

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*September 2019*

*In September, internal difficult processes took place in the Jewish communities of some post-Soviet countries. Relations between the states of the region with Israel, communities with* *the authorities and various Jewish organizations were not always easy to manage, behind the external facade of diplomatically friendly rethoric.*

*An important international forum was held in Russia, demonstrating the symbolic importance of the ties with international Jewry and Israel for the Kremlin. At the same time, in reality relations between Russia and Israel are not so easy to develop, primarily because of the difference in the interests of the two states in Syria and the Middle East region. In Ukraine, the changing of the authorities during last spring and summer led to a changes in the balance between different Jewish organizations. Those changes have exacerbated an internal competition and led to the numerous conflict situations.*

**Government & Community Relations**

Over the past month, the leaders of Russia and Ukraine met with top representatives of leading world Jewish organizations.

● On **September 17**, in Moscow, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin addressed the participants of the *Keren haYesod* Foundation World Conference. (http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61546) In the course of his speech, Vladimir Putin, in particular, formulated several important theses.

The Russian president spoke a lot about the importance of developing friendly relations with Israel. In particular, he said: “Without any exaggeration, I can say with pride that probably there has never been such a level of relations between Russia and Israel, if, of course, you don’t recall the very first months, or maybe first several years, after the proclamation of the State of Israel". (http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61546) Obviously, Vladimir Putin wanted to recall something positive in the history of bilateral relations. The Soviet Union really had supported the creation of the State of Israel at the UN General Assembly. Moreover, although the Kremlin refused the leadership of Jewish *Yishuv* in its request for arms supplies at the end of 1947, the USSR allowed the supply of weapons from Czechoslovakia. Similarly, although Jews from the USSR itself were forbidden to make *aliyah* (i.e., to repatriate to Israel), Jews from Moscow-controlled Eastern Europe got this opportunity. However, simultaneously during the first years after the formation of the State of Israel, an aggressive antisemitic campaign and repressions against leaders and activists of Jewish organizations, including international ones, were launched in the Stalinist Soviet Union. In addition, attention is drawn to the easiness with which Vladimir Putin identifies contemporary Russia and the USSR. We also note the certain hypocrisy of the Russian president. According to the information available publicly, at the meeting with the Israeli PM just a few days earlier it was extremely difficult for two leaders to find a common language (see below). Vladimir Putin mentioned this meeting in his speech, but limited himself to retelling a touching story about how Grandfather of Benjamin Netanyahu spoke at the events of the Keren haYesod Foundation, eloquently silent about fundamental differences in approaches to regional security.

But the most colorful phrase in Vladimir Putin’s speech was, of course, “we consider Israel a Russian-speaking country”. This remark was criticized both by some Israeli immigrants from the post-Soviet space, including Russia.

Finally, the following thesis of the Russian leader is remarkable: “In general, you know, I have to say something. When we are faced with some negative trends, with attempts to revision the results of the Second World War, to distort history, and I, on the one hand, enjoy it, but on the other hand it should be noted with concern that almost the only organizations that publicly opposed all these attempts were Jewish organizations in Europe, including in the Baltic countries. Of course, I always think about it, and I think with gratitude, but it is a pity that only they. [...] The positions of Russia and Israel, the peoples of our countries are united. We consider completely unacceptable any attempts to revise the outcome of the war, the distorting the truth, the justifying fascism and its minions. [...] In May next year, we will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory together and, of course, expect the leadership of Israel to accept the invitation and come to the Victory Parade on Red Square and other special events. ”

In other words, if translated from Kremlin language to human one, Vladimir Putin emphasized the importance of the Soviet-Russian version of the history of World War II in Kremlin propaganda on the international stage. Jewish organizations in Israel and Europe often become convenient venues for broadcasting Moscow's memory policy. Official Israel is also inclined to play along with the Kremlin in this matter. Some Jewish organizations are consciously involved in this process. In particular, as Vladimir Putin further noted, referring to the Keren haYesod Congress, “your foundation supported the construction of the Victory Monument in Netanya, which we opened in 2012 with President Shimon Peres. This monument is a tribute to the soldiers of the Red Army, who saved the lives of millions of Jews and liberated Europe from fascism. ”

