

Minorities at Risk in Russia

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Overview

The following brief overview of antisemitism, racism and religious intolerance in Russia presents a mixed picture. Improvements in the attitude of the central government towards the Jewish community probably contributed to a decrease in antisemitic attacks in 2002, but the fact that the government was just as well disposed in 2001, a year marred by an upsurge in antisemitic violence, throws the future safety of the Jewish community into doubt. Racism against Chechens and other dark-skinned minorities continues to worsen at an alarming rate, raising the specter of potentially disastrous ethnic conflicts breaking out in the future if the problem is not addressed. The number of skinheads has grown so quickly that they can now be found in cities as remote as Ulan-Ude and Yakutsk, and skinhead violence is reported on a weekly basis, yet at least in Moscow, police are more likely to arrest them than in previous years, and the central government is at last taking the skinhead problem seriously. Finally, hostility towards non-Russian Orthodox Christians has not abated, yet as the judicial system slowly evolves away from the Soviet model and becomes more independent from prosecutors, minority Christians are finding it easier to defend themselves in court against spurious charges brought by government security agencies of "using hypnosis" or "breaking up families." Overall, the situation for many ethnic and religious minorities in Russia remains dangerous, but to varying degrees, depending more on local conditions and the whims of regional bosses than the mostly good intentions of the still weak and dysfunctional central government.

Antisemitism, xenophobia and religious persecution, from both official and grassroots sources, continue to threaten the safety of ethnic and religious minorities throughout Russia. From Kaliningrad in the far west to the Pacific port city of Vladivostok, from the Arctic city of Murmansk to the southern resort area of Krasnodar, many regional authorities continue to ignore the activities of dangerous hate groups who aim violent rhetoric and actions against minority groups, refusing to prosecute hate crimes or, at best, classifying them under the euphemistic term "hooliganism." These hate groups range from skinhead gangs and other neo-Nazi organizations like the People's National Party to officially approved paramilitary Cossack formations. With some exceptions, federal authorities have failed to take strong, consistent action to crack down on hate groups or against demagogic politicians who illegally incite ethnic or religious hatred, preferring to engage in positive rhetoric and symbolism rather than action.

The Jewish Community

While there have been improvements in the way officials react to antisemitic incidents in recent years, official reaction is on a whole still disturbingly weak. Worst of all, after a welcome decline in antisemitic incidents in 2000, the summer and early fall of 2001 witnessed a rash of beatings of Jews (Moscow, Orenburg, Kostroma and Omsk) and arson attacks on Jewish property (Ryazan, Kostroma, Kazan), none of which have resulted in any criminal prosecutions. The vast majority of past antisemitic attacks-the synagogue bombings in Moscow in 1999, the attack on a Jewish school in Ryazan in 2000, and numerous other incidents-have also remained unsolved. Nor have those guilty of placing a booby-trapped antisemitic sign along a Moscow highway in May 2002 been brought to justice. Fortunately, 2002 was calmer, with significantly fewer attacks against Jews than the previous year, but the unpredictable nature of these cycles of antisemitic violence make it impossible to predict how the Jewish community will fare in 2003.

President Vladimir Putin continues to make positive gestures towards Russia's Jewish community by attending major Jewish events, praising the role of Jews in Russia's history and contemporary life, and strongly condemning antisemitism. In many regions, it is no longer uncommon to see a mayor or governor visit a synagogue or congratulate the community on a holiday. These official gestures have helped to create a more confident climate

for Jews in Russia, spurring a continued renaissance of Jewish life in Russia, as evidenced by the growing number of synagogues being returned to the community after decades of government ownership, the increasing media coverage of Jewish communal activities and statements by Jewish leaders about domestic and international events, and a rising willingness of Jewish leaders in some parts of the country to stand up publicly for their rights.

Yet under the veneer of stability and justifiable celebration of the amazing achievements of the past decade, there remains a sense of unease. In part, this feeling is unavoidable no matter what the current circumstances are, given the dark history of antisemitism in Russia and doubts about the country's long term stability and prosperity. Despite two years of economic growth (the first substantial rise in GDP since the collapse of the Soviet Union) and political stability under President Putin, most independent economists question the long-term viability of Russia's economic recovery. Many Russians still live in poverty, the country's population continues to plunge at an alarming rate, equipment and infrastructure are crumbling after years of neglect, and the economy remains dangerously dependent on historically volatile world oil prices. Russian Jews know that they are the favorite scapegoats of many demagogic politicians whose popularity may rise suddenly in the face of another economic collapse like the August 1998 crash, which led to a sharp rise in antisemitic incidents in 1998-99.

