

Weekly Top 10

WASHINGTON, D.C. September 18, 2020

TO: NCSEJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

Dear Friend,

With warm wishes for a happy and healthy Rosh Hashanah to you and your family,

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
NCSEJ Executive Vice-Chairman & CEO

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NCSEJ WEEKLY TOP 10 Washington, D.C. September 18, 2020

Azerbaijani president congratulates Jewish community of Azerbaijan Trend News Agency | September 16, 2020

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan sent a congratulatory letter to the Jewish community of Azerbaijan.

"Dear fellow countrymen,

I cordially congratulate you on the New Year Holiday of the Jewish people - Rosh Hashanah - and extend my best regards and sincerest wishes to each of you. Jews, along with representatives of various ethnic and religious groups, have for centuries lived in Azerbaijan, a country with rich historical and cultural heritage and centuries-old traditions of tolerance, in peace, tranquility, mutual respect and trust. Azerbaijan is one of the few places where ethnic and religious intolerance, xenophobia and anti-Semitism do not exist.

The state of Azerbaijan, which attaches great importance to coexistence based on democratic and constitutional principles, promotion of high tolerance and

multicultural values, pays a great deal of attention and care to the preservation of cultural and spiritual values, development of language and culture of all ethnic minorities, including the Jewish community.

[Read the full article here.](#)

1,000 hassidim trapped between Belarus and Ukraine trying to get to Uman

Jeremyt Sharon

The Jerusalem Post | September 15, 2020

Some 1,000 Breslov Hassidim and other Israelis seeking to visit Uman in Ukraine for Rosh Hashanah are stuck on the Ukraine-Belarus border, and slept out in the open on Monday night.

As of Monday, there were 2,500 hassidim and others in Belarus seeking entry into Ukraine.

According to an official from the Breslov community, Belorussian authorities said on Monday night that the border with Ukraine was now open to them, and 1,000 pilgrims subsequently flocked to the border crossing.

But Ukrainian border officials refused them entry.

According to Israel's Foreign Ministry, the authorities in Belarus are allowing those at the border crossing to return directly to Israel.

Chaim Weitshandler, a Breslov Hassid from Betar Illit who is currently among those waiting, told The Jerusalem Post that the group has little food, have to go to the bathroom in the bushes of the open territory they are stuck in, and had to sleep out in the cold.

He said the Red Cross distributed water and blankets, and that a delivery of sandwiches from a Breslov donor arrived but there was enough for less than half of those trapped.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Navalny team says nerve agent was found on hotel room water bottle

Reuters | September 17, 2020

MOSCOW (Reuters) - The nerve agent used to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was detected on an empty water bottle from his hotel room in the Siberian city of Tomsk, suggesting he was poisoned there and not at the airport as first thought, his team said on Thursday.

Navalny fell violently ill on a flight in Russia last month and was airlifted to Berlin for treatment. Laboratories in Germany, France and Sweden have established he was poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent, a poison developed by the Soviet military, though Russia denies this and says it has seen no evidence.

A video posted on Navalny's Instagram account showed members of his team searching the room he had just left in the Xander Hotel in Tomsk on Aug. 20, an hour after they learned he had fallen sick in suspicious circumstances.

"It was decided to gather up everything that could even hypothetically be useful and hand it to the doctors in Germany. The fact that the case would not be investigated in Russia was quite obvious," the post said.

The video of the abandoned hotel room shows two water bottles on a desk, and another on a bedside table. Navalny's team, wearing protective gloves, are seen placing items into blue plastic bags.

"Two weeks later, a German laboratory found traces of Novichok precisely on the bottle of water from the Tomsk hotel room," the post said.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Belarusian Protests Through Emotional Versus Analytical Lenses

Grogory Ioffe

The Jamestown Foundation | September 15, 2020

Narratives devoted to the ongoing political turmoil in Belarus fall into two basic categories: emotional and analytical. Attempts to mix both genres do not succeed. "Even if the Belarusian revolution [sic] ends in defeat, it will still go

down in history and will have a huge impact on the further development of the country,” wrote Valer Karbalevich of Radio Liberty, only to be rebuked by multiple comment posts to the effect that “by no means will the revolution be defeated” (Svaboda.org, September 10). Nevertheless, narratives of both kinds are warranted, each in their own right. And when looked at together, they form a much more complete and objectively truer picture of what is now happening on the ground in Belarus.

