonging to the Hesed organization, whose name in Hebrew means “virtue” or “charity.”

The eve of the Passover holiday, when Jews hold traditional seder dinners, this year falls on April 10.

Smith Introduces Bill to Help Combat Anti-Semitism

U.S. Congressman Chris Smith, April 5, 2017

<http://chrissmith.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=400252>

After recently chairing his ninth hearing on anti-Semitism, Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04) today introduced the bipartisan “Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Act” (H.R. 1911) to strengthen U.S. international leadership in the fight against threats to Jewish communities.

Smith authored the provisions of law that created the State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and the Special Envoy to lead it in 2004.

“Jewish communities here and abroad continue to be targeted for hatred and deadly violence. America has a proud bipartisan history of leading the fight against anti-Semitism—a history we must build upon and expand,” said Smith, who has been a champion against anti-Semitism for decades. “The Special Envoy is critical to focusing and redoubling our leadership and this bill enhances the position.”

The legislation follows a bipartisan letter, signed by Smith and 166 other House Members, sent to President Trump last month. The letter urged the President to maintain and prioritize the appointment of the Special Envoy, noting its critical importance in documenting human rights abuses against Jewish communities abroad as well as developing and implementing policies designed to combat anti-Semitism. [Click Here](#) to read the Letter.

Among other key provisions, the bill:

- Elevates the position of Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to the rank of Ambassador
- Directs the Special Envoy to report directly to the Secretary of State
- Prohibits the Special Envoy from being double-hatted with another portfolio of issues
- Emphasizes that the Special Envoy should be a person of recognized distinction in the field of combating anti-Semitism or religious freedom
- Clarifies that Special Envoy shall be the primary advisor and coordinator for U.S. government efforts to monitor and combat anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic incitement in foreign countries

“In 2004, Congress passed my legislation to create the Special Envoy position to match the threats we saw then,” said Smith. “This bill enhances the position to match the threats we see now. The State Department also must ensure that the Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, which the Special Envoy leads, is adequately staffed and resourced.”

The 8 original cosponsors were led by Reps. Brad S. Schneider (IL-10), Peter J. Roskam (IL-06), and Eliot L. Engel (NY-10), and also included Reps. Randy K. Weber (TX-14), Nita M. Lowey (NY-17), Gus M. Bilirakis (FL-

12), Theodore E. Deutch (FL-22) and Marc A. Veasey (TX-33). The legislation is supported by leading Jewish groups, including the Agudath Israel of America, American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith International, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, The Jewish Federations of North America, National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, Orthodox Union, Secure Community Network, Simon Wiesenthal Center, and World Jewish Congress, North America.

Eleven killed in suspected suicide bombing on Russian metro train

By Denis Pinchuk

Reuters, April 4, 2017

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-blast-metro-idUSKBN17519G>

A blast in a St Petersburg train carriage on Monday that killed 11 people and wounded 45 was carried out by a suspected suicide bomber with ties to radical Islamists, Russia's Interfax news agency cited a law enforcement source as saying.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was in the city when the blast struck, visited the scene of the explosion late on Monday night and laid a bunch of red flowers at a makeshift shrine to the victims.

Witnesses said they saw passengers who were bloodied and burned spilling out of the train, the door of which was buckled by the force of the explosion, and lying on a platform while smoke filled the station.

Russia has experienced bomb attacks carried out by Islamist rebels from Russia's North Caucasus region in the past. The rebellion there has been largely crushed, but Russia's military intervention in Syria has now made it a potential target for attacks by the Islamic State group, security experts say.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. Officials said they were treating the blast as an act of terrorism, but there was no official confirmation of any link to Islamist radicals.

Earlier, Russian media broadcast closed circuit television footage of a bearded man they said was being sought by police as a suspect. However, Interfax reported that the man had come forward and been eliminated from inquiries.

The news agency, quoting an unidentified law enforcement source, said that human remains examined at the scene suggested that the blast had been carried out by a suicide bomber. It said the police had identified a suspect with links to radical Islamist groups banned in Russia.

If it is confirmed that the bomb was carried out by radical Islamists, the Kremlin is likely to argue the attack underlines the importance of its campaign in Syria, where it is backing President Bashar al-Assad in a fight against Islamist militants.

However, some sections of Russian society could see the metro bombing as proof that Putin's decision to intervene in Syria has again made Russian civilians into targets.

Two years ago, Islamic State said it had brought down a plane carrying Russian tourists home from a Red Sea resort. All 224 people on board the flight were killed.

U.S President Donald Trump offered his condolences to Putin in a phone call late on Monday, the White House said in a statement, offering the support of the U.S. government. The two leaders "agreed that terrorism must be decisively and quickly defeated", the statement said.

