

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. July 3, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: James Schiller, Chairman;
Mark B. Levin, Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO**

Dear Friend,

More than 77% of Russian voters have backed constitutional changes that would allow Vladimir Putin to potentially stay in power until 2036. The opposition accused the government of rigging the vote. Critics of the Kremlin said the vote lacked transparency and was not conducted to electoral standards.

Polish President Andrzej Duda won the most votes in Sunday's election but fell short of the 50% needed to win without a second round of voting. Mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski was in second place with 30.3%. The results mean Duda and Trzaskowski will go head to head in a second round on July 12, in a vote that will determine Poland's political future.

A major challenger to Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has been barred from taking part in next month's presidential election. Valery Tsepka was among nine candidates removed from the race by Belarus' Central Election Commission (CEK). Lukashenko, who has served as President since the country's independence in 1994, has seen a decline in his popularity, with some polls estimating his popularity rating between 3 and 7 percent. There have also been a number of demonstrations leading up to the election, criticizing Mr. Lukashenko for his handling of the coronavirus crisis.

Finally, I'd like to wish you and your family a celebratory and safe 4th of July holiday.

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

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**NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10
Washington, D.C. July 3, 2020**

**Armenia Opens Embassy in Israel: Yerevan's Former Ambassador to Washington Shares Insights
The Armenian Mirror Spectator | June 30, 2020**

TEL AVIV – In 2019, Yerevan's interest in developing relations with the country of Israel began to take concrete form. Grigor Hovhannisian, Armenia's former deputy foreign minister and previously ambassador to the US, was on a trip to that country in March of 2019. In September, after Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan visited Tel Aviv, it was reported that Yerevan would open an embassy in Israel in the following year. Fast-forwarding to February of 2020, Armenia's President Armen Sarkissian signed a presidential decree on relocating the residence of the Armenian ambassador to Tel Aviv. Before that, the embassy was in Yerevan itself. Thus, the longstanding issue of whether to open an Armenian embassy in Israel moved forward from deadlock.

[Read the full article here.](#)

**Russians overwhelmingly back amendments that will keep Putin in power, early returns show
Isabelle Khurshudyan | July 1, 2020**

MOSCOW — Nearly six months after President Vladimir Putin first suggested a raft of constitutional changes, Russians voted Wednesday on the culmination of an agenda to keep the president in power until 2036.

Russia's parliament had already greenlighted the constitutional amendments, which, among other things, will give Putin a clean slate of presidential terms, meaning he can run two more times after his current term expires in 2024. So a public vote wasn't necessary, except that Putin insisted on it. A big turnout was just as important to the Kremlin symbolically as the expected positive result.

Before voting fully wrapped up, Russia's Central Election Commission released early results with numbers that would please Putin if they hold: a 65 percent turnout, with roughly 72 percent of the vote in favor of the amendments. The Kremlin's goal was a 55 percent turnout.

[Read the full article here.](#)

**Poland presidential election heads for second round
BBC News | June 29, 2020**

Poland's President Andrzej Duda has topped the first round of voting but must still go into a run-off vote in the presidential election.

The conservative Mr Duda will face the liberal mayor of Warsaw, Rafal Trzaskowski, in the second-round vote in two weeks' time.

With more than 99% of results in, Mr Duda took just under 44% of the vote and Mr Trzaskowski just over 30%.

Turnout was high despite coronavirus and social-distancing restrictions.

President Duda is an ally of the governing nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party and if he loses, the opposition could push through major changes in Polish politics.

The president has the power to veto legislation, so Mr Duda's re-election would be of benefit to PiS, of which he used to be a member.

He came under fire during the election, including for a speech in which he said LGBT rights were an "ideology" more destructive than communism.

[Read the full article here.](#)

The Taming of the Elite: Putin's Referendum
Tatiana Stanovaya
Carnegie Moscow Center | July 1, 2020

Perhaps the key question about the July 1 nationwide vote on changing the Russian constitution is why President Vladimir Putin needed it at all. Generally the explanation is that he needs to legitimize his new constitution—which will allow him to remain in power after his current term ends in 2024—and renew the social contract. These are reasonable deductions, but they fail to take into account another important factor: how the vote will affect Putin's relationship with the elite.