Even if present economic and political trends continue and Russia remains stable, there are other reasons to worry. Russian Jewish leaders' frequent assertions that "there is no state antisemitism in Russia" are only partially correct. While it is certainly true that the active promotion of antisemitism is no longer state policy, as it was throughout much of the Soviet period, passive state antisemitism persists. Although there has been some improvement in federal prosecutors' enforcement of laws against the incitement of ethnic hatred, as a rule they fail to properly apply these laws or ensure that regional prosecutors do, sending a message to antisemites that their actions will likely go unpunished. Far too much latitude has been granted to regional officials in how they react to the activities of hate groups or extremist politicians, leaving many to choose to take no action at all to protect local minorities. In a November 2001 meeting with regional police officials, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandr Chekalin admitted as much when he stated: "We have gone too far in our inaction against extremist youth." The consequences of this permissive attitude towards hate groups are especially clear in Moscow, where for years police ignored skinhead attacks against foreign students, dark-skinned market traders, Jews, and even diplomats from African and Asian countries.

Only now, when the problem has become so acute that skinhead violence is almost a daily event in Moscow, have the city authorities begun to take the skinhead problem seriously. Unfortunately, it may be too late to contain the growth of skinhead groups, which have increased their membership and geographical scope to a stunning degree. In addition, while there are some signs of improvement, cases of police idly watching as skinheads beat ethnic and religious minorities, or even engaging in such violence themselves, continue to be reported throughout the country.

With a few exceptions, in recent years, police in Moscow and other cities as a general rule have done nothing in the face of regular antisemitic demonstrations by neo-Nazis, Communists and Russian Orthodox fundamentalists. These demonstrations have ranged in size from a couple of dozen to several thousand participants. Even the smaller demonstrations are impressive if viewed within the context of widespread political apathy and cynicism in Russia today—anti-fascist or pro-democracy demonstrations in Russia are much less frequent and tend to be even smaller. As Vladimir Pribylovsky, a leading expert on Russian extremists, put it: "It isn't terrible when 3% of a country is made up of extremist groups, what's terrible is when nobody stands against them." On a positive note, however, antisemitic demonstrations were less frequent in 2002 than in previous years, though as noted above, given the cyclical nature of antisemitism in Russia, the situation could change for the worse in the near future.

The practice of passive state antisemitism and racism is even more apparent in the judicial branch, where there are numerous examples of judges refusing to punish antisemites and other extremists, even when they have clearly violated the law. While the justice system tends to come down hard on even minor ordinary criminal offenses, antisemitic and racist violence is often treated with kid gloves. Nor have prosecutors, judges, or federal and regional officials in charge of regulating the media dealt effectively with the dozens of antisemitic and racist newspapers published throughout the country, in blatant violation of the law.

In addition, the State Duma remains a hotbed of antisemitism and racism, especially among deputies from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). State Duma deputies from Bryansk and Krasnodar Krai regularly violate laws against public hate speech, as does Deputy Speaker of the State Duma Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In 2001-2002, hate literature was openly sold in the State Duma, including a Russian translation of David Duke's "The Jewish Question Through the Eyes of an American" and several antisemitic newspapers.

Speaking of Mr. Duke, at the same time that Russian authorities used spurious national security grounds to refuse visas to numerous human rights activists, foreign journalists and aide workers who criticize the war in Chechnya, as well as Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries, over the course of 2000-2001, the former KKK "grand wizard" was able to travel multiple times to Russia, where he publicly engaged in illegal hate speech against Jews and met with Russian extremists.