There is perhaps no need to explain that this rhetoric of the Kremlin is hypocritical, and it does not correspond to its real political behavior. (https://tsn.ua/ru/analitika/putin-evrei-i-yubilei-408198.html)

*Keren haYesod (in the English-speaking countries – United Israel Appeal) is one of the largest Zionist foundations (along with Keren Kayemet le-Israel), which has existed for almost a hundred years. Keren haYesod is one of the founders and one of the main sponsors of the Jewish Agency (Sokhnut), an organization representing the interests of the Palestinian Jewish population before the authorities during the British Mandate (until 1949), and today it is organizing the repatriation of Jews from all over peace to Israel.*

*Once every two years, the Keren haYesod world Congresses take place, each time in a different country.*

*In recent years, the Keren haYesod regional representative office in Eurasia has been headed by Mikhail Mirilashvili, a large businessman who is personally close to Vladimir Putin. He finances and lobbies a number of projects that help strengthen the Kremlin’s position in Israel and the Diaspora Jewish world. In particular, it is expected that Vladimir Putin will come to Israel to open a monument in Jerusalem to the victims of the siege of Leningrad, built at the expense of Mikhail Mirilashvili.*

● On **September 25**, in New York, President of Ukraine Volodymir Zelensky met with leaders of major American Jewish organizations.

Two main points can be distinguished In the speech of Volodymir Zelensky. First, the Ukrainian president asked representatives of Jewish organizations to help attract American and Israeli investors to Ukraine. Secondly, he sharply opposed antisemitism and declared his determination to combat this phenomenon. (https://president.gov.ua/news/prezident-ukrayini-zustrivsya-z-predstavnikami-yevrejskih-or-57509)

The Ukrainian president came to the United States to attend the UN General Assembly.

V. Zelensky was accompanied by the Chief Rabbi of the Dnieper and the region Shmuel Kaminetsky, representing the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine – the organization of Chabad-Lubavitch Chasidic movement. As a rabbi close to the president, he symbolically pushed both Yaakov Dov Bleich, who calls himself the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, and Moshe Reuven Azman, who calls himself the Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine. R. Bleich represents the Karlin-Stolin direction of Chasidism. R. Azman, like R. Kaminetsky, belongs to Chabad, and his community is not a member of the Federation of Jewish Communities.

**Relations with Israel**

● On **September 12**, Sochi (Russia) hosted a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The preparation of the Israeli PM’s visit to Russia became known in just a few days earlier. Just to compare: the August visit to Ukraine became known publicly in about a month. Moreover, the visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to India was planned for September 9. But it was canceled, according to Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesman, in connection with the PM’s busy schedule during the pre-election period. (https://lechaim.ru/news/netanyahu-otmenyaet-zaplanirovannyj-vizit-v-indiyu-menee-chem-za-nedelyu-do-ego-nachala/)

The Israeli Prime Minister meets with the Russian president more often than with any other foreign leader. He travels to Russia more often than to any other country also. In addition, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu regularly conduct telephone negotiations (for example, two telephone conversations are known during the last month). Obviously, the need for intensive contact is due to the situation in Syria. Both sides want to maintain their interests in the current conflict, while trying to avoid confrontation with each other. It is not so easy. Iran and Syria are allies of Russia. At the same time, Iran and its proxies are strengthening the capacity of the military infrastructure to attack Israel. From time to time, Israel attacks the sites of Iranian armed groups in Syria. Russia has deployed its air defense system in the country. Moscow constantly condemns Israeli attacks. (https://ria.ru/20190123/1549778841.html)

In this context, Benjamin Netanyahu wrote in an official Facebook account after the meeting: “Relations between our countries have never been so close” (https://www.facebook.com/netanyahurus/photos/a.906743896012061/2632994690053631).

