

Weekly Top 10



WASHINGTON, D.C. May 28, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

Dear Friend,

This week I participated in a panel for RAJE (Russian American Jewish Experience), speaking to young, Russian-Jewish college students about the history of Soviet Jewry and the importance of NCSEJ. [RAJE is offering online Jewish classes](#) offering a Jewish perspective and a sense of community.

Next Thursday, June 4, [NCSEJ will be holding a webinar with the Ambassador of Georgia to the United States, David Bakradze](#). Ambassador Bakradze will discuss the impact of the coronavirus on Georgia and throughout the Caucasus region. [Please click here for more info and to join us](#).

We wish everyone a happy and healthy Shavuot.

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

[If you enjoy these Newsletters, please consider making a donation to NCSEJ to help us support the Jewish communities of Eurasia during these uncertain times.](#)

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Goodbye, Open Skies?

Alexander Graef

Riddle.io | May 28, 2020

Last week the Trump Administration announced plans to leave the Open Skies Treaty. The US then submitted an official withdrawal notice to the treaty depositaries, Canada and Hungary. The withdrawal will take effect in November this year. Although the decision itself has been long in the making, its exact timing took even well-informed insiders by surprise. Back in October 2019, President Trump had signed an internal memorandum about withdrawing from the treaty. And in retrospect, by early April 2020, press reports did suggest a U.S. statement of intent to withdraw was imminent.

The Open Skies Treaty has been in force since January 2002. It allows its 34 member states to conduct joint, unarmed observation flights over each other's territory using sensors with a pre-defined resolution. The treaty also permits all member states to request images from overflights conducted by others. During overflights, representatives of both the observing state and the observed state can sit together in one aircraft. Military officers from different states, particularly NATO and Russia, engage with each other on a regular basis. Each member state has a fixed passive quota determining the number of flights it has to allow over its own territory. It corresponds to the number of flights it can conduct over other states' territory (active quota). Until December 2019, there were more than 1500 overflights. One third of them were over Russia and Belarus, which form one state party.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarus's Presidential Race Seemingly Heats Up

Grigory Ioffe

The Jamestown Foundation | May 27, 2020

Considering how front and center and ever present the novel coronavirus pandemic has been for months on end, it is rather stunning how the start of the presidential race in Belarus has managed, within only a week, to locally sideline news of the health crisis. This is all the more remarkable since, the outbreak of this dangerous respiratory illness is by no means over for Belarus. The country presently registers over 900 new COVID-19 cases daily, and the overall number of those infected was 38,059 as of May 26 (Tut.by, May 26).

Nonetheless, the campaign has been ramping up. Election officials have already registered the initiative groups (IG) of 15 presidential hopefuls (Onliner, May 20). Though, from the outset, it was unlikely that any more than five of these representative formations will be able to collect the 100,000 valid signatures needed for their candidates to be placed on the ballot, prior to the deadline of June 19. Those include the IGs of Victor Babariko, a former banker; Valey Tsepka, the founder of the Belarusian High-Tech Park (see EDM, May 19); Oleg Gaidukevich, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party; Andrei Dmitriev, a co-chair of the Speak the Truth civic campaign; and, possibly, Anna Kanopatskaya, a former member of parliament. Collecting 4,000 signatures per day on average is a daunting task even without the pandemic, during which many people are unwilling to open their doors to strangers.

[Read the full article here.](#)

The conflict in Donbas is not frozen and may soon require more attention

Arkady Moshes

Friends of Europe | May 28, 2020

The Minsk II agreement was signed in 2015 with the intention of settling the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas. Yet, it was doomed from the outset as it was founded on false pretences. Russia pretended it was not a party to the conflict. Europe pretended it agreed. And Ukraine, at that moment cornered militarily and diplomatically, pretended it was going to implement the deal.

Today, more than five years on, it should come as no surprise that any attempts to achieve progress on the ground, based on the Minsk accords, have little prospect. There is simply no incentive to carry them out.

Moscow refers to the letter of the document and insists that Ukraine could restore its sovereign control over the breakaway territories only after elections are held there and a special status is established for those territories within Ukraine. Not overly concerned with Western economic sanctions, which do not hinder energy trade with Russia, nor with the relatively minor costs of supporting separatist entities, the Kremlin sees no need to alter its approach.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Peter Eckstein-Kovacs has defended Jews and other Romanian minorities for decades. Will he survive the Orban era?

