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Moldovan Jews slam 'hate speech' following tirade against convicted Jewish mayor
JTA, August 10, 2018

<https://www.jta.org/2018/08/10/news-opinion/moldovan-jews-slam-hate-speech-following-tirade-jewish-con>

Following a politician's tirade against a Jewish mayor in Moldova convicted of fraud, the country's Jewish community condemned "hate speech's use as an instrument of political struggle."

The [statement](#) Friday by the Jewish Community of Moldova — a landlocked republic sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine — did not name former sports minister Octavian Țicu or any other alleged purveyor of hate speech.

But it came fresh on the heels of a [controversy](#) over Ticu's July 23 [post](#) on Facebook about Ilan Shor, the Israel-born mayor of Orhei, a city north of the capital Chisinau. The post called Shor a "thief" who "drinks wine and eats the bread of a country that has received him and many others generously, yet he curses us in Russian and considers us a herd of sheep." He also wrote that Shor "didn't bother to learn" the local language, Romanian.

Last year, a Moldovan court sentenced Shor to 7 1/2 years in prison for his role in a \$1 billion banking scandal that nearly bankrupted the tiny former Soviet republic in 2015.

Shor, who was a senior bank executive at the time, was found guilty of causing financial damage of \$1.26 billion linked to the scandal. He denies any wrongdoing; his appeal is pending in the Supreme Court.

Ticu's reference to Shor as a foreigner apparently owes to the fact that he was born to Moldovan parents in Israel, where they settled in the 1970s. But they returned in 1990, when he was 3 years old, and Shor grew up in Moldova.

The reference to Russian provoked outrage in Moldova, where nearly all of the country's some 2,000 Jews and about 20 percent of the general population speak Russian as a mother tongue. Ticu, a former boxer who served as minister for two months in 2013, [denied](#) any allegations of anti-Semitism leveled against him in the local media. Moldova has 3.5 million residents and is one of Europe's poorest countries.

Public figures, including "politicians and journalists," have a "special responsibility in the context of" preventing hate speech, the Jewish community wrote in its unusual statement.

Anti-Semitic books found in Likud activist's office in Moscow
Raid on office of Alexander Kargin, a representative of Israel's Likud Party in Russia, uncovers nationalistic and anti-Semitic books; 'The literature seized had been planted on me,' Kargin says.
YnetNews, August 11, 2018

<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5326533,00.html>

Russian police raided the Jewish community center in Moscow on Friday as part of an investigation into Alexander Kargin, the representative of Israel's Likud Party in Russia, finding books with anti-Semitic materials there, according to Russian news agency Interfax.

The investigation "into actions aimed at fomenting hatred or enmity or insulting a group of people based on their ethnicity and religion" was launched after law enforcement in the country received a report about Kargin.

Kargin's lawyer, Igor Zuber, insisted the books did not belong to his client.

"Officials from the Anti-Extremism Center of the Interior Ministry department for the Central Administrative District in Moscow came to the office today. During a search, they discovered nationalistic literature not belonging to Kargin but obviously planted in the office," Zuber told Interfax.

Zuber said Kargin was summoned for police questioning next week to provide explanations.

Kargin himself insisted he was innocent. "The literature seized had been planted on me. Most of the planted literature was anti-Semitic in nature," he told Interfax.

In a Facebook post, Kargin recounted the incident: "This wasn't the Shabbat I expected. I got a call from the synagogue and was told the police was there and asking that I arrive. After I got there I realized they wanted to search my office because they received information I was conducting extremist activity.

"As soon as we entered the office, you could see a pile of books and pages, almost all of which included nationalistic material, in the worst sense of the word. Some were simply anti-Semitic in nature. Books like 'The Final Solution for the Jewish Problem' found their way to me! A Jewish activist! In short, you understand. This entire thing has been planted."

Yudit Keller contributed to this report.

Analysis: Russia and Israel are on Georgia's mind

On 10th anniversary of 2008 war, Tbilisi's ambassador reflects on the lessons of the conflict and relations with Israel.

By Herb Keinon

Jerusalem Post, August 9, 2018

<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Russia-and-Israel-are-on-Georgias-mind-564511>

In 1990, Paata Kalandadze – a young diplomat from Georgia – was serving in the Soviet Union's diplomatic delegation in Israel that was operating out of the Finnish Embassy in Tel Aviv.

This was a time before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Mikhail Gorbachev was the Soviet leader and his foreign minister was a Georgian by the name of Eduard Shevardnadze. The Soviet Union had not yet disintegrated, but huge change was already in the works – as evidenced by the fact that the Soviet Union, which had been so anti-Israel for so long, opened a diplomatic delegation in Israel.

Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian Federation opened an embassy in Tel Aviv, and Kalandadze's stint as a Soviet diplomat representing Moscow's interests in Israel ended. More than two decades later he was back in Tel Aviv, but this time as the ambassador of the independent state of Georgia.

And now, rather than representing Moscow's interests, he represents those of Tbilisi – interests which are diametrically opposed.

Georgian diplomats around the world initiated interviews this week with the local media where they are stationed to draw attention to an anniversary that – outside of Georgia and perhaps some parts of Russia – few people noticed: The 10th anniversary of the five day Russo-Georgian War that began on August 8, 2008. During that war, which is often referred to as the first European war of the 21st century, Georgia lost control of two regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have ever since been occupied by Russia.

This anniversary, Kalandadze said during an interview in the lobby of Jerusalem's King David Hotel, is an "opportunity to see clearly the intentions of some actions done in the past."

In the telling of the Georgian ambassador, who has been in Israel for the last four years, the seeds of Russia's military engagement in Syria, and especially its invasion and occupation of Crimea and parts of Ukraine, were planted in that summer war in Transcaucasia.

"Today, after 10 years of the Georgian-Russian war, we can quite clearly identify what the intentions of the Russian Federation were. Why this war took place – what was the plan, was it a separate episode in the region, or a stage of greater plan."

According to Kalandadze, the war was part of a greater Russian plan, "which later on developed into the annexation of Crimea, and the activities and developments we are witnessing in regions of Ukraine."

Moscow, he said, has a plan to "harshly impose its will over its neighbors" who are opting for democracy and the West, and quashing Georgia was part of that plan. Moscow, in his telling, wants to keep Georgia and Ukraine "under its control, to not allow the independent countries to make a choice of their own way of development, and establishment of their own countries."

Russia's war in Georgia and six years later in Crimea were not only a blow to the security of those two countries, he continued, but a blow to European security, since in his mind "it is quite clear that one of the main intentions of Russia is to shake the stability of the EU as a stable and progressive entity."

Kalandadze said that Russia will not be "limited from the geographic perspective" and will try "to tackle the international order everywhere, whether in Georgia, in the vicinity of the EU border, "or in any other part of the universe" – which, in his mind, is the link to Syria.

"This is a part of the big plan, which is the shattering of international law and order, by extending the influential areas from where they can dictate their will," he said.

That brings up Israel's relations with Georgia, and with Russia.

The Russian-Georgian war posed serious diplomatic challenges for Jerusalem, torn between sympathy for the small South Caucasian country with its history with the Jews going back to the destruction of the First Temple, and not wanting to antagonize Moscow, which at the time was considering major arms sales to Syria and Iran.