China also condemned the attack, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi offering condolences and support in a statement that said "China resolutely opposed all types of terrorism".

Israel sends condolences, support to Russia following deadly subway bombing

JTA, April 3, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/04/03/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/israel-sends-condolences-support-to-russia-following-deadly-subway-bombing>

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent condolences to Russian President Vladimir Putin after at least 10 people were killed in a bombing attack on a St. Petersburg subway.

"On behalf of the Government of Israel, I send condolences to President Putin and to the families of those who were murdered following today's bombing on the St. Petersburg subway," Netanyahu wrote Monday in a statement hours after the afternoon blast, which also injured dozens more. "The citizens of Israel stand alongside the Russian people at this difficult time."

The homemade bomb filled with shrapnel detonated in a moving subway car after Putin had arrived in his hometown for a visit. A more powerful bomb was discovered later at a nearby train station and defused.

The attack shut down the entire subway system in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Poland accuses Russian air traffic controllers over Smolensk plane crash

By Marcin Goettig

Reuters, April 3, 2017

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-smolensk-kaczynski-idUSKBN175152>

Polish prosecutors said on Monday they would press charges against two Russian air traffic controllers of deliberately contributing to a 2010 plane crash that killed Poland's president and 95 other people.

The crash near Smolensk in western Russia killed the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his wife, as well as the central bank chief, top army commanders and several lawmakers.

An inquiry by the previous government returned a verdict of pilot error, but the ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party led by Kaczynski's twin brother Jaroslaw, has said the crash may have been caused by an explosion on board.

The prosecutors said on Monday that a new analysis of recordings of conversations between the pilots and Russian controllers justified pressing the charges.

"An analysis of the evidence ... has allowed prosecutors to formulate new charges against air traffic controllers, citizens of the Russian Federation," Polish Deputy Prosecutor General Marek Pasionek told a news conference.

Referring to the accusations, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Monday that circumstances of the tragedy have already been thoroughly studied and it was "certainly not possible to agree with such conclusions".

Russia has so far refused to return the wreckage of the jet to Poland, a member of NATO and the European Union, citing its own continuing investigation.

The accusations of the Polish prosecutors, whom the PiS brought under direct government control, are likely to worsen relations with Moscow - already strained over the conflict in Ukraine - and increase tensions within Polish society.

The previous Polish government's report indicated that Smolensk traffic controllers unintentionally contributed to the crash, charges Moscow had dismissed as false. A Russian report into the crash puts the blame squarely on the Poles.

The Polish prosecutors said on Monday that a re-opening of the victims' coffins, which had been sealed in Russia, has revealed that in two cases remains were in the wrong coffins and in five coffins there were fragments of other bodies.

The crash was the worst such disaster in Poland since World War Two and left society deeply divided over its causes.

A transcript of conversations from the plane's cockpit leaked by Polish media in 2015 showed that members of the president's entourage urged the pilots to land despite heavy fog.

But many Poles were shocked with video footage showing Russian workers pushing around large parts of the wreckage with excavators, cutting cables and carelessly throwing smaller pieces into a heap on a truck.

The crash took place as pilots attempted to land a Soviet-made TU-154 at a rarely used airport near Smolensk to take part in commemorations of 22,000 Polish officers executed there by Soviet secret police in 1940.

Lithuania says Russia has ability to launch Baltic attack in 24 hours

By Andrius Sytas

Reuters, April 3, 2017

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lithuania-russia-idUSKBN1750Z0>

Russia has developed the capability to launch an attack on the Baltic states with as little as 24 hours' notice, limiting NATO's options to respond other than to have military forces already deployed in the region, Lithuania's intelligence service said on Monday.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, annexed by the Soviet Union in the 1940s but now part of both NATO and the European Union, have been increasingly nervous since the Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014.

The Lithuanian intelligence service said in its annual threat assessment that Russia had upgraded its military in the Kaliningrad region last year, reducing lead times for any attack and potentially preventing NATO reinforcements.

The Russian upgrade included Su-30 fighter aircraft and missile systems allowing ships to be targeted almost anywhere in the Baltic Sea.

"This is a signal to NATO to improve its decision speed," Lithuanian Defence Minister Raimundas Karoblis told reporters on the sidelines of the presentation of the report. "NATO's reaction time is not as fast as we would like it to be."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the concerns as a display of anti-Russian sentiment.

"There is total Russophobia, hysterical Russophobia going on," he said at a daily conference call with reporters.

"Moscow has always supported good relations with the Baltic states," he said.

This year NATO is deploying a force of about 1,000 soldiers in each of the Baltic states and Poland, in addition to smaller contingents of U.S. troops already in the region.

