



NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10
Washington, D.C. October 05, 2018

'God Was on Vacation': A Visit with a Long-Lost Cousin in Romania Is a Holocaust Lesson

By Edward Zuckerman

The New York Times, October 04, 2018

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/travel/romania-holocaust-history.html>

Iancu Zuckerman is 95 and the host of a classical music show in Bucharest. But in 1941 he was marched through the streets of Iasi, a center of anti-Semitism. The specters are still there.

I had thought I was the last male Zuckerman in our family. Zuckerman is a fairly common Jewish name (see Pinchas, the Philip Roth character, my orthopedic surgeon), but my own family for the last few generations has produced an abundance of daughters, whose children inherited their fathers' last names.

The only remaining Zuckermans I knew of were myself, my sister and my two daughters (see?). "Zuckerman" means sugar man, marking us as descendants of a sugar beet peddler; so Windsors we're not, nor Rockefellers, nor Kardashians. But even so ...

Then cousin Motti in Israel (last name Klinger) told me about cousin Iancu Zuckerman, aged 95, resident of Bucharest, survivor of a Holocaust "death train," now happy and healthy and even somewhat prominent in Romania. Motti offered to translate if I ever wanted to visit Iancu.

Romania, ho!

Iancu wasn't hard to find. When I arrived at my hotel, exhausted and jet-lagged, he was waiting in the lobby. He is a small man, entirely bald except for white fringe at the rear. Motti had told me Iancu was in excellent shape, but how excellent could he be at 95? Sitting beside him was an attractive younger woman (whose name turned out to be Maria; her age, 45). Was she his home health aide? Did Iancu need an attendant? I whispered the questions to Motti, who was waiting with them. No, he said, she's his girlfriend. "She likes me for my personality," Iancu told us later. Clearly, he is doing fine.

At dinner in the hotel restaurant, Iancu was chatty and happy to see us. He invited me to sample his meal (the chicken soup was excellent, the cow brain croquettes fortunately tasteless) and started to talk about his life. During Romania's long Communist era, he worked for the Ministry of Agriculture. His passion, however, was music. Today he scouts talent for a philanthropist friend who gives grants to promising young musicians, and he hosts a weekly classical music show on Radio Shalom Romania. During his working career, he played violin in the Ministry of Agriculture orchestra.

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of my daughters with the surprising announcement that they were fugitives from the Bucharest police. They'd been coming to the hotel on a bus, for which they had taken great care to purchase the proper tickets. The conductor, however, insisted they hadn't paid the right fare. He stopped the bus, put them on the sidewalk and said the police were coming to deal with them. A young Romanian woman whispered a word of advice through a bus window: "Run!" They didn't run. But they walked. There was no evidence of pursuit.

Romania has a problem with corruption, from petty tourist shakedowns to high officials' malfeasance, and Bucharest, its capital, seems somewhat bereft. A large chunk of the center was razed by the Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, who was deposed and executed in 1989. Ceausescu had a vision of a grand socialist metropolis, its centerpiece the 1,100-room Palace of Parliament, the largest office building in the world after the Pentagon.

The area that escaped Ceausescu's bulldozers is dotted with handsome French-inspired buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many, however, are scarred and in need of cleaning. Even a monument in Revolution Square to those who were killed during the demonstrations that preceded Ceausescu's fall is in need of maintenance. Its base is crumbling.

Iancu and Maria live in a Communist-era apartment block on the west side of town. It has three small rooms — bedroom, kitchen, and a living room mostly filled with a dining table upon which Maria spread petits fours and champagne on an afternoon we came to visit. While a small dog snapped at my older daughter, Iancu showed us a photo of his late wife, Clarissa, who died in 2010. He showed us a photo of himself and Maria, arm in arm with the Israeli ambassador at an embassy party. And he brought out two medals, with proclamations from two Romanian presidents declaring him a "cavaler" (knight) of two national orders, citing his "high moral and professional attitude" and his "contribution to preserving the memory of the Holocaust." Then Iancu told us, as he has told many Romanian newspaper and television interviewers, about the events in Iasi in June 1941. Iasi, in northeastern Romania, is where Iancu grew up, as did my grandfather Julius, Iancu's uncle, who emigrated to the United States shortly before the First World War. The family story is that Julius left Romania to avoid being drafted into the Romanian army, but that, shortly after arriving in the United States, he'd been drafted into the American army and shipped back to Europe. Fortunately, he was the company tailor, a low-fatality position.

Julius's two sisters emigrated as well, but Julius's brother Samuel, Iancu's father, remained in Iasi, which had a large Jewish population and had been an important center of Jewish culture for decades.

Iasi was also a center of Romanian anti-Semitism, birthplace of the Iron Guard, a precursor to the fascist Romanian government that allied itself with Nazi Germany in World War II. In June 1941, Romania joined its German ally in invading the Soviet Union. When Soviet warplanes bombed Iasi, Romanian authorities accused Iasi's Jews of being Communist sympathizers who had sent signals to mark targets for Soviet aircraft. A vicious pogrom erupted, planned and encouraged by the Romanian government. A day before it started, Jewish men had been conscripted to dig large trenches in the Jewish cemetery, and Christian families were advised to paint crosses on their houses.

By June 28, Jewish men, women and children were being pulled out of their homes by soldiers, gendarmes and enthusiastic civilian volunteers, who spat on them, beat them — and murdered them, with guns, iron bars and sledge hammers. Other Jews, Iancu among them, were marched through the streets, past battered bodies, to the central police station. Seventy-seven years later, in his little apartment living room, Iancu showed us how he marched that day. Sturdy on his feet, between a couch and the table laden with petits fours, he raised his hands above his head and recalled how a Romanian officer slapped him and took his watch, saying, "Dirty Jew, you won't need a watch any more."

Hundreds of Jews were murdered in the streets, and hundreds more in the police station courtyard. From the police station, Iancu was marched to the train station, where thousands of Jews, many dying, some already dead, were crammed into boxcars that took off on long rides to nowhere. One train, carrying 2,500 (the freight manifest marked "Yids"), traveled for six days, crisscrossing from town to town near Iasi, stopping occasionally to offload bodies. No water was given to the prisoners; those who escaped from the train to find some were shot. Those still alive inside the cars, stifling hot and crazed with thirst, drank one another's urine, stripped off their clothes. Some went mad. Some committed suicide. The vast majority died.

Iancu was "lucky." His train traveled for only eight hours, but it was hellish enough. To avoid falling and being crushed or suffocated, one survivor said, he made benches of dead bodies and sat on them. One hundred and thirty-seven people were crammed into Iancu's car. "The main thing," Iancu told us, "was not to exert yourself. Many exhausted themselves, crying, cursing, asking for water. When there were only 25 left alive, I knew my turn was coming, but I had no fear. I said to myself, I have to get out of this train car, I have to get out." He, and only seven others, did.

After the train, Iancu was held in a local concentration camp, then worked through the war as a slave laborer. (Although Romanian soldiers murdered tens of thousands of Jews in territories they occupied, Jews in Romania itself did not face mass deportations to death camps.) When the war was over, Iancu studied agronomy.

