

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. February 21, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Daniel Rubin, Chairman;
Aleksander Smukler, President;
Mark B. Levin, Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO**

Dear Friend,

Please see below for the weekly stories.

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10 **Washington, D.C. February 21, 2020**

Amid High-Level Personnel Reshuffle, Moscow Retains Hard-Nosed Policy Vis-à-Vis Ukraine
Pavel Felgenhauer
The Jamestown Foundation | February 20, 2020

On February 18, President Vladimir Putin signed an ukaz (executive order) dismissing his long-time cohort and political advisor Vladislav Surkov (55). The Kremlin tradition known as nomenklatura requires that someone dismissed from a top job be immediately provided with another one. A couple of weeks after the Russian government resigned on January 15, 2020, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced, "All former cabinet ministers have been found new jobs" (Interfax, February 2). Surkov's dismissal came without any such cushion. Peskov told journalists, "They [Putin and Surkov] met and his [Surkov's] voluntary resignation was accepted. A person as talented as Surkov will find a job" (Ura.news, February 18).

[Read the full article here.](#)

History as a battleground: What's next in Russia's constitutional reform?
Anastasiia Starchenko
The New Eastern Europe | February 18, 2020

Speaking in his annual state-of-the-nation address on January 15th 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a number of sweeping constitutional amendments in a move that many experts believe marks his intention to shift to another position of authority in 2024 when his current term as president expires. He followed up on his call for constitutional amendments by submitting proposed changes to the State Duma (Russia's lower house of parliament), which unanimously adopted the draft bill in the first reading on January 23rd. Although the bill was scheduled to face its second reading on February 11th, Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Duma, said this would take place no sooner than late February or early March. However as much as one may speculate on regime change in Russia, Putin's obscure and rather contradictory constitutional agenda makes one thing clear: he may step aside from the presidency, but he will remain at the country's helm for the foreseeable future.

[Read the full article here.](#)

The curator of the Polish Jewish museum wins \$500k award - here's her story

PJ Grisar

Forward | February 20, 2020

In late January, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett received a call from an unfamiliar Israeli number. It was the president of Tel Aviv University, informing her she had received an award of half a million dollars. "It's like a TV show when they call you completely out of the blue," said Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the Ronald S. Lauder Chief Curator of the core exhibition at POLIN, Poland's Jewish museum in Warsaw. "It was a thunderbolt. It was, as they say, min hashamayim."

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Lonnie Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, share the \$1 million 2020 Dan David Prize for Cultural Preservation and Revival. The prize foundation, based at Tel Aviv University, awards three \$1 million prizes in three categories. This year, there are two laureates sharing each award. Bunch and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett will split the money and each will give 10% to scholarships for doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships in their field (she knows exactly where to put the money, but won't say quite yet).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Holocaust survivors inaugurate forest in the memory of Lithuanian Jews

Editorial

The Jerusalem Post | February 20, 2020

This Tu Bishvat, 250 Holocaust survivors and their close relatives inaugurated a new forest in Southern Israel, as part of a series of Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel-Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) forest rehabilitation projects, including in the Negev desert.

This new forest is dedicated to the memory of Lithuania's Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust. As such, the Ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania to Israel, Lina Antanavičienė, attended the inauguration ceremony and planted a tree.

The Consul-General of Germany, representatives from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the heads of leading Israeli NGOs assisting Holocaust survivors in Israel also attended the ceremony and planted trees.

Businessman and philanthropist, Roman Abramovich, is one of the main donors of the project. Of Jewish Lithuanian descent, Abramovich chose to fund the new forest in the memory of Lithuania's Jews.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Europe uses Israeli elections as excuse for inaction

Akiva Eldar

Al-Monitor | February 20, 2020

Opinion polls indicate that it would be unwise to place a bet on March 2 as the date Israeli television channels air the final episode of the popular reality show, "The story of a permanent interim government." With the opening date of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's trial on charges of corruption set for March 17, Israel could become the world's first democracy whose leader splits his time between Cabinet sessions and court sessions. The serial elections — with the third looming on March 2 — not only help Netanyahu's Likud party hold on to power, they delay the annexation of the West Bank settlements based on US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The back-to-back elections also enable opponents of the plan — chief among them the European Union (EU) and leading European states — to continue hemming and hawing and dozing in the bleachers. EU foreign ministers who met Feb. 17 to discuss the Trump plan and recognition of a Palestinian state decided to postpone their discussion until after next month's Israeli elections. "We briefly discussed how best to relaunch a political process ... and how best to defend internationally agreed parameters of equal rights and international law," the ministers' communique stated. How do they know that Israel will have an elected government next month? How can they be sure that if Blue and White leader Benny Gantz heads the next government rather than Netanyahu, he will have sufficient Knesset votes to impose the principles of "protecting equal rights and international law" in the occupied territories?

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russian-speaking Jews visit Israel's Gaza-border communities

Jewish news Reporter | February 20, 2020

Hundreds of Russian-speaking diaspora Jews visited Jewish communities near the Gaza border last

week as part of a 10-day Birthright Israel trip.