"The force is adequate in the short-term, but in the medium-term perspective we would like more capability, and not only land troops but also air defenses and capabilities to counter any blockade," Karoblis said.

Russia is monitoring and suppressing radio frequencies used by NATO pilots over the Baltic Sea and is using commercial and scientific ships for surveillance, the report said.

The intelligence service said there was also the risk of "deliberate or accidental incidents" involving Russian and Belarusian troops who are taking part in military exercises planned for March.

The Baltic states have previously said they would press the United States and NATO to take additional security measures in the region ahead of the exercises.

Intelligence officers said disinformation aimed at discrediting NATO soldiers stationed in Lithuania, such as a recent false report of a rape by German soldiers, was likely to persist.

"Provocations against NATO units in Lithuania will continue and will get bigger," Remigijus Baltrenas, head of Lithuanian military counterintelligence, told reporters.

Tillerson Moscow Visit Set For April 11-12

RFE/RL, April 5, 2017

<http://www.rferl.org/a/tillerson-moscow-visit-russia-lavrov/28412479.html>

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will visit Moscow on April 11-12 for talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

Russia's Foreign Ministry announced the trip -- Tillerson's first to Moscow since becoming the top U.S. diplomat -- on April 4.

It was unclear whether Tillerson will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The statement said the talks will focus on global security, Syria, North Korea, Ukraine, and other issues.

It added that Russia has "positively evaluated the new U.S. administration's efforts to improve ties" with Moscow.

U.S. President Donald Trump campaigned on pledges to improve strained relations with Russia. However, his administration has been dogged by accusations of improper contacts with Russia, which are currently the subject of several investigations.

Tillerson's visit comes as relations have been strained by an apparent chemical-weapons attack in Syria that the United States and others have blamed on the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Moscow has stood by its Middle Eastern ally and asserts Syrian warplanes struck a factory on the ground where chemical weapons were stored.

European Parliament Approves Visa-Free Travel For Ukrainians

RFE/RL, April 6, 2017

<http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-eu-parliament-approves-visa-free-travel/28414216.html>

The European Parliament has approved visa liberalization for Ukraine, a crucial step toward enabling Ukrainians to travel to the European Union without obtaining visas.

The measure passed on April 6 by a vote of 521 to 75, with 36 EU lawmakers abstaining.*

EU member states must also approve visa liberalization for Ukraine before the measure enters into force.

Ambassadors representing the 28 EU member states are expected to approve the deal when they meet in Brussels on April 26, and EU sources have told RFE/RL that EU ministers are expected to rubber-stamp the decision on May 11.

The deal would be sealed in a signing ceremony expected shortly after that.

Diplomats have expressed hope that the visa-free regime will enter into force in mid-June.

The decision will apply to all Ukrainian citizens who have biometric passports, including residents of the areas of eastern Ukraine controlled by Russia-backed separatists and of Crimea, the Ukrainian region that Russia illegally annexed in 2014.

Many in Ukraine, which saw Russia seize Crimea in 2014 and has been mired in a deadly conflict with Russia-backed separatists in the east for three years, see the visa deal as a symbol of closer ties to the EU.

The decision will apply to all Ukrainian citizens who have biometric passports. They will be able to enter most EU member states for up to 90 days during any 180-day period.

Visa-free travel to the EU for citizens of Georgia, another former Soviet republic under pressure from Russia, began on March 28.

Aleksandar Vucic scores solid victory in Serbian election

By Andrew Byrne

Financial Times, April 2, 2017

<https://www.ft.com/content/c320b1cc-17fc-11e7-a53d-df09f373be87>

Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vucic won an emphatic victory in Sunday's first round presidential elections, according to election analysts, avoiding a second round run-off and underlining his dominance of the country's political scene.

Preliminary results from the poll indicated Mr Vucic won 55.7 per cent of votes cast, far ahead of his nearest competitor among 10 rivals, former ombudsman Sasa Jankovic, who polled 15.6 per cent, according to the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy. Official counts were ongoing on Monday evening.

Mr Vucic's win cements his reputation as the pivotal political leader in the Balkan region and although the office of president is largely ceremonial, he is widely expected to retain strong influence over Serbia's government after moving to the presidential palace.

"I got 12 per cent more votes than all the other candidates put together," Mr Vucic told reporters at a press conference organised by his Serbian Progressive Party on Sunday night.

"When you have results like this, there is no instability — Serbia is strong and it will be even stronger," he added.

Sunday's result marks Mr Vucic's third electoral win in four years and came after blanket media coverage of his campaign in all major media — almost all major national newspapers were on Wednesday wrapped in his campaign advertisements.