And Moscow could have found an excuse to get annoyed at Israel, if it desired, since Israel, for the decade before the war, sold Georgia an estimated \$300-500 million of military hardware, and – perhaps even more significantly – defense contractors were involved in training the Georgian military. Among those involved were former generals such as Yisrael Ziv and Gal Hirsch.

According to a Wikileaks cable from September 2008, a month after the war, Russia – in the words of then-US ambassador to Moscow John Beyrle – urged Israel not to resume arms sales to Georgia.

Kalandadze acknowledge that no new defense contracts between Israel and Georgia have been signed since the war, though existing ones were completed. The defense cooperation "was completed in due time, in accordance to agreements by both sides," he said.

If Israel had to calibrate its defense relationship with Georgia carefully in 2008 – because it did not want the Russians to retaliate for Israeli arms sales to Tbilisi by selling state-of-the-art weapons to Tehran or Damascus – today it has even more of an interest in keeping relations with Moscow running smoothly because of Russia's

involvement in Syria. This has resulted in a close relationship between Moscow and Jerusalem, evident in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's three visits to Moscow so far this year, and his 10 telephone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin – more than with any other world leader.

Kalandadze denied that this has impacted on Israeli-Georgian ties, which he said are getting “stronger and stronger.

“As I mentioned, the State of Israel and Georgia are friends, Georgia considers Israel a friendly state,” he said. “Because of this friendship Georgia did not, does not and will not impose any kind of agenda on Israel that will violate – or be against the national interests – of the State of Israel.

In the next breath – and in what seemed his way of saying that Israel should remember who its real friends are – he said that there is “26 centuries of friendship between Jews and Georgians, which is very important.”

He added that both Israel and Georgia are free in choosing their friends, but at the same time – in a reference to the United States – “have the same strategic partner.”

Asked whether he thought Israel was making a mistake by developing such close ties with Russia, he replied that this was none of Georgia's business.

“Whatever Israel is doing is their own domestic agenda, they have a right and obligation to serve their natural interests. I am not interfering in the internal issues of a friendly state,” he said.

While the defense relationship between the countries fell victim to the war, cooperation in a wide array of other fields – from agriculture to hi-tech, education and tourism – has surged. For instance, regarding tourism, some 35,000 Israelis visited Georgia in 2014, compared to more than 135,000 tourists in 2017. This month, during the height of the tourism season, there are 26 weekly flights from Tel Aviv to Tbilisi.

Kalandadze said that not only are bilateral relations between the countries “perfect,” but “we also have a wonderful record of cooperation in multinational forums as well.”

And, indeed, Georgia generally abstains on anti-Israel resolutions in the United Nations. There were, however, two recent exceptions. Most recently, Tbilisi voted with another 119 countries in June to provide “protection for the Palestinian civilian population” following the violence along the Gaza border fence – 45 other countries abstained, and eight voted against.

And in December, Georgia was among 20 countries not present for the UN General Assembly vote that condemned the US for its decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. That vote passed 128 to nine, with 35 abstentions.

Kalandadze appeared a bit annoyed when asked about his country's votes on those issues. He refused to explain Georgia's absence from the hall on the Jerusalem vote, and said that the reason it voted for the resolution calling for protection for Gazans was “purely humanitarian, and not political.”

Asked if there was any chance that Georgia might move its embassy to Jerusalem, the ambassador replied, “There are always chances, and these chances will appear at the proper time.” He added, however, that he “did not think” there were any immediate plans to do so.

As to whether Israeli officials are talking about this with him, he replied, “We talk about it, we talk about every issue because we are friends.”

Romanian Police Nab Suspect in Anti-Semitic Vandalism of Elie Wiesel's Home

JTA, August 17, 2018

<https://www.jta.org/2018/08/17/news-opinion/romanian-police-nab-suspect-anti-semitic-vandalism-elie-wiesels-home>

Romanian police arrested a 37-year-old man whom they suspect wrote anti-Semitic slogans on the childhood home of Elie Wiesel.

The man, whose name police did not release, is believed to have written in fluorescent pink graffiti the words “public toilet” and “Nazi Jew lying in hell with Hitler” as well as “Anti-Semite pedophile.” The Memorial House Elie Wiesel is in Sighet in eastern Romania.

Wiesel died in 2016 at the age of 87. A Nobel peace prize laureate for his body of work on activism on behalf of fellow Holocaust survivors and those who were killed, he was honored last year by locals in his hometown. They marched from the museum, which was built where Wiesel was born and grew up, to the train station where in 1944 he and his family boarded a train to the Auschwitz death camp in Poland.

The suspect was arrested last week for the vandalism, which was discovered on Aug. 4, the news site digi24 last week reported.

The arrest “comes as a relief,” said Chaim Chesler, co-founder of Limmud FSU. Chesler’s group, which organizes cultural events for Jews across the former Soviet Union and other places where many Russian-speaking Jews live, was responsible for the 2016 memorial march for Wiesel in Sighet.

The graffiti incident “caused pain and outrage all over the world but it is reassuring to see that justice is being served,” Chesler added.

Tel Aviv on the Black Sea: Odessa, the Cradle of Israeli Culture, Enjoys a Jewish Renaissance The Ukrainian port city of Odessa, once home to hundreds of thousands of Jews, is experiencing a ‘golden age’ - with modern Israel proving an unlikely inspiration

By Rebecca Greig

Haaretz, August 14, 2018

<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.MAGAZINE-odessa-the-cradle-of-israeli-culture-enjoys-a-jewish-renaissance-1.6367188>

If you know where to look, the ghosts of Odessa’s Jewish past are everywhere, haunting and playful: in the pizza restaurant blaring “Hava Nagila” across from the Potemkin Steps; in the forshmak (chopped herring), tzimmes and gefilte fish served in the city’s oldest eating establishments; in the Jewish jokes and Yiddish words that pepper local patois; to the sign above an overgrown courtyard that reads “The State of Israel was born here.”

But for much of the latter half of the 20th century, Jewish Odessa was a city in retreat. On the eve of World War II, a third of the population (some 200,000 people) was Jewish. Now it’s more like 3 percent (45,000) and mostly assimilated. The majority of Odessa’s Jews are secular and from mixed families. People will tell you, “My mother is Jewish” or “My grandmother is Jewish,” with little understanding that, according to halakha (Jewish religious law), they too are Jewish.

The Holocaust, where some 100,000 Jews were shot or burned alive in the first month of Romanian and German occupation in October 1941, swiftly followed by decades of Soviet rule, decimated and then suppressed what remained of the Jewish community. Those who had the means to leave did – seeking new lives and freedoms in places such as New York and Tel Aviv. Today, some half a million Israeli citizens trace their origins back to Ukraine – there isn’t available data for the number of Jews who moved to Israel specifically from Odessa in the 1990s – around half of Israel’s Russian-speaking population.

Marat Parkhomovsky, an Israeli film and theater director, is one of those citizens. His special interest is the history of Israeli cinema, from documenting its origins in British Mandatory Palestine to Israel’s contemporary

film industry. He was in Odessa for the city's annual international film festival in July, celebrating 70 years of Israeli cinema.

