THE ‘RUSSIAN STREET’
THE PLACE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE FORMER USSR IN ISRAEL

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THE 'RUSSIAN STREET'

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MAIN POINTS

- The arrival of more than one million immigrants from the former USSR, back in the 1990s and post-2000, has resulted in a surge in Israel's demographic and economic potential, sealed the domination of right-wing parties on the Israeli political scene and in public discourse, left its mark on Israel's historical policy, and finally, contributed a new language and previously unfamiliar customs to the country's cultural mosaic.

- Russian-speaking newcomers from the former Soviet republics were the first wave of immigration in Israel's history to have so consistently refused to distance themselves from the culture of the countries they hail from. They continued to speak their language, observe their customs and nurture their ties with their home countries; they adapted to their new lives in their own unique manner, while maintaining numerous elements of their former identity. However, at the same time, most of them have accepted their new Israeli national identity, which includes being proud of their new state and displaying ardent patriotism.

- Despite the fact that, three decades from the collapse of the USSR, Russian-speaking Israelis continue on average to be less affluent and underrepresented in many spheres of life, struggle with negative clichés and are not all fluent in Hebrew, as a group they are relatively well-integrated into society and do not pose serious challenges to the state (in contrast, for example, to the ultra-Orthodox Jews, West Bank settlers and the Arab population). It should be assumed that although the Russian-speaking Israeli population will continue to exist for many years, the boundary between it and the rest of Israeli citizens will become increasingly blurred, their feeling of collective identity will increasingly weaken, and the political significance of this group will continue to shrink, due to natural demographic

processes and this group's ongoing integration into the mainstream of Israeli society.

- Despite this group's size and generally successful integration into society, Russian-speaking Israelis have never become a major interest/influence group which could impact on the state's life in a consistent and coordinated manner. Although the 'Russian' vote has repeatedly sealed major changes in Israel's domestic policy over the last thirty years, its political representation has been disproportionately small compared to its demographic potential, and its specific problems have remained unsolved for many years. Israel's major political powers have only intermittently taken an interest in this portion of the electorate – regardless of its size – and that usually only during election campaigns.

- The culture of historical memory is the sphere in which the Russian-speaking population has relatively been most successful in exerting conscious influence on its new homeland. Immigrants from the former USSR have brought along their memory of World War II, which was shaped by the Soviet-Russian narrative of the Great Patriotic War. This is a heroic narrative, focused on the decisive role of the Red Army (including its Jewish soldiers) in the victory over Nazi Germany. Due to consistent efforts by Russian-speaking Israelis, elements of this narrative have permeated into the Israeli culture of memory, for example in the form of monuments and national holidays. In Israel's historical policy, the 'Russian' motives are viewed as elements of secondary importance compared to the centrally-located memory of the Holocaust; however, they form a unique bridge between Israel and the Russian Federation (RF) which can be used when the political need arises.

- The presence of a large group of immigrants from the former USSR has translated into a dense network of interpersonal contacts between Israel and their respective countries of origin, mainly Russia

and Ukraine. However, this does not determine Israel's policy towards Moscow and Kyiv. For example, the recent intensification of Israeli-Russian relations (particularly noticeable post-2015), combined with Israel's pro-Russian decisions, can only be attributed to the situation in the region and to the RF's increasing influence in the Middle East. The fact that Israel is home to a Russian-speaking community facilitates communication between the two states and contributes to the emergence of a favourable context for political, diplomatic and military relations, without determining their directions.

- Billionaire oligarchs hailing from post-Soviet states who hold Israeli citizenship are another group that deserves attention. This group includes several dozen individuals who mainly reside in Russia and have ties to the Russian political leadership. At the same time, they are involved in business undertakings and charity initiatives in Israel. The full extent of their activity in Israel is difficult to gauge due to its largely low-profile nature; however, representatives of this group own significant financial assets and offer major donations to social, educational and charity initiatives. This has earned many of them the status of respected businessmen and philanthropists and provided them with easy access to the Israeli state's elites.

INTRODUCTION

The presence in Israel of around one million immigrants from the former USSR, Russian-speaking politicians who are members of the government and of the Knesset, Russian-language media, the Victory Day marches held in the streets on 9 May and the fact that the language of Pushkin is spoken in the public space all contribute to the impression that the community of immigrants from Russia and other former Soviet republics plays a special role in Israel.

