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On the Day of My Departure
By Ambassador John Tefft
The Moscow Times, September 28, 2017

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/john-tefft-on-the-day-of-my-departure-op-ed-59097>

When I first joined the diplomatic service, working on the Soviet desk in the 1980s, our relationship with Russia was at a low point. The Soviet Union had just shot down a Korean Airliner, with almost 100 Americans including a Congressman on board. There was a lot of anger in America.

Today, as I prepare to leave Russia, our relationship has reached another low point. Americans are concerned and angry about Russian interference in our elections and by the Russian authorities' refusal to accept their responsibility for it.

As Secretary Tillerson said, we need to rebuild trust between our two countries and move our relationship to a different place. The American people want the two most powerful nuclear nations in the world to have a better relationship. From the earliest days of this Administration we have said time and again that we would prefer a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation on common interests. We remain prepared to try to find a way forward.

Serving the American community is at the heart of the work of the U.S. Mission in Russia, and it will continue to be a main priority moving forward. The U.S. Embassy and our Consulates General throughout Russia first and foremost are here to provide services to the Americans living, working, and traveling in Russia. During my time here, I have seen what Americans can do in Russia to bring our countries together on a people-to-people, business-to-business, scholar-to-scholar, performer-to-performer level. This gives me hope, even during these difficult times.

With the help of our Foreign Commercial Service and Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. and Russian businesses receive assistance developing and expanding new relationships and introducing innovative technologies. This increases trade and investment and strengthens ties between our two countries. I have seen how cattle ranchers from the United States and Russia work together to produce high quality beef for the Russian market and how American-trained managers bring productivity and streamlined processing into Russian businesses to help make them more profitable and more successful.

I am particularly proud of the positive influence U.S. companies have had on the Russian business culture. When I contrast the present business culture with what I witnessed here in the 1990s, I notice tremendous progress in the areas of transparency, business ethics, and corporate social responsibility.

U.S. companies have led by example on corporate social responsibility. One major soft drinks manufacturer has partnered with governmental and non-governmental organizations to preserve and protect important watersheds; an oil and gas corporation has provided over \$250 million to support infrastructure and community projects in Sakhalin and Khabarovsk Krai; and a paper and pulp producer supports social programs in Svetogorsk. These are just a few of the many examples of the benefits of the presence of U.S. companies here in Russia. I have also been very impressed with Russia's talented business leaders, including women, many of whom rose from entry-level positions at U.S. companies to the highest ranks of leadership.

As I look back over my time here in Russia, I am struck by the richness of Russian culture and history. I will look back fondly on my travels to places like Tikhvin, where I had the pleasure of visiting Rimsky-Korsakov's

childhood home and seeing the piano on which so many amazing and talented Russian composers played and composed their works. I will particularly remember my annual visits to events such as the pop-culture and entertainment conference Comic-Con, my travels throughout the country to visit American businesses and partnerships, and all of the opportunities I have to meet with many creative, intelligent young Russians who are inspired by the possibilities of what we can do when we work together.

We will continue to stand up for our interests while looking for avenues of dialogue. We remain dedicated to finding ways to bring together Russians and Americans both to discuss our differences and to discover the many things we have in common. Having seen how we weathered the storm in the 1980s and the dedication of our staff of talented professionals in the State Department back home and here in Mission Russia, I remain optimistic that our governments will ultimately find a way forward. On our side, we're certainly ready.

Revival of a Soviet Zion: Birobidzhan celebrates its Jewish heritage

By Shaun Walker

The Guardian, September 27, 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/27/revival-of-a-soviet-zion-birobidzhan-celebrates-its-jewish-heritage>

In front of Birobidzhan's railway station, loudspeakers blast out Yiddish-language ballads while hundreds of schoolchildren in ersatz folk costumes dance circles around the menorah monument that dominates the square.

Across town, labourers are building a kosher restaurant, the city's first. A two-storey building under construction next door will house a mikvah, the ritual pool in which religious Jews must bathe.

The Jewish renaissance in Birobidzhan is the latest chapter in the surreal tale of this would-be Siberian Zion, founded nearly a century ago.

Nestled on the border with China, seven timezones east of Moscow and a six-day journey away on the Trans-Siberian railway, the region was first settled en masse during the early 1930s as part of a plan to create a Soviet homeland for Jews during the rule of Joseph Stalin.

Its story since then has reflected the vicissitudes of Soviet and then modern Russian history. The population of the area, still officially called the Jewish Autonomous Region, is barely 1% Jewish, but the authorities are trying to cultivate the memory of Jewish customs and history among the residents and even hope to attract new Jewish migrants.

Eli Riss, Birobidzhan's 27-year-old rabbi, said the local Jewish community currently numbered 3,000 at most, and only 30 were regulars at the synagogue. His parents emigrated to Israel when he was young but after religious schooling he returned to his birthplace as a rabbi.

"We are a long way from Israel here and a long way even from Moscow, where there are big Jewish communities," he said. "My task is for people to understand what it means to be Jewish."

When the area was officially established as the Jewish Autonomous Region in 1934, 14 years before the foundation of Israel, it was the first explicitly Jewish territory in modern times. By 1939, 18% of the population was Jewish and Birobidzhan had a Yiddish theatre and Yiddish newspaper. The work of the police department, courts and city administration was carried out at least partially in Yiddish.

Some historians have suggested the Birobidzhan project was tainted with antisemitism from the very beginning, creating a "dumping ground" for Jews thousands of miles from any areas where they had traditionally lived and in terrain that was miserably difficult for human habitation.

But in the 1930s many Jewish intellectuals promoted the project with vigour. Jews travelled to Birobidzhan from inside the Soviet Union, western Europe and even farther afield – infected with a revolutionary fervour

that gave a Jewish flavour to the utopianism that characterised many of those involved in the early Bolshevik project.

The optimism was short-lived. During Stalin's purges, much of the local party leadership was executed and expressions of Jewishness were discouraged. After the second world war, the region saw a new influx of Jews who had escaped the Holocaust and had no homes to which to return. A new wave of antisemitic purges was followed by decades of disinterest in Jewish identity.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, cheap goods from across the border in China flooded the market and economic misery ensued, as in almost all the former Soviet lands. But unlike most other Soviet citizens, the Jews had a way out from the misery: to leave for Israel. Iosif Brener, a local historian, estimates that 20,000 Jews left Birobidzhan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the majority for Israel.

Alexander Levintal, the region's governor, said Birobidzhan was still suffering from the effects of mass Jewish emigration. "When the Soviet Union collapsed and the borders opened, about 70 families of Jewish doctors left, and medicine in the region has still not fully recovered," he said.

Riss, the rabbi, said that among the few thousand Jews who remained there was little Jewish cultural identity. "Our community has lost the understanding of what it means to be Jewish."

Birobidzhan Stern, the town's Yiddish-language newspaper, is now published in Russian but has two pages in Yiddish each week. The paper's editor, Elena Sarashevskaya, fell in love with Yiddish as a child, studied it at university and now writes the Yiddish pages.

Sarashevskaya, who is not Jewish, said she intended to go on publishing the Yiddish pages even though most people in the city could not read them.

"Yiddish is imbued with a real life-force; maybe it's linked to the suffering of the Jewish people," she said. "People are always pronouncing Yiddish dead but it's still very much alive, it's always finding new ways to survive."

In Birobidzhan there is certainly an attempt to keep Yiddish and other elements of Jewish heritage alive. Street signs use both Russian and Yiddish, and one school still offers Yiddish lessons, although the university Yiddish faculty closed down a few years ago.

A four-day Jewish cultural festival held this month in the city featured a concert from a cantor of Vienna's main synagogue and the opening of an exhibition on the city's history, organised by an Austrian diplomat and featuring Russian, American and Israeli artists.

Archive photographs in the exhibit show the enthusiasm with which many Jews took to the project, including shopfronts with Yiddish signage and the first years of Valdgeym, a Jewish collective farm established a few miles outside the city.

One of the stranger parts of Birobidzhan's story is that although it was meant as a Jewish statelet, religious Judaism was alien to Soviet atheism and thus frowned upon. The local museum contains Yiddish leaflets warning locals not to celebrate Passover, and Sarashevskaya leafed through back issues of Birobidzhan Shtern from the 1980s, pointing out that although the newspaper was in Yiddish it contained no discussion of either Judaism or Israel.

With so few Jews now living in Birobidzhan, the massed Yiddish dances and mannequins of gurning Jews that welcome visitors to the Jewish cultural centre give the impression of a Jewish Disneyland rather than of a living, breathing community.

If the local government gets its way, more Jews would move to the region, especially some of those who left in the early 1990s. Rostislav Goldstein, the senator for the region in Russia's upper house of parliament, said

Birobidzhan's proximity to China could provide advantages for Israeli businesses wanting to crack the Chinese market.

He said he wanted to create a local version of the Aliyah, the name given to the process of attracting Jews from the diaspora to Israel. "We have one big advantage over Israel, and that's that there are no Arabs shooting here," he said.

Livental, the local governor, was rather more circumspect, but said his personal chauffeur had emigrated from Birobidzhan to Israel in the early 1990s but recently returned as he could not get used to the local mentality. "If the economic situation here improves then more people will want to return," he said.

