



The Joseph and Alma Gildenhorn  
Institute of Israel Studies

# Ex-Soviets in the Israeli Political Space: Values, Attitudes, and Electoral Behavior

Michael Philippov

Research Paper 3

April 2010



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# Ex-Soviets in the Israeli Political Space: Values, Attitudes, and Electoral Behavior

Michael Philippov

Key words: FSU immigrants, political culture, political attitudes, elections, electoral behavior

## INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF EX-SOVIETS IN ISRAEL

Approximately one million ex-Soviet immigrants have settled in Israel since 1989, with the majority having arrived between 1989 and 1995. This "Russian" immigration was noted for its high human capital, as a large proportion had college degrees and training in a variety of technical and professional fields, and the value of education and professional success was an important component of their worldview and culture. Most belonged to the middle class and had resided in large cities in the European portion of the Soviet Union. However, the demographic character changed as the immigrants who arrived in Israel since 2000 were more provincial and less "Jewish".<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s portion of this wave is a classic case of economic-driven migration, as the forces that pushed and pulled the immigrants were related to economic issues: Immigrants left the USSR during a period of economic decline with hopes of improving their fiscal situation in Israel and insuring a better future for future generations. Quite possibly, a large proportion of these immigrants preferred to go to the United States, however the American option was no longer available to most after the beginning of the 1990s and the majority came to Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Former Soviets' integration into Israeli society is such a complex process involving so many variables that it is nearly impossible to develop tools that are feasible and capable of objective measurement. The spectrum of scholarly opinion regarding the phenomenon is evidence of the great difficulties involved in arriving at definitive conclusions. Some scholars argue that émigrés' ambitions in deciding to immigrate to Israel were realized and thus this was a very successful process for them: "It is no longer new to claim today that absorption of the

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<sup>1</sup> According to religious laws (*halacha*), a person is considered a Jewish if born to a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism. About one third of the former USSR immigrants who came to Israel in the framework of the law of Return are not considered Jews according to these halachic laws. Remennick, L. *Russian Jews on Three Continents*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007; Smooha, S. 2008. "The Immigration to Israel: A Comparison of the Failure of the Mizrahi Immigration of the 1950s with Success of the Russian Immigrants of the 1990s," *The Journal of Israeli History*, 27 (1); 2002 report of the Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem: Government of Israel, 2002: [www.cbs.gov.il/publications/migration\\_ussr01/word/mavo\\_02.doc](http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications/migration_ussr01/word/mavo_02.doc)

<sup>2</sup> Lazin, F. *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics - Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Book, 2005.

"Russians" is a great success story overall in spite of a sea of difficulties and problems. According to survey results, more than 80% of this population (including the non-Jews among them) are satisfied with their decision and view Israel as their home."<sup>3</sup>

However, this optimistic conclusion includes a certain contradiction. It is difficult to accept the view that this integration process was a "great success" in light of "the sea of difficulties and problems". However, the finding that the majority of immigrants are satisfied with their decision to leave a poor, deteriorating country necessarily lead to the conclusion that they integrated successfully into the state of Israel. The present article focuses on the socio-political integration of the FSU immigrants in Israel. It claims that the economic and social difficulties that ex-Soviets confronted in integration are a more important basis for understanding most of the integration and adaptation processes in which they participated, including their contributions in the Israeli political arena.

The economic and social difficulties that ex-Soviets confronted in Israel are a more important basis for understanding most of the integration and adaptation processes in which they participated, including their contributions in the Israeli political arena.

Any description of the adaptation of immigrants to Israeli socio-political realities must start with the theme of "location". Unlike the majority of "veteran "Israelis, most ex-Soviet immigrants live in the country's periphery, together with Arabs and Mizrahi Jews. The complex and often unstable inter-group relations that develop in peripheral settlements in Israel is due in large part to cultural differences, competition over resources, and the deteriorating security situation in such localities. It is notable that, in comparison with Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrachim have a more negative view of Russians<sup>4</sup> and ex-Soviet immigrants have been found to have feelings defined as "deep hatred" for Arabs.<sup>5</sup> Their concentration in the periphery also

Despite the relatively high proportion of those participating in the workforce, many of the immigrants are employed in jobs that match neither their education nor professional training.

dictates, to a certain degree, the group's limited employment success. Furthermore, despite the relatively high proportion of those participating in the workforce, many of these immigrants are employed in jobs that match neither their education or professional training.

<sup>3</sup> Yakobson, A. 2008. "Collapse, Shmolapse: Israeli Society Facing the Prophecies of its Downfall." *Kivunim Khadashim* 18: 40-57 (in Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Remennick, L. 2007. *Russian Jews on Three Continents*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Fialkova, L. and M. N. Yelenevskaya. 2007. *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press; M. Philippov. 2006. "1990s Immigrants from the FSU in Israeli Elections 2006: The Fulfillment of the Political Dreams of Post-Soviet Man?" *The Elections in Israel 2006*, ed. A. Arian and M. Shamir. NY: SUNY Press.

Indeed, even after 15-16 years of residing in Israel, ex-Soviets earn much lower salaries than veteran Israelis working in the same job. The percentage of blue collar workers among immigrants has not changed significantly since the beginning of the 1990s, a statistic that may well be due to the relative decline in educational level of young former FSU immigrants. One scholar of the Russian immigration, Dubson, observed that, in contrast to the Soviet regime, Israel succeeded in shifting a large proportion of the Russian Jews to classic proletarian status in a relatively short period of time. This can be seen in one of the best-recognized characteristics of the Russian immigration – the dramatic decline in their occupational status.<sup>6</sup> There are many reasons for this failure: Peled and Shafir argue that the professional composition of this immigration wave did not match the needs of the Israeli economy, great difficulties were encountered in absorbing such a large number of engineers, doctors, architects, and so forth. As a result, the immigrants experienced a significant decline in their occupational status as many shifted from being employed in the professional and technical sector in the USSR to skilled and unskilled employment in the service sector in Israel.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in comparison with the US and European economies, the Israel economy is small and relatively inflexible, with upward mobility often a function of social networking acquired through years of residence in the state. Since it does seem that the younger generation is enjoying more success in integration, with those completing a higher education degree attaining employment in fields such as high tech, then the relative failure of employment seems characteristic of the older generation.<sup>8</sup> Yet, according to the 2009 Democracy Index, young immigrants are less successful than Israel-born peers, according to the subjective feeling of members of these groups.<sup>9</sup>