Earlier, the Israeli PM even spoke about the "golden era" of Russian-Israeli relations. (https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2716681.html) Vladimir Putin also does not skimp on rhetoric pathos about an unprecedented "level of relations" between Russia and Israel (see above).

However, these relationships are hardly cloudless.

Just a few days before the visit to Sochi, Benjamin Netanyahu went in the electoral campaign’s rhetoric to the promise "to extend Israel's sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and the northern part of the Dead Sea." The Russian Foreign Ministry has responded to this idea with a harsh statement. (https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4089761)

In addition to friendly rhetoric, it is not clear what the leaders of the two countries agreed on. Israeli media wrote that Benjamin Netanyahu explained to Vladimir Putin the severity of the threat that Israel is trying to minimize by its actions. However, it is unclear whether any agreement was reached. The media wrote that Russia prevented three Israeli attacks on Syrian territory by threatening to use its air defense system in the month preceding the meeting. (https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Russia-prevents-Israeli-airstrikes-in-Syria-601618) Apparently, in Sochi, despite peppy comments in an interview (http://newsru.co .il / israel / 16sep2019 / netanyahu\_int\_701.html), in reality, Benjamin Netanyahu failed to shake the position of Vladimir Putin.

An eloquent detail showing which of the two leaders the meeting in Sochi was really needed - Vladimir Putin made Benjamin Netanyahu wait for him for three hours.

In addition to the foreign policy agenda, probably Benjamin Netanyahu, obviously, pursued domestic political goals, continuing the tactics of flirting with the Russian-speaking electorate. (https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-gets-pre-election-support-from-Putin-in-Sochi-601544) According to the election results, the tactics did not bring results.

**Community life**

● On **September 11**, a meeting of the Coordinating Council of Vaad of Ukraine, the oldest association of Jewish communities and organizations and still the largest one, was held in Kyiv.

Among other decisions regarding the organization’s current activities, the Vaad Coordination Council adopted a special statement expressing the trust and support of R. Yaakov Dov Bleich in connection with his participation in attempts to resolve the conflict at the old Jewish cemetery in Sambir (Lviv region; see August overview, https://www.ucsj.org/blog/2019/9/12/jewish-life-in-fsu-an-overview-monthly-report-for-august-2019-by-vyacheslav-likhachev). (http://vaadua.org/news/zayavlenie-koordinacionnogo-soveta-vaada-ukrainy-o-podderzhke-iniciativnoy-gruppy-po) After participating in the ceremony, Rabbi Bleich was severely criticized by some Jewish organizations, including previously friendly to him the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine. (https://jcu.org.ua/news/zayava-eku-z-privodu-ceremonii-vidkrittya-pamyatnika-geroyam-oun-upa)

**Holocaust Remembrance**

● Memorial Day for the victims of Babi Yar was held on **September 29** in Kyiv with a touch of scandal.

At the end of a privately-held Memory March, after a prayer at the Menorah Memorial, the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Dov Bleich, unexpectedly took the floor and in an emotional manner drew attention to the fact that the President of Ukraine did not participate in the events. “For the first time in the history of independent Ukraine, the President of Ukraine did not come to Babi Yar on September, 29th!,” exclaimed the rabbi. (https://youtu.be/nrU\_yhlKJI8)

A video recording of R. Bleich's speech was widely distributed on the Internet and was vigorously discussed on social networks. (http://vaadua.org/news/vyacheslav-lihachev-chto-vladimiru-zelenskomu-svoystvenno-narushat-slozhivshiesya-ceremonii-i)

On the same day, in the late afternoon, employees of the President’s Office began to distribute photos of the President with flowers near the old, Soviet monument in Babi Yar on social networks.