Celebrating Birthright's 20th year, around 800 visitors from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Azerbaijan attended the 'Taglit in the Flourishing Desert' event in the western Negev to "show long-standing support" for the residents and businesses near Gaza.

Activities included food-tasting, graffiti workshops, drumming circles, bike tours and even "laughing yoga" as participants toured places such as Ashkelon and Sderot, as well as kibbutzim and moshavim.

[Read the full article here.](#)

In World Zionist elections, American Jews who care about Israel get their say

Ben Harris

JTA | February 20, 2020

It's election season, and American Jews are turning out in large numbers to vote with Israel on their minds.

No, we're not talking about the U.S. presidential election or Israel's upcoming Knesset elections, but elections for the World Zionist Congress - the only genuinely democratic body in which Jews from around the world get a say in how some \$1 billion per year is allocated to projects in Israel and around the world through some of Israel's largest national institutions.

When the last World Zionist Congress elections were held five years ago, some 56,000 American Jews voted and 11 parties were in the running.

This time, more than 54,000 votes have been cast since the voting period began on Jan. 21— about double the pace compared to the 2015 election and rising as the March 11 voting deadline approaches. In all, 15 party slates featuring 1,800 candidates are vying for 152 seats from the United States.

"American Jews want to have a voice," said Herbert Block, executive director of the American Zionist Movement, which organizes the U.S. elections. "The high turnout is a strong sign of the renewed interest in the U.S. Jewish community in Israel and Zionism."

To participate, voters must register online and pay the \$7.50 fee (\$5 for those 18 to 25).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Israeli ambassador: 'Right to free speech is not the right to hate speech'

Editorial

Sofia Globe | February 19, 2020

The right to free speech is not the right to hate speech, Israel's ambassador to Bulgaria Yoram Elron told the "Together against Hate Speech" event in Sofia on February 19.

The event, a response to the annual Lukov March to be held in Bulgaria's capital city on February 22, was co-organised by the Goethe Institute, Israeli embassy, German embassy, GLAS Foundation, Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom", the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Wikipedia Bulgaria volunteers.

The Lukov March, held in Sofia every February since 2003, honours a pro-Nazi general who led the fascist Union of Bulgarian National Legions during the early 1940s. Participants in the torchlit evening procession include neo-Nazis from other parts of Europe.

Elron said that hate speech was a global challenge that affects everyone.

The Lukov March was propaganda of an aggressive nature, with xenophobic ideas and hate speech, honouring a person who promoted xenophobia, he said.

Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev understood this, Elron said, saying that he appreciated Geshev's endeavours in investigating the organisers of the Lukov March.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russia Faces New Demands and Conditions From Bulgaria

Kseniya Kirillova

Jamestown | February 19, 2020

Tensions between Russia and Bulgaria looked on the verge of resolution at the end of last month. But trust between the two countries has since declined.

In late January, Bulgaria announced its intention to replace half of its Russian natural gas consumption with volumes from the United States (Lenta.ru, January 28). The Russian media angrily likened this declaration to “blackmail,” designed to extort lower prices (Aftershock.news, February 3). Nonetheless, passions soon calmed down. And according to the latest information, Bulgargaz is in the final stages of negotiations with Russian Gazprom; the parties hope to reach an agreement to significantly reduce gas prices for Bulgaria by the end of February (TASS, February 11).

It appears, however, that the front-and-center debate over gas prices drew attention away from much more serious bilateral frictions. Notably, on January 24, Bulgarian authorities announced the expulsion of two Russian diplomats. The Bulgarian Prosecutor’s Office revealed that the decision was motivated by information received from the State Agency for National Security about suspected espionage activities by these two Russians with diplomatic immunity (Prb.bg, January 24).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Rabbi Goldschmidt: Social media must do more to combat hate speech online

Editorial

The Jerusalem Post | February 18, 2020

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and chief rabbi of Moscow, chaired a panel discussion at the Munich Security Conference on "combating hate crimes" on February 14, a statement from CER said. He was speaking alongside Maram Stern, executive vice president of the World Jewish Congress.

The discussion was on the spread of antisemitism, far-right extremism and Islamophobia on social media. One of the main focuses was that social media platforms must do more to regulate their channels and to deal with hate speech online.

"The internet has created a vast arena in which those who hold a deep hatred towards religious groups, for instance, are able to share their views with others," said Goldschmidt.

"More worryingly, they use a variety of platforms such as instant messaging to share dangerous tactics in their attempt to attack – both verbally and physically – those who do not subscribe to their way of thinking or choice of lifestyle," he warned.

"The evidence is clear: Hate and prejudice [are] commonplace on social media. The Halle synagogue on Yom Kippur and the mosque attack in Christchurch, New Zealand are prime examples of digitally inspired attacks," Goldschmidt concluded.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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About NCSEJ

Founded in 1971, the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry represents the organized American Jewish community in monitoring and advocating on behalf of the estimated 1.5 million Jews in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, including the 15 successor states of the former Soviet Union.