In the historical sense, this impression is correct. Although the Zionist idea was articulated most clearly at the turn of the twentieth century in Vienna by Theodor Herzl, it was Eastern European Jews who put it into practice. When viewed in terms of state citizenship, these were mainly Russian Jews. Russia, in its pre-1918 borders, was the country of origin for the vast majority of Jews who came to Palestine in the first three *aliyah*s, or waves of immigration, following the emergence of the Zionist movement (from 1882 to 1923). In addition, Russia was the country of birth and youth of the founding fathers and mothers of Israeli statehood, including David Ben-Gurion (the first Prime Minister of Israel), Chaim Weizmann (the first President), Levi Eshkol[1] (the third Prime Minister), Golda Meir (his successor) – just as in the case of the majority of prominent activists representing all shades of Zionism, ranging from the left-leaning ones to the right-wing revisionists led by Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. The Socialist ideas brought in from Russia were an important source of inspiration for the labour Zionism which was politically dominant in the first three decades of Israeli statehood. From the historical perspective,

[1] Levi Eshkol (born Levi Shkolnik in 1895 in what today is central Ukraine) emigrated to Palestine in 1914. His brothers remained in Russia. One of them died during World War II in which he fought as a Red Army soldier. Another one, Ben Zion Shkolnik, survived the war and decided to live in the Soviet Union. In 1964, when Levi Eshkol was Israel's Prime Minister, Ben Zion obtained a consent from the Soviet authorities to visit his brother in Israel (the visit was organised and supervised by the Soviet embassy). See 'Prime Minister Eshkol Visited by Brother Who Lives in Odessa', Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 15 April 1964, jta.org.

it can be said that immigrants from Russia were both a lasting element of the Zionist project and its most prominent enforcers.

However, it is much more difficult to assess the place and importance of the Russian-speaking population in present-day Israel. The immigrants who came to the Levant at the beginning of the twentieth century were mainly rooted in the Yiddish-language *shtetl* culture, which was a cultural enclave within the Russian state, and had a strong motivation to emigrate (fear of pogroms, Zionist ideology, economic reasons). Once they arrived, they embarked on a new life. In turn, most of the members of the 'Russian' community in Israel today only arrived there in the 1990s, and had a cultural background and identity that had been shaped by the USSR. They were very strongly attached to the heritage of their country of origin and – at least at the moment of their arrival – far from Zionist zeal. In addition, unlike the pioneers of Zionism, they arrived in an independent country, which by then had existed for more than 40 years and had developed its own distinct culture and social hierarchies. Therefore, upon their arrival they found themselves caught between two very different realities.

The purpose of this text is to attempt to sum up the process involving this group's adaptation to their new life in Israel and Israeli society's adaptation to these newcomers, and to assess the degree to which immigrants from the former USSR have changed the life of the Israeli state. The first part provides information on what the 'Russian' Israeli population is and what elements it is composed of; part two offers a discussion of this group's unique nature against the backdrop of Israel's other citizens, and the final part provides answers to all these questions.

The attempt to characterise a group that is so large, diverse and – what is equally important – constantly changing over time carries the inevitable risk of simplifications, generalisations and other types of distortions. Therefore, this text should be viewed as a systematic, yet by definition obviously imperfect and non-exhaustive attempt at taking a closer look at a complex social and political reality.

I. THE 'RUSSIAN STREET': DEFINITION, SIZE, STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

In the period between 1989 and 2018, around 1.1 million individuals from the USSR and the former Soviet republics relocated to Israel. They joined a group of around 150,000 immigrants who had emigrated to Israel from that region back in the 1970s. At present, as a result of demographic processes and secondary migration, just over 900,000 individuals born in the post-Soviet area now live in Israel.[2] Alongside a portion of the 'second generation' (i.e. children born in Israel to immigrants from the former USSR), whose size is difficult to assess, they form a community of more than a million individuals, i.e. more than 10% of Israeli society. This community is referred to as 'Russians', the 'Russian-speakers', 'immigrants' or 'repatriates' from the former Soviet Union, the 'Russian street'[3] and 'Russian Israel', depending on the attitude of the speaker.[4]

Despite this group's collective image and the numerous clichés associated with it (both positive – educated, diligent, ambitious; and negative – alcoholics, members of organised crime gangs, prostitutes, gentiles, racists), it is internally highly diversified. It is composed of individuals who relocated to Israel at various periods, in various circumstances and for various reasons. Each of them has their own unique experience in adapting (more or less successfully) to the new reality and the degree of 'Russianness' with which they themselves identify. Factors determining these differences mainly include: the exact moment and circumstances of their arrival in Israel, their country of origin, the degree of their integration with Israeli society, the degree of their attachment to the language and culture of their original homeland, their social status