Russian defense minister to make rare Israel visit for talks on Syria

By Judah Ari Gross

Times of Israel, September 24, 2017

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/russian-defense-minister-to-visit-israel-to-talk-syria/>

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu will visit Israel next month to discuss the two countries' ongoing security coordination in Syria, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman's office confirmed on Sunday.

It will be Shoigu's first official visit to Israel, and the first visit for a Russian defense minister to the Jewish state in many years.

According to Liberman's office, the two defense ministers will "discuss the continuing coordination of the two militaries, the cooperation between the two countries and Iran's entrenchment in Syria, in which the Iranians are transferring advanced weapons to Hezbollah through Damascus."

Liberman's office would not give a specific date for Shoigu's trip, but said it would take place sometime in mid-October.

Israel Radio, which first reported on the planned visit, said Israeli defense officials ascribe great importance to the trip.

While Shoigu has yet to visit Israel in his five years as defense minister, he has made multiple trips to Syria, including one earlier this month, as well as a surprise stop in Iran last year.

The soft-spoken defense minister is seen by many analysts as a driving force behind Russia's aggressive support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

The visit would be a departure from recent years, which have seen Israeli leaders travel to Russia multiple times for diplomatic meetings, but almost no such sit-downs taking place in Israel. Last month, for instance, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Russian resort town of Sochi.

Israel has repeatedly stated that it will act militarily in Syria if one of its "red lines" is violated, notably the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. This is potentially problematic for the Jewish state's relations with Russia, as Moscow has aligned itself with Assad, who is also allied with Iran and Hezbollah.

In order to avoid friction and accidental conflict for the past two years Israel and Russia have coordinated their military efforts in Syria.

Israeli officials do not generally discuss the full extent of that coordination, but they stress that the Israeli military does not seek Russian permission before carrying out operations.

As the Syrian civil war appears to be coming to a close, or at least stagnating, Israel's attention has increasingly turned to the threats posed by Syria's other ally, Iran, in establishing bases and military infrastructure near the Israeli border on the Golan Heights.

Israel has reportedly asked Russia and the United States to include in ceasefire agreements for the Syrian conflict that Iran-backed Shiite militias not be allowed within 60 kilometers (37 miles) of the border. However, according to reports, these requests have been denied.

The Moscow-Tehran Axis is a Coalition of the Weak

By Frederick W. Kagan

Mosaic, September 25, 2017

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2017/09/the-moscow-tehran-axis-is-a-coalition-of-the-weak/>

The excellent essay in Mosaic by Michael Doran and Peter Rough articulately lays out the challenges facing American national security in the Middle East and the flaws of U.S. strategy in the region over the past decade. The authors accurately assess the strength of the Russo-Iranian coalition, rightly dismissing the chimerical notion that the U.S. can somehow leverage Moscow to contain or control Tehran. And, again rightly, they ascribe the ascendance of that coalition to the efforts by President Obama to realign the U.S. against our traditional partners in the region as well as to his decision, accepted in turn by President Trump, to focus singlemindedly on the fight against Islamic State before seeking to address the Russo-Iranian challenge, particularly in Syria.

To account for the strength of the bonds between Moscow and Iran is a necessary and important task. No less necessary and important, however, is to avoid the trap of believing that the U.S. is so helpless before their power that we must accept whatever they insist on lest we provoke a conflict we cannot win.

In truth, the Moscow-Tehran axis—which, given the very close cooperation between Iran and North Korea on nuclear weapons and missile research, could be extended to include Pyongyang—is a coalition of the weak. Iran’s economy remains inefficient and inadequate to the needs of the regime and the Iranian people. Long-term sanctions have played a role in producing that weakness, but structural problems have been much more decisive. The outsized role played by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) distorts the economy badly, as does the influence of the bonyads (ostensibly “charitable organizations” but actually mechanisms of state control) and the massive trust, known as the Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order (EIKO), that is controlled directly by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

These institutions crowd out the free market, turn much of Iran’s economy into a patronage system controlled by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, and fuel massive corruption. Sanctions relief provided under the 2015 Iran deal (JCPOA) enabled the government of President Hassan Rouhani to improve matters somewhat, but opposition by Khamenei and the Guards to Rouhani’s structural reforms have rendered any such improvement limited and temporary.

The Russian economy is in even worse shape. Dependent on hydrocarbon and arms exports for most of Russia’s revenue, Moscow has been financially devastated by the combination of low oil prices and international sanctions. The effects of the former are much the more significant and long-lasting. Even if sanctions were fully lifted, Russia simply cannot balance its budget while oil remains at anything like its current value. Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin’s turn toward autocracy and managed kleptocracy has alienated and sidelined the few serious economic reformers in Moscow. Not only is there no real prospect of undoing the structural defects of the Russian economy; there is not even any meaningful plan to do so.

As for the state of the North Korean economy, it requires no elaboration.

It doesn’t follow, of course, that Russia and Iran pose no serious threat to the U.S. and its allies. After all, aggressive military action can conceal and even to some extent overcome economic deficiencies, at least temporarily. If the Russians or Iranians were to threaten or to use military force in order to gain control of significant resources beyond their borders, they might well alleviate some of the worst of their domestic problems without even needing to address their economies’ fundamental flaws. Only in our postmodern world does the idea of states seeking to gain wealth by conquest seem strange; to the contrary, it has been the norm throughout human history.

Thus, Iranian efforts to gain dominant influence in Iraq could prove beneficial if translated into the ability to tap into the latter country's flow of hydrocarbons, or simply reduce its oil exports and thereby cause a rise in prices. Similarly, the establishment of Russian suzerainty in the Baltics, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan could provide Moscow with influxes of cash and resources.

So we must never lose sight of the danger that weakness can drive expansion rather than contraction, or of the fact that weakness rather than strength is a frequent cause of aggression. Above all, however, we must understand something else: compared with the Russo-Iranian coalition, the wealth of the U.S. and its allies is almost unimaginably vast.

The combined GDP of Russia and Iran stands at about \$1.9 trillion; that of the U.S. and the European Union stands at about \$35.5 trillion. The combined economies of Russia and Iran are slightly larger than Italy's. Whereas both Russia and Iran depend heavily on hydrocarbon exports for large portions of their revenue, the U.S. is not dependent on such exports and Europe is a major net energy importer. Continuing low hydrocarbon prices will therefore continue to shape economic trends in our favor.

To be sure, economic power is important in security matters only if it is harnessed explicitly to that purpose. Sanctions are one way of harnessing it, and Doran and Rough's recommendation that we increase non-nuclear sanctions—which, whatever defenders of the nuclear deal may say, do not violate its terms—makes a great deal of sense. Increasing sanctions on Russia is also a good idea.

But it is long past time for the U.S. (to say nothing of Europe) to begin once again seriously investing more of its national wealth in both its foreign-policy and its military systems and structures. The Trump administration's disdain for the State Department, if perpetuated, will bring about a significant erosion of America's ability to understand and influence the world, at a cost-savings that amounts to budgetary dust. The refusal of both the White House and Congress to make a major priority of restoring and expanding our military, battered by decades of underfunding and continual war, severely undercuts our capacity to deter, shape, and respond to the multiple enemies and threats we face all around the world.

Designing an intelligent strategy to push back against Iran and Russia while destroying Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the rest of the Salafist-jihadist movement, and also while containing China and responding to the North Korean crisis, is an immensely difficult task. Executing such a strategy, however, is well within our means. If only we have the will, and stop allowing enemies far weaker than we are to intimidate us, there is no reason why the U.S. should not be able to accomplish all of our core national-security goals. To repeat: if only we have the will.

Court and Politburo: Putin's Changing Inner Circle

By Konstantin Gaaze

Carnegie Europe, September 22, 2017

<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/73193>

Of all the allegories tossed around to describe the Putin regime, "Politburo 2.0" may be the most apt. The term was coined by Minchenko Consulting in a 2012 report that discarded the concept of a "collective Putin" in favor of a system that regards Russia's power structure as a network of delegated power akin to the Soviet Politburo.

Yet this concept harking back to the Soviet era coincides with one from Russian imperial times. Putin evidently also has a "court" consisting of figures who do not have government positions but still exercise great power. How do these two models work in practice?

The Politburo 2.0 is not a formal structure. Its members don't gather in the Kremlin's Walnut Room, as their predecessors did, or adhere to the formal procedures of the Soviet Politburo. Instead, the Politburo 2.0 encompasses the most influential and independent centers of power in Russia—a club of select government officials and businessmen that have the president's trust.

The composition of the new Politburo defines the official political strategy, rather than the other way round. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's admission to the high elite in 2013 foreshadowed the militarization of foreign policy. Sergei Ivanov's removal in 2016 presaged reshuffles that began last summer and have continued until today.

Politburo 2.0 is a system built upon internal conflict. Its members can be divided into two different categories: government officials whose strength lies in the positions they hold rather than in their closeness to Putin—Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, and Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu—and businessmen from Putin's inner circle—Arkady Rotenberg, Gennady Timchenko, and Yuri Kovalchuk.

The state officials have real formal power, although they must be cautious about how they use it. The members of the inner circle can do little without the president's say-so and do not have administrative power.

One figure, Igor Sechin, fits both categories. While he has his own powers as the head of Rosneft, he is also an old crony of Putin and has his ear.

