

## Weekly Top 10

**WASHINGTON, D.C. August 14, 2020**

**TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties**

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

Dear Friend,

Last week, the Jewish world lost an acclaimed educator, philosopher, author, and spiritual mentor to many with the passing of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. Best known for his translation and groundbreaking commentary of the Babylonian Talmud and Bible, he was also the founder of the Steinsaltz Center in Moscow. Founded in 1989, it became the center of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union. Moscow Chief Rabbi [Pinchas Goldschmidt describes the importance of the center](#) as "giving Soviet Jews, who were often cut off from the Jewish people the opportunity to meet a plethora of Jewish intellectuals from a range of affiliations."

Rabbi Steinsaltz continued to provide a network of educational initiatives for Russian Jewry through the Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem.

August 12 marked the 68th anniversary of the Night of the Murdered Poets when twenty-four leading Jewish poets, writers, and intellectual public figures were executed in the basement of the Lubyanka prison in Moscow in 1952. This was the culmination of a calculated campaign to eradicate Jewish life in the Soviet Union.

For more information and to read their poems and other writings, [please see NCSEJ's pamphlet produced on the 50th anniversary of their execution.](#)

On Tuesday NCSEJ hosted a webinar featuring State Department Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Cherrie Daniels. Moderated by Deputy Director Lesley Weiss, recordings of this webinar and past webinars are available on the [NCSEJ.org web site.](#)

Shabbat Shalom!

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin

NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

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**NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10  
Washington, D.C. August 14, 2020**

**Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who brought the Talmud within reach of millions, dies at 83**  
**Emily Lagner**  
**The Washington Post | August 12, 2020**

Adin Steinsaltz, an Israeli rabbi who devoted nearly a half-century to translating the Talmud for modern readers, an epic undertaking that unlocked for millions of people a foundational but often impenetrable Jewish text, died Aug. 7 in Jerusalem. He was 83.

His death was announced by the Steinsaltz Center in Israel, which describes as its mission “making a world of Jewish knowledge accessible to all,” and was reported in publications including the Jerusalem Post, which said the rabbi had been hospitalized for a lung infection. In 2016 he had a stroke that left him unable to speak.

One of the most famous passages in the Old Testament arises in the book of Exodus, when Moses, leader of the enslaved Israelites and their defender before the Pharaoh, demands that he “let my people go.” Rabbi Steinsaltz, as one of the most prominent intellectuals in modern Judaism, adopted a wry take on that ancient *cri de coeur*: “Let my people know.”

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

**Putin’s Belarus Conundrum**  
**Pavel Felgenhauer**  
**The Jamestown Foundation | August 13, 2020**

In the midst of the political crisis that has engulfed Belarus since its August 9 presidential elections, the Russian state propaganda machine finds itself in an unusual position. The official Russian media outlets have been trying to play the role of the mainstream press, presenting more-or-less balanced reports that quote both Belarusian government sources and their opponents. It was officially announced in Minsk that the incumbent, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, was reelected with over 80 percent of the vote. This result has not been recognized by the opposition, leading to ongoing street protests in Minsk and other Belarusian cities. The protests are being decisively suppressed by riot police. Various news reports indicate that thousands of protesters have been arrested and/or beaten by Lukashenka’s special police, which has employed water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and, apparently, sometimes live ammunition and shotguns. Journalists reporting on the violence, including Russian ones, have been targeted by Belarusian law enforcement (Interfax, Kommersant, August 13).

Valery Tsepkalo—a Belarusian politician, diplomat, corporate executive and entrepreneur, who attempted to run against Lukashenka but was refused registration and fled to Moscow—claims that the Belarusian opposition has ample evidence the election was rigged and that Lukashenka, in fact, lost. Footage of

the demonstrations in the streets of Minsk and other Belarusian cities never shows any Lukashenka supporters—only riot police. Tsepkalov told Kommersant, “We were surprised [Russian President Vladimir] Putin promptly congratulated Lukashenka on his victory. We had hoped Moscow would be more neutral.” Apparently Tsepkalov and other Belarusian opposition figures were receiving information from Russian sources that Moscow wants to see the fall of the Lukashenka regime. In recent weeks, Tsepkalov has relocated to Kyiv and has been visiting other regional capitals to organize international support for the Belarusian opposition (Kommersant, August 12). A correspondent with the independent Russian internet news site Znak, Nikita Telizhenko, was arrested in Minsk on August 10, beaten up in a police precinct and, eventually, expelled to Moscow after an intervention from the Russian embassy. Telizhenko writes that, while in custody, he witnessed severe beatings and torture of citizens and arrested protesters by the Belarusian special police. One Belarusian officer allegedly told Telizhenko, “If riots begin, we were given orders to shoot to kill. We will not allow Belarus to become part of Russia.” Apparently, these police officers have been instructed that the Belarusian opposition is trying to organize a “second Ukraine” or Maidan revolution, at Moscow’s bidding (Znak, August 12)

