

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*May 2019*

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*● The most significant event of Jewish life in the post-Soviet space in May 2019 was the Kyiv Jewish Forum, which took place in the Ukrainian capital on May 5-7.*

**Kyiv Jewish Forum**

The Kyiv Jewish Forum (https://kyivjewishforum.com/) was the most important high-level Jewish political assembly in post-Soviet countries recently. The head of the Ukrainian state, and high-ranking governmental officials participated in the events of Forum. The Ukrainian Jewish community and the communities of neighboring countries (in particular, Moldova), and leading international Jewish organizations, like Word Jewish Congress were represented also, the United States, and the State of Israel as well.

The event was organized by the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine and was timed to the twentieth anniversary of this organization.

The President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko, President of the World Jewish Congress Ronald Lauder, symbolic person for the struggle of Soviet Jews for the right to immigration Natan Sharansky, Primate of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Metropolitan Epiphanius, Primate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Patriarch Svyatoslav Shevchuk, Special Envoy of the US Department of State for Monitoring and Countering Antisemitism Alan Carr (this was his first foreign visit to fitsialnom as), the Attorney General of Ukraine Yuriy Lutsenko, co-president of the Vaad of Ukraine Joseph Zissels, the OSCE Representative on combating antisemitism Andrew Baker, and many others important figures were speakers on the various panels and thematic events in the frames of the Forum. (https://jcu.org.ua/news/mi-nadzvichayno-pishaemosya-rezultatami-debyutnogo-kyiv-jewish-forum-boris-lozhkin)

Although the agenda of the Forum suggested, in particular, special attention to the problems of antisemitism, Ukraine itself was practically not addressed in this context. However, this is understandable. The context that set the tone for the Forum was shaped by the President elections that took place in Ukraine two weeks earlier. An ethnic Jew was elected as the head of state as a result of a nationwide free vote for the first time not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in Europe. This event , of course, was a landmark evidence of the level of Ukrainian-Jewish relations and ethnic tolerance in general in the country. So, the atmosphere on the Forum had a certain shade of euphoria.

In terms of format, the Kyiv Jewish Forum sought to be similar to the Annual AIPAC conference or the Global Forum of the American Jewish Committee. To some extent, it worked.

The organizers want to make the event annual.

*Reference. The Jewish Confederation of Ukraine (https://jcu.org.ua/) was created in 1999 as an alternative to the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, which appeared shortly before, as an “umbrella” all-Ukrainian association of local communities. (Many Jewish leaders at that time were dissatisfied with the authoritarian style of leadership and personal ambitions of the president of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, Vadim Rabinovich.) As well as the Vaad of Ukraine, the oldest and most representative association in terms of the number of local organizations, the JCU represents the Ukrainian Jewish community at the World Jewish Congress. The leaders of the Vaad and JCU automatically receive the position of Vice-Presidents of the WJC. However, due to a number of subjective reasons, the initial unifying potential of the JCU was not realized, and until recently this organization did not work actively. The newspaper "Jewish Observer" publishing and a kind guardianship over the “Harry and Jeanette Weinberg House for the Elderly People" for years were the only JCU’s community projects. However, the newspaper, good relations with Rabbi Yaakov Bleich (who claims to be the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine) and the formal status of the JCU in the WJC, of ​​course, provided some presence for the Confederation in the information space. But in reality, the organization was not among the leading Ukrainian community structures. The JCU strongly inferior in activity not only to the Vaad of Ukraine, but to the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine and* *other Jewish associations also.*

*However, a year ago, JCU received a second wind. In May 2018, Boris Lozhkin, former head of the Presidential Administration of Ukraine, headed the Confederation. He immediately declared his intention to make the JCU the main Jewish organization of the country. This, of course, was too ambitious. However, the JCU has really stepped up its activities. Together with the Vaad of Ukraine, Jewish calendars were issued for the Jewish year 5779 (2018/2019), on Passover 2019 – matzoth was baked. The JCU has made significant efforts to promote a remarkable project – renaming streets in many Ukrainian cities and towns in honor of the local Righteous Among the Nations, who saved the Jews during the Holocaust.*

