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60,000 joined a Polish nationalist march. Should Jews be worried?

By Cnaan Lipshiz

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<https://www.jta.org/2017/11/13/news-opinion/world/60000-joined-a-polish-nationalist-march-should-jews-be-worried>

The sight of far-right activists waving racist banners and shouting anti-Semitic slogans during a nationalist march in the capital of Poland over the weekend shocked many around the world.

It was an understandable reaction to witnessing tens of thousands in Warsaw marching near what used to be the largest Jewish ghetto during the Holocaust amid shouts of “Jews out” and “Remove Jewry from power.”

The march, an annual event that began in 2009 with 500 participants on Poland’s national day, Nov. 11, was not necessarily the largest so far. Similar numbers of marchers showed up last year. But it did showcase the rising strength of Polish nationalists who are feeling emboldened by the conservative government in Warsaw — and to some extent by the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president.

Despite its size, the Warsaw gathering was neither unusual nor even particularly toxic compared to similar gatherings in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Similar or worse displays have occurred regularly in other post-communist countries — including in Ukraine earlier this year and annually in the Baltic states — where the far right is far more powerful and violent than in Poland.

In the aftermath of the march, JTA posed five questions on the situation to some of Poland’s leading experts on the issue and a former leader of its Jewish community.

Despite their growing visibility, ultranationalist Poles have neither the prominence nor acceptance they seem to enjoy in Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary and Ukraine.

Still, their popularity among young people is seen as a worrisome sign, according to Rafal Pankowski, co-founder of the Polish anti-racism group Never Again, who cited a 2013 survey of high school students showing that 44 percent would rather not have Jewish neighbors and more than 60 percent would not want to have a Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend.

“The sociological data shows us that the younger generation is more prone to xenophobia than that of their parents, which is perhaps the most alarming aspect of the phenomenon,” Pankowski said.

Though there were certainly racists at Saturday’s march, there were also “ordinary people, families who just wanted to do a patriotic act, which to them is just to march with the Polish flag,” said Piotr Kadlcik, the former president of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland.

And while some shouted offensive slogans about Jews, there were no known anti-Semitic banners on display, nor was there rioting or violence.

“In a way this is scary, too, because it shows the far right have their act together and can demonstrate the discipline of a political movement rather than a bunch of hooligans,” Kadlcik said. “But there was very little intimidation.”

Polish Jews are split on whether anti-Semitism has increased under the conservative Law and Justice party, which rose to power in 2015.

President Andrzej Duda in a post Monday on Twitter wrote: "In our country, there is no room, nor is there consent, to xenophobia, to insane nationalism, there is no room in our country to anti-Semitism."

Polish Jews agree that racist violence in their country is relatively rare. Only a few dozen anti-Semitic incidents are recorded annually, most of them verbal, though several anti-Semitic statements were made by Polish politicians.

Those are crucial differences, Kadlcik said, between Poland and other countries in the region.

In Hungary, activists from the ultranationalist Jobbik party, the country's second largest, rally regularly in the thousands and sometimes terrorize Jews, as well as Roma and gays. In Ukraine, synagogues and Jewish cemeteries are routinely targeted and activists for the xenophobic Svoboda party call for chasing "Jews out."

In Latvia, veterans of the Nazi Waffen SS march every year. In Bulgaria, the Lukov March, named for a Nazi ally, also draws thousand of participants. And in Lithuania, nationalist marches often feature swastikas and other fascist symbols.

"Things are bad, but they're not as bad as many people think, at least not yet," Kadlcik said of Poland.

Spared the political instability of war-torn Ukraine and the financial crisis gripping Hungary, Polish voters have not displayed the same penchant for raw nationalism as some of their neighbors. Law and Justice is decidedly right wing in that it opposes immigration from the Middle East, seeks to limit access to abortion and increase its control over the media. But the ruling party also has scrapped its plans for asserting greater control over the judiciary and vocally opposes anti-Semitism. It also celebrates rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.

Pankowski cites a number of factors in explaining the rise of Polish nationalism. As citizens of a key NATO ally with bitter memories of Russian domination, many Poles have been driven to nationalism in response to Russian expansionism under President Vladimir Putin. The rise of the far right elsewhere in Europe, and the election of Trump, is also "creating a feeling of solidarity," Pankowski said.

"The U.S. election is an important factor," said Pankowski, who noted that the official banner of the Warsaw march — "We Want God" — was taken from a Polish poem Trump quoted during his July visit to Poland.

Anti-Semitism was neither a central theme of the Polish far right, nor was it very prominent at the Warsaw march, observers said. Most of the focus at Saturday's rally was Muslim immigration, Pankowski said. Among the banners on display was an anti-Muslim caricature drawn by a Danish cartoonist in 2005 carrying the slogan "Mohammed not welcome."

Nonetheless, Jonny Daniels, founder of From the Depths, which promotes Holocaust commemoration in Poland, filed a complaint on Monday accusing marchers of incitement to hate and calling on the government to identify and punish them to the full extent of the law. Marchers found guilty could face up to three years in prison.

"Hatred of Jews remains an element of the identity of the far right in Poland even though it has no large Jewish community, and that's what was on display at the march," Pankowski said.

The issue of anti-Semitism in Poland is a contentious one among its Jews and led to a public row among community leaders in August.

Leslaw Piszewski, president of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, and Anna Chipczynska, head of the Warsaw Jewish community, sent a letter to Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski saying that Polish Jews are increasingly fearful due to government inaction in the face of rising anti-Semitism.

But Artur Hofman, who runs the country's largest Jewish cultural organization, TSKZ, dismissed the letter as "stupid" and scheduled a meeting with Kaczynski. Daniels and two Chabad rabbis also attended.

Hofman and the rabbis then accused Piszewski and Chipczynska of exaggerating Poland's anti-Semitism problem as part of a "political war" against Law and Justice. Piszewski and Chipczynska dismissed that charge and claimed the accusing groups are not legitimate representatives of Polish Jewry.

Sergiusz Kowalski, a leader of a Polish branch of B'nai B'rith and an ally of Piszewski and Chipczynska, called the four men who met Kaczynski "court Jews." And Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland, said in an interview with the Forward that Daniels "has become a supporter of the ultra-right wing."

Daniels, a frequent target of the far-right online who has criticized ultranationalism in Poland and Holocaust denial, has denied this, adding his organization is willing to participate in intercultural dialogue with a wide range of partners.

For the most part, Israel has remained silent about Holocaust revisionism and incidents of anti-Semitism in countries that have friendly ties to the Jewish state. But on Monday, a spokesman for its Foreign Ministry called the Warsaw event "a dangerous march of extreme and racist elements," and urged Polish authorities to act against the organizers.

Last year, Israel's ambassador to Poland, Anna Azari, hosted Tadeusz Rydzyk, a Catholic priest who runs a radio station that the U.S. State Department has called a main purveyor of anti-Semitism. She defended the move as important outreach even as Never Again, Pankowski's group, called it a "big mistake."

Azari did speak out last month against proposed legislation on restitution, arguing its preclusion of claims by distant relatives and non-citizens discriminates against Jews whose families lost property in Poland during or after the Holocaust. An Israeli restitution official told JTA, referring to the proposed law: "First the Nazis seized private property and then the communist authorities of Poland seized it, when most Polish Jews were already dead."

Ultimately, however, Israel's attitude seems to be guided by comments Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made in 2013 during the visit by Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski to Jerusalem. Noting the suffering of non-Jewish Poles and Jews under Nazi occupation, Netanyahu observed that "Poland and Israel have to support each other."

