



NCSEJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF  
Washington, D.C. May 5, 2017

**Murder investigation opened against 94-year-old Jewish former Soviet officer**  
JTA, May 1, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/05/01/news-opinion/world/murder-investigation-opened-against-94-year-old-jewish-former-soviet-officer>

Prosecutors in Ukraine initiated a murder investigation against a Jewish former Soviet officer who is suspected of killing a nationalist in 1952.

The General Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine opened the probe against 94-year-old Boris Steckler on April 18, the Ist Pravda news website reported last week based on documents it obtained from the National Advocacy Center, a nationalist and anti-Russian not-for-profit group.

Steckler is accused of killing Neil Hasevych, an artist who was a member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, or OUN, which fought during the first half of the 20th century against Soviet domination. Leaders of OUN briefly collaborated with Nazi occupation forces before turning against them.

Steckler is accused of throwing a grenade into a bunker where Hasevych and several other underground fighters were hiding. His accusers claim he was working for the feared NKVD security service, which later became the KGB.

Nationalist groups in Ukraine have for years tried to prosecute Steckler. Last year, the Rivne District Administrative Court began reviewing a lawsuit connected to Steckler that nationalists brought against Ukraine's SBU security service. The petitioners wanted the SBU to release old classified files about Steckler.

He declined to show up at the hearing in Rivne and appealed to the court to dismiss the plaintiffs' petition. Steckler has declined to comment on the allegations made against him, the news website said.

Following a bloody revolution in 2014 that unleashed a wave of nationalist sentiment in Ukraine, the state has celebrated the legacy of various personalities from OUN and its military wing, the UPA, including commanders who are accused of responsibility for the murder of thousands of Jews and Poles. One such leader was Stepan Bandera, who has a large statue of him in the city of Lviv and streets named after him in several cities, including Kiev. Another is Roman Shukhevych, whom the director of the state-operated Ukrainian National Memory Institute recently praised as "one of five eminent personalities who have changed the course of history."

Advocates of nationalist leaders like Bandera and Shukhevych claim their vision of Ukraine extended to Jews, some of whom served in UPA's ranks. Some UPA militants also rescued Jews from the Holocaust.

**Komsomolskaya Pravda, Russia Today – leading outlets for anti-Semitic and anti-Israel propaganda, Israeli researchers say**

**Euromaidan Press, May 1, 2017**

<http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/01/komsomolskaya-pravda-russia-today-leading-outlets-for-anti-semitic-and-anti-israel-propaganda-israeli-researchers-say-euromaidan-press/#arvlbdata>

In its annual survey of anti-Semitism in the world, the *Kantor Center* at *Tel Aviv University* says that *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Moscow paper with Russia's largest print run, and the *Russia Today* TV channel (and especially its English-language variant) "continue to be the main platforms for noxious anti-Semitic and anti-Israel propaganda."

The center [notes](#) that the number of victims of anti-Semitic crimes around the world continued to decline in 2016 but says that with the help of the media, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli ideas have been spreading in groups both on the far-right and the far-left of the political spectrum.

Among the developments in Russia last year that the *Kantor Center* sees as particularly worrisome are anti-Semitic statements by senior politicians. In both cases, they were forced to apologize; but the center's researchers point out, those who spread vicious libels from the past – [Petr Tolstoy](#) and [Vitaly Milonov](#) – do not appear to have suffered as a result.

More seriously, the report continues, both Russian nationalists and some Russian media outlets now identify opposition figures as Jewish, and they spread fabricated stories about Jews and Israel in order to damage the reputations of both.

The *Kantor Center* study echoes the findings of Moscow's SOVA research center which reported that there were very few violent attacks on Jews in Russia in 2016 but that "anti-Semitic rhetoric was extremely prominent" in the media and public life, a worrisome development especially for the future.

**Belarus hopes to develop all-round cooperation with Israel**

**Belta, May 2, 2017**

<http://eng.belta.by/president/view/belarus-hopes-to-develop-all-round-cooperation-with-israel-100898-2017/>

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has sent greetings to Israel President Reuven Rivlin as the country celebrates Independence Day, BelTA learned from the press service of the Belarusian leader.

"The relations between our countries rely on a solid foundation of the centuries-long good neighborly co-existence of Belarusians and Jews on the Belarusian soil," the message of greetings reads.

The head of state remarked that he hopes for the expansion of the bilateral dialogue and active development of all-round cooperation in the best interests of Belarus and Israel.

**Following earlier snub, Ukraine's Jewish PM to visit Israel in May**

**By Alexander Fulbright and Raphael Ahren**

**Times of Israel, April 30, 2017**

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/following-earlier-snub-ukraines-jewish-pm-to-visit-israel-in-may/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet with his Ukrainian counterpart during an upcoming visit to Israel next month, after a previously scheduled visit was nixed in protest over Kiev's support for a UN Security Council resolution against Israeli settlements, the Foreign Ministry said Sunday.

Volodymyr Groysman, who became Ukraine's first Jewish prime minister last year, will arrive for a two-day visit in Israel on May 14, in what Hebrew media reports said will mark a formal end to the tensions between Jerusalem and Kiev.

The Ukrainian prime minister was originally scheduled to arrive in Israel for a two-day visit in December, that was set to include meetings with Netanyahu, President Reuven Rivlin and other top officials.

However, after Ukraine voted in favor of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 in late December, which labeled Israeli settlements as having "no legal validity" and "a flagrant violation under international law," Jerusalem disinvited Groysman to protest Kiev's support for the resolution, which Israel denounced as "shameful."

Following the cancellation of Groysman's visit, Ukraine reacted angrily to the slight by summoning Israel's ambassador, Eli Belotserkovsky, to the Foreign Ministry in Kiev for a dressing-down.

