

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. June 19, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

Dear Friend,

On Thursday June 18, [NCSEJ co-sponsored a film screening by the Kennan Institute to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Leningrad “Hijackers”](#). The film is about a group of young refuseniks—mostly Soviet Jews denied permission to emigrate—who set out to commandeer an empty plane outside of Leningrad and use it to escape the USSR in June of 1970. The Leningrad Trials was one of the events that spurred the creation of NCSEJ almost 50 years ago and served as an inspiration to the millions of Jews wishing to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

[On Wednesday, June 24](#) we will honor outgoing NCSEJ Chair, Daniel Rubin, and welcome incoming Chair, James Schiller, at our Board of Governors Virtual Meeting. The guest speakers are Bulgarian Foreign minister, Ekaterina Zaharieva and Assistant Secretary of State at the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip T. Reeker. [We hope you will join us.](#)

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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For Migrants in Russia, Virus Means no Money to Live and No Way to Leave

Ivan Nechepurenko

The New York Times | June 15, 2020

MOSCOW — Migrant workers from Central Asia, shrugging off the risk of coronavirus infection, have gathered in groups each day outside their countries' embassies in Moscow, banging on doors and fences and shouting for officials to come out and tell them when they can finally get on a charter flight home.

With regular flights canceled, charters offer the only feasible way out for the more than five million migrant workers from former Soviet republics now stranded in Russia as a result of the pandemic, with many living in increasingly dire circumstances.

While Russia has been battered by the virus, with the third most cases in the world after the United States and Brazil, the crisis has hit migrant workers especially hard, as they were the first to lose their jobs and often the last to receive medical help.

Many have no money for food and, once infected with the coronavirus, have been left in crowded dorms to fight the disease by themselves. Many would like to return to their countries.

But they can't.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Kyiv Raising the Level, Accelerating the Pace of the Minsk Process (Part One)

Valdimir Socor

The Jamestown Foundation | June 18, 2020

Kyiv is adding Ukrainian citizens from the Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine's east as members of Kyiv's delegation to the Minsk Contact Group (see EDM, June 15, 17). But this is only one aspect of the delegation's thorough overhaul. At the same time, Kyiv has turned its Contact Group delegation from a semi-official one into a fully governmental and parliamentary delegation, under the presidential office's and the government's hands-on management, albeit bringing Ukrainian citizens from Donetsk-Luhansk along as delegation members.

According to Presidential Office chief Andriy Yermak, Kyiv's delegation to the Minsk Contact Group until recently resembled a "charitable activity" ("volonterski"), in the sense that its key figures were no longer active-duty officials, were not mandated to make significant decisions, and (as Yermak implies) had basically volunteered their services (Levy Bereg, June 17).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russian disinformation operation relied on forgeries, fake posts on 300 platforms, new report says

Ellen Nakashima and Craig Timberg

The Washington Post | June 16, 2020

Russian operatives used online forgeries, fake blog posts and more than 300 social media platforms to undermine opponents and spin disinformation about perceived enemies throughout the world, including in the United States, according to a new report published Tuesday.

The list of figures that operatives targeted over six years of persistent, wide-ranging activity reads like an enemies list for Russian President Vladimir Putin: Ukraine's government, the World Anti-Doping Agency, Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, French President Emmanuel Macron and former U.S. secretary of state and presidential nominee Hillary Clinton.

The claims, detailed in the report by research firm Graphika, were rarely subtle. Clinton in 2016 was dubbed a “MURDERER.” Political rivals were depicted as incompetent or alcoholics. The World Anti-Doping Agency, which barred Russia and many of its athletes from the 2016 Olympics, was falsely accused of colluding with pharmaceutical companies.

Graphika, despite working closely with researchers from numerous social media companies, was unable to identify what part of Russia’s sprawling intelligence operations were responsible for the disinformation effort. But the motive, researchers said, was clear — to malign and divide people and organizations disliked by Putin and seen as threats to his power, particularly in Ukraine.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Postviral Complications: What Next for the Russian Regime?

Konstantin Shorkin

Carnegie Moscow Center | June 15, 2020

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s team has managed to alleviate the old standoff between east and west that had dominated Ukrainian politics for many years. But it’s being replaced by a new dividing line: between the center and regional clans. While old foes from both east and west have been sidelined, local barons—unified by their unhappiness with the lockdown—are ready to challenge Zelensky’s hegemony in regional elections this fall.