Ex-Soviet immigrants cannot be described, of course, as a homogeneous group, who live solely in the periphery and suffer from difficult economic and social problems. Like many others living in the center of the country, many young immigrants found themselves working in companies involved in developing Israel's high tech industry. However, in most cases the situation of immigrants is inferior to that of Israeli-born peers of the same age, profession, and educational level. And here, too, immigrants residing in the country's center are found to have a more pessimistic view of the future.<sup>10</sup>

Attempts at economic integration into the Israeli economy occurred in parallel with processes of socialization and adaptation to the new society, including gaining proximity and

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Y. and Y. Haberfeld. 2007. "Self-Selection and Earning Assimilation: Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel and the United States." *Demography* 44; Dubson, B. 2007. "Sozialno-Profesionalnaya Mobilnost Immigrantov" [Social-Professional Mobility among Immigrants], "*Russkoe*" *Lizo Izrailya* [The "Russian" Face of Israel], ed. M. Kenigstein Jerusalem: Gesharim (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> Peled, Y. and G. Shafir. 2007. *Mihu Israeli?* [Who is the Israeli?]. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press (in Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> Smooha, S. 2008. "The Immigration to Israel: A Comparison of the Failure of the Mizrahi Immigration of the 1950s with Success of the Russian Immigrants of the 1990s." *The Journal of Israeli History*, 27:1.

<sup>9</sup> Arian, A., M. Philippov, and A. Knafelman, A. 2009. *The Israeli Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy, Twenty Years of Immigration from the Soviet Union*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

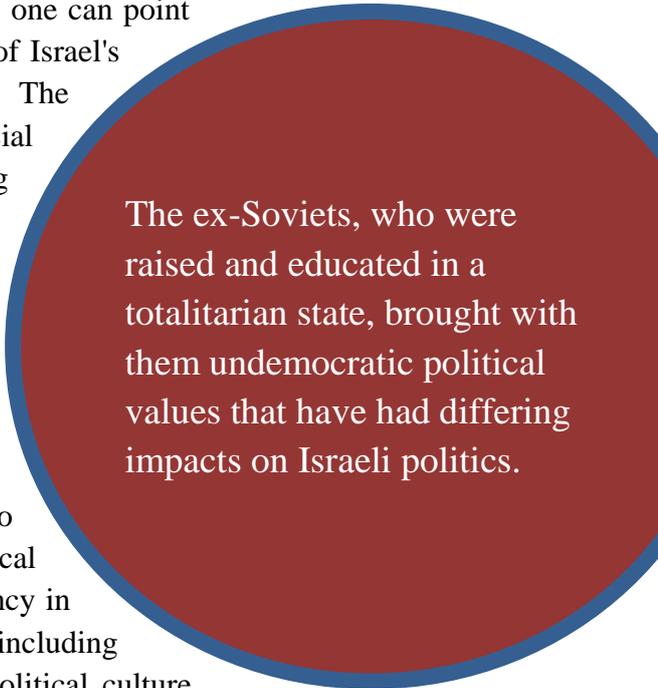
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

access to the local culture and accepting behavioral norms. Here, it is worthwhile noting that the Russian immigration changed the face of Israeli society to an unusually visible degree compared with other waves of immigrants. The immigrants created a new, Russian-speaking subculture within the majority Hebrew-speaking population, with their own newspapers, television channels, book and food stores, youth nightclubs, and theaters catering to the needs of the Russian-speaking population. All of these became an integral part of the urban Israeli cultural landscape.

Finally, alongside the immigrants' impact on society, one can point to their significant contribution in shaping the contours of Israel's political domain, which is the focus of this article. The immigrants established political parties and social movements, influenced the public agenda by advancing unique topics, and came to hold political positions that were significantly different from other Israelis of European origins. Furthermore, it appears that the ex-Soviets, who were raised and educated in a totalitarian state, brought with them undemocratic political values that have had differing impacts on Israeli politics.

The electoral behavior of ex-Soviets continues to surprise not only the public at large but also political scientists, who have had a difficult time finding consistency in and a rationale for immigrant voting over the years, including defining exactly the connections between the group's political culture and their voting patterns.

In addressing these matters, the first portion of this article deals with the unique aspects of the ex-Soviets' political culture and its adaptation to other Israeli political cultures. This discussion draws heavily on opinion surveys conducted by the Guttman Center of the Israeli Democracy Institute. The second part of the article outlines the forces shaping recent Russian politics in Israel, with special attention devoted to the transformation of Russian parties in constructing a non-structural Israeli image in parallel with strengthening their connections with the Russian-speaking voter. The final section presents and discusses a number of hypotheses regarding the possible political integration of the immigrants in Israeli society in the future.



The ex-Soviets, who were raised and educated in a totalitarian state, brought with them undemocratic political values that have had differing impacts on Israeli politics.

