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TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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UKRAINE UPDATE #28

Yesterday, pro-Russian activists proceeded with a highly controversial referendum in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Eastern Ukraine. According to the results presented by the pro-Russian separatists, 89% and 96% in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions respectively voted in support of independence of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk.

Shortly after the referendum, Donetsk People's Republic leader Denis Pushilin called on Moscow to include the Donetsk region in the Russian Federation.

The interim Ukrainian government and western countries condemned the referendum as illegitimate. Acting President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov called it "a farce...which will have no legal consequences except the criminal responsibility for its organizers."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Ukraine's government must start a direct dialogue with separatists in Eastern Ukraine before international talks on the crisis can proceed. Referencing the referendum he said today that the Kremlin "respects the expression of [the] will of the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions," and asked for the referendum's results to be respected and implemented.

The EU foreign ministers met today in Brussels, and agreed to expand sanctions on Russia. The new sanctions will impose visa bans and asset freezes on 13 additional individuals, including Russian officials and pro-Russian separatists operating in Ukraine, as well as two Crimea-based energy companies.

NCSJ spoke to the Jewish community representatives in a number of cities in Eastern Ukraine. In Mariupol, where deadly violence broke out last week, the situation as of today is more stable. According to Jewish community representatives, the referendum proceeded with no major incidents. The general population is concerned about further unrest in the city, and are waiting to see what the next steps from Moscow will be, the representatives said.

While the situation in Mariupol is more stable now, some bank branches have closed and a number of people have difficulty accessing their social security payments and their savings. The bank closings have also affected the Jewish community funds.

The Jewish community of Slavyansk reported shootings in the city yesterday and today. Nevertheless, Hesed centers are open, and schools and kindergartens will reopen tomorrow. Some banks have stopped operating and there are difficulties with getting cash. According to the Jewish community leadership, people in the city have been shaken up by recent violence resulting from the government's anti-terrorist operation offensive, and don't see an easy solution to the current crisis.

In Artemovsk, another small town in the Donetsk region, local authorities banned the referendum and the general situation is stable.

In Kharkiv, according to the Jewish community the situation is also stable. A small number of people came out yesterday in support of the referendum, but no other incidents occurred over the weekend.

The situation is also quiet in Odessa. The Jewish community leadership reported no new incidents in the city. They again refuted reports of calls for mass evacuation inside the Jewish community. Jewish community programs are being held as scheduled and Hesed centers are open, they said.

They also said that the deadly violence that took place on May 2 has divided Odessans on the issue of who is responsible for the deadly clashes; however, the people of Odessa stand united in wanting a stable situation in the city and an end to violence.

NCSJ also contacted the Jewish community leadership of Dnipropetrovs'k. They reported a stable situation in the city and the Dnipropetrovs'k region. However, the general level of anxiety about the recent developments in the Donetsk and Lugansk region is very high. Businesses have been negatively affected by the crisis and by Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

As always, NCSJ will continue to monitor the situation throughout Ukraine, and provide you with timely and critical updates.

About NCSJ

NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia, founded in 1971, represents the organized American Jewish community in monitoring and advocating on behalf of the estimated 1.5 million Jews living in the 15 successor states of the former Soviet Union.

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