It is the first time he has been back since leaving as a 10-year-old, 28 years ago. He is here with his Israeli-born wife Avital Bekerman, who is head of development at the Israel Film Fund. They are attending a party marking Israel's contribution to world cinema.

The setting is somewhat incongruous: a private beach at sunset, palm trees, gazebos – and the acerbic clucks of Netta Barzilai's chicken noises in recent Eurovision winner "Toy." The cheesy Israeli tunes emanating from the DJ booth have the festivalgoers convinced that the man behind the music is an Israeli import. One of the guests suggests the atmosphere is more akin to a Jewish wedding in Malibu than an international film festival.

As guests quaff champagne and nibble finger foods, conversations switch with ease between Russian and Ukrainian, Hebrew and English.

For Parkhomovsky, the two-and-a-half-hour flight was a three-decade trip back in time.

"It was very strange. When I came to Israel from Odessa, it was still the Soviet Union. I didn't think I would ever return," he says.

The Soviet city of his memory – a city of austere lines and decaying neo-baroque architecture – has been replaced by a bustling commercial and tourist center, where gaudy neon signs advertising pizza and strip joints compete with fashion boutiques and hipster coffee bars on historic Derybasivska Street

"It's a very intriguing city. I want to know it better. It's part of my puzzle. I want to understand my roots, my history, my heritage. Odessa is a really important part of who I am today," Parkhomovsky says.

The history of Odessa is also the history of Tel Aviv. Long before the State of Israel was founded, the Jewish community in Odessa raised money for the land where Tel Aviv was established. Odessa was the birthplace of Revisionist Zionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky, of essayist and Zionist intellectual Ahad Ha'am and Israeli national poet Haim Nahman Bialik. And it was in this Black Sea port city that modern Hebrew was born in the poems of Shaul Tchernichovsky and where Tel Aviv's first mayor, Meir Dizengoff, spent his formative years.

It is this rich Jewish intellectual tradition that Vladislav Davidzon and his wife Regina Maryanovska-Davidzon draw on in their literary creation, *The Odessa Review*. This English-language magazine in the style of *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* is profoundly Jewish and Eastern European. Davidzon, a fast-talking New Yorker, was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to Russian-Jewish parents who moved to New York's Brighton Beach (also known as "Little Odessa") when he was age 7. Following a childhood steeped in Russian culture and literature, he went on to major in Slavic studies and philosophy before meeting his wife, an Odessa native, in Paris – where they live part of the year.

Galvanized by Maidan – the 2014 pro-European revolution that ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich – the Davidzons were compelled to play their own part in the evolution of a new Ukraine: "A liberal and cosmopolitan Ukraine where Jews and Ukrainians stand as equals," Davidzon wrote in an introduction to a recent Jewish issue of the magazine focusing on "the relationship between Ukrainians and Jews – past, present and future."

"From the Pale of Settlement to the Promised Land," one headline reads. Another promises "Jewish humor from Odessa's Moldavanka," referring to the raucous Jewish ghetto so vividly depicted in Isaac Babel's "Odessa Tales."

Davidzon's vision is of a country "where Ukrainian scholars study Yiddish to read the works of great Jewish writers, where Odessan Jews tell their city's famous jokes in Ukrainian [and] where Jewish history is recognized as a critical part of Ukrainian history."

Over tarator, a chilled yogurt and dill soup, and traditional Slavic kompot in one of his favorite Odessa haunts, Davidzon says his dream is becoming a reality.

Odessa, and Ukraine, he says, are both experiencing a “golden age.” The majority of the Jewish population may have gone but the “Jewish experience is everywhere,” he says. The DNA of the culture of the city is Jewish.”

Maryanovska-Davidzon agrees. Her Jewish-Odessan family, assimilated first in Soviet and latterly Ukrainian society, was one that was always culturally Jewish, from the gefilte fish and eggplant her grandmother prepared to the literature and art they consumed.

Now, she says, the Jewish cultural revival is stronger than ever – helped in no small part by a very active Chabad community, and Israeli and Jewish cultural centers that have become a focal point of Odessan Jewish life.

“We have Israeli cinema week and multiple Israeli cultural events in Odessa throughout the year. There are many mixed (Jewish and non-Jewish) families in Odessa – and almost all of them are involved in Jewish cultural life,” says Maryanovska-Davidzon.

Jewish religious life in Odessa has also seen a revival. The city has two synagogues with active congregations: The Main Synagogue, which dates to the city’s founding and the first Jewish community in 1798; and The Old Synagogue, built at the turn of the 20th century and renovated by the Chabad movement in 1996.

A third synagogue, Brodsky – built by Jews from Brody in 1863 – was the largest synagogue in the south of what was then the Russian Empire, famed for the beautiful singing voices of its cantors. Today it is a dusty shadow of its storied past. Two years ago, the synagogue was returned to the Jewish community after a century of state control. Once restored, it will host the Chabad congregation and the Odessa Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. This will be a significant upgrade from the unmarked courtyard and four crowded rooms that comprise the current community-run Jewish museum, populated with donations from families who mostly fled Odessa. As a result, it is more an overflowing depository of Jewish domestic artefacts than an organized exhibition that follows a clear chronology.

The optimistic Jewish Odessa of today is hard to square with the city where 300 Jews were killed in a bloody pogrom in 1905 – one of five such massacres that roiled the city’s Jewish population in the 19th and 20th centuries. But despite reports of virulent anti-Semitism in Ukraine, Davidzon is adamant that Odessa, and Ukraine, is more tolerant than its Western European neighbors.

“I had one [anti-Semitic] incident in 10 years,” he says. “But this country is totally safe for us. There is no organized anti-Semitism in Odessa, and I often tell people that I feel safe walking in a kippa in Odessa and Kiev, but not next to my apartment in Paris.

“In my experience, the level of anti-Semitism is the lowest in Europe,” he adds.

Davidzon’s experience is reflected in the robust tourist trade between Ukraine and Israel as growing numbers of Ukrainians and Israelis take advantage of visa-free travel between the two countries. Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko announced in September 2016 that this has led to a tenfold increase in tourist flow, with 137,000 Ukrainians visiting Israel last year alone. This cross-cultural pollination is evident in a number of bars and restaurants in the city center: From Allenby – an Israeli restaurant that draws its guests in with signs in Hebrew and English – to Dizyngoff, an ambitious Israeli-Parisian-Asian fusion restaurant that looks out to a monument of Catherine the Great. With offerings including smoked salmon and cucumber cheesecake, shiitake mushroom hummus, sea bass sashimi and baked snails, the menu doesn’t disappoint. A Russian inscription on the restaurant’s Facebook page reads “Dizyngoff – a part of Israel in the center of Odessa.”

Alexander Vlasopolov, 26, one of the restaurant’s four founders, had the idea after spending some time in Israel after a Birthright Jewish heritage trip. He is adamant that Dizyngoff is at heart a Tel Aviv restaurant, multicultural and multiethnic, with strong Jewish roots.

“Our restaurant is influenced by Jewish and Israeli culture, but we also wanted it to be fun and essentially Odessan,” Vlasopolov says. The beautiful young things imbibing the imaginatively named “Boker Tov” and “Damascus Gate” cocktails seem to agree.