#### *EX-SOVIET IMMIGRANTS: SOVIETIZED ISRAEL*

Sergei Dovlatov, one of the most brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian writers, wrote extensively about Soviet immigrants in the West. Like many others, he viewed them as a branch of the USSR [the actual title of one of the author's stories] among whom Soviet values are strictly preserved,

transmitted from one generation to the next, and adapted to Western reality in creative ways that only a cunning Soviet survivor could invent. In one of his stories, Dovlatov addressed the desire of ex-Soviet immigrants to teach the American public about real democratic values, as we see in the following short excerpt: "...there is no order in the country. Gas prices are rising. Black persons can be found everywhere. And, most important, democracy is in danger...and we will save it! We will teach President Carter how to run the country. We will arm him with a series of orders: Take away tape recorders from Black youth! Conquer Cuba immediately. Hit Teheran with an atomic bomb. And other types of acts..."<sup>11</sup>

Ex-Soviet immigrants in Israel are not very different from their compatriots who came to the USA in the 1970s, as both groups share a political culture and a desire to infuse the absorbing society with political norms and values of their homeland. Indeed, though many years have passed since the breakup of the USSR, Israeli sociologists continue to speak about the relevance of the concept of "*Homo Sovieticus*" in analyzing the political opinions and voting patterns of these immigrants to Israel. Hence, rather than receding, *Homo Sovieticus* culture is actually growing stronger as the immigrants adapt themselves to the realities of life in Israel.

Studies have found that FSU immigrants have a clear stance with regard to the issue of whether to return the lands Israel captured in 1967. According to the statistical data available, approximately 65% of 1990s immigrants are unwilling to make any compromise regarding Judea and Samaria, and nearly 80% assert that under no circumstances should Jerusalem be partitioned again. The data regarding the views of veteran Israeli population suggests that they are more moderate than the Russians, with around 50% opposing return of the Occupied Territories and 60% opposing re-partition of Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

A number of explanations for the immigrants' inflexibility in the political domain can be proposed. For example, according to Gitelman, a sizeable portion of the FSU population is unwilling to make any territorial compromises because they come from a huge country and are used to traditional expansive Russian spaces.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the idea that one does not

relinquish territories paid for in blood may well be grounded in stories of heroism and sacrifice that are an integral part of ex-Soviets' collective historical memory of Russian culture. Similarly, Russian-language Israeli media often relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict using slogans taken from the period of the Great Patriotic War, aka World War II, and in doing so

More than 70% of the immigrants think that Arabs should be encouraged to emigrate, while this view is held by approximately 50% of veteran Israelis.

<sup>11</sup> Dovlatov, S. 1995. *Proza*. Sankt Petersburg: Limbuss Press, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> Statistical data, Guttman Center of The Israel Democracy Institute, Jerusalem.

<sup>13</sup> Gitelman, Z. 1982. *Becoming Israeli*. N.Y.: Praeger Publishers.

reinforce and perpetuate Soviet attitudes in the context of life in Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, immigrants' opinions regarding the issue of the Occupied Territories may well be related to their views of the Arab minority in Israel and of Arabs beyond the country's borders. More than 70% of the immigrants think that Arabs should be encouraged to emigrate, while this view is held by approximately 50% of veteran Israelis.<sup>15</sup> Some scholars think that immigrants' views are due to generally negative perceptions of Muslims that are the norm in the highly conventional Soviet education they received.<sup>16</sup> Others claim that this is conditioned behavior; that is, the 1990s immigrants learned that holding such views provides them with efficient entry into Israeli society, since being prejudiced against Arabs is a tendency respected and accepted among parts of the Israeli society.

Juxtaposed with veteran Israelis and immigrants from other countries, support for a strong leader is one of the political values brought to Israel by FSU Jews. This trend was first identified in studies of immigrants who arrived in the 1970s. Recent arrivals continue to agree with the statement that a strong leader "is capable of solving the country's problems more efficiently than all the discussions and laws."<sup>17</sup> According to the 2009 Israeli Democracy Index, 74% of 1990's immigrants support such a statement, in comparison to 60% support by other Israeli Jews. It seems that the political system functioning in Israel appears to a large proportion of the immigrants to be too complicated; less efficient than the political approach in which one strong person assumes responsibility and makes decisions. Indeed, as a recent study found, even a majority of the veteran residents of the country supports strong leadership at the expense of democratic mechanisms, though there is less support for this view among them than was found among FSU immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

Support for strong leadership has remained steady among the Russian immigrant population since 2003, even when there was a slight decline for it among veteran Jewish Israelis during the Gaza disengagement initiated by Ariel Sharon. It is possible to explain the immigrants' support of the disengagement, despite their principled resistance to territorial compromise, by their support for Ariel Sharon, who was perceived by them as a strong leader.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fialkova, L. and M. N. Yelenevskaya. 2007. *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Arian, A., Philippov, M. and Knafelman, A. 2009. *The Israeli Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy, Twenty Years of Immigration from the Soviet Union*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

<sup>16</sup> Horowitz, T. 2003. "The increasing political power of immigrants from the Soviet Union in Israel: From passive citizenship to active citizenship." *International Migration*, 41:1, 45-71.

<sup>17</sup> Gitelman, Z. 1982. *Becoming Israeli*. NY: Praeger Publishers.

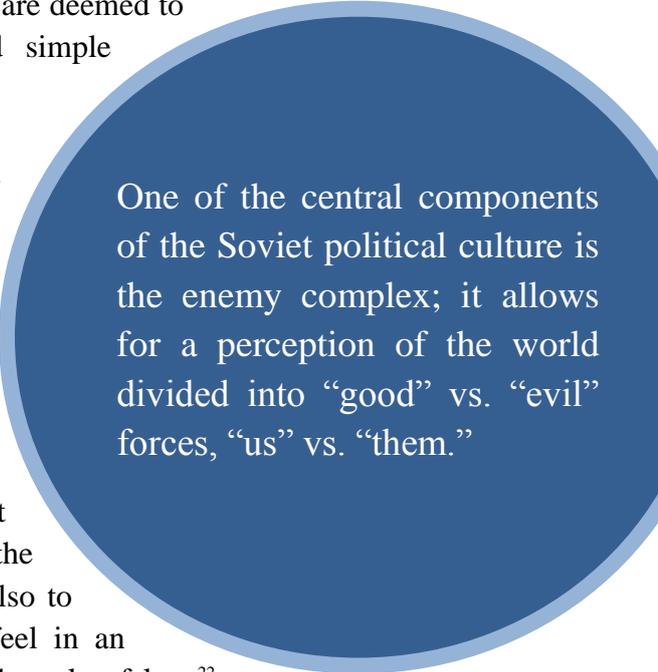
<sup>18</sup> Arian, A., M. Philippov, and A. Knafelman. 2009. *The Israeli Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy, Twenty Years of Immigration from the Soviet Union*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

<sup>19</sup> Statistical data from Guttman Center, The Israel Democracy Institute, Jerusalem.