On the regional level, President Putin has made some progress in his efforts to reverse years of radical decentralization under the Yeltsin administration. Many regional laws have been brought into accordance with federal legislation, secessionist movements that threatened the integrity of the Russian Federation have been successfully undercut (with the obvious exception of Chechnya), significant sources of revenue have been redirected from the regions to the center, and the central government has achieved the right to remove governors who go too far in abusing the law. However, despite the appearance of strength, the central government remains weak, and this weakness, when combined with the indifference of many central government officials towards the problems of antisemitism, racism, religious persecution and other human rights violations, has helped create a system of government in which regional leaders make some basic concessions to the Kremlin in return for the right to treat their citizens almost any way they choose. As a result, minority groups are treated differently from region to region, largely at the whim of the local bosses. The Jewish community is a case in point: In a few extreme cases they are demonized by regional leaders (Kursk, Krasnodar) or by media controlled by local governments (Vladimir, Oryol, Bryansk, Voronezh), in a few more their concerns are taken very seriously (the Moscow city administration being the most obvious and important example), while in the bulk of Russia's regions, the authorities neither attack nor adequately defend Jews against grassroots antisemitic violence. In a prime example of collaboration between hate groups and regional authorities, in at least four regions (Ryazan, Voronezh, Tver, Republic of Mari-El), local newspapers reported that a successor organization to the violent neo-Nazi organization Russian National Unity (RNU) called "Russian Rebirth" was officially registered in 2001-two years after Russia's most infamous hate group was banned in Moscow. The RNU was included on public councils attached to government bodies in Bryansk and Saratov. Despite the split within the RNU, it and similar groups remain strong in some provincial cities. In late December 2001, a Jewish leader from Borovichi gave a possible reason for the persistence of these hate groups:

"Small cities today are of special interest to leaders of extremist organizations, since the low level of life, the low education level of the population and the large fall in the economy and the difficult material situation of residents of these cities are all potential soil for new members."

While some measure of re-centralization is obviously needed after the decay of state authority throughout the 1990s, the manner in which President Putin is tackling the problem of the central government's weakness shows an alarming tendency on his part to focus more on the levers of power than on the rule of law. Jews and all other citizens of Russia will never be truly safe until a democratic, law-based system develops, yet Russia under Putin seems to be sliding more and more towards authoritarianism.

Finally, a new, disturbing trend that emerged in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US is the radicalization of some of Russia's Islamic community. A few Russian Muslim leaders, most but not all of them self-proclaimed, publicly repeated the radical Islamist canard that Israel secretly planned the September 11 attacks. Rallies in support of the Taliban and the Palestinian Authority have taken place in some predominantly Muslim regions. So far, such opinions are shared by a small minority of Russian Muslims and are for the most part concentrated in Chechnya and Dagestan, yet this is obviously a growing trend that requires continued monitoring.

Dark-Skinned Minorities

Aside from Jews, other ethnic minorities continue to be subjected to violence and intimidation, both from official and grassroots actors. Chechens and other so-called "people of Caucasian nationality"-a widely used racist term used to describe people from the Caucasus, millions of whom live in Russia-continue to be subjected to police shakedowns and skinhead attacks in almost every region and city. These attacks have widespread, though silent, public support, as migrants from the Caucasus are resented by many Russians for their perceived control of open-air markets and penchant for criminal activity. One of Russia's leading pollsters--Yuri Levada--revealed in December 2001 (a year before the terrorist attack on the Moscow theater) that around 40% of Russians believe that non-Russians are bad people. This violence has intensified after the October 23-26, 2002 seizure of a Moscow theater by Chechen terrorists, which resulted in the deaths of 128 people, most of whom were killed by poisonous gas pumped into the theater by Russian anti-terrorist units. In many cases, the police themselves act no better than the skinheads, and have engaged in revenge attacks against innocent Chechen civilians in at least two cities that I know of (Moscow and Voronezh).

A January 16, 2003 State Duma hearing spotlighted the problems of Chechens in Moscow, according to a report that day broadcast on TVS. Chechen students told the parliament how since the theater siege they have sewn their pockets shut in order to stop Moscow police from planting drugs or weapons on them. Allautin Musaev-an aide to Chechnya's representative in the Duma--accused the prosecutor in charge of Moscow's Babushkino district of secretly ordering police to round up all Chechens. The Duma has conducted similar hearings in the wake of the theater seizure; one thing they all had in common was the conspicuous absence of security officials, despite the fact that they were invited. Two days before the hearing, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov was quoted as saying on Center TV that unregistered migrants are responsible for more than 40 percent of all crimes in the Russian capital. Mayor Luzhkov called for mandatory registration for all migrants throughout the country and suggested using "the tax inspectorate's control over people who rent their apartments to migrants" and the collection of information about migrants "from divisional police inspectors and street cleaners."

