

Country Visit: Russian Federation
Report of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office
on Combating Anti-Semitism, Rabbi Andrew Baker
December 14-17, 2010

I was accompanied on this visit by Ms. Floriane Hohenberg, Director of the Department of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Introduction

Jewish communal leaders estimate the Jewish population of the Russian Federation at about 600,000, with 60-70 percent living in Moscow and St. Petersburg. However, other major cities in Russia with a population of a half million or more will also host Jewish communities of about 10,000. Although exact numbers are hard to determine, the Jews of the Russian Federation are still among the largest world Jewish communities.

Jewish leaders describe a situation today that is also markedly improved over previous eras and better than what they faced even ten to fifteen years ago, when anti-Semitic literature and political movements were far more common and a serious threat to the community's well-being. Russian Jewish experts who monitor anti-Semitic incidents concur with official Government accounts that report small numbers of violent incidents directed against Jews.

There are today over three hundred registered Jewish organizations, encompassing a broad range of religious, educational and cultural activities in all regions of the Russian Federation.

Ministry for Regional Development

Responsibility for relations with the 180 ethnic groups that comprise the Russian Federation is centered in this Ministry. Anti-Semitism is acknowledged to be present but marginal. Jews live throughout the Russian Federation and as a result other national minorities have experience of living alongside them. Representatives of the Jewish National Autonomy report that the Ministry is a "daily partner" of the Jewish community. The Ministry is focused on programs to increase both an understanding of the many national minorities and cooperation among them. In this regard, Jewish groups have played a helpful, coordinating role.

There have been relatively few violent attacks on Jewish targets, and those high profile cases have received special attention by the Presidential administration, which maintains a dialogue with the national Jewish organizations. Several officials noted that the perpetrator of a knife attack on worshippers in a Moscow synagogue a few years ago was sentenced to sixteen years in jail.

The media has been a source of anti-Semitic material although authorities maintain that today this is more a problem in the regions. Although Article 282 of the Criminal Code criminalizes hate crimes and hate speech, the borderline with free speech protection is not always clear, and radicals have become adept in coming close to but not crossing it. Russian officials are also troubled by the growth of hate speech on the Internet. Much of it is in the Russian language, but it originates from around the world and its sources are often hard to identify; it requires international cooperation.

The Ministry has tried to stimulate the positive role of the media and organizes an annual competition for the best coverage of interethnic activity, which has seen an increasing number of participants including minor regional outlets. It has also published a catalogue delineating all religions and nationalities in the Russian Federation.

Authorities say the Government must take measures to prevent extremist activities but in the long term it must also nurture a culture of interethnic relations. Russian society itself, we are told, is “synthetic”—formed from different nationalities and not just ethnic Russians.

Ministry of Education and Science

Events of December 11, when a mix of skinheads, extremists and sports fans rioted in the center of Moscow were an initial focus of discussion. In light of plans for Russia to host international sporting events, a special working group has been formed together with the Tourist Ministry in order to raise the behavioral level of fans.

The Ministry of Education considers fighting anti-Semitism to be a focus of its efforts. In this regard it has developed a program entitled, “Lessons of the Holocaust—a Path to Tolerance,” in cooperation with the Holocaust Educational Center in Moscow. Newly-published materials are being distributed in teacher training programs for use with students in Grades 9-11 that would be components of classes in history, literature and world culture. With changes adopted in 2007, the Ministry has the power to set federal education standards and determine the requirements for the unified examination, but it can only recommend the use of specific materials.

As a result of these changes it also mandates a course on “ethical values of the Russian Federation” for all 4th and 5th grade students, allowing parents to select from six subjects—either “civil ethics” or one of five traditional religions. The classes are now being offered on an experimental basis in 19 regions and 15,000 teachers have been trained. Plans call for the classes to be implemented nation-wide in 2012.

Ministry of Justice

Anti-Semitism is a problem but not the dominant trend, and state authorities will focus on serious incidents. Article 282 of the Criminal Code forbids the expression of ethnic hatred. The Ministry maintains a registry of extremist materials which numbers about 800, and they have been outlawed by the courts. About five percent of them are anti-Semitic in nature. The Article is the main tool employed in confronting anti-Semitism and other forms of hate speech and is applied in all regions of Russia. Authorities consider it to be quite effective.

Specific material is evaluated by the courts which rely on the testimony of experts to aid in their determination. [However, Jewish experts who monitor anti-Semitism in Russia report that they are routinely not consulted because, being Jewish, they are considered "biased."]

Ministry of the Interior

Anti-Semitism is considered one manifestation of extremism and, as such, is addressed by the 2002 law on extremism, which provides for criminal and administrative prosecution. There are 32 elements in the criminal code ranging from hooliganism to murder which are addressed here. However, authorities report that anti-Semitic incidents are not widespread. According to their statistics violent incidents numbered 8 in 2008 and 6 in 2009; desecrations of Jewish sites numbered 10 each in 2007 and 2008 and 9 in 2009; and acts of vandalism of Jewish cemeteries number 9 in 2007, 14 in 2008, and 11 in 2009.