However, a February phone call between Netanyahu and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko effectively put an end to tensions between Jerusalem and Kiev, with a statement from the Prime Minister's Office at the time saying "the two leaders agreed to resume their efforts to further strengthen the friendship between Israel and Ukraine."

In the wake of the passage of the Security Council measure, Ukraine defended its vote in favor of Resolution 2234 by hinting at its own conflict with Russia as a driving force behind the decision.

Without explicitly mentioning Moscow's annexation of Crimea and a civil war in the country's east with Russian-backed separatists, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said it "experienced itself the tragic consequences brought by" the violation of international law, effectively drawing a parallel between Israeli building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and Russian policies.

After the measure was passed, the Israeli government took a number of retaliatory measures against countries that supported its passage, including an official dressing-down of the Security Council members' ambassadors to Israel.

The Security Council resolution, which passed 14-0 with only the United States abstaining, also called on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem," while also expressing its "grave concern that continuing Israeli settlement activities are dangerously imperiling the viability of the two-state solution."

### **Poroshenko invites Netanyahu to visit Ukraine UkrInform, May 3, 2017**

<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/2221188-poroshenko-invites-netanyahu-to-visit-ukraine.html>

President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko had a phone conversation with Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, the Ukrainian president's press service reported on Tuesday.

"The Head of State congratulated the interlocutor on the 69th anniversary of the Independence Day of Israel... Petro Poroshenko invited Benjamin Netanyahu to make a visit to Ukraine at his convenience," reads the report. Also, the parties confirmed mutual willingness to intensify bilateral cooperation in various spheres.

"The two leaders discussed topical issues of interaction within international organizations. The President informed the interlocutor about the signing of the law on ratification of the Ukraine-Israel Agreement on joint production of movies and cooperation in the sphere of cinematography," reads the report.

The parties expressed hope that the visit of Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman to Israel in May will be successful.

**Bulgaria: new hope for Vidin synagogue?  
Jewish Heritage Europe, May 1, 2017**

<http://www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2017/05/01/bulgaria-new-hope-for-vidin-synagogue/>

The Bulgarian Jewish community is donating the synagogue in Vidin, on the Danube River, to the municipality, raising new hopes that the hulking ruins of the once magnificent building may be restored as a cultural venue and tourist attraction.

The Shalom Association, which represents Bulgarian Jewry, took the decision at a meeting of its consistory assembly in March, after meetings between between Shalom secretary-general Yosif Melamed and Vidin Mayor Ognyan Tsenkov.

According to a Shalom representative, Tsenkov had given “highest guarantees that the building will be restored to its previous glory and serve as a town landmark.”

No timetable or concrete plans have been announced for restoration of the building. It is estimated that the cost of the restoration could amount to \$5 million – \$6 million, which still needs to be raised.

In a separate development, a group of students with connections to Vidin are hoping to organize a crowdfunding campaign for the synagogue as well as other actions to further the restoration of the building.

Built in 1894 in a neo-Gothic style, the synagogue, which is listed as a national cultural monument, was put on the World Monuments Fund Watch list in 2004.

At that time the WMF reported that:

During the 1970s the Ministry of Culture and the National Institute of Monuments developed a plan to restore the building. Work began in 1983 and continued until 1989, when the collapse of the communist regime led to the abandonment of the project, just as workers had removed the roof. Exposed to the elements for more than a decade the synagogue is now a ruin. Complete photo documentation of the synagogue and its interiors took place prior to the restoration attempt and could be used as the basis for a new restoration program.

In 2012, the Ministry of Culture announced plans to adapt the building into a museum complex and library, to be named after Vidin-born Jewish artist Jules Pascin (1885-1930). But as we reported in 2013, restoration work stalled. In the video on the Bulgarian news site gospodari.com, posted below, reporter Petar Antonov focused on the lack of progress.

**Exhibition of art looted from Czech Jews opens in Prague  
Prague Monitor, May 3, 2017**

<http://www.praguemonitor.com/2017/05/03/exhibition-art-looted-czech-jews-opens-prague>

The exhibition Looted Art describing the fate of the artefacts bought, collected and loved by the Czech Jews the Nazis sent to death during World War Two opened in the Nostic Palace in Prague centre on Tuesday.

The exhibition was prepared by the Centre for the Documentation of Property Transfers of Cultural Artefacts of World War Two Victims that is in charge of the search for the property of its former Jewish owners in Czech state collections.

There is still some work to be done even more than a quarter-century after the end of the Communist regime in 1989, Helena Krejcova, the director of the centre, told CTK on Tuesday.

The approach of some administrators of the public collections is not always perfect, Krejcova said.

"The Holocaust was not only the biggest mass murder in history, but also the biggest mass robbery," Tomas Kraus, the secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities, said at the opening.

It is almost impossible to return the property because entire families perished and too much time has passed. This is why the centre at least wants the artefacts of original owners to be denoted by the labels with the original owners' names, Krejcova said.

"This is their memory," she added.

"The museum staff often do not have the required knowledge and experience that is needed for the search for the property and its identification," Krejcova said.

"It may happen that a transport number is on the back side of an exhibit, but it takes a long time to find out what the number really means, while it may denote a specific person," she added.

There are many regional institutions with a small staff, Krejcova said.

Some institutions are afraid that they might lose their exhibits. The fear sometimes makes them remove the labels proving their origin from an exhibit, she added.

The centre was formed soon after 2000. Last year, the government approved its another, five-year work. It receives 14 million crowns from the Culture Ministry budget.

The centre has made a detailed catalogue of the artefacts in the Prague Museum of Decorative Arts (UPM). In it, each of the artefacts identified as original Jewish property was given a caption with its origin.

## **Israel, Jewish group join forces in last bid for Holocaust restitution**

**By Greer Fay Cashman**

**Jerusalem Post, May 3, 2017**

<http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Ministry-for-Social-Equality-and-WJRO-make-last-bid-for-Holocaust-restitution-489615>

The Ministry for Social Equality is joining forces with the World Jewish Restitution Organization in what may be a last ditch effort at restitution of Jewish property seized and confiscated during the Holocaust.

