

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*June 2019*

*By Vyacheslav Likhachev*

**Israel and the post-Soviet countries**

*The most important news in June concerned Russian – Israeli relations, which was caused by the dynamics of the military and political situation in the Middle East region.*

On June 13, two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman. The United States, Great Britain and Saudi Arabia claimed that Iran was behind the attack. The situation began to heat up. On June 20, the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps shot down an American surveillance drone. U.S. President Donald Trump ordered a military strike against Iranian targets (object’s of IRGC infrastructure) but reversing the decision. The whole region was one step from the big war.

Israel is a close ally of the United States. In case of any regional military conflict, it could became a natural target for attacks from Iran directly or from Iran’s proxies (i.e., different terrorist groups under Iran’s control). Obviously, Israel is least interested in the escalation of international conflict.

● On **June 25**, a trilateral meeting of key representatives of Russia and the United States and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was held in Jerusalem. Moscow was represented by Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev, Washington – by US National Security Advisor John Bolton. On **June, 24,** Netanyahu discussed regional security with Patrushev during a bilateral meeting also.

The representative of Russia said that he had come to give America "Iranian lessons" (https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4012107). In other words, the task of Moscow was to convey to Washington Tehran’s position. US and Iran have no direct bilateral contacts. So, Russia pretends to be a kind of mediator.

Similarly, the day before, Patrushev discussed with Netanyahu mainly the problem of Iran’s military presence in Syria (earlier this month, Israel once again struck at Iranian targets in Syria).

Putin’s envoy did not stint on assurances of friendship and mutual understanding between Russia and Israel. In particular, Netanyahu did not object to him (https://ria.ru/20190624/1555859249.html). However, the role of the Moscow negotiator was obvious. He’ve represented the position of the one side of the geopolitical conflict, league of Russia, Syria and Iran, to the other side – the United States and Israel. A clear alignment of forces in this case is probably more important than concrete agreements, which are hardly possible while Russia (together with Iran and its satellites) and Israel (with the United States) are on opposite sides of geopolitical confrontation.

*Other important news concerning the relations between the post-Soviet countries and Israel have come from Moldova.*

● The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Moldova, headed by Pavel Filip, unexpectedly announced on **June, 12** the decision to transfer the country's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. However, due to the specific circumstances of the decision, it is unlikely to have any consequences whatsoever.

As a result of the constitutional crisis from June, 10, there were two governments operated in the country. The legitimacy of the Cabinet headed by P. Filip was questioned by the international community. The countries of the European Union, the USA and Russia recognized as a legitimate another one government, formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Maia Sandu. By the decision to relocate the embassy in Israel, as well as to allocate land in Chisinau for the construction of the US embassy new building, the government of Fillip clearly tried to gain America’s favor, but without any success.

On June, 14, the cabinet led by Pavel Filip resigned. The short period of diarchy was to end. On June, 26, the Constitutional Court, whose decision created a legal conflict on June 8 that led to a political crisis, resigned in full also.

On **June, 21**, the collision about the embassy received a logical conclusion. Moldovan Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu said that the embassy will remain in Tel Aviv. According to his statement, at the time of the announcement of the decision, the office of Pavel Filip had already lost his authority (http://ru.tv8.md/2019/06/21/ministr-inostrannyh-del-niku-popesku-posolstvo-moldovy-v-izraile-ostanetsya-v-tel-avive/). Moreover, Prime Maia Sandu explained that the loud statement by Pavel Filip was unreliable. His quasi-government did not accept any official documents on the transfer of the embassy. Filip’s words had no documentary confirmation (https://omg.md/index.php?newsid=16687). The press-release about the decision to relocate the embassy disappeared from the government website (https://gov.md/en/content/moldovan-filip-government-approves-transfer-moldovan-embassy-israel-jerusalem).

**Historical memory**

*A number of important events in June related to the memory of the Holocaust and preservation of mass graves sites.*

● On **June 4**, a monument dedicated to the heroes of the resistance in concentration camps and ghettos during the Second World War was erected in Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin participated in the ceremony. The main sponsor of the memorial was Viktor Vekselberg, one of the Russian businessmen, who is under the US personal sanctions.