2 Data compiled by Israel's Ministry of Aliyah and Integration as at the end of 2018.
3 The term was coined by analogy with the Yiddish term 'the Jewish street' (*di yiddishe gas*) used by the Jewish diaspora, which means 'the Jewish world' or 'the Jewish life' (as opposed to the world of the non-Jewish majority). The term 'the Russian street' refers to the world of the Russian-speaking Israelis.
4 'Soviet-Jewish Refugees and Their Political Preferences in the United States and Israel', Woodrow Wilson Center, 4 June 2019, wilsoncenter.org.

and their outlook on life. In addition, not everyone who (on the basis of objective criteria such as place of birth) may be considered a member of this group should indeed be viewed as a member of it. Some immigrants (especially those who relocated to Israel as children and teenagers) have become assimilated into the Israeli cultural mosaic and do not feel any particular connection with their country of origin or their first language. For their part, some immigrants from non-Slavic regions of the former USSR, such as the North and South Caucasus and Central Asia, have, in terms of culture, religion and political behaviour, actually assimilated into the Sephardic portion of Israeli society than into the community of immigrants from Russia and Ukraine.[5]

To put it simply, the Russian-speaking Israeli population is composed of three main waves of immigration, or *aliyah*s: the first, which lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1970s; the second, which was the biggest and occurred in the 1990s; and the third, which happened in the twenty-first century.[6] Due to the fact that the phenomenon of the 'Russian street', with its unique subculture and numerous clichés, emerged following the second of these *aliyah*s, this will be the central theme of this paper, and the main points discussed in the second part of the text will mainly focus on it.

1. The 1970s *aliyah*: the 'Zionist' *aliyah*

Immediately after the end of World War II there was a large-scale exodus of Jews from many Eastern European states, which was tolerated by their Communist authorities (for example around 200,000 individuals[7] emigrated from or fled Poland in 1945–8). However, the Soviet authorities

[5] One example is Amnon Kohen, who was born in 1960 in Samarkand, and was a member of the Knesset for several terms (1999–2015), representing the Sephardic ultra-orthodox Shas party.

[6] For full data on the dynamics of immigration from the USSR and the post-Soviet states, see 'Total Immigration to Israel from the Former Soviet Union (1948 – Present)', Jewish Virtual Library, jewishvirtuallibrary.org.

[7] G. Zalewska, 'Emigracja Żydów z Polski', Wirtualny Sztetl, sztetl.org.pl.

did not allow the Soviet Jewish population to leave the USSR. This is why in the first decade of Israel's existence (1948–1958), when more than 900,000 immigrants arrived in the newly-established state, the proportion of newcomers from the Soviet Union was less than 1% of this group as a whole.

In the USSR, larger groups of Jews were only allowed to leave the country at the beginning of the 1970s. This happened in an atmosphere of détente between the West and the Eastern bloc, and as a result of pressure on the Soviet Union from the United States. One element of this pressure was the 1974 Jackson–Vanik amendment that introduced restrictions in trade between the US and those states which were limiting the freedom of emigration.

As a consequence, in 1969–79 more than 150,000 immigrants arrived in Israel.[8] Despite the fact that this group was internally diversified, it is frequently referred to as the Zionist *aliyah*, i.e. one which was ideologically-motivated. Israel's spectacular victory in the so-called Six-Day War in 1967 was among several important factors that accelerated migration. On the one hand, it boosted the feeling of national pride among many Soviet Jews, and on the other it sparked a state-sponsored 'anti-Zionist' (and de facto anti-Semitic) campaign in the USSR.[9]

The Soviet *aliyah* of the 1970s (in particular its first years) mainly included individuals who were aware of their Jewish identity and tried to preserve it as much as possible within the realities of a totalitarian state. They were determined to leave the Soviet Union and to relocate to Israel specifically, not to any other country, and were ready to risk falling into disfavour with the authorities as a result of their efforts to obtain a permission to leave the country. Many of these individuals came from the non-Slavic and relatively less Sovietised parts of the USSR, such as

8 'Total Immigration to Israel from the Former Soviet Union (1948 – Present)', *op. cit.*
9 A review of 'anti-Zionist' posters and caricatures from that period is available on the propagandahistory.ru website.

the Baltic republics, Georgia and Moldova, life in which had allowed them to preserve their identity to a somewhat greater extent. Having said that, some of the newcomers (particularly in the mid- and late 1970s) were also ordinary people who had left their country seeking a better life.[10]

Otkazniks (from the Russian *otkaz* – refusal) or refuseniks, i.e. individuals who were repeatedly refused an exit visa to Israel by the authorities and were persecuted for intending to relocate there, were the symbolic representatives of this *aliyah*. A number of prominent figures representing this movement, such as the 'prisoners of Zion' Natan Sharansky (released in 1986 after nine years of incarceration in a labour camp) and Yuli Edelstein (released in 1987 after three years of imprisonment), later played an important role in the life of their new homeland (see further).