In many cases, such property was initially looted by the Nazis and was then subsequently sequestered by the Communists.

Nowadays in many of these cases liberal governments are reluctant to deal with the restitution issue, not only because it is complicated in terms of people who are currently in possession of Jewish assets, but because governments don't want to pay out millions of dollars in cases where actual property cannot be returned to its rightful owners.

A joint restitution program to be carried out by the Ministry for Social Equality in conjunction with WJRO will be launched on Thursday at the President's Residence with the participation of President Reuven Rivlin, Minister for Social Equality Gila Gamliel and representatives of the WJRO.

The WJRO is the roof body for all Jewish organizations working in the sphere of restitution.

The intention is to come up with a program that will be acceptable to all such bodies and to join forces with the common aim of introducing legislation and regulatory measures that will guarantee benefits to Holocaust survivors and to the heirs of survivors who have died and those of victims of the Holocaust murdered by the Nazis and their cohorts.

The joint program will focus on five countries in which there is sizable Jewish property the restitution for which has not yet been settled. The countries in question are Poland, Romania, Hungary, Croatia and Lithuania.

Among the participants in the cooperative launch will be Foreign Ministry director-general Yuval Rotem, Social Equality Ministry director-general Avi Cohen, former government minister Rafi Eitan, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, who is also the co-chairman of the WJRO, as well as representatives of countries that have been assisting the WJRO in its efforts – primarily the United States, represented by acting ambassador Leslie Meredith Tsou, German Ambassador Dr. Clemens von Goetze, deputy head of mission at the British Embassy Tony Kay, first secretary at the French Embassy Jean-Marie Druette, special French envoy for restitution François Croquette, and head of the delegation of the European Union Ambassador Lars Faaborg-Andersen.

According to Gamliel, “the Jewish people and the Jewish state have a moral obligation to do everything possible to restore to Holocaust survivors all property that was seized from them.”

## **Russia Risks a Showdown With Israel over Hezbollah in Syria**

**By Jonathan Schanzer**

**Newsweek, April 29, 2017**

<http://www.newsweek.com/russia-risks-israel-showdown-over-hezbollah-syria-590991>

Back in 1967, Moscow shrugged when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran, cutting shipping routes to the Israeli port of Eilat—Israel’s only one in the Red Sea. Egyptian and Syrian troop movements on the Israeli border — coupled with Nasser’s fiery rhetoric threatening mass slaughter — paved the way for war. All the while, Moscow fed the Egyptians and Syrians erroneous information about Israeli troop movements.

The Israelis put an end to all of it with a blitzkrieg that neutralized Russia’s Arab clients in six days, and in the process seized the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and much of the Golan Heights.

Fifty years later and history looks set to repeat itself. Russia’s allies are again provoking the Israelis, who may ultimately see little choice but to strike first. The ensuing war, Israel warns, could, like the Six Day War in 1967, fundamentally change the region.

The theater this time is Syria, but the precipitating factor for the next conflict — believe it or not — isn’t Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own people. It is Iran’s most lethal proxy, Hezbollah.

Tehran dispatched Hezbollah to buttress Assad’s beleaguered Syrian troops. The first Arab child of Iran’s Islamic revolution, the Lebanese Shiite militant organization have deployed thousands of fighters to Syria, who are now gaining valuable experience from the war.

Iran is also arming Hezbollah in preparation for the next conflict with Israel. In fall 2015, Israel’s military assessed that Hezbollah had increased its rocket arsenal from an estimated 100,000 to roughly 150,000 since the Syrian war began.

Later that year, the Russians began to carry out airstrikes against rebel groups fighting to oust Assad from Syria. Moscow had long provided Assad with arms and other provisions via its Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus.

But the Russians soon deployed ground and air forces, intelligence assets, and heavy hardware to protect the Assad regime, making it clear that Syria was part of its ever-expanding sphere of influence.

Russia soon established fusion centers so that it could coordinate its war effort with Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad regime. Hezbollah has benefited from Russian air cover, and even fought alongside Russian forces against Syrian rebels.

Meanwhile Iran and its Lebanese proxy have tried to exploit both the Russian presence and the fog of war to move what Israelis have called “game-changing weapons” from the war zone to Lebanon. Israeli officials say the weapons they are attempting to acquire include long-range and high payload rockets, lethal anti-ship missiles, and perhaps even sophisticated anti-aircraft systems.

These weapons have prompted a distinct sense of alarm inside Israel’s Kiriya, their Pentagon. Officials say the hardware would reduce the Israeli edge significantly when the next war erupts, which is why Israel has so far launched some three-dozen airstrikes throughout Syria, according to one senior Israel official

It’s unclear if these sorties represent the entirety of the Israeli effort. But we do know that the drama came into full focus in March when the Syrian army fired anti-aircraft weapons at Israeli aircraft after they struck what was believed to be yet another Hezbollah weapons convoy inside Syria. The anti-aircraft missile hurtled toward Israeli territory, prompting the Israelis to use its medium-range Arrow missile defense system.

The Arrow incident has led to an escalation in the war of words. Damascus has threatened that future incursions will prompt Scud attacks, and even warned that Russia will come to their aid if the Israelis strike again.

It is doubtful that Russia would fire on an Israeli aircraft, especially given that the Israelis have paid multiple visits to Moscow to ensure that their air force can continue to strike Iranian and Hezbollah assets when required.

The longer Iran and Hezbollah have to perfect their weapons smuggling infrastructure, the higher the likelihood of a successful transfer of “game changing weapons.” Hezbollah already has tens of thousands of rockets but a successful transfer of more advanced weapons would be a red line for Israel, prompting a pre-emptive strike before those weapons can be deployed.