For an adequate understanding of this event, it is important to mention that in Moscow there were no one memorial or monument dedicated to the memory of Holocaust previously. The new monument, opened on the territory of the Jewish Museum and the Center for Tolerance, is dedicated, as its creators specifically emphasized, to honor the heroism, not to the memory of the victims of Nazi crimes.

The emphasis in the state policy of memory precisely on heroism and armed struggle in relation to the Holocaust is traced in Russia at the system level.

To give only one example: last year with the government financial state the landmark film *Sobibor* was shot. The main character of this film is Alexander Pechersky, a Soviet soldier, prisoner of war who led an uprising in Sobibor extermination camp. It is very typical that the Russian state propaganda campaign around perpetuating the memory of the uprising began after Poland had refused the Russian participation in the international consortium for the construction of a new memorial and a museum at the site of Sobibor camp. Russia rather painfully accepted this refusal, although Russian government itself gave a reason for it, having removed the Polish side from participating in the memorialization of the Katyn tragedy previously (https://maidan.org.ua/2017/08/vyacheslav-lyhachev-sobybor-y-katyin/).

Post-Soviet Russia went even further than the Soviet Union on the way of "privatization" of the victory over Nazism, bringing the Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War to an absurdity. For example, Vladimir Putin claims that Russia itself, without Ukraine, “could win World War II” (https://youtu.be/K0FJge8nDxM).

The uprising in Sobibor is a symbol that Russia actively uses to strengthen its image as an exclusive “winner of Nazism” in the international arena. According to many estimates, *Sobibor* was filmed primarily for a foreign audience. The image of the Soviet prisoner of war, who led a one-of-a-kind successful uprising in the extermination camp, fits well into the general logic of Russia's attempt to privatize the victory over Nazism. The Russian propagandists pay no attention to the fact that the real Alexander Pechersky was born in Ukraine. By the way, after his escaping from the Nazi captivity he was subjected under repression by the Soviet punitive organs.

Kremlin propaganda systematically and consistently creates a clear association of Russia with resistance to Nazism and victory over Nazism. An important element of this narrative is the defamation of Eastern European political rivals of Russia (including Ukraine and the Baltic countries) under the formal pretext of the struggle for the memory of the Holocaust.

By the way, the competition for the project of the monument to the heroes of the Resistance was timed to the 75th anniversary of the uprising in Sobibor (https://lechaim.ru/federation/zavershilsya-konkurs-na-razrabotku-arhitekturnoj-kompozitsii-posvyashhennoj-geroyam-soprotivleniya-vravte i-getto /).

 Speaking at the opening of the monument, Russian President Vladimir Putin, of course, mentioned “Banderists” [i.e., members of the Revolutionary Organization of the Ukrainian Nationalists], who, in his opinion, “voluntarily became accomplices in the atrocities” of the Nazis. The Kremlin pool of journalists carried this quotation out separately in their messages (https://twitter.com/dimsmirnov175/status/1135892224208752640).

Russia does not cease to make efforts to attract Israel to the dissemination of its version of the historical memory of the Second World War.

Thus, Vladimir Putin laid the foundation stone of the planned monument to the heroes of the Resistance last year together with Benjamin Netanyahu who was on a visit to Russia.

Kremlin emissary Nikolai Patrushev stated that “Russia and Israel are united in opposing the rewriting of history and the glorification of Nazism” during his visit to Israel, which was mentioned at the beginning of the review (http://9tv.co.il/news/2019/06/24/ 271894.html).

According to the Russian state news agency TASS, on **June 14**, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin officially invited Vladimir Putin to visit Israel in January 2020 and to participate in events to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army (https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6548561). According to TASS, Reuven Rivlin also called Putin "a faithful ally in the fight against antisemitism."

In other words, Israeli leaders willingly play along with the Russian president in his propaganda statement on historical memory issues.

Why? First, the interests of Moscow and Jerusalem outwardly coincide partly. Israel itself, even without any Moscow’s influence tends to consider the history of World War II as a primitive black and white picture, which is unnecessarily simplifying.