Despite a degree of prejudice displayed by Israeli society at that time, which has affected all *aliyahs* regardless of their origin,[11] the newcomers from the USSR successfully adapted to the new reality, mainly owing to their determination to become Israeli citizens. To fit into the consistently promoted image of an ideal immigrant, which at that time equated to the concept of the 'new man' who severs his ties with the diaspora culture, they not only learned Hebrew but also frequently stopped speaking Russian at home and changed their first names and/or surnames to Hebrew-sounding ones. A retired Israeli intelligence general, who was born in Riga and came to Israel in 1972 as a child, recalls this process in the following manner: "In our class at school nearly half of pupils had come from the USSR but when we spoke to each other we used Hebrew. When I spotted my father reading a book in Russian, I would shut it and shout at him that he should be reading in Hebrew".[12] In addition, the process of this group's integration into the local population was accelerated by

10 Cf A. Shapira, *Historia Izraela*, Warszawa 2018, p. 524.

11 This phenomenon was the subject of a skit entitled 'New immigrants' filmed in 1973 by comedians Arik Einstein and Uri Zohar, which can be seen on YouTube and elsewhere.

12 'Генерал спецслужб заговорил по-русски благодаря Либерману. Первое интервью', Вести, 10 July 2019, vesty.co.il.

the fact that back in the 1970s immigrants from the Soviet Union were unable to maintain their ties with their country of origin, even if they had wanted to.[13]

Individuals who were children or teenagers when they came to Israel back in the 1970s today hold prominent posts (although rarely top-level posts) in public administration, the military and government structures.[14] At the same time, this generation of immigrants is still far from homogenous. The feeling of belonging to the Russian-speaking population is different for each member of this group. Some of them have lost contact with the language and culture of their country of origin; others continue to speak the language but do not identify with the 'Russian' group,[15] while still others actively nurture their 'Russianness' (as defined according to their own unique criteria). The estimated size of the latter group is around 35,000–40,000 individuals.[16]

2. The 1990s *aliyah*: the 'great' *aliyah* or the 'sausage' *aliyah*?

Although, as mentioned earlier in the text, the immigrants from (broadly understood) Russia were among some of the largest immigrant groups

[13] The longing of some of the emigrants for their country of origin was illustrated in a Soviet 1977 comedy-drama entitled 'Mimino'. While on a business trip in West Berlin, the film's protagonist, Mimino – an Aeroflot pilot from Telavi in the Georgian SSR – goes to a post office and tries to make a phone call to his hometown. By mistake, he gets connected to the same phone number in... Tel Aviv, where the phone is answered by a new immigrant from the Soviet Georgian republic. When the two men realise that the call was connected by mistake, the man in Israel breaks into tears and asks Mimino to sing a song in Georgian along with him. See 'Звонок в Телави. Разговор с Исааком из Тель-Авива. «Мимино»', YouTube, youtube.com.

[14] The former minister (who has held the defence and foreign affairs portfolios) Avigdor Lieberman, who relocated to Israel in 1978 (see further in the text) is an exception, as an example of an individual who has held several top-level posts in the state administration.

[15] For example, see the interview with the Israeli ambassador to Russia Alexander Ben Zvi 'Посол Израиля в РФ Александр Бен-Цви: «Главная черта, которая отличает израильтян, — стремление выйти за рамки обычного»', 5781 Еврейский журнал, 10 January 2021, jewishmagazine.ru.

[16] Cf В. (З.) Ханин, *«Третий Израиль»: Русскоязычная община и политические процессы в еврейском государстве в начале XXI века*, Институт Ближнего Востока, Москва 2014, p. 7.

that came to Palestine, and then to Israel from the beginning of the Zionist movement, the phenomenon of a 'Russian' Israel de facto emerged in its present form following the *aliyah* of the 1990s.

Over a decade, around 870,000 new citizens[17] arrived in Israel, which in 1989 had 4.6 million inhabitants. Most of the newcomers relocated from Russia and Ukraine (around 30% each) and the remaining portions came from Uzbekistan, Belarus, Moldova and other former Soviet republics.[18] In Israel, this wave of immigration is referred to as the great Russian *aliyah*.