He treated us to a meal one afternoon at a pretty lakeside restaurant in Bucharest's Herastrau Park. He told us that he lectured about his Holocaust experience several times a year in schools. One student asked him, "Where was God?" Iancu replied, "God was on vacation." Now, he ordered a bottle of excellent Romanian red, and we toasted, four Zuckermans and Motti and Maria. The park is lovely. An excursion boat passed on the lake. Iancu took another sip of the wine, Maria by his side. "It is better to be here," he observed, "than in a mass grave in Iasi."

The next morning we flew to Iasi. The city is a cultural center with a symphony orchestra, a national theater and a university district flush with parks and cafes. But we arrived with Iancu's story fresh in our minds, and it didn't help that a taxi driver, asked to take us to Iasi's Great Synagogue, professed ignorance of its existence. Recently restored, the elegant synagogue sits in a parklike setting ("Romanian-Israeli Friendship Square") easily visible from a major intersection. But the driver said he'd never heard of it. Were we sure we didn't want to go to a church, he asked. "Biserica?" "No," said Motti, "Sinagoga, Evrei [Jewish]." "Biserica?," asked the driver.

We found it despite him, and, nearby, a small Jewish community office. Iasi once had 35,000 Jews. Now it has 300. The woman who runs the office knows Iancu and his story, and she walked us to the spot where Iancu had lived with his family. That building is gone, replaced by a modern hotel. Our guide left us there, and then the four of us (my daughters, cousin Motti, myself) retraced the steps Iancu had taken, hands raised, through a hostile mob, on a summer day in 1941.

We walked down Cuza Voda Street, passing the Golia Monastery, tended by black-robed Orthodox monks, and a variety of shops. Looking around, I tried to imagine what Iancu might have seen that day. Probably not the tattoo parlor, nor the obese male manikin wearing brown pedal pushers, nor the woman with long stringy hair haphazardly dyed turquoise. But a street sweeper wielded a broom that could easily have been from the 1940s, if not the 1640s. And, as an ancient-looking tram clanked by, I looked at its driver, and he gave me what seemed an unfriendly look, and I recalled a line from a history of the pogrom: "The tramway ticket taker Constantin Ifras is reported to have used a crowbar to kill the Segals (father, mother, and two children), who happened to be passing him on the street."

We walked by Philharmonic Hall, then turned into Vasile Alecsandri Street and reached the courtyard of the former police headquarters, where the Jews of Iasi had been herded and many beaten to death. Now it was a construction site; part will be a Holocaust museum.

From there we walked, as Iancu had, to the train station, where thousands of Jews were crammed into the death trains. It was decorated with a large banner advertising a local film festival. A small plaque on the station wall memorialized "2,713 Jews who died in turmoil after they were crowded into freight wagons, stabbed and tortured." Inside, passengers waited for trains to Timisoara, Vaslui and Ungheni Prut.

Our final stop was Iasi's old Jewish cemetery, on a hilltop at the edge of town. We were greeted by a pack of dogs inside the cemetery gates, barking furiously, running toward us, blocked by its iron fence. We entered through a gate some distance away, and the first thing we saw were row after row of identical tombstones, the graves of Jewish soldiers who died fighting for Romania in World War I. Near that, we found the grave of Samuel Joseph Zuckerman, Iancu's father, my great-uncle. Iancu had told us that his father was so well-regarded that his grave was in a prominent spot, and it was.

Finally, we saw the mass graves where Iancu preferred not to be. There were four of them — 15 feet wide, 90 feet long, flat concrete adorned only with blue Stars of David — enormous. As we were standing there, the dogs found us and came, barking. Motti picked up a large branch and waved it, and the dogs retreated.

Outside again, we could see an adjacent Orthodox Christian cemetery, well maintained and still in business. Below us, we had a panoramic view of Iasi. A woman arrived in a taxi. She got out and, through the fence, started to feed the dogs.

Russia Publishes Video of S-300 Anti-Aircraft Missiles' Arrival in Syria

By Jack Khoury

Haaretz, October 03, 2018

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/russia-publishes-video-of-s-300-surface-to-air-missile-systems-arrival-in-syria-1.6527499>

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told President Vladimir Putin during a meeting broadcasted by Rossiya 24 TV on Tuesday that Russia successfully delivered the S-300s to Syria.. "The work was finished a day ago," Shoigu said.

Meanwhile, Iranian forces have started retreating over the past couple of days from the T-4 military airport, the Al-Quds newspaper reported Wednesday, citing Syrian opposition sources.

According to the report, the Iranians have started vacating the premises of the base, which is situated on the outskirts of the Syrian city of Homs, to make room for Russian forces who entered the military compound in order to help complete the transfer of the S-300 missiles.

The Russians have also reportedly asked to see Syrian presence reduced in the airport nearby, which is considered to be one of the most highly-guarded strategic sites in Syria.

On Saturday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Moscow had already started delivering the S-300 air defense systems to Syria's government. He added that "the measures we will take will be devoted to ensure 100 percent safety and security of our men in Syria, and we will do this."

Russia announced last week that it would supply the anti-aircraft missiles after Syrian forces responding to an Israeli airstrike on September 17 mistakenly shot down a Russian military reconnaissance plane, killing all 15 people on board.

The friendly fire incident sparked regional tensions. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Russian President Vladimir Putin to express sorrow at the loss of life and sent a high-level military delegation to Moscow.

Last week, an Israeli official said that the S-300 anti-aircraft missiles are "a complicated challenge" for Israel. he official added: "We're dealing with it in different ways, not necessarily by preventing the delivery."

According to the official, Russian President Vladimir Putin updated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the fact that he intends to send the missiles to Syria within two weeks, and then acted accordingly. Israel has meanwhile clarified to Putin that it will continue to act within Syrian territory and U.S. President Donald Trump has stated that his country fully supports Israel's actions as well as its right to defend itself.

"Putin made a move, but it's a big playing field and he understands that," the official said.

Also last week, Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said that "Israel, which has gotten used to carrying out attacks under various pretexts, will now have to weigh and rethink before attacking again." Mekdad told the Chinese news agency Xinhua. "The aggression against Syria is directed towards the forces that are fighting against terrorism in Syria. If Israel will try to attack we will defend our people as we did in the past."

A spokesman for a Russian company producing electronic warfare systems said last Friday that their deployment to Syria will help protect the country's air defense assets and fend off enemy air raids.

Vladimir Mikheyev of Radioelectronics Technologies in remarks carried by the Interfax news agency that Krasukha and Zhitel electronic countermeasure units will place Syria's air defenses under an "electronic umbrella," making it hard to spot and attack them.

Russian Nationalists and Hardliners Denounce Alleged 'Israel Lobby' Influence in Moscow

By Ben Cohen

The Algemeiner, October 03, 2018

<https://www.algemeiner.com/2018/10/03/russian-nationalists-and-hardliners-denounce-alleged-israel-lobby-influence-in-moscow/>

In the two weeks since 15 Russian servicemen died when their military plane was downed over Syria, conservative, ultranationalist and communist circles in Russia have stepped up their rhetorical attacks on the alleged control of Moscow's foreign policy by a so-called "Israel Lobby."

