



UCSJ: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union

"The Voice of Emigration, Jewish Survival, and Human Rights in the Former Soviet Union Since 1970"

P.O. Box 11676 ♦ Cleveland Park ♦ Washington, D.C. 20008 ♦ (202) 237-8262 ♦ Fax (202) 237-2236
E-mail: ucsj@ucsj.com ♦ Web: <http://www.fsmonitor.com>

Yosef I. Abramowitz
President

Micah H. Naftalin
National Director

ANTISEMITIC AND RACIST VIOLENCE IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

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The problems of antisemitic and racist violence continue to worsen in Ukraine and Russia in 2007. Both countries have yet to overcome the historical legacy of Tsarist and Soviet mistreatment, violence, and discrimination against Jews and some other minorities. Both confront similar problems of corrupt and dysfunctional criminal justice systems that are ill-equipped to deal with relatively complicated legal issues like hate crimes and hate speech. Xenophobic attitudes among the general population are widespread, and several politicians in both countries have been elected and re-elected while openly espousing antisemitic and racist beliefs.

Nevertheless, conditions in both countries differ in six significant ways:

1. While the neo-Nazi movement has expanded rapidly in both countries, this is especially true of Russia, where it laid down roots much earlier than in Ukraine.
2. The frequency of violent attacks against Jews is higher in Ukraine than in Russia, where the main targets of neo-Nazi gangs are dark-skinned migrants. These migrants greatly outnumber the Russian Jewish population, while in Ukraine non-Russian migrants are present in much smaller numbers. The additional factor of Islamophobia stoked by the wars in Chechnya further aggravates Russian nationalists' attitudes towards dark-skinned migrants, pushing the Jews further down the list of "enemies" than they were in the past.
3. Ukrainian media frequently ignore antisemitic attacks, in contrast to the Russian media, which does a better job of reporting both antisemitic and racist violence. Most of the attacks that UCSJ learn of in Ukraine are never reported in the mainstream Ukrainian press.
4. In both countries, there is an unfortunate tendency by some local authorities and law enforcement agencies to cover up hate crimes by lumping them under the vague rubric of "hooliganism." Some local authorities have denied the existence of neo-Nazi gangs in their region, despite clear evidence to the contrary. However, in recent years, this kind of disingenuous official rhetoric has become less common in Russia as the problems of extremist nationalist groups and inter-ethnic violence spin increasingly out of control. In Ukraine, the neo-Nazi movement is at an earlier stage of development than in Russia, and most of media is indifferent to this issue, which allows some local officials and agencies the political cover to deny that extremist nationalist groups and antisemitic violence are serious problems. Russia's hate crimes laws, which were effectively moribund in the 1990s, are being applied more frequently in recent years, while in Ukraine, UCSJ is only

aware of one successful hate crimes prosecution this decade.

5. In Russia, a coalition of human rights NGOS called the Coalition Against Hate (made up of UCSJ, the Moscow Helsinki Group, the Sova Center, and others) has been effective in voicing concern, engendering media attention, and putting pressure on Russian officials when it comes to hate crimes. No equivalent to this coalition currently exists in Ukraine. On the other hand, the Kremlin's crackdown on NGOs—society's first line of defense against human rights abuses—could make the situation much worse in the near future in Russia. Correspondingly, Ukraine's climate of greater political freedom since the Orange Revolution may in time have the opposite effect.
6. A final complicating factor is the unfortunate use of blatantly racist rhetoric by President Putin in the wake of the 2006 Kondopoga riots, which targeted migrants from the Caucasus. The president used the widespread publicity surrounding the riot to successfully push for a law that bans foreign market traders—a blatant pander to the extreme right. Shortly afterwards, the Russian government engaged in a racist witch hunt against ethnic Georgians, during which 1,000s were detained and an unknown number deported, including many who were present in the country legally and even a few who had Russian citizenship. The Ukrainian government, to its credit, did not engage in any openly racist policies.