Charles Dunst

The Jewish News of Northern California | May 26, 2020

The former Romanian politician Peter Eckstein-Kovacs knows how to command an audience. He has broad shoulders and a bellowing voice, which at a recent political event here, in this country's Transylvania region, he uses to denounce all forms of bigotry and promote diversity. When the event organizer hands him the mic, Eckstein-Kovacs launches into a speech decrying those who use the "issue of the foreigner to scare people" — a less than opaque reference to the anti-immigrant views of right-wing European politicians.

Eckstein-Kovacs adds that he has some Jewish ancestry, which with the rest of his identity has informed stances he took throughout his political career — notably as a parliament member and adviser on minority issues to the president and prime minister — and now as a private citizen.

He represents ethnic Hungarians in Romania, who make up nearly 7 percent of this European nation's population (and almost 20 percent of Transylvania's) at the panel. Romania's centrist USR and PLUS parties organized the event to promote diversity in Sibiu, the former capital of the Transylvania region, as a model for the rest of Romania and Europe.

Other representatives stood in for their own communities: the Jews, Germans, Roma and even Arabs — there is one Syrian refugee who settled here in the 1990s, became fluent in Romanian and married a Romanian woman. Eckstein-Kovacs' voice fills the room, bouncing off the yellow-painted walls of the Biblioteca Astra Sibiu, the city's high-ceilinged baroque library.

It's a significant event for this part of Europe, where the anti-immigrant and autocratic policies of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in neighboring Hungary echo loudly. The event is also symbolic of Eckstein-Kovacs' position at the nexus of a range of these issues — and how he notably stands up for Romanian Jews and other minorities in a region highly scrutinized for its nationalism.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Opinion: US-China strategic rivalry will impact the South Caucasus too
Commonspace.eu | May 27, 2020

The post - COVID - 19 world is full of ambiguities. The future of global supply chains, and entire sectors such as tourism, face significant changes. However, amidst the uncertain predictions and assessments one thing stands apart in its clarity: US - China competition will be transformed into a strategic rivalry, and this will be the defining trend of 21st century's geopolitics. For sure, bilateral ties started to fray long before the pandemic, and the first signs of growing American concerns appeared during the second term of the Obama Presidency. However, the new American approach towards China crystallized in President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy. China, alongside Russia, was named as a revisionist power that wants to shape the world antithetical to U.S. values and interests, and Beijing was accused of having a desire to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

President Trump launched a trade war against China in 2018, but the two sides appeared to have reached a compromise in January 2020 when they signed the first phase of a mutual trade deal. Many hoped that this ceasefire will hold at least until the November 2020 US Presidential elections. However, COVID - 19 has changed everything. The colossal blow it struck on the United States where more than 100,000 people have died so far, and where the biggest economic decline since the Great Depression has been registered, brought China back into the American political debate. President Trump accuses the Chinese leadership of lack of transparency, and providing distorted information, also claiming that China is responsible for the terrific worldwide implications of the pandemic. Washington increased pressure on the Chinese economy, and in particular on its digital sector, putting in place tough measures against the technological giant Huawei. Simultaneously, the US demands its allies and partners decrease economic ties with China, to put more vigorous screening processes for Chinese investments, and to cancel any cooperation with Huawei.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russia's loan to Moldova (and its geopolitical strings)

Maximilian Hess

NPR | May 27, 2020

On April 17 the Moldovan government signed a loan agreement with Russia. Moldovan President Igor Dodon, who has long pushed closer ties with the Kremlin, posted the terms of the agreement to his Facebook page. With the COVID-19 pandemic pressuring Moldova's already struggling economy, Dodon presented borrowing 200 million euros from Moscow as the sort of brotherly support Chisinau could expect from the Kremlin.

Dodon and his allied Socialist Party's government under Prime Minister Chicu have publicly considered borrowing cash from Moscow for months. (Reportedly, the Kremlin had been

offering as much as 500 million.) Yet despite Dodon's positive words, the loan represents an emerging trend where the Kremlin uses government debts for political leverage in debtor countries.

In any case, the deal was still not complete by the end of April. And in fact, Moldova's constitutional court then struck down the agreement on 7 May, finding it unconstitutional. With this ruling, the country dodged a bullet, despite Dodon's condemnation that the deal's collapse would damage the economy.