Odessa may have given birth to Israeli cultural life, but in one of life’s many twists, it is now contemporary Israeli culture that is returning to the Black Sea.

Ukraine’s little known memory war

Russian propaganda whipped up allegations of anti-Semitism in Ukraine during the country's 2014 protests; why that makes it more difficult to talk about anti-Semitism in Ukraine today.

By Samuel Sokol and Anna Kupinska

Open Democracy, July 26, 2018

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anna-kupinska-samuel-sokol/ukraines-little-known-memory-war>

Earlier this year, more than 50 members of US Congress [issued an open letter demanding American pressure on Ukraine](#) in response to recent “incidents of state-sponsored Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism.” The lawmakers called on Kyiv to “unequivocally reject Holocaust distortion and the honoring of Nazi collaborators and fully prosecute anti-Semitic crimes,” a claim rejected as “a mix of incompetence and deliberate distortion of information” by Ukrainian memory czar Volodymyr Viatrovyh.

In a [previous analysis](#), Sam Sokol briefly touched on Ukraine’s efforts to rehabilitate its wartime nationalist movements – many of whose members had been involved in the ethnic cleansing of Poles and Jews. This campaign, a throwback to the memory policies of President Viktor Yushchenko, was strongly supported by the country’s post-Maidan political leadership and made ideal fodder for Russian propaganda, which sought to portray Ukraine as a hotbed of fascism and anti-Semitism.

This revisionist historiography reemerged shortly after Russia began a vicious propaganda campaign against Kyiv. Here, as part of the propaganda war waged alongside the physical conflict, the Kremlin portrayed Ukraine’s post-revolutionary leadership as a “fascist junta” – one out to get Jews and other minorities.

The Russian state weaponised allegations of anti-Semitism while Ukrainian groups attempted to create a new national historiography centered around the perennial struggle for independence in which vicious anti-Semites and war criminals, suitably rehabilitated, were held up as examples for those currently fighting against the Kremlin’s revanchism. Ukraine’s memory wars, little known in the west, are a perfect example of how narrative has become central to 21st century war.

A “Fascist Junta”

Already at the beginning of EuroMaidan in late 2013, Russian media [began tying the revolutionaries to fascism and Nazism](#). State media played up the involvement of far right elements such as Svoboda and Pravy Sektor (Right Sector, a group formed as an informal union of ultra-nationalist factions at the beginning of the protest cycle), highlighting a series of anti-Semitic attacks that had put Kyiv’s Jews on edge.

Fearful that Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity would show Russian citizens that it was possible to throw off the yoke of kakistocracy, Russian President Vladimir Putin doubled down on the promotion of a politics of memory which, in the words of author Nikolay Kaposov (the author of a [recent groundbreaking book](#) on European memory laws) “created a lens through which the only analog to the contemporary Ukrainian movement for national liberation is the Banderivtsy” – a reference to Ukrainian militant nationalists active between the 1930s and 1950s. Such an approach, Kaposov explained, was fundamental in creating “a language of political mobilization against the external enemy, which the regime needed in order to marginalize the in-country opposition.”

Here, the Kremlin presented itself as a defender of Russian and Jewish populations in Ukraine, especially in Crimea and the Donbas, who they alleged were threatened by nationalists in the newly formed revolutionary

Ukrainian government. Russian media promoted a narrative centered around the historical parallels between the Russian army as a descendant of the Soviet Union, which defeated Hitler, and Ukrainian nationalists, who collaborated with the Nazis, as predecessors of the current rulers of Ukraine.

Protest chants such as “Glory to the nation! Death to the enemies!”, which had its origin in the cant of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), were highlighted as examples of Ukrainian racism while the increase in security at synagogues and other communal institutions was held up as proof of the Jews’ fears. Meanwhile, out of either conviction or a desire not to alienate demonstrators at the numerous Maidan protests, local Jewish leaders repeatedly blamed anti-Semitic incidents, including several stabbings and beatings, on alleged Russian provocateurs.

After Hillel Cohen, the director of a local Jewish ambulance service, was [beaten and stabbed in Kyiv](#) in March 2014, Josef Zissels, the director of the Association of Jewish organizations and communities of Ukraine (Vaad), condemned it as a Russian-orchestrated provocation intended as “justification for the continuation of Russian aggression” in Crimea. “I have never claimed that the Russian government or Yanukovich administration were anti-Semitic,” he told the [Jerusalem Post](#). “It is much worse – they are cynically willing to play the Jewish card in the implementation of their objectives, and are therefore [shown to be] willing to sacrifice Jews.”

Shortly before the attack on Cohen, Putin, in a [statement](#) that typified Russian rhetoric regarding Jews during the first two years of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, decried what he described as a “rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces” in Ukraine. Laying the part of the propaganda groundwork for his country’s intervention in its neighbour’s affairs, the Russian strongman declared that “if we see such uncontrolled crime spreading to the eastern regions of the country, and if the people ask us for help, while we already have the official request from the legitimate president, we retain the right to use all available means to protect those people.”

In response, American-born Ukrainian Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich [shot back](#), comparing the Russian Federation to Nazi Germany: “Things may be done by Russians dressing up as Ukrainian nationalists” in the “same way the Nazis did when they wanted to go into Austria and created provocations.”

Around the same time, Misha Kapustin, a Reform Rabbi in occupied Simferopol, decided to move abroad. Immediately after the Russian takeover of Crimea, anti-Semitic graffiti appeared on his Sevastopol synagogue in what many suspected was an intentional effort by Russia to prove its propaganda claims true. Kapustin was shocked when an interview he had given to the Kremlin-backed Russia Today television network was [broadcast](#), painting his move as an escape from Ukrainian Judeophobes.

“I needed a psychologist, (I was) a rabbi who needed a psychologist,” he recalled to one of the authors. “I felt terrible... I thought that I was set up... I did not expect anything to be done like that just, they just misused my words... they just perverted my words, you know. In fact it was me, my voice, my words, it was me all the time there, and I must admit they did it professionally, they professionally changed the context so nicely.”

Like all good propaganda, Russia Today had taken real events and re-contextualised them, twisted the truth so as to portray a narrative far removed from reality. The network summed up the message that the Kremlin wanted its viewers to walk away with when it wrote, in an [article accompanying the segment](#), that “many from the Jewish minority (have said that) they feel they will be forced to leave the country.”

This claim was as far as reality as possible. In the coming years, as war gripped the country and the economy sunk deeper into recession, many thousands of Jews ended up fleeing, but not one out of dozens interviewed by this article’s authors indicated that they left because of anti-Semitism. The question is: why would the Kremlin have an interest in Ukrainian Jews?

The military uses of history

The truth is, it didn't. It would be incorrect to assert that the media reports of Ukrainian anti-Semitism were particularly useful in and of themselves in rallying Russian domestic support for action in Ukraine. We would contend, however, that the use of Nazi imagery did serve a distinct purpose.