A report published on Tuesday by the Russian Media Studies Project – a branch of the US-based think-tank, the Middle East Media and Research Institute (MEMRI) – highlighted recent claims by a former chief of staff of the Russian armed forces that his country was being compelled to "obey" Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"The fight will continue. Russia's sovereignty is at stake here," retired Russian Gen. Leonid Ivashov declared in a paper written for a prominent nationalist organization. "Either we obey Netanyahu — then personnel appointments and all the rest will continue to depend on the Israeli lobby."

Ivashov's remarks were published by the Izborsk Club – a nationalist grouping that brings together monarchists, conservatives and communists eager to reassert the Russian state as a global power. According to Areg Galstyan of *The National Interest*, Izborsk Club members "include the most prominent and influential politicians, such as Sergei Glazyev, the Russian president's advisor on Eurasian integration; the Nobel-laureate scientist Zhores Alferov; popular writer Zakhar Prilepin; philosophers including [Alexander] Prokhanov and Alexander Dugin; the historians Natalia Narochitskaya and Nikolai Starikov; and the journalists Maxim Shevchenko and Mikhail Leontyev."

While refraining from direct personal criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ivashov indicated at several points in his paper that senior Russian military officials are unhappy with current security arrangements in Syria, where Israel continues to carry out air attacks against Iranian facilities and weapons convoys. The downing of the military plane on Sept. 17 occurred in the wake of an Israeli strike and was initially blamed squarely on Israel by the Russian Defense Ministry. Hours later, following a telephone conversation with Netanyahu, Putin deemed that the crash was the consequence of "a chain of tragic accidental circumstances."

Accusing the Kremlin of "blurring" Israel's responsibility for the loss of the plane, Ivashov argued that Russia should have taken instant steps to punish Israel, starting with the suspension of the visa-free travel agreement between the two nations.

"I don't think that it was the [Russian] military who had reached an agreement with Israel to cooperate in order to prevent incidents in the air," Ivashov continued. "This arrangement...allows the Israelis to invade Syrian air space and make strikes, i.e. commit acts of aggression. I am certain this was not decided by the military."

Ivashov argued that while Russia's military leaders were pushing back against alleged Israeli influence on foreign and defense policy, "I would not hasten to celebrate victory yet."

"The pro-Israeli lobby permeates, in fact, all the administrative structures of the Russian Federation, plus the mass media, plus the oligarchs, etc." Ivashov wrote. "But I am trying to find a deeper cause-and-effect relation: why does a strong pro-Israel lobby exist, why do we dance to Netanyahu's tune?"

Ivashov laid the blame at the feet of Russian Jewish billionaires, citing by name Roman Abramovich, a member of Putin's inner circle and the flamboyant owner of English Premier League soccer team, Chelsea.

“The fact is that the assets of those who had moved their billions...to the West, are now being arrested — and their owners are being arrested as well,” Ivashov charged. “But in Israel they are always welcome to stash their funds.”

Ivashov, whose thirty years of service to the Soviet military saw him rise to the rank of colonel-general, added that the presence of Netanyahu at the Victory Day parade in Moscow in April 2018 was a sign of Russia’s “humiliation.”

“I remember the way the Israeli national anthem resonated on the Red Square,” he wrote. “We must rise from this degraded state.”

While Ivashov has a long record of promoting outlandish conspiracy theories – most famously insisting that the Sept. 11, 2001 Al Qaeda atrocities in the US were carried out by “political and business circles interested in destabilizing the world order and who had the means necessary to finance the operation” – he is regularly quoted on military affairs by the Russian media, with frequent citations on English-language state broadcaster *RT*.

In a September interview with the leading Russian news agency *Interfax*, Ivashov claimed that joint military exercises being held with the Chinese military were prompted by new US sanctions targeting Russian individuals and businesses. Ivashov is also a stalwart defender of the Iranian regime, having praised its “counterterrorism” strategy for providing the world with “a model to follow.”

I Stepped Down as U.S. Ambassador to Estonia. Here’s Why.

By James D. Melville Jr.

The Washington Post, October 03, 2018

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-stepped-down-as-us-ambassador-to-estonia-heres-why/2018/10/03/f579c7a4-c5c4-11e8-9b1c-a90f1daae309_story.html

James D. Melville Jr. is a former member of the U.S. Foreign Service who served as ambassador to Estonia from 2015 until his resignation in July.

When you serve as U.S. ambassador to a foreign capital, you represent your country, of course. But you are also the personal representative of the president. Professionalism demands that career foreign service officers — like career military officers — follow the orders and pursue the policies of our elected civilian leadership.

If you cannot do that, the honorable and right thing to do is resign. That is what I did in July, when I stepped down as U.S. ambassador to Estonia. Now, with my formal departure this week from the U.S. Foreign Service after 33 years, I can more fully explain why.

Service in the diplomatic corps and the military are alike in another key respect. In both worlds, a special burden attaches to any individual in leadership. Within both hierarchies, each of which bears a share of responsibility for conducting U.S. foreign policy, those in leadership roles can — and should — advocate the policies and strategies they believe in.

Along with many colleagues in the executive and legislative branches, I devoted tremendous energy and time trying to convince officials in the new administration of the importance of our NATO alliance. When then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was going to skip the first NATO foreign ministerial meeting of his tenure, I made sure Washington knew what a poor signal that would send to our frontline allies such as Estonia.

Ultimately, however, I knew that it wasn’t my call what “U.S. policy” is — nor should it have been my call. Under the Constitution that I swore to uphold and defend, the duly elected president, working through the executive branch, sets U.S. foreign policy.

The legislation still must pass the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the full Senate.

This spring, I reached the point where I could no longer support President Trump's policies and rhetoric regarding NATO, our European allies and Russia.

What do I believe? I am extremely uncomfortable with the trade policies the United States is pursuing. I also believe it is a historic mistake to cozy up to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

It is in the United States' fundamental interests to champion a rules-based world order. After the dark years of World War II, we worked in accordance with our values to pursue, nurture and achieve a peaceful and prosperous world. The great global and transatlantic institutions — NATO, the United Nations and, to an extent that would surprise many of my fellow citizens, even the European Union — are the fruits of policies carried out and resources expended by the United States over decades.

The refusal of the United States to give up on Estonia's independence through the entire Soviet occupation is the cornerstone of Estonians' deep appreciation for America. But it is the values of our nation and the leadership and role we have played in protecting the democracies in Europe that give them the confidence to stand up to the genuine threats emanating from their eastern neighbor.

There is an old proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That is the principle the United States has followed for decades and, while there are still many problems to be grappled with, it is why the world is as peaceful and prosperous as it is.

The alliances we have built and the friends we have made all around the globe look to the United States for leadership and guidance as we, together, tackle the world's challenges. There should be no question that we are more effective and powerful when we work in concert with our allies and partners.

Arrogance does not suit us well. "America First" is a sham.

Russia and its corrupt, authoritarian government are a threat to the rules-based order and the fundamental values and interests of the United States and its allies. Trump's habit of denigrating our allies and their leaders while lauding Putin and other authoritarians is no way to lead. It placed me in an untenable position in Tallinn whenever I was asked, as chief of mission, to explain our intentions.