The Israelis have warned repeatedly that the next war with Hezbollah could be one in which Israel will seek nothing less than total defeat and ousting of Hezbollah from Lebanon.

Vladimir Putin’s foray into Syria has been described as an attempt to resurrect Russia’s past. But Soviet actions in the Middle East contributed inexorably to the Six Day War and its own weakening in the region. Russia risks repeating the mistakes it made a half century ago, mistakes that still have a profound impact on the region today.

*Jonathan Schanzer is senior vice president for research at Foundation for Defense of Democracies.*

### **Corker: ‘We’re not going to do a Russia sanctions bill’**

**By Austin Wright**

**Politico, May 1, 2017**

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/01/corker-russia-sanctions-senate-237855>

The leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have reached a decision that’s sure to disappoint Russia hawks: They’re not taking up a Russia sanctions bill anytime soon.

Instead, Committee Chairman Bob Corker of Tennessee and ranking Democrat Ben Cardin of Maryland have agreed to move forward on a measure to counter Russian influence in Eastern Europe without using sanctions as well as an Iran sanctions bill.

The measure to counter Russian influence is expected to draw from a bill put forward by Cardin in January but will strip the measure of its sanctions. Cardin's sanctions bill is co-sponsored by 10 Republican defense hawks, including Sens. John McCain of Arizona, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Marco Rubio of Florida.

"We're not going to do a Russia sanctions bill," Corker told POLITICO on Monday. "The ranking member and I are in strong agreement on a pathway forward and that's what we're going to do. We're going to do an Iran sanctions bill. It'll be done toward the end of this work period. We're also working together on a bill to push back against Russia in Europe and what they're doing, and those are the two courses of action that we're taking."

Cardin spokesman Sean Bartlett confirmed the agreement in an email.

"Senator Cardin stands by the series of proposals he's laid out on Russia but looks forward to working with Chairman Corker on this bill as an initial step to hold Russia accountable for its destabilizing activities," Bartlett said.

The deal between Corker and Cardin resolves a point of contention between Corker and some Democrats on the Foreign Relations panel, who wanted to move Iran and Russia sanctions together, according to multiple Democratic Senate aides.

The Iran sanctions bill was introduced in March by Corker and has bipartisan support. It's in retaliation for Iran's ballistic missile development, support for U.S.-designated terrorist groups and human rights violations.

The Russia sanctions bill was designed to punish Moscow for its meddling in November's presidential election.

Corker on Monday said he wanted to wait until the Senate Intelligence Committee completes its investigation into Russia's election activities before slapping Russia with more sanctions.

"I think there's a general understanding that there isn't going to be an attempt by this administration, which people feared at one time, including me, to undo sanctions," Corker said. "We're going to wait for a period of time. We may at some point pursue" Russia sanctions.

Rubio, a member of the Foreign Relations panel, indicated Monday he was unhappy with the decision to table the Russia sanctions measure for now.

"I think anytime is a good time for Russia sanctions given everything they've done," Rubio said.

## **Alexei Navalny Is Now Russia's Outlaw Presidential Candidate**

**By Kevin Rothrock**

**Moscow Times, May 3, 2017**

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/alexei-navalny-is-now-russias-outlaw-presidential-candidate-57893>

A felony conviction against Alexei Navalny is now in force, effectively banning him from running for president for 15 years, though he says he isn't stopping his presidential campaign.

This February, following rulings by the European Court of Human Rights and the Russian Supreme Court to overturn an earlier case, Navalny was found guilty a second time of embezzling money from a lumber company in Kirov. The verdict entered force on Wednesday, after an appellate court refused to hear Navalny's challenge to the February verdict. Navalny's lawyer has vowed to take the matter to the ECHR again.

Unfortunately for Navalny, Russia has federal laws on voting rights and the election of the president that ban candidates with serious felony criminal convictions. The verdict that entered force on Wednesday falls under this

criminal category. Even after an individual has served out their sentence, the person can't run for president for another 10 years.

So why is Navalny continuing his campaign? In part, he is pinning his hopes on another likely victory in the ECHR, though the problem here is that the court often takes several years to rule on a case. Russia's next presidential election is less than a year away, and candidates are required to submit all necessary paperwork at least 45 days before the vote.

Navalny also says he plans to appeal to Russia's Constitutional Court, pointing out that Russia's Constitution only bans incarcerated and legally incompetent citizens from running for office. He argues that a suspended sentence should not bar his candidacy. In other words, Navalny will ask the Constitutional Court to overturn the federal laws now in place that make it illegal for him to run for president.

In October 2013, however, the Constitutional Court ruled that the government has the power to expand the ban on presidential candidacy, arguing that the Constitution's list isn't exhaustive.

Pressing ahead with his presidential run, Navalny could find himself in even more trouble with the authorities. Russia's Central Election Committee is already accusing him of "manipulating" and "misleading" voters, warning that "serious problems" will arise, if he doesn't end his campaign.

Since announcing his intention to run for president last December, Alexei Navalny's presence in the Russian media has grown five times, according to a study released this week by Medialogia. The only people whose names appear more often are President Vladimir Putin, U.S. President Donald Trump, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

## **Merkel pushes Putin on Ukraine, gay rights**

**Maria Panina and Jan Dorner**

**AFP, May 2, 2017**

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/merkel-makes-rare-russia-visit-putin-backs-warmer-020413568.html>

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Vladimir Putin insisted Tuesday that there was no alternative to a stalled Ukraine peace plan as they struggled to mask deep rifts during a first meeting in Russia since 2015.

Merkel pushed Putin at a frosty encounter to ensure a ceasefire in war-torn east Ukraine, but the Russian leader laid the blame on Kiev for a European-brokered peace deal hitting a dead end.

The rare visit also saw the German chancellor confront Putin over rights issues in Russia, including the alleged persecution of gay men in the North Caucasus region of Chechnya.