The instrumentalisation of the Jewish issue was key to Vladimir Putin's goal of awakening Russian national memory related to the Second World War. Known to former Soviet citizens as the Great Patriotic War, the memory of the millions of lives lost in the struggle against Nazism and fascism still resonate in Russia today. During the Putin era this idea has been [turned into a national semi-religion](#) in which war veterans are treated like saints and martyrs, and symbols such as Saint George ribbon have become a symbol of patriotism, loyalty to the regime and Russian pride. By packaging the war as a fight against the modern-day successors of the Nazis, Putin was able to tap into a reservoir of emotion – incredibly useful in any attempt to mobilise popular support.

Accusations of anti-Semitism also provided Putin with a (flimsy) pretext for interference in his neighbour's affairs, while supplying a ready-made propaganda weapon for the delegitimization of the new administration in Kyiv. Anti-Semitism is one of the more pressing issues in contemporary Europe and by linking Ukraine to troubles in France, England and elsewhere, the Russian leadership apparently hoped to influence public opinion abroad to at least some degree.

False reports of anti-Semitic attacks would become a leitmotif of Russian propaganda. One striking incident occurred in October 2014, only weeks before the 109th anniversary of the 1905 Odessa pogrom. Russian newspapers [Pravda](#) and [Izvestia](#) reported that members of Pravy Sektor had terrorised the Jewish community of Odessa and had beaten more than 20 of its members. "Pravy Sektor is just destroying us, it is pure militant Nazism," Mikhail Maiman, a [fictional Jewish communal figure](#), was quoted as saying. "We will not allow our people to be beaten, to rob our future... We must disarm and disperse the 'right wingers!'"

Of course, this story was a complete fiction. Local Jews knew nothing of the attacks, with one local leader telling the [Jerusalem Post](#) that there was "no question that from the beginning we became a tool. Both sides are trying to say (they) are the protectors" of the Jews. This was unquestionably true, as after the "attacks," the leadership of Pravy Sektor actively sought to engage with the Jewish community in order to brand itself as Philo-Semitic.

Reality, as always, was somewhat ambiguous. At the same time, [statistics provided by local Jewish communities](#) did indicate a measurable increase in anti-Semitic activity in Ukraine, primarily vandalism and arson aimed at Holocaust memorials and similar sites. For the most part, however, anti-Semitic violence, so common in Western Europe and almost unheard of in Eastern Europe, calmed down after the initial surge during the Maidan period. That being said, there was a definite tendency to overlook racist and anti-Semitic sentiments on the part of those engaged in the fight against Russian revanchism, some of whom, like Neo-Nazi [Vadym Troyan](#), a former member of the violent and xenophobic group Patriot of Ukraine, obtained positions within the country's law enforcement.

Whitewashing the past

Meanwhile, Ukrainian efforts to rehabilitate ultra-nationalist fighters, primarily affiliated with the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and its militant offshoot UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army), created something of an unpleasant atmosphere for the country's Jews, even as most, if not all, of those leaving during this period cited Russian aggression and economic factors rather than anti-Semitism as the reasons for their emigration. Despite the Ukrainian far-right Svoboda party's fall from grace in the first post-Maidan parliamentary elections, Russian propaganda continued to paint Kyiv as a city run by anti-Semitic fascists.

The Ukrainian government rejected any accusation of sympathies towards Nazism and anti-Semitism. The contemporary Ukrainian historical narrative emphasises its struggle with Russian imperialism, which has affected Ukrainian society since the council of Pereyaslav (1654) that assigned Ukrainian Cossacks to the Tsar of Muscovy. According to this narrative, Ukrainians and Jews are victims of Russian imperialism – therefore Ukrainian nationalists, as well as Ukrainian and Jewish dissidents, are actual allies in this struggle.

From the late 1980s, Ukrainian historiography has searched for a new national meta-narrative that could replace the outdated Marxism-Leninism and contribute to the new country's nation-building program. Ironically, this wish to withdraw from the Soviet past has repeated Soviet patterns of following a single "general line" on historical interpretation, which aimed to educate people in a preferable way, and has limited public discussion. Eventually a meta-narrative reflecting the views of the Ukrainian diaspora gained ascendancy. This narrative is based on two pillars: glorification of OUN/UPA and victimisation of Ukrainians in reference to the Holodomor famine. After the Second World War, many Ukrainian nationalists and veterans of nationalist military organisations found themselves in exile in Europe and North America. Ukrainian nationalists in the diaspora continued the process of denying their previous anti-Semitism which had begun in 1943-1944, when Nazi Germany started to lose ground against Allied forces.

The Maidan spirit was widely seen in Ukraine as uniting Ukrainians and Ukrainian minorities and molding them into a single nation. Nevertheless, after the adoption of legislation on the legal status and honouring the memory of fighters for independence of Ukraine in the 20th century (2015), members of the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) that collaborated with the Nazis and contributed to the murder of thousands of Ukrainian Jews, were proclaimed national heroes. Official Kyiv completely whitewashed OUN members from their crimes, using their images as examples of Ukraine's struggle with Russian imperialism and foreign oppressors. This politics of whitewashing divided opinions in Ukraine's Jewish community: while some Ukrainian Jewish leaders and intellectuals supported this upgrade of the historical canon as progressive and "pro-Ukrainian", others were alarmed by the possible consequences of glorification of nationalist and anti-Semitic groups.

This dynamic can be seen in the recent decision by more than 40 communal leaders to [issue a joint statement](#) disavowing Josef Zissels, head of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (Vaad), after he [publicly condemned](#) dozens of US lawmakers critical of Ukrainian memory policy. The Congressmen, Zissels stated, had collaborated with "political technologists working for the Kremlin" as part of "a new wave of anti-Ukrainian propaganda of anti-Semitic speculations".

This memory war led to increased tensions with neighbouring Poland, which considers the UPA's campaign of ethnic cleansing of Poles during the Second World War to have been a genocide. As Ukraine's decommunisation programme put into place in mid-2015 has sped up, Poland and Ukraine have entered into a diplomatic battle over the [Volhynia massacres](#), showing that Ukraine's memory policy has had a negative effect on its relations with its neighbours, many of whom have their own nationalist interpretations of history.

Not content with fighting only over history, however, the Ukrainian authorities took a page out of Russia's book and used allegations of anti-Semitism against Moscow. In one high profile incident, President Poroshenko [accused the Kremlin of cultivating anti-Semitism in Crimea](#), claiming that Crimean Jews were being "oppressed" and had been banned from attending synagogue.

Despite a [rise in vandalism of Jewish sites](#) since Maidan, Ukrainian leaders continue to blame Russian agents for anti-Semitic incidents, characterising them as provocations intended to harm the Ukrainian government. Official Kyiv's willingness to turn a blind eye to escalating far-right violence over the past two years — including against the far-right's political and ideological opponents, feminists, liberals, the LGBT community and Roma — as well as the well documented ties between senior officials such as Interior Minister Arsen Avakov and the Azov Battalion, are incredibly worrying. Neo-Nazi groups like [C14](#) and the [National Corpus](#) have been allowed to patrol the streets of Kyiv and it appears that while they have not enjoyed much electoral success, certain Ukrainian extremist groups [benefit from support from state structures](#).