His political career has been marked by contrasts — a former radical nationalist and information minister in the government of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, he has since co-operated with EU-led efforts to normalise

relations with neighbouring Kosovo and expressed shame over Bosnian Serb war crimes. While he targets EU membership for Serbia by 2020, he has also built close ties with Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Johannes Hahn, the EU's enlargement commissioner, congratulated Mr Vucic with a tweet describing the victory as "convincing".

"Looking forward to working with new president as partners and friends on EU accession, Serbia and EU," Mr Hahn wrote on Twitter.

Mr Vucic said "crystal clear" victory was an endorsement of the EU reform path his government has pursued, but also an indication of support for "preserving traditional friendships that we have with both Russia and China".

Ruling Republican Party Wins 'Tainted' Armenian Elections

RFE/RL, April 3, 2017

<http://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-vote-parliament-sarkisian-tsarukian/28404992.html>

Official results indicate that President Serzh Sarkisian's ruling Republican Party of Armenia has won about half the votes cast in parliamentary elections that international observers said were "tainted" by reports of vote-buying and pressure on voters.

The Central Election Commission said on April 3 said that with ballots counted from almost all precincts in the April 2 vote, the Republican Party had won 49.15 percent and the center-right Tsarukian alliance, led by Russia-friendly tycoon Gagik Tsarukian, had 27.37 percent.

Republican Party (HHK) spokesman Eduard Sharmazanov told a news conference that the results meant the party "has every chance of forming the new government" in the South Caucasus state, which is set to shift to a parliamentary system of rule next year.

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other groups said the vote was "tainted by credible information about vote-buying" and pressure on voters, according to a statement posted on the OSCE website.

It said the interference "contributed to an overall lack of public confidence and trust in the elections."

The pro-Western opposition alliance Yelk (Way Out) got 7.78 percent of the vote, enough to secure entry into parliament, the election commission said.

It said the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (HHD-Dashnaktsutjun), a nationalist party that is currently in a ruling coalition with the Republicans, was also on track to win seats, with 6.58 percent.

Turnout was 60.86 percent, the election commission said.

The Tsarukian alliance and the HHD are potential coalition partners for Sarkisian's HHK if it does not win enough votes to form a government on its own.

Nine parties and alliances were seeking seats in parliament in a campaign that focused mostly on economic difficulties in the country of 3 million.

Gross domestic product (GDP) growth dropped from 3 percent in 2015 to 0.2 percent last year in the former Soviet republic, whose economy is heavily dependent on Russia.

Under constitutional changes approved in a 2015 referendum, the Armenian prime minister's office will become more powerful while the presidency is to become a largely ceremonial post elected by parliament.

Those changes are due to take place when Sarkisian's second and final term ends in 2018. Critics charge that they were designed to allow him to stay in power beyond the presidency's two-term limit.

Sarkisian denies that. But if the ruling party wins enough votes to control a parliamentary majority, either alone or in a coalition, he could continue to exercise executive power as prime minister.

He also could maintain clout by staying on as leader of his party, or he could exert influence through a handpicked successor.

Hungary passes law targeting Soros-founded university, U.S. 'disappointed'

By Gergely Szakacs and Marton Dunai

Reuters, April 4, 2017

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-soros-parliament-idUSKBN17619Q>

Hungary approved a new law on Tuesday that could force a university founded by financier George Soros out of the country despite protests against the plan in Budapest and condemnation abroad.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a critic of liberal civil organizations funded by Soros, said last week the Central European University had violated regulations in awarding diplomas, an allegation the college rejects.

The law, which the government says is designed to address the administrative shortcomings of foreign universities, marks the latest clampdown on independent institutions that has seen Orban allies increase their influence over the judiciary, the media and the central bank.

U.S. and European leaders have spoken out in defense of the university and of academic freedom in general.

After the law was passed in parliament, thousands of students, professors and civilians held a rally, surrounding the central blocks in downtown Budapest that are also home to the headquarters of the CEU.

Protesters shouted "Free country, free university" and held up banners saying "Veto", referring to the new legislation.

Orban's human affairs minister told parliament earlier that institutions backed by Soros were trying to undermine the government.

"The organizations of George Soros operating in Hungary and around the world are just such pseudo-civilian agents, and we are committed to stamping out such activity," Zoltan Balog said.

CEU, founded in Budapest in 1991, has 1,400 students. It said it operated lawfully. The school will challenge the law's constitutionality and mount an international campaign to convince Orban's government to reverse course, CEU Rector Michael Ignatieff told a press conference.

Ignatieff spoke from Washington DC, where he is meeting lawmakers and government members, including Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Shannon.

"We will respectfully ask the president of Hungary to exercise his constitutional responsibility (regarding) the legislation," he said.

