



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,  
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

## NewsWatch December 2008

### NCSJ Board of Governors Holds Meeting in Washington, D.C.

Senior government and community officials provided updates on politics in Russia and Ukraine, restitution in Lithuania, and on other regional issues, at the NCSJ Board of Governors Meeting on Tuesday, June 17, 2008.



U.S. Under Secretary of State Amb. William J. Burns (all June 17 photos: Ron Sachs/CNP)

NCSJ board members and representatives from Jewish organizations and the diplomatic community convened in Washington, D.C. Featured speakers included Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Bleich, and keynote speaker U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and former Ambassador to the Russian Federation William Joseph Burns.

#### KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Under Secretary Burns, who had just returned from Moscow, related important insights about U.S.-Russia relations.

Mr. Burns stressed three main points. First, the U.S. and Russia matter to each other. Second, Russia will likely continue on its current path of economic modernization, political

authoritarianism and foreign policy assertiveness. Third, U.S.-Russia relations will continue to mix conflict and cooperation.

#### MISSION TO MOLDOVA AND BELARUS

In May 2008, NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin, NCSJ President Lesley Israel and NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin traveled to Chisinau (Kishinev), Moldova and Minsk, Belarus. In Chisinau, they met with President Vladimir Voronin, who expressed his support for the local Jewish community. They also met with other senior government officials, U.S. Ambassador Michael Kirby, representatives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and local Jewish leaders.

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### NCSJ Awards Alexander Machkevitch "Torch of Liberty"

At the NCSJ Board of Governors meeting on June 17, NCSJ presented its Torch of Liberty award to Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) President Alexander Machkevitch, in recognition of his distinguished service and leadership in the advocacy movement to protect and renew Jewish life in the former Soviet Union.

On the evening of June 16, over 100 people, including Ambassadors from Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine, and U.S. Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) attended a dinner in tribute to Machkevitch's dedication to building and nurturing Jewish life. He was joined at the dinner by his wife Larisa, and his close friends and EAJC colleagues Josef Zissels, Mikhail Chlenov and Roman Spektor.

As President of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, he has donated his time and material resources to multiple causes, including the construction of synagogues, churches and mosques in Kazakhstan. He is also the President

of the Jewish Congress of Kazakhstan and a member of the Steering Committee of the World Jewish Congress. With his support, synagogues have also been erected in Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine. Mr. Machkevitch annually donates 100 tons of matzoth to the Jewish communities of Eurasia and on a

regular basis supports charitable and educational projects in Israel.

"The NCSJ Torch of Liberty award is not an annual award, but an award that is given to an individual who has made a difference in the lives of Jews in the former Soviet Union and around the world," said NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin, "and it is my pleasure to present this award to Alexander Machkevitch, an exemplary Jewish leader, a dedicated humanitarian, and a good friend of NCSJ."

In accepting the award, Machkevitch thanked NCSJ for "contributing their hearts and their lives for people who live ten thousand kilometers from the United States...such beautiful synagogues, it's a real miracle and it would never have happened without NCSJ."



(l.-r.) Alexander Machkevitch, NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin, Executive Director Mark Levin and President Lesley Israel

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In Minsk, NCSJ met with local Jewish leaders, representatives from international Jewish organizations, and the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy, Jonathan Moore.

#### REPORT FROM KYIV

Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Dov Bleich provided an update on the political situation and anti-Semitism in Ukraine. Although some refer to Ukraine as in "constant crisis," Rabbi Bleich believes that the state of democracy in Ukraine is strong and not in any danger. The crisis, he said, refers to the clash of politicians, not to the citizens of Ukraine.

Rabbi Bleich called Russia's attempts to meddle in Ukrainian affairs and keep Ukraine under its sphere of influence the greatest threat to Ukraine today. He proposes that Ukraine strengthen its civil society by asking former politicians, journalists, and community leaders to come together and discuss where they see Ukrainian society in the next ten years, and help strive for a society where people of different faiths and nationalities can live together in peace and understanding.

#### WASHINGTON-MOSCOW STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Tracey Jacobowitz and Cheryl Saferstein, who participated in NCSJ's Washington-Moscow Student Leadership Program, spoke about their experiences. On March 9-17, 2008, Jewish students from American University and The George Washington University participated in a program in Moscow focusing on advocacy and cross-cultural dialogue. The program was coordinated by NCSJ, American Univer-

## NCSJ Board Meeting, continued



Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Bleich



(center) NCSJ Student Leadership Program director Lesley Weiss and participants (left) Cheryl Saferstein and (right) Tracey Jacobowitz



(l.-r.) Alexander Machkevitch celebrates receiving the Torch of Liberty award with Kazakh Chief Rabbi Yeshaya Cohen, Amb. Erlan Idrissov of Kazakhstan, and Amb. Yashar Aliyev of Azerbaijan



Rabbi James Morgan of Boston's Jewish Community Relations Council

sity Hillel and Moscow Hillel. Major funding was provided by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.

The program was led by NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss. During the eight-day trip, ten American Jewish students paired with ten Jewish students from Moscow Hillel and shared ideas about building Jewish identity and community, and confronting anti-Semitism in the fledgling Russian democracy. Program highlights included meeting Russian government officials and the media, with representatives from the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Russian Jewish Congress, briefings at the U.S. Embassy and Israeli Cultural Center and visits to homebound elderly and JDC's Chesed Chamah senior center.

#### A STORY OF JEWISH REVIVAL

Rabbi James Morgan, Director of International Partnerships for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, gave an update on the partnership between the Boston and Dnepropetrovsk Jewish communities.

"This has been a partnership that has brought great benefit to both of our communities... [and] has shown itself to be a potential model for a partnership between communities here in America and communities in the former Soviet Union," said Rabbi Morgan. He thanked NCSJ for their role in bringing the two communities together.