Even if far-right aggression towards Ukrainian Jews is now hidden and revealed only by graffiti on synagogues and posts on social media, their actions show that the situation can be changed dramatically — the far right now feel their power after discovering that they can act with relative impunity. While allegations of anti-Semitism in Ukraine were largely propaganda during the first two years of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, there is now real concern that Kyiv's policies are emboldening extremists.

Sam Sokol is a freelance journalist based in Israel. In 2013-2016, he covered Ukraine for the Jerusalem Post. He is currently writing a book on anti-Semitism, propaganda and national memory formation in post-Maidan Ukraine.

Anna Kupinska researches the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the politics of memory in modern Ukraine.

The sale of Azerbaijan's Jewish community center deals a painful blow to a dwindling community

By Cnaan Liphshiz

JTA, August 14, 2018

<https://www.jta.org/2018/08/14/news-opinion/azerbaijans-icc-sold-off-painful-blow-dwindling-community>

BAKU, Azerbaijan — About one year after Bella Regimov's two children left their native country for Israel along with many of her friends and relatives, she began feeling socially isolated.

On her own in Azerbaijan's family-oriented society, the 76-year-old was losing "the will to get up in the morning" following their immigration in the early 2000s, she said.

But in 2006, things turned around. That year, she started volunteering at the Jewish community center that the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC, had opened two years earlier in this capital city of the Caucasus republic.

"This became my home, my real home," Regimov said of The Jewish House, a crumbling building on a busy street bordering the Baku Railway Station. "I come here first thing in the morning and I stay to close the place."

Since she started volunteering, Regimov has come to depend on the center for social interaction, a sense of purpose and even exercise: She walks at least two miles a day to the center and back to her home in Baku's old Jewish quarter. In the summer, she walks briskly to minimize her exposure to the scorching sun, slowing down only under the shade of the buildings featuring the city's ubiquitous beige sandstone tiles.

But this month, Regimov and dozens of others of elderly Jews in Baku will have to leave the building that houses the city's only Jewish community center. JDC has sold it to streamline its expenses in a city with a dwindling Jewish community.

The sale is part of a broader effort by JDC to respond to shifting Jewish community demographics, the New York-based group said. In the case of Baku, whose Jewish population has shrunk from 16,000 to 8,000 since 2000, JDC will move its offices to a much smaller space, a JDC spokesperson said.

Many Azeri Jews have left for Russia and Israel in search of opportunities unavailable under the nepotist economy of Azerbaijan, an oil-rich country where many residents nonetheless live in abject poverty.

As the community shrinks, Regimov and other elderly Jews value even more the institutions that have been their solution to loneliness.

"Please tell them not to take this away from us," she said. "It's my reason for getting up in the morning, and I'm not the only one."

The Jewish House, at 13,000 square feet, includes an auditorium, workshop rooms, classrooms and space for exhibitions. JDC said the new space is about five times smaller, but will have space for activities and a day center for seniors.

Still, Shaul Davidov, who has headed The Jewish House since its opening, said the change means the "end of an era" for his community.

The organizations that run Jewish communal activities in Baku will find a new address there, he said, but "it means a painful loss" for Regimov and dozens of elderly Jews who come to The Jewish House daily to play cards, participate in arts and crafts lessons and study Hebrew.

“I don’t think they’ll come. It will not be the same,” he said.

Arnold Zeligman, an 86-year-old volunteer teacher of Hebrew at The Jewish House, is determined to resume his activity in the new space.

“But where will we have concerts? Where will we have a festive kabbalat Shabbat?” he asks. “I don’t see it happening, and it’s a very big shame.”

The Jewish House’s annual upkeep costs about \$60,000, Davidov said.

Baku has two active synagogues in the old Jewish quarter. Both are small in comparison to The Jewish House and “our people don’t really feel like it’s their space there,” said Zeligman, whose only son lives in Israel.

His students are a dozen or so pensioners, who enjoyed the unplanned study break they were given last month while Zeligman spoke to JTA. Watching him wrap his tongue around some of the best Hebrew-language words in his vocabulary, they crack jokes at his expense in Juhuri, the dying dialect spoken here by many Jews.

A mix of Farsi and Hebrew, it is the centuries-old language of the Mountain Jews — a stream of Judaism that is considered neither Sephardic nor Ashkenazi, and whose members have their own manner of singing scripture and songs. About half of Azerbaijan’s Jews are Mountain Jews. The rest are Ashkenazim who came here before 1991, when Russia still ruled what is now Azerbaijan.

Fading and lacking an agreed-upon alphabet — the few Juhuri books in existence are divided into volumes using Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin — the pensioners’ native tongue is no use for communicating with grandchildren in Israel and beyond over Skype, requiring them to study Hebrew. But none of them is seriously thinking about moving to Israel as long as they are in good health, Zeligman said.

Michal Frank, the executive director of JDC in the former Soviet Union, said she “understands that it can be upsetting” to some in the community.

“We’re very attentive to their needs, but we need to adjust to demographic shifts and decreasing budgets for the good of all JDC clients,” she said.

In 2017, JDC spent more than \$120 million — slightly over one-third of its budget — on supporting Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union. This included funding for the Hesed program, which provided that year support to some 110,000 individuals from the neediest segments of the community.

JDC has had to direct extra resources to Russia and Ukraine, where most of the former Soviet Jews live, in order to meet growing needs. Since 2013, JDC has seen at least 6,500 Jews apply for its welfare programs in Ukraine, one of the most dramatic increases in reliance on JDC aid since Ukraine gained independence in 1991. It was part of JDC’s response to a financial crisis that in 2014 hit the economies of both Russia and Ukraine in connection with their territorial conflict.

These socioeconomic developments coincided with a decrease in JDC’s available cash. The group’s assets dropped gradually from \$711 million in 2014 to \$644 million last year – a 10 percent decrease. And expenditures dropped accordingly, from \$336 million to \$311 million over that same period, according to its annual reports.

As needs increase elsewhere, they shrink in places like Baku.

At The Jewish House, the number of people receiving services, or clients, declined by half since 2005, according to JDC. There are currently some 900 elderly clients there. Few younger Jews apply for aid.

This depletion is not unique to Azerbaijan. It is being seen across the former Soviet region, where ailing economies and the erosion of democratic standards are prompting many Jews who resisted earlier waves of emigration to finally leave.

In the Russian Siberian city of Chelyabinsk, the JDC Hesed office has seen a decrease of 51 percent in the number of its clients from 2004. In Krasnoyarsk, another Russian city in Siberia, a 63 percent decrease in clients since 2004 resulted in JDC merging that city's Hesed operations, servicing its 219 remaining clients, with the one in Novosibirsk.

In Belarus, after the number of clients fell by half, Hesed offices in Polotsk and Vitebsk merged.

Israel is certainly seeing the impact of this trend. Russia and Ukraine alone provided Israel with most of its immigrants in 2017 — the first calendar year in over a decade that this has happened. In Azerbaijan, many Jews leave for Moscow, where they can easily obtain work visas and where many wealthy Azeri Jews can help them put down roots.

Davidov, the head of The Jewish House, says he is aware of the bigger picture.

"We'll soon be gone anyway," he said. "Is saving a few thousand dollars a year really worth tearing all this down?"