"In the fight to save CEU we are fighting for the academic freedom of all Hungarian institutions of higher learning."

LOCAL PROTEST, INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Thousands of students, professors and supporters rallied in Budapest already on Sunday demanding the government withdraw the draft legislation.

The new law sets several requirements that could force the CEU to leave Hungary.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier urged the European Parliament on Tuesday to defend human rights, specifically citing CEU.

"Europe should not remain silent, if civil society, even science – we are seeing now at the Central European University in Budapest – is being stifled," Steinmeier said.

The Council of Europe, Europe's leading human rights organization, said it was following developments.

Under the law, foreign universities must have campuses in Budapest and their home country. The CEU operates in Budapest but is the only international college with no overseas branch.

Foreign universities can henceforth only award degrees in Hungary if its government and, in CEU's case, the United States sign an accord on the matter within six months of the law taking effect.

The top U.S. diplomat in Hungary said Washington was "disappointed by the accelerated passage of legislation targeting Central European University."

"The United States will continue to advocate for its independence and unhindered operation in Hungary," chargé d'affaires David Kostelancik said.

Hungary's Foreign Ministry said it had summoned the German and US chargé d'affaires for Wednesday saying the new law was only meant to ensure all universities obey the laws, and "any statements to the contrary are false."

Watchdog report: 'Breakdown of democracy' in Poland, Hungary

By Vanesa Gera

AP, April 4, 2017

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/watchdog-report-breakdown-democracy-poland-hungary-103426371.html>

U.S.-based pro-democracy group Freedom House said Tuesday that a "spectacular breakdown of democracy" has been taking place in Poland and Hungary, two countries that stood as models of democratic change after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

Hungary now has the lowest democracy score in Central Europe, and Poland's score is falling, the watchdog organization said in a report. It cited attacks by populist leaders in both countries on constitutional courts and the system of checks and balances, as well as the transformation of public media into "propaganda arms."

"The spectacular breakdown of democracy in these countries should serve as a warning about the fragility of the institutions that are necessary for liberal democracy, especially in settings where political norms have shallow roots and where populists are able to tap into broad social disaffection," the report said.

The downward spiral began with the election in 2010 of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his ruling Fidesz party, according to the report. Together, they have re-written the constitution, taken over the courts, eroded critical media, attacked civic society and stoked anti-migrant feelings, Freedom House said. Orban himself has declared that he is building an "illiberal democracy" modeled on Russia, China and Turkey.

The civic society attacks played out dramatically Tuesday, when Hungarian lawmakers approved a bill targeting Central European University. The university in Budapest is funded by George Soros, the liberal Hungarian-American billionaire whom Orban sees as an ideological foe.

Poland's ruling Law and Justice party, under the leadership of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, has taken similar steps since assuming power in 2015, eroding the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and turning public media into a propaganda outlet for the party.

"Despite their apparent maturation, the media, the judiciary, and institutions of democratic representation in Poland and Hungary have turned out to be quite vulnerable," the report said.

The Hungarian government rejected the report's conclusions.

"Freedom of the press fully prevails in Hungary. Every political opinion can find room and be published in the Hungarian press. Hungarian citizens can exercise their democratic rights in free elections," the government press office said in a statement.

It also sought to undermine Freedom House by alleging it is financed by Soros, adding: "The Hungarian government is not surprised that an institution supported by Soros is attacking Hungary."

Freedom House spokesman Robert Ruby told The Associated Press that the organization received no funds from any Soros-backed institution in 2016 and 2017, and that "the last such grant was received in 2015, for an amount that was less than 0.5 percent of the organization's budget."

Freedom House made its assessment in its yearly "Nations in Transit" report, which evaluates the state of democracy in 29 formerly communist countries from Central Europe and the Balkans to Central Asia.

It found backsliding on democracy across much of this region but also noted Ukraine, Romania, and Kosovo had made "modest gains."

Could Israel's Actions Mean Russian Jews End Up as Putin's Hostages?

By Lev Stesin

Haaretz, April 2, 2017

<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-1.780186>

Israel may face an unexpected constraint to its attacks on Hezbollah weapons convoys in Syria: Fear of a backlash against Russia's always potentially vulnerable Jewish community.

"If a gun is on the mantle in the first act, it must go off in the third," the ever-relevant Anton Chekhov assures us. Russia's surprising, almost theatrical, entrance into the Syrian quagmire has produced a story line of which the famous novelist would definitely be proud. The plot thickens every day with all participants scheming against each other and sudden unexpected alliances arising and falling apart with astonishing speed.

In this drama, the interests of Russia and those of Israel are in direct conflict with each other. Only wishful thinking would dissuade an astute observer from a logical conclusion that the clash is inevitable.