'Poland's Charlottesville' Has Jews Rattled

By Larry Cohler-Esses

Forward, November 14, 2017

<http://forward.com/news/world/387557/polands-charlottesville-has-jews-rattled/>

A huge Independence Day march organized by far-right, racist forces in Poland came off peacefully Saturday for the first time in years.

And this has Jews in Poland more worried than ever.

"They're learning to hide who they are," said Michael Schudrich, Poland's American-born chief rabbi. "Don't ask me if it's better or worse that they're nonviolent."

The disciplined nature of the march enabled the organizers to draw an estimated 60,000 participants — the biggest attendance ever to their annual procession. The source of the Jewish leaders' worries included parade banners espousing white supremacy, chants denouncing Muslim immigrants, symbols of fascist parties brandished openly, calls for Christian triumphalism, slogans shouted that blacks can't be Poles and several denunciations of Jews.

Organized by a committee of far right-wing groups, its sponsors included one faction, known by its Polish acronym, ONR, with radical fascist roots going back to the 1930s, and deeply influenced by Nazism; another,

known as All-Polish Youth, has its own fascist history. Both were known before and during World War II for their violence against Jews, including massacres in the case of ONR.

According to Sergiusz Kowalski, president of Poland's chapter of B'nai Brith, it was "unclear" whether everyone who came to the march supported the ideology espoused by the radical sponsors. "But they all marched under banners and slogans saying taboo things," he said, "like you came across in Charlottesville."

The difference was that this coming together of far-right forces was many times bigger — and took place in the center of Poland's capital and largest city. The gathering of white nationalists, racists and anti-Semites that took place last August in Charlottesville, Virginia, numbered in the hundreds or low thousands.

"It's as if the Ku Klux Klan were marching in the tens of thousands through Washington, D.C.," explained Kowalski, who was at the scene, where he took part in a small anti-fascist counter-protest of some 4,000 people.

"This march was really impressive," he said. "It was colorful, with numerous banners and fireworks; something you can't pretend you don't see."

"But they do pretend," he said in reference to Poland's right-wing nationalist government under the Law and Justice party.

Poland, unlike America, has laws outlawing hate speech and the public use of fascist or communist symbols, and some leaders of Poland's small Jewish community were angry that the Law and Justice party government granted the parade organizers legal permission for their event. Police, they noted, also did nothing to confront the banners and sloganeering promoting racism.

Meanwhile, Poland's state television network, TVP, which is under the Law and Justice party's control, described the event as a "great march of patriots" that drew mostly mainstream Poles, even as a demonstrator interviewed by TVP said he was on the march to "remove Jewry from power."

Poland's interior minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, said of the march: "It was a beautiful sight... We are proud that so many Poles have decided to take part in a celebration connected to the Independence Day holiday."

As criticism of the march mounted from abroad — including from Israel's foreign ministry — Poland's foreign ministry strongly condemned racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia generally in a statement issued Monday. But the statement described the Saturday Independence Day march as "a great celebration of Poles, differing in their views but united around the common values of freedom and loyalty to an independent homeland."

"People are horrified," said Jonathan Ornstein, who is the executive director of the Jewish Community Center of Krakow, Poland's second-largest city. "They feel the government is allowing this. And the police, who are supposed to protect people against the fascists, are now empowering them."

As a result, groups like ONR feel "emboldened," he said. "It's like in the United States, where similar groups are now a lot more visible and don't feel as restrained [because] the government hasn't taken a strong stand against them."

On Tuesday, Poland's president, who is a Law and Justice member but represents the state rather than the government, bluntly condemned expressions of racism specifically at the march. Such expressions, he said, represented a "sick nationalism."

Poland, which was home to 3 million Jews before the Holocaust, today is estimated to have anywhere from 25,000 to 100,000 Jews by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which provides services in the country. Only 7,353 people openly declared their nationality as "Jewish" in the 2011 census. Despite their miniscule presence in a country of 38 million people, a study released earlier this year documented a sharp rise in anti-Semitic attitudes among Poles.

According to multiple press reports, and confirmed by Kowalski, the messages on banners in the parade reflected this problem and the broader problem of racism in Poland. They included slogans such as “Pure blood, clear mind” and “Europe will be white or uninhabited.” Some participants marched under the falanga, a fascist symbol used by ONR in the years before the Nazis’ 1939 invasion of Poland. Others carried the Celtic Cross, a white supremacist symbol. Some participants marched under the slogan “We want God!” — words from an old Polish religious song that President Trump quoted during his visit to Warsaw in July. There were also anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim slogans and chants.

The march drew not just Poles, but also right-wing extremists from across Europe as it featured banners that praised a “White Europe of brotherly nations.”

“The borders they say they want to maintain in opposition to the European Union are disappearing for them,” Ornstein observed.

On Tuesday, Jonny Daniels, a public relations executive and Holocaust remembrance activist in Poland (and a British-born Israeli national), announced that he had formally requested Polish prosecutors to take action against individuals at the march who could be identified as engaging in “discrimination and acts of racism.”

In his announcement, Daniels, who has often been accused by other members of the Jewish community of taking pro-government stances, seemed to characterize displays of racism at the parade as isolated incidents limited to a small group.

“Sadly,” his statement said, amid some 60,000 marchers, “a group of reportedly uninvited participants took this as an opportunity to intimidate and show intolerance, in turn breaking the Polish law.”

Daniels urged the use of video from the event to find and prosecute those involved.

Some Jewish leaders were dubious about Daniels’s intentions. But beyond that, the government has shrunk from imposing serious penalties against hate speech in recent cases. When Piotr Rybak, an ONR activist in the city of Wroclaw, was convicted of burning the effigy of a Hasidic Jew during a 2015 anti-immigrant protest, a district court sentenced him to 10 months in prison. Government prosecutors joined the defense in appealing that sentence as too severe; they asked that he be spared prison and given 10 months of community service.

“Part of the problem is that these people vote for them,” Schudrich said, referring to the Law and Justice party. Some party members have told him privately that the parade was “a scandal,” the rabbi said, “but will someone be brave enough to say this publicly? Their challenge will be to make an unequivocal statement.”

Poland and the Uncontrollable Fury of Europe’s Far Right

By Paul Hokenos

The Atlantic, November 15, 2017

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/europe-far-right-populist-nazi-poland/524559/>

In Poland, last weekend’s independence day celebrations mutated into perhaps the ugliest international congregation of the extreme right seen in Europe in recent times. The grotesque procession of militant nationalists, white supremacists, and radical Islamophobes included Poland’s National-Radical Camp, the National Movement, and the All Polish Youth, as well as the deputy chairperson of Jobbik, Hungary’s most xenophobic party. These groups and others who attended trace their ideas back to anti-Semitic, sometimes-fascist movements popular before World War II. Like their forebears, they won’t rule out the use of violence.

The march cast a disturbing light on the militant and radical currents coursing through Europe’s ever-more successful nationalist parties, for whom Hungary’s governing Fidesz party is a model. Its members include Poland’s ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, Alternative for Germany, and the Austrian Freedom Party, among many others. Their polished images and relatively temperate language have enabled them to post record numbers at the ballot box of late—and, indeed, to jar Europe’s liberal order by pushing their policies on three areas in which their interests overlap with neo-Nazi extremists: immigration, Islam, and the EU.

Not all of the estimated 60,000 people who took to the streets on Saturday were sympathizers of the far right, or even of PiS. But the old-school extreme right, unapologetic fascists among them, was on full display, emboldened by the impressive electoral showings of Europe's national populist parties, most recently in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Austria. The radicals turned what could have been a civil celebration of Poland's return to statehood in 1918 into a fierce exhibition of hatred and intolerance.

