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Moscow's Ignoring of Iranian Leader's Anti-Semitism Has Deep Roots, Dangerous Consequences, Russian Commentator Notes

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Unlike some countries that refused to participate and others whose representatives walked out, the Russian delegation to the UN Conference on the Struggle Against Racism acted as if it "did not notice the anti-Semitic declarations" of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a leading Moscow commentator writes.

In an essay published in Novaya Gazeta, Boris Vishnevsky points out that the absence of any Russian reaction was especially troubling because it came on the anniversary of Hitler's birth and just before the Day of Memory for the Victims of the Holocaust, but he observes that unfortunately such a posture by Moscow has deep roots and sad consequences.

In large part because the UN conference gave a forum for the Iranian leader, who had earlier called for wiping Israel off the face of the earth, described the Holocaust as "an invention of the Zionists," and warned that Jews "must know that they are living out their last days," many Western countries refused to participate.

Among those, Vishnevsky points out, were the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and Italy, and when Ahmadinejad repeated his inventions and slanders, the representatives of Great Britain, France, the Czech Republic and other countries of the European Union walked out in protest.

"Only Russia," the Moscow commentator pointed out, "gave the impression that it had not taken notice of the revelations of the Iranian leader." Instead, Aleksandr Yakovenko, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said before Ahmadinejad's speech that "not all manifestations of racism, xenophobia and intolerance" have been eliminated from today's world.

But at the same time, Yakovenko, who headed the Russian delegation to the Geneva meeting, "assured those who had assembled that 'the mechanisms of the struggle with ethnic intolerance and xenophobia which exist in Russia are quite effective,'" a claim, Vishnevsky says, is undercut by "the terrifying statistics of Nazi attacks" in the country.

That claim reflects Moscow's effort to present itself as a fighter against extremism abroad even as it is doing little or nothing at home: The Russian Duma, he notes, is considering a draft bill that would impose criminal penalties on anyone, including foreign citizens, who denies Russia's unique role in World War II and then turns up on Russian territory.

If Moscow is indeed serious about fighting extremism, the Moscow writer says, it "might begin with Ahmadinejad and his friends, the leaders of Hamas," a group Moscow even now refuses to "recognize as a terrorist organization" but instead prefers to view as "worthy and respected partners for negotiations."

What makes Moscow's responses, or, more precisely, lack of response, to the Iranian leader's appalling remarks is, in the words of Vishnevsky, that "all this alas has deep historical roots and not only because Soviet and after them Russian officials have traditionally chosen for themselves friends and allies of the most odious international figures."

As Vishnevsky notes, Soviet and now Russian textbooks, when they talk about the Munich accords, do everything to minimize the reality that "until fascist Germany attacked the USSR, the Kremlin maintained with Hitler the best of relations." And if these texts mention the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact at all, they ignore many of its aspects.

One thing such books ignore is the speech of Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov on October 31, 1939 &mdash "a month after the beginning of the Second World War," as Vishnevsky notes &mdash in which the Stalinist leader denounced "the ruling circles of England and France" for trying to "present themselves as battlers for the democratic rights of peoples against Hitlerism."

"How all this ended," Vishnevsky writes, "is very well known." And given that bitter historical experience, he continues, "it would seem" that Russians in particular "would understand once and for all that there cannot be any dialogue, any attempt at mutual understanding or any political correctness in dealings with fascism."

Instead, they would know, "the struggle with fascism is not a struggle of ideologies, not

a struggle of rights and lefts, of social democrats and conservatives, of liberals and statists, where each has its own arguments that deserve respect;" but instead that it is "the struggle of people with cannibals." And in that, there cannot be "any compromises."

Unfortunately, and with potentially tragic consequences for the future, that is not an understanding the Russian government reflected by its failure to take note of and to condemn what the Iranian leader said at a conference to which he should never even have been invited to speak.

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