Russia has inserted itself into the Syrian civil war with one purpose only: to preserve President Assad with all tools available at its disposal. Why the fate of this archaic and unstable regime is so important for Putin is irrelevant. Whether it is safeguarding the Mediterranean naval bases in Tartus, projecting the ability and the will to use force or just showing West's inability to act resolutely does not matter.

What matters is the Kremlin's resolve to keep the Alawite clan in power, and if that requires supporting Iranian elements such as Hezbollah or Iran directly, so be it. Moscow is not interested per se in bolstering Shiite power,

but if that's what it takes to preserve the Damascus regime, then such by-product is tactically permissible. All of Moscow's diplomatic moves in the region are directed towards its own strategic goals. Russia's desire to placate Israel and create a veil of normalcy is designed to keep a potential spoiler of its plans complacent and limited in options.

Israel, to its credit, is not easily misled into becoming a "useful idiot", to use Lenin's terminology. It understands Russian's design. However, given the size of the adversary, Israel is limited in its options. Wisely, Netanyahu has decided to play the game and negotiate a minimum amount of security requirements. Israel has no better option than to play for time. Given recent Russian history and its current internal centrifugal forces, it is not beyond impossible to imagine the country disappearing suddenly from the world stage by going into a deep internal crisis yet again. However, to base one's strategy on that, unlikely as a near-term scenario, would be highly imprudent, to say the least.

The recent admission by Israel of a bombing raid near Damascus, the firing of anti-aircraft missiles by the Syrian army and the subsequent summon of the Israeli Ambassador to Russia, testifies to the unraveling of this loosely tied knot. Especially telling is the event is taking place only weeks after Netanyahu's visit to Moscow. Given the fluidity of the situation in Syria, it was only a matter of time before such an incident would take place. Israel has no choice but to act in its own interest to prevent game-changing weapons reaching Lebanon and disappearing there until the next war. Israel has clearly stated it will go the mile to prevent Iran from acquiring a permanent footing on the border with Israel. These well-vocalized 'red lines' come in direct conflict with Russia's current moves.

Nevertheless, Israel will try to preserve the status quo, still incomparably better than a confrontation (whether military or diplomatic) with Russia. However, the question arises what will happen next time, if or when a Hezbollah convoy contains Russian equipment or manpower, or if Russian lives are lost in collateral damage. Such scenarios aren't easily contained or predictable (the Russian jet shut down by Turkey's air force was not part of Putin's calculus early in the campaign). Israel would try to deescalate the situation as fast as possible. However, in its dealings with Russia, Israel has another constraining aspect: the Russian Jewish community.

Israel, being the Jewish state with a self-declared mandate of responsibility for Jews worldwide, cannot act in disregard to the fate of one of the largest Diaspora Jewish communities. Given the high profile of many Jews in today's Russia, a potential backlash from a confrontation with Israel cannot be underestimated. There are strong forces in the Russian society ready to unleash the worst kind of anti-Semitism. The government has been keeping them in check (like wild animals in a zoo), but could as easily set them loose, as it has shown no reservations elsewhere in using the worst human instincts in achieving immediate political goals.

The proverbial gun has not fired yet. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine how Russia and Israel's conflicting interests won't lead to a worsening relationship or even a direct confrontation. More robust direct U.S. involvement in Syria (and there are already signs of that taking place) may prevent the situation from deteriorating. However Israel, and Russian-speaking Jews in particular, should prepare for the day when the red stars still painted on the wings of Russian jets are viewed through the gun scopes. Anton Chekhov was a master of irony. This one would not escape him as well.

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Is Russian the new Yiddish?

BY CATHRYN J. PRINCE

Time of Israel, April 7, 2017

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/is-russian-the-new-yiddish/>

OOnce upon a time, hearing Yiddish on the street corners of the Lower East Side was as ubiquitous as a chocolate egg cream. Not any more.

“Russian is becoming the Yiddish of now. Russian is the global lingua franca of the Jewish Diaspora,” said Dr. David Shneer, the Louis P. Singer Chair in Jewish History, at University of Colorado, Boulder.

In 1900 more than 5 million Jews lived within the borders of the Russian empire. Today, in 2017, there are four times as many Russian-speaking Jews living outside the former Soviet Union than within.

Russian-speakers account for 20% of US Jews, 25% of Canadian Jews, 18% of Israeli Jews and 80% of German Jews, said Shneer. That means Jews in the Diaspora are far more likely to speak Russian than Yiddish.

But while the shared language has changed, the reason for it has not — it’s a way to connect with Judaism, while keeping certain memories of the old country alive.