The president’s attempts to strengthen control over the regions immediately face two major obstacles. The first is a long-running reform aimed at decentralizing Ukraine, which boosts the position of regional elected officials. The second is resistance to the center from local clans, which dislike the president’s fight against corruption and the fresh blood his team has brought in. The mayors of big cities such as Kiev, Kharkiv, Odessa, and Lviv, who have close ties to regional and national business groups, are becoming the president’s main opponents.

Zelensky cannot abandon the decentralization reform. It’s part of the process of closer integration with the EU, and is financed by international institutions, in addition to being one of the terms of the Minsk agreements aimed at ending the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Those agreements stipulate decentralization and special status for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics. The problem is that local government has essentially been hijacked by regional factions that are largely in opposition to the president. In the west of the country, they are controlled by supporters of Zelensky’s predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, while in the southeast, they are the heirs of the Party of Regions, Ukraine’s ruling party under former president Viktor Yanukovich.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarus presidential election 2020: (un)obvious choices

Maxim Rust and Yahor Azarkevich

The New Eastern Europe | June 15, 2020

In recent years, we have become accustomed to the fact that the topic of Belarus mostly appears in global media in connection with its most important election campaigns. These were usually parliamentary or presidential elections. The geopolitical situation in the region has changed significantly over the past five years – and Belarus has increasingly started to appear in the media in context other than elections. However, this year’s election campaign is unique.

Firstly, the Belarusian establishment began to significantly diversify its foreign policy directions. There were efforts to normalise relations with the West, and on the other hand, attempts were made to reduce Russia’s political influence. This policy has partly changed the character of the socio-political relations in the country. Secondly, the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak in Belarus (and the response of the authorities to it) has greatly influenced the dynamics of political processes. The initial aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic highlighted the weaknesses of both the ruling elite and the counter-elite. They also began to reveal the hidden mobilisation potential of the Belarusian society. Thirdly, this year’s campaign has lost the dichotomous division we have known for many years: authorities vs political opposition. Fourthly, as a result of the factors mentioned above, several new candidates have emerged who do not want to be associated with either the authorities or the opposition. They present themselves as an alternative to the political and social system, and, crucially, have the greatest public support.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Emerging Room for Rapport Between Sokhumi Tbilisi

Emil Avdaliani
CACI | June 18, 2020

Russian-occupied Abkhazia held presidential elections on March 22, with a turnout of 71 percent according to the released figures. Up to 100,000 people participated in the elections where Aslan Bzhania, a long time opposition figure in Abkhazia, garnered most of the votes. The elections followed a wave of protests from early January when hundreds of protesters gathered in front of the presidential building, which then housed Raul Khajimba. On January 9, demonstrators stormed the government administration building, which eventually led to Khajimba's resignation on January 13. Moscow was instrumental in the political transition process, with Russian President Vladimir Putin's longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov travelling to Abkhazia and facilitating the transfer of political power from Khajimba.

An event equally important to internal Abkhaz politics was Surkov's resignation in late January. Surkov was responsible for orchestrating policies in Ukraine's Donbas and no less importantly in Abkhazia as well as Georgia's other Russian-occupied region, South Ossetia.

Khajimba was closely linked to Surkov. The latter's resignation fits into the growing discontent in Moscow over the decrepit state of affairs in Abkhazia. Surkov became more involved in Abkhazia's politics after 2012 when he made frequent visits to the region. The Kremlin's policies in Abkhazia were to a large extent constructed around Surkov's personal contacts, which he had accumulated over several years of service. An Abkhaz president would inevitably be a man of his choice. This was the case with Khajimba, whose demise reflected problems with Surkov's management style and Russia's overall troubled position in the region.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Interior Ministry suspends Jewish status of 2,200 children
Jeremy Sharon
The Jerusalem Post | June 16, 2020

The Interior Ministry has denied the Jewish status of more than 2,200 children born to immigrants from the former Soviet Union in recent years, following investigations it conducted into the documentation provided upon immigration. As reported by The Jerusalem Post in 2018, the Interior Ministry's investigations only target citizens from the former Soviet Union, or their children, but it now appears that the ministry is conducting them on a far more systematic basis. The data was obtained by the Itim religious services advisory organization following a freedom of information request it made in 2018.

It took a year for the request to be granted and the information provided, which is accurate as of the middle of 2018. There are likely many more children who the Interior Ministry has refused to register as Jewish today.

Typically, the investigations begin when a citizen from the former Soviet Union has a child and registers it with the Interior Ministry, or when another member of the family seeks to perform some other bureaucratic function with the ministry, such as marriage registration or similar.