Secondly, questions of historical memory are important for Israel only on a symbolic level. Any contradictions in this field never had prevented Jerusalem from establishing close relations with any countries, if there were any kind of pragmatic benefit, especially in security issues. For example, last year, despite the backdrop of the crisis of Polish-Israeli relations in the context of differences in the interpretation of historical nuances, military-political cooperation strengthened. The dynamics of the geopolitical situation throughout the region partly depends on Russia. Recent years, there is a free possibility for Israel to operate in Syria, preventing the supply of weapons to terrorists in Lebanon. Hezbollah currently represents the most serious threat to the security of Israel directly at its borders. Confrontation with Hezbollah is considered by Israeli military analysts as inevitable in a strategic perspective. In this situation Jerusalem is ready to placate Moscow in any issue which has no strategic importance to the Jewish state (https://nv.ua/opinion/stekljannyny-busy-bandera-i-sbityj-samolet-2514167.html). For example, Irael is ready to legitimize at a symbolic level the Soviet-Russian version of the memory of World War II and its expansion into the foreign policy arena.

● Despite the dominant official discourse of glorifying the tragic events of World War II, there are examples of the Holocaust memory model that is more accepted in the civilized world also. With the efforts of the Russian Jewish Congress on **June, 18**, a monument to the memory of more than 7.5 thousand Jews who were shot by the Nazis in September 1942 was erected in Mineralnye Vody. The names of 1034 dead, which historians were able to establish are carved on the monument (http://www.aif.ru/society/history/memorial\_zhertvam\_holokosta\_poyavilsya\_v\_mineralnyh\_vodah).

● On **June, 16**, a monument to victims of the Holocaust who were shot in the Pakakponis Forest was erected in Birjai (Lithuania). Historians were able to establish the names of 500 people from about 2400 people who died here (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news64062.html).

● The Сity Сouncil decided to rename two streets in honor of the Righteous Among the Nations in Dnipro (Ukraine). Darwin Street was renamed to Yana Khodorovsky Street, and Yasnaya Street to the Zubkov Family Street (http://djc.com.ua/news/view/new/?id=21594&lang=en).

● In **June**, the story about the planned building of the proposed site of the massacres during the Second World War in Poltava (Ukraine) went international. The subject of the collusion is a plot of land in the territory of the former artillery depots. according to historians, there was a cemetery in the XIX century. During the German Nazi occupation more than 30 thousand people were shot there. About a half of them were Jews. The area is also known as Pushkarevsky Yar. There are a memorial dedicated to the Holocaust victims and *To the Grieving Mother* monument nearby.

Back in 2017, human remains were found during the developing of communications to the land lot, were new neighborhoods should have been built (https://www.unian.net/incidents/1910223-v-tsentre-poltavyi-obnarujili-massovoe-zahoronenie-lyudey.html). The City Council and the developer denied that any human bones were found during the work. The national police even opened criminal case on the findings of human remains.

In February of this year, the City Council announced its intention to hold an auction for the land lots in Pushkarevsky Yar for further development. The mayor’s office claimed that there were no mass executions in the areas allocated for auctions, but historians question this statement (http://poltavske.tv/events/12841). The public appealed to the City Council with a request to suspend the execution of the decision to hold an auction prior to the examination, which would allow it to accurately determine whether there are human remains in the areas set aside for construction.

In April, local residents turned to the City Council with a petition containing demands to stop the auction and not to give these land plots to private hands. The activists were supported by Jewish organizations – by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities (Vaad) of Ukraine, the Poltava Chabad Lubavitch Religious Organization and the Religious Community of Progressive Judaism in Poltava. Jewish organizations also appealed with letters to the Ambassadors of the State of Israel, the United States of America and Germany urging them to join the process of restoring historical justice and perpetuating the memory of tens of thousands of victims of Nazism.

 On **June, 13**, the Ambassador of Israel to Ukraine, R. Joel Lyon, wrote to the acting mayor of Poltava and the City Council members and called for "stopping this historical injustice."

On **June, 26,** during the session of the City Council, the deputies decided to hold an auction, but supported the proposal to exclude eight lots from the list (land plots No. 4–11), where, according to information from public organizations, burials of victims of the Second World War are possible.

● On **June, 12**, human remains were found during the construction of a new facility in the Kyiv Botanical Garden.