I had no choice but to resign. I have no sympathy or understanding for those who remain in government service while claiming to be ignoring or otherwise violating their instructions. I certainly don't understand an anonymous op-ed proclaiming some right to fight a rear-guard action behind the president's back. That approach is devoid of integrity and seems cowardly to me.

Now I am free to speak for myself as a citizen. I want to use my voice to advocate policies more in accord with our history, our values and the global good. And I also hope to convince as many ambitious, smart young people as I can that a life in service to their country is a wonderful way to make a contribution toward a better world.

World in Ukraine: German Project Honors Memory of Ukrainian Jews Killed in Holocaust

By Mariya Kapinos

Kyiv Post, September 28, 2018

<https://www.kyivpost.com/business/world-in-ukraine-german-project-honors-memory-of-ukrainian-jews-killed-in-holocaust.html>

The order was stark: All Jews in the city of Dnipro, eastern Ukraine, must gather in the city center. Those who disobey will be executed.

It was October 1941, and Dnipro was occupied by the forces of Nazi Germany.

Nelly Tsygina was 10 years old. She and her grandparents obeyed the order and left the house immediately.

“When we came there, I saw thousands of exhausted faces,” Tsyypina recalls. “Some people were in wheelchairs, most came with their children.”

It was a sunny day, she recalls. Nazi soldiers rounded up the Jews and marched them in the direction of a train station.

Many hoped they were to be deported to Palestine, their long-remembered Promised Land. But when they were marched past the train station and headed to the city outskirts, the prisoners started realize that something was very wrong.

The Jews were being taken by the Nazis to a large ravine near the city’s botanical gardens.

There, they were mown down by machine gun fire by Nazi extermination units, helped by Ukrainian police auxiliaries.

The bodies of the dead and injured fell into the ravine, and then the Jews were buried, some still alive. “We were moving towards slaughter,” Tsyypina says. “And we were forced to stand in line all night long waiting for our turn to be killed.”

By the next morning, thousands of Jews had been massacred.

Tsyypina is presumed to be one of only a handful to escape being murdered by the Nazis. “My grandfather saved me,” Tsyypina says.

“When the soldiers lined us up in front of the machine guns and started shooting, he pushed me down to the ground and covered me with his body.”

Project idea

Tsyypina’s story is part of a project titled Erinnerung Lernen (Learning to Remember)—a German-Ukrainian cultural initiative working to educate people about the Holocaust.

The idea for the Erinnerung Lernen came from its project director, German historian Matthias Andre Richter, who in September 2014 came to Ukraine for the first time to honor the victims of Babyn Yar.

Babyn Yar is the site of a mass shooting of Jewish people in Kyiv. Historians estimate that the number of the Babyn Yar victims ranges between 70,000 to 120,000 people.

According to German documents, over only two days on Sept. 29–30, 1941, more than 33,000 Jews were shot there. “When I came to Babyn Yar — I literally couldn’t breathe, I was so overwhelmed,” Richter says. “Standing there, I decided that more people should know about that place.”

So he did. And on Sept. 29–30, on the 77th anniversary of the Babyn Yar atrocity, Richter’s Erinnerung Lernen initiative will celebrate its second birthday.

Intriguing advert

The project itself started with a short message in a newspaper. It was published in a Jewish newspaper in Dusseldorf, western Germany, in September 2016: “If you have relatives or friends who were victims at Babyn Yar — let us know.”

Richter wrote the advert himself. He and a few other like-minded people wanted to know if there were any people in Germany personally connected to the tragedy.

Within a few days, they received 16 replies. “It was then that I saw clearly how many lives were influenced by what happened at Babyn Yar,” Richter says. He started to plan the project, and soon found a sponsor to implement his ideas — the German embassy in Ukraine.

Daniel Lissner, the deputy head of the Department of Culture and Education at the embassy and Richter’s good friend, witnessed the beginning of the Erinnerung Lernen project.

“Germans are trying to take on the responsibility for their past,” Lissner says. “This project is another attempt to apologize for what was done.”

With the support of the German embassy, Erinnerung Lernen arranges museum exhibitions all over Ukraine, does presentations at universities, produces documentaries, and even created an illustrated novel for children on the Holocaust.

The team of the project has only a few full-time employees, but anyone can join the initiative via the Erinnerung Lernen website, [www. erinnerung-lernen.de](http://www.erinnerung-lernen.de).

Bringing peace

In Germany, the project’s activists record the memories of those who survived the Holocaust in Ukraine.

Ukrainian filmmaker Kseniya Marchenko produced a documentary about one of these survivors — a German Jew named Herbert Rubinstein, who was born in Chernivtsi, now western Ukraine.

In the “I Was Here” documentary, Marchenko documented Rubinstein’s travels to three cities: Dusseldorf in Germany, where Rubinstein lives, Amsterdam in the Netherlands where he spent some time, and Chernivtsi, the town of his childhood, which he hasn’t visited for over 70 years.

There is one moment in the documentary when, in Chernivtsi, he walks by the wall and sees daubed on it a Nazi symbol, which someone has crossed out. “It’s bad that people are painting these symbols,” he says in the movie.

“Yet it is good that someone crossed it out, and now it has the opposite meaning.” Marchenko says that the documentary brought peace to Rubinstein’s family.

Rubinstein didn’t very much to talk about the past, but his sincerity during the filming helped his daughter and wife understand him better. “Herbert wasn’t that close to his daughter,” Marchenko says. “Yet after the trip to Ukraine he opened up and they started communicating at a much deeper level.”

Jewish Kyiv

In May, “I Was Here” was presented at the Jewish Film Festival in Dusseldorf and received positive feedback from the audience.

“It’s amazing how people both cried and laughed watching it,” Richter says. Both in Ukraine and Germany, Richter keeps encouraging young people to join the project.

In Lviv, in western Ukraine, they presented a multimedia exhibition dedicated to the Jewish poet Debora Vogel, who died in the Lviv ghetto in 1942.

“The project is designed by two artists — Asya Gefter from London and Olesya Zdorovetska from Dublin,” Richter says. “They expressed their desire to do it, they contacted us, and they did it.”

Richter also is very proud of the audio tour about Jewish history in Kyiv. In cooperation with Arseniy Finberg, the founder and co-owner of Interesny Kyiv (Interesting Kyiv) tour services website, they developed the tour, which is now available through the Kyiv City Guide mobile application.

“So many internationally known Jews were born and grew up in Kyiv,” Finberg says. “Jewish history is part of Kyiv’s history, and we wanted to show that.”

Despite having already been much, Richter isn’t satisfied yet. His next goal is to publish an illustrated book for children about the Holocaust.

First copies have already been printed. The plot is based on the memories of concentration camps survivors.

Through the eyes of the two main characters — a boy and a girl both 10 years old — the readers find out about the dreadful events in Ukraine that happened less than a century ago.

“Every time I think of this book I can’t stop myself from shedding a tear,” Richter says. “It’s a breathtaking story.” The novel was created by specialists of the Jewish museum in Chernivtsi and its director, Mykola Kushnir.

