

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. June 12, 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 is co-sponsoring a film screening by the Wilson Center 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. [We hope you will join us.](#)

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

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Trump envoy to begin nuclear talks with Russia as key treaty hangs in the balance

Paul Sonne and Robyn Dixon
The Washington Post | June 9, 2020

The last major treaty limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear might hangs in the balance as the Trump administration pushes to replace it with a long-shot arms-control pact that also includes China five months before the U.S. presidential election.

The New START accord, which restricts the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads and certain launch platforms, is set to expire in February. If the Trump administration declines to extend it and the caps disappear, the United States and Russia will be left without any significant limits on their nuclear forces for the first time in decades.

Russia has said it is willing to extend New START unconditionally. But the Trump administration has balked, saying the treaty signed by President Barack Obama in 2010 is outdated, insufficient and overly advantageous for Moscow.

In addition to wanting a broader pact that covers China, the Trump administration is seeking better verification mechanisms and limits on all Russian nuclear weapons, many of which are particularly risky and fall outside the parameters of New START.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarusian Elections and Geopolitical Somersaults

Grigory Ioffe
The Jamestown Foundation | June 10, 2020

A joke has long been making the rounds in Belarus that the country has produced three times as many presidents of Israel as native-born presidents of Belarus itself. Amazingly, this joke continues to accurately reflect reality, with the country's first and only Belarusian-born head of state, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, having wielded uninterrupted power since 1994. Yet, that durable longevity may finally be turning into a liability for the incumbent, who is up for reelection this August. Lukashenka has been evincing fairly unusual electoral anxiety at this early stage of the campaign—before all the signatures in support of his potential rivals have even been collected. Meanwhile, transient factors such as the pandemic and economic decline appear to be turning portions of the electorate away from him.

That situation may help explain why, for the first time ever, two heavyweights from the Belarusian nomenklatura with more than a theoretical chance to beat Lukashenka at the ballot box have dared to run against him. To be sure, their actual chance is contingent upon, first, their successful registration by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and, later, on how vote-counting proceeds. However, as Victor Babariko, arguably the strongest of Lukashenka's rivals, claimed in an interview, there are limits to vote rigging. He specifically pointed to surveys by the now-defunct independent polling firm ISEPS, which revealed that the incumbent did, in fact, win all of his previous elections, albeit four of them with scores not nearly as high as officially announced (Euro Radio, June 4).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar has the coronavirus

JTA | June 9, 2020

Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar has contracted the coronavirus.

The Russian News Agency TASS reported on Sunday that the rabbi is "under medical supervision," and that his "health is out of danger," citing the rabbi's press service.

A total of 467,673 coronavirus cases have been confirmed in Russia as of Sunday morning, with 5,859 fatalities nationwide.

He has served as chief rabbi of the country for some 20 years.

By mid-March, Lazar had closed down all Moscow synagogues and Jewish institutions. A week later he closed all Jewish institutions throughout the country, the Times of Israel reported.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Ukraine's Latest Schism: Zelensky Against the Regions

Konstantin Shorkin

Carnegie Moscow Center | June 3, 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.](#)

Post-pandemic Georgia: stepping out of a political crisis?

Soso Dzamukashvili

The New Eastern Europe | June 9, 2020

There are approximately five months left until the 2020 Parliamentary elections in Georgia and prior to this crucial period for the country's politics, the government found itself confronted by a number of problems. Due to the pandemic, Western support for the country has become as critical as ever. It has the ability to remedy the country's economic and social problems and also solidify the ruling party's stance before the elections. The Georgian Dream party needs to maintain recognition as a reliable partner to the West and, amid this challenging situation, it needs to follow the conditions set by its Western partners.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Soft or Hard Power? Russia Reacts to Uzbekistan's Draft Language Policy

Farkhod Tolipov

CACI | June 8, 2020

Some time ago, the Russian side took a similar stance when a number of Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, decided to change their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin. This immediately initiated a loud discussion in Russia on the problem of minority rights for ethnic Russians living in the former Soviet republics. The change of alphabets was equated with discrimination of ethnic Russians. Some even associated the question of alphabets with a delimitation of Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, thereby adding a geopolitical dimension to these developments (see CACI Analyst 06/06/17).

Protection of the Russian language and ethnic Russians has been a permanent item on Moscow's foreign policy agenda in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the USSR. At the forefront of this policy is the Russian Agency on cultural-humanitarian cooperation, Rossotrudnichestvo, created as an official agency to promote Russian interests by means of cultural, humanitarian and linguistic campaigns and projects. The agency's website articulates that Russian has the sixth largest number of speakers in the world after English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish and Arabic.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Russia resorts to a policy of supporting Russians and Russian language abroad as one tool for demonstrating and maintaining its great power status. This is a normal strategy of any great power.

The question, however, is if this policy is pursued as a part Russia's geopolitical and imperial goals or as part of a democratic and normative endeavor.