The government's practice of using police units from all over the country as soldiers in Chechnya has made Russia's already severe problem of police brutality and racism even more acute. After several months of having witnessed or taken part in combat operations and reprisals against civilians (including extra-judicial killings, rape, looting, and torture, all of which have been widely documented by international and Russian human rights groups), these officers are somehow expected to return to their home towns and resume their normal duties as guardians of law and order. The catastrophic lack of psychological counseling for these war veterans, combined with a public mood calling for revenge against Chechens, make for an explosive mix.

Dark-skinned foreign students, tens of thousands of whom reside in Russia, are constantly beaten by skinheads and, with a few exceptions, police do nothing to defend them. Meskhetian Turks, Armenians and other groups are targeted by an official policy of racism in Krasnodar Kray, where officials deny them the most basic rights and empower Cossack paramilitary groups to beat and harass them. Krasnodar Kray is but the most extreme example of the problem of vigilante Cossack formations; most Russian cities now have such groups, many of which are explicitly racist, working in cooperation with police or as private security guards. Unfortunately, there are simply not enough public resources to pay for the necessary number of police to keep crime in check, necessitating cooperation with unofficial paramilitary groups:

In contrast to the ambiguous situation facing the Jewish community, when it comes to racism, the situation keeps getting worse and worse. Despairing of police protection, many targeted minority groups, some of whom are quite numerous, are beginning to form self-defense groups, raising the terrifying specter of future ethnic conflicts possibly breaking out in Russia. In an April 20, 2002 statement, Oleg Mironov-Russia's human rights ombudsman--explicitly compared Russia to Yugoslavia in the 1990s and posed the rhetorical question: "Couldn't enmity provoked by extremists groups and politicians towards those who belong to different ethnic groups and religious confessions lead to an outbreak of racial, ethnic and religious conflicts [in Russia]?" While Russia is certainly not on the brink of a Yugoslavia-style civil war, when minority groups completely give up on police protection and start forming self-defense groups, just such a nightmare scenario seems a step closer.

Minority Religious Groups

As in past years, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) constantly whips up hysteria about minority Christians, labeling them "totalitarian sects" and even tools of foreign intelligence agencies bent on breaking apart Russia in a "spiritual attack." The ROC remains a bastion of extreme anti-Western views, as was shown in December 2000 when Patriarch Alexi II accused the West of waging "a well planned, bloodless war against our people, aimed at exterminating them." These extremist views are often reflected back onto minority Christian groups, who are seen as somehow "non-Russian" or "Western" despite the historical presence of many of these faiths in Russia. In some regions, local authorities collaborate with the ROC by denying minority Christians registration or by demonizing them in the local press.

In full view of a thunderstruck foreign press corps, the Moscow city authorities tried to disband the Salvation Army and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Though these efforts were struck down by numerous courts, Moscow prosecutors have time after time appealed these decisions. As a result, since 1998, the Moscow branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses been put on trial nine times on the same set of charges!

"Islamophobia" remains widespread, reflected in the opposition by some regional authorities to the building of mosques (Taganrog, Murmansk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Volgoda) and the tendency of much of the Russian press to equate Islam with terrorism, without taking into account the diversity of the Islamic faith. Like the Jews, treatment of minority Christians and Muslims varies from region to region, largely dependant on the whims of the local authorities.

At the same time, there has been some improvement in the situation of minority Christians-several congregations have recently won court cases against regional authorities who were trying to disband them. Perhaps out of fear of defamation law suits, federal and regional officials, along with hostile elements within the ROC and the media, have more and more often begun using the generic term of "sect" rather than specifically attacking Baptists, Pentecostals or Seventh Day Adventists. While this trend does not represent any lessening of the climate of hostility, it does perhaps reflect a growing ability of some minority Christians to be able to defend themselves through legal means. The two big exceptions to this rule are the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, who are constantly attacked by name.

Continued monitoring of these phenomena, in close partnership with Russian non-governmental organizations, therefore remains critically important to all those who are interested in the country's stability and future prospects.