In Ukraine, the number of hate crimes reported by UCSJ's Kiev monitor Vyacheslav Likhachyov reached 70 in 2007. The largest category of victims were Jews (13 attacks) and students from various Arab countries (also 13 attacks), with Africans a close second (12 attacks). The very weekend that this report was being compiled, thugs in Dnepropetrovsk assaulted a rabbi in a clear hate crime (there was no attempt to rob the victim and the assailants were especially vicious, kicking their victim multiple times as he lay prone on the ground). Police have not yet made any arrests in connection with this latest attack.

As in previous years, many of these attacks remained unsolved crimes. Police responses to these crimes ranged from professional in some cases to completely indifferent in others. For example, on December 16, 2006, three Orthodox Jews were attacked in Kiev by a gang of young men screaming antisemitic abuse. In a December 17 report, the AEN news agency quoted one of the victims as saying:

“Suddenly around 10 young people with bottles in their hands ran out of a courtyard. Screaming ‘kikes, get out of here’ along with several curse words they attacked us and started to savagely beat us. I and a friend managed to escape and called the police. However, when we called 02 [the local equivalent of 911], a voice told us to call back tomorrow because it was already late and the police couldn't come.”

“We found out later that our third friend [who didn't escape] was thrown to the ground and kicked,” the victim continued. “A passerby came out of a parked car and tried to help him. He tried to explain to the hooligans that it isn't right to beat a man who is down on the ground. They beat him up too. We haven't been able to find him. Our friend has a concussion and several other injuries.”

As promised, the police arrived the next day and began investigating the attack. However, by that time the criminals' trail had obviously gotten cold, and UCSJ is not aware of any arrests having been made in connection with this attack.

The number of extremist crimes recorded by Russian law enforcement agencies has risen by a factor of three since 2004, according to the first deputy head of the Interior Ministry. A January 21, 2008 report by the Interfax news agency quoted Aleksandr Chekalin saying that while in 2004 the number of such crimes was 130, 152 were recorded the following year, 262 in 2006, and a whopping 356 in 2007. These "were crimes in general committed on ethnic or religious grounds," the minister said--a valuable disaggregator, since in the past government statistics lumped in terrorist acts and other forms of violence stemming from the Chechen war with hate crimes committed by Russian extremist nationalist groups.

Although not pointed out in the Interfax piece, the fact that so many of the victim of hate crimes are illegally present in the country, combined with long-standing police practices of suppressing hate crimes data and targeting certain ethnic minority groups for harsh treatment, means that these numbers are very likely just the tip of the iceberg, valuable only insofar as they show the broader trend of increasing inter-ethnic violence in Russia.

According to the Sova Information-Analytical Center—a member of the Coalition Against Hate which closely tracks hate crimes and extremist groups—in 2007 Russian courts convicted 23 people of hate crimes and an additional 27 of violating hate speech laws. While this is the highest number of hate crimes and hate speech convictions that the Russian justice system has recorded to date, and therefore a positive sign, in a vast country where hate crimes are reported literally on a daily basis, a couple of dozen extremists brought to justice are the proverbial drop in the bucket.

For example, just during the week of January 21-28, 2008 UCSJ and its coalition partners recorded the following hate crimes: A neo-Nazi gang attack in the small city of Pervouralsk, the stabbing of an ethnic Tajik in St. Petersburg, the posting of threatening leaflets on the door of a mosque in Nizhny Novgorod, a likely arson attack against a Pentecostal church in Saratov, the sentencing to a laughably short one year in prison of a group of neo-Nazi youths in Obninsk who filmed their multiple attacks on non-Russians and then posted them on the Internet along with images of swastikas, and the arrest in Yekaterinburg of youths who murdered a non-Russian migrant. In Moscow, the following hate crimes were reported: the vicious beating of a citizen of Turkmenistan, two separate attacks on ethnic Buryats, the fatal stabbing of an Armenian student, and the arrest of five suspects in a string of murders of Central Asian migrants.

This is what now passes for a typical week in our monitoring of the situation in Russia, where inter-ethnic violence is fast approaching the point where it is starting to tear apart the country's social and political fabric. The potential consequences for the Jewish community and other vulnerable minority groups if these trends are allowed to continue are grim.