

## Weekly Top 10

**WASHINGTON, D.C. August 21, 2020**

**TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties**

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

Dear Friend,

This week has been a tumultuous one for the region. Belarus, experiencing daily protests since the presidential election on August 9, was hit with another blow yesterday when the European Union rejected President Lukashenko's mandate to rule the country. The bloc also warned of imminent new sanctions. Over the course of the protests, the Jewish community in Belarus has remained untargeted.

Israeli Hasidic Jews, who are set to make their annual pilgrimage to the central Ukrainian town of Uman to visit the grave of Rabbi Nachman next month, were urged by both the Ukrainian and Israeli governments to cancel the journey due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Russian opposition leaders Aleksei Navalny was reportedly poisoned on Thursday via a cup of tea in the airport before departing from Siberia to Moscow. Navalny is the face of the opposition movement in Russia, has been jailed at least 13 times and has been poisoned at least once before. He is now in a coma in a hospital in Omsk, Russia.

Shabbat Shalom!

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.](#)**

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

**In Belarus, 'Europe's last dictatorship,' Jews fear police but not anti-Semitism**

**Sam Sokol**

**The Times of Israel | August 19, 2020**

As security services and protesters clashed in the Belarusian capital of Minsk last week, riot policemen grabbed Alexander Fruman off the street, bundling him off to a police station where, he says, he was beaten with a rubber truncheon and showered with anti-Semitic insults.

Fruman, who has since been released, was visiting his native Belarus to connect with extended family on a roots tour, but currently resides in the central Israeli city of Modiin. He said that police forced him, under threat of violence, to sing patriotic songs proclaiming longtime strongman Alexander Lukashenko "the best president in the world."

After finding out that he was Israeli (he does not have Belarus citizenship), officers told him that "it was time for me to have another circumcision," Fruman told The Times of Israel in a phone conversation.

Fruman's experience is certainly harrowing. However, it appears to be an outlier in a rapidly escalating conflict in which local Jews say that they have experienced no anti-Semitism despite the increasingly violent government crackdown. (At least two other Israelis were detained and subsequently released, according to the Foreign Ministry.)

Following a disputed election on August 9, in which Lukashenko claimed to have won about 80 percent of the vote, hundreds of thousands of citizens — angered by decades of political repression, economic stagnation and a lackluster response to the COVID-19 pandemic — took to the streets of Minsk and other cities across the country to demand his resignation.

Known as "Europe's last dictator," Lukashenko has been in power since 1994, coming out on top in repeated elections criticized by Western governments and human rights organizations as blatantly rigged.

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

---

**A reporter's notebook**

**Aleksei Navalny Hospitalized in Russia in Suspected Poisoning**

**Andrew Higgins**

**The New York Times | August 20, 2020**

MOSCOW — Groaning in agony from a suspected poisoning before losing consciousness, the Russian opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny was rushed to a Siberian hospital on Thursday after the plane he was flying on made an emergency landing because of his sudden illness.

Doctors at the No. 1 Clinical Hospital in Omsk, the Siberian city where the plane landed, initially said that Mr. Navalny, a fierce critic of President Vladimir V. Putin, was on a ventilator in "serious condition" but later reported that his condition, though still grave, had stabilized.

Mr. Putin's spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, told journalists that the Kremlin wished Mr. Navalny a swift recovery, "as we would for any citizen of Russia," and would, if asked, provide help to get the opposition leader transferred to a hospital abroad.

Mr. Navalny, who often refers to Mr. Putin as the head of "a party of crooks and thieves," is the latest in a long line of Kremlin opponents to be suddenly afflicted by bizarre and sometimes fatal medical emergencies. The Kremlin and its supporters have for years regarded him as an enemy because of the investigations he has led into graft by officials — including, most vividly, the former prime minister, Dmitri A. Medvedev. Mr. Navalny has been harassed and jailed numerous times for short periods, but the authorities have, until now, refrained from harsher steps that could elevate his national profile.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**A reporter's notebook: Jewish Belarus then and now**  
**Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt**  
**The Forward | August 20, 2020**

Belarus — that strange country, locked in a previous era, and now reeling from anti-regime protests — is drenched in Jewish history, and blood.

To go to the Republic of Belarus is to travel in time. It is to go to a land where few tourists enter and where foreigners require “additional special security.” Where President Alexander Lukashenko has ruled for 26 years, where there is no American diplomatic presence, where the intelligence service still calls itself KGB, where Lenin’s face still smiles down from buses and where children still sing about a future of eternal sunshine. The economy is state-controlled, as is the media.

When I visited there as a journalist in 2013, I was taken by the stark contrast between the still-very-Soviet Minsk, Belarus’s capital, and cosmopolitan, westernized Moscow.

Minsk’s eerily quiet streets were filled with polite people walking in silence with their heads down. “It’s a very clean city,” Minskians love to say about their city. And so it was, then: Clean of memory, clean of politics, clean of dissent. The architecture of Minsk is supremely Soviet, its wide avenues built for military parades, its Choral Synagogue now a theater.