*Obviously, by virtue of personal connections and aptitudes of the new leader, the JCU tends to specialize as an organization claiming the political representation of the interests of the Jewish community. I must admit that at JCU it works quite well. The past Kyiv Jewish Forum has clearly confirmed this.*

**Jews and society**

● On **May 20**, the inauguration ceremony of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky was held. The Jewish community at the event was represented by the Chief Rabbi of Dnipro Shmuel Kaminetsky (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news63834.html). It should be noted that previously the Jewish religious community was represented by Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich of Kyiv at the events like the inaugurations of 2010 and 2014. R. Dov Bleich, who usually calls himself the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine (at the time of the very beginning of the Ukrainian independence, he was the only rabbi in Kyiv, and automatically became the Chief Rabbit, first of all, therefore) belongs to the Karlin-Stolin direction of Hasidism (one of the branches of the Orthodox Judaism). R. Kamenetsky belongs to the another Hasidic movement – Chabad-Lyubavich.

The Prime Minister of Ukraine, also an ethnic Jew, Volodymyr Groisman, resigned on the same day. However, the Parliament did not accept the resignation of the PM. Now he remains in office until the formation of the next government by a new parliament, formed after the early elections, which should take place on July 21.

Thus, in Ukraine, the only country other than Israel, at the same time both the president and the PM are ethnic Jews by birth.

Earlier, after the preliminary announcement of the President election results, but before the official inauguration ceremony, Volodymyr Zelensky met with a group of rabbis. The conversation took place in the largest Ukrainian Jewish community center "Menorah" in the city of Dnipro. The meeting was attended by rabbis who have the symbolic status of the Chief rabbis in the regions of Ukraine – Shmuel Kaminetsky (Dnipro, the Chief rabbi of Central Ukraine), Rabbi Moishe Moskovich (Kharkiv, Eastern Ukraine), Rabbi Abraham Wolf (Odesa, Southern Ukraine), Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm (Zhytomyr, Western Ukraine), as well as Chief Rabbi of Donbass Pinhas Vyshetsky and Chief Rabbi of Kyiv Moishe Reuven Azman. According to the press release, the rabbis congratulated Volodymyr Zelensky on the result of the election and discussed with him a number of issues, in particular, “the development of the Jewish life in Ukraine”. It is noteworthy that all the participants in the meeting represented only one direction of orthodox Judaism – the Lubavitch Chasidism (or the Chabad movement).

After it became obvious that Volodymyr Zelensky was winning the elections, he held meetings with leaders of the main Christian churches of Ukraine (except for the Protestant ones). Thus, it cannot be argued that in this sense any preference was given to Judaism.

A few days after the meeting with the rabbis, Volodymyr Zelensky posted a short video on his Facebook account containing a “message of peace for the residents of Crimea and Donbass”. The population of the occupied territories was addressed by religious leaders belonging to different confessions of Christianity (Orthodox Christians belonging to different denominations and Greek Catholics were represented), Islam, and Judaism also. Moreover, five of the eleven spiritual leaders on the recordings were rabbis (representing only Chabad movement).

According to these first symbolic steps of the new president of Ukraine, several preliminary conclusions could be made.

First, although Volodymyr Zelensky is inclined rather to deny or at least to downplay the level the importance of his own Jewish ethnic origins, among his first steps after the election were contacts with leaders of the Jewish community. Of course, the elected president spoke not only with them. However, previous presidents did not have contacts of such intensity. Mr.Zelensky tries to keep the external balance, and he met far not only with the rabbis, but nevertheless it is impossible not to notice some “disproportionality” of the “Jewish” component of his first public steps after the elections. The same “disproportionate” presence of the rabbis is striking when watching the “interfaith” video also.