[Read the full article here.](#)

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**Russia unveils coronavirus vaccine ‘Sputnik V,’ claiming breakthrough in global race before final testing complete**  
**Isabelle Khurshudyan and Carolyn Y. Johnson**  
**The Washington Post | August 11, 2020**

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed Tuesday that Russian scientists achieved a breakthrough in the global vaccine race, announcing that the country has become the first to approve an experimental coronavirus vaccine and that his own daughter has already taken a dose.

Officials have pledged to administer the possible vaccine to millions of people this summer and fall — including tens of thousands of teachers and front-line health-care workers in the coming weeks, before even finishing clinical trials. The formula was developed by the Gamaleya Institute in Moscow.

But Russia’s hard charge toward a potential vaccine has raised alarm among global health experts that the country is jumping dangerously ahead of critical, large-scale testing that is essential to determine if a possible protection against the coronavirus is safe and effective. Few details of the Gamaleya research have been made public or have undergone peer review.

Russia’s Health Ministry did not respond to requests for comment, and the Gamaleya Institute referred an interview request to the ministry.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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**Belarus Protests Signal the Autumn of Lukashenko’s Regime**  
**Artyom Shraibman**  
**Carnegie Moscow Center | August 13, 2020**

If the official results announced following Belarus’s presidential election on August 9 were entirely typical—a landslide win for President Alexander Lukashenko with 80 percent of the vote—the public reaction was anything but. The fiercest street clashes in the country’s history, which have already cost at least one life and left dozens of others seriously injured, will go down in history as a symbol of the autumn of Lukashenko’s decades-long regime. There’s no obvious way to bridge the gulf between the authorities and what may well be the majority of Belarusians.

The Belarusian government had been sowing the seeds of the current protests since the beginning of the year. Having shown itself to be passive and indifferent during the coronavirus pandemic, it began turning a great number of previously apolitical people political. Lukashenko’s slumping ratings and the appearance of dynamic new alternative candidates only fueled people’s hopes for peaceful changes this year.

Belarusian political culture has always adhered to the principles of nonviolence and compliance with the law, but if all the outlets for protest energy are closed off one by one, eventually it will burst forth like an explosion. In the run-up to the election, over 1,000 people were detained at various protests, and the three most popular candidates—Sergei Tikhanovsky, Viktor Babariko, and Valery Tsepkalov—were barred from running. The first two are now in pretrial detention awaiting criminal charges, while the third managed to leave the country. People started registering en masse as electoral commission staff, but were

rejected: the commissions were formed almost entirely of state sector employees and officials. Independent observers were refused entry to the polling stations on the pretext of coronavirus precautions. The most persistent ones were arrested by the dozen at the polling stations.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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## **Zelenskyy's strategy in Donbas is destined to fail: Human security as a major constraint**

**Maryna Parfenchuk**

**The New Eastern Europe | August 12, 2020**

The first year of Zelenskyy's presidency appears to have brought about more frustration than actual results. During last year's election, Zelenskyy's campaign was incredibly successful due to his eloquent speeches, which transformed the comedian into a civil servant who seemingly understood the Ukrainian people's hardships. Zelenskyy managed to pinpoint two major and long-lasting challenges in society while building a "deliberately vague" electoral campaign. Certainly, as part of his landslide victory in April 2019, he specifically focused on issues surrounding corruption and the conflict in Donbas. He said he wanted to establish peace in eastern Ukraine by respecting the ceasefire and releasing all Ukrainian prisoners of war. This campaign of peace, however, also emphasised something very different from his main rival (at the time the incumbent, Petro Poroshenko): Zelenskyy was open to a potential compromise with Russia. These issues were and still remain priorities for the Ukrainian population. Subsequently, they explain why a political newcomer could win such widespread support. However, one year later, Zelenskyy's strategy for Donbas still has not resulted in progress and it is very unlikely that it will.