On the emotional side, many observers have expressed astonishment and admiration over the scale of the protests involving members of a national community previously thought to be rather pliant or passive. At the same time, vote-rigging and mistreatment of protesters, especially women, elicits indignation. The bonds of solidarity and the emergence of networks of mutual support in what heretofore looked like an atomized society generates pride and commitment to resist the brutal handlers of the regime to the bitter end. The moral authority of the female leaders of the protest movement is currently sky-high, with Svetlana Tikhonovskaya largely a symbol of the protest and Maria Kolesnikova rising to the level of its political head. The circumstances of the latter’s September 7 abduction; the distorted version of what happened next, shared by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka (RBC, September 8); and the actual chronicle of Kolesnikova’s intransigence, culminating in her choosing imprisonment in Belarus over personal freedom abroad (Nv.ua, September 8) will surely be rehashed repeatedly by future scholars and dramatists alike. Incidentally, Kolesnikova’s treatment by the authorities invokes the memory of the famous 1964 quip of the poet Anna Akhmatova about the Soviets’ handling of Joseph Brodsky (Nobel laureate in literature, in 1987). When he was sentenced to forced hard labor in the High North, Akhmatova exclaimed, “What a biography they are making for our red-headed one—as if he had hired someone to do it.” Kolesnikova will now also stand trial, officially accused of making “public calls for the seizure of power” (article 361 of Belarus’s criminal code) (Tut.by, September 9).

[Read the full article here.](#)

Can Moscow Manage a Power Transition in Belarus?

Artyom Shraibman

Carnegie Moscow Center | September 16, 2020

Last month’s presidential election in Belarus was expected to end with one clear victor: Russia. As Belarusian society grew sharply politicized over the summer, President Alexander Lukashenko ramped up the repression. This culminated in the brutal breakup of protests immediately after the vote, setting back Lukashenko’s budding relationship with the West many years.

This turn of events should have, according to all the forecasts, pushed Minsk into the Kremlin’s arms and given Moscow free rein in Belarus, and at first, this seemed to be more or less what had happened. But the Belarusian political crisis has turned out to be far more serious than even the boldest forecasts had anticipated. Lukashenko’s international and domestic legitimacy have been too fiercely subverted for the comfort of any of his remaining foreign partners. Having burned all of his bridges with the West, ending his long-running balancing act between it and Russia, Lukashenko spent several weeks preparing for his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on September 14. Once again, the West was designated Belarus’s archenemy, and the Belarusian opposition was labeled Russophobic and accused of working for the United States, even though just last month, that same opposition was supposedly being managed by Russian puppet masters.

Lukashenko wanted to arrive in Sochi as a leader who had already vanquished an uprising at home. Hundreds of people were once again arrested, violence was used against female protesters, and water cannons and stun grenades were deployed. But it didn’t work. There may be fewer protests in the regions than a month ago, but 100,000–150,000 people regularly turn out for Sunday marches in the capital Minsk.

[Read the full article here.](#)

“Together” or separate? The Belarusian political elite after the elections

Maxim Rust

The New Eastern Europe | September 17, 2020

Over the past 20 years, the majority of Belarusian society has not seen a real alternative to the ruling elite led by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The system of Lukashenka and his elite has never been democratic, but it has provided stability for the majority of society. The government offered to the people a simple ideology, spoke to the nation in an understandable language and guaranteed a

minimal means of survival. They also provided the same minimal sense of stability, security and the “certainty of tomorrow”. This was more important for most Belarusians than the incomprehensible and often distracted slogans of the opposition parties. The ruling elite, unlike the counter-elite, was able to adapt to changing conditions, albeit with different results. According to public opinion polls, dissatisfaction with the authorities did not translate into support for the counter-elite. However, 2020 has seen fundamental changes take place within the Belarusian political elite as a whole.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Matzeivos Damaged at Polish Jewish Cemetery Hamodia | September 15, 2020

Approximately 20 tombstones were damaged at a Jewish cemetery in Zabrze, southern Poland. This is the third time such vandalism has been reported this month.

Dariusz Walerjanski, caretaker of the cemetery for 30 years, described the act and posted photos online, in which broken tombstones are seen.

“After many years of peace and tolerance, and understanding for the place where the dead rest, an act of vandalism was committed. It’s a rude act of stupidity. I can’t find an answer for why someone planned and did it,” he wrote. “Police are searching for the perpetrators.”