"I think we have differences but international politics means to always keep looking for dialogue," Merkel said at a press conference in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi.

The meeting was meant to focus on preparations for the G20 summit in Hamburg in July, and no major breakthroughs were expected on mending the deep divisions caused by the conflict in Ukraine.

The German leader has strongly backed EU sanctions on Russia for seizing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and for supporting a pro-Kremlin separatist insurgency in the east of the country.

Merkel said she hoped some of the sanctions could be lifted if a flatlining peace plan brokered by her and French President Francois Hollande in 2015 was fulfilled.

And both leaders admitted there was no choice but to stick to the process despite its running into a brick wall amid recriminations from all sides.

"We cannot think about any alternative and we should not have to think of it," Putin said at a press conference.

"It is impossible to create new plans without achieving elementary results for what we outlined in previous years."

- Gay rights -

Merkel last visited Russia in May 2015 when she met Putin in Moscow, and the two leaders have scaled back contacts as the Ukraine crisis has driven ties to a post-Cold War low.

Putin talked up economic ties between the two countries, insisting that "our cooperation makes a significant contribution to stabilising the world economy."

But it was clear that despite pledges to talk there remain deep gulfs between the German leader -- seen as a major bulwark of the Western liberal order -- and the Kremlin strongman, who many accuse of trying to undermine it.

At the press conference Merkel said she raised recent high-profile accusations of rights abuses in Russia, including allegations the authorities in Chechnya were rounding up gay men.

"We received very negative reports about how homosexuals are treated in Chechnya," Merkel said. "I asked President Putin to use his influence to guarantee the rights of minorities."

Ramzan Kadyrov, the Putin-loyalist and strongman leader of Chechnya, has fiercely denied claims of a crackdown in the socially conservative region, and after a delay Russian investigators said they are probing the allegations.

Putin was also forced to deny that Russia was planning to meddle in German elections that Merkel is competing in later in the year after claims that Moscow interfered with the US presidential vote.

"We never interfered in the political life or the political processes of any other country," Putin said.

- Trump talk, Erdogan meeting -

The meeting with Merkel comes ahead of a busy diplomatic push for Putin.

After meeting Merkel, he was expected later Tuesday to hold his third phone call with US President Donald Trump.

The two leaders are looking to make headway on ties in the face of deep rifts over the conflict in Syria and after claims of Russian hacking during the US elections.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also due to meet Putin in Sochi on Wednesday.

Putin and Erdogan have inched closer together on Syria as Erdogan's ties with Europe have deteriorated in recent months.

### **Poll: Number Of Russians Who Would Vote For Putin Slips Below 50 Percent**

RFE/RL, May 4, 2017

<http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-levada-poll-putin-48-percent/28467840.html>

A new opinion poll indicates that 48 percent of voters would cast their ballots for incumbent President Vladimir Putin if Russia's presidential election were held in the near future.

The figure in the [April 21-24 poll](#) by the independent Levada-Center was down from 62 percent in a similar poll in April 2015 and 53 percent in January 2016.

Putin, in power as president or prime minister since 1999, is widely expected to seek a new six-year presidential term in a March 2018 election. He has not announced his candidacy.

Levada polled 1,600 adults nationwide, asking them whether they would vote -- and for whom -- if the election were held "next Sunday." The pollsters did not name any candidates, leaving it up to the respondents to do so.

Flamboyant ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov received 3 percent piece, while opposition politician Aleksei Navalny was one of four people who were each named by about 1 percent of respondents.

Staunch Putin critic Navalny is campaigning for the presidency, but it is unclear whether the authorities will put him on the ballot.

Putin was named by 49 percent of respondents to a similar Levada poll in April 2014, and by 29 percent in April 2013.

In Russian presidential elections, a candidate must win more than 50 percent of the votes cast to avoid a runoff.

According to official results, Putin won about 64 percent in 2012, about 72 percent in 2004, and about 53 percent in 2000.

In a March 31-April 3 Levada poll, 64 percent of the respondents said they would like Putin to win another term in 2018, while 22 percent said they would like to see another person as president, and 14 percent were unable to answer the question.

## **U.S. Extends Sanctions Relief For Belarus By Six Months**

**RFE/RL, April 29, 2017**

<http://www.rferl.org/a/us-extends-sanctions-relief-belarus-six-months-/28458490.html>

The United States has extended sanctions relief for Belarus by another six months in the continuation of a policy started under the Obama administration to encourage the country to turn away from traditional ally Russia and toward the West.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control on April 28 issued a new waiver extending sanctions relief through October 30. The sanctions were originally imposed over concerns about the human rights situation in Belarus.

The waivers, which had been scheduled to expire on April 30, allow major Belarussian companies to continue to deal with U.S. businesses.

The extension of the waivers had been in doubt after Belarussian authorities arrested hundreds of people during March in a crackdown on antigovernment protests in Minsk, the capital.

U.S. officials are attempting to encourage the government of Belarussian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to continue its stop-and-start moves to engage more closely with the West. After five years, the European Union in 2016 ended sanctions against Minsk.

The authoritarian Lukashenka has been in office more than two decades in the former Soviet republic and has been a traditional ally of Moscow.

Economic hard times have driven many people to the streets to protest, but his government's sustained suppression of dissent has limited the effectiveness of the opposition.

Meanwhile, NATO members Poland and the Baltic states have expressed concerns about increased Russian influence in Belarus.

The Estonian defense minister this week said Russia may use planned large-scale military exercises later this year to permanently move thousands of troops into Belarus.

## **Tillerson names condition for U.S. to engage with Russia on Ukraine issue**

**UNIAN, May 3, 2017**

<https://www.unian.info/politics/1905841-tillerson-names-condition-for-us-to-engage-with-russia-on-ukraine-issue.html>

The engagement between the United States and Russian Federation in relation to the Ukraine settlement is only possible after a certain level of trust is restored between the two nations, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said during his address to the State Department's staff.

