

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*December 2019*

*In December 1989, the first Congress of representatives of independent Jewish groups and organizations was held in Moscow. The Confederation of Jewish Communities and Organizations, the Vaad of the USSR, was officially established. (‘Vaad’ is a Hebrew word for “Council”, and the historicalname of traditional Jewish autonomic self-government bodies in Easretn Europe.) The creation of Vaad was preceded by the Round table of representatives of Jewish communities and organizations, held in May 1989 in Riga. The decision to withdraw the independent Jewish movement from the underground had been taken there. Informal disparate groups had become an official organization, more precisely, an association of organizations on the scale of a huge country that has been living out its last years.*

*(An archive video of the opening ceremony of the Congress of the year of 1989 see: http://www.worldjewishtv.com/content/detail/1659/)*

*The December 1989 Congress and the creation of the Vaad of the USSR became a symbolic reference point for the revival of the Jewish community after decades of Soviet repression, violent secularization, state antisemitism and, as a result, intense assimilation.*

● On the **16th of December**, on the anniversary of the First Congress of the Vaad of the USSR, the Conference *Jews of the USSR: 30 Years of Exiting the Underground* was held in Moscow. The event was organized by the Russian Jewish Congress (REC) and the "Vaad" inter-regional organization (the Russian fragment of Soviet Vaad). The delegates of the first Congress of Vaad from Russia shared their memories and reflection on the path traveled. In addition, sociologists presented the results of research on the Russian Jewish identity. The REC President Yuri Kanner and the Russian Vaad President Mikhail Chlenov made an attempt to articulate a kind of vision of the future of the Jewish community of Russia. Attempts to analyze the situation on the whole territory of the entire post-Soviet region were not made at the conference.

(<https://www.svoboda.org/a/30335761.html>;

<https://rjc.ru/ru/news/2273-v-moskve-proshla-mejdunarodnaya-konferentsiya-evre>)

In Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, whose representatives had took part in the Riga Round table and the Moscow Congress in 1989, practically nobody has remembered the anniversary this year. The only notable exception was an interview with Josef Zissels (<http://www.vaadua.org/news/i-zisels-ya-rassmatrivayu-evreyskuyu-zhizn-kak-sushchestvennuyu-chast-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva>). Josef Zissels was one of the founders and leaders of the Vaad of USSR and he is a Co-President of the Vaad of Ukraine now. The interview was partly devoted to the personal recollections of the work of the Soviet Vaad, and partly – to reflections on what it means to be a Jew in modern Ukraine also.

It is striking that the anniversary of such a significant event, actually the central one for the Jewish life in the whole region was celebrated quite modestly. Generally speaking, it went unnoticed.

If we recall how the events dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet Vaad’s creation took place ten years ago, the difference will be significant. In May 2009, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Round Table, a conference to analyze the path taken by the post-Soviet Jewish communities was held in Riga. In December, quite large-scale anniversary events took place in Moscow – conferences, round tables and ceremonial receptions, as well as the anniversary Congress of the Vaad of Russia (http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news14530.html). Representatives and many leaders of the Jewish communities of most post-Soviet countries took part in all the anniversary events of 2009. Some of them was a delegate to the first Congress of Vaad, but many participants have belonged to the next generation of community activists.

Unlike the Riga jubilee conference, in Moscow in 2009 the main subject of discussion was no longer reflection, but discussion of the future post-Soviet Jewish community. One December Moscow conference was called *The Future of the Jewish Community of the Former USSR: Challenges* (<http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news14705.html>).

The continental association of national level communities, the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC), which rightly claimed continuity with the Vaad of USSR, also timed a series of events to coincide with the anniversary conference. One of them, the meeting *Jewish Community Life in the Post-Soviet Space: Results and Prospects*, was dedicated to coordination of the efforts of large Jewish philanthropists and donors from all over the post-Soviet space to support the community.