The actual number of immigrants is not the only aspect in which the 1990s *aliyah* differed from that of the 1970s. Although retrospectively it is impossible to measure the strength of Jewish identity among those who immigrated to Israel at that time (especially considering this group's size and diversity), it can be assumed that for most of them, the main incentive to their decision to relocate to Israel was economic reasons and the deep crisis in their homelands resulting from the collapse of the USSR. This means that when taking their decision they were motivated not so much by their commitment to the Zionist idea as by their desire to seek a better life after their former Soviet life had collapsed. This is why the 1990s *aliyah* is sometimes ironically referred to as the 'sausage' *aliyah* (with sausage being a symbol of a better material standard of living).

Israel was not necessarily the emigrants' first choice of new country. This is evidenced by the fact that back in the 1980s around 80% of Jews who obtained permission to leave the USSR relocated to the United States. This came as a major challenge to Israel, which since its establishment had intended to increase its demographic potential, but in the 1980s

17 'Зеев Ханин: Чем новые граждане Израиля отличаются от предыдущих репатриантов?', VAAD of Ukraine, October 2016, vaadua.org.

18 Cf L. Galili, *The other tribe: Israel's Russian-speaking community and how it is changing the country*, The Brookings Institution, 21 September 2020, brookings.edu; Central Bureau of Statistics, 'היבטים סוציולוגיים של יהודים דוברי רוסית בישראל ובתפוצות 1989-2015', 30 March 2016, cbs.gov.il, 3rd slide.

recorded the lowest number of immigrants in history.[19] As a consequence, the Yitzhak Shamir government launched talks with the US authorities at the end of the 1980s which resulted in significant limitations to the legal opportunities enabling Soviet Jews to relocate to the US, starting from October 1989.[20]

In addition, by means including its special *Nativ* service, the government made every effort to ensure that individuals holding an Israeli visa actually did travel to Israel upon their departure from the USSR. To achieve this, additional dedicated routes for facilitating the transit of large groups of Soviet emigrants were organised. Aside from the standard route which ran via Vienna, other routes were arranged via Hungary (at the turn of 1990) and Poland (in 1990–2) as part of the 'Bridge'[21] operation, and direct air routes to Israel were launched in mid-1991.

In these circumstances, Israel became the genuine main destination for Jews emigrating from the USSR. In 1989, the number of immigrants who came to Israel from the USSR was around 13,000; in 1990 this number rose to 185,000, and in 1991 reached 148,000. Until the end of the

[19] 'Total Immigration to Israel by Year (1948 – Present)', Jewish Virtual Library, jewishvirtuallibrary.org.

[20] As of autumn 1989, only those Soviet citizens who had completed the visa procedure and received their US visa in the USSR were allowed to resettle to the US. This equated to the abolition of the system applied thus far, in which emigrants were allowed to leave their country if they had an Israeli visa (issued by Dutch consulates in the USSR; it was much easier to obtain an Israeli visa than a US visa) and then they applied for permission to enter the US in the transit centre in Vienna. For more, see *inter alia* A.L. Goldman, 'Israel Asking U.S. to Bar Soviet Jews', New York Times, 1 March 1987, nytimes.com; *idem*, 'Russian Jews Come to U.S. In Big Group', New York Times, 29 September 1989, nytimes.com; M. Zur Glozman, 'The Million Russians That Changed Israel to Its Core', Haaretz, 4 January 2013, haaretz.com.

[21] An operation carried out by Israeli, Polish and American special services involving the organisation and supervision of the transfer of large groups of emigrants from the USSR via the territory of Poland. Keeping the operation secret and offering protection to the expatriates was necessary due to the serious threat posed by Arab terrorist groups, which had an efficient network of contacts in the former Eastern bloc states and used the support of diplomatic posts of some Arab countries. See T. Kozłowski, 'Jak organizowano tranzyt Żydów z ZSRR', Polityka, 1 February 2017, polityka.pl.

twentieth century, the average number of immigrants coming to Israel annually from the former USSR was between 46,000 and 68,000.[22] Alongside this, large groups of Jewish emigrants from the former USSR relocated to Germany (a total of around 200,000 individuals in 1990–2005) and the United States (more than 300,000 in the corresponding period).