At the same time, Soviet culture has been found in most cases to be well-suited to Israeli reality and immigrants are able to interpret it easily and comfortably. Yearning for a strong leader who brings order to every domain has a long history in Russia and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Soviet (and Russian) political culture is based on the idea of a centralized regime in which the highest authority is responsible to the people for everything that happens in the country and to whom citizens can complain about every troublesome matter. It is quite possible that democratic mechanisms based on the distribution of political power among different authorities are not perceived by ex-FSU residents to be sufficiently efficient, especially when it remains unclear who is responsible.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, it is not surprising that in a country immersed in war and often lacking personal security, there would be support for a strong leader among immigrants accustomed to thinking in such a manner while living in their former country; or that complex democratic mechanisms are deemed to be unsatisfactory by citizens seeking efficiency and simple solutions.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, one of the central components of Soviet political culture is the *enemy complex*, i.e., the process of characterizing the enemy that enables a person to analyze the country's conflicts and its surrounding borders in a clear, one-dimensional manner. The *enemy complex* allows for a perception of the world divided into "good" vs. "evil" forces, "us" vs. "them." Generations of Soviet citizens became habituated to this simple, dichotomous view. Having enemies makes it possible for the post-Soviet population to justify all the difficulties in their lives, to repress self-criticism, and also to suppress the sense of degradation that most citizens feel in an undemocratic regime that suffers from the absence of the rule of law.<sup>22</sup>

One might hypothesize that in the reality of life in Israel (one that is especially harsh for immigrants who often feel that they exist at the bottom of the social ladder), that the "enemy complex" serves as a useful and easy mechanism to develop clear political stances that not only simplify the complex territorial conflict but also justify daily difficulties.<sup>23</sup>



One of the central components of the Soviet political culture is the enemy complex; it allows for a perception of the world divided into "good" vs. "evil" forces, "us" vs. "them."

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<sup>20</sup> Carnaghan, E. 2001. "Thinking about Democracy: Interviews with Russian Citizens." *Slavic Review*. 60:2, 336-366; Colton, T.J. and M. McFaul. 2001. "Are Russians Undemocratic?" *Carnegie Endowment Working Papers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20: 1-2; Gozman, L. Y. and E. B. Shestopal. 1996. *Politicheskaya Psikhologiya*, Rostov na Donu: Fenix.

<sup>21</sup> Gitelman, Z. 1995. "Immigration an Identity - The Resettlement and Impact of Soviet Immigrants on Israeli Politics and Society." *Wilstein Institute Research Report*.

<sup>22</sup> Levada, Y.A. *Ot Mneniy k Ponimaniyu. Sotsiologicheskie Ocherki 1993-2000* [Rus. From opinions to understanding: Sociological notes 1993-2000]. Moscow: Moscow School of Political Research.

<sup>23</sup> Feldman, E. 2003 "Russkii" Izrail: mezhdru dvukh poljusov," Market DS, Akademicheskaya serya; Philippov, M. 2008. "1990s Immigrants from the FSU in Israeli Elections 2006: The Fulfillment of the Political Dreams of Post-Soviet Man?" *The Elections in Israel 2006*, ed. A. Arian and M. Shamir, 135-158. New York: SUNY Press.

However, the negative view so common among ex-Soviet Israelis regarding Arabs living in Israel cannot be explained solely by their importation of Soviet culture. Geographical space is one of the special components of political immigrant socialization in Israel. Most immigrants live in the country's periphery, in areas adjacent to Arab populations. Given the cultural gaps that separate the groups, the nature of the meetings between the two communities does not contribute substantially to shaping positive relations between them. For example, the Eastern European cultural background of most of the immigrants is expressed in their style of speaking, behavior outside their homes, and so forth. In contrast, most of the Arabs' Mediterranean culture is very different from anything experienced by the immigrants. Encounters between members of these two cultures occur in the context of the Israeli periphery where there is a lower standard of living and economic tension between the two groups who are in competition for scarce resources in terms of employment, leisure space, and so forth.

Ex-Soviet immigrants appear to be much more militant and patriotic than veteran Israelis.

There is also a clear gap between the views of veteran Israelis and immigrants with regard to situations in which citizens are required to protect their country. According to Guttman Center surveys, the latter appear to be much more militant and patriotic than other groups in Israeli society. Indeed, it is slightly ironic that immigrants in their 60's and 70's are the most militant group, with more than 90% stating their willingness to fight.<sup>24</sup> Quite possibly, this is additional evidence of the influence of Soviet culture on Israeli culture,

as it was the older immigrants who grew up and were educated on the many stories of heroism and sacrifice from Soviet war history that are pervasive in Soviet political education.

The immigrants' view of the role of the citizen is another key cultural component imported into the Israeli political space. It appears that the immigrants do not recognize, and hence do not sufficiently value, the potential for citizen influence on events in their country. As a result, they are one of the most passive groups in Israeli society. Aside from electoral participation, it is not possible to identify any other form of civic participation by the group. [Future implications of this situation will be discussed in the next section.] When queried in the Democracy Index survey regarding their influence on the country's policies, 61% stated that they have no influence, in comparison with 46% among veteran Israelis. Additionally, more than 40% of the immigrants also think they do not have any influence on what takes place at work and in the community where they reside, in comparison with about 20% of veteran Israelis who share this view.

Immigrants' prior socialization into the Soviet political culture may explain their civic passivity. In addition to their lack of experience in civic activity, researchers emphasize that it

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<sup>24</sup> Statistical data compiled by the Guttman Center of The Israel Democracy Institute, Jerusalem.

