

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*August 2019*

August turned out to be full of important events in Jewish life in the post-Soviet space. The attention of observers was focused on the official visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to Kyiv. In addition, new objects of Jewish infrastructure were opened, complicated processes continued in the sphere of preservation of historical memory, and new synagogue in Cishinau.

**Israel and the post-Soviet countries**

**●** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu v isited Ukraine on **August 18–20**. The head of the Israeli government met with Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky. Together they took part in the memorial ceremony for the victims of the Holocaust in Babi Yar. Negotiations with the Ukrainian PM Volodymyr Groysman were held also. Several bilateral cooperation agreements were signed during the visit. Benjamin Netanyahu also met with representatives of the Ukrainian Jewish community.

The visit took place in a welcoming and solemn atmosphere. The Israeli PM himself described it as a “historical” (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=748282698949388>). This definition has become a cliche. It was constantly used by Ukrainian media. (https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/zelenskiy-i-netanyahu-video-brifinga-novosti-ukrainy-50038163.html

). Meanwhile, the visit did not bring any tangible results. The Israeli media called it “unnecessary” and drew attention to his election character. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-unnecessary-visit-netanyahu-returns-from-ukraine-with-few-achievements/> ).

In the video which was shot in Kyiv, Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that the visit brought “a free trade agreement and a representative office of Ukraine in Jerusalem”. (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=748282698949388>) This statement seems to be somewhat exaggerated.

The free trade zone agreement has long been signed. In Ukraine, the agreement was already ratified by the Verkhovna Rada. On August 7, the president also signed it. First of all, due to the unworkable end of last year due to the coalition crisis in the Knesset. It was alleged that the extension of the agreement not on goods only but to services also was discussed during the visit to Kyiv. (<https://zn.ua/ECONOMICS/ukraina-i-izrail-planiruyut-rasshirit-soglashenie-o-zst-na-sferu-uslug-327384_.html> ) However, it is not entirely clear how to expand the conditions of the free trade zone which de facto does not work yet.

The cooperation agreements concluded in Kyiv were signed by the ambassadors of both countries. This fact clearly reflects the low degree of importance of those agreements. They were declarative in nature and dealt with not the most significant aspects of bilateral relations. None of the signed documents required either the participation of the heads of state neither any serious preliminary negotiations and coordination.

Claiming that “the visit brought the Ukrainian representative in Jerusalem,” Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have deliberately misled the audience, wanting to pass off the results of the “historic” visit as a serious success in his foreign policy. This statement looked like an allusion, that Ukraine (following the United States) to move its diplomatic mission from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In fact, firstly, no official documents have been signed about the Ukrainian “representative office”. Secondly, and even more importantly, we are talking about business centers, not official diplomatic institutions. The idea of ​​opening "centers of high-tech cooperation" in Kyiv and Jerusalem was only voiced during a joint briefing by Volodymir Zelensky and Benjamin Netanyahu. The Ambassador of Ukraine to Israel Hennady Nadolenko was even forced to make an official explanation on this subject. He stressed that the transfer of the embassy or the opening of the consulate in Jerusalem is not a question. (<https://gordonua.com/news/politics/ukraina-planiruet-otkryt-v-ierusalime-ofis-innovaciy-a-ne-diplomaticheskoe-predstavitelstvo-posol-1211049.html>)

The assumption that the Israeli PM was motivated by the domestic political goals primarily seems plausible. In the unprecedented situation of repeat early elections in Israel in September, the “Russian” voters may be decisive. (in Israel, “Russians” means emigrants from all the countries of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine.) The Likud party and PM paersonally are active in propaganda on “the Russian street” as never before. It seems that Benjamin Netanyahu wanted to attract the sympathy of immigrants from Ukraine with a Kyiv visit. He also wants to balance his image of a “pro-Russian” politician and a “friend of Vladimir Putin”. Recently in Israel, it has been increasingly argued that even immigrants from Russia itself are far from enthusiastic about “Russian” accents in Likud campaign. (<https://972mag.com/netanyahu-putin-elections-likud-liberman/142661/> ).

Before the trip, the Israeli Prime Minister claimed that a pension agreement would be discussed. (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=466098117560838>) This issue was not mentioned at all in Kyiv, at least in public. It seems that the promise to discuss the issue made in Israel was only intended to attract the votes of elderly Israelis who came from Ukraine.