In contrast to the professional politicians who crave respectability and votes, the figures who marched on Saturday wore masks, flashed white-power insignia, and screamed "Pure Poland, white Poland!" and "Refugees get out!" One banner on display read Pure blood, Clear mind; another read Europe will be white or uninhabited. Marchers waved giant Polish flags and set off smoke bombs and flares that blanketed the procession in clouds of red smoke. The rightist parties—distinct from the mob—need the energies and numbers of the extremists to keep their base alive and engaged. But that comes with enormous risks, ones that Europe knows well.

Poland, led by the arch-conservative nationalist PiS party, is on the front lines of Europe's shifting political landscape. The government's refusal to condemn the march—the interior minister even called it "a beautiful sight"—is emblematic of the new zeitgeist in parts of Europe. Obviously the radicals knew they were safe in Poland. Two days after the march, Polish president Andrzej Duda, not a PiS member, condemned the xenophobia and racism, saying there's no place in Poland for "sick nationalism." But, incredibly, the PiS government wouldn't budge.

"The groups on the streets in Warsaw espouse the most extreme ideology in Europe today," Peter Kreko, director of the think tank Political Capital Institute in Budapest and an expert on Central Europe's far right, told me. "They see Christian Europe and their own nations in apocalyptic terms, as being overrun by Muslims and other immigrants, and ruined by the EU."

While the rightist parties and the radical streets movements are not one and the same, their paths overlap as do their strategies. The government's official slogan for the event was "We Want God," lyrics from a Polish song that President Donald Trump quoted this summer while in Poland. (Trump lauded Poland for defending Western civilization, presumably a reference to its role in helping oust the Ottoman Empire from Europe in the 17th century and defying the Soviet Union during the Cold War.) In Warsaw and elsewhere, marchers—militants as well as ordinary burghers—chanted "God, honor, country," reflecting Poland's own brand of Roman-Catholic-inflected nationalism.

Pro-government media outlets like the website wPolityce.pl defended the event. "Of course, if someone is bent on doing so they can depict the independence march as a gathering of fascists," one of its bloggers wrote. "Crowds chanting patriotic slogans, national flags, the odd firework—this is a dreadful spectacle for the left-liberals who advocate multi-cultural values. [But] a positive message was discernible. The participants want a Catholic Poland that respects its own traditions and culture." TVP, a government-friendly station, described it a "great march of patriots."

"Populist parties like Fidesz and PiS use the mob to promote their goals," Kreko said. "The strong, negative enemy images mobilize the masses by blurring the boundaries between the mainstream right and the extremists." Moreover, he points out, populist parties like PiS and Fidesz need to show they have the backing of the masses to legitimate their populist credentials as the true voice of the folk. "It's a risky business for the electoral parties but they have to rely on the radicals for their numbers," he said.

The rally drew condemnation across Europe. Some observers drew parallels with Europe of the 1930s, when underground fascist movements nurtured and empowered extremist politicians. Poland's liberal media outlets, like the opposition daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, claimed the event reflected the "fascistic" metamorphosis of public life in Poland under the PiS leadership, which has been starkly criticized in the EU for authoritarian reforms and arch-conservative social policies.

Just as unnerving was the march's international scope: In attendance were extremists from Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Slovakia, the U.K., and elsewhere. (Originally, the American white supremacist Richard Spencer was invited to speak in Warsaw the day before the march. Poland's government expressed "opposition" to his visit, and he cancelled his plans to attend.) Paradoxically, the ultra-nationalists conceive of themselves as an international, pan-European front. They seem to believe that there's much to be gained through cross-border cooperation—especially when borders themselves aren't the issue—for now at least. The extremists are united in their hatred of the EU, which they claim shackles their sovereignty and suppresses the original spirit of the continent's ethnic nations. The EU, they realize, isn't going to be overthrown by one country alone, but by many—and perhaps even at the ballot box.

In every country where Europe's far-right parties are ascendant, they act in loose conjunction with radical, often thuggish circles in their vicinity: groups that often take the parties' carefully chosen words, their veiled racism, to their logical conclusion—namely, violence against foreigners or minorities like the Roma. The militants may not stand on the same podium as the politicians, but the parties are content to allow the garish displays of the mob grow into spectacles like the one in Warsaw in order to rally support and draw attention. But the parties intent on joining coalition governments, from Austria's Freedom Party to Slovakia's National Party, don't control the violent radicals. They can't keep them from burning down refugee hostels or ransacking Roma villages—crimes that hopefully, the polite, well-coiffed populists don't condone.

Whatever support the mob gives, it can take away, too. And one day it is sure to—when the made-for-TV political parties show themselves too timid and reluctant for their tastes. It is then that they will finally be forced to reckon with the violent furies they have stoked.

Buried testimony from the Warsaw Ghetto goes on display for the first time in Poland Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 16, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/11/16/news-opinion/world/proof-of-nazi-evils-documented-by-warsaw-ghetto-jews-gets-first-exhibition>

Eyewitness accounts of Nazi atrocities found buried in the rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto have gone on display in Poland for the first time.

The exhibition, "What We Could Not Shout Out To The World," includes more than 35,000 documents compiled and hidden by historian Emanuel Ringelblum and other Jews who lived in the ghetto.

The Ringelblum archive survived the destruction of the ghetto and World War II in 10 metal cases and two metal milk bottles that were recovered in 1946 and 1950, respectively.

The exhibition opened to the public Thursday at the Polish capital's Jewish Historical Institute. It tells the story of Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto and its destruction by the Nazis.

The trove includes original documents in Polish, German and Yiddish; Nazi proclamations and Jewish appeals; ghetto ration cards, tram tickets, private letters and photographs depicting life in the ghetto.

Polish President Andrzej Duda visited the exhibition Tuesday ahead of the public opening and said he believed deeply in "speaking the truth about the Holocaust."

"The Ringelblum archive is a priceless testament to the most tragic chapter in the common history of Jews and Polish people," he said.

The Nazi occupiers of Poland in 1940 forced some 400,000 Jews into the Warsaw Ghetto, a tiny section of the city. The vast majority of the inhabitants died either from the miserable conditions there or after being deported to Nazi labor or extermination camps. In 1943, some Jews rose up to resist further deportations, and the Nazis leveled the ghetto.

Ringelblum, a historian by training, worked for the Joint Distribution Committee in Poland and organized relief efforts in the ghetto. He and his aides collected testimonies and documentation, naming their efforts the "Oneg

Shabbat” (Shabbat pleasure) archive because they often met in secret on Saturday afternoons. He and all but three of his aides were killed during the Holocaust. In 1999, UNESCO gave the Ringelblum archives “Memory of the World” status.

The exhibition is the result of many years of work to organize and translate the Ringelblum archive. Many documents were partly damaged and had to be deciphered. Its title came from the words of one of Ringelblum’s helpers, 19-year-old David Graber, in a fragment of his will included in the archive.

Russia May Make All Outside News Media Register as ‘Foreign Agents’

By Andrew Kramer

New York Times, November 15, 2017

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-news-media-foreign-agents.html?ref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fworld&action=click&contentCollection=world®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=sectionfront

Russia’s Parliament approved legislation on Wednesday that could require foreign media organizations operating in Russia to label news they produce the work of a “foreign agent,” the latest step in the unraveling of relations since the United States accused Russia of meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

The measure will become law if passed by the Russian Senate and signed by President Vladimir V. Putin. Over the weekend, however, Mr. Putin expressed some doubts, saying the rule may go too far.

The proposed new regulation is evidently intended as retaliation for reporting requirements imposed by the Department of Justice on the American affiliate of RT, the Russian state-run TV news outlet that American intelligence agencies say is a propaganda tool of the Kremlin.