The Ministry reports that these extremist crimes are committed by neo-fascist and skinheads most of whom are younger than 18. Last year they counted 579 such crimes out of a total of three million violent crimes committed overall. Only six were directed at Jews.

They consider their primarily goal to detect and prevent such crimes, and as such they are engaged in monitoring and analyzing collected information including from the Internet. In this way they were able to prevent a neo-Nazi terrorist attack on the threshold of Victory Day celebrations. Prevention also entails education and proper upbringing, and it is not only a police issue. The Ministry cooperates with key Russian NGOs such as the Sova Center and the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights.

A new draft law is under consideration that would provide for stricter punishment and would also include provisions that would address the financing of extremist activities. According to the Ministry there is evidence that some young men are paid to participate in these crimes.

Jewish Community Leaders and Civil Society Representatives

Jewish leaders describe a situation where intolerance and extremism seem to be on the increase while anti-Semitism has steadily declined and is mostly marginal in everyday life. However, they are still not sanguine about the current situation. It is well understood that Caucasians and other internal migrants were the targets of skinheads, neo-Nazis, and bigoted sports fans who had recently rioted in central Moscow, attacking bystanders on the streets and in the subways. However, the ideologies of these groups are also anti-Semitic, and their gatherings often feature anti-Semitic placards and slogans. Jewish leaders say Jews are not targeted primarily because they are not physically identifiable, but they take small comfort in the fact that Caucasians may have replaced Jews as the traditional “enemy” of xenophobes and extremists.

There is consensus that authorities have become significantly more active in the last two to three years in combating anti-Semitism, even while some wonder if there is any clear plan to address the overall challenge of a growing xenophobia.

They also identify two areas where more could be done or done differently. While Article 282 has provided for the cessation of publications that the courts have determined are anti-Semitic, they report that frequently such newspapers reappear soon thereafter with new mastheads or new editorial names. Rarely, they say, are the publishers of such material seriously prosecuted or do those prosecutions result in more than suspended sentences. Additionally, they maintain that there is much more anti-Semitic literature that is not on the official government list, and the courts do not seek their expert advice. Holocaust education is another subject that Jewish leaders say few teachers or students know much about and little can be found in current textbooks.

Historically, religious prejudice has frequently been a contributor to anti-Jewish attitudes. Communal experts say that in some Russian regions the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church does contribute to anti-Semitism. They have also noticed Islamic anti-Semitism growing in a very modest way. At the same time, the anti-Israel animus that has frequently fueled anti-Semitism in parts of Western Europe does not seem to be present in Russia, which has a generally positive view of Israel and its relationship with its neighbors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Today Russian Jews face only minimal anti-Semitism in their day-to-day life, which compares favorably to many Western European communities. Anti-Semitic incidents are few and are dealt with seriously by state authorities. Anti-Jewish demonstrations or political movements that played on anti-Semitic themes are no longer present, also reflecting the greater controls imposed by Moscow. However, it may be premature to declare that the deeply anti-Semitic roots have been irrevocably severed. Certainly the Jewish community will feel more secure as Russia continues to confront the larger

problem of intolerance and xenophobia and makes further strides in cultivating a climate of interethnic understanding.

- Education Ministry officials should consider adopting curriculum material designed to combat anti-Semitism and intolerance as developed by ODIHR and now employed by 14 countries.
- Authorities should consult with Jewish community experts on anti-Semitism in determining the nature of anti-Semitic publications.
- Regional Ministry officials are encouraged to submit to ODIHR information on good practices to combat intolerance and discrimination.
- Interior Ministry officials should consider joining in OSCE-wide police training efforts to share the Russian experiences and good practices to identify and combat hate crimes.
- The National Point of Contact on Hate Crimes should submit information and statistics on hate crimes for 2009.
- Teachers should be encouraged to make full use of the newly-published teaching materials on the Holocaust. The Russian Federation should consider membership in the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF) as a means of deepening and expanding these initial efforts.

Meetings with Russian Federation Officials:

Maxim Travnikov
Deputy Minister for Regional Development

Maxim Dulinov
Deputy Minister of Education and Science

Georgy Matyushkin
Deputy Minister of Justice

Yuri Kokov
Head of the Department for Combating Extremism
Ministry of the Interior

Oleg Malginov

Director of the Department for International Humanitarian Cooperation and Human Rights
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Meetings with Civil Society Representatives:

Sova Center for Information and Analysis

Moscow Bureau for Human Rights

Youth Human Rights Movement

Euro-Asian Jewish Congress

Russian Jewish Congress

Federation of Jewish Communities