Their next goal is to introduce the book to the educational programs of Ukrainian schools. Richter and his team are currently working on it.

The novel is for children between 11 and 13 years of age, because “by that time they are old enough to understand the importance of the topic,” Richter says.

“However, they still haven’t formed their views on life, they don’t really know what’s good and what’s bad and, hopefully, this book will help them draw a few important conclusions.”

The Dilemma of Hungarian Jews

By Gabor Somlai

Arutz Sheva, October 03, 2018

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/22798>

As has been published recently worldwide, the European Union is examining the option to trigger Article 7 proceedings against Hungary, which may result in stripping certain rights from the country that are granted within the EU.

The basis of this investigation is the Sargentini Report, which examines 12 issues in which Hungary may be violating European values, such as:

- The functioning of the constitutional system,
- The independence of the judiciary and of other institutions,
- Corruption and conflicts of interest,
- Privacy and data protection
- Freedom of expression,
- Academic freedom,
- Freedom of religion,
- Freedom of association,
- The right to the equal treatment,
- The right of persons belonging to minorities, including Roma and Jews,
- The fundamental rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees,
- Social rights

First of all, since one of the arguments of the Hungarian Government is that the report is about

Hungary and the Hungarian people, it has to be noted that the addressee in the report is, of course, the Hungarian Government, its authorities and institutions, not the citizens. The citizens of a country or a nation can never be considered a homogeneous society with people who share exactly the same values and beliefs.

But what does this “illiberal system” as Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary calls it, mean for the Jews in the country? To answer this question, we need to look at things from a much wider perspective.

Anti-Semitism in Hungary

Based on research and election results from the past 28 years, 5-10% of Hungarian citizens can be considered truly anti-Semitic. There is a much higher number of “hidden anti-Semites”, for example those who would oppose having a Jewish neighbor (according to research done in 2016, 31% of Hungarians agreed with this statement) but – unlike the 5-10% truly anti-Semitic citizens – their way of thinking is not driven by hatred.

After the fall of communism, democracy and freedom of expression brought the same effect into society that we are seeing now on social media: suddenly everything was allowed to be said and, unfortunately, nationalism was hijacked by the anti-Semitic and xenophobic groups.

The reason I call this unfortunate is that normally nationalism can be healthy; just look at the United States where it is absolutely normal to be a proud American and being a proud American has nothing to do with xenophobia. In the early '90s in Hungary, however, demonstrators, who claimed to be nationalistic, appeared with red-white striped flags. This flag was originally associated with the founding dynasty of Hungary but the Arrow Cross Party, who were in power in Nazi Hungary in 1944-1945, had an almost identical flag. Therefore it's not so hard to imagine why people started waving these flags as soon as they were allowed to, after the establishment of the first democratic government in 1990.

Despite the fact that Nazi rhetoric came into reality in the early '90s, life for Jews was relatively calm and normal until the arrival of Jobbik, the far right and anti-Semitic party, whose rise in popularity was based on two pillars:

- 1) reach out to the young generation who can easily be brainwashed with hate (similarly to how ISIS and fanatical Islam, with their online presence, reach and radicalize young Muslims who live in Western countries)
- 2) reach out to the abandoned and poor citizens living in the countryside, whose everyday life became very hard, or more accurately, unbearable, due to their being terrorized - mostly by members of the Roma community. Here I have to note that the integration of Gypsies into society still remains one of the biggest challenges we face, but politicians continue to turn a blind eye when this question comes up.

The rise of Jobbik resulted in the legitimization of anti-Semitism and until 2010, there was no clear border between Fidesz and Jobbik in this issue. After losing two consecutive elections, from 2006 Fidesz needed Jobbik to do the dirty work for them: to legitimize hate speech and to turn every national holiday into an opportunity for violent anti-government protest with burning barricades and Molotov-cocktails in Budapest - this in order to create the illusion of instability. The ruling center-left and liberal government was not able to handle this new reality, especially while the economic crisis in

2008 and the corruption issues paved the way for a landslide Fidesz victory in 2010, after which the Hungarian political system changed dramatically.

The Orban era

Since then the ruling party Fidesz has won all parliamentary elections, there is no real opposition and as long as Viktor Orban is healthy and ready to lead the country, he does not have to worry about losing power. Even an economical setback would not endanger his personal cult and approval since many Hungarian voters are casting their votes in fear: fear of African and Muslim immigrants, who don't even want to come to Hungary. The government is doing a professional job in playing this card and constantly keeping the immigrant crisis in the headlines of state run media.

Orban's other stable voters are the fanatical supporters who consider Fidesz not really a political party, but a religion, therefore no matter what the political agenda is, they agree 100% with Orban, even if his current beliefs are exactly the opposite of what he said 5 years ago. These people come from a wide range in the political spectrum, some of them include homophobic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic citizens, who share two common beliefs: the opponents of Fidesz are traitors and Orban is the only true leader of the country no matter what. It should, however, be noted that this does not mean that Orban himself and the leaders of Fidesz share the same views as these voters. They don't, since they don't have views but have one goal: to stay in power.

After winning the elections in 2010 with an overwhelming 2/3 majority, Fidesz changed the rules of the game by redrawing the borders of the voting zones and reducing the 2-round general election to a 1-round, two ballot system. This resulted in what many expected: in the latest elections in 2018, Fidesz won exactly 2/3 of the seats in the Parliament while receiving only 49% of the total votes in the popular vote.

Orban's rule can be compared to what is going on in Russia or Turkey, where officially there are several parties in the competition, but the government has such big influence on the media, the court and every state institution, that it can manipulate the voting system and in the end there is no chance of having fair elections.

The ordinary citizens of the country are living their normal European lives but there are those who are dependent on the state – the poor, the uneducated and the old citizens – who are manipulated into fear of losing the very small benefits they receive and these citizens – together with the previous group I mentioned –, thanks to the unbalanced voting system, keep on winning the elections for Fidesz.

The Hungarian Jews' dilemma

So let's go back to the original question regarding why this political system creates a dilemma for Hungarian Jews, most of whom are open minded and liberal. Well, exactly because they are open minded and liberal and the ongoing campaign in Hungary against George Soros (basically he's seen as the devil and cause for every problem), the constant campaign against the Central European University in Budapest and the depiction of refugees as the new colonizers contradict liberal values.

But if we analyze the questions a little bit deeper, we realize that not everything is black or white.

1) George Soros is funding BDS and other anti-Semitic NGO-s who hide behind the criticism of Israeli politics while they are clearly anti-Semitic, and they are one of the main causes of the reality we are living in today in which you cannot have an honest debate about the Arab-Israeli conflict, because if you defend anything Israel does, you will be in the best case only verbally, in the worst case even physically assaulted.

2) The ongoing refugee crisis is bringing in a wave of people into Europe, refugees and immigrants from Muslim countries in which people grew up generation after generation learning that Jews are the descendants of apes and pigs and women are objects for pleasure. Their mindset cannot be changed by organizing lessons for them, like they tried in Norway. These lessons try to teach the fact that in Europe men and women go out together, have fun together, even flirt, but this does not mean that the man has the right to rape the woman.