The strategy for Donbas was doomed to fail from the very beginning. This is not only due to the complexities of power relations between the state and non-state actors, the political deadlock in the Minsk agreements or Russia's persistent denial of its presence in Ukraine. Ultimately, it was also the result of widespread internal ignorance regarding the realities of the region. By focusing on the political aspect of security, Zelenskyy and his team are overlooking the need to first ensure human security, which is naturally connected with political or strategic notions of conflict management. Human security goes hand-in-hand with national security, but it plays a more fundamental role in local mobilisation by involving the grievances and motivations of the community. The human security approach broadens the focus of policy from territorial security to the wellbeing of people. It also applies a bottom-up approach, starting from the provision of essential needs and later, building up to solving more complex issues.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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## **Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on Russia**

**RM Staff**

**Russia Matters | August 13, 2020**

Less than a week before the start of the Democratic National Convention, Joe Biden announced Sen. Kamala Harris of California as his vice-presidential running mate. The nomination is another first in Harris's illustrative career. In 2017, Harris joined the U.S. Senate as the second African-American woman and first South Asian-American senator in U.S. history. As a senator, she has served on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, the Select Committee on Intelligence and the Committee on the Judiciary, among others. Prior to that, she served as the first female attorney general for California. Given her professional experience, Harris does not hesitate to weigh in on key U.S. domestic issues. But where does the first woman of color to be nominated for national office by a major political party stand on the important foreign policy issue of U.S.-Russian relations?

As for Biden—who, when a vice president himself, made headlines by proclaiming the Obama administration's intention to "press the reset button" in U.S.-Russian relations—have there recently been any significant changes in his own views on Russia? Below is a sampling of Biden's and Harris's statements on what U.S. policies they advocate on key Russia-related issues, as well as their views on Russia itself, as expressed since U.S. President Donald Trump's election in November 2016, not an exhaustive record. The quotes are divided into categories similar to those in Russia Matters' news and analysis digests. The current president's views on Russia were published in an earlier compilation.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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## **In Belarus, young Jews among those picked up and jailed amid police crackdown**

**Cnaan Lipshiz**

**The Times of Israel | August 14, 2020**

JTA — Seeking an air conditioned place to escape the summer heat, Artur Raisky and a friend decided last Saturday to walk to a McDonald's in downtown Minsk, the capital of their native Belarus.

But Raisky, 25, and his 22-year-old friend, Albert Kengerli, never reached the restaurant.

They were arrested at random on the street and locked up as part of the mass arrests being carried out by security forces in connection with protests against the authoritarian regime of President Alexander Lukashenko, who is often called Europe's last remaining dictator.

The protests were triggered by the August 9 presidential elections, which are widely seen to be rigged. Lukashenko claimed to have won about 80 percent of the vote.

Raisky and Kengerli, both Jewish tech professionals and former heads of the local Nezter Zionist movement affiliated with Reform Judaism, were not part of the protests, which erupted in earnest Sunday, Raisky told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. He was released Tuesday. Kengerli is still in police custody and reportedly ill, his whereabouts unknown.

"There had been protest initiatives going on all week, and everyone knew there'd be a mass rally on Sunday. So they just arrested young people at random," said Raisky, who left Minsk in 2017 to work in Moscow but was back in the city to visit his family "and really had no intention of protesting," he said.

[Read the full article here.](#)

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## **Turkmenistan: Smells like Berdymukhamedov spirit**

**Akhal-Teke**

**Eurasia.net | August 11, 2020**

The president returned from his lengthy summer holidays with a spartan new look and brimming with spiritual inspiration.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov appeared on the evening news on August 5 wearing a customary colorful Turkmen skullcap, a traditional embroidered shirt and a steel blue kaftan, sagely looking upon a desk creaking under the many tomes he is purported to have written. The news on this occasion was that he had completed another book.

This is the 53rd and maybe the most consequential - in his own mind, at least - work ever to be put to Berdymukhamedov's name. The Spiritual World of the Turkmen is a moral-historical treatise on the customs of the Turkmen people through the centuries. The book is divided into 12 chapters devoted variously, as the state news agency explains, to "the beauty of life, prosperity on earth, the eternity of existence, the importance of science and education in the development of society, the principles of a healthy lifestyle, and the significance of industry, hospitality, friendship and kinship, moral foundations and unity."

With boasts of prosperity looking threadbare in light of the economic stagnation only deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, more emphasis is being placed on the ineffable and much cheaper consolations of spirituality. Berdymukhamedov cloaked himself in Islamic piety some weeks ago on the occasion of his 63rd birthday - a milestone deemed hallowed because it is the age at which the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have died - but mere Abrahamic tradition has never been regarded with approval by Turkmen state ideologues.

The late President Saparmurat Niyazov instead churned out his own moral-literary lodestars in the shape of the Rukhnama - a three-volume work of gibberish pseudo-history and half-baked spiritual insights. There have long been whispers that Berdymukhamedov would eventually displace those books with his own quasi-religious texts, and that day appears to have come.

[Read the full article here.](#)

### 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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