And outside the city, a lush countryside awaited — white birch trees, endless meadows, vistas that don’t need any Instagram filter, storybook villages with abject poverty.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**The risks of a Russian intervention in Belarus**  
**Leon Aron**  
**The Washington Post | August 18, 2020**

Alexander Lukashenko, the dictator of Belarus, is facing the biggest threat of his 26-year reign. An extraordinary popular revolt has brought his regime to the brink of collapse — something that Vladimir Putin, mortally afraid of democratic contagion from a “color revolution” in his western neighbor, can hardly countenance.

Yet as startling as it might seem, the turbulence in Belarus also gives Russia’s president an opportunity — one he could seize with a high-stakes display of brazen military aggression that could go beyond merely cracking down in Belarus. Perhaps the most frightening scenario: an invasion of Lithuania. The Baltic republic, which shares a 420-mile border with Belarus, is a member of both the European Union and NATO.

Combining a raid on Lithuania with an intervention in Belarus could give Putin a chance to solve several problems at once. He could snuff out the threat of a Western-oriented regime in Minsk. He could drown his own people’s resentments in fear and patriotic exultation, as he did with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. And perhaps most important for him personally, he would revenge the fall of the Soviet Union by humiliating and wounding NATO — that predatory and perennially plotting bugaboo, which every Russian alive today has been taught to hate.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**Turmoil in Belarus: Looking Beyond the Horizon**  
**Eugene Rumer**  
**Carnegie Moscow Center | August 17, 2020**

Three months ago, Belarus was a country whose domestic politics were best described as stagnant. Ruled by the same leader for twenty-six years, it was due to hold yet another seemingly perfunctory presidential election. Today it stands as a symbol of both popular yearning for democracy and brutal oppression. None of this was expected or predicted. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic are at a loss as to what to do other than follow their Pavlovian reflexes honed in the course of previous revolutions in the former Soviet bloc, most recently in Ukraine in 2013–2014, and endorse democracy and threaten sanctions. Neither will advance democracy in Belarus, put an end to police

brutality, or deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from sending his troops to Belarus to save its crumbling dictatorship—should he decide to do so. What is needed as a first step before acting is a sober assessment of the situation in Belarus—regardless of whether its despised dictator stays or goes—and what awaits it over the coming weeks, maybe months, and what its friends can do to help.

It is a safe bet that on President Donald Trump's watch, the United States can be counted out as a constructive force in this situation. The Trump administration has worked hard to undermine trans-Atlantic relations and weaken NATO, coddled aspiring autocrats, and insulted key European allies. It has squandered its credibility with its transactional approach to foreign relations, widespread disinformation, and ambitions to suppress votes in the upcoming U.S. presidential election.

That leaves Europe. It too is weakened by internal divisions and the lasting consequences of the pandemic. But it cannot turn a blind eye to events in Belarus. It should be obvious to everyone that imposing sanctions on the Minsk regime or its backers in Moscow will be just as effective as sanctions have been in deterring Russian aggression against Ukraine: i.e., not at all. Moreover, friends of Belarus need to recognize that a revolution is not the end, but merely the beginning of what is certain to be a long and difficult road toward making it a "normal country." Anyone doubting that should look at Ukraine and its post-2014 struggles.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

### **Serbia's self-defeating neo-Yugoslavism** **Janusz Bugajski** **The New Eastern Europe | August 19, 2020**

While the US and EU have pushed for restarting talks between Serbia and Kosovo to help stabilise the Western Balkans, the Serbian government has been assisting both Russia and China in undermining Western interests. Since the ouster of Slobodan Milošević twenty years ago, successive governments in Belgrade have tried to raise Serbia's stature by replicating the Titoist Yugoslav policy of non-alignment. But in trying to balance the US, EU, Russia and China, Serbia is in effect subverting its own links with Western institutions and weakening security on the Balkan peninsula.

All other countries in the Western Balkans, except the Serbian Republic entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, have unequivocally chosen their geopolitical alliances and national destinations to be NATO and the EU. Serbia remains stuck in a time vortex in which Russia, China, Europe and the US are viewed as equivalent, and government officials have sought advantages by playing these powers off against each other.

When dealing with NATO states, Serbia downplays its relations with Russia and China and asserts that it conducts more military exercises with the Alliance than with Russian forces. When dealing with Moscow, Belgrade describes its relations with NATO as merely technical and portrays the Alliance as an aggressor and Russia as an Orthodox Slavic brother and national protector. During and since the Milošević era, Serbia-Russia relations have been symbiotic, through which both sides aim to increase their regional leverage. While Moscow has used Belgrade to inject itself politically and economically into the Western Balkans, Belgrade has used Moscow to reinforce its policies, such as blocking Kosovo from membership in international organisations including the United Nations.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

### **Ukraine, Israel Urge Hasidic Jews to Cancel Pilgrimage Due to Coronavirus** **The New York Times | August 18, 2020**

KYIV — The Ukrainian and Israeli governments issued a joint statement on Tuesday asking Israeli Hasidic Jews to cancel their annual pilgrimage to the central Ukrainian town of Uman this year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Tens of thousands of Hasidic Jews descend on Uman every Jewish New Year to visit the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who revived the Hasidic movement and died in 1810.