(https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2582115728498862&set=p.2582115728498862)

It was alleged that Volodymir Zelensky visited the memorial privately, incognito. (https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2019/09/29/7227636/) Obviously, the visit was organized for the photo shoot precisely as a response to criticism from the Rabbi Bleich.

Jewish organizations close to the President hastened to speak in his defense. R. Moshe Reuven Azman, who was present at the ceremony next to R. Bleich, also found it necessary to express his disagreement with his statements on his Facebook account. (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\_fbid=1008122719538740&id=388184211532597)

The organizers of the Memory March also dissociated themselves from R. Bleich, having distributed a statement according to which they “have nothing to do with the fact of the speech or with what was said.” (https://www.facebook.com/marchofmemory/posts/2457329157650051)

The most harsh one was the statement of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, headed by Ihor Kolomoisky. The official statement made completely incorrect accusations against R. Bleich (https://jewishnews.com.ua/society/oeou-vyirazhaet-protest-protiv-zayavlenij-blajxa-na-marshe-pamyati-v-kieve). The director of the organization Michael Tkach even came to the assumption that the President did not come to Babi Yar precisely because he did not want to attend the same event as a person like R. Bleich. (https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid= 3114393218633703 & set = a.1071364676269911) Later, however, even he himself recognized this assumption as untenable. (https://www.facebook.com/mikhail.tkatch/posts/3117348821671476)

Obviously, in response to criticism, already in October, on the eve of Yom Kippur, President of Ukraine Volodymir Zelensky once again came to Babi Yar and fully participated in the ceremony in memory of the victims of Nazism.

**Manifestations of Antisemitism**

● On **September 15,** it became known about the desecration of the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, located near the village Bohdanivka (Domanevsky district of the Mykolaiv region, Ukraine). Swastikas were scratched on the monument, and the inscription “Fuck you Jews, you won’t buy our land!” was inscribed on the pedestal. In addition, a piece of paper with threats on behalf of the “Ukrainian people” was pasted on the monument: “Jews, stop! Selling Ukrainian Land will very quickly lead to the Holocaust! ” (https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/09/16/7226383/)

The memorial was erected in memory of more than 55 thousand people, mostly Jews, who were killed by German Nazi during the Second World War in nearby ravines.

Three weeks earlier, in another district of the Mykolaiv region, another memorial to the victims of the Holocaust was desecrated in a similar way (see the August overview).

● On **September 17,** became aware of the similar act of vandalism, the third one of this type. The memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Golovanevsk settlement (in Kirovograd region), was desecrated with similar inscriptions and swastikas. In addition to the repeating slogan ““Fuck you Jews, and you won’t buy our land!” vandals also wrote on the monument “Haydamaky sanctified their knives” and others. (Haydamaky – members of cossack paramilitary bands in XVIII century)

(https://www.facebook.com/KnguUa/posts/910157966029076)

As in the case of vandalism in Bohdanivka, a leaflet was also attached to the monument with an appeal on behalf of the “Ukrainian People” with threats for “selling the Ukrainian Land”.

Later, already in October, the suspect in the commission of these acts of vandalism was detained.

(http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news64983.html)

● On **September 16**, it became known about the detention of members of an antisemitic group in Taganrog (Russia). The purpose of the group, according to the FSB press release, was “to fight Jews and representatives of Orthodox Jewish religious groups, including by force, for which a battle group was created on the basis of the movement". In the Russian media, the detainees are called the “Ukrainian gang of nationalists”.

(https://news.rambler.ru/incidents/42838586-fsb-poymala-borovshuyusya-s-evreyami-ukrainskuyu-bandu-natsionalistov/)

According to the same press release, the "extremist group" Union of the World Liberation Movement AllatRa Popular Brotherhood, allied by the FSB, was "created on the ideology of the foreign religious association" of AllatRa International Public Movement.

The center of the internationally-spread New Age sect “AllatRa” is really located in Kyiv. True, the political ideology of the occult revelations of the organization has a pronounced pro-Russian and pro-Putin character.

*By Vyacheslav Likhachev*