On the place where construction is underway, there is an abandoned old Jewish cemetery. The Jewish community received this section from the government as early as the year of 1798. But at the beginning of the XX century, when the cemetery was transferred to the local communal services, the activities of the Jewish community in this area were discontinued. In the 1930s the cemetery was demolished. Only a number of unique Matzevot (gravestones) have been preserved, which were transferred to the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. The remains of more than 20,000 people became underground. After the discovery of human remains, the Chief Rabbi of Kyiv Moshe Reuven Azman wrote a statement to the police on his behalf demanding that construction be stopped (http://sinagoga.kiev.ua/node/15026). As response to the statement, criminal proceedings were opened. Today, construction is suspended.

The fact that, according to Azman’s information, the embassy of Indonesia plans to build a *stūpa* – a symbolic copy of Borobudor, the largest Buddhist temple in the world

(https://strana.ua/news/206162-hlavnyj-ravvin-kieva-pozhalovalsja-v-politsiju-na-stroitelstvo-buddistskoho-khrama-v-botsadu.html)

**Early elections to the Ukrainian parliament**

A number of politicians, known for their antisemitic statements, participate in the early elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which are due to take place on July, 21. The highest concentration of antisemitic candidates is in the candidates’ list registered by the political party *Svoboda* (“Freedom”) All-Ukrainian Union. This year, members of the Right Sector, the National Corps and some other political groups are also included in the *Svoboda’s* list in addition to members of the party.

Among the first twenty candidates on the list, antisemitic statements were made by the following politicians (http://jewseurasia.org/page18/news64177.html):

* the leader of *Svoboda* **Oleh Tyahnybok**;
* the leader of the "National Corps" **Andriy Biletsky**;
* deputy chairman of *Svoboda*, a famous actor **Bohdan Benyuk**;
* member of *Svoboda* **Yuri Syrotyuk**;
* member of *Svoboda* **Andriy Mokhnik**;
* member of *Svoboda* **Alexiy Kayda**;
* non-party candidate **Arsentiy Klimakov** (in the list, probably, by the quota of the “Right Sector”).

A number of candidates, who’s antisemitic rhetoric was previously recorded, run with support of *Svoboda* also in single-seat territorial electoral districts.

It should be noted, however, that in recent years, the *Svoboda* party as a whole has become much more restrained and moderate in antisemitic statements. Antisemitism was important in its ideology and propaganda (http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss19/05Likhachev.pdf), but the most outspoken antisemitic materials in recent years have been removed from the site or edited (though not all of them). The overwhelming majority of antisemitic statements recorded from the candidates running now to the elections were made 5-10, or even 15 years ago. In other words, during the past five years, antisemitism has faded from *Svoboda*. Anderiy Biletsky, the leader of *Svoboda’s* main ally in these elections, the National Corps Party, also was much more outspoken in his statements previously, and now he chose a more respectable image. This concerns not only antisemitism, but xenophobia in general also. However, it is also important to note that neither *Svoboda* nor the National Corps ever apologized for the racist statements, and did not make any statements about the revision of erroneous elements in their ideology. This makes it possible to doubt the sincerity of the ideological evolution of parties. Perhaps in this case we should rather talk about mimicry.

 *Svoboda’s* party list, according to pre-election polls, has little chance of overcoming the electoral barrier. However, some candidates have chances to win in single-seat territorial electoral districts. In case this happens, their views will be analyzed in an overview of Jewish life in the post-Soviet space in July.

**Manifestations of Antisemitism**

● On **June, 23** an act of vandalism happened at the Rahumäe Jewish cemetery in Tallinn. At the bus stop nearby, a swastika was drawn also (https://rus.err.ee/955527/na-evrejskom-kladbiwe-rahumjaje-zafiksirovali-pervyj-za-110-letnjuju-istoriju-akt-vandalizma).

**Arts & Humanities**

● On **June, 20–21**, a symposium “A Long Shadow of Mass Violence: The Case of Ukraine, 1918-2019” was held in Lviv (Ukraine). The main topic of which was the issue of violence against Jews in the ХХ century on the territory of Ukraine. The event was organized by the Ukrainian Catholic University.

The main task of the symposium was an honest discussion on the “black pages” of the Ukrainian-Jewish history. According to the organizers, such an expert dialogue is necessary for fruitful coexistence (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news64105.html).

● On **June, 26** in Vilnius, on the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Jewish community, a memorial plaque was opened on the building where the Jewish Research Institute (YIVO) was located until 1940 (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news64113.html).

Since 1940, the YIVO Institute is based in New York and continues to remain the leading research center in the field of Jewish Studies.