

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. April 3, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

Dear Friend,

Below are stories grouped by region on how the countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia are dealing with the COVID-19 health crisis.

We have been holding a series of conference calls with leaders from the region. The latest was with Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Bleich and Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich. We will continue to arrange live reports from the region for the foreseeable future.

If you are not receiving notification of these calls and would like to join us, please contact David Pasmanik at dpasmanik@ncsej.org

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Passover!

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10 Washington, D.C. April 3, 2020

Indispensable Oligarchs: Ukraine Turns to Business Leaders to Support Anti-Coronavirus

Vladimir Socor

The Jamestown Foundation | April 2, 2020

Ukraine's top businessmen are answering President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call to assist and even lead the country's efforts to deal with the novel coronavirus pandemic. Zelenskyy had summoned Ukraine's wealthiest businessmen for an emergency meeting on March 16 in the presidential building to consider a coordinated response to the crisis. They responded with alacrity, and the effort is unfolding based on ideas exchanged at that meeting.

Three guiding ideas are clearly discernible. First, the "oligarchs" seem ready to help finance the state's effort, in addition to undertaking their own initiatives, which could be more extensive than the state's. Zelenskyy has asked for 12 billion-13 billion hryvnias (some \$440 million-\$470 million), it being understood that this would be a first-stage, short-term response to the pandemic. Second, Zelenskyy has assigned certain geographical areas of responsibility to the top business leaders, namely where their major business assets, company headquarters and social networks are based, and where their businesses are the main employers. And third, they are expected to organize anti-crisis centers on the level of Ukraine's provinces, assigning professional managers from their companies to such centers, it being understood that private-sector personnel would act more effectively than the state's.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Turkmenistan Has Banned Use Of The Word 'Coronavirus'
Joanna Kakassis

The Central Asian country of Turkmenistan claims it has no coronavirus cases. But if you happen to utter the word "coronavirus" while waiting, say, for the bus in the white-marbled capital Ashgabat, there's a good chance you'll be arrested.

That's because the Turkmen government, run since 2006 by the flamboyant dentist-rapper strongman Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, has reportedly banned the word, according to Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

Citing reports from Chronicles of Turkmenistan, which RSF describes as a rare independent media outlet in this notoriously secretive and restrictive country, the press freedom organization says Berdymukhamedov's government has forbidden state-controlled media from writing or uttering the word and has ordered its removal from health brochures distributed at hospitals, schools and workplaces.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondents in Ashgabat report that plainclothes police officers are also arresting people who wear face masks or discuss the pandemic in public.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Putin Extends Stay-at-Home Order Through April in Russia

Ann M. Simmons and Georgi Kantchev

Wall Street Journal | April 2, 2020

MOSCOW—Acknowledging the challenges of curbing the spread of coronavirus, Russian President Vladimir Putin extended a stay-at-home order through the end of the month, in a move expected to seriously challenge the country's ailing economy.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Czechs get to work making masks after government decree

Robert Tait

The Guardian | March 30, 2020

Czech citizens have mobilised in a national effort to make and distribute home-made masks after the government decreed face-wear mandatory for everyone in an effort to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The government, led by the prime minister, Andrej Babiš, has trumpeted mask-wearing as vital in controlling the spread of the virus and has urged other governments to follow suit.

The Czech Republic and neighbouring Slovakia are the only two countries in Europe to impose mandatory mask-wearing, the supposed benefits of which – although endorsed by the World Health Organization – are disputed by some.

[Read the full article here.](#)

The Shocking 'Coronavirus Coup' in Hungary Was a Wake-Up Call

Daniel Baer

Foreign Policy | March 31, 2020

On Monday, the Hungarian parliament passed a coronavirus bill that gave Prime Minister Viktor Orbán the power to rule by decree, with no end date, and established chilling new penalties on speech and on those who violate quarantine. The draft legislation had been released a week earlier and drew criticism from civil society groups and the Council of Europe's human rights chief, Dunja Mijatovic, among others. Orbán and his Fidesz party charged ahead with the move, which was greeted by declarations that democracy in Hungary was effectively over.

It was a reminder of something we should already know: While much of the world has shut down in the face of the pandemic, history hasn't stopped. The coronavirus is—understandably—consuming an enormous share of our collective attention right now; that means that other things that warrant our attention—Russia's plans to intervene in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the pre-existing humanitarian catastrophe in Syria's Idlib region, the calamitous state of climate change policy, the geopolitical and security concerns surrounding 5G digital infrastructure, European right-wing populism, and so on—are getting less of it than they otherwise would.