(<https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/premer-izrailya-netanyahu-rasskazal-o-celi-vizita-v-ukrainu>).

In general, Benjamin Netanyahu apparently avoided to mention publicly any complicated or controversialquestions. He was criticized by the Israeli press, for example, for the lack of any statements about the Ukrainian collaborators during the years of the German Nazi occupation. (<https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/europe/.premium-1.7768392>)

Volodymir Zelensky in his speeches and comments during the visit spoke about the problem of refusing Ukrainian citizens from entrance to Israel (despite the visa-free regime). He has articulated an offer to the Israeli side to recognize officially the Holodomor as genocide of the Ukrainian people several times, and expressed gratitude for supporting the Ukrainian territorial integrity also. Benjamin Netanyahu has not comment any of these points. Obviously, he did not want to speak out on issues that could be questioned, so as not to give rise to criticism. (<https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/podrobyci/pryyizd-netanyagu-bez-gostryh-kutiv>)

The Israeli side even asked the press not to attend the formal, protocol-laying of flowers near the memorial to the victims of the Holodomor. Perpetuating the memory of the victims of the Holodomor is painfully perceived by Russia. According to the *Maariv* newspaper, Russia expressed an informal wish that the Israeli Prime Minister not participate in official ceremonies in memory of the victims of the Holodomor in Kyiv. The representative of the Russian embassy in Tel Aviv, however, denied this message (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-denies-seeking-to-stop-netanyahu-from-honoring-holodomor-victims/> ) Obviously, Netanyahu did not want to tease the Kremlin without any serious reason.

However, the declarative nature and lack of a really meaningful agenda does not negate the positive fact of the visit itself and the importance of direct personal contacts between the leaders of Ukraine and Israel.

Some details of the visit that the popular media did not pay attention to, are important for understanding trends in the Jewish community.

● The memorial ceremony held in Babi Yar was organized solely on the occasion of the arrival of the Israeli PM and, presumably, on his initiative. Usually, the victims of Nazi massacres in Kyiv are remembered on September 29, the day the mass executions of Jews in Babi Yar began. In his speech, Benjamin Netanyahu has mentioned, that he "spoke with Mr. Sharansky about establishing here a sign of memory for the sake of all our dead," but hasn’t articulated clearly what did he mean.

To a wide audience it remained incomprehensible that the Israeli PM mean a very concrete “memorial sign”, not an abstract initiative. Apparently, he was involved by lobbyists of the controversial project of the “Babi Yar” Holocaust Memorial Center (BYHMC) to its public promotion. Soviet-era dissident Nathan Sharansky currently heads the project’s Supervisory Board.

The BYHMC project was initiated by an international group of Jewish businessmen, mainly from Russia (or with strong Russian ties). The main financial resource in this group is is in the hands of Mikhail Frdiman, the owner of Alfa Bank. He is known for being close to the Kremlin and for his personal friendship with Vladislav Surkov. The Ukrainian public, historians and the Jewish community were wary of the initiative, suspecting that the Holocaust theme in this project could be used for anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

(<https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3133540/babin_yar_do_chogo_tut_poltichna_volya_olgarhi_ta_konflkti_pamyat> )

BYHMC is not the only Babi Yar memorialization project. In parallel, the Ukrainian Jewish community, together with the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, are working on the project of the Babi Yar Museum. (<http://jewseurasia.org/page18/news58498.html>)

This project enjoys the support of axperts and the Ukrainian public in general. However, the significant financial resources of Russian oligarchs allow them to lobby their BYHMC project at the international level much more effectively.

● In addition, the composition of the guests at the meeting of the Israeli PM with representatives of the Ukrainian Jewish community is noteworthy. The event once again demonstrated the role of structures associated with the Chabad Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine and the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, which sharply increased after the victory of Vladimir Zelensky in the elections. (<https://jewishnews.com.ua/society/premer-izrailya-vstretilsya-s-evrejskimi-liderami-ukrainyi>)

The central organs of both organizations are located in the Dnieper. Both of organizations are closely connected with businessman Igor Kolomoisky.