[Read the full article here.](#)

How Jewish Socialists Fought to Stop the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War

Brendan McGeever

Jacobin | June 4, 2020

The anti-Jewish violence that spread during the Russian Civil War was unprecedented in scale — even conservative estimates put the number of dead at over 50,000. Most of this violence was perpetrated by the nationalist armies which emerged amidst the breakdown of the old tsarist regime, who also painted the postrevolutionary Bolshevik government as “cosmopolitan” and foreign.

Yet as historian Brendan McGeever's new book *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* shows, antisemitism was not limited to monarchist or nationalist circles — or just a hangover of tsarism. Rather, antisemitic vitriol against “outsiders” was also rife among parts of the peasantry and working class, including in a certain populist discourse that blurred the lines between “the speculator” and “the Jew.”

Long having identified pogroms only with the tsarist regime, the Soviet state did in summer 1918 launch its own focused campaign against antisemitism. But as McGeever shows, the move to confront this problem decisively relied on the intervention of non-Bolshevik, Jewish socialists, who demanded a state response to the pogroms being perpetrated even by some Red Army units.

David Broder spoke to McGeever about the Russian Social Democrats' historic opposition to antisemitism, the role of Jewish socialists in combatting Civil War-era pogroms, and what the violence of this period says about the relationship between socialist politics and anti-racism.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Turkmenistan: Going with the grain

Akhal-Teke

Eurasia.net | June 9, 2020

The president's devotion to cycling has not gone unnoticed overseas. That may, in fact, have been the point all along.

On June 2, the eve of International World Bicycle Day, a date whose creation was spearheaded by Turkmenistan, David Lappartient, the head of UCI, the world cycling body, bestowed his organization's highest award of merit upon President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov in recognition of his contribution to the sport. The honor could not, sadly, be conveyed in person on account of the coronavirus pandemic, so Lappartient had to brandish Berdymukhamedov's certificate at him via teleconference call instead.

Berdymukhamedov's caprices are undeniably frivolous. He marked bicycle day with the unveiling of yet another folly, among a seemingly endless list now populating the capital, Ashgabat. This one was a giant, blue-colored pebble decorated with a cameo of a map of Turkmenistan and surrounded by gold-leafed cyclists mechanically rotating on a white base. Some stationary camels add local flavor. The president surveyed the monument while pushing along his own bike as singers performed a lively paean to cycling, sport in general and, of course, Berdymukhamedov himself.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Major Fuel Spill in Russia's North Spreads Toward Arctic Ocean

Andrew E. Kramer

The New York Times | June 10, 2020

MOSCOW — Floating barriers hastily laid across rivers in the far north of Russia have failed to contain a major diesel fuel spill that has now spread to a lake near the Arctic Ocean and is threatening a nature reserve, a regional governor said Tuesday.

The environmental disaster is unfolding far to the north of the Arctic Circle, in a marshy wilderness near the isolated mining city of Norilsk.

Diesel fuel spilled from a tank that burst last week after settling into permafrost

that had stood firm for years but gave way during a warm spring, Russian officials said.

The accident, which environmental groups have compared to the Exxon Valdez tanker spill in Alaska in 1989, has highlighted the risks of industrial development in the thawing Arctic, where climate change is warming the environment at a rate about twice as fast as the rest of the Earth.

The spill released about 150,000 barrels of diesel into a river, compared with about 260,000 barrels of crude oil released into Prince William Sound during the Exxon tanker accident, a touchstone for environmental damage from petroleum spills.

The diesel has been seeping into the marshy riverbanks and spreading as an iridescent sheen on the surface of rivers. A frantic effort to lay booms, or floating barriers, across the rivers has not contained the spill.

By Tuesday, fuel was found in a 43-mile-long finger lake called Pyasino, which stretches toward the Arctic Ocean, Aleksandr Uss, the governor of the Krasnoyarsk region, told local media.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Lessons in division: is it a good idea to merge Russian regions?
András Tóth-Czifra
Institute of Modern Russia | June 3, 2020

On May 13, the heads of the Arkhangelsk Region, known for its shipyards and paper production, and the Nenets Autonomous District (NAO in Russian), a sparsely populated hydrocarbon-rich region, announced their intention to merge. Less than a week later, the working group set up to oversee the merger proposed to add the Komi Republic, a nominally autonomous territory with a sizeable Komi minority, to the deal. The three regions together would have a territory about 1.5 times the size of Texas, but are inhabited by a mere two million people, just about the population of New Mexico. But a week later, the Komi Republic declined to join.

The paradox of the NAO is that it is both part of the Arkhangelsk Region in terms of administrative division and an independent subject of the Russian Federation (since 1993), which grants it the right to have its own legislative assemble and senators in the Federation Council (the upper chamber of Russia's Federal Assembly), as well as to run its own budget. Relying on a significant gas and oil industry, even as many of these revenues have been centralized in recent years, the NAO is one of Russia's richest regions. In 2019, its budget revenue stood at 17.1 billion rubles, compared to 93 billion rubles in the Arkhangelsk Region with its population 25 times that of the NAO. However, the recent crash of global oil prices is expected to have a negative impact on the NAO's finances, which provided an excellent pretext for putting the merger on the table.

[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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