

## **A bold "j'accuse" to Putin by prominent Ukrainian Jews on behalf of all Ukrainians**



(©Ansa) Vladimir Putin

*“Open letter” signed by Jewish intellectuals and public figures challenges Putin’s “lies” and hegemonic goals*

**LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 10 MARCH 2014**

“Mr. President! We are Jewish citizens of Ukraine: businessmen, managers, public figures, scientists and scholars, artists and musicians” begins the “Open letter To the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.”

“We are addressing you on behalf of the multi-national people of Ukraine, Ukraine’s national minorities, and on behalf of the Jewish Community.”

The letter now circulating, signed by significant Ukrainian Jewish personalities and still gathering more signatures, charges Putin with “consciously choosing lies and slander from the massive amount of information about Ukraine” to “delegitimize the new Ukrainian government”, defame the revolutionary movement for democracy of Maidan Square and divide the country.”

Lies have been circulated in Russian media, the letter holds, regarding the trampling of civil rights of Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine and “bans on the Russian language” existing only “in the heads of those who invented them”. The letter notes that “historically, Ukrainian Jews are also mostly Russian – speaking”.

Putin is also charged with falsely accusing Kiev of anti-Semitism and “Fascism.”

“Your certainty of the growth of anti-Semitism in Ukraine also does not correspond to the actual facts. It seems you have confused Ukraine with Russia”, the letter states, “where Jewish organizations have noticed growth in anti-Semitic tendencies last year.”

The letter hits out hard against Russia's hypocrisy in attributing extremism to Kiev while nurturing it at home. It states that while it is true that nationalistic groups are part of "the political opposition and forces of social protests who have secured changes for the better...even the most marginal do not dare show anti-Semitism or other xenophobic behavior. And we certainly know that our very few nationalists are well-controlled by civil society and the new Ukrainian government – which is more than can be said for the Russian neo-Nazis, who are encouraged by your security services."

Moreover, "there are quite a few national minority representatives in the Cabinet of Ministers: the Minister of Internal Affairs is Armenian, the Vice Prime Minister is a Jew, two ministers are Russian. The newly-appointed governors of Ukraine's region are also not exclusively Ukrainian."

The real threat, the letter holds, "is coming from the Russian government, namely – from you personally."

"It is your policy of inciting separatism and crude pressure placed on Ukraine that threatens us and all Ukrainian people, including those who live in Crimea and the Ukrainian South-East. South-eastern Ukrainians will soon see that for themselves", the letter warns.

The letter closes with irony and clear-cut demands.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich, we highly value your concern about the safety and rights of Ukrainian national minorities. But we do not wish to be 'defended' by sundering Ukraine and annexing its territory. We decisively call for you not to intervene in internal Ukrainian affairs, to return the Russian armed forces to their normal fixed peacetime location, and to stop encouraging pro-Russian separatism."

"Vladimir Vladimirovich, we are quite capable of protecting our rights in a constructive dialogue and in cooperation with the government and civil society of a sovereign, democratic, and united Ukraine. We strongly urge you not to destabilize the situation in our country and to stop attempts of delegitimizing the new Ukrainian government."

Estimates of the total Jewish population in the Ukraine today vary from 70,000 to 300,000.

According to Josef Zissels, Chairman of the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations of Ukraine (VAAD) who is the first signer of this document, the higher figure is the more credible. Because of their historic experience of pogroms and massacres during and between wars, Ukrainian Jews are fearful of exposing their religious or ethnic sense of identity, afraid this will lead to a proverbial "knock at the door" of their homes with subsequent violence. The estimated population includes both religious and secular Jews well integrated into public life.

"The Jewish population of Ukraine is about 0.7% of the total population of Ukraine and at least 10% of the members of the Ukrainian parliament have Jewish roots – i.e. they are part of the very same 300 000 that we count among the Jewish community, even if they do not advertise their Jewishness" says Zissels.

Ukrainian Jews participate in protests on an individual basis, neither encouraged nor discouraged by the Community. "But I believe", says the VAAD chairman, "first, that the

Jewish youth participate more often than older people, and, second, that as in other actions directed to democratize society, participation of Jews is disproportionately high.” He himself, some of his family, Jewish friends and acquaintances have joined the public protest.

However, as individuals living in democracy, Ukrainian Jews are also divided politically. Not all support the revolution.

The small minority of Jews in Crimea (which, incidentally, once hosted Jewish collective farms, temporarily designated by Communist Russia to become a future ‘Jewish homeland’) keep a lower profile, surrounded as they are by a majority of Russian nationalists and now invaded by Putin’s men.

An additional input of support for Maidan Square comes from young Israeli Jews of Ukrainian origin returning to the country in search of their roots, who have now joined the protest movement.

On Feb 28 “Haaretz” published a JTA interview with a former Israeli soldier known as “Delta”, born in the Ukraine, immigrated to Israel in the 1990s, who moved back to Ukraine several years ago and has headed the “Blue Helmets” – a nickname for a force of 35 men and women who are not Jewish plus “several fellow Israeli Defence Force veterans...in the still-unfinished revolution.”

Delta is an Orthodox Jew “in his late 30s who regularly prays at Rabbi Moshe Azman’s Brodsky Synagogue”. Although Svodoba, the Extreme Right political movement is part of the protest movement, Delta claims he “never saw any expression of anti-Semitism during the protests, and claims to the contrary were part of the reason I joined the movement. We’re trying to show that Jews care” he said.” Delta says the Kremlin is using the anti-Semitism card falsely to delegitimize the Ukrainian revolution, which is distancing Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence.”

He and Rabbi Azman “are organizing the airborne evacuation of seriously wounded protesters – none of them Jewish – for critical operations in Israel.”

All are hoping that this time, in contrast to past history, Ukraine’s Jewish citizens will not be cynically sacrificed as scapegoats for conflicting political strategies for hegemony – on one side or the other.

Several synagogues have been firebombed recently in the South-east, creating anxiety regarding future developments.