“They want to speak Russian with their children because they want to pass on ties with the old country, it’s a language they associate with their Judaism,” Shneer said.

For these immigrants, the Russian language links them to Judaism, particularly where in the US, Germany, and Israel they might not be seen as Jewish enough. They are not native Yiddish speakers, and while some might use Yiddish words, most don’t keep kosher and rarely attend synagogue or join a Jewish organization.

That last point is important, said Dr. Anna Shternshis, the AI and Malka Green Associate Professor of Yiddish and Diaspora Studies at the University of Toronto.

“Whether they landed in the US, Germany, Israel or elsewhere, a key feature of the Russian-speaking Jewish community is the idea that Jews can stay Jewish without being religious. But for them the Russian language is the language of Russian-Jewish culture,” she said.

Shternshis said Russian-speaking Jews also teach their children Russian for reasons that have nothing to do with Judaism.

Of the nearly 60,000 Russian-speaking Jews who live in Canada, most are fluent in both Russian and Hebrew. That’s because most spent about 10 years in Israel before moving to North America.

But parents stress Russian over Hebrew because it is seen as being more useful, allowing for more social mobility, said Shternshis.

Russian-speaking Jews left the former Soviet Union in three waves. The first wave came during the late 1970s at the height of détente. Most who left had an Israeli visa, and while some did go to Israel, the majority came to the US via Vienna and Rome. During the second wave, in 1980, after the Red Army invaded Afghanistan and the Americans boycotted the Olympics, the door slammed shut. The third wave then came those after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It’s a migration that has radically impacted the social, cultural and political make up of many countries — particularly the United States, Israel and Germany, according to the 2016 book “The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-speaking immigrants in the United States, Israel and Germany.”

“It definitely is a mark of Jewishness,” said Dr. Rebecca A. Kobrin, Russell and Bettina Knapp associate professor of American Jewish History at Columbia University.

“Most of the people who emigrated from Russia and Ukraine are Jewish and so speaking Russian marks them. That’s how they think of themselves. There is the joke ‘In Russia we are Jewish and in America we are Russian.’ It speaks to the notion that Russian is a language that binds them,” she said.

In each wave different political and cultural influences shaped the way they related to the new world.

While Shneer said it's too early to determine how impactful the most recent wave of emigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union will be on American culture, he doesn't think it will have the same kind of impact that Yiddish-speaking Jews had 100 years ago. This is mostly because the context is different, both in the societies from which they were leaving and to which they were arriving.

Much of the reason Yiddish made such an impression on American culture is because Yiddish speakers were involved in vaudeville, television, literature and movies, Kobrin said.

"They'd use comical [Yiddish] words and then they're entered into the vernacular," she said. "If Gary Shteyngart is multiplied, than we'll start to have borrowed Russian words."

Still, in time, Russian as a spoken language for this new Diaspora may well go the way of Yiddish, Kobrin said.

"That's the question isn't it?" she said. "It's an issue of time."

Bukharian Jews face new, uniquely American challenges

By Rachel Delia Benaim

JTA, April 5, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/04/05/news-opinion/united-states/bukharian-jews-now-americans-face-new-set-of-challenges>

The restaurants are packed on the wide boulevard in the Queens borough of this city known as the Bukharian Broadway.

At Da Mikelle, one of many kosher eateries featuring Bukharian cuisine, families crowd the dining rooms to mark the occasion of a yushvo, the anniversary of a loved one's death.

Down the road, the Beth Gavriel synagogue and community center is obscured by scaffolding and construction cones. Inside, dozens of men sit late on a Monday night hunched over volumes of Talmud and Torah, their animated discourse filling the study hall. In the main sanctuary, prayer books and Bibles in Hebrew and Russian translation line the shelves. Once the construction is complete, the community will have a new multipurpose center that will include mikvah ritual baths, expanded prayer rooms and events space.

"We have four minyanim on Shabbat — three of them youth services," boasted Yaniv Meirov, the executive director of a community organization Chazaq, which runs some programming for young adults at Beth Gavriel.

The construction, bustling restaurants and lively study sessions are all signs of the growing size and significance of New York's Bukharian Jewish community.

"We had only one synagogue 30 years ago. Now we have 40," said Rafael Nektalov, editor in chief of the community weekly, Bukharian Times. "While other Jews who lived here moved away to Long Island or Miami, Bukharian Jewish people saved the face of Orthodox Jewry in Queens."

Once fledgling, the Bukharian community in New York now makes up the largest concentration of Bukharian Jews outside of Israel with an estimated 50,000 members in Queens, according to communal leaders. They have their own schools, restaurants, a museum, a newspaper and a cemetery. A community radio station is scheduled to launch in April.