3) If you do a Google search for "Students for Justice in Palestine Hungary", you will see that there is one university in the country which hosts this organization: Central European University – which, by the way, is funded by George Soros. As we know very well, renaming "Students for Justice in Palestine" to "Students for the Elimination of Israel" or rather "Students for a Jew-free World" would be a more honest name for them.

The list of the government's illiberal actions is much longer and the rule of Fidesz did cause historical wounds which will take generations to heal – if they ever do. Hungarian society is cut into two: those who support and those who oppose the government. Thanks to the rhetoric of Fidesz, there is a general consensus among the former that the latter is not part of Hungarian society.

The biggest crime of Orban, however, is that he joined his predecessors by doing nothing with the economy, which is still breathing only thanks to the funds arriving from the European Union. Ever since the collapse of Communism, apart from a short period in 1994-1995, none of the governments had the courage to really do the necessary reforms in areas like schooling, healthcare, pensions and in general the economy to put Hungary on a sustainable path for development.

Fidesz is the only party that would be able to pass reforms, because Fidesz, in reality, is a dictatorship. Orban is Fidesz and Fidesz is Orban and nobody from his party would dare to challenge him, his views or his decisions. Therefore, after his landslide victory in 2010, he would have been able to make the necessary sacrificial reforms for the sake of the economy. But he didn't, instead he focused on nationalizing the energy industry in order to have total control over it, purchasing every independent newspaper, television and radio station, and making his close supporters and allies very-very rich from European taxpayers' money.

But there are two more interesting parts of the story: thanks to actions by the government and its loyal media, Jobbik is now split into two. Radicals and Nazis stepped out of the party to form a platform that has the same ideology as Jobbik had 10 years ago. Currently both groups are further away from power than ever.

Although a large number of the population still view Jews as the bankers and traders who are causing problems for the country and they do have nostalgic feelings for the anti-Semitic political environment that was present in the 1920s and 1930s - and the government wants to satisfy them in words in order to be popular - Jewish life is flourishing in Hungary.

Unlike the capital cities of many Western European countries, you can walk around in Budapest wearing your kippah without the fear of being attacked and the government is a strong supporter and one of the closest allies of Israel within the European Union.

So to conclude: there are many reasons why one might want to change the Hungarian government. But which is better? Hiding your beliefs in a free and democratic country or living in semi-dictatorship with an extremely corrupt ruling party, but also enjoying support, safety and freedom that you didn't experience for decades?

That is the dilemma.

Russian Police Accuse Colleagues of Displaying Swastika in Anti-Nazi Poster
The Moscow Times, October 04, 2018

<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-police-accuse-colleagues-displaying-swatika-anti-nazi-poster-63089>

Police in southern Russia are reportedly investigating a complaint that fellow officers have displayed a swastika in a Soviet anti-Nazi poster in their office.

Changes to Russian law in 2014 made it a criminal offense to display any Nazi symbols, regardless of intent. The decision has seen prosecutions soar from 480 cases in 2013 to 1,800 in 2016, according to Russia's Supreme Court data gathered by rights groups. Displaying Nazi symbols is subject to a fine and a jail term of up to 15 days.

A regional police officer filed a complaint about a Soviet anti-Nazi poster that fellow policemen in the town of Taganrog put up in their office, local media reported Wednesday.

The offending poster features a Red Army soldier holding a swastika-bearing wolf in sheep's clothing with a caption saying: "Stay Sharp – the Enemy is Cunning."

"The publication of a photo of a poster with Nazi symbols is being inspected," an unnamed regional police spokesperson told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency on Thursday.

The Honorable Ronald S. Lauder Receives Sheptytsky Award at Ceremony in New York
Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, October 04, 2018

<https://ukrainianjewishencounter.org/en/the-honorable-ronald-s-lauder-receives-sheptytsky-award-at-ceremony-in-new-york/>

The Honorable Ronald S. Lauder, philanthropist, activist and president of the World Jewish Congress received the Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky Award for 2018 at a ceremony at New York's Ukrainian Institute of America on 27 September.

Amb. Lauder was recognized for his support of Ukraine's Jewish community and his promotion of Ukrainian-Jewish cooperation. He is the fourth recipient of the award, which is conferred by the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter.

In presenting the award, UJE Board Chairman James C. Temerty called Amb. Lauder, "a great leader of the global Jewish community and a friend of Ukraine and of the Jewish community in Ukraine."

Borys Lozhkin, JCU's president said it was appropriate the award was presented during Sukkot, an important Jewish holiday of celebration.

"Thanks to Ambassador Lauder's philanthropy and commitment, our community is now coming from a place of strength," he said. "Ambassador Lauder's deeds have helped bring the entire Ukrainian Jewish community together through the establishment of Jewish educational institutions such as the Ronald Lauder Camp Shuva, Jewish Day Schools and kindergartens in Ukraine, as well as a modern security system to protect the Jewish community."

Dr. Leon Chameides, who survived the Holocaust because of Metropolitan Sheptytsky's efforts, said it was appropriate that Amb. Lauder received the award as the two men shared three characteristics: a deep and abiding faith, evidence of courageous independence and the saving of Jews.

"I am here with you only because Metropolitan Sheptytsky and the brothers of the Studite Order had the conviction and the moral courage to answer the Biblical question 'Am I my brother's keeper?' in the affirmative," Dr. Chameides said. "Theirs was a lonely beam of light on an otherwise dark and bleak horizon."

Mr. Lauder noted he was humbled in receiving the medal, and paid homage to the Metropolitan.

“What makes this award special is that it is named after Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church during World War II. The Archbishop had to strike an unusual balance to deal with Nazis who occupied his country, and to save Jewish lives.”

In saving 150 Jewish lives, the Metropolitan “saved 150 worlds”, Amb. Lauder said, referring to the Jewish precept “Whoever Saves a Life Saves the World”.

“Although I may have educated many thousands Jewish children, I don’t know if I saved one Jewish life,” he said. “But the fact is, this man had courage, unbelievable courage at a time when so few people had that courage and so few people raised up, particularly in the religious world, and this man deserves all the credit. And my only sadness is that his name is not better known. I do believe much more should be written about him, spoken about him. He deserves everything we can give.”

“We must remember the Jewish people have been tied to Ukraine for over a thousand years,” Amb. Lauder said. Although the relationship between Ukrainians and Jews has not always been positive, he credited Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko for insisting that anti-Semitism would not be tolerated in Ukraine.

“For that we are very grateful,” he said.

He noted everything needed to be done to bring the Ukrainian and Jewish people together and welcomed UJE’s efforts in that direction.

In his remarks Mr. Temerty said that “although there are persistent anti-Semitic acts in Ukraine, as is the case in most nations, I’m happy to note that the predominant tenor of Ukrainian-Jewish relations there and in the diaspora is one of mutual respect and regard. To strengthen this process, we must both honestly address the past and build a future together focused on cooperation and rooted in the fact that a huge proportion of Israelis and the Jewish diaspora can trace their roots to the territory of Ukraine.”