The much-vaunted "Putin majority" has long been not so much a pillar of Putin's rule as an argument he can use in his debates with his own circle. The vote is an attempt to obtain a certificate of public trust that Putin can thrust in the faces of the elites, who are the real source of his worries.

Recently, the president said that unless the clock was reset on presidential terms in this vote, allowing him to run again in 2024, "in a couple of years, as I know from experience, instead of a normal work routine, people at many levels of authority will start looking around in search of possible successors."

[Read the full article here.](#)

Georgia moves closer to Europe or just away from authoritarianism?
Krassen Stanchev
The New Eastern Europe | June 29, 2020

On June 23rd, the Georgian parliament approved a crucial constitutional amendment concerning the electoral system. This change is directly related to last year's public protests and political crisis in the country, as was recently reported in New Eastern Europe.

On June 25th, a week-long popular vote began in Russia, which is also related to amendments to the constitution. Putin had requested a vote concerning these matters earlier this year.

The first hearing related to Georgia's amendment took place during an extraordinary parliamentary session on June 21st. The third hearing is scheduled for later this week. There is now a sense of urgency in the country, as reforms to the electoral system will need to be completed no later than six months before the elections. These are scheduled for autumn this year.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Working to serve the needs of Jews in Eastern Europe in the age of corona
Sean Savage
JNS | July 2, 2020

While the coronavirus pandemic showing no signs of slowly down globally, most of Europe appears to be heading in the right direction, with cases dropping across the continent and economies either starting to or in the midst of reopening. However, unlike its counterparts in Western Europe, many Eastern European countries, with the exception of Russia, were largely spared the worst of the pandemic thus far.

In Eastern Europe, it appears that the early shutdown of many countries across the region could have played a role in the virus's slow spread. As a result, Jewish communities there, although small, have been spared some of the worst effects of the pandemic that their brethren in the West, such as in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, which have seen a very high proportion of its Jewish community die as a result of the virus. While Italy and Spain have been hit the hardest, their Jewish populations are simply smaller—approximately 30,000 and 60,000, respectively.

“It varies from country to country and how quickly they recognized the challenges that were before them. Some acted early on and have control of the situation. Also depends on the level of openness of the government and the accuracy of cases reported,” said Mark Levin, executive vice chairman of the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, which mainly serves the Jewish community located in the former Soviet Union.

Levin told JNS that the Jewish communities in these countries largely face the same challenges as the larger population, with some exceptions such as the Jewish population skewing older, and in some countries in the region, more impoverished.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarus presidential election: Key challenger Valery Tsepkalo barred as Lukashenko rivals trimmed

Linas Jegelevicius

EuroNews | July 1, 2020

A major challenger to Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has been barred from taking part in next month's presidential election.

Valery Tsepkalo was considered one of the most credible threats to Lukashenko, dubbed Europe's last dictator.

But Tsepkalo was among nine candidates removed from the race by Belarus' Central Election Commission (CVK).

“I can hardly call it a shocker,” Alexandr Feduta, a Belarusian political analyst and journalist at Minsk-based newspaper The Peoples' Voice told Euronews. “It could be expected. It is just a matter of time and means when all the main candidates and challengers of the incumbent president [Lukashenko] will be pushed out of the race.”

Candidates needed 100,000 supporting signatures to take part in the election, which is scheduled for August 9.

Tsepkalo, Belarus' ex-ambassador to the United States, submitted 160,000 but CVK said only 75,249 were in line with requirements.