Last week, acting in accordance with the Foreign Agents Registration Act, a 1938 law that was aimed at Nazi propaganda organs, the Justice Department required RT to identify itself as a “foreign agent.” Under that law, foreign agents are required to file reports on the sources of their funding and on all activities intended to influence a lawmaker or other government representative. It is not clear what that would mean for RT’s reporters.

The law is typically applied today to lobbyists representing foreign governments or state-owned companies, though some foreign state-run news outlets have been required to register. Pressure to take action against RT grew after American intelligence agencies accused it of playing a role in what they say was a Kremlin-directed campaign to discredit Hillary Clinton and elect President Trump in 2016.

The proposed Russian law appears far broader in its potential application, covering all foreign media organizations, not only state-run outlets. That has news organizations scrambling to see how it would affect their operations, and Russian rights groups are fearful of another crackdown on freedom of speech.

Russian officials, who fiercely condemned the registration requirement for RT, said they took the retaliatory measure reluctantly. “We didn’t want to pass this law,” said Pyotr Tolstoy, the deputy speaker of Parliament. “This is a law that might not have existed. In Russia, we never took measures limiting freedom of speech in any of its forms.”

Dmitri S. Peskov, Mr. Putin’s press secretary, said of the rule that “any encroachment on the freedom of Russian media abroad is not and won’t be left without a strong condemnation.”

Though presented as a reply to the United States’ demand that RT register, the rule could affect all foreign news media, not just American organizations.

“Numerous independent media in the country get foreign funding,” Tanya Lokshina, the Russia program director at Human Rights Watch, said in a telephone interview. “The foreign funding could become a pretext to crack down on them. It is just shockingly disproportionate and broad. The way it is written now, it appears it could be used for many different purposes.”

As written now, the Russian law would allow the Ministry of Justice to designate as a foreign agent any news media organization based outside Russia or receiving non-Russian funding, and would apply the same rules to designated news media as to nongovernmental groups under a 2012 Russian law.

Under that measure, foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations were required to file quarterly reports on their funding and activities to the Justice Ministry, open their books to an outside auditor and identify themselves as foreign agents on any published materials. Many organizations ceased operating rather than comply with the requirements.

It remains unclear what might be asked of news outlets based outside Russia and publishing online, or how the Russian government might seek to enforce the law.

“This legislation strikes a serious blow to what was already a fairly desperate situation for press freedom,” Denis Krivosheev, deputy director for Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International, said in a statement. He said the rule would be likely to curtail the Russian-language services of the BBC, Deutsche Welle and the Washington-funded outlets Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

“The Kremlin has been tirelessly building a media echo chamber that shuts out critical voices,” Mr. Krivosheev said, “both inside Russia and from abroad.”

Trump and Putin: What Comes Next?

By Nikolas K. Gvosdev

The National Interest, November 13, 2017

<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-putin-what-comes-next-23172>

Last week, writing in these pages, I noted that any encounter between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin that would take place at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, would have to address two critical questions if there was to be any clarity in U.S.-Russia relations. We’ve now gotten a first draft of answers.

I argued that, for the Russian side, the overarching issue is whether or not Donald Trump is calling the shots on U.S. policy. Seven days ago, the White House press operation was signaling that there would be a formal encounter between the two presidents, a scheduled meeting with a defined agenda. As the week progressed, the United States began to back away from those announcements. By the end of the week, the encounter was a far less structured event, essentially folded in around an informal stroll to a photo opportunity and brief chats in between APEC sessions—nothing at all like the meeting that took place at the G-20 summit in Hamburg in July. What happened? And does it suggest that Donald Trump has a George W. Bush problem—the apparent inability to take a personal rapport with Vladimir Putin and transform it into concrete policy directives?

As the APEC summit drew nearer, it became clear that the Russian president would not bring any agenda to Vietnam that suggested a willingness to reverse course or offer major concessions to U.S. preferences regarding Russian policy on North Korea, Syria, Iran and Ukraine. At best, the Russian leader might seek to bargain with President Trump, seeking concessions from Washington in some areas in return for Russian acquiescence to American proposals in others. There are, of course, two major items being prepared for the president’s review and approval. First is the application of U.S. sanctions, authorized by congressional legislation, both against Russian companies and against third parties that do business with them. Here, a critical test is pending within weeks, should the Italian energy conglomerate ENI go ahead with a joint project with Rosneft in the Black Sea—a deal grandfathered in under European regulations, but one that will certainly draw the attention of U.S. regulators for any violations of U.S. financial or technological sanctions. The second is the final decision on whether or not the United States will provide advanced weaponry, especially antitank missiles, to the Ukrainian military.

Because of the way the United States geographically boxes Russia in as only a “European” state, Trump’s “Russia hands” were not scheduled to join his delegation to APEC. Thus, there were concerns that any substantive meeting between Trump and Putin would occur without the U.S. officials who would be most likely

to provide necessary expertise (and who would wind up implementing any results). Linked to that were fears that, if another meeting followed the Hamburg precedent (of just the two presidents and their chief diplomatic officers), Putin might convince Trump to accept a series of compromises: trading Russian support of Trump's initiatives in return, for instance, for concrete sanctions relief and acceptance of Russian preferences for Syria and Ukraine. There had already been some advance warning of this, such as, when Saudi Arabia's King Salman visited Moscow last month in an historic summit, the Saudi delegation seemed to suggest that a Russia playing a more constructive and stabilizing role in the Middle East would outweigh the logic of maintaining the full raft of U.S. sanction, imposed after the 2014 incursions into Ukraine and after the 2016 elections.

Keeping the tenor of the encounters between the two presidents at Da Nang informal precluded the chance of any intense bargaining sessions on the sidelines. But for the Russian side, it also raises questions—of whether Trump is in fact inclined to bargain with the Kremlin, or whether he has the clout to carry through any agreement in the face of stiff domestic opposition, not only from his own national-security team, but from Congress, where opposition to any concessions to Vladimir Putin is one of the few genuine bipartisan issues left. There is no support (even from his own appointees) for any compromise with Moscow that leaves Bashar al-Assad in power in Damascus, or that ratifies any of the gains Russia has made in Ukraine since 2014—not when there is still a sense that strong, concerted U.S. action could lead to different outcomes. Indeed, with the European Commission recognizing that Russian plans to bypass Ukraine by 2019 are moving ahead, even despite existing sanctions, new efforts are underway to find ways to block the expansion of the Nord Stream line and forestall the expansion of the Turkish Stream export route to Europe. There is confidence that expanded sanctions, plus a renewed commitment to the Syrian opposition, could change Russia's calculations—and therefore there is no reason to prematurely concede anything to the Kremlin.

But then we have Trump's comments to the press following the Da Nang summit. Much of that coverage has focused on Trump's willingness to accept Putin's denials of Russian interference in the 2016 election at face value, but two other items deserve greater attention. The first is that the president, having been convinced, guided, or maneuvered into not having a formal sit-down with Putin in Vietnam, is apparently committing to a full-fledged summit meeting of the two presidents and their respective "teams" at some indefinite point in the future. If so, then how the agenda for that meeting is set, and what parameters are established for the negotiations, will be critical. The second is what role Trump himself intends to play in Russia policy. What struck me at times about his comments on Air Force One was how he seemed to view himself, as "the president," as something separate and distinct from the executive branch as a whole. As chief executive, Trump is in charge of the U.S. intelligence community, the diplomatic corps and the military. Yet his comments seem to suggest that, at times, the government is pursuing a policy towards Russia that he personally disagrees with but somehow has little power to change.