Putin's court can be said to have formed in 2009, when he left the Kremlin and handed over the presidency—temporarily—to Dmitry Medvedev. As prime minister, Putin was forced to restructure his life and revamp his inner circle. His court consisted of those who worked with him every day: bodyguard Alexei Dyumin, protocol officer Anton Vaino, and oligarch-lite Arkady Rotenberg.

The court was not a continuation of his earlier team but a sign that that team had been disbanded. Governing the country took a backseat to demonstrating loyalty to the boss and providing for his comfort and leisure. From 2009 to 2011, to gain Putin's favor, one had to avoid the spotlight, abandon one's own political ambitions, and resolve problems quickly and effectively—all without distracting the boss.

By 2012, the year he returned to the Kremlin, Putin faced a dilemma. Should he dismantle the court and return to command and government work practices, or incorporate these practices into the court? Putin opted for the latter option, paving the way for the system of rule we see today: a formal presidential administration and cabinet bureaucracy that is complemented by the court. However, this compromise has created a system in which there are multiple loyalties and confusion about roles.

The hand of Putin's court can be seen in a significant but poorly understood aspect of Russian foreign policy. Courtiers play a role in prosecuting the unofficial hybrid war Russia is allegedly waging in Ukraine, Syria, and on the Internet. When courtiers acquired quasi-government functions in 2012, they were able to do what Putin's 2003 and 2007 teams were never capable of. For instance, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who used to run the Kremlin kitchen, is credited with financing the Wagner private battalion, which fights in Syria, and the Olgino troll operation.

What else does the court do? One need look no further than fluctuations in cultural policy. Most members of the August 2017 Politburo are neutral or even Western-looking on cultural issues. So why is Russia moving in a determinedly conservative cultural direction when the Politburo 2.0 is apathetic about such issues? Things make sense when you look at Putin's court and the figure of Tikhon Shevkunov, a Russian Orthodox Church bishop who has eschewed official positions but is often referred to as Putin's confessor. Cultural policy doesn't concern the Politburo 2.0 but is of great interest to the court.

Personal sanctions against Putin's inner circle dealt a serious blow to the court by making it a public spectacle. From 2015 onward, the president came to terms with the fact that he could no longer conceal his private inner circle. Equally problematic has been the court's uneasy relationship with government. While it exists outside government structures, the court nevertheless has become part of state bureaucracy and acquired client networks.

More recently, trying to resolve contradictions between the bureaucracy and the informal elite, President Putin started to incorporate members of his court into public politics and state bureaucracy, a trend that is now

known as the “personnel revolution” of 2016–2017. Putin’s protocol officer Anton Vaino and his orderlies Alexey Dyumin and Yevgeny Zinichev were appointed to public offices, ousting career bureaucrats.

How will these figures work outside the confines of the royal palace? Will they start operating by the rules of the bureaucracy, or will they try to preserve their informal court practices of dealing with the president? This dilemma has yet to be resolved.

Putin faces a long list of challenges ahead of his fourth term, not least of which is that he has no concept of the future structure of the ruling elite. For that matter, he has no strategy for Russian politics, or for the country as a whole. He has yet to decide whether to rely more on the informal courtiers he is bringing into government or on the old government structures that his courtiers have been undermining. Ordinary Russians will feel the impact of that decision, which is imminent next year.

Russian TV series claims Jewish Trotsky masterminded bloody 1917 revolution

By Julie Masis

Times of Israel, September 28, 2017

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/russian-tv-series-claims-jewish-trotsky-masterminded-the-bloody-1917-revolution/>

Trotsky portrayed as a butcher in the upcoming Russian television series bearing his name. (Courtesy)
A hundred years after the Russian revolution, the Russians are claiming that a Jew was behind it — at least according to a new television drama.

An eight-episode series entitled “Trotsky” argues it was Jewish revolutionary Leon Trotsky — and not Vladimir Lenin — who masterminded the revolution that brought the communists to power. The film also blames Trotsky for the execution of the Russian royal family.

The upcoming televised drama will be screened on Russian TV in the beginning of November, in time for the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

“You can say that Trotsky wrote the music, and Lenin sang to it. Trotsky made the revolution happen; Lenin only lead it,” said Alexander Kott, the Jewish co-director of the TV series.

“I hope the public view on Trotsky will change when the film comes out because no one remembers him. Everyone knows Lenin, but everyone forgot Trotsky,” said Kott.

Kott said that there are documents that prove Trotsky was more influential than Lenin.

“He signed all the orders,” Kott said. “I found out a lot for myself too. I didn’t know that Trotsky was in charge [before working on this series].”

The idea for the TV series came from Konstantin Ernst, the chief of Channel 1, Russia’s most popular TV network.

Although Trotsky masterminded the revolution, he could not serve as its public face because of his Jewish background, Kott said.

“The people wouldn’t have followed a Jewish leader,” said Kott. “For the factory workers, he was a stranger. So he did everything and then he stepped aside.”

The TV series presents Trotsky as a ruthless man who was responsible for the execution of the Russian Tsar, according to Kott.

Trotsky fought to reinstate the death penalty after it was abolished by Russia’s provisional government, which made it possible for the Bolsheviks to shoot the Tsar’s entire family including his children, according to Kott.

“He was a cannibal and a tyrant,” Kott said. “He was up to his elbows in blood. Under his orders, entire villages were burned down.”

But most historians don't accept the new theory that it was Trotsky who masterminded the Russian revolution.

“This is utter nonsense. It doesn't fit in with any historical facts. I totally disagree,” said Gennady Estraikh, a New York University professor who specializes in Jewish history in Russia. “It smells like anti-Semitism, the claim that the Jews were responsible for the revolution rather than the Russians. It's very strange.”

Joshua Rubenstein is an Associate of the Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies who wrote a book about Trotsky. He also said that there is no question that the leader of the Bolsheviks was Lenin.

Trotsky only joined the Bolshevik party a month before the revolution, while Lenin was the leader of the Bolsheviks throughout, Rubenstein pointed out. The fact that Trotsky joined the Bolsheviks late is something that Stalin used against him during the power struggle that followed Lenin's death, he added.

“I'm intrigued by the idea that the producers would put Trotsky in the center of the narrative and not Lenin. I wonder what their intention is by putting an explicitly Jewish figure like Trotsky at the center of the story,” Rubenstein said.

Rubenstein also said that Trotsky was not responsible for the execution of the Tsar.

“If they're saying that Trotsky was behind the execution of the Tsar, that's simply not true. Lenin and Sverdlov executed the Tsar,” he said. “If they're saying it was Trotsky, then I really question their motives because this is a very sensitive point.”

As the leader of the Red Army, Trotsky was at the front and most likely was not even in Moscow when the decision to execute the Tsar's family was made, according to Rubenstein.

“Trotsky always wanted to bring the Tsar to trial and serve as a prosecutor,” Rubenstein said. “The Tsar is an honored figure by the Russian Orthodox Church — to say that a Jew was behind his execution is a very incendiary accusation.”

Although Trotsky had blood on his hands like the other revolutionaries, he also saved thousands of Jews from the pogroms during the Russian civil war when he was the leader of the Red Army, said Rubenstein.

“We believe that 150,000 Jews were killed and it was the Red Army that stopped it,” Rubenstein said. “Trotsky was absolutely opposed to any physical attacks on Jews.”

Whether the Russian television series about Trotsky is intentionally anti-Semitic, or is only trying to attract more interest from the public by presenting a new angle on a famous historical event, is something that remains to be seen. The Sreda Production company that made the series did not allow The Times of Israel access to the show before the premiere.

The director of the drama said he does not think his film is anti-Semitic. In fact, Kott said he would be happy if the series aired on Israeli television, too. He does not worry about an anti-Semitic reaction in Russia, he said.

“I tried to be objective,” he said. “In Russia, there is no anti-Semitism anymore. Half of the Jews immigrated and the anti-Semitism that existed in the Soviet times doesn't exist at all now.”

**U.S. Military Chief Says Recommends Providing Ukraine with Lethal Defensive Aid
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 27, 2017**

<https://www.rferl.org/a/us-military-chief-dunford-says-recommends-providing-ukraine-lethal-defensive-aid/28759423.html>

The top U.S. military commander has said he recommended that the United States provide lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine to help the country "protect [its] sovereignty" amid a conflict with Russia-backed separatists.

General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 26 that a proposal to provide lethal aid to Ukraine was awaiting a decision from the White House.

"In my judgment, from the military perspective, Ukraine needed additional capabilities to protect their sovereignty," Dunford said when asked why he supported the provision of lethal weapons.

In particular, Dunford said, "we felt [that the] ability to stop armored vehicles would be essential for them to protect themselves."

Under President Donald Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, the United States provided nonlethal military aid such as radar equipment and night-vision goggles to Ukraine, but Obama declined to provide lethal aid out of concern that it might escalate the war between Kyiv's forces and the Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian authorities have urged the United States to send weapons and have asked in particular for portable Javelin antitank missiles, which soldiers in the conflict say are needed to fend off attacks from tanks and self-propelled artillery.

Dunford said that the Pentagon, in reviewing Ukraine's defenses against fighters equipped by Russia, detected a "gap" between Ukraine's defensive capabilities and its needs.