(http://jewseurasia.org/page6/news14698.html)

Strategic planning and coordination were especially relevant ten years ago due to the consequences of the 2008 global economic crisis. The crisis led to a significant reduction in financial support from foreign donors, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, to a decrease in the possibilities of internal fundraising.

Obviously, the striking differences in the anniversary events of 2009 and 2019. They are explained not only by the fact that another ten years have passed since the moment of the event. Many initiators and organizers of the 1989 Congress are still alive and active. However, the unified Jewish post-Soviet space, which objectively existed back in 2009, today has largely disintegrated. Independent and separated communal infrastructure had been successful developing since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Natural centrifugal trends began to influence on general picture especially rapidly since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Kremlin consciously and actively used speculation on the Jewish topic to advocate for the aggression. Pocket Russian Jewish organizations readily sang along to the new agitprop. Ukrainian Jews, in turn, began to identify themselves with their country more strongly in the situation of an external threat to it's freedom, independence and the very existence. The idea of ​​a trip to Moscow itself for many Ukrainian Jewish leaders and activists seems categorically impossible, even to an event, organized by an old friends and former colleagues. The structure, which calls itself the “Euro-Asian Jewish Congress” today, despite its claim to succession, has little in common with the EAJC ten years ago, only the name is the same. Ten years ago the Congress was a strong umbrella-type association of the main post-Soviet Jewish communities, with main offices in Almaty, Kyiv ad Moscow. Today it is an Israeli non-governmental organization with an open pro-Kremlin orientation.

The disintegration of a common Jewish organizational, infrastructure and information post-Soviet space has not occurred fully yet, primarily due to the existence of large sponsors, trying to be active in the whole region, but it is already inevitable. Today, the Jewish communities of different post-Soviet countries have no sense to coordinate their actions and to discuss the future. It is obvious that they have no common future.

**Relations with Israel**

In December, the Russian-Israeli crisis of a visa-free regime unfolded.

● On **December 16**, a group of eight Israelis were denied from entry to Russia at Moscow's Domodedovo airport. On **December 18**, already 46 Israeli citizens were deported back after the interview. Despite attempts to resolve the conflict within the framework of bilateral consultations, long humiliating inspections, denials and deportations continued in the following days.

(https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Russian-delegation-heads-to-Israel-amid-tourist-detention-tit-for-tat-611341)

Mostly, Israelis were denied entry if the reason for the visit was business, participation in educational seminars or other events. Russian border guards claimed that visa-free entry applies only to tourist trips. In fact, following the text of the agreement on the abolition of the visa regime of entry, this is not so clear.

(https://tourism.zahav.ru/Articles/3529/mest\_kremla\_pochemu\_izrailtyan\_ne\_puskaut\_v\_moscvu).

Lying on the surface, the reason for carping about Israelis is a large number of denied entry of Russians at the Ben Gurion Tel Aviv Airport. During the year of 2018, almost 6 thousand Russian citizens were not allowed to enter Israel.

(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israelis-held-up-at-moscow-airport-russia-says-israel-denied-entry-to-thousands-1.8287626)

According to the Israeli side, the source of the problem is the situation when Russians had arrived to the country and have asked for the asylum seekers status (2 thousand per year). Since the beginning of 2019, a similar Israeli-Ukrainian crisis has unfolded, caused by Israel's accusations that a significant number of Ukrainians who come as tourists remain in the country illegally, to work and sometimes to seek asylum.

(<https://detaly.co.il/izrail-ne-vpuskaet-rossijskih-grazhdan-iz-za-rosta-chisla-prositelej-politicheskogo-ubezhishha>)

However, perhaps, in the Russian case, the symmetry of the actions of the border service is not the only reason for the inconvenience of the Israelis. In particular, it is striking that the difficulties began after Israel’s extradition to the United States of the Russian hacker Alexei Burkov (see the November review). A whole series of other complications in bilateral relations, superimposed on the crisis of a visa-free regime.