Secondly, it is obvious that the “Jewish community” in the understanding of the new Ukrainian president (or in the understanding of those who are responsible in his team for the formation of his external image) has a pronounced religious character. At the inauguration of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010, the leaders of “secular” (ethnocultural) Jewish organizations close to the Party of Regions were represented also. Previous Ukrainian presidents, Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko, visited the synagogue several times and held meetings with representatives of the Ukrainian Jewish community and foreign Jewish organizations, but never -- separately with a delegation of religious leaders, rabbis.

Finally, it looks like the Chabad-Lubavich movement received a complete monopoly on the representation of Judaism in the eyes of the new president. This unpleasantly resembles the situation in Russia in 2000, when the newly elected president, Vladimir Putin, radically changed the balance of power in the Russian Jewish community, providing obvious preferences to the Federation of Jewish Communities, which represents the same Chabad branch of Judaism. However, the internal logic of preferences by Volodymyr Zelensky, obviously, is quite different. If Putin needed to strengthen one Jewish organization in order to weaken the influence and further marginalize others, incuding those ones who previously represented the Jewish community in relations with the authorities, but now associated with political opponents, then the Ukrainian president has no opponents in the Jewish world. However, his friends are clearly there. And first of all, these are structures (organizations and informal groups) associated with Zelensky’s senior partner, businessman Ihor Kolomoisky. It is unlikely that the President of Ukraine has any ideological or any other reasons to feel special sympathy for the Chabad-Lubavich movement. However, Kolomoisky maintains a close relationship with this very direction, to which personally the Chief Rabbi of the Dnipro, Shmuel Kaminetsky.

In 2000, choosing favorites in the Jewish community, Mr.Putin was guided by practical calculations and considerations of usefulness in the context of political confrontation. With his characteristic tendency to “sweep” social space, having chosen a specific group, he provided it with the resources to monopolize Jewish life in Russia. For Zelensky, personal connections, personal loyalties, and personal relationships are important (as could be seen from the first appointments), and no one can monopolize the diverse and pluralistic Jewish community life in Ukraine.

● On **May 29**, the Latvian parliament decided on the candidacy of the next president of the country. The next President of Litva is Egil Levits, a lawyer.

The father of the new Latvian president, Jonas Levits, was a Latvian Jew, whose whole family perished in the Holocaust. The mother’s family was expelled by the Stalin regime to Siberia. In the 1970s, the Levits family, together with 17-year-old Egil himself, went to Germany by a “Jewish visa”.

Egil Levits himself says that he feels himself Latvian, and not a Jew. He is known for his anti-communist views. He is close to Latvian nationalists. One Russian newspaper even responded to his election with the headline “The new president of Latvia – the ideological Latvian Nazi from a Jewish family”. Previously, he spoke out against the restitution of Jewish property (https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/story/levits-novyj-prezident-latvii-chto-o-nem-nuzhno-znat.d?id=51139459&all=true) .

**Community life**

● On **May, 7**, in the Kyiv region, in the village of Anatevka, the public multidisciplinary medical and rehabilitation center “Beit Shmuel” was opened. The opening ceremony was attended by many Ukrainian and foreign guests of the Kyiv Jewish Forum that ended on the eve (https://jcu.org.ua/news/u-anativci-vidkrivsya-noviy-gromadskiy-centr).

Anativka is a camp for internally displaced Jews from a war zone in eastern Ukraine, built on the territory of the village of Gnatovka. The name of the camp was taken from the writtings of Sholem Aleichem.

As a social adaptation and charity project, the camp of Anatevka has an ambiguous reputation. Justification of construction in the camp of a large medical center is extremely doubtful.

● On **May 30–31**, representatives of official Russian Jewish organizations, such as the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, celebrated the Day of Liberation and Salvation. The reason is the anniversary of the so-called "Victory Day", May 9, which in 1945 according to the Jewish calendar fell on Jewish month of *iyar* 26. This year, *iyar* 26 fell on May 31. The Day of Liberation and Salvation is supposedly a “new religious holiday” in Judaism, which the servile pro-Kremlin Russian Jewish figures are persistently trying to introduce. (https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3984996)

The Soviet-German war (or the Great Patriotic War, according to Soviet historiography) occupies an important place in the Russian state politics of memory. Jewish organizations which are loyal to the Kremlin went to the invention of a new religious holiday for the sake of maintaining an official narrative. Through the efforts of pro-Kremlin Jewish structures, they are trying to introduce this date in Israel and in the Jewish diaspora both.