On the face of it, Russia's loan offer seemed benign. After all, Dodon shared its terms publicly and the 2 percent annual interest on a 10 percent loan is far below what Moldova would have to pay on the private market for a similar credit. Closer analysis of its terms, however, lays clear the trap within.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarus is the world's strangest state right now

Yahor Azarkevich

The New Eastern Europe | May 28, 2020

On Sunday, many Belarusians came to the square in front of Minsk's largest food market to endorse the presidential candidates Svetlana Tikhonovskaya and Vladimir Nepomnyashchikh - they had their first meeting to collect signatures. These were the so-called "protest candidates", led by the increasingly popular video blogger Sergei Tikhonovsky and Mikola Statkevich, one of the leaders of Belarus's conventional political opposition. Both of them have been recently denied registration as presidential candidates. For Tikhonovsky, this was because his documents lacked a personal signature which he couldn't put due to the ongoing administrative arrest, while Statkevich was once imprisoned as one of the organisers of the 2010 mass protests. Although not officially on the list of candidates, Tikhonovsky is the head of his wife Svetlana's team and Statkevich is heading the campaign of the retired MIA officer Nepomnyashchikh.

At the same day and in the same place, these two were joined by groups of supporters of the other two potential candidates: Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepkalo (the politicians themselves were not there). Babariko is a philanthropist, patron of the arts and the ex-director of one of the largest banks in Belarus, Belgazprombank - the position he resigned from upon announcing his presidential bid. Tsepkalo is the former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the US and Mexico and the creator of Belarus Hi-Tech Park - the centre of the country's new leading economic sphere. According to multiple opinion polls from the independent media, Babariko (especially), Tikhonovsky and Tsepkalo are leading the race for support with more than 80 per cent of its total share.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Dozens of Eastern European Interns Explore Aliyah as Doctors in Israel

Hana Levi Julian

The Jewish Press | May 28, 2020

Despite the fear of another wave of the COVID-19 coronavirus next winter, 110 doctors from across Eastern Europe signed up for the next session of the 'Israel Experience' medical program, the Jewish Agency's subsidiary for education.

The program brings physicians from Eastern Europe who are entitled to the Law of Return and integrates them into the medical system in hospitals and the IDF. To this date, over 700 doctors have graduated from the program.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russian Jews have been preparing for this crisis our whole lives

Alex Zeldin

The Forward | May 24, 2020

It's hard to resist employing the kind of cynical Jewish humor that Russian-speaking Jews know so well when speaking with Americans. If you're asked a question you don't want to answer, well, be a clever Jew and respond back with your own question.

For Russian Jews, whether they reside in Moscow, Ashkelon, Berlin, or Minneapolis there is one thing they can be sure of: hard times will come.

I successfully resisted the urge when my editor posed to me the question: How will COVID-19 change the Russian-Jewish community? I really wanted to ask a question in response: What Russian-Jewish community? But the honest answer is, COVID-19 won't change Russian Jews. Without coordinating with each other, most Russian Jews have unknowingly been preparing for COVID-19 their entire lives.

To get a sense of what I mean, it's important to first understand who we're talking about. After

all, there is no communal structure to speak of for Russian Jews in America or other places where they fled to. There is no Russian Jewish Rabbinic Assembly, Union of Russian Jewish Congregations of America, or Russian Jewish federation (unless you count UJA's Russian division or a Russia-based Jewish organization that, for better or worse, has good Kremlin access).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Uzbekistan: Critics of state TV's disaster coverage fired Eurasia.net | May 27, 2020

Two journalists at a popular sports television channel in Uzbekistan have been fired after speaking critically on air about how a state-run news channel covered the recent disastrous collapse of a dam near the town of Sardoba.

Bobur Akmalov and Jamoliddin Babajanov, a former editor and producer at Sport, respectively, made their remarks during a radio program broadcast on May 18.

Babajanov expressed surprise at how footage aired by Uzbekistan-24 predominantly showed jubilant residents in Sardoba, despite many of those same people having only recently lost their homes. State-run and state-loyal media indeed focus much of their coverage not on the disaster itself, but instead on rescue and relief operations. The collapse of the dam, which was built in the years that current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was serving as prime minister, forced 90,000 people from their homes and left at least six dead.

"Watching Uzbekistan-24, I thought that Sardobans must be happy about the flood. That they were delighted by the tragedy," Babajanov said on the radio show.

Akmalov expressed similar bemusement, saying that the people seen on television reminded him of images from North Korean propaganda.

[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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