[Read the full article here.](#)

Covid-19: Jewish school in Bulgaria’s capital Sofia benefits from crisis fund Clive Leviev-Sawyer The Sofia Globe | September 15, 2020

The Ronald S Lauder School in Bulgaria, opened in 2019 as the first Jewish school in Sofia for several decades, is among beneficiaries of a crisis fund to counter the threat from the Covid-19 pandemic, a September 15 media statement said.

Thanks to the generosity of seven funders teaming up to secure the future of Jewish education in communities across Europe, more than 3000 children in 13 communities will be able to continue to pursue their studies at Jewish community day schools.

The statement said that the detrimental economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has threatened European day schools, which play a central role connecting children and families to the local Jewish community and educating future leaders.

“Without additional support, many of the schools would be unable to provide tuition relief to families affected by the crisis, and other schools face existential risk of closure,” the statement said.

“Most of the beneficiary schools were in precarious financial positions before the pandemic hit. Now, with parents struggling to pay tuition as well as regular donors unable to support the schools at previous levels, the situation has become dire.”

[Read the full article here.](#)

Sens. Rosen, Lankford push Poland on anti-Semitism, Holocaust restitution JNS | September 16, 2020

Sens. James Lankford (R-Okla.) and Jacky Rosen (D-Nev.), co-chairs of the Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Anti-Semitism, sent a letter to Polish President Andrzej Duda expressing concern over the rise of anti-Semitic discourse in Poland and urging Poland to enact a comprehensive Holocaust restitution law.

“Poland’s partnership with the United States as a stalwart NATO ally has contributed significantly to security and prosperity in Central and Eastern Europe,” they wrote. “We appreciate Poland’s longstanding defense cooperation, including its participation in U.S. military operations and willingness to host American troops on Polish territory. It is for these reasons that we are alarmed by growing anti-Semitic discourse in Poland and scapegoating of the Jewish community, which run counter to our nations’ shared values. Specifically, during Poland’s 2020 presidential campaign, the Law and Justice Party and state

television peddled anti-Semitic tropes and thinly veiled demagoguery.”

The senators continued, “In addition to putting Poland’s Jewish community at risk, these troubling statements undermine Poland’s obligations under the 2009 Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues. As one of 47 signatories, Poland committed to supporting national laws to help Holocaust survivors reclaim their property. We know you share our desire to strengthen the U.S.-Poland partnership, which is why we call on you to unequivocally condemn anti-Semitism, including when propagated by the Law and Justice Party and your political allies, and to adopt comprehensive legislation on Holocaust-era property restitution.”

Poland is the only European Union member-state that has not adopted a national comprehensive private-property restitution law.

[Read the full article here.](#)

Nord Stream 2 and more sanctions: the endgame begins

Ivan Tkachev

Riddle.io | September 16 2020

It seemed that U.S. sanctions against foreign contractors involved in construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, imposed in late 2019, came far too late and that nothing could stop the project. By that time, following two years of deliberations, Denmark had issued the final construction permit; the pipeline was 94% complete. Russian officials radiated optimism and gave assurances Gazprom would be able to complete the pipeline on its own, using the pipe-laying vessel Akademik Cherskiy, purchased by the company a few years earlier. Gazprom and President Vladimir Putin asserted that the U.S. sanctions would only delay the launch of the pipeline until late 2020 or early 2021, but would not stop the project.

Time passed by; construction did not resume. Unexpectedly, the prospects for completing the pipeline dwindled. Nord Stream 2 pipes have been lying idle in the German port of Mukran since late 2019. It has now transpired that the Akademik Cherskiy is not properly equipped. No one wants to insure the vessel either. Yet another pipe-laying contractor meant to finish the pipeline publicly distanced itself from the project. Meanwhile, in summer, American congressmen threatened to tighten sanctions against Nord Stream 2. The US Department of State unexpectedly updated its public guidance for the 2017 CAATSA, extending the potential scope of sanctions to include persons engaged in activities related to the pipeline project.

Now, there is a new threat hanging over Nord Stream 2, which may finally bury a €12bn mega-project. After the attempted poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny with what German military and medical experts identified as a nerve agent from the Novichok family (which the Russian security services are most likely to have access to), the German political establishment is calling for suspension or abandonment of the project. Chancellor Angela Merkel, a supporter of Nord Stream 2 from its outset, has publicly changed her tone. She has not ruled out imposing sanctions against the project. Given there had already been threats to German national security coming from Russia (a massive hacking attack on the Bundestag in 2015 and the assassination of a former Chechen warlord in Berlin in 2019, both cases allegedly involving Russia’s GRU military intelligence), the German government faced a situation that required a decisive response.

[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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