He showed a clip from the film *Kehilla: Rekindling Jewish Life in Ukraine*, documenting the Boston-Dnepropetrovsk partnership. Describing the cir-

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## NCSJ Director Mark Levin Awarded Medal By Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko

Executive Director Mark Levin represented NCSJ at the 2008 opening of the UN General Assembly in New York City. The Russia-Georgia conflict, Iranian nuclear ambitions, and the state of the global economy were prime areas of discussion at the UN General Assembly. NCSJ and its member agencies participated in meetings with world leaders including discussions with the Presidents of Ukraine, Georgia and Latvia, the Russian Foreign Minister and other international government officials. These meetings presented an opportunity to discuss the political climate in the respective countries, and the state of the region's Jewish communities.

During his time in New York, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko honored Levin with the Order of Merit of Ukraine. The Order of Merit recognizes citizens of foreign

countries for their significant personal contribution to the cause of strengthening the prestige of Ukraine in the world and the promotion of its historic and contemporary achievements. "I share this honor with NCSJ's staff and lay leadership, who continue to make a difference for so many people in the former Soviet Union," said Levin about what he described as a special and humbling experience.

September 23, 2008: NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin receives the Order of Merit of Ukraine from President Viktor Yushchenko in New York City, during the annual meeting of the United Nations



## NCSJ Regional Briefs

### LITHUANIA

NCSJ has continued its involvement with its member agencies, including the American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, and B'nai B'rith International and others, in dealing with Jewish-Lithuanian concerns.

Rising xenophobia and anti-Semitism have been of particular concern in Lithuania. On August 10, swastikas and other anti-Semitic epithets were discovered on the central building of the Vilnius Jewish community center. In a strongly-worded statement, President of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus condemned the attack, and vowed that all forms of bigotry, hatred and anti-Semitism would not be tolerated in Lithuania.

In September 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution strongly supporting an "immediate and just restitution of, or compensation for [communal and religious] property illegally confiscated during the last century by Nazi and Communist regimes." The measure calls on Lithuania's government to return the properties or fairly

compensate communities whose properties had been seized.

Also in September, the Lithuanian government stopped their legal proceedings against Holocaust survivor Yitzhak Arad, an internationally respected scholar and longtime director of Israel's Holocaust memorial and museum, Yad Vashem. Mr. Arad was accused of war crimes related to his activities as an anti-Nazi partisan in World War II. It is unclear whether the government's case will proceed against Fania Brantovsky and Rachel Margolis, other Jewish partisans who fought against the Nazis.

### GEORGIA

Since the conflict with Russia began on August 7, 2008, NCSJ has been in regular contact with the Jewish community and government officials in Georgia. On September 7, 2008, NCSJ hosted the Jewish Agency for Israel's Special Envoy to Georgia, who spoke about the Agency's immediate response to the crisis, and its efforts to help the community.

In the beginning of October, Russian troops pulled out of Georgia, and have since been replaced by unarmed European Union monitors as

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cumstances under which the film was created, Rabbi Morgan said, "This movie really is a celebration of and a call to action of our obligation to rebuild and make sure that Jewish life survives and thrives in the former Soviet Union."

per the EU ceasefire agreement. Since the withdrawal of Russian troops, 20,000 Georgians who were displaced have returned to their homes.

On October 16, negotiators from Russia, Georgia, and the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia met for direct talks in Geneva, Switzerland, for the first time since the five-day war began. The meeting was organized by the EU, United Nations, and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Both Georgian and Russian delegates walked out of these talks after Georgia objected to Russian demands for the inclusion of separatist representatives at the session. A second round of negotiations held on November 19 were considered more successful than the previous round, but negotiations are likely to continue for years.

The United Nations and the World Bank estimate that Georgia will need \$3.25 billion over the next three years to help tens of thousands of displaced persons and to repair and develop infrastructure. During a one-day conference in Brussels on October 22, Georgia received aid pledges of \$3.7 billion in public loans and grants and \$850 million in private capital.

## Belarus: 65th Anniversary of the Minsk Ghetto's Destruction

NCSJ President Lesley Israel and Executive Director Mark Levin attended commemorative events in Minsk, Belarus on October 20, 2008, to mark the 65th anniversary of the destruction of the Minsk Ghetto and to honor those who perished. "It was an emotional experience to join together with survivors, members of the Belarus Jewish community, diplomats, senior government officials and colleagues from around the world in marking this tragic event," said Israel.

Events began with a speech by Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko, who said, "New generations haven't forgotten what happened in the middle of the last century." He expressed his commitment to fight anti-Semitism in Belarus and elsewhere.

While in Belarus, Israel and Levin met with U.S. chargé d'affaires Jonathan Moore to discuss U.S.-Belarus relations,

and also met with Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Haysyonak to discuss EU-Belarus relations, anti-Semitism, and voting issues.

Oct. 21: bottom left - NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin, with interpreter, speaks at a ceremony at the Minsk Yama memorial; bottom right (l.-r.) - NCSJ President Lesley Israel, Union of Belarusian Jewish Organizations and Communities Chairman Leonid Levin and NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin



2020 K Street, NW, Suite 7800  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Tel.: 202-898-2500  
Fax: 202-898-0822

[www.ncsj.org](http://www.ncsj.org)

Email: [ncsj@ncsj.org](mailto:ncsj@ncsj.org)

**Chairman**  
**President**  
**Executive Director**  
**NewsWatch Editor**  
**NewsWatch Writer**

*Edward B. Robin*  
*Lesley Israel*  
*Mark B. Levin*  
*David S. Shulman*  
*Alla Lipsky*