So while we've gotten a first set of answers, the questions still remain unresolved. Sideline encounters at the G-20 and at APEC were not successful in changing the dynamic of the U.S.-Russia relationship. So will a direct Trump-Putin summit be a game changer? Only if those original questions can be answered definitively.

U.S. Pledges to Hold Russians Responsible On Anniversary of Magnitsky's Death Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 16, 2017

<https://www.rferl.org/a/us-pledges-hold-russians-responsible-sanctions-anniversar-magnitsky-death-prison-whistleblower/28856808.html?lflags=mailer>

Marking eight years since whistle-blowing lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died in a Moscow jail, the United States has pledged to continue enforcing legislation imposing sanctions on Russians over human rights abuses.

"We honor the memory of Sergei Magnitsky, who died on November 16, 2009, while in custody in a Moscow prison," State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a statement late on November 15.

"An investigation by Russia's Presidential Human Rights Council found that Magnitsky had been severely beaten in prison, and members of the council said his death resulted from beatings and torture by police officials."

"Magnitsky uncovered a vast tax-fraud scheme perpetrated by Russian officials, and was imprisoned by those whose crimes he uncovered," Nauert added.

"Russian authorities have failed to hold those responsible for his death accountable and instead, in recent months appear to be increasingly propagating conspiracy theories designed to distract attention from the crime," she said.

"In honor of Magnitsky's extraordinary courage, we continue to support efforts to hold those responsible for his treatment in prison and subsequent death accountable," she said.

Nauert said those efforts include implementation of the 2012 Magnitsky Act, which imposed sanctions on Russians believed to have been involved in persecuting Magnitsky as well as on other suspected human rights abusers.

Magnitsky was employed by U.S.-born British financier William Browder when he was arrested and accused by Russian law enforcement officials of carrying out the same alleged \$230 million tax-fraud scheme that he helped uncover.

Enactment of the 2012 U.S. sanctions law three years after Magnitsky's death was one of a series of events that ushered in an era of increasing tensions between the United States and Russia.

Moscow responded by barring Americans from adopting Russian children.

Russia took the unusual step of trying Magnitsky after his death, and he was convicted of tax evasion in 2013 after a posthumous trial that was widely criticized by human rights activists and Western governments.

Browder was tried in absentia and sentenced to nine years in prison in the case, which deepened U.S. and European Union concerns over human rights and the rule of law in Russia under President Vladimir Putin.

Russia and the West's South Caucasus Dilemma

By Sergei Markedonov

Carnegie Moscow Center, November 14, 2017

<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/74720>

The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are currently far from the front lines of the standoff between Russia and the West. After Moscow recognized the independence of Georgia's two breakaway regions on August 26, 2008, a new status quo emerged in the South Caucasus: Abkhazia and South Ossetia came into Russia's sphere of influence, while "core Georgia" (as German Chancellor Angela Merkel has described it) made major strides toward integration into the EU and NATO. Tbilisi received an "enhanced cooperation" package from NATO and signed an association agreement with the EU, and Georgian citizens were granted visa-free entry to the Schengen zone.

Talks have been underway between representatives of Georgia and the two partially recognized republics since October 2008 within the framework of the Geneva International Discussions. Diplomats from the United States, the EU, and Russia, as well as officials from the UN and the OSCE, are also taking part in the consultations.

However, they have not achieved a diplomatic breakthrough in this time, and are highly unlikely to do so in the near future. Neither Tbilisi nor its supporters in Washington and Brussels will back down from the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity, whereas Moscow views the declaration of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be part of the new geopolitical reality in Eurasia that everyone will have to accept sooner or later. This explains the unwillingness of the sides to sign legally binding commitments not to use force.

The Russian delegation insists that the only parties to the conflict are Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Tbilisi counters that Moscow is not simply an observer and participant in the talks, but also a key player in the South Caucasus that could offer crucial guarantees on the non-use of force—among other reasons, because

Russia provided military support to Tskhinvali and Sukhumi in August 2008, and then served as a guarantor of their socioeconomic recovery and security after recognizing their independence.

Having asserted its military and political dominance in the two former autonomous regions of Georgia, Russia is not, however, attempting to expand its sphere of influence into “core Georgia.” Likewise, the United States and its allies are not trying to shift the balance in their own favor, despite continuing to emphasize their adherence to the principle of restoring Georgia’s violated territorial integrity.

It is too early to write these conflicts off as completely and irreversibly frozen. The fact that no one is currently trying to dispute the status quo does not mean that the West approves of it. Many Western politicians, diplomats, and experts view the Kremlin’s decision to lend military support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and then recognize their independence as an overture to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas region.

One could argue that such connections are spurious, but that doesn’t change the way Western officials perceive the situation. They don’t see the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the result of complex ethnic and national self-identification in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, in which each side has some valid arguments but also bears some responsibility for the violence. They view the conflicts as Russia’s resurgence as a Eurasian hegemon, which does not suit their own perceptions of how the post-Soviet space should evolve.

The absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia, together with the standoff between Russia and the West in the South Caucasus, means that a new crisis cannot be ruled out. The idea that Georgia is unlikely to join NATO often comes up during expert discussions of the South Caucasus. True, the alliance’s charter does not allow a country that has unresolved territorial conflicts and disputes with its neighbors to join. However, there is nothing to prevent Washington and Tbilisi from building up bilateral military and political cooperation. This model of relations has been used many times in the past when for any reason a U.S. partner could not enter the transatlantic alliance.

If NATO were to go ahead and admit Georgia, and if the Kremlin decided that political expediency and external circumstances outweigh the internal logic of the South Caucasus conflicts, Moscow could bring South Ossetia into the Russian Federation. After all, the idea of uniting with the “fraternal” Russian republic of North Ossetia is very popular in South Ossetia. Over the past three years, South Ossetian President Anatoly Bibilov has run successful campaigns—first for parliament and then for the presidency—using slogans of such reunification.

This scenario could also be set in motion by rapid escalation in military and political cooperation between Tbilisi and Washington, for example, if U.S. military bases or forces appeared in the immediate vicinity of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian borders. The result could be increased sanctions and a revival of revisionism.

However, Russia and the West have a choice in the South Caucasus. They can either treat the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as being isolated from other conflicts—such as those in the Donbas and in Transdniestria—or they can use it as an additional argument in their overall confrontation. Moscow and Washington have experience in both selective partnership (such as in the unstable frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus) and selective agreement to disagree.

The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are an example of the latter model, in which adversaries have diametrically opposite objectives, but don’t want to exacerbate a conflict and entangle it with the overall negative context of bilateral relations. In other words, they are trying to manage the new status quo. This will not result in a breakthrough or real progress, but at least it will prevent a complete security collapse in the currently cooled hot spots.

The most we can expect today from the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not their complete resolution, but a decrease in their dependence on external factors and on the general negativity in relations between Russia and the West. Russia and Georgia must have their own agenda that is separate from the existing unresolved disputes. This agenda could include promoting security in the North Caucasus or

containing the threat of jihadi extremism. In addition, although Tbilisi does not advertise this, it is clearly interested in reducing its dependence on Ankara and Baku.

Destabilization in the Middle East forces the nations of the South Caucasus to be more pragmatic about Moscow's actions and to not count blithely on NATO assistance—particularly since this assistance does not always come, as evidenced by the events of August 2008. However, despite the ceaseless confrontation, Russia and the West are not inciting discord in the South Caucasus, and they are withholding their “final arguments” until the last, which allows for some cautious optimism.

30 Years Later, 'The Big Rally' Is Little Remembered

By Gary Rosenblatt

Jewish Week/Times of Israel, November 15, 2017

<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/30-years-later-the-big-rally-is-little-remembered/>

If it had been up to the leaders of the American Jewish establishment, the largest demonstration for a Jewish cause in U.S. history would never have happened.