A Jewish 'Hogwarts' in the Land of Shtetls

At a summer camp an hour from the banks of the Danube where thousands of their ancestors were shot only seventy years ago, young Jews from all over the world are gathering to celebrate.

By Alex Weisler

Tablet, August 15, 2018

<https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/268636/a-jewish-hogwarts-in-the-land-of-shtetls>

People tend to look at me quizzically when I tell them about my travels to Central and Eastern Europe.

I've got a strong Jewish identity — married to a Conservative rabbi, attending synagogue weekly, big fan of Fran Drescher — and they often start by asking me, "So you're touring concentration camps there, right? Maybe a cemetery?"

No, I tell them. In fact, I've never been to a concentration camp.

But I have been to dozens of resurgent Jewish communities in the region, a somewhat hidden and unlikely phenomenon given the Holocaust and legacy of Communism in this part of the world.

What are Jews, especially young ones, doing staying put in these places where so many of their ancestors were murdered by the Nazis and where survivors were oppressed by a 70-year regime intent on erasing them from history? Why stay today, of all times, in the face of growing anti-Semitism, political extremism, and terrorism?

I found the answer in rural Hungary, more than 100 miles from Budapest, at the bar mitzvah celebration of a 15-year-old from Ukraine.

Feeling just as proud as I would if a sibling or cousin had reached that milestone, I beamed at Ilya Tolstolytkin, who I had met months earlier at a gathering of Jewish teens from across the former Soviet Union.

I thought back to my first conversation with him: We spoke for an hour, and I found myself inspired by the energy of this young man, a symbol of the blossoming of Jewish life in his part of the world.

Ilya's a counselor for his city's Jewish teen club and his mom works at one of its Jewish preschools. His grandparents and great-grandmother receive food, medicine, and other support from my organization, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

And here he now was, deep in the Hungarian woods on the banks of the Koros River, chanting Hebrew at the synagogue of Szarvas, the international Jewish summer camp founded in 1990 by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and JDC.

I arrived at the sanctuary just in time to see Ilya sing a song and receive a blessing from Budapest rabbi Tamás Vero under a large tallit.

Ilya's friends showered him with candy; they clapped and cheered and danced around the room.

To those of us who grew up with the bunks, swimming pools, and dining halls in the summer sleep-away camps of upstate New York, the Poconos, and elsewhere, Szarvas may look familiar. But its campers are something else.

Each year, some 1,600 Jewish kids from all over – Croatia, Poland, Moldova, India, Turkey, the U.S., Israel, and more – descend on Szarvas for four two-week sessions.

Among them, I met Rebeka Mucheva, a 24-year-old from Skopje, Macedonia, which is home to just 250 Jews. Each session at the camp, there are more Jews at breakfast than in her entire country.

I caught up with Miriam Rosențvaig, who teaches English at Bucharest's Jewish kindergarten and coordinates teen programming for its Jewish community center. Miriam is 29 and now the head of the camp's Romania delegation. But each summer when she returns to Szarvas, she feels like Harry Potter when he got that letter from Hogwarts: lucky, amazed, chosen.

I spoke with Sasha Friedman, the former camper born in Soviet Ukraine who grew up in Hungary and took over Szarvas at just 22. He's still a camper at heart, smitten with this place and the raw potential he sees etched on each camper's face and among the 25,000+ camp alumni from more than 30 countries, many of whom have gone on to become leaders in Jewish communities the world over.

Meals at Szarvas are something wild. As the kids finish eating, someone stands on a chair and starts to scream out a cheer. Suddenly the room erupts — Hungarians, Serbians, Slovaks, Spaniards, kids who grew up in the community and kids who just recently found out they were Jewish, all dancing and laughing and shouting and so, so glad to be there.

I got a little teary when I spotted a young boy who I'd met in Romania two years ago sitting on top of a counselor's shoulders and beaming. When I first photographed him sitting on his grandmother's lap at the Bucharest JCC, one of the staff shared with me his sad story — a challenging home life, one absent parent, a struggle to make ends meet. I never imagined I'd see him in this context.

Mah Tov, the lovely song Ilya sang at his bar mitzvah, comes from the moment in the Bible when the prophet Balaam is recruited by a local king to curse the Jewish people.

He arrives at the Israelites' camp fully intending to excoriate them, but what emerges from his mouth is only blessing: "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel."

I think the power of Szarvas is baked right into Mah Tov.

It's a place of endless Jewish opportunity about two hours from the banks of the Danube in Budapest where thousands of Jews were shot into the river's waters seven decades ago.

Beyond its explosive joy, its multilingual mealtimes, the lifelong friendships, and even marriages that begin on its grounds, it's that there exists a place where so many only saw curses and some dared to find blessing.

Alex Weisler, a former journalist, is the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's digital content producer.

Israel Rolls Out Red Tape Instead of Red Carpet for Many Russian Jews Seeking Aliyah

By Liza Rozovsky

Haaretz, August 15, 2018

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-rolls-out-red-tape-for-would-be-russia-immigrants-1.6382427>

Many Jewish citizens of former Soviet countries [once welcomed to Israel with open arms](#), now many their applications for aliyah bogged down for years in red tape and bureaucracy.

Would-be immigrants describe long waiting periods and unexplained rejections from Nativ, the government agency in charge of determining [eligibility for aliyah](#).

Lydia Dolinsky, 70, has lived in Safed for five years since moving to Israel on her own accord from the Russian city of Ryazan. But by making aliyah, she's been separated from her son, Michail, 40, who, diagnosed with schizophrenia, has been living in a Russian psychiatric hospital.

Dolinsky says that Nativ refuses to grant her son an aliyah visa, and has not responded to numerous requests for an explanation.

Nativ, headed by Neta Briskin-Peleg, operates under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office. It used to operate as a secret organization, but the way cases such as that of Dolinsky have been handled suggests the veil of secrecy has not totally been lifted.

Some aliyah eligibility cases have dragged on for many years, and rejection notices are often given without any clear reason, which makes it difficult for the applicant to file an appeal.

Dolinsky's attorney, Yadin Elam, has also been unable to find out an answer. Last month, Nativ informed Elam that the case was moved to the Interior Ministry's Population Authority. But the authority says it is not familiar with the case.

The government rejected aliyah applications from 4,900 Russians and 4,500 Ukrainians between 2006 and 2016, according to data provided by Nativ in response to a freedom of information request submitted by attorney Eli Gervits.

Presumably the figure might be higher if all former Soviet countries were taken into account. Until recently, ambiguity surrounding the reason for rejecting aliyah applicants was Nativ's official policy. The organization has not provided rejections in writing for repeat applications and the aliyah department at the Moscow embassy has put up a sign saying no reasons would be provided for rejected applications.

The attorney-general ordered the policy revised late last year following inquiries from Gervits and Elam.

Nativ now offers responses in writing though the notices are brief, and often fail to provide any details about the cause for rejection.

The delays and failure to provide written explanations are in violation of a law that requires civil servants to respond in writing within 45 days and include an explanation for any decision.

Gervits says of Nativ's failure to provide explanations that "they're violating the law and meanwhile obtaining a tactical advantage in court."