3. The 2010s *aliyah*: the 'Putin' *aliyah*, also known as the 'quality' *aliyah*

Following the decrease in the dynamics of immigration from the former USSR recorded in the 2000s, 2014 saw a rise in immigration figures. In 2009–13, the total number of newcomers from all post-Soviet states was around 7000–7500 annually. In 2014, this rose to around 12,000; in 2015 to around 15,000, 17,000 in 2016, 19,000 in 2018 and 25,000 in 2019. According to data compiled by the Jewish Agency for Israel, in 2014–19 the total number of immigrants from that region was around 105,000, 50% of whom from Russia and almost 40% from Ukraine.[23] This suggests that the immigrants who came to Israel in 2014 and later likely account (at least on paper) for as much as 10% of Israel's 'Russian' population.

Journalists writing on the subject refer to this *aliyah* as the 'Putin' *aliyah*, the 'cheese' *aliyah* or the 'quality' *aliyah*. The first two terms were coined to reflect the political reality that emerged in the former USSR following Vladimir Putin's return as Russia's President in 2012. They mainly emphasise Moscow's increasingly tough domestic policy and aggressive external policy (in particular towards Ukraine) which resulted in Russia's relationship with the West cooling down and sanctions being imposed on the RF. In this context, the term: the 'cheese' *aliyah* – coined in allusion to the 'sausage' *aliyah* – refers to the European-made delicacies (including various types of cheese) subject to the import restrictions

22 'Total Immigration to Israel from the Former Soviet Union (1948 – Present)', *op. cit.*
23 The author's own calculations, based on annual reports available on the Agency's website.

which the Russian authorities introduced as part of counter-sanctions targeting the EU member states.

The term 'quality' *aliyah*, for its part, suggests that this group of immigrants included educated and affluent individuals whose decision to emigrate was not economically-motivated but rather driven by their desire to seek stability and better legal and political standards.[24] According to an inside joke, 'all the poor Jews had left [Russia] in the 1990s' and those who remained there were perceived as either holders of well-paid jobs or owners of profit-making businesses.[25] However, no data is available to clearly establish whether the levels of education and personal wealth of these immigrants was indeed higher among the 'Putin' *aliyah* than that recorded in previous waves of immigration.

Similarly, it is difficult to assess what proportion of the new citizens actually remained in Israel to reside there permanently.[26] In an interview published in an Israeli newspaper in 2019, a representative of the Jewish Agency said that 25% of immigrants from post-Soviet states return to their country of origin immediately once they are issued an Israeli passport.[27] Figures presented in autumn 2020 by the 'HaMakor' investigative TV programme (allegedly obtained from the Israeli Interior Ministry) suggest that in fact this proportion may be as high as 45%.[28] According to these reports, since 2017 there has been a rapid increase in the number of individuals applying for Israeli citizenship but not intending to relocate to Israel permanently. This is because since 2017, as a result of

[24] See for example А. Ребель, 'Новая русская жизнь в еврейской стране', 9 Kanal, 21 May 2016, 9tv.co.il.

[25] 'Израильское гражданство, почему к нему проявляется массовый интерес со стороны россиян?', Эхо Москвы, 25 February 2020, echo.msk.ru.

[26] See L. Rozovsky, 'Why Members of the 'Putin Aliyah' Are Abandoning Israel', Haaretz, 16 April 2017, haaretz.com.

[27] Z. Klein, 'תופעה: עולים לישראל בשביל דרכון וחוזרים הביתה', Makor Rishon, 28 November 2019, makorrishon.co.il.

[28] Э. Шлеймович, '«Гражданство по дешевке» (часть 1): кто торгует израильскими загранпаспортами?', Детали, 26 October 2020, detaly.co.il; 'המקור, עונה 19, פרק 5: אזרחות או הפקרות', Reshat 13, 25 October 2020, 13tv.co.il.

efforts by a 'Russian' party Yisrael Beiteinu (which literally means: Israel Our Home), immigrants have been entitled to receive Israeli passports almost immediately upon their arrival in Israel rather than after several months of residence, which had been a compulsory requirement in the previous system.

There is no doubt that some of the newcomers from the former USSR mainly view the opportunity to live in Israel, a state in which 'Russian is spoken but citizens are respected according to American standards',[29] as a safe haven for their families and their capital in which they can find refuge should the situation in their original homeland deteriorate. Another important factor is the fact that holders of Israeli passports can travel much more freely than holders of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian passports.

