

Our good friend Vladimir?

President Putin's playing the Jewish card in Ukraine, but will it come up trumps?

VLADIMIR Vladimirovich Putin likes Jews. He particularly likes Chabad Jews. And he loves Israel. So he also sells weapons to Syria, which ships them to Hezbollah. That's business. But, against that, he's eager to tell you that he's sent the Red Army into Crimea to protect Ukraine's Jews from the Nazis, Fascists and anti-Semites who've seized power in Kiev.

No, this is not a Purimspiel script. But it is a Putinspiel script. The Russian president is "playing the Jewish card".

He's aiming to weaken support in the West for the Maidan revolution and to raise the spectre of pogroms in Ukraine. Having helped to write the agitprop playbook while at the KGB, Putin knows that sometimes propaganda needs to include some bits of the truth.

Enter Ukrainian history, replete with anti-Semitism. More recently, since the Maidan revolution began last November, public order has broken down in some cities, and allowing for suspicions about Russian provocateurs, there has been an increase in attacks on Jews, synagogues, and cemeteries.

Add to the mix that a minority partner in the new Kiev government, the Svoboda party, is unabashedly anti-Semitic, and even some Russian Jews are echoing Putin's propaganda. Yet the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, representing 200,000 Jews and the world's fifth largest Jewish community, has rejected the Kremlin's claims.

Moreover, one of the new Kiev government's three deputy prime ministers, Vladimir Groisman, is Jewish, and a Jewish oligarch and community leader, Igor Komoloisky, is the new governor of the Dniepropetrovsk province. Russian TV promptly labelled Komoloisky "as a Jewish gangster who secretly finances the Nazi-Svoboda party".

Reporting these developments in *The Jewish Daily Forward* (11/3), David Fishman noted that Putin is basing his campaign on the assumption that "Jews are well-represented in the US opinion-making elites, and that the European Union is deeply sensitive to Holocaust memory, xenophobia and racism."

It's worth reflecting on both the assumptions attributed to Putin. True, we cannot really know what motivates the Russian leader. But Fishman's analysis is plausible. In short, Putin may well believe that Jews have power and influence in the United States which they will use on behalf of other Jews in trouble. He may also believe that European opinion-makers are still sensitive about Nazis and the Holocaust.

As for the first assumption, there's something wonderfully – and weirdly – ironic about contemporary history's roller-coaster. Less than three decades after 250,000 American Jews rallied in 1987 in Washington DC, and called on Moscow to "Let my people go", Putin is trying to mobilise American Jews to help Moscow pursue its

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geo-strategic objectives. Go figure.

But it's the second assumption attributed to Putin which bears closer scrutiny. The alarming increase in anti-Semitism in Europe is an ugly amalgam of the extreme right's classical anti-Jewish scapegoating and stereotyping; Israel-bashing and leftist "anti-Zionism"; and Islamist religious incitement.

It varies by country; anti-Semitism in France, for example, expresses itself differently than in Hungary where it has infiltrated the government parties. Against that, Jews in Warsaw are far more relaxed about wearing a kippah in public than Jews in Copenhagen.

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But for most European Jews, anti-Semitism is all too real. On the evidence which the European Union itself gathered in 2013, based on a large-scale survey of 6000 Jews in eight member states with 90 per cent of Europe's Jewish population, 76 per cent said anti-Semitism had increased in the previous five years, especially in online hate, 46 per cent said they feared verbal harassment in public, and 33 per cent feared physical attack.

More than 75 per cent of respondents didn't report anti-Semitic harassment to police, and 64 per cent didn't report physical attacks, because they didn't believe that the police would do anything effective. Most disturbing, nearly a quarter fear to identify openly as Jews, including 50 per cent in Sweden, 40 per cent in France, and 21 per cent in Britain.

When these figures were published last November, to mark Kristallnacht's 75th anniversary, some European governments expressed their concerns, and did indeed show they were "sensitive to Holocaust memory".

But governments are influenced by the opinion-makers. And as so many of Europe's opinion-makers have become increasingly hostile to Israel, and more accommodating to Islamist pressures, they have also become less "sensitive" about old-fashioned extreme right-wing anti-Semitism.

So we come to the ultimate irony: Putin's efforts to portray himself as the Tsar who loves the Jews won't work. The Jews most concerned, those in Ukraine, don't want his help. And even if they did, the European opinion-making elites aren't all that sensitive any more about anti-Semitism.

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