**●** On **December 17**, the Russian Spiritual Mission (RDM) sent an objection to the Jerusalem District Commission on planning and building. The topic of the objection is the project for the construction of the new transport interchange in the area of ​​exit from the Israeli capital towards the village of Ora and the Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital. The works on construction for the section of rails for the city tram was the subject of petition also.

RDM manages the property of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Holy Land. In particular, it operates the Gorny Convent in Ein Kerem. Naturally, the Mission is worried about the preservation of the historical appearance of the area and the complex of buildings. It has every right to submit its objections and comments regarding new infrastructure and construction projects to the commission for consideration.

However, observers note the atypically sharp tone of the document. After listing fears about possible damage to buildings from vibration during mining operations and worrying that the noise of construction would prevent the nuns from praing, the authors of the document conclude: “the above trends unwittingly make the representatives of the Mission and its lawyers think about the systematic disregard for the interests of Christian communities in the region”.

(https://detaly.co.il/podveli-pod-monastyr-pochemu-moskva-protivitsya-stroitelstvu-v-ierusalime/)

Municipality officials suggested that "the RDM protest, in fact, indicates a conflict between Israel and Russia at the highest political level."

It is noteworthy that RDM's sharp objections were raised on the eve of Vladimir Putin’s planned visit to Israel in January 2020.

One of the possible issues leading to the deterioration of the Russian-Israeli bilateral relations is a real perspective of a kind of competition in the gas sector.

In January 2020, with the participation of Vladimir Putin, the opening ceremony of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline will be held, through which Russian gas will go to southern Europe. (https://detaly.co.il/izrailskij-put-cherez-sredizemnoe-more-v-evropu/) Almost simultaneously, Benjamin Netanyahu will visit Greece to sign an agreement on the construction of the Israeli-Greek-Cypriot gas pipeline, through which several years later gas from Israeli fields in the eastern Mediterranean will be delivered to southern Europe. In a strategic perspective, Israel could become a serious competitor to Russia. Jerusalem and Moscow have taken a strong place in different regional geopolitical and economic blocs today, between which a serious confrontation is quite real.

● Interestingly, against the backdrop of trends towards worsening Russian-Israeli relations, on **December 25**, Benjamin Netanyahu mentioned Vladimir Putin’s quote an interview: “Putin told me that were it not for our relationship, we could have found ourselves in the midst of a military clash...” (https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-putin-said-that-if-i-were-not-pm-israel-and-russia-would-be-at-war/)

Such a formulations in the lips of the Russian President may have a shade of threat. However, it is not obvious that the Israeli PM understands this.

**Community and the government**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has resorted to speculation on antisemitism to justify aggression against an independent state and the occupation of its territory once again. This time it was an attempt to rehabilitate the Stalinist crimes and legitimize the Soviet-German invasion of Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II in 1939.

**●** Speaking at a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on **December 20**, Vladimir Putin took a bold excursion into history. He turned to the topic of support, which supposedly in 1938 was expressed by the Polish ambassador to Nazi Germany Józef Lipski to Adolf Hitler’s antisemitic plans. (http://special.kremlin.ru/events/President/transcripts/62376)

On **December 24**, at the expanded board of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Russian President once again returned to this topic, allowing himself to express his idea very sharply. “Bastard!” Antisemitic pig! There is no other way to say. He fully solidified with Hitler in his anti-Jewish, antisemitic moods and, moreover, he promised to erect a monument to him in Warsaw for bullying the Jewish people, ”, Vladimir Putin described Józef Lipski.

(<https://lenta.ru/news/2019/12/24/svoloch/>)

**●** The President of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, Aleksandr Boroda has warmly supported the Russian President in using the topic of antisemitism for legitimization of the Soviet-German aggression against Poland. “On behalf of the Jewish community of Russia, we can only express deep gratitude for such an emotional and righteous response to the publication of new facts regarding Poland’s support for German policy in the 1930s and 1940s ... The words that our President addressed to the ampassador are very accurate,” he declared. A. Boroda also added that Lipski has not only sympathized with Hitler’s ideas, but “he has inspired him for murderous decisions, he has supported the deadly plan at its very beginning”. (https://lenta.ru/news/2019/12/24/taki\_za/)

In other words, if the Russian President simply allowed himself completely unacceptable expressions, the President of the servile Russian Jewish community made frankly false statements.