The fact that even those immigrants who permanently relocate to Israel maintain their strong interest in the situation in their countries of origin is evidenced by the solidarity initiatives they organise to show support for opposition movements in post-Soviet regimes. No such actions were recorded among members of the previous waves of immigration. These initiatives take the form of statements published in the Russian-language media and on social media platforms, and street rallies held across Israel, for example, in protest against Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the arrest of Alexei Navalny in Russia, and as demonstrations of solidarity with the protestors in Belarus.[30]

Despite the relatively small number of attendees – for example, only around 1500 participants attended the biggest rally organised in support of Navalny (in January 2021 in Tel-Aviv) – these demonstrations are a novelty in Israel. What is new is both their subject matter, related to

[29] Ц. Кляйн, 'Makor Rishon (Израиль): новых репатриантов привлекает израильский загранпаспорт или пугает Путин?', ИноСМИ, 28 August 2019, inosmi.ru.

[30] 'В Тель-Авиве и Хайфе на митинги солидарности с Навальным пришли тысячи человек', 23 January 2021, newsru.co.il.

the situation in a foreign country, and the very fact that the Russian--speaking citizens have become involved in a spontaneous, grassroots political activity of a kind in which they had not previously participated.

Many representatives of the 1990s *aliyah* disapprove of this behaviour; they argue that the ‘Putin’ *aliyah* immigrants treat Israel instrumentally, have no emotional bond with it, and are more interested in the situation in Russia and Ukraine than in their new homeland. The two groups differ in other aspects as well. The new immigrants tend to settle in the Tel Aviv metropolis and surrounding area, rather than in the usual locations with the largest Russian-speaking population such as the cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon. As regard their outlook on life, unlike the representatives of previous *aliyah*s, these immigrants are more liberal and individualistic, more critical of many elements of Israeli reality, and more distanced from Israeli ultra-patriotism. This is another sphere in which conflicts between representatives of the two groups emerge.

4. The ‘money’ *aliyah*: the oligarchs

Billionaire oligarchs from the former Soviet republics form a unique group of Russian-speaking Israeli citizens. According to *The Marker* daily, in 2020 seven out of the 100 richest Israelis were from the former USSR: five from Russia, one from Ukraine and one from Kazakhstan.[31]

In turn, according to a ranking compiled by *Forbes*, in 2020 at least ten out of the 200 wealthiest Russians also held Israeli citizenship. Four of them – Mikhail Fridman (8th place), Roman Abramovich (10th), Viktor Vekselberg[32] (12th) and German Khan (14th) are among Russia’s top billionaires. Other holders of Israeli citizenship include Viacheslav Moshe

[31] ‘כאן גרים בעושר. 121 מיליארדרים’, The Marker, themarker.com.

[32] Since April 2018, he has been covered by US sanctions: see ‘Ukraine-/Russia-related Designations and Identification Update; Syria Designations; Kingpin Act Designations; Issuance of Ukraine-/Russia-related General Licenses 12 and 13; Publication of New FAQs and Updated FAQ’, U.S. Department of the Treasury, 6 April 2018, home.treasury.gov.

Kantor (25th place), Yuri Milner (27th) and Viacheslav Mirilashvili (110th).[33] As regards prominent representatives of the Ukrainian business and political world, one important holder of Israeli citizenship is Ihor Kolomoyski, the oligarch associated with the city of Dnipro, one of Ukraine's richest[34] and most influential[35] people, and a patron and sponsor of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidential campaign.[36] Other holders of Israeli citizenship include the billionaire Hennadiy Boholyubov, Kolomoyski's former business partner, and Vadym Rabinovych, a Jewish activist and deputy in the *Verkhovna Rada* (Ukraine's parliament), and a leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life party.[37] Another individual listed as one of the wealthiest Israelis is Alexander Mashkevich, a mining industry tycoon, and co-owner of the Eurasian Resources Group which mines natural resources in Kazakhstan, Brazil and six African countries.

With some exceptions, most of these individuals do not permanently reside in Israel[38] and do not participate in the life of the Russian-speaking population. However, they are listed among the wealthiest Israeli

[33] А. Ляликова, 'Дорогие нероссияне: зачем миллиардерам второе гражданство', Forbes, 9 October 2018, forbes.ru.
[34] 'Рейтинг 2020: 100 самых богатых украинцев. Полный список', Фокус, 14 September 2020, focus.ua.
[35] 'Рейтинг 2019: 100 самых влиятельных украинцев', Фокус, 23 December 2019, focus.ua.
[36] Having come into conflict with the then President Petro Poroshenko, in 2017–2019 Kolomoyski was resident abroad: first in Switzerland, and then in Israel, in the city of Herzliya, where he owns a property. A journalistic investigation carried out by the Ukrainian section of Radio Svoboda in April 2019 suggests that during his stay in Israel the oligarch actively put pressure on the course of the electoral campaign which was ongoing in Ukraine at that time. He returned to Ukraine shortly after Zelensky's victory. Cf 'Кто посещал Коломойского «в эмиграции» – расследование', Экономическая правда, 18 April 2019, epravda.com.ua.
[37] It should be assumed that many representatives of the Ukrainian political and business elite do not disclose the fact that they are citizens of yet another state (e.g. Israel).
[38] Roman Abramovich is one exception. He relocated to Israel in 2018, when the British authorities refused to prolong his visa. Upon his arrival in Israel, he became this country's richest man. Other individuals permanently residing in Israel include Mikhail Mirilashvili (since 2009) and – presumably – Alexander Mashkevich.

