

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*November 2019*

*After a brief October lull, November again turned out to be Jewish community of the region full of controversial events and difficult processes.*

**Relations with Israel**

● On **November 11**, according the United States’ request for extradition Israel deported a Russian hacker Alexei Burkov, who is suspected of cyber fraud. He was detained at Tel Aviv Airport in 2015. (https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50385854)

Russia also requested for his extradition. Russia convincing Israel not to expel him to the United States, but to return him to the homeland. The relatives of the Israeli woman Naama Issahar, who has been convicted in Moscow in October on charges of drug smuggling, also requested for the hacker’s extradition to Russia. They believed that Israel’s satisfaction with Moscow’s request could have a positive effect on Naama’s case. The Israeli Supreme Court even suspended the extradition process, but the delay turned out to be short. (https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50260137) Probably, Moscow was not ready to make concessions in the Issakhar’s case.

At the end of the month, it became known that Russia was taking part in the fate of another detainee in Israel – a resident of the Golan Heights, an ethnic Druze Sidqi al-Maqt, who is serving a prison term on charges of spying for Syria. Russia has requested the extradition of a prisoner to Syria. But Sidqi al-Maqt himself refused the idea of extradition to Syria. He insists on the possibility of returning to his native village on the territory of the part of the Golan Heights annexed by Israel.

(http://newsru.co.il/israel/29nov2019/russia\_israel\_0015.html)

Earlier Russia facilitated the extradition to Syria to two of its citizens who were in Israeli prisons in exchange for help in transferring to Israel the remains of the body of Sergeant Zechariah Baumel, who died during the Lebanon war.

**●** In **November,** new round of bilateral negotiations between Ukraine and Israel on the crisis of a visa-free regime lasting more than a year took place. In 2010 the agreement on the abolition of visas for short-term (up to 90 days) visits to the country was reeched. In 2011, the visa-free regime came into force. It caused a significant increase in the number of tourists.

However, in the context of Russian aggression and the resulting deterioration in the socio-economic situation in Ukraine, the Israeli side has expressed concern about the significant number of Ukrainian citizens violating the regime of stay in Israel in recent years. According to the Israeli Ministry of Internal Affairs, many Ukrainians remain on earnings longer than the period stipulated by the visa-free regime. In addition, thousands of Ukrainian citizens applied for asylum in Israel in connection with the armed conflict in their homeland. To prevent possible violations, the Israeli side tightened the check at the airport for all Ukrainian citizens entering the country in a preventive manner. In 2018, Israel refused entry to nearly 8 thousand Ukrainians. Many of them complained of unmotivated nit-picking, rudeness y the passport control officers, arbitrary detention and inadequate conditions of detention pending deportation. A significant number of Ukrainians were not allowed into Israeli territory without reasonable justification. Even Ukrainian officials, such as the Minister of Education and the mayor of the Ukrainian's capital, were subjected to humiliating additional checks at the Tel Aviv Ben-Gurion airport.

In early 2019, after repeated but unsuccessful protests by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ukrainian side began to use the same measures against Israeli tourists. Strengthening checks at the Kyiv Borispol airport led to the refusal of entry for some Israelis, which, in turn, only tightened the attitude of the Israeli side. For example, on February 15, in response to the refusal of 35 Israelis to enter Ukraine, Israel did not let in a whole passenger plane with 140 Ukrainians. The Ukrainian side voiced the initiative to abolish a visa-free regime that did not really function properly.

During the spring and the summer, consultations and meetings were held at the level of interior ministers, designed to make amends. Despite repeated claims that the crisis was over, Israel continued to refuse entry to Ukrainians.

● On **November 27**, a delegation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine visited Israel to negotiate with colleagues on resolving the situation. An agreement on the creation of working groups was reached. Working groups will include representatives of the border services of both countries. According to the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine Tatyana Kovalchuk, they will have the opportunity to be physically present on passport control area when tourists cross the border, and will be able to influence decision-making.

(https://mvs.gov.ua/ua/news/26381\_Tetyana\_Kovalchuk\_Stvoreno\_ukraino\_izrailsku\_\_policeysku\_grupu\_dlya\_protidii\_nezakonnomu\_pracevlashtuvannyu\_gromadyan\_Ukraini\_na\_teritorii\_\_Izrailyu.htm)

**Community life**

● The Summit of the Jews of Eurasia, organized by the Israeli NGO “Euro-Asian Jewish Congress”, was held on **November 27-28** in Kyiv.