But thanks in large part to the vision, passion and sheer drive of Natan Sharansky, the iconic Prisoner of Zion who initiated the rally and worked tirelessly to galvanize the community, more than 250,000 people gathered on Washington, D.C.'s National Mall on a bright, frigid Sunday afternoon, Dec. 6, 1987, and made history.

The outpouring of solidarity with millions of Jews trapped in the Soviet Union, unable to practice their religion or emigrate to freedom, coincided with a summit the following day at the White House between President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev — a dramatic effort to pressure the Soviet president to open the gates of emigration.

At the White House, Reagan told Gorbachev: “Yesterday I had 250,000 people in my backyard saying, ‘Let my people go.’ Until you do what they want, nothing will happen.”

As a result, things began to change. And though it took almost a decade for the mass exodus to culminate, the events of Freedom Sunday, as the rally was known, marked a key turning point in the eventual release of more than a million Jews, most of them settling in Israel and the U.S.

On the eve of the 30th anniversary of that rally, and at a moment when the very notion of American Jewry coming together now for a common cause seems beyond the imagination, it may be instructive to reflect on how a small grassroots movement led to one of the great achievements of the American Jewish community — especially given the odds of taking on the powerful Kremlin; why this extraordinary episode has not been widely heralded and taught as part of our communal curriculum; and whether there are lessons about communal commitment, messaging and moral leadership that can be learned for the future.

On Sunday afternoon here, a segment of the opening plenary of the 86th annual General Assembly (GA) of the Jewish Federations of North America, the umbrella group for more than 100 federations in North America, highlighted the upcoming Freedom Sunday anniversary. A five-minute film was shown about the Soviet Jewry movement and the rally. Ilia Salita, the president and CEO of the Genesis Philanthropy Group, dedicated to inspiring and engaging Russian-speaking Jews around the world, thanked the federation movement for its work on behalf of Genesis and all those who gained their freedom through the Soviet Jewry movement.

He noted with pride the accomplishments of those who came to the U.S., and the next generation, and he expressed collective gratitude for the Jewish community's efforts.

“You helped us get settled, you were generous and kind ... and you opened your doors and our hearts,” he said, crediting the community for its efforts in achieving “one of the most successful emigrations in American history.”

Addressing “Jewish federations across North America, large and small,” for their role in “the historic fight for freedom,” he said: “You answered the call of history with righteous conviction and brotherly love,” reminding us that “there is no limit to what you can achieve when we stand together.”

The large audience burst into applause when Salita concluded his remarks. It was a poignant moment, especially for those of us who remembered Freedom Sunday.

From all around the country we came that day, by every mode of transportation but most memorably by charter buses, more than 1,000 from the New York area alone, rolling into the nation’s capital. As the throngs descended on the Mall, the mood turned from somber to celebratory as we looked around in wonder, watching our numbers swell — as did our pride — beyond anything imagined. For several hours that afternoon we listened to rambling speeches from a seemingly endless list of politicians and dignitaries, saving our greatest ovations for Sharansky, the most famous of the refuseniks; he had languished for more than nine years in the Soviet gulag, much of it in solitary, for the crime of seeking to make aliyah.

“The Soviets have to know,” Sharansky told the crowd, “that no missiles and tanks, no camps and prisons, can extinguish the light of the candle of freedom.”

Thousands of signs proclaimed, “Let My People Go,” the mantra of a movement that began among a small number of grassroots activists more than two dozen years earlier and reached a crescendo of commitment, unity and pride.

“It’s very unfortunate that the movement that changed the world is almost nonexistent today in our educational curriculum and in the historical memory of our people.” – Sharansky

Sharansky, now approaching the last months of his nine-year tenure as chairman of the executive of Jewish Agency for Israel, bemoans the fact that the history of the Soviet Jewry movement is all but forgotten in Israel as well as the U.S.

“It’s very unfortunate that the movement that changed the world is almost nonexistent today in our educational curriculum and in the historical memory of our people,” Sharansky told me in a phone interview from Jerusalem.

He said the movement was uniquely successful because it included all peoples who cherished liberal values and the cause of human rights as well as those “with a Jewish identity, willing to fight anti-Semitism.

“There was no contradiction,” he said, in contrast to now, when “if you say you are a Zionist, you are not considered a liberal.” The cause of “human rights has been hijacked, and the banner of patriotism is suspect,” he observed.

Sharansky has always credited “the housewives and students” who personified the grassroots effort that fueled the movement which led to his release. But from the outset of the movement in the U.S., sparked by Elie Wiesel’s “The Jews Of Silence,” an account of his 1965 visit to the Soviet Union, there was friction — and sometimes bitter division — among the various advocates on behalf of Soviet Jewry. There were the grassroots activists like the late Yaakov Birnbaum, who founded the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), and his tireless colleague, Glenn Richter, who together kept up the pressure with countless demonstrations at the Soviet consulate; the militant Jewish Defense League, led by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, who advocated violent tactics; and the more conservative Jewish establishment groups, which came late to the cause and often called for quiet diplomacy rather than confrontation.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, then a leader of SSSJ, said that while the 1987 rally was “a tremendous logistical feat” and “the linchpin” in turning the tide for the Soviet Jewry movement, “it was hardly a time of Jewish unity” for the cause.

He and others note that many of the clashes over strategy — activism vs. diplomacy — were motivated by responses to Gorbachev’s new and more lenient approach to political and social issues, known as glasnost (Russian for “open”). The establishment leaders were persuaded that the Russian leader was sincere; the

activists were highly skeptical. The two sides differed on whether the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which in part restricted U.S. trade with the USSR unless Soviet Jews could leave, should be suspended to appease Gorbachev.

Another internal battle was between American Jewish leaders and the Israeli government over whether Soviet Jewish emigration should be directed toward Jerusalem, in the name of Zionism, or wherever those leaving the USSR chose to settle, in the spirit of freedom and human rights.

Sharansky, who aligned most with the grassroots activists, recalled that not long after his release from a Soviet prison and much-heralded arrival in Israel in early 1986, he began to speak out for a major rally on behalf of 400,000 Soviet Jews whom he said wanted to emigrate. (The Jewish establishment groups referred to 10,000 to 20,000 they estimated would leave.)

In the fall of 1986, during a Sharansky U.S. visit, American Jewish leaders warned him against overreaching, asserting that it would be extremely difficult to get tens of thousands of people to mobilize on short notice and come to Washington in the winter to demonstrate. Why risk the embarrassment of a small turnout that would convince Moscow that the Soviet Jewry movement is not a serious concern, they argued. Even Rabbi Weiss told Sharansky he didn't think a massive rally was possible to organize.

As months went by, the establishment leaders were frustrated with Sharansky's zeal. "They said to me, 'Who are you to teach us how to have demonstrations?'" he recalled.

David Harris, executive director of the AJC, was the head of the group's Washington office at the time, and described how Sharansky "challenged us and succeeded." By the time it became known that Gorbachev was scheduled to meet with Reagan in Washington in early December 1987, there were only five weeks to mobilize a massive demonstration among the various Jewish groups. Sharansky undertook a whirlwind tour of more than 30 U.S. cities drumming up enthusiasm for the rally. Harris was freed up to coordinate the huge effort full time, and funds poured in from Jewish federations and other philanthropic sources.

"People seemed to realize they had to go, they felt that if not, they would be judged poorly by history." – Harris "We saw a shift in attitude, with people saying, 'I'll see you in Washington,'" Harris said. "People seemed to realize they had to go, they felt that if not, they would be judged poorly by history."