● **Antisemitic reaction**. Some aspects of the visit caused critical and not always correct comments, primarily in social networks. Most often, unrestrained emotional comments concerned an incident that occurred at the Borispol airport immediately upon arrival of the Israeli delegation. Mr. Netanyahu and his wife, Sara Netanyahu, faced a ceremonial meeting. Girls in Ukrainian national costumes, addressing Israeli guests in Ukrainian, presented them with traditional bread and salt. The Prime Minister broke a symbolic piece of loaf for himself and for his wife. In the video that captures the meeting, however, one can clearly see the gesture of Sara Netanyahu, shaking the crumbs off her fingers immediately after the husband gave her the treat. The next morning, this video was widely distributed on social networks and on some news resources. Many commentators focused on the fact that the wife of the Israeli PM negligently threw a piece of bread, thereby showing disrespect and neglect of Ukrainian traditions and etiquette.

The emotonal critical discussions did not go beyond the boundaries of social networks and, in softversion, of comments on news channels. None of the well-known public people spoke negatively on this topic and no demonstrative actions related to the mentioned incidents were noticed. On the contrary, the dominant tone of comments on the visit in the media was an extremely positive tone, reaching an enthusiastic one. There were even conspiracy theory-style suspicions that the “incident with the bread” at the airport was inflated by Russia in order to spoil Israeli-Ukrainian relations.

(<https://censor.net.ua/ua/news/3143641/rosiya_vede_informatsiyinu_viyinu_dlya_dyskredytatsiyi_vizytu_netanyahu_zapustyvshy_feyik_pro_vykynutyyi>)

These assumptions, of course, are unfounded, but such ideas are indicative in their own way. It is obvious that bilateral relations are now in good times, and the level of anti-Israeli sentiment in Ukrainian society is low.

Some of the negative comments also went to the Ukrainian president. So, far-right blogger and publicist Dmytro Korchinsky in a videocomment on the visit emphasizes the ethnic origin of the Ukrainian president and claims that “Netanyahu just arrived with his presence to support his fellow countryman, since Volodymir Zelensky, as you know, is Jewish. And it’s good that someone else comes to us with such a president. ” (<https://youtu.be/wEmtXzbPuws>)

The most absurd antisemitic reaction to the arrival of the Israeli PM was recorded on Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory and in Russia itself.(<http://zavtra.ru/events/panoptikum_feericheskij_vizit_cheti_netan_yahu_v_banderostan>) For example, the former "chairman" of the so-called "Council of Ministers of the Luhansk People's Republic", the Russian political strategist Marat Bashirov articulated the version that Israel is concerned about the creation of a "reserve airfield", a kind of "reserve state." This desire is allegedly due to the claim that "the State of Israel in the next 30 years may be in danger of destruction." Ukraine, according to the former head of the occupation administration of the regions of the Luhansk region captured by Russia, “with its huge debts” and “the conflict in the Donbass”, “is the most likely version of the new “Promised Land”. (<https://t.me/politjoystic/10174>)

For the Russian political elite, such views are not exotic. Previously, similar ideas were expressed by adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin Sergey Glazyev, who also actively participated in organizing Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

(<http://zavtra.ru/blogs/glaz_ev_raskol> )

**Community life**

● An attempt to temporarily close the choral synagogue in Vilnius, the only one operating in Lithuania, had wide public resonance.

On **August 6,** Faina Kuklanski, Chairwoman of the Jewish Community (Litvaks) of Lithuania, stated that the synagogue and the communal house were closed due to constant threats. (<http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news64469.html>)

 Obviously, the reason for this decision was the tension that arose after the dismantling of a memorial plaque dedicated to Jonas Noreika at the end of July (see the *Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview* for July.

 The decision immediately faced criticism from the heads of the regional branches of the community from Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Šiauliai and Panevezys. In a joint letter, they argue that the position taken by Faina Kuklanski "sets up part of Lithuanian society against Lithuanian Jews." (https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2684053.html)

 On **August 9**, a decision was made to resume the work of the synagogue. ([https://www.lzb.lt/ru/2019/08/09/%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%bb%d1%8c%d0%bd%d1%8e%d1%81%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0%d1%8f-%d1%85%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bb%d1%8c%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%8f-%d1%81%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%b3%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%b0-%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%b7%d0%be/](https://www.lzb.lt/ru/2019/08/09/%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8E%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%BE/) )

 No antisemitic incidents were recorded during this period.

● In the early days of August, the Days of Jewish Culture festival was held in Berehove (Transcarpathian region).

(<https://goloskarpat.info/culture/5d47cebe3d351/?utm_content=031>)

● On August 25, the synagogue “Lemnaria” reopened in Chisinau.