(http://eajc.org/novosti-kongressa/v-Kyive-otkryilsya-pervyij-cammit-evreev-evrazii)

***Reference****. Israeli amuta (public organization) claims to be a successor of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, but without sufficient legal grounds. Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) is an international association of communities of Eastern Europe, the post-Soviet space and the Asia-Pacific region. Established in 2002 by the Jewish communities of Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine, the EAJC had the status of the continental section of the World Jewish Congress. At the peak of its development, the EAJC united communities of 26 countries and was active in different parts of the region. In Almaty, Kyiv and Moscow EAJC’s offices operated. In 2017, after some internal crisis in the leadership of the Congress caused by difficulties in relations between the founders and the president, the EAJC’s General Assembly made an unsuccessful attempt to attract new sponsors and to reform the structure of the organization. However, the new president, elected at the General Assembly, Mikhail Mirilashvili, a major Russian-Israeli businessman, chose not to try to breathe new life into an international association, but to replace it with an Israeli NGO, simply using a name that has a well-deserved reputation in the Jewish world. Contrary to the EAJC’s Charter and ignoring the decisions of the General Assembly, the new team declared the Israeli NGO the only legitimate Congress and attempted to liquidate the regional offices. However, the attempt of this illegal “take-off” of the organization was not entirely successful due to the active resistance of some of the founders. The key community that was the founder of the EAJC, the Vaad of Ukraine, refused to participate in the work of the Israeli NGO. The EAJC Kyiv office, headed by the chairman of the Congress Program Commission, elected at the General Assembly, Josef Zissels, continues to act on behalf of the international community association, distancing itself from the Israeli NGO of the same name. Obviously, this is precisely why Kyiv was chosen by the Israeli NGO as the venue for the Summit, which was designed to legitimize symbolically the “take-off” of the organization. Relations between the communities – former members of Congress and the new leadership of the Israeli NGO of the same name are complicated by the political contradictions also. Mikhail Mirilashvili and his team have a clear pro-Russian orientation, contributing to the propaganda efforts of Moscow in all issues that are ideologically significant for the Kremlin. The Mirilashvili’s choice of a new organization representing Ukraine in the EAJC, instead of Vaad headed by Josef Zissels, related to the geopolitics issues also. The All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress of Vadim Rabinovich, a Member of Parliament and one of the leaders of the pro-Russian Ukrainian political party Opposition Platform - For Life, is now working with Mikhail Mirilashvili’s Israeli NGO “EAJC”. In May 2018, Vadim Rabinovich became the first Vice-President of the Israeli NGO EAJC. “is a great honor to help Mikhail Mirilashvili, and we will definitely do it, because I proudly assumed the title of EAJC First Vice President,” Vadim Rabinovich commented on his appointment.* (http://mignews.com/news/220518\_112903\_70272.html) *Then there was an attempt to consolidate the pro-Russian part of the Ukrainian Jewish community, designed primarily to publicly articulate a position alternative to the Vaad of Ukraine and Josef Zissels personally.* (http://jewish.Kyiv.ua/news/10574/)

As part of the Eurasian Jewish Summit in Kyiv, an extended meeting of the Israeli NGO “EAJC” members was held, which the organization’s leadership called the “General Assembly”. At the same time, a joint session of the European Jewish Parliament was held with the “EAJC General Assembly”.

***Reference****. The creation of the European Jewish Parliament was proclaimed by Vadim Rabinovich in 2012. The “Parliament” was based on the European Jewish Union, an organization that tried unsuccessfully to become an alternative to the European Jewish Congress. Once every several years the project participants gathered at the “session”, but the “Parliament” did not carry out substantive activities. The resuscitation of the project, apparently, was caused by the desire of Vadim Rabinovich to strengthen his symbolic role in the Jewish life of the region. Financial support from Mikhail Mirilashvili, who made a bet on Vadim Rabinovich in Ukraine, made it possible for the European Jewish Parliament to symbolically remind of itself. Note that on January 31, 2019 Vadim Rabinovich “awarded” Mikhail Mirilashvili “the highest award of the European Jewish Parliament”.* (http://ejp.eu/the-official-statement-of-the-jewish-religious-community-in-krakow-12/)

It must be said that the representative level of the Eurasian Jewish Summit was not high when compared, for example, with the Kyiv Jewish Forum held in May. The summit was ignored by the most authoritative international European and American Jewish organizations, as well as the first persons of Israel and Ukraine.

Among the events that took place during the summit, the greatest public outcry was the affixation of the mezuzah to the door jamb of the office of Vadim Rabinovich in the building of the Ukrainian parliament.

(https://www.vesty.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5633285,00.html)

**●** Earlier, on **November 12**, the Israeli NGO "EAJC" held a ceremony of tab the monument to the heroes of besieged Leningrad in Jerusalem.

(http://eajc.org/novosti-kongressa/v-ierusalime-sostoyalas-torzhestvennaya-czeremoniya-zakladki-monumenta-geroyam-blokadnogo-leningrada)

Two days later, Mikhail Mirilashvili held in Jerusalem "a ceremony of honoring the participants of the monument installation project."

(http://eajc.org/novosti-kongressa/v-ierusalime-proshla-czeremoniya-chestvovaniya-uchastnikov-proekta-ustanovki-monumenta-geroyam-blokadyi-leningrada)

The monument project, funded by Mikhail Mirilashvili and his business partners, is obviously part of the systemic promotion by the Kremlin and its allies of the Soviet-Russian narrative of memory of World War II. In modern conditions, the instrumentalization of the politics of memory serves the Kremlin to strengthen its position in the international arena and to conduct information campaigns against Eastern European countries, primarily the Baltic states and Ukraine, which trying to escape from the orbit of Russian political influence.