[Read the full article here.](#)

The Kremlin Delegates Unpopular Closedown Measures to Governors

Pavel Felgenhauer

The Jamestown Foundation | April 2, 2020

The chief surgeon of the main Russian coronavirus medical facility on the outskirts of Moscow, in Kommunarka, Denis Protsenko (44), has contracted COVID-19 and is in seclusion within his own facility (RIA Novosti, March 31). On March 24, Protsenko was in close contact with President Vladimir Putin (67), who visited Kommunarka (see EDM, March 26). While touring the medical complex, Putin donned a bright yellow full-body hazmat suit and respirator (Protsenko had on a white one); but both before going in and while discussing the COVID-19 outbreak afterward, Putin stood close and pressed hands with Protsenko (Kremlin.ru, March 24). The Kremlin has denied Putin caught the disease. But still, the president is now in seclusion in his Novo Ogaryovo (Moscow Oblast) countryside residence and ruling Russia remotely. Anyone Putin may physically meet, including his most trusted cohorts, could be an asymptomatic coronavirus carrier—and thus, a potential mortal health hazard to the president. On April 1, Putin for the first time chaired a Cabinet meeting remotely from Novo Ogaryovo. The government ministers were also each speaking via video connection, each of them from their own offices, not in one conference room. Putin announced this was a practical way to do government business while not threatening anyone's health. Russia's authorities have always had a reputation for remoteness from the masses they rule. But the COVID-19 outbreak has made this characterization that much more notable (Kommersant, April 2).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Why Estonia Was Poised to Handle How a Pandemic Would Change Everything

Masha Gessen

The New Yorker | March 24, 2020

Panic, dismay, anger, defiance, fear, despair, doubt, and occasional portions of denial: all of these have been common notes of communication lately, from the news media to private texts. But some of the messages coming out of Estonia, a tiny country on the Baltic Sea, sound discordantly confident. Estonians seem to think they've got this: they are not only handling the coronavirus pandemic but also facing the world in which we will live after it's over.

In many ways, Estonia's response has looked indistinguishable from that of most European nations. The country has closed its borders, shuttered its schools, and banned entertainment and leisure businesses from operating. The government has pledged to cover the bulk of personal income lost because of the pandemic; it has also been criticized for lacking a coherent strategy for addressing the crisis, including not having a clear and consistent approach to testing for covid-19. Still, with a relatively high rate of infection among European nations—it's in ninth place as of today, with two hundred and thirty-one known infections per million people—Estonia appears to have one of the lowest levels of panic. Politico is keeping track of panic levels, ranking them on a ten-point scale based on media coverage, panic buying, and other indicators. Estonia's level of panic is ranked three out of ten (compared to seven in France, which is just above Estonia in the number of known cases per capita; and five in Denmark, whose case number is just below Estonia's).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Lukashenka Comes Under Widespread Fire for Lax COVID-19 Response

Grigory Ioffe

The Jamestown Foundation | April 1, 2020

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has come under growing public pressure and international criticism for not undertaking the types of pervasive quarantine and mobility restriction policies to limit the spread of COVID-19 that had become de rigueur across most of the West.

On March 27, the Belarusian Ministry of Health held a press briefing at which it reported that 94 individuals in Belarus had been found to be infected with the novel coronavirus, including 8 infected within the previous two days, and 32 who had already recovered. Not a single COVID-19 death had been recorded to date. The country has 2,221 vacant hospital beds to isolate the immediate contacts of those infected. All those coming from abroad are obligated to maintain two weeks of self-isolation (Sputnik.by, March 27). But no other limitations currently exist in the country, in striking contrast with all of Belarus's neighbors. According to the official data, Belarus has presently recorded one person infected with coronavirus per 101,000 people—fairly low on the European scale.

Lukashenka's attitude to the coronavirus threat was clearly reflected in his remarks on March 24: "Anything can happen to you, but most important is not to panic. I am particularly afraid that people will become psychotic as a result of media-inspired anxiety. Psychosis will then breed all other illnesses—that is what the specialists say... We are relying on our and on [Chinese] experience in order to pass the peak of this disease at a manageable level. If we endure until Orthodox Easter [April 19], then we will survive" (Tut.by, March 24).

[Read the full article here.](#)

COVID-19 and the Greater Caspian Region

Caspian Policy | April 3, 2020

COVID-19 is the greatest test we have faced together since the formation of the United Nations,” UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said April 1, stating what many have felt — and feared — is indeed the case. As an American, if someone had told me a month ago that New York City would be shut down because of the disease, I would have said they were crazy. Now New York has been shut down for weeks and such restrictions on movement, social engagements, and business are overwhelmingly accepted as necessary by Americans, as confirmed in a report that the Brookings Institution released March 30.

The nine countries of the Greater Caspian Region also face severe challenges from the global spread of the coronavirus. These challenges are longer term as well as immediate. They affect individuals as well as institutions. They are domestic as well as international. And actions that individuals, governments, businesses, academic institutions, and other entities take now may also shape dynamics within these nine countries and the region even after COVID-19 is brought under control.

[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.



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