In the end, a confluence of motivations — guilt over the Holocaust, the very real drama playing out in the USSR over basic freedoms, the human stories of the refuseniks and the willingness of Jewish groups to work together —coalesced in the outpouring of commitment on Freedom Sunday.

Looking back, Zeesy Schnur, a public relations expert who spent 22 years working to free Soviet Jews — 12 years as director of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry — said she was motivated in large part by her family history, her reading Elie Wiesel's "Jews Of Silence" as a teenager and her meeting Sharansky in Moscow in 1976, shortly before he was imprisoned.

A child of Holocaust survivors, Schnur said the subject wasn't openly discussed at home but "I always felt it," and the plight of Soviet Jewry resonated with her.

"I know it's a cliché that one person can make a difference," she told me. "But the courage of those Jews who sought to leave the Soviet Union inspired us and gave us a sense of purpose." Freedom Sunday was "a great day, but there was still much work to be done."

Schnur said it is important to "remember what we did that was right and correct, and to realize that we need to stand up for issues of human rights, inside and beyond the Jewish community, and to respond quickly."

She said it was "embarrassing" that the American Jewish community did not do more "to stand up and defend the European Jewish community" during the recent waves of anti-Semitism including the 2015 attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris

Schnur and the others interviewed here stressed the need for teaching the lessons — positive and negative — of the struggle for Soviet Jewry, whether as a formal curriculum in Jewish schools or in other ways. And in light of Ilia Salita's expression of gratitude this week at the GA, Rabbi Weiss said, "We American Jews should thank the brave Soviet Jews for standing up and for inspiring us."

Yossi Klein Halevi, the Israeli journalist and author, who, as a 14-year-old in Brooklyn was active in SSSJ, wrote in an email this week: "The movement's success was based, in part, on its emphasis on klal Yisrael, working with the entirety of the Jewish people. It was the last great expression of the ideology of klal Yisrael, and that is its challenge to Jews today. Are we still capable of functioning as one people, on any issue?"

"Yaakov Birnbaum, the founder of the movement, spoke before he died of establishing a Soviet Jewry Liberation Day, that would celebrate one of the greatest moral victories in Jewish history and promote the message of klal Yisrael. That's one way of ensuring that the Soviet Jewry movement isn't forgotten."

Perhaps finding a way to mark one of American Jewry's greatest efforts in communal cohesion can help heal the deep wounds that divide us today.

Race to Aid Eastern Europe's Forgotten Survivors

By Jane Ulman

Jewish Journal, November 16, 2017

http://jewishjournal.com/news/los_angeles/227564/race-aid-eastern-europes-forgotten-survivors/

In 1941, Iraida Solomonova, an 18-year-old slave laborer in Kuibyshev, U.S.S.R., was arrested by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. She was tortured and jailed for a year. She then spent 10 years in a Kazakhstan gulag, where she endured hard labor, hunger, insect infestations and malaria before exile to Siberia.

Now 93 and living in Kishinev, Moldova, Solomonova is a survivor of two heart attacks and suffers from hypertension and thrombophlebitis. She has difficulty walking and has not ventured outside for several years. Her gas stove leaks and her 1958 refrigerator needs replacing.

Solomonova is one of 1,000 or more people The Survivor Mitzvah Project hopes to help as the end of 2017 — the peak season for charitable giving — approaches. Zane Buzby, the project's founder, is preparing the year's final distribution of funds, poring over lists of Eastern European survivors who are new to the program or need additional assistance.

This year to date, Buzby has brought in more than \$500,000 to help just over half of the 2,300 impoverished, ailing and mostly forgotten survivors in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Slovakia, Russia and Ukraine on The Survivor Mitzvah Project's current roster. She hopes to raise at least an additional \$250,000 by year's end to assist Solomonova and other survivors, whom she defines as any Jewish man, woman or child impacted by the Holocaust.

"It's always a race to the finish. We don't have any source of guaranteed institutional funding," Buzby said.

The Survivor Mitzvah Project (survivormitzvah.org) has been a grass-roots effort since 2001, when the former actress and television sitcom director/producer traveled to Lithuania and Belarus to visit her grandmothers' former shtetls. There, she encountered eight elderly survivors, living alone in Vilnius or remote Belarusian villages, poor and forgotten.

When Buzby returned to Los Angeles, she couldn't get them out of her mind — survivors such as Zeydl Katz, then 80 and toothless, covered in dirt from digging up potatoes, his only food supply for the long winter. She began sending them money.

The list of survivors quickly grew to 35 and kept expanding.

"I thought once I told people about these survivors living in such conditions, the major philanthropists and the Jewish welfare organizations would immediately step in," she said.

They didn't. So by 2008, Buzby had founded The Survivor Mitzvah Project, got 501(c)(3) status as a public charity, and started helping more than 750 survivors in five countries with financial aid for food, medicine, heat and shelter on a total budget of \$209,000.

Buzby, a CNN Hero in 2014 and a recipient of the Anti-Defamation League's 2017 Deborah Award, has relied mostly on individual donors. "These people who are compelled to help these last survivors are, and always have been, the lifeblood of the project," she said.

Individual donors account for 91 percent of all contributions, mostly small donations averaging \$150, with some up to \$5,000 or \$10,000. The project receives some larger contributions from corporate and family foundations.

In 2016, the project's best year to date, it raised \$711,185. All donations go directly to help survivors, except those earmarked specifically for general support, which include an annual contribution for overhead from the project's co-founder, Chic Wolk, 91, and help from foundations for translators. Buzby takes no salary.

The project wants to ensure that each survivor — each of whom has been vetted — receives \$150 a month, or \$1,800 a year, for adequate food, medication and heat. But the need always has exceeded the resources, and providing all of the survivors on the current roster with \$1,800 a year would require \$4.1 million.

With less than \$1 million a year, Buzby and her staff are forced to triage, distributing funds according to need. Crisis situations, such as hospitalizations, surgeries, expensive medications, caregivers and broken windows, are covered by a small emergency fund.

Over the years, the project has been life-changing for survivors, providing emergency aid as well as friendship and hope.

Anna Israelevna, 93, from Kherson, Ukraine, wrote to Buzby: "Thanks to The Survivor Mitzvah Project, I stay alive, I am warm, I have food, and because you helped me, I was able to have the operation on my eyes, and now I can see."

Like most American Jews who Buzby meets, she once believed that the majority of Eastern European Jews had been murdered by the Nazis or had emigrated to the United States or Israel.

But many thousands were — and still are — struggling in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Their current pensions average \$75 a month, just \$18 a month above the line the World Bank established in 2015 for measuring extreme poverty. Some pensions, particularly in Moldova, are as low as \$10 a month.

"These destitute survivors are forced to choose every day between food, heat and medication," Buzby said.

These are survivors who receive no compensation or only a minimal, one-time payment of reparation funds from Germany as negotiated by the Claims Conference, and who receive no or minimal goods and services from the Joint Distribution Committee.

Data culled in September 2017 from 530 Survivor Mitzvah aid applications show that 69 percent of survivors do not have enough food; 73 percent cannot pay for doctors, hospitals or medication; and 50 percent need help with daily tasks or home improvements.

As they age — most are in their mid-80s to mid-90s — and encounter more health issues without health insurance or government assistance, their situation becomes more urgent.

And the number in need continues to grow.

The Claims Conference recently changed eligibility requirements for survivors in the former Soviet Union, cutting off compensation funds to 3,000. Many of those are seeking aid from The Survivor Mitzvah Project, which already has helped more than 100. (To help all 3,000 would require \$5.4 million a year.)