Statements by the Russian President expectedly caused a diplomatic scandal.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Moravecki issued a special appeal, which, inter alia, said: “ The Russian leader is well aware that his accusations have nothing to do with reality, and that there are no monuments of Hitler or Stalin in Poland. Such monuments stood on our soil only when they were erected by the aggressors and perpetrators – the Third Reich and Soviet Russia. The Russian people – the greatest victim of Stalin, who was one of the cruelest criminals in the history of the world – deserve the truth. I believe that Russians are a nation of free people, and that they reject Stalinism, even when President Putin’s government is trying to rehabilitate it. We cannot accept turning perpetrators and those responsible for committing cruel crimes against both innocent people and invaded countries into victims. "

(https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/oswiadczenie\_ru\_0.pdf)

According to some information, Polish President Andrzej Duda began to consider refusing the invitation to take part in the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Jerusalem. The main reason is the central role of Russian President Vladimir Putin in these celebrations. (<http://jewseurasia.org/page16/news65744.html>)

**Community life**

● On **December 18**, Moscow hosted the “Violinist on the Roof” award ceremony. The award was established by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FEOR). The prize is awarded annually on the eve of Hanukkah to people who “have made a significant contribution to the development of the country's cultural and social life through their activities”.

In 2019, Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma (the lawer camber of the Russian parliament), received the award in the nomination “State Activities”. One of the RIA Novosti projects became the laureate in the nomination on journalism.

Vyacheslav Volodin is a former deputy head of the Presidential administration in Russia in 2011 – 2016. During his tenure in the Presidential administration, an invasion on Ukraine took place and a speculative campaign to instrumentalization of the topic of antisemitism to legitimize aggressive Russian politics reached its peak.

RIA Novosti is a state-run news agency that performs the function of propaganda rather than information. It is one of the symbols of the lack of real freedom of speech in modern Russia.

At the same time, the prize in the "Publishing" category was received by the translator, editor and publisher of Jewish classical texts Menachem Yaglom for managing a unique project – publishing of the 14-volume academic edition of the Maimonides Code "Mishne Torah" in Russian.

The award ceremony was held at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses.

(https://lechaim.ru/news/18-dekabrya-v-gosudarstvennom-kremlevskom-dvortse-sostoyalas-torzhestvennaya-tseremoniya-nagrazhdeniya-laureatov-premii-feor-skripach-na-kryshe/)

The award of the FEOR is an excellent illustration of the activities of this organization as a whole and of the duality of its place in the Russian socio-political context. On the one hand, it supports truly unique projects for the development of a qualitatively new level of religious and community Jewish life in the country. On the other hand, it diligently demonstrates its unconditional and unconditional support for the Russian government and its specific representatives, including the most odious, on every occasion and even without special need.

**Manifestations of Antisemitism**

● On the night of **December 25** a swastika was drawn on a sign at the gates of the synagogue in Rovno (Ukraine).

(<https://www.facebook.com/KnguUa/photos/a.586852125026330/995318784179660/>)

**Historical memory**

● On **December 4**, a new head of the Ukrainian Institute of Historical Memory was appointed – Anton Drobovich.

Earlier, Anton Drobovich was the head of educational programs at the Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, an ambiguous private museum project initiated by prominent Jewish businessmen from Russia and Ukraine.

Some Jewish organizations have complained to the previous director of the Ukrainian Institute of Historical Memory, Volodymyr Vyatrovich, earlier. He was accused of excessive ethnocentrism and the glorification of radical nationalist groups in the mid-twentieth century, and their leaders.

*By Vyacheslav Likhachev*