Amb. Lauder is the fourth winner of the Sheptytsky Award. In 2016, the recipient was Ukrainian writer and former Soviet dissident Ivan Dziuba, recognized for his decades-long commitment to human rights, speaking out against xenophobia and anti-Semitism and working for national reconciliation.

In 2014, the award was presented to Ukrainian businessman Victor Pinchuk for his work in fostering Ukrainian-Jewish relations and advancing his homeland’s European aspirations. A year earlier, the award was given by the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine to James C. Temerty, Canadian-Ukrainian businessman, philanthropist, and founder of the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter.

The Ukrainian Jewish Encounter has dedicated significant efforts to advance international recognition of the legacy of the legendary Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Leader Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, one of the towering Ukrainian leaders of the twentieth century.

UJE’s efforts were advanced when the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine created the Andrei Sheptytsky Medal. The award was established for contributions to the cause of Ukrainian-Jewish understanding and cooperation and is awarded to people who have dedicated themselves to fostering relations between the Ukrainian and Jewish peoples.

Metropolitan Sheptytsky is a model worthy of celebration and emulation, providing a basis for building trust and bridges between communities.

Born in 1865 to a prominent aristocratic family, he was the spiritual leader of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church from 1901 until his death in 1944. During World War II, he helped save more than the 150 Jewish lives. The Metropolitan sheltered Jews in his own residence at great personal risk and arranged for Church monasteries to protect well over one hundred Jewish children. Not one of them was betrayed or lost.

Metropolitan Sheptytsky also publicly protested against Nazi Germany's murderous policies towards Jews, alerted Pope Pius XII in personal reports about the mass murders taking place, and issued the pastoral letter *Thou Shalt Not Kill* in November 1942, urging his parishioners not to participate in Nazi atrocities.

Throughout his life, the Metropolitan was dedicated to preserving Ukraine's cultural heritage. He collected icons and objects of art, and as a patron of the arts and philanthropist, supported many prominent Ukrainian artists. Today, his collection is the basis of the Andrei Sheptytsky National Museum in Lviv.

Ukrainian Government Tries to Expel Foreign Volunteer Fighters

By Mykola Vorobiov

Jamestown Foundation, October 03, 2018

<https://jamestown.org/program/ukrainian-government-tries-to-expel-foreign-volunteer-fighters/>

Recent tensions between local members of volunteer battalions and the police threaten to spark another wave of protests in Ukraine on the fifth anniversary of the EuroMaidan revolution. In mid-September, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine extradited to Russia Timur Tumgoev, a 31-year-old Ingush man who had served in a "Right Sector" volunteer battalion in Donbas (Pravda.com.ua, September 13). In his statement, Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko claimed that Tumgoev, a Russian citizen, was a long-time member of the Islamic State in Syria and in fact had never served in eastern Ukraine. According to Lutsenko, Interpol had issued a Red Notice for Tumgoev at Russia's request, two years ago. As a result, Tumgoev was detained by Ukrainian law enforcements in 2016. But he was released shortly thereafter, when the United Nations Human Rights Committee ordered the Ukrainian authorities to halt Tumgoev's extradition to Russia because of a high probability he would face torture if forcibly returned (Khpg.org, September 13).

During his stay in Ukraine, Tumgoev had applied for asylum, claiming he was facing prosecution in the Russian Federation because of his religious beliefs and strong anti-Kremlin rhetoric. Moreover, he asserted that the Russian police and Federal Security Service (FSB) had tried to turn him into an informant (Khpg.org, September 13).

Several hundred activists, including members of several volunteer battalions and Donbas veterans, organized a demonstration in front of the Prosecutor General's Office in downtown of Kyiv, on September 17 (UNIAN, September 17). Specifically, leaders of Right Sector demanded Tumgoev's release, affirming that he served with them on the frontlines in eastern Ukraine, in the Chechen Sheik Mansur Battalion. One of organizers and former commander of Right Sector, Andrey Gergert, claimed Tumgoev would be murdered in a Russian prison since he is a personal enemy of the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov (UNIAN, September 17). Nevertheless, Deputy Prosecutor Eugeni Enin earlier declared that Tumgoev never provided the authorities with any strong evidence of his participation in the Sheik Mansur Battalion (Gordon.ua, September 14).

On September 20, another rally on behalf of Tumgoev attracted nearly 500 demonstrators. This time, the protest, which was organized by the far-right party National Corps, took place near the Ukrainian parliament. The party's leader, parliamentarian Andrey Biletsky, harshly denounced "traitors" among the authorities, including lawmakers who had allowed Tumgoev to be handed over to the Russian FSB "without any legal reasons" (Censor.net.ua, September 20). Biletsky declared that roughly 500 foreign volunteers currently serve in the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions, mostly from neighboring countries, such as Russia, Belarus and Georgia. And despite risking their lives on the frontlines, to date only a few have managed to obtain asylum by becoming Ukrainian citizens.

Among other demands, the activists in front of the parliament called for the resignation of Prosecutor General Lutsenko for, in their view, enabling Tumgoev's extradition. Furthermore, the protesters petitioned for the passage of Bill Number 3433, which would allow foreign volunteers to be granted Ukrainian citizenship through a simplified procedure. That piece of legislation also importantly includes a moratorium on foreign volunteers' deportation to other countries where they might be at risk of torture or other kinds of pressure (Informator.ua, September 20).

Many foreign volunteers either lost their IDs or had them expire while they stayed on the frontlines. As a result, these people became illegal immigrants, necessitating an extradition to their homeland. According to Ukrainian

law, if they want to restore their IDs, they have to check in at their native country's embassy or return home, which could mean imprisonment due to their activities in Ukraine.

Before Tumgoev was detained by Ukrainian authorities, he had lived in Turkey for several years without facing any problems. The sudden decision by the General Prosecutor's Office and Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) to arrest and voluntarily turn him over to the Russian FSB is, therefore, rather unusual—especially considering the number of Ukrainian citizens who continue to be held in custody in Russia without any clear evidence of their guilt.

The Tumgoev case may spark more serious tensions between volunteer fighters and the Ukrainian government even beyond the series of protests that occurred last month, both of which resulted in violent scuffles with police. After more than four years of conflict in Donbas, there are now thousands of local volunteers who participated in combat against the regular Russian military, and they still lack any sort of legal status. Since most of them went to fight in the summer of 2014 on their own initiative, many Ukrainian volunteers have not been recognized as veterans. As such, they are not entitled to legal benefits such as social welfare or other support from the government. And the recent incident involving Tumgoev being handed over to the FSB will only increase the volunteer fighters' mistrust of Ukrainian officials and law enforcement, likely resulting in additional potentially violent street rallies in the future.

Furthermore, the upcoming Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections, scheduled for next year, may increase the popularity and visibility of far-right organizations such as National Corps, Right Sector, Svoboda, etc., in the country's political arena. A number of Donbas war veterans will be taking part in these elections. But since many of them lack sufficient resources to run independent campaigns, they could become targets of manipulation by various oligarchs and businessmen tempted to exploit for their own interests the strong patriotic feelings that continue to burn in Ukrainian society (Atlanticcouncil.org, April 19).