It means there are now just six — down from 15 — runners left.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Unplugging the Baltic States: Why Russia's Economic Approach May Be Shifting

Emily Ferris

RussiaMatters | July 1, 2020

Russia's approach to the Baltic states is occasionally framed as an imminent territorial takeover. This view has become salient since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when other nearby countries became concerned that they may be in Russia's sights. In fact, Russia is unlikely to be interested in a territorial incursion in the Baltics, not least because this would trigger NATO's Article 5, its collective defense principle, and because Russia would be unlikely to win in a conflict against NATO allies. Additionally, as some polls indicate, a conflict close to Russia's own borders might not have the full support of the Russian population. For instance, a 2017 poll from the independent Levada Center polling agency, the latest on the subject, showed declining support for Russia's involvement in other border conflicts, such as in eastern Ukraine. However, a more recent poll by state pollster All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) showed that 71 percent of respondents were in favor of the proposed amendment to the Russian constitution stating that the Russian government is responsible for defending compatriots abroad. But Russia has many other tools—more effective than covert or overt military aggression—at its disposal to influence the Baltic states. Their significant ethnic Russian populations and enduring dependence on Russia for energy enable Moscow to maintain its status as one of the most powerful regional stakeholders.

[Read the full article here.](#)

In Lithuania, lawmakers want to dedicate 2021 to honoring an alleged perpetrator of Holocaust pogrom

Cnaan Lipshiz

JTA | June 29, 2020

(JTA) — Lithuanian lawmakers want to make 2021 the year of Juozas Luksa-Daumantas — a nationalist accused of participating in a Holocaust-era massacre of Jews.

The parliament's Committee on Education and Science submitted the proposal June 23 in a draft resolution titled "The Announcement of the Year 2021 as the year of Juozas Luksa-Daumantas."

Witnesses placed Luksa-Daumantas, a leader of the pro-Nazi Lithuanian Activist Front militia during World War II, at the 1941 Lietukis Garage massacre in Kaunas, where locals tortured and beat to death dozens of Jews. Some of the perpetrators posed for pictures, some displaying the iron bars they used as murder weapons.

Some victims were held down while their tormentors blasted jets of water from a high-powered hose down their throats, causing them to drown or die of internal bleeding.

[**Read the full article here.**](#)

Lithuanian Jews slam Putin for 'falsifying' history of WWII annexation Times of Israel | June 30, 2020

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuanian Jewish leaders on Tuesday accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of "falsifying" history after he defended the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states during World War II.

While paying tribute to those who perished fighting the Nazis, the Jewish community dismissed Putin's attempt to play down Soviet crimes in Lithuania and fellow Baltic states Latvia and Estonia.

"We, the descendants of the Jews of Lithuania, oppose this falsification of the history of the enslavement of our independent Lithuania," community leader Faina Kukliansky and lawmaker Emanuelis Zingeris said.

They issued a joint statement in response to Putin's article in US magazine The National Interest earlier this month in which he described the Baltic states' annexation as "incorporation."

"Their accession to the USSR was implemented on a contractual basis, with the consent of the elected authorities," Putin wrote, saying it was in "line with international and state law of that time."

Putin has repeatedly accused the West of playing down the Soviet contribution to the Nazi defeat — an estimated 27 million Soviet troops and civilians were killed in World War II.

[**Read the full article here.**](#)

For elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union, COVID-19 lockdown loneliness is debilitating Cnann Lipshiz JTA | June 25, 2020

(JTA) — Tamara Boronina, an 82-year-old Holocaust survivor living in Ukraine, can barely afford her small Odessa apartment on her monthly pension of \$65. She is a widow whose only daughter died in 1999. Unable to visit the local Jewish community center that has been her social lifeline, Boronina now eagerly awaits the weekly visit by her caseworker from the JDC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"The worst loss this virus and quarantine has brought for me is isolation," Boronina said of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I am a very sociable person and communication is even more important for me than material assistance." The former Soviet Union has about half a million Jews, most of them living in Russia and Ukraine. Many thousands of them are elderly and have decided to pass up the opportunity to immigrate to Israel or the United States because they feel too old to readjust to a new country.

The JDC, a 106-year-old Jewish international aid agency, was born in 1914 to assist exactly those types of Jews who found themselves mired in difficult circumstances at the start of World War I. It helped Jews flee Nazi Germany beginning in 1933. Some 80,000 German Jews escaped Europe altogether with the help of the JDC, whose work now with victims of Nazi persecution is funded in

part by the Claims Conference, a body that represents world Jewry in Holocaust restitution negotiations.

Later, when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the JDC was only reliable source of aid for many who were plunged into extreme poverty. It also has helped thousands of non-Jews survive in the wake of natural disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

[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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