In a video released by C-Span, Tillerson is seen calling the "reengagement" with Russia one of the State Department's top priorities.

Admitting that Russia is "part of the engagement in Syria," he added that "we have other issues with Russia, as you all well know, in Europe and the situation in Ukraine.

The U.S. state secretary recalled that during his recent trip to Moscow he characterized the relations between the two countries as at their lowest since the Cold War, adding that Vladimir Putin "did not disagree."

"It's getting worse," Tillerson said.

He added that his comment to Putin was that "the two greatest nuclear powers in the world cannot have this kind of relationship. We have to change it."

Tillerson said that the two governments have "a number of efforts underway to first stabilize the relationship."

"Acting Deputy Secretary Shannon is leading a working group effort to see if we can address some of the things that are just irritating the relationship, that make it hard for us to talk to one another even in civil tones," he said. "So we're working hard on that and we're hoping to begin to solve some of that."

Tillerson added that following the Tuesday's conversation between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, the two sides will continue to work on the "first big area of cooperation," which is Syria.

Admitting that it's not yet clear in which direction the relations between the U.S. and Russia will go, Tillerson said that "if we find space where suddenly we feel we can begin to rebuild some level of trust – because today there's almost no trust between us... Can we build some level of trust, we got a long list of things to work on, from our arms agreements... initiatives we have with our nuclear arms agreements; to obviously getting to Ukraine, Crimea, and other places where Russia is not being particularly helpful today. So that's what we're hoping is that we can begin to build a way in which we can learn how to work with one another. I don't know whether we can or not. We're going find out."

## **Bulgaria's Borisov names new coalition government**

**Reuters, May 3, 2017**

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-government-idUSKBN17Z0XO>

The winner of Bulgaria's parliamentary election, the center-right GERB party, named ministers on Wednesday for a coalition government that will see its leader Boiko Borisov return as prime minister for the third time since 2009.

The pro-market and pro-EU GERB, which won a snap election in March but failed to secure an outright majority, has teamed up with United Patriots (UP), an alliance of three nationalist parties, for a four-year term in office.

GERB named Vladislav Goranov as finance minister, a post he held in Borisov's last government, and the party will also keep control of infrastructure, energy and foreign policy.

The nationalists, who will hold office for the first time in the Balkan country, secured two deputy prime minister posts and control over the defense, economy and environment ministries.

The new government, which is expected to win a vote of confidence in parliament on Thursday, will respect Sofia's commitments to the European Union and NATO and will work to boost incomes in the EU's poorest member state.

One of its key challenges will be to make a success of its six-month presidency of the European Council from January next year, when the bloc will be enmeshed in debates about its future and negotiating the terms of Britain's exit.

Borisov proposed his former construction minister, Lilyana Pavlova, as minister of the Bulgarian presidency.

The UP, which used strongly anti-migrant and anti-Turkish rhetoric during the election campaign, has significantly toned down its language in a move expected to ease concerns in the EU, which is facing a surge in support for right-wing populism.

At home, analysts expect the new government to maintain political and fiscal stability, but have expressed doubts that it will push ahead with meaningful reforms to tackle corruption and overhaul Bulgaria's judiciary.

GERB and UP have agreed to raise the minimum state pension, committed to boost economic growth, to double teachers' salaries and to increase the average monthly wage by 50 percent during the four-year parliament.

The coalition, which has only a one-seat majority in parliament but is also supported by the populist Will party, is expected to maintain income and corporate taxes, among the lowest in the EU, unchanged at 10 percent, and to keep the lev currency pegged to the euro until Bulgaria joins the euro zone.

## **How We Can Help Holocaust Survivors Get Back Their Property**

**By Gunnar Hökmark and Gideon Taylor**

**Newsweek, May 1, 2017**

<http://www.newsweek.com/holocaust-memorial-restitution-591752>

“One day I want to walk on the same land on which my mother and my grandmother walked,” says Hania Rosenberg. “My decision to carry on fighting is not based primarily on the value these assets may represent. It was, and still is, about my family roots.”

Last week, Rosenberg, an 82-year-old Holocaust survivor, went to the European Parliament to appeal for the return of her grandparents' farm and their three-storey house, seized when the family was deported by the Nazis to the Sosnowiec Ghetto in Poland in [World War II](#).

Her grandfather and uncle disappeared during the Holocaust, and her father was murdered. When her mother finally returned, having survived years of hard labor at Auschwitz and a death march to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp in Germany, it was impossible for her to recover their cherished properties in Ledziny. Rosenberg's mother did not live long enough to see justice, passing away in 2003, and it has fallen to Rosenberg to continue the struggle she describes as akin to "passing through the eye of a needle."

More than 70 years after the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews were murdered, these historical wrongs have still not been corrected. Only a small fraction of the private and communal, immovable and movable property illegitimately seized from Jewish victims has been returned or compensated to its rightful owners, heirs, or to the Jewish people at large. Today, a significant number of Holocaust survivors live below the poverty line, without adequate social care.

On Wednesday, the World Jewish Restitution Organization and the European Alliance for Holocaust Survivors, a body made up of Members of the European Parliament, joined Rosenberg at the "Unfinished Justice: Restitution and Remembrance" conference at in Brussels. We urged governments to complete the unfinished work still to be done around restitution and compensation of looted property, and to support the growing needs of Holocaust survivors.

Few of us can imagine the pain and despair of people who were stripped of everything they cherished and faced death while their neighbors divided up their land, looted their houses and picked over their belongings. In such circumstances, the process for returning what was stolen from them should be fair, comprehensive and expeditious. Sadly, as Rosenberg's experience illustrates, it is too often the opposite.