It is expected that the opening of the monument in January 2020 will be attended by Vladimir Putin

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**●** By the way, on **November 21**, the President of Russia handed the Order of Friendship to the Vice-President of the “EAJC” German Zakharyaev in the Kremlin.

(http://eajc.org/novosti-kongressa/pozdravlyaem-vicze-prezidenta-eaek-germana-zaxaryaeva-s-pochetnoj-nagradoj)

German Zakharyaev directly linked the award with his contribution “to the preservation of the memory of the heroic deed of a soldier of the Red Army”

(https://gorskie.ru/juhuro/events/item/48227-vladimir-putin-nagradil-prezidenta-fonda-stmegi-germana-zakharyaeva-ordenom-druzhby)

**Manifestations of Antisemitism**

● On **November 23**, the Nazi greeting was wtotten on the building of the Kaunas Choral Synagogue (Lithuania).

(http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news65386.html)

● On **November 25**, two swastikas were painted on the monument to Sholom Aleichem in Kyiv.

(https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\_fbid=1061150477569297&id=388184211532597)

The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations condemned the vandals.

(http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/615-uccro-statement-against-provocation-of-antisemitism-in-kyiv)

The investigation team of the Pechersk police department documented the incident. The investigation department began criminal proceedings under Part 1 of Art. 296 (hooliganism) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine. The monument was promptly cleared of traces of vandalism.

(https://kyiv.npu.gov.ua/news/publichna-bezpeka-ta-poryadok/pravooxoronczi-z-yasovuyut-obstavini-poshkodzhennya-pam-yatnika-na-stolichnomu-pechersku/)

Sholom Aleichem was a writer and playwright of the late 19th century – early 20th, one of the most important classics of Yiddish literature.

**Problematic issues of preservation of historical heritage**

**●** On **November 29**, the Tverskoy Court in Moscow ordered the arrest of the director of the Agudas Chassidei Chabad library, Sholom Dov-Ber Levin, accused of not returning cultural property to Russia. The reason for the decission was his refusal to return seven books from the library of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Joseph-Yitzchak Schneersohn. The decision was made in absentia -- Levin lives in the United States. (http://newsru.co.il/world/29nov2019/rebbe\_202.html)

Books, which were at that time stored in the Lenin Russian State Library, were temporarily transferred to the Library of Congress in 1994 as a part of an international subscription. Library of Congress, in turn, handed the books over to the library “Agudas Chassidei Chabad”, which refused to return the rarities to Russia.

The paradox of the Moscow court verdict is that earlier the American court issued several decisions regarding the unlawful appropriation by Russia of the Schneersohn library. Part of the unique collection of books of the Lubavitcher Rebbe was transported to the United States during World War II, and part after the war was confiscated as a trophy by the Soviet Union and placed in the archives of the Red Army, than subsequently transferred to the Lenin Library. In 1985, an American court recognized Agudas Chassidei Chabad as the legal owner of the library. In 1991, the State Arbitration Court of the Russian Federation (RSFSR this time) ordered the collection to be returned to its rightful owners, but the Lenin library did not obey. In 2010, an American court ordered Russia to return the Schneersohn library, but Moscow refused to comply with this decision. In 2013, an American court ordered Russia to pay a fine for refusing to comply with a decision to return the book collection to its rightful owners. In the same year, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the transfer of the Schneersohn Library to the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, which opened in Moscow.

**Holocaust remembrance**

● On **November 20**, in the Kyiv conference hall of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, a presentation and discussion on the concept of Babyn Yar National Historical and Memorial Reserve was held. The audience and participants of the discussion were for the leaders of the Jewish organizations and communities of Ukraine. (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news65375.html)

The concept of comprehensive memorialization of Babyn Yar was developed by the Working Group at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and the National Historical and Memorial Reserve Babyn Yar. According to the conception, it is planned to create a united memorial space of the reserve and two museums – the Babyn Yar Museum and a separate Holocaust Museum. Currently, work on the reconstruction of the building of the former office of the Jewish cemetery on 44 Melnikova St., is already underway. The Memorial Museum in memory of the victims of Babyn Yar will be open there with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture. (http://jewseurasia.org/page18/news58498.html)

The issue of the boundaries of the reserve was also discussed on the presentation. The question is not only about expansion, but also about the designation of boundaries, in order to avoid a desecration of memory. For many visitors, the memorial complex is still nothing more than an ordinary leisure park. The developers of the concept insisted that the space of the reserve should be arranged in such a way that it automatically immerses the guests of the reserve in the appropriate atmosphere.

● At the same time it became known informally about serious changes in the work of the another project on the same subject. The top-management of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center (BYHMC) was changed. The BYHMC project was initiated by Russian businessmen with Jewish roots, the main sponsor is Mikhail Fridman. A film director with a scandalous reputation, Ilya Krzhanovsky, was invited as a new artistic director of the Memorial Center. All the project management, including CEO, Yana Barinova, resigned. Obviously, the new director will not only form a new team, but also re-formulate the concept of the project.

**Culture**

**●** On **November 7–8**, Minsk hosted the first international festival of Jewish culture and klezmer music, Litvak Klezmer Fest, in Belarus. (http://klezmerfest.by/)

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