The immigrants do not sufficiently value the potential for citizen influence on events in their country. As a result, they are one of the most passive groups in Israeli society. Aside from electoral participation, there is no other form of civic participation by the group.

was always easier for persons in the USSR to maintain a perceptual distance between themselves and the state. This distance made it possible for Soviet and post-Soviet citizens to develop autonomous frameworks and social enclaves with self-defined laws and norms that averted state intervention. Accordingly, post-Soviet persons were not interested in taking responsibility for what was taking place in the state because they felt that nothing could change the present situation, in which politics is an immoral domain and governments always lie. According to this view, any state activity deemed to be unsatisfactory or difficult for citizens justifies distancing oneself and adopting a posture of non-involvement in civic activity. Indeed, citizens do not protest in post-Soviet culture when the state infringes on their personal civic rights; rather they remain in familiar niches where they engage in criticism of the state without necessarily identifying its interests, as they continue with the familiar processes of survival.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that 75% of Russian citizens think that there is a distance between state activities and citizen desires, and that the state really does not care what citizens think.<sup>26</sup> The approach of immigrants in Israel seems to be similar to that of the Soviet citizen; indeed, the Guttman Center found that immigrants are skeptical and cynical about politics and the state, and perceive there to be a great distance between citizen and state. And, yet, similar to the situation in the USSR, there is a sense that these immigrants continue to combine a sense of patriotism and readiness for self-sacrifice on behalf of the state together with a very individualistic approach that enables them to confront difficulties in everyday life without calling for significant intervention by the state or the government.

In summary, it is possible to say that the ex-Soviet immigrants brought with them values, norms, and types of thinking that were widespread in their country of origin. Indeed, it does seem that the "Perestroika" period did not succeed in instilling stable democratic values and they came to Israel as a Soviet public body with a set of political values characteristic of a closed totalitarian society. Like many of their fellow citizens who remained in Russia, ex-Soviet immigrants prefer a steady, strong government that is prepared to struggle aggressively with its enemies. To a certain degree, there is a sense that immigrants not only brought with them "Soviet" stances that they adapt to Israeli reality, but that they retained and apply these stances in the socialization of the new generation growing up in Israel. Indeed, a review of the political opinions of young ex-Soviet immigrants, on the basis of the Guttman Center findings, suggests that a majority declare themselves as feeling distant from politics; yet similar to their parents, they hold hawkish views, including an uncompromising stance regarding issues such as the final status of the Occupied Territories, the peace process, and democracy.

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<sup>25</sup> Levada, Y.A. *Ot Mneniy k Ponimaniu. Sotsiologicheskie Ocherki 1993-2000* [Rus. From opinions to understanding: Sociological notes 1993-2000]. Moscow: Moscow School of Political Research.

<sup>26</sup> Colton, T.J. and M. McFaul. 2001. "Are Russians Undemocratic?" *Carnegie Endowment Working Papers*. 20: 1-2. NY: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The political opinions and values detailed in the previous section shape the space often referred to in Israel as "Russian politics." Interestingly, it is difficult to identify a consistent pattern in analysis of this group's voting since the beginning of its participation in Israeli elections. Many different hypotheses have been proposed over the years to explain how these immigrants select their representatives for the Knesset. One leading commentator claims these are a sort of protest vote (voting against the governing parties) and sectoral voting. However, over time, immigrants' voting has come to represent their sense of electoral strength and capability to advance their interests as a group.<sup>27</sup>

The following overview is presented in order to identify and to define a shared pattern of voting for the seven elections in which FSU immigrants participated.<sup>28</sup> In general, 15-19 Knesset members [from among the 120 members] were voted into the Israeli parliament by this group, though this number is dependent on the relative size of the group among the Israeli electorate. The percentage of FSU immigrant participation in the elections has not been significantly different from that of veteran Jewish Israeli voters.

In general, 15-19 Knesset members (from among the 120 members) were voted into the Israeli parliament by the FSU immigrants.

In the 1992 election, a majority of the FSU immigrants voted for the Labor Party headed by Itzhak Rabin, and indeed the slight electoral advantage of the Israeli Left was due to the immigrant vote. However, it was already evident in this initial vote that Rabin's relative popularity among the Russian public was not derived from support for his ideas, but rather it was an expression of immigrants' frustrations with the absorption policies of the ruling Likud Party led by Itzhak Shamir. The many economic difficulties involved in their integration into the country caused the immigrants first vote in Israel to be a non-ideological vote "against" and not "for." In fact this was the sole time that left-wing parties succeeded in garnering votes from former FSU residents.

The 1996 election continued the trend of voting against ruling parties in a number of respects. However, here we see that the immigrants gave massive support for unique ideas that characterize Russian sectoral parties. For example, the slogan - "put the Internal Affairs

<sup>27</sup> Horowitz, T. 2003. "The Increasing Political Power of Immigrants from the Soviet Union in Israel: From Passive Citizenship to Active Citizenship." *International Migration*, 41: 1, 45-71.

<sup>28</sup> For numbers and statistics see: Goldstein, K. and Z. Gitelman. 2004. "From 'Russians' to Israelis?" In *The Elections in Israel 2003*, ed. A. Arian and M. Shamir. N.Y.: SUNY Press; Horowitz, T. 2003. "The Increasing Political Power of Immigrants from the Soviet Union in Israel: From Passive Citizenship to Active Citizenship". *International Migration*, 41: 1, 45-71; Philippov, M. 2008. "1990s Immigrants from the FSU in Israeli Elections 2006: The Fulfillment of the Political Dreams of Post-Soviet Man?". In *The Elections in Israel 2006*, ed. by A. Arian and M. Shamir. NY: SUNY Press.