Holidays and observances associated with historical events exist in Judaism. But since biblical times, no new holidays have been added to the Jewish calendar. Israel celebrates Independence Day and celebrates the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust victims according to the Jewish calendar, but no one claims that these days are religious holidays of Judaism.

A much more serious problem with the new holiday is that May 9 as “Victory Day” is a purely Soviet ideological construct, rethought in the post-Soviet era and actively used in Russian propaganda today. The Second World War in Europe ended on May 8. On this day, Europe celebrates the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation. The last day of the war is the day of mourning for the dead. In the Soviet Union Victory day on May 9 was the central state holiday – the militaristic holiday of victorious weapons. Modern Russia is trying to privatize the victory over the Nazi Germany, and speculate on this symbolic capital. State-dependent servile Jewish community organizations play along with the Kremlin.

**Manifestations of antisemitism**

● On **May, 7,** Sergey Glazyev, an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was responsible for preparing the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, published a post in a personal blog on the website of the nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* (http://zavtra.ru/blogs/glaz\_ev\_raskol). The subject of analysis of this famous Russian expert was the possible changes in Ukrainian politics after the election of Zelensky. However, S. Glazyev considers that it is possible not to take the elections seriously, since Ukraine, in his opinion, is “occupied” by America, “and elections were also held in the territories occupied by Hitler’s fascists, including Ukraine”. Attempts to understand the intentions of the “American occupation regime” lead the author to the following thought: “Perhaps the stake on Zelensky, made long before these elections, is connected with the general trend of the Trump administration towards the Far-Right forces in Israel. Probably, they will set new tasks for the updated Kyiv regime. I do not exclude, for example, the possibility of a massive move the inhabitants of the Promised Land, who are tired of the permanent war in the Middle East, to the land of the South-East of Ukraine, "cleaned" of the Russian population,. "

The suggestion that the “genocide of the Russian population of the land of the South-East of Ukraine” was staged by the Americans in order to resettle the Israelis into the liberated territory caused a considerable public outcry. In fact, the author’s antisemitic conspiracy, formulated in such streamlined expressions (the word “Jew” has never been encountered throughout the text), looks even somehow inexpressive against the background of a totally wild picture of the world. Arguments about the “blood of innocent victims of the neo-Nazi regime”, “no less than” “one hundred thousand” “victims of political persecution” by the “American occupation regime with a puppet government” (in Ukraine) make a rather strong impression without imaginations about the immigration plans of “the inhabitants of the Earth promised ". However, the rabid Ukrainophobian ristorica in the mouths of the representatives of the Russian political elite has long become familiar, but the antisemitic conspiracy theory is less common and still causes bewilderment and indignation.

● In the Russian city of Kurgan, a sentence was pronounced against a 23-year-old local resident who wrote appeals to kill Jews in several courtyard arches. In view of previous convictions, the antisemite received a rather serious punishment – 2.5 years of imprisonment (https://jewishnews.com.ua/society/antisemita-iz-rossijskogo-kurgana-prigovoril-k-tyurme).

● Early in the morning of **May, 27**, an electronic letter from “Motorola Terrorist” was sent to the e-mail address of the Central Kyiv Synagogue (Brodsky Synagogue) from “motorola\_dnr\_1488@mail.ee” email. The text of the letter stated that the building had a homemade time bomb. Another bomb, according to an anonymous "terrorist", was laid in a car parked nearby.

Worshipers were evacuated from the synagogue urgently. The bomb was not found.

● On **May 21**, it became known about the desecration of the Holocaust Memorial in Poltava. The unknown vandal painted on the monument "Death to the Jews" and drew the emblem of the SS – a double "Sieg" rune in the form of a lightning.