Gervits has filed petitions for years for rejected aliya applicants, but now avoids approaching the High Court without knowing the rationale behind such obscure reasons provided as "belated recognition of paternity," "criminal past" or "change of religion."

"You can't argue with a sphinx," says Gervits, quoting the late justice Moshe Landau.

Gervits says it is tough to contest a decision when the only reason provided for a rejection is "due to professional guidelines of the Population and Immigration Authority."

"If you have such rules, then let's hear what they are," he says. "If there aren't any, then just say that you decide to do whatever you want with each case. The information is not yours, it belongs to the public."

Elam says another difficulty in challenging Nativ's decisions is that its representatives avoid giving any answer to rejected applicants, and recommend that the applicant come to Israel and try on their own to have their status recognized by the Population Authority, which amounts to recommending to those rejected for immigration to come to Israel as tourists and wage a bureaucratic or legal battle once in the country, until their tourist visa expires.

Elam sees this as peculiar advice coming from an organization whose main purpose is to determine whether or not a person is eligible for aliyah.

"Nativ is supposed to be executing the policy of the Population Authority," says Elam. "They are in close contact with the authority. If you don't know what to do in a certain case, then talk about it and make a decision. Why send someone to Israel?"

Nativ head Briskin-Peleg says, "There are complicated cases in which the Nativ consul cannot make a clear-cut decision on eligibility.

In such cases, the Population and Immigration Authority is the final arbiter. There are cases that are transferred to the Population Authority for a decision and in which there is no need for the family to come to Israel, and there are cases where the applicant's physical presence in Israel is required.

ut, at least in the year that I have served as head of the organization, the number of these cases has been close to zero. I am certainly against bringing the family here."

Bozhena Rynska, a journalist and well-known blogger in Russia, has been waiting six years for an aliya visa, Gervits says.

Rynska, whose father is Jewish, decided to make aliya in 2012 due to tensions with Russian authorities over her participation in an anti-government protest. But Nativ has not provided any assistance, she says. She went to the aliya department at the Israeli embassy in Moscow nine times, and each time was asked to bring new documents.

One of the papers she was asked for was an additional document for a group of documents she had already submitted attesting to a job she had held many years ago.

In response to the administrative petition Gervits filed with the Jerusalem District Court on behalf of Rynska and two other Russian citizens seeking to immigrate to Israel, Nativ told the court that Rynska "was born just three months after her parents' marriage, and in such a case, proof of paternity is needed in order to make a decision."

Gervits' request that Nativ present a written guideline for addressing the matter has yet to be met in court.

Briskin-Peleg declined a request from Haaretz to see Nativ's guidelines, saying only that the organization operates in accordance with the regulations of the Population and Immigration Authority, which apply to [all those eligible under for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return](#), not only those from the former Soviet Union.

Haaretz asked the Population Authority to present its guidelines, or to clarify whether there is actually a guideline regarding the right of the child of a Jewish parent to make aliya cannot be recognized if the child was born "too close" to the parents' wedding date.

The Authority said that just because Nativ adheres to its procedures "doesn't mean that Nativ officials don't get to exercise significant independence of judgment."

A businessman from Moscow, who wished to remain unidentified, says he submitted an aliya application in 2014. Only recently after a freedom of information request filed by Gervits, did he and his wife receive identical letters from Nativ, which said: "Your application is rejected because you were born to a Jewish mother and you are of a different religion," with no further explanation.

But [the man says he has never converted to another faith](#). He calls himself a "good Jew" who has been donating for years to the Chabad synagogue in Moscow, attends synagogue on Jewish holidays and fasts on Yom Kippur. His wife, however, has gone to church from an early age.

"She wrote about this honestly (in the questionnaire she filled out at the embassy)," the man says. "It's her right," he insists.

Although his religion has nothing to do with that of his wife, Nativ somehow decided that he had converted to another faith. The organization also refuses to reveal the questionnaire he filled out on which he declared himself a Jew under the section of nationality and under the section on religion.

Nadezhda Popova, a 65-year-old math teacher from Karpinsk, whose father was Jewish, is another case in point. She and her husband and son contacted Nativ in 2014 to apply for an aliya visa.

The organization decided she had insufficient proof of her father's paternity, and advised Nadezhda to have tissue testing done with an aunt who lives in Israel and is registered as Jewish by the Population Authority.

After an initial test was inconclusive, a second test was done that indicated the two had a greater than a 99-percent chance of being related. The family court in Haifa provided an expert opinion that both Nadezhda's relatives living in Israel are her relatives.

The Popovas presented the findings to Nativ in 2016 but the organization refused them a visa, and advised them to come to Israel and resolve the issue with the Population Authority.

The authority's offices in Haifa referred them back to Nativ. Late last year the Population Authority finally decided to reject the application. Elam says the decision was never delivered to the family and Nativ refused his request to relay it to them.

"This hurts me so much. I am the daughter of a Jew, I have the right to make aliyah," says Nadezhda. "My whole life I was humiliated for being a Jew, and now Israel won't accept me either." The Population Authority says that "the court ruling says the results of the genetic testing are not sufficient to permit the applicant's entry into Israel" and that "the applicant must present documents proving her eligibility in accordance with the Law of Return."

Briskin-Peleg declined to comment on the cases presented in this article, citing privacy concerns. In response to other questions, she said, "Nativ's source of authority is the Population and Immigration Authority and reviews of eligibility are done in accordance with the procedures of the Interior Ministry and based upon the Law of Return.

An eligibility review is made on the basis of original documents that have been determined to be sufficient for proving eligibility, and when applicants do not have documents that unequivocally prove their eligibility, eligibility cannot be determined.

"Therefore in certain cases, additional documents are needed to complete the picture. As of now, anyone who comes to the consulate and is not found to be eligible for aliya receives a written answer with an explanation of the reasons for the rejection.

"When additional documents are needed, the applicant does not receive a negative answer but tries to gather more documents to prove his eligibility, and of course may go back to the consulate and request to submit more documents. Unfortunately, not all applicants are able to come up with documents to prove their eligibility."

The Population Authority says "Nativ is authorized to determine eligibility for aliya on the basis of the Law of Return" and that all of the procedures may be found on the authority's website. But there is nothing on the website that lists the rules for determining aliya eligibility.

Are Polish-Israeli Ties Thawing? August 13, 2018

Relations between Israel and Poland could be in recovery mode, now that the eastern-European country has backed away from legislation that would have criminalized statements implicating Polish involvement in the extermination of Jews during World War II.

KAN News reported on Sunday that Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz could be meeting [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) on the sidelines of the 73rd opening session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September.

It would be the first high level meeting between an Israeli and Polish officials since the crisis began in February.

The event attracts many heads of state and top level ministers, many of whom use the event to have both secret and public meetings.

Netanyahu traditionally attends, but has not yet formally announced plans to travel to this year's event. Media reports, however, have already begun to circulate about with whom he may or may not be meeting.

Israel and Poland have strong diplomatic ties and Warsaw often stands in solidarity with the Jewish state at the United Nations.

But the ties hit a snag when Poland passed a law that allowed for a jail sentence of up to three years to be imposed on those who spoke of "Polish concentration camps" to describe the Nazi death camps that were located on Polish soil.