It appears that when officials from the ministry notice that an individual is from the former Soviet Union they begin their investigations into their Jewish status, and examine documents provided when they or their parents immigrated. In some cases, the Interior Ministry has refused to register as Jewish some citizens who actually married through the chief rabbinate.

In one case reported by the Post, the Interior Ministry refused to register as Jewish the child of a woman whose grandmother was a Holocaust survivor and whose mother was a Soviet refusenik who eventually was able to leave the Soviet Union and married through the Chief Rabbinate.

When the Interior Ministry flags up an individual they believe not to be Jewish, a vaguely worded letter is sent to them informing them of indeterminate issues with their Jewish status.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Kazakhstan grapples uneasily with its second coronavirus wave
Almaz Kumenov
Eurasia.net | June 18, 2020

With official coronavirus bulletins showing Kazakhstan's outbreak reverting to a worrying trend in recent days, the president this week sought to inject a note of reassurance.

"The situation with coronavirus has, because of the mass lack of observance of the quarantine regime on the part of citizens, remained complicated, but it is under the government's control," Kassym-Jomart Tokayev wrote on Twitter on June 17. "Tomorrow, it will unveil measures to stabilize the epidemiological situation."

Details of those measures, however, would be entirely overshadowed when it emerged that Tokayev's predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was diagnosed with COVID-19. That he is one of a number of top elite figures to become infected looks like a vivid illustration of the intensity of this phase of the crisis. Saule Kisikova, head of the city health department in the capital, Nur-Sultan, acknowledged that the epidemiological situation is deeply troubling.

"In infectious diseases and temporary hospitals, up to 90 percent of available beds are occupied," she said at a briefing. "Among those hospitalized, 91 percent of the patients are classified as mild to severe cases. Another 9 percent are severe or extremely severe. The number of patients on ventilators has increased fourfold."

She provided no timeframe for that last figure.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Poland's Jewish leaders deplore stigmatization of LGBTQ people **NBC News | June 17, 2020**

WARSAW — Jewish community leaders in Warsaw on Tuesday voiced their opposition to the "dehumanizing" language they say is being used against LGBTQ (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and queer) people in Poland's presidential election campaign.

Gay rights have been thrust into the spotlight during the campaign for the June 28 election. President Andrzej Duda, an ally of the right-wing ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), views what he calls LGBTQ "ideology" as an invasive foreign influence that harms traditional values in the devoutly Catholic nation.

"We have observed politicians... cynically undertake to foment hostility and hatred towards LGBT persons," the Board of the Jewish Community of Warsaw wrote in a letter.

"We Jews - the descendants of Holocaust survivors - cannot and will not remain indifferent to words that would dehumanize LGBT persons," the board wrote, saying that politicians had failed to learn the lessons of World War Two.

Duda has said he would ban teaching about LGBTQ issues in schools and labelled LGBTQ "ideology" more destructive than communism. He later said his words on LGBTQ and communism were taken out of context.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Why Putin Needs a "Nationwide Vote" **Yana Gorokhovskaia** **Institute of Modern Russia | June 16, 2020**

Beginning on June 25, Russians will vote on a package of constitutional reforms that include, among affirmations of the primacy of the Russian language and heterosexual marriage, the "zeroing out" of Vladimir Putin's four previous presidential terms. This change would overturn the current constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms, and allow Putin to potentially remain in power until 2036. The voting procedure is designed to confirm Putin's continued leadership of Russia while minimizing the possibility of public dissent. Plebiscites of this kind usually deliver the result sought by the regime but can also act as a barometer of public sentiment. By putting the question of reforms to a vote, Putin is showing that the foundations of his political power are built on popular consent, not institutional legitimacy.

Plebiscites, also called referendums, are a popular political tool in democracies. They are a form of direct democracy that take the decision on a difficult political issue—Brexit, parliamentary reform, succession—out of the hands of elected representatives and put it into the hands of the people. These "supreme forms of popular power" also have a long history in authoritarian states where, rather than

empowering the public, they demonstrate public approval of decisions already made by elites. In the post-Soviet space, plebiscites have been used to expand and secure executive power repeatedly in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Researchers have found that personalistic regimes, which derive legitimacy from the leader's popularity, are more likely than other kinds of authoritarian regimes (i.e. military or party dictatorships) to hold plebiscites to demonstrate the "people's trust."

Russia's upcoming vote on the constitutional reforms is an attempt to gain public endorsement of the political course chosen by Putin. The procedure by which the Kremlin seeks to validate the constitutional reforms has been specifically designed to mitigate any risks potentially posed by directly engaging the public rather than working through compliant legislatures.

[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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