Ongoing political pressure on indigenous and international volunteer fighters, the absence of clear legal instruments to support them, combined with publicized examples of Ukrainian law enforcement's cooperation with the FSB may further radicalize far-right activists and veterans of the war in the east. And this may lead to dangerous outcomes ahead of the 2019 elections.

The Baltic Nations Look Abroad and See Problems

By Andriano Bosoni

Stratfor, October 04, 2018

<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/baltic-nations-look-abroad-and-see-problems>

2018 is a symbolic year for the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, because it marks the centenary of their independence from the Russian Empire. The last century has been less than easy for the trio of small countries, because independence was quickly followed by occupation, first by the Nazis and then the Soviets. The three republics spent five decades under the USSR, only regaining independence between 1990 and 1991. When I visited the region last month, I couldn't help but think that the past few years have probably been the best in their troubled century as republics, because they have never been so prosperous, so democratic and so open to the world. Nevertheless, the ghosts of the past have not completely vanished, and the Baltic states are once again looking at the world around them with concern.

Threats on the Doorstep

When listening to government officials, academics, business leaders and think tank experts from the Baltic countries, one common theme rapidly emerges: Russia is still widely seen as a threat. This fear is the result of history and geography, because Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are small, flat and easy to invade. Their position by the Baltic Sea, and their strategic location at the crossroads of the European, Nordic and Russian markets have made these lands an attractive place for invaders, which explains why they have spent so many centuries under foreign rule. Regional powers such as Germany and Sweden invaded the region in the past, but the freshest memories obviously stem from the Soviet occupation after World War II.

The late 1990s and early 2000s offered temporary relief to the region, as the three states joined the European Union and NATO, and Russia — for the first time in decades — did not look as aggressive as it used to. But the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, and especially the Russian annexation of Crimea and its backing of separatist forces in eastern Ukraine in 2014, reignited the Baltic region's traditional fears of Russian aggression. Those fears do not necessarily stem from a potential invasion, but from other forms of aggression, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and support for subversive domestic groups.

In recent years, the Baltic countries have increased their military spending and sought to reduce their dependence on Russian energy. Still, these countries continue to import significant amounts of its natural gas and conduct a great deal of trade with it. At the same time, Russian money is present in their banking sectors, and in the case of Estonia and Latvia, ethnic Russians represent about a quarter of the population. And while NATO membership ostensibly protects the region from any formal military attack, the leaders of the Baltic states are fretting about the challenges of preventing and deterring other forms of economic, political and social aggression.

Tensions Between Friends

Questions about Russia's intentions tie into a second concern in the Baltic region: the stability of the Atlantic alliance. The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president created uncertainty in the region, especially after he criticized Europe's low levels of military expenditure and, at least for a while, raised doubts about the White House's commitment to NATO's principle of collective defense. But what America does is more important than what it says, and the reality on the ground is that the United States remains committed to Baltic security. For example, U.S. fighter jets remain an important part of NATO's air policing mission in the area, and U.S. forces periodically participate in military exercises in the region.

In early September, Trump even said the White House was contemplating a permanent military base in Poland. Even if the idea never materializes, the musings provide a clear message of support to the region. This, however, does not mean that there's a whole lot of warm sentiment between the United States and Europe these days. In fact, relations between the United States and Germany have deteriorated since Trump took office, as the White House has denounced Germany's massive surplus in bilateral trade while also accusing Berlin of spending too little on defense. The war of words puts the Baltic states in an awkward situation, since their main military ally, the United States, is sparring with one of their main economic and political partners, Germany.

In addition, Germany's foreign policy is ambiguous when it comes to Russia. While Berlin has spearheaded economic and political sanctions against Moscow due to the conflict in Ukraine, it has also defended the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which would transport Russian natural gas to Germany across the Baltic Sea — thereby bypassing Ukraine as a transit state. German officials insist that Nord Stream 2 is a purely economic project, but history has taught the Baltic countries to be skeptical of pacts between Berlin and Moscow.

There are additional factors complicating the picture for the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian governments. For one, relations might be good between the Baltic states and the European Union, but the same does not ring true for some of the Baltic nations' allies. Poland and Romania share the trio's sense of urgency regarding Russia, including a desire to reduce the region's dependence on Russian energy and keep NATO as engaged as possible in the region, but Warsaw — and to a lesser degree, Bucharest — are currently experiencing tension with the European Commission because of what Brussels perceives as the deteriorating rule of law in those countries.

Brussels has threatened to cut development funds and agricultural subsidies for countries that fail to respect its principles and values, while the French government has suggested that the next stage of continental integration could include a smaller group of countries rather than the entire bloc. Even if Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are not directly affected by such initiatives, a potential downturn in relations between the Baltic countries' main allies would only increase their sense of insecurity.

Finally, Brexit is also a source of concern for the region, especially because the United Kingdom is a key ally in deterring Russia and often acts as a bridge between the United States and Europe. To be sure, the United Kingdom is only leaving the European Union — not NATO — and London wants to retain close defense and security ties with the Continent, but the country's divorce from the European Union compounds the problems in the political, economic and military structures that have kept the Baltic region safe for the past two decades.

Hopes and Fears

This intricate geopolitical environment creates challenges and opportunities for the Baltics. Among the difficulties is the fact that Russia can exploit tensions within Europe, as well as between the Continent and the United States, to its own advantage. From the Kremlin's perspective, if Moscow can't make NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union, go away, then it must ensure they remain as fragmented as possible, lest they threaten Russia.

The Baltics, however, have the opportunity to harness these tensions to attract American interest to the region, such as through the Three Seas Initiative. Created in 2016, it is a discussion forum for 12 countries from the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas, and its goal is to increase economic and political cooperation in the region, especially on infrastructure projects. The group has sought American approbation from the start. Trump was the guest of honor during last year's summit, while U.S. Secretary of Energy Rick Perry attended the summit in 2018.

So far, America's support for the forum is mostly symbolic, but Germany is becoming increasingly worried that it could become a framework for cooperation between the United States and Central and Eastern Europe that bypasses Western Europe. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas duly attended this year's summit, noting that Berlin wanted to become a formal member of the group. The request is a reminder that, at the end of the day, Germany is a Central European power with interests that lie in both the east and west of the Continent.

The debate over whether to accept Germany as a member will be intriguing to follow. German involvement entails political support and financing for infrastructure projects (after all, the forum's members are small economies that would be happy for every penny), but it would also provide Berlin with a means to steer the region's agenda. Germany's actions present a particular challenge for Poland, which aspires to consolidate its own sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

One hundred years have passed since Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia declared their independence, but the countries' external challenges — as well as their strategies — in 2018 are much the same as they were in 1918. For small countries surrounded by powerful neighbors, developing as many international alliances as possible is essential. NATO and EU membership will remain the cornerstone of their foreign policy, and keeping the United States (which they see as the ultimate guarantor of their security) engaged in the region will be key. By the same token, friction within the Atlantic alliance and the political fragmentation in Europe represent serious threats to their security. Faced with such challenges, the Baltic nations will continue to develop as many political, economic and military partnerships as possible to ensure their hard-earned independence becomes the norm — instead of the exception — in a history marked by so much turbulence.