After the war, Rosenberg's mother, like most survivors, left Poland looking to rebuild her life. She was reunited with Rosenberg, who had been placed in an orphanage in Sweden after the war, and contacted the authorities in Poland as early as 1947 to register her claim to her parents' property. Decades later, she learned that the Communist government had expropriated some of her land and sold other parts of it.

"The demands required of us currently in order to attempt to retrieve our legacies is too great," Rosenberg told the European Parliament conference. "Most survivors, who are in their 80s and 90s as well, do not have the strength, patience and, most importantly, the time left to fight this fight."

Indeed, the chances of Holocaust survivors seeing the return of what is rightly theirs are fading each day. Each year more and more survivors are dying, which is why it's crucial that we accelerate the quest for justice, compassion and restitution.

Part of a declaration MEPs presented at the European Parliament called for member states of the European Union to reaffirm their commitment to the principles of the Terezin Declaration, and to appoint special envoys for post-Holocaust related Issues, including restitution. This recognition is crucial to urgently advance the cases of tens of thousands of survivors and their heirs seeking property restitution, and to ensure it stays as a high priority for all member states.

We cannot bring back the families of survivors, and we cannot enable them to forget the horrors inflicted on them during the Holocaust. But we can fight to ensure a small recognition and a symbolic measure of justice for those who lost so much.

*Gunnar Hökmark is a member of the European Parliament from Sweden and chair of the European Alliance for Holocaust Survivors.*

*Gideon Taylor is Chair of Operations of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, an umbrella body of 14 major international organizations representing Jews worldwide regarding Holocaust-era restitution issues.*

## The war never ended for poor, elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union

By David Schizer

JTA, May 2, 2017

<http://www.jta.org/2017/05/02/news-opinion/opinion/the-war-never-ended-for-poor-elderly-jews-in-the-former-soviet-union>

We Americans use the phrase “the greatest generation” to describe those who grew up during the Depression, prevailed in World War II and contributed to America’s postwar prosperity and influence. But on a visit last week to Jewish communities in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and Belarus’ Minsk and Bobruisk, I came to realize that elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union deserve this recognition as well.

In many ways they are the other “greatest generation,” whose quiet heroism is inspiring and humbling. While their American Jewish counterparts have mostly enjoyed unprecedented security and comfort, elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union have confronted five almost unimaginable challenges.

First, many are Holocaust survivors. Take Maya, who I met at a Holocaust memorial service in Minsk. She talked about the day the authorities took her mother away “to fill out paperwork for the family.” Although Maya offered to join her mother – not knowing what would happen on that fateful day – her little brother vetoed the idea. Because he asked Maya to stay with him, their sister went instead.

Tragically, Maya’s mother and sister never returned.

Maya found her mother’s body hanging in the town square and never learned what happened to her sister. While the barbarity of what happened to them is hard for us to imagine, the family dynamics she describes are familiar. In any family, the youngest child might insist that one of his siblings should stay with him, so the other ends up going on an errand instead. In so many ways, the Holocaust’s victims were just like us.

A second challenge is that many of these elderly Jews lost fathers in the war, among the millions of Soviet men who never returned. For example, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, Reuven’s father was drafted and sent to the front. A few days later, the family left their home in Bobruisk to stay ahead of the advancing German army. Shortly thereafter, Reuven’s father returned to help his family escape, but all he found was a crater where the family home had been. He returned to the front and eventually died in battle. Seventy-six years later, Reuven cried telling us that his father perished without knowing whether his family was alive.

Third, after the war ended, although proudly victorious in defeating Nazism, this generation of Jews continued to endure persecution in the Soviet Union. The regime enforced strict quotas to limit the access of Jews to education and professional opportunities. In addition, because of the regime’s hostility to religion in general, and to Judaism in particular, Jews were not allowed to study Jewish texts, observe Jewish holidays, pass on Jewish traditions to their children, join synagogues or operate other Jewish communal institutions.

Fourth, because of this discrimination, as well as the lack of economic opportunity more generally in the region, elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union are the poorest Jews in the world despite their advanced education and well-known appetite for culture and the arts. A retired engineer or doctor in Ukraine has a pension of approximately \$2 per day, and her counterpart in Russia has a pension of perhaps \$5 per day. I visited an elderly woman in Bobruisk who lives in what once was a stable. She has no indoor plumbing and relies on a small wood stove – with fuel for only a couple of hours a day – to combat the effects of a Belarus winter. Thousands of elderly Jews live in this sort of poverty throughout the region. The conditions are hard to imagine for those who have not seen them firsthand.

Finally, many of these elderly Jews are alone in confronting these harsh conditions. In the past quarter century, a million Jews have left the former Soviet Union for Israel, and hundreds of thousands have gone to the United States and Western Europe. Obviously, this emigration has been a great success for the immigrants themselves,

and for the new communities they now call home. But those left behind have had to fend for themselves. Unlike their Christian neighbors, who depend on their children for care, elderly Jews often are on their own.

These Jewish heroes deserve our help, and improving their lives is much easier than you might think. Today, the organization I lead, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, helps care for 110,000 elderly Jews, including 50,000 victims of the Nazis. With partners such as the Claims Conference, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and Jewish federations, we provide food, medicine, home care and other forms of critical support. The cost of home care averages about \$4 per hour. For those of us who arrange care for relatives in the U.S., this number is astonishingly low. The cost of our daily cappuccino is enough to change the life of one of these Jewish heroes.

It is no secret that the American Jewish community is divided about many important issues today. But there can be no disagreement about the sacrifice and heroism of this generation, or about the life-saving impact we can have assisting them. Indeed, by helping them, we find the profound satisfaction of putting into action the sacred values and obligations that unite us as a people.

