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TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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UKRAINE UPDATE #13

Yesterday, tensions intensified again in Ukraine, as the Crimean parliament voted in favor of joining Russia and set March 16 as the date for a regional referendum.

The situation has also escalated in Donetsk, in Eastern Ukraine, where clashes took place between police and pro-Russian groups who seized the city administration building. The pro-Russian protesters called on the local administration to declare the new government illegitimate and to announce a referendum on the breaking away from Ukraine.

Russia's parliament voiced support for the vote in Crimea to break away from Ukraine and become a part of the Russian Federation.

Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, however called the Crimean vote unconstitutional and said the referendum would be "an illegitimate decision. Crimea was, is and will be an integral part of Ukraine."

The vote was also condemned by President Obama, who in a speech said that "any discussion about the future of Ukraine must include the legitimate government of Ukraine." The EU leaders also issued a statement calling the planned referendum unconstitutional.

In an hour-long phone conversation with President Putin yesterday, President Obama urged his Russian counterpart to authorize direct talks with Ukraine's interim government and called for a diplomatic settlement.

Meanwhile, the United States government announced targeted sanctions against Russia, including visa bans on individuals deemed responsible for undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity. The U.S. administration has already suspended military cooperation and bilateral trade talks with Russia.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill yesterday (H.R. 4152) to provide loan guarantees to the new Ukrainian government. During a House Foreign Relations Committee hearing on U.S. policy toward Ukraine, ranking Democrat Rep. Elliott Engel directly quoted NCSJ in his remarks: "Let me take this opportunity to say a word about anti-Semitism...I recognize that there is a concern, but as the respected NCSJ recently stated, '...while there have been isolated incidents in Crimea and eastern Ukraine since the protests began in November, there has not been a pattern of violence against the Ukrainian Jewish population.'"

The EU has also suspended talks with Russia on liberalizing visa requirements for travel between Russian and the EU countries. Further measures, including travel bans and asset seizures are under discussion.

Russia reacted to these admonishments by the international community by threatening to respond in kind with similar bans or seizures.

Several Ukrainian Jewish community leaders sent an open letter to President Putin, urging him not to intervene in Ukraine's internal affairs. They argued in the letter that "the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine are not being discriminated against, [and] their civil rights have not been infringed upon." They also added that, while the opposition includes nationalistic groups, "even the most marginal do not dare show anti-Semitism or other xenophobic behavior."

NCSJ remains in regular contact with the Ukrainian community and others and continues to closely monitor the situation. The need to secure the Jewish institutions hasn't dissipated, and NCSJ continues to impress upon the Ukrainian government and the Jewish community the need to take necessary measures.

Several American Jewish organizations have responded to the needs of the Ukrainian Jewish community. The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) has established a Ukraine Assistance Fund to provide for the community's most vulnerable and ensure the security of Jewish institutions. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) has increased security at select communal institutions and Hesed social welfare centers.

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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