"We just looked at it as a military gap that existed, and if that gap was filled, it would increase the probability the Ukrainians could defend themselves," he said.

The U.S. special envoy for negotiations on the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Kurt Volker, has also advocated providing lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine.

In an interview after his appointment in July, Volker told Current Time TV -- the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America -- that it would help Kyiv counter Russia's "large, large military presence" in eastern Ukraine.

The conflict there has killed more than 10,000 people since it began in April 2014, after Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and fomented separatism across much of the country following the ouster of a Moscow-friendly president.

**Ukrainian Leaders Blame 'Sabotage' for Huge Blast at Munitions depot
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 28, 2017**

<https://www.rferl.org/a/artillery-warehouses-explode-evacuations-ordered-around-vinnitsa-ukraine-kalinovka-evacuated/28759382.html>

Ukrainian leaders said "sabotage" was behind massive explosions at an ammunition depot in central Ukraine that prompted the evacuation of more than 30,000 people and the closure of airspace over the region on September 27.

The blasts late on September 26 sparked a massive blaze at the depot near Kalynivka in the Vinnytsya region, some 270 kilometers west of Kyiv, which the country's defense agency said had been brought largely under control late on September 27.

"We have to learn to defend our strategic facilities from sabotage groups," President Petro Poroshenko said during an emergency evening meeting with his top military commanders on the incident. "We will no longer put up with these events."

Ukraine's military prosecutor's office had said earlier that investigators were treating the explosions and fire as an act of "sabotage," Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) spokeswoman Olena Hitlyanska said.

Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroysman, who arrived in Vinnytsya hours after the blast, also said "external factors" were behind the incident.

"This is the arsenal of the Ukrainian Army, and I think it was no accident that it was destroyed," he said in televised remarks.

The Vinnytsya regional administration more than doubled the Ukrainian military's initial estimate of the amount of munitions stored in the depot to 188,000 tons.

While Hroysman's remarks suggested he believes the incident was connected with Kyiv's war against Russia-backed separatists, neither he or Poroshenko named specific groups, nations, or individuals they believed to be responsible.

Zoryan Shkiryak, an adviser to the head of the Interior Ministry, said on Facebook that he was "convinced that this is a hostile Russian sabotage" and said it was the seventh fire at military warehouses in Kalynivka.

He said a state commission of inquiry will be set up to investigate the cause of the explosions.

Despite the huge fire and explosions that witnesses said blew out windows and could be heard as far away as Kyiv, no deaths or serious injuries were reported.

The Defense Ministry late on September 27 said in a statement that shells and missiles that had been stored in the depot had stopped exploding and the fire at the depot had been brought largely under control.

Earlier, the chief of Ukraine's National Police, Vyacheslav Abroskin, said that hundreds of police officers from Vinnytsya, Zhytomyr, Khmelnytskyi, Kyiv, and Chernivtsi regions were providing security and the safe evacuation of people at the site.

Some 600 National Guard troops were deployed to the area to assist with the evacuation of the residents and to ensure the protection of their property from looters, the National Guard said in a statement. Some 1,200 Ukrainian firefighters worked to contain the blaze, Ukrainian news agency UNIAN reported.

After the explosions and fire broke out, local authorities said they shut off electricity and gas supplies and rerouted train and auto traffic around the disaster area.

The airspace within a radius of 50 kilometers from the zone of explosions was closed, Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Infrastructure Yuriy Lavrenyuk said on Facebook.

The Language Issue in Ukraine, Again

By Mykhailo Minakov

Kennan Institute Focus Ukraine Blog, September 26, 2017

<http://www.kennan-focusukraine.org/the-language-issue-in-ukraine-again/>

On September 25, 2017, the Ukrainian president signed off on the Law on Education, which had been approved by the parliament twenty days before. This law, which had long been anticipated as a means of launching educational reform and somewhat prematurely praised by the U.S. embassy in Ukraine, has caused a scandal because of its clear assimilative policy: secondary education is to be accessible only in Ukrainian, with some options for “indigenous peoples” (Crimean Tatars, Karaites, and Gagauz). This critical linguopolitical norm was amended during the approval process in the Verkhovna Rada: from more inclusive approach taken in the draft, the law was changed to require basically monolingual education for all students, despite Ukrainian bilingualism and minority diversity. The veteran politician and governor of Zakarpattia oblast (Transcarpathia) Hennady Moskal has compared this law to the Soviet policies on minorities, which seemed to him to have been more humane and “correct.”

Three and a half years ago, a legislative act of the same kind ginned up the secessionist movement in Ukraine. This time, in addition to adding to the internal cleavages that divide Ukraino- and Russophone populations, the decision has been harshly criticized by the governments of Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Russia—countries that have large minority populations residing in Ukraine.

To provide Kennan Focus Ukraine readers with more information on the current language issue, we asked experts to comment on the law and its expected impact on Ukrainian society. Here are their responses.

Tetyana Malyarenko, Visiting Research Fellow, Uppsala Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies (Sweden), Fulbright-Kennan fellow (2013–2014)

Ukraine’s recently passed Law on Education, which limits the cultural rights of ethnic minorities in Ukraine, gave rise to a heated debate within the Ukrainian and international academic and policy communities regarding the legitimacy and consequences of such a legislative act. In examining the immediate and longer-term implications of this law, especially its potential role as a trigger for conflict escalation in Ukraine, the limitation of human rights implied in the law should be analyzed in combination with other causes of conflict and by paying specific attention to the particular context in which the limitation of human rights occurs.

This context, in the case of Ukraine, is shaped by several factors. First, ongoing reforms in Ukraine (in the spheres of education, health care, pensions, and decentralization) have been implemented with a view to “optimization of public expenses.” Thus, what is most important is that the proposed education reforms are likely to further deepen existing socioeconomic inequalities in Ukrainian society, with the most painful consequences, in both the short and the long term, experienced by socially vulnerable groups (the poor, the desperate, the elderly, and women) and in the rural and peripheral territories of the country.

Second, deepening socioeconomic inequality, in the context of an already apparent ethnic dominance policy and the ongoing isolation of minorities under conditions of economic decline and related problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and armed conflict in Donbas, will likely facilitate the articulation of group grievances and thus contribute to the further polarization of attitudes both between different social groups (horizontally) and between elites and society (vertically).

Third, the perennially weak state institutions in Ukraine act as an additional enabling factor in conflict escalation as they create opportunities, even incentives, for local elites to channel public grievances into electoral support (peaceful scenario) or support for a coup d’état (violent scenario). Put differently, the limitations of human rights in the newly adopted Law on Education may or may not act as a trigger for conflict escalation now, but they will obviously create new fracture lines in Ukrainian society while further exacerbating existing tensions.

This long-term cumulative effect of individual policies that foster exclusion rather than inclusion reflects a worrying tendency in Ukrainian politics and society that does not bode well for the democratic development of the country, for its security and stability, or for prospects of sustainable conflict management and settlement.

Iryna Kogut, Analyst, CEDOS (Kyiv, Ukraine)

Ukraine's newly approved Law on Education states that children can be taught in their native language in preschool and primary school, while they learn Ukrainian as an additional language. Beginning with lower secondary education, however, Ukrainian replaces minority languages as the main language of instruction, though children from minority groups can continue to learn their native languages and some related cultural subjects.

This decision implies a reduction in the use of minority languages. Still, national minorities could learn their mother tongue until the end of high school. But at the same time, some of them—principally about 16,000 Hungarian-speaking and the same number of Romanian-speaking students—appear to be rather weakly integrated into Ukrainian society. About half the graduates of Hungarian and Romanian schools did not pass the Ukrainian graduation test in 2016. The 300,000 students in Russophone schools also had poor results on the graduation test, and their learning outcomes in other subjects are also lower than the results of students from Ukrainian schools of similar status and location. Children who study in the languages of national minorities have limited educational opportunities in Ukraine (because vocational and higher education is conducted in the national language): they face barriers to holding positions in civil service, fully participating in public life, or working outside a relatively narrow accommodation of the relevant minority.

The idea of reform is to give students time to learn in their native language (in kindergarten and elementary school) and prepare to study in Ukrainian in secondary school. This approach should increase the level of integration while allowing the study of a native language and culture. However, this decision raises new challenges: schools with minority language attendees often lack bilingual teachers, while Hungarian and Romanian communities often lack opportunities for Ukrainian language practice. Therefore, the state should oversee an intensive teacher training program, possibly to include the creation of bilingual textbooks, as well as language camps, school visits, and study visits to children and teachers.

Oksana Mikheyeva, Professor, Ukrainian Catholic University

For a long time, Ukraine has had to face the consequences of unthought-out policies with respect to the educational system. That the pedagogical professions require the lowest admission grades and are predominantly female professions indicate that this sphere is extremely underfunded and the career prospects of the graduates are poor. Moreover, bribery is rampant in the system of academic degree defense and, combined with the lack of competition in the academic environment, is creating a closed system of inadequacy. The need for reform is urgent.

In the debate that has followed passage of the new law regarding education, I've been more concerned about the implementation of the law than about the law itself. Ukraine lacks teachers with the necessary skills to advance such a complex reform. The heated discussion was caused by the language issue, but that is not the root of the problem. One can learn a language and teach others. Creating a teaching community that is prepared to shoulder responsibility for the learning process and its results is far more difficult.

