



Statement
by Lesley Weiss

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Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia**

At the OSCE Conference On Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and
Understanding
Follow-Up to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance
Bucharest, Romania – June 7-8, 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am Lesley Weiss, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs for *NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia*. NCSJ has participated actively in the Helsinki process since its founding in 1975, and is an umbrella organization that includes nearly 50 national American Jewish organizations and over 300 local community groups, including a number of those working and partnering with OSCE.

I am grateful for the opportunity to offer this intervention, which focuses on the key role governments play in responding to anti-Semitic and hate-motivated crimes. NCSJ has worked very closely on this important issue with parliamentarians, officials and organizations in the United States, Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Much has been accomplished in combating anti-Semitism across the former Soviet Union since the first OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism held four years ago in Vienna. We want to recognize the very real efforts and achievements of governments among the Soviet successor states in recognizing the problem and taking concrete actions to address it. However, much more needs to be done, especially in the key area of formulating a more systematic approach to combating anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. We encourage the OSCE and

governments in the former Soviet space to promote a comprehensive, across-the-board strategy to combat anti-Semitism that incorporates close cooperation with national law enforcement and education officials, media institutions, and civil society representatives in countries of concern.

We believe that today, more than 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, governments and civil societies in the FSU are ready to move to a higher level in meeting this challenge, by addressing comprehensively and strategically the root causes of anti-Semitism in this dynamic region.

I would like to mention some specific examples of actions already taken by post-Soviet governments. In Russia, home to the region's largest Jewish community, authorities are showing growing willingness to charge perpetrators of anti-Semitic acts with hate crime charges rather than the lesser charge of hooliganism, as was usually the case in the past. In 2006 and 2007, Russian law enforcement and judicial officials used the more serious hate crime charges on at least 8 separate occasions, including in the sentencing of a criminal group in the Siberian city of Tomsk that had set up a booby-trapped anti-Semitic poster and was reportedly planning to attack the local synagogue; in the sentencing of a gang of teenagers who had beaten a Jewish man to death in Yekaterinburg; and in charging a police captain in a town near St. Petersburg who had disseminated anti-Semitic and racist materials on his personal website. Also noteworthy was the move by the Russian Duma in April 2007 to toughen criminal penalties for extremist activity, including harsher fines for persons making, selling, or distributing Nazi or Nazi-like products or symbols, and longer prison sentences for persons desecrating graves or human remains. This new legislation will allow Russian authorities to prosecute anti-Semitic vandals, who often target cemeteries and wear Nazi symbols, more vigorously in the future.

Together with the widely publicized case of young skinhead Alexander Koptsev – sentenced in late 2006 to 16 years in prison on attempted murder and hate crime charges stemming from his notorious stabbing attack in a Moscow Synagogue in January 2006 – these developments represent positive steps and the appropriate use of the Russian law concerning the incitement of religious, ethnic and racial hatred. Russia's President Putin has recognized the importance of this issue by speaking out publicly against anti-Semitism and intolerance, including at the World Summit of Religious Leaders in Moscow in 2006. Following his lead, other Russian government officials and religious leaders have begun to emphasize this topic more actively.

We encourage the Russian Federation and other Soviet successor states to build on these efforts by undertaking a comprehensive and sustained campaign to counteract the actions and voices of hate and intolerance. This campaign must be waged through the coordinated implementation of legislation, law enforcement, and education. Only a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to anti-Semitism, as well as racism and xenophobia in general, will set the countries of the former Soviet Union on a path to a society freed from hatred and ethnic strife.

In Ukraine, the government has continued to speak out forcefully against anti-Semitism, and has actively enforced laws against incitement of inter-ethnic hatred. In the spring of 2007, following several prominent cases of large-scale desecration of Jewish cemeteries and Holocaust memorials across Ukraine, President Viktor Yushchenko said publicly that those who deny the Holocaust in Ukraine should be prosecuted, and ordered his senior security and law enforcement officials to take measures to stop the rising incidence of vandalism against Jewish and other memorial sites in Ukraine, including targeting the extremist groups who are often responsible for such attacks.

Such public statements by President Yushchenko in Ukraine and similar statements by President Putin in Russia should be recognized and acknowledged. Never in the long and often troubled history of this region have heads of state publicly expressed such strong condemnations of anti-Semitism. Indeed, both Presidents Yushchenko and Putin enjoy unprecedented warm and positive relationships with Jewish communities in their respective countries, especially in contrast to most prior leaders of Ukraine and Russia.

Yet more has to be done. The need for a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of anti-Semitism in the region is well illustrated by the ongoing saga of MAUP, the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, one of the largest private universities in Ukraine. Starting in 2002, MAUP and its ideological president Georgy Schokin have spread aggressive anti-Semitic propaganda through a series of books, articles, brochures, and sponsored conferences. In recent years, MAUP has sponsored anti-Semitic conferences, called for the deportation of Jews from Ukraine, repeated the age-old anti-Semitic libel that Jews commit ritual murder, cooperated closely with leading American racist and anti-Semite David Duke, and supported Iran’s President in his public efforts to promote Holocaust denial and his ongoing vilification of Israel and calls for its destruction.

Following the lead of President Yushchenko and his senior cabinet officials, who have condemned MAUP in no uncertain terms, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Sciences has taken action to deny MAUP University official recognition of diplomas issued to MAUP graduates in 2006. The ministry based this decision on blatant violations of the license agreement on the part of MAUP. Pressure on MAUP from Ukrainian officials continues; just last week, upon learning of a kiosk with MAUP-sponsored anti-Semitic material located at the site of Babi Yar, the infamous ravine outside of Kyiv where over 70,000 Jews and others were murdered during the Holocaust, the government quickly had it removed. We welcome these important moves by the Ukrainian authorities to battle a major promoter of anti-Semitism in Ukraine.

However, recent court rulings have allowed previously closed MAUP branches to reopen, and MAUP shows no sign of relenting in its anti-Semitic campaign. Ukrainian government responses to anti-Semitic provocations by MAUP, although timely and welcome, have been reactive and episodic, and have not resolved this problem. In fact, a reactive approach cannot resolve the problem of anti-Semitism by itself; the problem is better treated by sustained and significant action.

We call on the Ukrainian government to adopt a more systematic approach to ridding MAUP of this shameful legacy, which has cast a dark cloud on its once-respected name in Ukraine. Until persistent and targeted pressure is brought to bear by the authorities, those individuals responsible for turning MAUP into an anti-Semitic diploma mill will continue to use it as a highly convenient soapbox for their strident message of hate.

The OSCE, in its effort to fight the use and proliferation of global anti-Semitism, can serve its member agencies well through ODIHR and the Special Representative on Anti-Semitism. NCSJ and its member agencies will continue to work with the OSCE and with governments across the former Soviet Union to combat the alarming rise of global anti-Semitism. Only through a joint effort to provide the public with reliable information, consistent monitoring, and effective education and training, can the threat of anti-Semitism be alleviated. We urge the continuation of the OSCE Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office for Combating Anti-Semitism.