Queens alone has some half-dozen Bukharian schools, not counting regular Jewish day schools with large Bukharian student populations. Beth Gavriel's school, Sha'arei Zion, has more than 600 students. The boys high school is bursting at the seams, and a high school for girls is slated to open next year.

All the growth is bringing about another major change for the community. Long marked by insularity, the Bukharian Jewish community is building new bridges with the broader American Jewish community in an effort to confront a new set of challenges. Whereas a generation ago the newly immigrant community's main struggle was adapting to life in America, today the community is facing the challenges of how to maintain its distinct Jewish identity, pay for Jewish day school and keep kids engaged while their parents are at work.

"Here in the United States we have freedom of speech, freedom of religion – everything is freedom everywhere," said Imanuel Rybakov, 34, a young community leader who teaches a Jewish studies course at Queens College titled "History and Culture of the Bukharian Jews."

"We're successfully integrating into American Jewish society," Rybakov said. "But at the same time we're losing a lot of our ethnic culture based on Central Asian customs and culture."

Bukharian Jews got their name and distinct cultural identity from the Emirate of Bukhara that once stretched over swaths of modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Most of the Bukharians who immigrated to the United States came from Uzbekistan, and many originally were from the city of Bukhara, which was formerly part of the Persian Empire.

A trickle of Bukharian immigration to New York began in the early 1970s, but it turned into a wave after the fall of the Soviet Union, transforming parts of Queens into a distinct ethnic enclave now known more broadly as Queensistan. Many shop signs throughout Forest Hills and the adjacent Rego Park neighborhood are in English and Russian. Many community members speak Bukharian, a Persian dialect, in addition to Russian.

The synagogue is the locus of communal life for many of these Sephardic Jews. Among the numerous Bukharian shuls in Queens are homes that have been repurposed into synagogues and minyans that meet in private homes. Although many Bukharian Jews in the United States are not strictly Orthodox, they are overwhelmingly traditional and favor Orthodox synagogues over non-Orthodox ones.

"Bukharian Jews were stripped of their religiosity in the former Soviet Union," Meirov said. "But when they came to America they clutched to the traditions."

Perhaps more than anything else, the tight-knit community has been held together through the bonds of marriage. Few wed outside the Bukharian community, and marrying out of the faith is exceedingly rare.

"We're all friends, we're all family," said Rabbi Ilan Meirov, Yaniv's older brother and one of the rabbis at Beth Gavriel.

In recent years, stresses on the community have increased. With their growing Jewish student population, the community is straining under the weight of parochial school tuition fees and concerns about youth engagement. There is mounting concern about the threat of drug and alcohol abuse – problems that did not exist back in Bukhara, community members say. Several weeks ago, four young people from the community died of drug overdoses, according to Nektalov, the newspaper editor.

These challenges have prompted the Bukharian community to look outward as never before. In 2013, the Jewish Child Care Association helped launch a program called the Young Bukharian Leadership Institute to aid Bukharian Jewish college students and young professionals develop leadership skills and build bridges to the larger Jewish community.

Last year, Beth Gavriel became the second Bukharian shul to join the Orthodox Union's network of Orthodox congregations; Kehilat Sephardim of Ahavat Achim joined in 2014. The O.U. is also looking to expand the relationship between the Bukharian community and the National Council of Synagogue Youth, the O.U.'s teen programming division known by the acronym NCSY. In March, Bukharian Jews for the first time joined the O.U.'s annual lobbying trip to Albany, the New York state capital, to advocate for issues of importance to their community.

“Synagogue servicing is just a gateway to accessing the variety of programming which the O.U. offers,” said Yehuda Friedman, the O.U. Queens regional director.

On the political front, Bukharian Jewish leaders have formed their own lobbying group, the Alliance for Bukharian Americans, to represent the community’s interests to local and state government. The goal is to have the group be the voice for all Bukharian Americans – not just in New York, but also for the growing Bukharian communities in Arizona, Colorado and Florida.

The alliance’s goals are to obtain government funding for Jewish schools, secure grant funding for afterschool programs, get funding for Bukharian Jewish community centers and educational institutions, and “defend the security and welfare of the State of Israel,” according to the official mission statement.

“We need to make our voices heard in the political world,” said Simcha Mushayev, a community leader who is involved in the political action committee.

The community’s main umbrella organization is the Bukharian Jewish Congress of the United States and Canada.

Maury Litwack, director of the O.U.’s Teach-NYS advocacy effort, has worked closely with the Alliance for Bukharian Americans on day school advocacy efforts. He noted that the community is quick to mobilize and get elected officials involved.

“We are excited to be building this partnership with a community that is at once rooted in tradition as well as forward-looking and invested in its future,” Litwack said.