The response to the proposed changes regarding the language of instruction is somewhat exaggerated, in my view. Article 7, on the language of instruction, does not violate Ukraine's constitution, even though it creates room for discussion of human rights, tolerance, and diversity. The law can be seen as a nontraumatic plan for the integration of minority groups through the primary schools and for further increasing the proportion of classes taught in Ukrainian. In addition, it is expected that minorities will be better integrated into the national context and their career opportunities will expand.

The emotional response to this issue is crowding out the responses to the crucial problems of poor funding for education, the immense bureaucratization of the learning process, the backwardness of educational programs, and neglect of minority rights in other areas. For instance, the program in history remains xenophobic and

stigmatizes minorities. The cultural specifics of certain population groups often are not taken into account. For example, different kinds of student competitions are usually held on Saturdays. This creates obvious obstacles to the participation of Jewish children.

The situation with respect to language in Ukraine is complicated. Language often is not regarded as among the crucial identity markers. The goals of this reform, therefore, would be difficult to achieve without a wider social focus on the spread of the Ukrainian language. The request for education in Ukrainian can be energized and incentivized by the prospect of better career opportunities.

Balazs Jarabik, Non-Resident Scholar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Budapest, Hungary)

The new Law on Education is a progressive reform that has been in preparation, with the engagement of local and European experts, for almost two years. Compared to this, the ominous Article 7 of the law regulating the language of education was added a mere thirty minutes before the vote in parliament. The new paragraph is a significant step backward for the rights of national minorities as it introduces Ukrainian as the only language of instruction beginning in the fifth grade of secondary school.

Although the law includes a paragraph on the possibility of teaching one or more items in the language of the European Union, this is vague at best. It excludes Russian, the native language of around 15 percent of Ukrainians (with another 22 percent considering both languages equally to be native). Importantly, there is neither existing capacity nor funding to maintain a high standard of teaching in Ukrainian and in other languages at the same time.

The law will certainly be a point of contention between Ukraine and the EU, not to mention between Russia and Ukraine. However, the law's passage shows that Kyiv feels confident enough to move against the Russian language, three years after parliament's cancellation of the existing language law sparked serious protests and was said to be the *casus belli* for the anti-Maidan resistance.

The move can be explained as the ruling elites in a pre-election mode choosing patriotism and resistance against Russian aggression as key campaign themes. The rush to legislate, however, seems unnecessary. Polls show that around 60 percent of the population prefer to speak Ukrainian in everyday communication, a significantly higher figure than at independence. Language continues to be a sensitive issue in this diverse country, from Bessarabia to Donbas to Zakarpattya oblast, and this step seems unlikely to strengthen the weak legitimacy of the government. Unfortunately, by adopting such an assimilation tactic, Ukraine may come to look like the Soviet Union, the hated predecessor overlord that pursued similar policies against Ukrainian-speakers by forcing the dominance of Russian in Soviet Ukraine's schools.

Museum of Polish Jewry honored with EU's top heritage award Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 28, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/09/28/news-opinion/world/museum-of-polish-jewry-honored-with-eus-top-heritage-award>

The Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews was recognized with a top honor from the European Union for a project promoting Jewish cultural heritage.

The Europa Nostra Prize, or Our Europe, was presented Wednesday at a ceremony at the Warsaw museum. Twenty-nine laureates from 18 countries were honored.

The project was made up of some 3,500 events.

"Hundreds of thousands of people took part in the events we organized, and millions of people did it through the internet," said the director of the museum, Dariusz Stola.

"It would not have been possible without the hard work of our museum staff and our Norwegian partners. This award belongs to them all."

The Europa Nostra is the top prize handed out by the EU for outstanding achievements in the fields of conservation, research, education, training and raising awareness of cultural heritage.

A panel of independent experts analyzed 202 applications submitted by organizations and cultural institutions from 39 countries across Europe for this year's prize.

Poland's President Offers New Path to End Court Crisis

By Rick Lyman

New York Times, September 25, 2017

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/world/europe/poland-courts-andrzej-duda.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2FEurope&action=click&contentCollection=europe®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=sectionfront

Two months after vetoing laws to restructure the Polish court system that had drawn sharp rebukes from the European Union and brought thousands of protesters into the summer streets, President Andrzej Duda on Monday offered his own draft versions of the legislation.

But his proposals contain provisions likely to upset all sides in the bitter debate.

The earlier laws would have forced all Supreme Court justices to resign – a move widely criticized in Brussels and elsewhere as undermining judicial independence and the rule of law. Mr. Duda's version institutes an age limit of 65 for high court judges, which would force the retirement of nearly 40 percent of the court's 82 justices by year's end.

And rather than giving the right-wing ruling party vast control over the selection of judicial candidates, Mr. Duda's proposed measure would require that candidates get at least 60 percent of the vote in Parliament. That's enough to force the ruling party, with its slim majority, to seek outside support.

After vetoing the earlier bills in the summer, Mr. Duda promised to write his own to address his problems with the legislation. "I have kept my word," he said at a news conference on Monday, taking no questions.

But Mr. Duda's measures also include provisions fiercely rejected by most opposition parties, including one that would create a Disciplinary Chamber within the Supreme Court to investigate and punish judges it deems corrupt. And it was unclear whether any party would be satisfied with Mr. Duda's age-limit approach.

The bills will be presented to Parliament on Tuesday, beginning what promises to be weeks of debate while opponents most likely stage protests and try to derail the process.

On Monday, the immediate reaction was muted. Both the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party and its opponents promised to study the proposals, though all sides found something to criticize.

Law and Justice said the proposals were not entirely acceptable, but were good enough to provide a start for further debate. "We will work on this legislation so that it is acceptable for us and the president," said Ryszard Terlecki, head of the party's parliamentary caucus.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the ruling party's undisputed leader, offered no comment on Monday about the new proposals. Mr. Kaczynski handpicked Mr. Duda as his party's presidential candidate.

Mr. Duda noted that his proposals, if enacted, might be unworkable without a change to the Constitution giving him more power to appoint judges. Analysts said it was doubtful that any party, including Law and Justice, was interested in amending the Constitution at the moment to give Mr. Duda more power.

"I am afraid we are back to square one," said Marcin Matczak, a professor of law at the University of Warsaw. "This proposal from Duda changes nothing and Law and Justice will just use it to promote its own ideas in Parliament."

Law and Justice officials have said that reforms are urgently needed to fix what they describe as an unpopular and sclerotic court system. Domestic opponents and European Union officials have accused them of trying to subvert the rule of law by placing the courts more firmly under the control of the right-wing ruling party.

Mr. Duda's draft laws came just a day after a populist, right-wing party drew enough votes to enter the German Parliament, and on the same day European Commission officials were meeting in Brussels to discuss whether Poland was violating democratic standards.

The coming weeks of debate over the Polish court laws – and the potential return of the mass street protests that filled streets across in July – ensure that friction between the European Union and the more populist and authoritarian governments in the East will persist through the autumn.

Czech parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of October also promise to turn largely on attitudes toward Brussels, particularly rules forcing member nations to accept refugees.

"I think it's going to get very serious," said Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society European Policy Institute in Brussels. "I get the sense Kaczynski is going all out there, kamikaze, and he's going to keep going."

In Brussels, Frans Timmermans, the senior vice president of the European Commission, said commissioners reaffirmed their demand at a meeting on Monday that Warsaw comply with the bloc's democratic norms.

The commission has threatened to invoke against Poland a never-before-used article in the European Union treaty to punish members who violate democratic or human rights standards, potentially resulting in economic sanctions or even a loss of voting rights. Mr. Timmermans said that the commission would study Mr. Duda's proposals and that it was eager for negotiations with Warsaw to resolve the crisis.

Meanwhile, Law and Justice officials have indicated the party will also try to pass laws later in this parliamentary session to regulate foreign ownership of private media outlets and to restructure the way provincial and local elections are conducted. Critics say the proposals are designed to cement the party in power.

The best hope, Ms. Grabbe said, is that any efforts to dilute the rule of law or subvert the union's democratic standards will be opposed by so many Poles that the ruling party backs down — as it did in late 2016 when tens of thousands took to the streets to oppose a government-backed law outlawing all abortions.

Law and Justice had tried to fast-track its court bills in July, approving them without hearings or debate under an expedited schedule. This time, party officials said, the bills would go through regular hearings and debate, probably lasting for weeks and forcing opponents to calculate how to structure its protests to avoid losing steam.

For the ruling party, altering Mr. Duda's proposals raises the risk of another round of vetoes.

"If they do change his proposals, the president said he will veto the bills again," said Jan Grabiec, spokesman for Civic Platform, the leading opposition party. "It's a very important political declaration, because I believe he will do that. If he signs such bills now, he will lose the entire political capital he has recently built and he will never get it back."

Moldovan President Says NATO Liaison Office 'Will Not Bring Peace' **Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 26, 2017**

<https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-president-dodon-nato-office/28758587.html>

Moldova's pro-Russia president has renewed criticism of plans for a liaison office of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the country, saying the ex-Soviet republic should stay clear of a "geopolitical confrontation" between Washington and Moscow.