*(David Schizer is the CEO of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee [JDC].)*

## **Russia, Feeling Slighted by Trump, Seeks a Reset**

**By Neil MacFarquhar**

**New York Times, May 3, 2017**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/world/europe/trump-putin-russia-relations.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2FEurope&r=0>

Given the spotlight focused on [Russia](#) during the American presidential campaign and [Donald J. Trump](#)'s warm words as candidate for President [Vladimir V. Putin](#), the Kremlin anticipated a starring role as foreign policy partner No. 1 under the Trump administration.

Instead, while President Trump has been feting every Theresa, Justin and Abdel Fattah at the White House or at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, including a high-profile dinner with President Xi Jinping of China, Mr. Putin has had to content himself with three measly telephone calls since the inauguration.

"They feel slighted," Vladimir Frolov, a prominent foreign policy analyst and columnist, said of the Russian leadership.

For one thing, it looks bad at home. Mr. Putin, after all, sold Russian interventions in Ukraine and especially Syria as proof that Moscow was back on the global stage as the indispensable equal to the United States in world affairs, just as in the Soviet days.

Second, it has left the Kremlin perplexed as to how it can move forward in its relations with Washington, especially as Russia slouches toward a presidential election campaign in March 2018, although Mr. Putin has not yet officially declared his candidacy for a fourth term.

Worse, instead of heralding a new chapter in relations, Washington seems to be piling on the demands. Even anticipated friends like Rex W. Tillerson, the secretary of state awarded a medal by Mr. Putin when he was head of Exxon Mobil, have proved disappointing.

Mr. Tillerson showed up in Moscow for his first trip as secretary of state last month only to start resurrecting positions that Moscow thought had been laid to rest with the Obama administration.

Mr. Tillerson endorsed the idea that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Russia's main friend in the Middle East, had to go, for example. The Trump administration has also made clear it wants Russia out of Ukraine, and an end to what it calls violations of a key missile treaty. It even dredged up Afghanistan again as an issue.

Asked about Russia in an appearance on Fox News last Sunday, the national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, said he thought Mr. Putin was not serving Russia's best interests. "We need changes in words and the nature of the relationship," he said, "but what we really need to see is change in behavior."

Aleksei Pushkov, a well-known voice in foreign affairs in the Federation Council, tweeted in response that Mr. McMaster's remarks were reminiscent of the Obama administration. "Counterproductive approach," he wrote.

The chain of similar statements from Washington has pretty much curdled the idea that there will be a grand bargain on global issues with Washington.

Furthermore, according to some analysts, while Russia is eager for improved relations, the Trump administration has not exactly made clear what reward Russia might get for executing a major, across-the-board reversal in its foreign policy.

"It has not detailed the definition in terms of what an improved relationship would be, in other words what is the bag of goodies in exchange for a dramatic U-turn in their foreign policy," Mr. Frolov said.

He added, "The Russians are basically scratching their heads and asking, 'What are we going to get from this?'"

In the third Trump-Putin call, on Tuesday night, the two presidents agreed to coordinate more closely on Syria and Korea, and possibly to meet on the sidelines of the G-20 summit meeting in Hamburg, Germany, in early July.

The standard explanation in Russian circles for the cold shoulder from President Trump is that American foreign policy mandarins will not let Trump be Trump when it comes to Russia.

"Trump rejected the idea of holding a separate meeting early due to fear of hysteria by his enemies in the USA," Mr. Pushkov wrote on Twitter after the latest telephone call.

Naturally, the idea that Presidents Trump and Putin are equals has not died entirely, either. "The third contact between the two presidents has confirmed that the Russian-American dialogue is not at a standstill, that both sides are interested in its development, and that it can proceed only on an equal footing," Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the foreign affairs committee in the Federation Council, told Russian reporters on Wednesday, according to RIA Novosti, the state-operated news agency.

Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, is expected to hold talks with Mr. Tillerson on the sidelines of an Arctic conference in Alaska next week, talks that the Russians are hoping might bring some clarity.

There are things the Russians want, like the withdrawal of the American missile defense system in Romania and Poland, but nothing so specific has been broached. Mr. Trump's effusive praise of the Russian leader while running for president has slowly faded as other issues have come to the fore, including multiple investigations into Russian meddling in last year's presidential campaign and the stark differences over Syria's use of chemical weapons against its own people again in April.

On the other hand, Mr. Frolov noted, the Kremlin appreciates that the Trump administration has been largely silent on Russian domestic issues like violence against opposition leaders, arrests of political protesters and the persecution and torture of homosexuals in Chechnya.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, was not so reticent in her joint news conference with Mr. Putin on Tuesday, questioning the prosecution of civil society groups, homosexuals and religious sects while pooh-poohing Mr. Putin's stance that the change of government in neighboring Ukraine had been undemocratic.

The more discreet American approach indicates that Washington wants to keep channels open, Mr. Frolov said, so the Kremlin will most likely welcome a one-by-one approach to foreign policy issues rather than a grand bargain.

Russia is looking for an agreement in Syria in particular, because Mr. Putin wants to avoid any violent surprises from there once the Russian presidential campaign begins in earnest at the end of 2017.

Both sides are aware of the dangers of letting any confrontations between them overheat. There remains the risk of a collision in Syria, noted Dmitri V. Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, but there is also room for a deal on a diplomatic solution there.

Mr. Putin repeated at news conferences two days running that the United States would be instrumental in solving the Syria problem, noting on Wednesday that Mr. Trump had endorsed the idea of safety zones that Russia began formally pushing as part of a new round of Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Wednesday. Mr. Trump dispatched a high-level American diplomat to the talks.

“Optimists in Moscow and Washington hope that the U.S.-Russian relationship wouldn’t decline any further,” Mr. Trenin wrote in a piece on the Carnegie website.

It is premature to expect outright cooperation, he and others said, predicting that relations might remain where they are until the terms of engagement are hammered out. That might take a meeting between the two presidents in Hamburg, they noted, assuming that Mr. Trump finally stops shunning Mr. Putin there.