Ministry under our control" was employed successfully along with the "good vs. bad" dichotomy by the *Israel b'Aliyah* party, as it garnered seven seats in the Knesset. Headed by Natan Sharansky, Israel b'Aliyah also proposed that every immigrant should oppose the hegemony of the religious parties in Israeli politics and promised that it would engage in vigilant scrutiny on behalf of immigrants of all that was happening in spheres controlled by the religious parties. The idea of "us" (the "good") versus "them" (the "bad") was very successful in these elections, and later served both "Russian" and "non-Russian" parties that sought immigrants' electoral support. No doubt. There is also the fact that in 1996 Israel adopted a new electoral system—a double ticket, one vote directly for the PM, and the other for the party. This fact influenced the success of Yisrael Beiteinu. As a result, the immigrants could split their vote and vote for a rightwing PM on one ballot and for the party that represents them in the other.

In the end, in the 1996 election, most of the immigrants supported Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Israeli right wing, and gave very little support to Shimon Peres the left-wing candidate.

At first glance it might appear that the 1999 election signified a reshuffling of the cards, as a large proportion of the immigrants voted for Ehud Barak, the left-wing candidate, and not the right-wing parties' candidate - Benjamin Netanyahu. However, this vote is actually not surprising but rather further evidence of the consistency of the pattern identified. True, the immigrants did vote for Barak in this direct election of the prime minister. However, they remained quite distant from parties of the Left. Barak portrayed himself as "Soldier Number One" and as a strong leader with a secular agenda, characteristics that were appealing to most of the immigrants. Thus, in 1999, a decade after the beginning of the great wave of immigration, it is possible to claim that the former USSR population in Israel had achieved a kind of electoral consensus that continued in later elections: Immigrants vote for parties perceived to be right-centralist in orientation; that is, they do not vote for left-wing parties. Furthermore, they prefer a party leader who is presented as relatively more forceful than his opponent, whose solutions are clearer, and whose agenda includes a division of Israeli reality into "in-groups" and "out-groups." In 1999, Barak was perceived to be a more forceful candidate than Benjamin Netanyahu and his agenda was clearly anti-religious, in comparison, supposedly, with that of Netanyahu. As in the 1996 election, the immigrants supported the idea of strengthening the secular orientation of Israel in the face of encroaching religious "darkness."

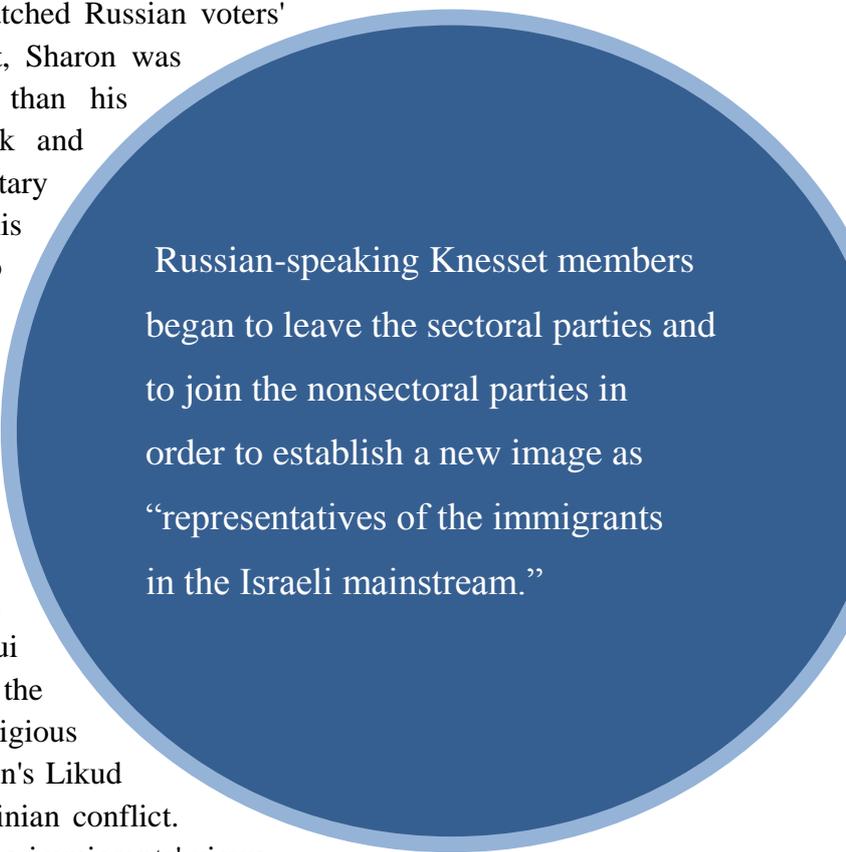
Thus, one of the primary conclusions from analyzing immigrants' voting patterns in the 1996 and 1999 elections is

Former USSR immigrants in Israel vote for parties perceived to be right-centralist in orientation.

Whoever is able to provide this group with a successful image of the "enemy" will earn most of the immigrants' votes.

that when deciding for whom to vote, a large proportion of the Russian immigrant needs a clear opponent (an enemy) and a well-defined struggle. Whoever is able to provide this group with a successful image of the "enemy" will earn most of the immigrants' votes. And, of course, the enemy should be selected from among the groups less desired by the immigrants, presumably the Arabs and/or the ultra-orthodox religious [Haredim].

The two election campaigns that followed, in 2001 and 2003, were dominated by the personal magic of Ariel Sharon, who matched Russian voters' needs nearly perfectly. Without a doubt, Sharon was perceived as a much stronger leader than his opponents – Labor leaders Ehud Barak and Amram Mitzna: he had a rich military background, held right-wing views, and his uncompromising approach corresponded to the worldview of the FSU immigrants in Israel. Sharon's political rhetoric promised aggressive politics, uncompromising relations with the Arabs, and strong resistance to relinquishing the Occupied Territories during the period of the Second Intifada. Even so, in the 2003 election, the Russians were torn between the agenda of the Shinui Party, which posed everything along the dichotomous axis of the secular and religious worlds, and the familiar contents of Sharon's Likud Party that focused on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. Both of these dichotomies were close to the immigrants' views and, as a result, these two parties split the Russian mandates. Thus, the immigrants' voting pattern remained stable: They voted for a strong leader and an aggressive agenda, including support of supposedly effective ways of dealing with the problem or enemy that was clearly distinguishable from the approaches of the left wing of the political spectrum in Israel.