Igor Dodon's comments in a September 26 interview came weeks after he accused his country's pro-Western government of trying to "add the Moldovan Army" to the alliance by sending a contingent of soldiers to NATO-led military exercises in neighboring Ukraine.

The planned NATO office in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, "will not bring peace" to Moldova and will hamper efforts to resolve the frozen conflict with the country's breakaway Transdniestrian region, Dodon said.

"We are a neutral state. Why would we need offices of military blocs in Chisinau?" he told RFE/RL's Moldovan Service.

Moldova's government, which backs closer ties with the United States and the European Union, signed an agreement with NATO on the opening of the liaison bureau in November.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has described the planned office as "a small diplomatic mission with only civilian staff" and said "it is absolutely possible to further strengthen our partnership with Moldova, fully respecting the neutrality of Moldova."

Dodon, who took office in December, has opposed the plan. The Moldovan presidency is largely symbolic but Dodon's position has been strengthened by the fact that he was elected in a direct popular vote, the first president to win office through such an election since 1997.

Moldova has been a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program for more than two decades, with the alliance helping it to train troops for international peacekeeping missions.

Dodon told RFE/RL that, while he welcomes some forms of cooperation between Moldova and NATO, "that doesn't mean we should open a NATO office here."

Dodon advocates stronger ties with Russia, which has bristled at NATO's expansion toward its borders after the fall of the Soviet Union. The three ex-Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the alliance in 2004.

After years of growing suspicion from Moscow, relations with the alliance deteriorated sharply in 2014 following Russia's seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and its subsequent backing of armed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Earlier this month, Moldova's government overruled Dodon in order to send 57 Moldovan soldiers to NATO-led exercises in Ukraine.

Russia maintains an estimated 2,000-strong force in the pro-Moscow Transdniestrian region, which declared independence from what was then the Soviet republic of Moldova in 1990.

The Russian presence includes 1,500 troops who Moscow says guard huge Soviet-era arms depots, and up to 500 peacekeepers to maintain the uneasy 25-year-old cease-fire that ended fighting between Moldova and its eastern separatist region.

Shalom organization of Bulgarian Jews irked by 'Patriots' declaration on Rosh Hashanah

By Clive Leviev-Sawyer

The Sofia Globe, September 21, 2017

<http://sofiaglobe.com/2017/09/21/shalom-organization-of-bulgarian-jews-irked-by-patriots-declaration-on-rosh-hashanah/>

The Shalom Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria has responded with extreme concern to a declaration in Parliament by the nationalist United Patriots group, that used the occasion of Rosh Hashanah to take a sideswipe at "enemies" of Bulgaria over the events of 1943.

During the Second World War, the majority of Bulgarian society stood up to successfully resist the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to the death camps of the Holocaust where more than six million Jews were murdered. In 1943, the planned deportations of Bulgarian Jews were postponed and never carried out.

However, Bulgaria allowed the deportation of more than 11 000 Jews from the “new territories” under its administration in northern Greece and Yugoslavia. All but a very few of these Jews were murdered in Treblinka within a few days of their arrival.

In a declaration in the National Assembly in Sofia on September 21, marking the start of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the United Patriots – a grouping of far-right and nationalist parties that is the minority partner in government – accused “enemies of Bulgaria” of downplaying the prevention of the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews while emphasising what had happened to those in northern Greece and Yugoslavia.

“Today, the enemies of Bulgaria, actively supported by people with no country born here, try to downplay this fact and stick a shameful accusation against the Bulgarians, deleting the memory of salvation, emphasizing only the fallen Jews from Macedonia and Thrace,” the United Patriots’ declaration said.

In its response, Shalom said that the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews is a historical fact that neither the Jewish community in Bulgaria nor the Bulgarian Jews in Israel and their descendants will forget.

“However, the deportation of the Jews from the territories administered by Bulgaria during the Second World War is also a fact, and denying that is an attempt to erase the memory of those who died in the death camps, and to rewrite history.”

Shalom said that it has a political position on the issue of the fate of the Jews under Bulgarian rule during the years of the Holocaust in Europe. This position was adopted by the organization’s highest body, the Management Board (Consistory) in 2011.

The position said that in the years of the Second World War, the Bulgarian Jews were saved from deportation to the Nazi death camps. This salvation was the result of the actions of the majority of the Bulgarian people, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian non-fascist community. For this action, Bulgarian Jews will be grateful eternally.

It added that the deportation of the Jews from Aegean Thrace, Vardar Macedonia and the town of Pirot at the time these territories were under Bulgarian administration in the years of the Second World War is a historical fact that cannot be denied.

“We, the Bulgarian Jews, mourn for the innocent victims, honour and will in the future continue to honour their memory.

“The blame for the deportation of the Jews from these territories lies with the German authorities, along with the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government. It is therefore important that the Bulgarian Government, at a time and place that it deems fit, should accept moral responsibility for the actions of the pro-Nazi government towards the Jews in the period 1941-1943,” the position adopted in 2011 said.

“Historical facts about the fate of the Jews during the Second World War in Bulgaria and in the territories administered by the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government cannot be a reason for anti-Bulgarian propaganda today and in the future,” Shalom said.

The Fight to Get Israel's Holocaust Survivors Their Benefits

By Lee Yaron

Haaretz, September 25, 2017

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.813964>

Coka is fighting to get recognition for surviving the murderous regime at the World War II-era ghetto in the Romanian city Iasi; Tzila has fallen between the cracks and isn't getting any money from the Poles or the Romanians; Polina is coping with a debt of 120,000 shekels (over \$34,000) to Beilinson Hospital for a stay there; and Motke was forced to buy shoe inserts with all the money he gets from his survivor's allowance.

They, like many other Holocaust survivors, are spending the last years of their lives fighting the Israeli and European bureaucracies to get benefits they're entitled to. Many don't even know what rights they have, even though these have been expanded considerably in the past few years, while others are aware but are having difficulty getting the funds because of a demanding bureaucracy that even younger people would have a hard time navigating.

These elderly people must download forms from the internet, find old documents that testify to previous citizenship and where they were located during the Holocaust; answer dozens of questions and obtain all the relevant information from government agencies in places like Poland and Romania – and have it approved.

To help survivors who are having a hard time handling these assignments alone, The Center for Organizations of Holocaust Survivors in Israel held a conference last week at Kfar Hamaccabiah in Ramat Gan for survivors seeking assistance and information. Between 9 A.M. and 2 P.M., elderly men and women waited in long lines to get information from the government agency booths at the site.

"You would think we were young people waiting for demobilization information from the army or to register for university," said one survivor to her friend on line. In response, the friend brought over two chairs. "We're already too old to stand and wait," she said.

On another line, one of the survivors fainted. A Magen David Adom team was summoned and the old man was revived and resumed his place in line. But the incident only illustrated the urgency needed in helping survivors get what they're entitled to. Some 1,000 Holocaust survivors die every month, and there are less than 200,000 survivors remaining in Israel. According to the Social Affairs Ministry, a third live under the poverty line.

Data obtained by Haaretz shows that over the past three years some 10,000 Holocaust survivors have initiated legal action to obtain benefits, allowances and compensation through the Legal Aid Division of the Justice Ministry. The unit for Holocaust survivors was set up in 2013 and provides assistance for free, with no means test. Others get help from the Holocaust organizations center and various other nonprofit groups that help survivors obtain benefits. Many others pay private lawyers and private companies hefty fees.

One reason that survivors have to spend their last years fighting to get compensation is actually a positive one; in recent years the State of Israel and an increasing number of European countries have granted survivors an expanded array of rights. For example, survivors from Poland started to get a monthly allowance of 400 zlotys (395 shekels) in April 2015. In 2016, Serbia began returning property seized by Nazis. And just this past May, the Romanian government passed a law on returning property to Holocaust survivors that is relevant to 27,000 people here. The Romanian government has also started paying pensions to survivors living in Israel.

The problem arises because survivors are required to submit to these governments numerous documents in various languages that prove where they were during the Holocaust. The Holocaust organizations center has only two clerks responsible for assisting survivors with this task, and so far they have helped 4,000 people seeking money from Poland and 3,000 from Romania.

"The survivors' difficulty has two parts – knowing what they're entitled to, and getting the various countries to provide the benefits," says Avi Rosenthal, director of the Holocaust organizations center. "We're talking about elderly survivors, many of them childless. Without help it's very hard to get these benefits. There are many

survivors that fall between the cracks. We are always encountering survivors who aren't getting even half of what they're entitled to."

The dynamic legal situation is also an obstacle, explains Sari Vardi, the national Holocaust survivors coordinator in the Justice Ministry division. "There are constant legislative amendments and new decisions," she says. "If yesterday I couldn't get an allowance from a certain country, tomorrow that may change. It's very important for survivors to apply for help. We are constantly encountering survivors who are getting the minimum, the lowest possible allowances, because they don't demand more."

The Finance Ministry's Holocaust Survivors Authority, which is meant to integrate all the assistance offered to survivors, helps them obtain benefits through the local authorities, through mobile information centers and by sending letters to survivors to update them on new benefits available to them – but it cannot intervene to obtain benefits from other countries. Only if a survivor asks for help with the paperwork that other countries require will the authority assist, in coordination with the various authorities and the Holocaust organizations center.