An antisemitic inscription put earlier was also found on an information stand located nearby.

The memorial and the nearby monument to the "Grieving Mother" have repeatedly been desecrated over the past years, judging by the handwriting and the content of the inscriptions – by the same vandal.

The memorial was erected on the site of German Nazi executions on ten thousand inhabitants of Poltava, first of all – Jews.  (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news63840.html).

● On **June 3**, the Director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, Eduard Dolinsky, reported (https://www.facebook.com/eduard.dolinsky/posts/2521020314596688) about the “attack” of the “National Corps” (allegedly “Azov battalion units”, according to E. Dolinsky) against the "office of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee in Kharkiv." Mr. Dolinsky also claimed that the Israeli Cultural Center and the office of the consul of the State of Israel in Kharkiv are located in the same building. The date of the attack was not indicated in the message.

The “information” of Mr. Dolinsky about the “attack” on the “Jewish community center” (as it was called in the publication in the newspaper Jerusalem Post) was widely spread in the Ukrainian and world media.

In fact, there was no “attack” on the “office of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee”.

The actual reason for the manipulation message of E. Dolinsky was a peaceful public rally, which took place on May 23 in Kharkov. The rally came mainly entrepreneurs trading in the *Barabashovo* market. Most of the market belongs to the AVEC corporation, whose president is MP Oleksandr Feldman (formally, he heads the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, but the organization’s activity in the past 5 years has been limited to the posts of its director E. Dolinsky on Facebook). The reason for the protest was the protracted conflict around the market. Many entrepreneurs claim that they face pressure from the administration, which forces them to pay for a trading place in the “black” cash desk, and constantly increasing the amount of this informal “lease”. Traders have created an initiative group. In recent months, entrepreneurs have complained of physical attacks and arson of retail outlets.

Activists of the Right-Wing political party of the National Corps joined the protest of entrepreneurs. According to the administration of the *Barabashovo* market, the situation is about a coordinated “raider attack” (a kind of brutal business take-off) on the market. Many observers are convinced that Gennady Kernes is behind the raider attack.

On May 23, the protest began near the building of the regional police department. Participants of the rally demanded an investigation of the violence attacks against the market’s businessmen which taken place earlier. Then the action moved to the courtyard of the AVEC corporation office building, where, indeed, young people, mostly football hooligans and the National Corps members, really had burned pyrotechnics and painted the porch of the office with the graffiti “Feldman is a thief”.

No antisemitic statements or slogans were recorded during the action. The fact that Feldman is not only the AVEC Corporation President and the *Barabashovo* Market owner, but also the President of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, was not announced during the rally and did not play any role for its members. Of course, there is no separate “Kharkov office of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee” in the building. The premises of the Israeli Cultural Center and the office of the consul of the State of Israel in Ukraine are not in the same building as the office of the AVEC Corporation, but in the neighboring one. The fact that they are located there, the protesters could not know, because there is no sign about it. (http://jewseurasia.org/page18/news63961.html)

The attempt of Eduard Dolinsky to issue a protest against violence and a rally with demands to investigate crimes committed on the basis of an economic conflict as an attacking the office of a Jewish organization is clearly in the nature of deliberate disinformation.

**Relationships with Israel**

● On **May 23**, a draft resolution on the transfer of the Ukrainian embassy to the State of Israel from Tel Aviv to its capital, the city of Jerusalem was registered in the Verkhovna Rada.

According to the official website of the Verkhovna Rada, almost 70 MPs representing almost all parliamentary factions took the initiative to introduce the draft resolution. Among them are Borislav Bereza, Yuriy Bereza, Alexander Bryginets, Anton Gerashchenko, Alexey Goncharenko, Alexander Granovsky, Mikhail Dobkin, Igor Lutsenko, Georgy Logvinsky, Sergey Kaplin, Nikolai Knyazhytskyi, Borislav Rozenblat, Alkesander Feldman, and others.

In light of the early parliamentary elections, consideration of the question of postponing the embassy has been postponed indefinitely.