Russian-speaking Knesset members began to leave the sectoral parties and to join the nonsectoral parties in order to establish a new image as “representatives of the immigrants in the Israeli mainstream.”

The decade that began in 2000 can be characterized by a slight decline of sectoral parties. After the cancellation of the system of direct election, the immigrants were forced to choose between their sectoral agenda and the national agenda. Since the return to the previous electoral system precluded them from splitting their vote and thus choosing both a sectoral party and a rightwing PM, it was clear that they preferred the national agenda.

Explanations for this phenomenon do not relate to the successful immigrant integration in Israel and their becoming thoroughly Israeli. Rather, the opposite is the case. At the beginning of 2000, the number of immigrants disappointed with their economic situation was very high and there was a rising trend of emigration of FSU immigrants from Israel. The sectoral parties

and Russian-speaking Knesset members who claimed to be successful in solving immigrants' problems were met by strong opposition, since most of the goals they proclaimed were not realized: The civil marriage project that sought to solve immigrants' problems in Israel had not been advanced in practice, public building starts had declined, and the problems with immigrants' pensions remained unresolved [older immigrants would not have resided in the country a sufficient period of time to qualify for government pensions]. In addition, "Russian" parties were unsuccessful in presenting a new national agenda of "fighting against....," as had Shinui, Likud, and Israel be'Aliyah parties in the 1996 election. And, finally, Russian-speaking Knesset members began to leave the sectoral parties and to join the non-sectoral parties in order to establish a new image as "representatives of the immigrants in the Israeli mainstream" (for example, Marina Solodkin, Roman Bronfman, Yuli Edelstein, and many others).

The 2006 election, conducted following Ariel Sharon's incapacitating stroke, marked the initial success of Avigdor Lieberman in paving his way to the heart of the Russian voter. In making effective use of simple tools, Lieberman and his advisers demonstrated that they had learned an important lesson from the failure of the Russian parties: In order to win a majority of the immigrants' votes, there is no need to base the campaign on unsolved sectoral problems and so be identified with past failures. In any event, Russian speaking voters do not view themselves as part of civil society and are not fully aware of what is involved in struggling for their economic and social rights. Rather, since their interest is in a clear nationalist agenda, the campaign should be based on an aggressive, nationalist, geopolitical agenda that focuses on a clear image of the enemy.

In a relatively short period of time, Lieberman developed an image as a strong, uncompromising leader, who defined the enemy - the Arabs - in the clearest of terms, including Israeli Arabs. The solutions he proposed were direct and clear: the platform of his Israel Beiteinu Party called for an exchange of territories with the result that few Arabs would remain in Israel. This emphasis on territorial exchange is different from Sharon's policies of disengagement from the Occupied Territories, such as Gaza. In addition, Lieberman proposed that Arabs remaining in Israel should be required to proclaim allegiance to Israel as a Jewish state, and that those who refused would lose their right to vote or to be elected. Thus, in accordance with the cultural component of the "enemy complex," Lieberman made so sharp a division between good and the evil forces in the world that he left Israeli citizens with no room to maneuver: Either you are with us (and totally loyal to the state) or you oppose us (from beyond the country's borders or without rights as a citizen). This right-wing approach of a strong leader who touches upon the cultural component of the *enemy complex* enabled Lieberman to win more than 50% of the immigrant vote. If it had not been the case that many immigrants voted for Kadima, out of a sense of

The Israel Beiteinu party distanced itself from a sectoral agenda by emphasizing pan-Israel nationalistic messages in both Russian and in Hebrew.

In doing so, the party made its first attempt to solicit support of Israeli veterans.

respect for Ariel Sharon, Lieberman would have received additional votes, as he did in the 2009 election.

The Israel Beiteinu Party continued its winning agenda into the 2009 election by honing and reinforcing advantageous points. The party distanced itself from a sectoral agenda by emphasizing pan-Israel nationalistic messages in both Russian and in Hebrew. In doing so, the

Lieberman's success in the 2006 and 2009 elections demonstrates clearly the politically passive character of large portions of former residents of the USSR living in Israel. A majority of Russian-speaking Israelis believe their civic obligations are limited to voting in elections.

party made its first attempt to solicit support of Israeli veterans, after previous attempts to advance the "Soviet" agenda with Israelis did not achieve much success. It appears that a majority of the right-wing Israeli public gladly welcomed Lieberman's ideas, especially those encapsulated in the campaign slogan – "no citizenship without loyalty." While pre-election polling predicted that Lieberman's party could expect to earn 20 parliamentary seats, in fact it only attained 15 seats. Assuming that 10-11 mandates can be attributed to Russian votes, the remaining seats indicate limited success with other Israeli voters. While the party's "Soviet-style" agenda, with its appeal to right-wing voters, continues to be based on strong leadership and well-identified enemy, the absence of a religious dimension is the primary limitation that prevents right Israelis (most of them are religious people) from voting for Israel Beiteinu in massive numbers. And, while the secular pragmatism demonstrated by Lieberman may appeal to the post-Soviet public, it does not attract many voters who have become accustomed to seeing a connection between the right wing, religion, and religious nationalism. Thus, it is quite possible that the secular Lieberman does not appear to the wider population of Jewish Israeli voters to be the perfect option. Nevertheless, Israel Beiteinu remains as the

most popular pan-Israel right-wing party that continues to be supported primarily by the Russian-speaking public.

In addition, Lieberman's success in the 2006 and 2009 elections demonstrates clearly the politically passive character of large portions of former residents of the USSR living in Israel. As noted in a previous section, a majority of Russian-speaking Israelis believe their civic obligations are limited to voting in elections. They do not think that the Israeli government desires nor is capable of solving the specific problems of their sector and as a result they do not participate in demonstrations or protests. Rather, like Soviet citizens, they have settled into a comfortable niche, assuming themselves to be "unwanted, not needed."