 The synagogue was founded in 1835. The building was nationalized after the Soviet occupation of Moldova in 1940.

 In 2005, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee opened a Jewish community center in the building. But there was no synagogue there until Alexander Bilinkis, president of the Jewish Community of the Republic of Moldova, donated funds to restore the premises of the synagogue in the building.

 The opening of the synagogue was timed to coincide with the Limmud-FSU educational conference in Chisinau.

(https://www.timesofisrael.com/moldovas-dwindling-jewish-community-reopens-synagogue-seized-by-soviets/)

**Manifestations of Antisemitism**

● On **August 17,** a Memorial to the victims of the Holocaust near the village of Berezka in the Krivoozersky district of the Nikolaev region was desecrated. Swastikas were scratched on the monument. Criminal proceedings were opened.

**Sambir conflict**

● A controvertsal reaction was caused by the ceremony of erecting monument in the “Remember” Memorial Center in the town of Sambir (Lviv Region).

The Jewish cemetery of Sambir, one of the oldest in Ukraine, was restored by the initiative of the American philanthropist Jack Gardner in the 1990s. A kind of memorial square was created with his financial support also.

The activity of the Jewish community in the field of preserving historical memory caused an ambiguous reaction of some local residents. Point is that several fighters of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) were shot by the German Nazis in a cemetery. In response to Jack Gardner’s initiative, the local nationalistic activists set up three crosses in the Jewish cemetery.

In the 2000s Canadian lawyer Mark Freiman seized the initiative. After years of negotiations with local authorities, the creation of the Memorial Park “Remember” was approved. The project would perpetuate the memory of all victims of the Second World War in the town of Sambir. At the same time, the condition was stipulated that Christian crosses would be transferred to another cemetery. The project was developed and implemented with the support of the Canadian Friends of the Former Jewish Cemetery in Sambir and Ukrainian-Jewish Encounter. The authorities' readiness to agree with Canadian Jewish organizations provoked an antisemitic reaction among some local radicals. (http://hadashot.kiev.ua/content/v-sambore-vspomnili-o-evreyskih-mogilah)

On **August 21**, with the participation of the Primate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Metropolitan Svyatoslav (Shevchuk), the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Metropolitan Epiphanius (Dumsenko) and the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, Yakov Dov Bleikh. a ceremony to illuminate the monument to members of the OUN was held. a memorial prayer at the Jewish mass grave where about 1,500 Jews were buried was served also as a part of the ceremony.

Despite the fact that a difficult compromise was found, radicals and provocateurs from different sides continued to fan the conflict around the Jewish cemetery in Sambir.

On the one hand, antisemites claim that Jews cynically supplant Orthodox symbols and seize land. An attempt to dismantle the crosses for their transfer ran into opposition. In an antisemitic vein, what was happening was actively commented, for example, by Bogdan Khodakovsky. the leader of the *Tradition and Order* far-right group (https://www.facebook.com/bohdan.khodakovsky/posts/502714830557743 )

On the other hand, at the suggestion of the director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, Eduard Dolinsky, who had previously repeatedly distorted information to fan the scandals, many were outraged by the presence of the rabbi at the ceremony for the memory of OUN soldiers. In publications dating back to E. Dolinsky's post on Facebook, they cleimed that members of the OUN in Sambir are accused of murdering Jews. (https://ukraina.ru/news/20190822/1024712439.html)

**Holocaust remembrance**

**●** On **August 6,** Alexander Kozhin, chairman of the Rostov regional branch of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture, said that the state-protected area of the *Zmievskaya Balka* memorial had decreased by almost two-thirds. The status of the protected object was preserved by the monument itself, but not located across the road from the monument mass graves, in whichthe bulk of those killed in *Zmievskaya* ravine lie.

(<https://rostof.ru/articles/mesto-zahoroneniya-rostovchan-rasstrelyannyh-v-zmievskoy-balke-s-2012-goda-ne-ohranyaetsya>)

About 27 thousand Jews, were shot by the German Nazi in the *Zmievskaya* ravine near Rostov-on-Don (Russia) in August 1942.

**●** On **August 27**, a memorial dedicated to the memory of Holocaust victims and the Righteous Among the Nations opened in Bila Tserkva (Kyiv region). (<http://sinagoga.kiev.ua/node/15409>)

*By Vyacheslav Likhachev*