Buzby also received the names of 70 survivors from Father Patrick Desbois' organization Yahad-In Unum, which locates and marks the Einsatzgruppen killing fields of Eastern Europe and interviews aging witnesses. Buzby began collaborating with Desbois in 2015.

Buzby receives additional names from other survivors and volunteers in Eastern Europe.

Since her initial trip in 2001, Buzby has made 12 expeditions to Eastern Europe. She's had the opportunity to see firsthand the impact that the project has made in survivors' lives.

Mina Zalmanovna, now 83, whom she visited in Pinsk, Belarus, in 2007 and again in 2016, now walks less painfully and without canes, and can treat her diabetes and heart problems thanks to previously unaffordable Western medications. She has a new gas stove, replacing a wood-burning unit, new windows to protect her from rain and snow, and new curtains.

"You are my rescuers," Zalmanovna wrote.

Buzby is planning an expedition to Moldova, where more than 1,200 survivors are scattered across 16 cities and villages. But first she needs to raise at least \$120,000 to distribute.

More than 75 years since the start of World War II, Buzby is hoping major funders will step in so every survivor on her list can be helped and she can begin the search for the tens of thousands still out there suffering.

"Everyone has to die," Buzby said. "But for a Holocaust survivor to die of neglect, what does that say about us as a people?"

EU Parliament Hails Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova Reforms; Eyes Russia Pressure Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 15, 2017

<https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-parliament-georgia-ukraine-moldova-reforms-russia-pressure/28855898.html>

European Parliament lawmakers overwhelmingly passed a resolution praising reforms in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova and said the three former Soviet republics could eventually be considered for membership in the European Union.

The resolution on November 15 also vowed to maintain "collective pressure on Russia to resolve the conflicts in eastern Ukraine, the occupied territories" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Transdniestar.

The move by parliament members comes ahead of the 2017 Eastern Partnership summit scheduled for November 24 in Brussels. The partnership was created in 2009 to deepen EU ties with six Eastern European partners -- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The recommendations had been approved on October 10 by the parliament's foreign affairs committee.

The text is nonbinding, but EU lawmakers said they welcomed "significant progress" made since the previous Eastern Partnership summit held in Riga in 2015.

The text called on member states to "agree to an ambitious declaration for the 2017 Summit that sets relevant long-term goals" and highlights that the association agreements signed with the three countries "do not constitute the final goal in their relations with the EU."

The lawmakers said they were in favor of "clear benchmarks for future cooperation" and that the EU would make no further deals with any Eastern Partnership country that does not respect EU values or "intimidates human rights defenders and journalists."

The text was not specific, but the parliament has in the past criticized some of the countries for alleged rights violations. On November 13, 47 members of the parliament condemned the treatment of imprisoned Azerbaijani journalist Afqan Muxtarli and demanded his immediate release.

Diplomats told RFE/RL that the final declaration of the upcoming summit will acknowledge the EU aspirations of the partners but will not make any specific commitments toward potential membership.

The lawmakers did recommend providing aid to Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in the form of trust funds to focus on private and public investments in social and economic infrastructure.

One of the goals, they said, would be to support economic reforms "aimed at phasing out monopolies, limiting the role of oligarchs, and preventing money-laundering and tax evasion."

"The summit must not only talk about what has been achieved, but what needs to be done and where to do homework," said Knut Fleckenstein, an MEP from Germany.

The lawmakers also vowed to "keep pressure on Russia to resolve conflicts in the EU eastern neighborhood," without going into detail.

The resolution also stated that the MEPs supported the deployment of an "armed" police mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in eastern Ukraine.

Russia occupied and seized the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and backs separatists whose war against Kyiv's forces has killed more than 10,000 people in eastern Ukraine since April of that year.

Russia has also unilaterally recognized the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following a brief war with Georgia in 2008. And Moscow maintains troops in Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region over the repeated objections of the Moldovan authorities.

5 amazing discoveries from a trove of documents hidden during the Holocaust

By Josefin Dolsten

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Last month, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research made an astonishing announcement: the discovery of 170,000 Jewish documents thought to have been destroyed during the Holocaust.

The papers, which date from the mid-18th century through World War II, survived destruction attempts by both the Nazis and the Soviets.

In 1941, as part of program to loot Jewish museums and institutions, the Nazis raided YIVO, which is now based in New York but then was headquartered in Vilna. A group of Jewish slave laborers called the "Paper Brigade" smuggled some books, papers and artwork into the Vilna ghetto — risking their lives in the process. After World War II, a non-Jewish Lithuanian librarian, Antanas Ulpis, hid the collection in the basement of a church amid a campaign by the Soviet government to rid the country of religion.

In 1991, the Lithuanian government said it found 150,000 documents that Ulpis had kept in the church, but the new discovery appears to surpass that collection both in terms of size and the condition of the documents, said Jonathan Brent, YIVO's executive director.

Together the two discoveries make up "the largest collection of material about Jewish life in Eastern Europe that exists in the world," Brent told JTA earlier this month at YIVO's downtown headquarters here. Brent said the documents shed new light on the lives of Eastern European Jews, whose history is often told as a series of persecutions.

“It was nothing but pogroms,” Brent recalled of being taught about Ashkenazi history as a child. “And what this opens up to is it was so much more than that, that indeed the Jews had a real civilization that flourished.”

The Lithuanian government found the documents in 2016 and told YIVO about them earlier this year. Most of the material remains in Lithuania, but 10 items are being shown through January at YIVO, which is working with the Lithuanian government to archive and digitize the collection.

Here is a look at a handful of the documents displayed at YIVO and what they teach about Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

1. Communal record book, Lazdijai, Lithuania, 1836

The book, called a Pinkas, was written for a Talmud study association and used to record information about its members, such as births, deaths and business transactions. It is decorated with ornate illustrations and states that in order to be a part of the group, members must study a full page of Talmud together.

“What you see here in the way it’s decorated is the pride and the care that they felt about their life and their desire to memorialize it for generations,” Brent said.

2. Letter written by Sholem Aleichem from a health resort, Badenweiler, Germany, 1910

The famed Yiddish author had health problems and would spend time in health resorts far away from friends and family. In this note, Sholem Aleichem makes fun of Leon Neustadt, a leader in the Warsaw Jewish community, writing that a biblical verse referring to non-kosher animals forbidden to Jews actually refers to Neustadt.

3. Agreement between a water carrier union and the Ramayles Yeshiva, Vilna, 1857

In the document, the group of carriers promises to donate a Torah scroll and raise money to purchase a Talmud set for the prominent yeshiva in exchange for using a room for religious services.

Water carriers, workers who ferried water to people’s homes, were “the lowest economic rung of society, and the fact they had a contract with the yeshiva was significant,” Brent said. “What this modest document shows us is that this community functioned in such a way that the very top of the community and the very bottom of the community communicated with each other and helped each other.”

4. 10 poems by Avrom Sutzkever, Vilna, 1943

The prominent Yiddish poet wrote these on top of old documents, creating a makeshift book for his poems in the Vilna ghetto, where paper was scarce. These are the earliest-known versions of the poems Sutzkever wrote in the Vilna ghetto, which he reproduced several times and knew by heart. He composed some of them while living in the woods as a partisan fighter. Writing the poems in the book helped give other ghetto residents greater access to them.

5. Autobiography of Bebe Epstein, Vilna, 1933-34

Epstein was 12 when she wrote this book and submitted it to YIVO for a youth autobiography contest. The fifth-grader writes about the day-to-day happenings of her childhood, such as dealing with a strict teacher: “At first, he was good to us. Later he got strict, and even stricter.” Epstein also detailed various illnesses she suffered from and complained about having too much homework. Epstein was later forced to live in the Vilna Ghetto and in concentration camps, but she survived the war and moved to the United States.