Accordingly, disappointment with the lack of accomplishments of the sectoral parties of the 1990s was not translated into a political form that could have placed the immigrants' problems on the public agenda. Such disappointment caused the immigrants to focus on geo-political problems instead of sectoral problems that they believed were unsolvable. Indeed, in Israel, as in the USSR, questions of "war and peace" are considered by the average immigrant

to be more important since he or she does not believe the government to be capable of solving social and economic problems.

In summary, we can say that the voting pattern of most of the immigrant population of former citizens of Russia has stabilized and seems clearer than ever before. With circa-80% claiming to have political views similar to those held by right-wing parties in Israel, immigrants vote for right-wing parties – usually the Likud and Israel Beiteinu. They value having an aggressive "strong leader" as head of the party, such as Avigdor Lieberman, who has proven that it is possible to compensate, electorally, for the lack of a military background. They prefer to vote for parties that deal with geo-political issues, define clear ways of confronting the country's enemies, and distance themselves as far as possible from the agenda of the Israeli Left.

### IMMIGRANTS IN THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SPACE – WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Given this picture, what can be said about the overall influence of the Russian wave of immigration on Israeli political sphere?

First, we should note that the FSU immigrants brought with them the Soviet political culture. On the one hand, this culture is different from other Israeli political cultures since it is grounded in the immigrants' experience in an east European, secular, totalitarian country. On the other hand, it is easy for such a culture to adapt itself to the political and security realities of Israel since security and threats of war relate to the immigrants' historical memory and classic Soviet patterns of thought. For example, the slogan "there is nowhere to retreat, Afula lies behind us" (paraphrasing the famous saying about the defenders of Moscow in 1941),<sup>29</sup> which appeared in the Russian media in Israel, demonstrates completely the ease with which Soviet political culture in harkens back to former conditions.

Prominent is the immigrants' belief in the need for aggressive leadership capable of solving all of Israel's problems which, in their view, democratic mechanisms have trouble achieving.

Also prominent is the immigrants' belief in the need for aggressive leadership capable of solving all of Israel's problems which, in their view, democratic mechanisms have trouble achieving. Immigrants also have difficulty understanding and internalizing the value and meaning of a broad concept of "citizen," and view it as dependent on the existence of extant conditions. In their post-Soviet consciousness, loyalty to the state is an important, indeed, necessary pre-condition for gaining citizenship.

<sup>29</sup> Fialkova, L. and M. N. Yelenevskaya. 2007. *Ex-Soviets in Israel: From Personal Narratives to a Group Portrait*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

The immigrants' stance in regard to the Occupied Territories is unequivocal, as an absolute majority opposes relinquishing any of the territories. Here, too, Soviet conceptions play a meaningful role in the manner in which these immigrants view their new homeland's space and the means they feel are needed to confront the enemies' demands. Both of these dimensions lead the immigrants to assume hawkish, right-wing political views. As time passes, it increasingly appears that the Israeli political system has learned to adapt itself, nearly entirely, to the immigrants' political culture. The Israel Beiteinu Party is a good example of the use of Soviet political values in building electoral power and recruiting supporters.

As of 2009, FSU immigrants had elected around 16 Knesset members, a majority of whom represented right-wing parties. This is a significant contribution, one indicative of their potential in changing the balance of power in the Knesset. And, in turn, this potential enables right-wing parties to be an important force in coalition building. At the same time, the immigrants are incapable, on their own, of enabling a large party to be elected to the Knesset, one whose leader will be elected the country's prime minister. The 2009 election is an excellent example of this phenomenon. The classic right wing of Israeli politics is generally religious in nature and, accordingly, has not been quick to assimilate Israel Beiteinu's electoral power and ideas. Indeed, it appears that 15 is the maximum number of mandates that the party will be able to earn unless it finds a way to bridge the gap between its secular Soviet-style agenda and religious Israeli ultra-nationalism.

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We know from the literature that a political culture is a stable values system that does not lend itself easily to change. This is especially true in situations in which a group's political culture assists it to internalize events in a new country, to confront difficulties, and to justify them by means of threats and enemies. The natural conclusion to be derived from the nature of these forces is that interaction between FSU immigrants and the Israeli political system will continue to be stable.

However, it is possible that this is a more complex, fragile situation than meets the eye. For example, it appears that, as years pass, there will be a decrease in the power of the agents of political socialization, such as the Russian-language media. As younger immigrants become more and more accustomed to information consumption via Hebrew language media, there will be a decline in exposure to political messages rooted in the Soviet culture. Although the influence of the inner circle – parents and friends – will remain significant, the lack of exposure to sources of information in the Russian language may change the nature of their socialization. Indeed, recent surveys indicate that immigrant youth are uninterested in politics and distance themselves from all manner of public and political action. Thus, it may be the case that, while young immigrants will continue to hold right-wing-Soviet political

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views for the near future, some of these opinions may not be translated into votes nor have influence on Israeli political discourse.

In addition, we should also note the strong connection that exists between the economic integration of the immigrants in Israel and their political opinions. At present, this relationship is, to a certain extent, an expression of the immigrants' special peripherality and lack of life experience in non-Tel Aviv Israel. However, this situation, too, may change slowly as more and more immigrants move to the center of the country. In doing so, they may, first, lose their connection with Russian-speaking social networks dominant in the periphery; and, second, they may distance themselves from daily interaction with the Arab population. In this case, the less "Soviet" portion of the immigrants, which today numbers about a quarter of the group's members, may grow and pose a problem for the right-wing parties. However, as noted, the immigrants' economic integration is taking place slowly, as is the development of the Israeli periphery in general. Thus, we should not expect a significant change in the political agenda of FSU immigrants in the immediate or mid-range future.