"There are lots of agencies and lots of budgets, but there isn't enough coordination between them," adds Rosenthal. As Haaretz recently reported, the state comptroller has also demanded a coordinating body be established, but the Prime Minister's Office has not made a decision for six months.

Meanwhile, the survivors continue their struggle. Tzila Resnik, 81, of Haifa, volunteers to help Polish survivors fill out forms to get their benefits, but she herself has yet to receive compensation. She was only three years old when the war broke out and the town whose ghetto her family was living in got annexed to Romania. When the Poles started to pay monthly stipends she sent the required applications numerous times. When the Polish authorities refused her request, she sent two appeals and is awaiting an answer.

"The Poles say to apply to the Romanians because they managed the ghetto," she says. "But I can't get compensation from Romania because I wasn't born there. I'm not accepting this excuse."

Coca Palmon, 83, of Haifa, was confined to the ghetto in Iasi, Romania. It was only two months ago that survivors of the death trains, pogroms and ghetto in Iasi were recognized as being eligible for pensions from the Romanian government. She is now in the process of establishing her past presence in the ghetto there.

"My father was on the death train, and our whole family was in the ghetto," she says. "When the Russians bombed the city a bomb fell on our house. We lived in the basement without food or water for half a year," she says. After immigrating to Israel she worked as a secretary in a medical clinic. "I don't want to talk about my difficulties. I have my pride and I want to live in dignity and not be dependent on anyone. I want recognition for the horrors we went through after all those years and to get the money I'm entitled to. It's very hard for us survivors to get the money. They should have made it more simple and dignified."

Polina Factor, 80, lives in Ariel after coming here 18 months ago from Russia. She survived the Vitebsk ghetto when a German soldier who saw her blond hair asked, "What are you doing here with all these 'Zhids,' and ordered her and her mother out of the roundup of those being sent to their deaths.

She came to Israel as a tourist after the birth of a great-granddaughter, but had heart problems and had to undergo cardiac surgery at Beilinson. After the surgery she decided to immigrate and received an identity card, but since the surgery took place when she was still a tourist, she owes the hospital a huge sum, which her Russian insurance is refusing to cover. The Legal Aid Division is trying to help her get recognized as a Holocaust survivor and get benefits from the government. Her family has tried incessantly to get Health Ministry officials to help erase her debt.

"My mother was in a life-threatening situation," says Polina's daughter, Emma. "It isn't fair to impose such a large debt without mercy, while at the same time we are merciful to the refugees of an enemy country [Syria]. None of them is paying any bills."

Mordechai "Motke" Weisel was born in 1929 in Satmar, Transylvania. On his 15th birthday he arrived in Auschwitz, where he lost his entire family except his twin brother, Meir, and an older brother. After they came

to Israel, Meir was killed in battle during the War of Independence. Motke became an army officer, is married to Esther, and has two children and eight grandchildren. He even lit an Independence Day beacon in 2007.

Yet he and his wife cannot make ends meet. Recently he was forced to buy shoe inserts with his entire allowance, and his wife desperately needs more nursing hours. "I'm not a charity case; I worked all my life and I've been through enough," he says. "I have bad pain in my legs and I applied to everywhere I could to get inserts, but they told me there are no inserts for Holocaust survivors. So I had to buy them for more than 2,000 shekels, all the money I get from the Holocaust survivors authority. I'm helping my wife, whose nursing aide comes only once a week although we've asked for more. That's how they treat 88- and 84-year-old Auschwitz survivors."

Roma Holocaust survivors look to Jews as model for recognition – and reparation

By Julie Masis

Times of Israel, September 23, 2017

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/roma-holocaust-survivors-look-to-jews-as-model-for-recognition-and-reparation/>

This September, about 70 Roma survivors of World War II in Moldova will receive compensation from Germany.

But the reparations given to these elderly people in Europe's poorest country will not take the form of cash — only food and coal to use as fuel, and only for a few months. The budget is about \$600 per person.

"These are people who never received any compensation before," said Marin Alla, the director of the Voice of the Roma Coalition, an NGO that is distributing the aid from the Germany-based EVZ Foundation. "They are trying to survive. Some have a pension of 15 euros (\$18) per month, others get 50 euros (\$60) per month."

He said there are now about 600 Roma who lived through WWII left in Moldova, but the funding from Germany is not sufficient to help all of them.

None of the Roma Holocaust survivors in Moldova currently receive German pensions, he said.

Jewish Holocaust survivors in Moldova who were in camps, ghettos and labor battalions have been receiving a pension of 336 euros (\$400 USD) per month since 1998. Even those Moldovan Jews who fled from Fascist occupation have been entitled to a one-time hardship fund of 2,556 euros (\$3,048 USD) since 2013, according to Greg Schneider, the executive vice president of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference.)

In addition, Jewish victims of Nazism in Moldova receive help with home care, food, medicine, as well as winter clothes and coal. Almost 700 elderly seniors in Moldova are currently receiving this aid, according to the Claims Conference.

The situation in Moldova is similar to the rest of Europe, where compensation for Roma survivors of the Holocaust came many decades after the Jewish survivors began receiving compensation — or not at all.

"The authorities said, 'The Roma had nothing anyway, so what should they be compensated for?'" said Mirjam Karoly, the senior advisor on Roma and Sinti issues at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose father was born in a Roma concentration camp in Austria.

"They were second-class victims. [The authorities said] the Roma are not victims of the Holocaust because they were put into camps for crime prevention purposes because they were criminals. So they were using the Nazi language," she said.

The compensation for Roma survivors has varied from country to country.

For example, a year ago, it was announced that Roma survivors in the Czech Republic would get a one-time payment of 2,500 euros (\$3000) each as a result of months of negotiations between the Czech and German foreign ministries.

In Romania, 200 Roma survivors began to receive monthly pensions from Germany two years ago — but only thanks to the efforts of a dedicated historian. Because the compensation came 70 years after the end of the war, very few of the survivors were still living.

Petre Matei, a researcher at the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, helped Roma survivors in Romania apply for German pensions. He said that the reason that the Roma began to receive pensions decades after the Jewish survivors is because many Roma are illiterate, the Roma community is not organized, and because there is still a lot of discrimination against the Roma.

“The problem for the Roma is that they can’t read and write, and even if they could, they wouldn’t be able to speak German,” Matei said. “Also, to be anti-Semitic could be problematic, but to not like the Gypsies in Eastern Europe, it’s not that dangerous.”

Of the 300 Roma Holocaust survivors in Romania who applied for German pensions because they were deported to concentration camps, 200 survivors received the pensions which average approximately 200 euros (\$239 USD) monthly plus a sum of approximately 12,000 euros (\$14,000 USD) which is supposed to make up for the money that they should have been paid in the last 10 years, Matei said.

The other 100 Roma concentration camp survivors did not receive the pensions because they were younger than 11 years old during the war, so the German authorities decided that they were too young to perform forced labor, Matei explained. (Those 100 people have become eligible for a one-time payment from Germany this year.)

It is not clear how many Roma Holocaust survivors received compensation in other countries because compensation programs often lumped the Roma together with everyone else.

As a result, the Roma were often underrepresented, according to Ralf Possekel, who is in charge of quality management at the EVZ Foundation in Germany, which is funded by the German government and private companies to compensate the victims of Nazi forced labor camps.

“Our experience is when we did a general project for survivors, very few Roma attended,” Possekel said. “It’s hard to reach the Roma people, it’s hard to include them.”

Because of this observation, EVZ began to work directly with Roma organizations to help Roma survivors. In addition to the project in Moldova that started in September, EVZ has nine similar projects in Ukraine and one in Russia and is planning to expand the program to Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania, Possekel said.

The budgets of these projects are small and cash is not distributed to the survivors directly. EVZ funds food, home repairs and volunteer helpers for the elderly, Possekel said.

One EVZ project in Ukraine even aims to bring a Roma organization for Holocaust survivors together with a Jewish organization “because Jewish organizations have huge experience working with survivors,” Possekel said.

Indeed, while the Jewish and Roma communities have not been historically close, during WWII both suffered.

Of the 25,000 Roma who were deported to Romanian concentration camps from Moldova and Romania between 1942 and 1944, only approximately 11,000 survived, according to Ion Duminica, a Roma researcher at the Moldovan Academy of Sciences. But these numbers are estimates at best, he said.

Lured by fascist propaganda to the so-called “work camps,” the Roma perished from hunger, typhus and from the cold. There were cases of cannibalism, with parents trying to save their starving children by feeding them dead family members, Duminica said.

“The Roma said, ‘We wished that we were executed like the Jews,’” said Duminica who interviewed survivors. “When they remember [that time], they start crying.”

Worldwide, historians estimate that between 500,000 and 1.5 million Roma were murdered during the Holocaust, with some countries such as Germany, Austria, and the Baltic states losing their entire Roma populations.

“Many groups were victimized (by the Nazis), but only the Jews and the Roma were victims of the Final Solution, victims of genocide,” said Prof. Ian Hancock, the director of the Romani Archives and Documentation Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

Hancock points out that the Roma also had their property stolen from them during the Holocaust — their gold, their horses, and their homes — and are therefore also entitled to compensation.

In Moldova, so far, this compensation has not come.