This year, Jewish New Year celebrations run from Sept 18-20. "Guided by the recommendations and warnings of the Ministries of Health of Ukraine and Israel, we urge all pilgrims who plan to take part in the current festive events on the occasion of Rosh Hashanah in Ukraine to refrain from visiting the city of Uman due to the threatening epidemic situation," the

governments said in the statement.

It was published on the site of Ukraine's government and on the Facebook page of the Israeli embassy in Kyiv.

Ukraine has registered 94,436 coronavirus cases and 2,116 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic in March.

Some regions have had to reimpose some restrictions such as the mandatory wearing of masks due to a jump in the daily number of new cases to above 1,500 last week.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**Lithuania bans Hezbollah-affiliated persons from entering its territory**  
**Cnaan Lipshiz**  
**JTA | August 14, 2020**

(JTA) — Lithuania has banned affiliates of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah from entering its territory.

“Hezbollah-affiliated persons were banned from entering Lithuania,” the BNS news service quoted the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry as saying in a statement on Thursday. The ban will remain in force for 10 years, the ministry said. Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius thanked Lithuanian and Israeli national security agencies for information that led to the decision.

The European Union, of which Lithuania is a member, considers only Hezbollah’s military wing to be a terrorist group. Hezbollah officials have said the distinction is false and that all the organs of the movement operate in unison.

According to multiple diplomatic sources, the distinction was made at the insistence of France, which has resisted a comprehensive ban on the group because it believes that would harm the EU’s relationship with Lebanon, where Hezbollah is a major political force.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**Kazakhstan: Too close for comfort in the age of coronavirus**  
**Joanna Lillis**  
**Eurasia.net | August 17, 2020**

One afternoon in July, as medics battled to contain the wave of coronavirus infections washing through Kazakhstan, an ambulance screeched past a freshly minted billboard on an Almaty boulevard popular with pedestrians.

“Maintain your distance!” the eye-catching pink sign implored. The billboard illustrated the point with an image of two people separated by an arrow indicating a distance of two meters.

Nobody moved aside even a few centimeters, let alone two meters, to create space as couples strolled past groups eating ice-cream on benches. Deliverymen weaved through on electric scooters, dodging teenagers zooming up and down on skateboards and children riding bicycles.

And this was happening just as Kazakhstan had imposed fresh lockdown restrictions to curb a surge in new coronavirus cases.

[Read the full article here.](#)

---

**What the Battle of Warsaw of 1920 meant for Jews**  
**Joshua Zimmerman**  
**The Times of Israel | August 19, 2020**

One-hundred years ago, on August 16, 1920, the Soviet Army reached the outskirts of Warsaw. The Bolshevik commander on the ground, Gen. Mikhail Tukhachevsky, enthusiastically cabled the commander-in-chief of the Red Army – Leon Trotsky — with frightening words. Warsaw, he wrote, was merely a bridge. After the collapse of Poland, the Red Army would march through Berlin, Paris, and even London to incite world revolution and create a European Union of Soviet Socialist Republics under Moscow.

The fate not only of Europe, but of Europe’s largest Jewish center — Warsaw — hung in the balance. For Warsaw’s 310,000-strong Jewish community was second in numbers only to New York in 1920. In the Polish capital, foreign embassy staff

hurriedly evacuated their posts, and Warsaw residents began fleeing the capital in panic. Joseph Pilsudski, Poland's head of state and commander-in-chief, emerged from isolation with an eerily calm, confident demeanor, presenting his generals with a plan that came to be known as the Battle of Warsaw.

At the moment Soviet forces set foot on the bridge over the Vistula River connecting Warsaw's east bank to its city center, Pilsudski ordered a massive counter-offensive. As Poland's elite First Army defended Warsaw, Polish forces simultaneously attacked the Red Army from the rear, the north and the south.

The Russian advance was not only halted but dramatically reversed. Within two days the Red Army had been repelled 25 miles eastward and some 30,000 Russian POWs were now in Polish hands. As the Bolshevik retreat intensified, Pilsudski was hailed as the savior not only of Europe, but of the Western world from a Communist takeover. Pilsudski, in hot pursuit of the retreating Red Army, continued his advance, until agreeing to an armistice in October 1920, under intense pressure from France, Britain, and the United States. Ukraine and Belarus were divided between Poland and Bolshevik Russia.

[Read the full article here.](#)

1120 20th Street NW, Ste. 300N Washington, DC 20036-3413  
Telephone: +1 202 898 2500 | [ncsejinfo@ncsej.org](mailto:ncsejinfo@ncsej.org)

### 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.

 JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST

 FORWARD THIS EMAIL