“They mistreated us then and they still mistreat us now,” said Artur Cerari, the Roma Baron of Moldova who is regarded as the most respected Roma leader in the former Soviet Union. “The Jews get pensions every year and every month, but the Roma got nothing.”

Following the Twists, Turns in Kyrgyzstan’s Presidential Race

By Bruce Pannier

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 26, 2017

<https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-kyrgyzstan-election-rundown/28758572.html>

There are no elections in Central Asia like Kyrgyzstan's elections, and the upcoming presidential election there is further proof of that.

As of early August, there were 59 people saying they would run for president. There are now 11 candidates left in the race and there will probably be even fewer by October 15, when the election is held.

Since September 17, two of the stronger contenders have indicated they are supporting the front-runners in an example of the political deal making we're likely to see much more of before mid-October.

There have been accusations of "administrative resources" being used to support the incumbent president's pick as his successor. And there have been complaints about some of the endorsements candidates are receiving, and accusations of biased coverage on TV.

On September 10, Kyrgyzstan's Central Election Commission announced the 13 officially registered candidates for the presidential election.

The three leading contenders were all prime ministers during incumbent President Almazbek Atambaev's term in office -- Omurbek Babanov, Temir Sariev, and Sooronbai Jeenbekov.

Four other candidates -- Adakhan Madumarov of Butun (United) Kyrgyzstan, Bakyt Torobaev of Onuguu-Progress, Kamchybek Tashiev of Ata-Jurt (Fatherland), and Azimbek Beknazarov from the newly formed Union of National Patriotic Forces of Kyrgyzstan -- probably could not win, but they would likely each receive 5 percent or more of the vote.

We recently heard from Bakyt Beshimov, professor at Northeastern University in Boston and a former deputy in Kyrgyzstan's parliament, and Timur Tokotonaliev, the Bishkek-based Central Asia editor for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, that the race is really between Babanov and Jeenbekov.

Recent events support their assertion that a process of consolidation has started among the candidates.

It started with Babanov, a businessman who leads the Respublika party. On September 17, Onuguu-Progress presidential candidate Torobaev and Babanov announced they were forming a tandem. Should Babanov win, Torobaev would become prime minister.

Admittedly, Torobaev might not prove the staunchest of political partners. At the start of August, a short-lived alliance was formed consisting of Torobaev's party, Madumarov's Butun Kyrgyzstan, and Tashiev's Ata-Jurt with the goal of nominating a single candidate.

There was speculation at the time that the three candidates, all from southern Kyrgyzstan, were merely trying to strengthen their hand for potential quid pro quo negotiations with one of the front-runners: give your support in the elections now in exchange for positions in the government later.

That alliance fell apart in mid-September and days later Torobaev joined with Babanov.

Madumarov had already showed up at a Babanov campaign rally in the town of Uzgen on September 16, but Madumarov held back from making any direct statements of throwing his support behind Babanov.

Tashiev announced on September 20 he was dropping out of the presidential race and appeared the same day at a rally for Jeenbekov. Tashiev announced his support for Jeenbekov, indicating the Ata-Jurt party was moving behind Jeenbekov's (and President Atambaev's) Social Democratic Party.

In the meantime, the Respublika-Ata-Jurt coalition that was formed before the 2015 parliamentary elections continues to maintain the unity of its faction in parliament.

Elmira Ibraimova, the campaign manager for Temir Sariev and his Ak-Shumkar (White Falcon) party, announced on September 25 she was leaving the team due to differences with Sariev over the course of campaigning.

There are rumors Sariev might be planning to make a deal with Jeenbekov.

There have always been accusations of the use, or more correctly misuse, of administrative resources in Kyrgyzstan's elections and this one is no exception.

The accusations target Jeenbekov, who has the official backing of President Atambaev. There are claims of pressure being put on employees and students to vote for Jeenbekov or face an uncertain future.

The Knews.kg news site posted a photograph on September 25 purportedly showing a Jeenbekov campaign banner hanging on a polling station in the southern Nookan district.

Babanov's and Jeenbekov's respective campaign teams have complained to the Central Election commission about reports in various news outlets that they contend are meant to smear their images.

There have been accusations against other media outlets.

Torobaev, who is still a presidential candidate despite the announcement of the tandem with Babanov, rejected his allotted 15-minute campaign spot with the Public Television and Radio Corporation because he said the station had broadcast material that blackened his reputation and caused harm to his political reputation. Torobaev called on other candidates to boycott their free 15 minutes of airtime on the station, too.

The greatest uproar has come from endorsements and perceived endorsements for Jeenbekov and Babanov.

There was the incident with Deputy Prime Minister Duishenbek Zilaliev in Batken on September 19, when he addressed a group of state employees and not only openly pledged support for Jeenbekov, but warned those present they should do the same.

However, Jeenbekov would receive far more powerful support the next day at a campaign rally in Jalal-Abad.

At the same event where Tashiev announced he was supporting Jeenbekov, the country's former chief mufti, Chubak Ajy Jalilov, addressed the crowd.

"I came here not as the former mufti, not as a member of the international council of the Ulema or as a member of the Ulema Council of Kyrgyzstan, but as a son of the Kyrgyz people, as a citizen of this country," Jalilov said. "Standing here, on our soil, in front of our people, next to Kamchy ake [Tashiev], we say that you Kamchy ake, are not alone...we also will give our support [to Jeenbekov]."

Civic activist Adil Turdukulov and Erik Iriskulbekov, the head of Babanov's campaign team, complained immediately to the Central Election Commission.

Article 22 of the Electoral Code clearly forbids clerics from campaigning for political candidates.

"Chubak ajy Jalilov is a well-known religious figure and an active member of the Ulema Council," Turdukulov said. "And the question of responsibility [for allowing Jalilov to speak] needs to be raised with the campaign team of Sooronbai Jeenbekov, who permitted this."

Jeenbekov's campaign team responded that Tashiev had invited Jalilov to the event and the former mufti spoke because members of a workers group asked him to do so.

Whatever the election commission says about Jalilov's comments, Jalilov is an extremely influential person, and what he said is very likely to have an effect on the course of the campaign. I spoke with an Uzbek friend of mine who is from the Osh area. He told me Jalilov was a "powerful weapon that cannot be overestimated."

Jalilov is generally popular in Kyrgyzstan, but importantly he appears to have the respect of the 700,000-strong Uzbek community in southern Kyrgyzstan, many of whom did not vote in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

Kyrgyzstan has some 3 million registered voters, but more than 600,000, officially, are outside the country, working mainly in Russia. Most of these will not cast ballots.

So the possibility of picking up a couple of hundred thousand votes from the Uzbek community represents a huge boost to Jeenbekov's chances.

There is another element in Kyrgyzstan's elections that has not been seen before. On September 19, pictures were published of Babanov meeting with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev.

Candidates are forbidden from posting pictures of themselves with foreign officials, the result of previous elections when candidates went to Russia to get pictures with top officials there.

In this case, the pictures came from Kazakhstan, but they appeared in Kyrgyz media and Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry handed over a note on September 20 protesting the meeting and Nazarbaev's alleged support for Babanov.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry shot a note back quickly dismissing these allegations and noting that Nazarbaev had met with Jeenbekov as recently as August 14.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry omitted mentioning that Jeenbekov was still Kyrgyzstan's prime minister at the time and was in Astana for a meeting of the prime ministers of Eurasian Economic Union countries.

Babanov's meeting with Nazarbaev came after a curious incident earlier in September, when Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoev visited Kyrgyzstan.

Mirziyoev met with leaders of Kyrgyzstan's political parties who were lined up to shake hands with the Uzbek leader. When Mirziyoev reached Babanov he stopped for a few extra seconds and said to Babanov, "[I've] heard something about you."

Mirziyoev continued walking down the line of political party leaders without ever explaining the cryptic remark.

Russia has certainly had an influence on some of Kyrgyzstan's previous elections, whether it was Russian officials making visits to Kyrgyzstan ahead of elections, or political figures from Kyrgyzstan going to Russia during campaigning, or simply Russian TV broadcasts, widely available in Kyrgyzstan, reporting in favorable or negative terms on a particular candidate.

The Central Asian leaders really have never had a chance to dabble in Kyrgyz elections.

During the 1990s they had their own problems and were in no position to try to influence the outcome of elections in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan's 2005 parliamentary elections caught everyone by surprise when they sparked a revolution that ousted President Askar Akaev.

The other Central Asian leaders were shocked to see a fellow postindependence president forced to flee the country, and there was nothing they could do when Kurmanbek Bakiev was elected three months later but work to ensure something similar could not happen in their own countries.

The April 2010 revolution again shook up the other Central Asian leaders and again there was little they could do as a parliamentary system was approved in Kyrgyzstan, and parliamentary elections were held in October 2010 and a presidential election the next year.

This time it appears the Kazakh and Uzbek leaders are taking a greater interest in Kyrgyzstan's presidential election.

The shifting political landscape seems to indicate the first round of elections will be the only round.

Had most, or all, of the second-tier candidates, such as Torobaev and Tashiev, participated it is unlikely any single candidate could have received the 50 percent plus one vote needed to win outright, which would have necessitated a second round in November.

The recent political horse-trading increases the probability Kyrgyzstan's next president will be elected on October 15.