citizens,[39] own property in Israel, do business there and – like many wealthy representatives of the Jewish diaspora from other countries – fund social, charity and religious initiatives. This has earned them the status of respected philanthropists and provided them with access to the Israeli state's elites.

The Genesis Prize, worth US$1 million and referred to as 'the Jewish Nobel prize', is one example of such activity and of the prestige associated with it. It is an annual prize awarded in Jerusalem to Jewish people from all over the world for their professional achievements and attachment to Jewish values.[40] It is funded by the Genesis Philanthropy Group, which was established by the Russian billionaires Mikhail Fridman, German Khan and Pyotr Aven. The founding of the prize was announced in 2012 by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during President Putin's visit to Israel.[41] In addition, Prime Minister Netanyahu is a frequent guest at the award ceremony, and has on several occasions personally handed the prize to its winners.

Another factor which gives the above-mentioned post-Soviet oligarchs the platform and mandate to maintain their contacts with Israel is the fact that all of them are actively involved in the operation of various Jewish organisations (national or regional), and are (or used to be) members of their executive bodies.

Russian billionaires who hold Israeli citizenship head two of the five regional Jewish organisations affiliated with the World Jewish Congress (WJC).[42] Since 2007, the European Jewish Congress (EJC), which represents around 2.5 million European Jews, has been headed by Viacheslav

[39] See footnote 31.

[40] The winners include Michael Bloomberg, Michael Douglas, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Steven Spielberg.

[41] D.M. Herszenhorn, 'Russians Join Israel to Start Jewish Prize of $1 Million', New York Times, 26 June 2012, nytimes.com.

[42] *World Jewish Congress Regional Affiliates*, World Jewish Congress, worldjewishcongress.org.

Moshe Kantor,[43] who aspires to a leadership role not only within the Jewish diaspora in Europe but also increasingly in the US. The incomparably smaller and less influential Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) is headed by Mikhail Mirilashvili.

In addition, oligarchs are highly active in Jewish organisations operating at the national level. Roman Abramovich is chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, which is associated with the Kremlin, and groups religious communities connected primarily with the Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty. Fridman, Vekselberg, Khan and Mirilashvili are members of the executive body of the secular Russian Jewish Congress (RJC). Kolomoyski is the president of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine (UJCU), which is among Ukraine's biggest Jewish organisations, and a sponsor of the impressive Menorah cultural and business centre in Dnipro.

As regards the political aspect, it should be emphasised that most Russian-born billionaires holding Israeli citizenship have ties to the current Russian system of power (although the degree of closeness of their ties with the decision-making centre varies) and can be used by the Kremlin to promote Russia's interests if needed.[44] However, other Israeli citizens and residents include former Yukos shareholders and associates of Mikhail Khodorkovsky: Leonid Nevzlin,[45] Vladimir Dubov and Mikhail Brudno. All of them fled Russia following Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003, and at present are not only vocal critics of the Kremlin but

[43] Kantor was the *spiritus movens* behind the organisation of the 75th anniversary of Auschwitz liberation in Jerusalem.

[44] The oligarchs' links with the Kremlin and their servility towards the Russian leadership have been discussed in detail, for example in Catherine Belton's book *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*, published in April 2020. In the UK, Abramovich, Fridman and Aven sued the author for libel. See K. Shubber, A. Barker, H. Foy, M. Seddon, 'Russian billionaires file lawsuits over book on Putin's rise', Financial Times, 1 May 2021, ft.com.

[45] In 2008, in Russia Nevzlin was sentenced *in absentia* to imprisonment for life. In 2004–8 the Russian prosecutor's office attempted to have him extradited from Israel, to no avail. Nevzlin is the father-in-law of Yuli Edelstein, a former *otkaznik* and currently a prominent politician in the Likud party.

also have a prominent place among the anti-Putin portion of Russian-speaking Israelis.[46]

It is difficult to assess the actual scale and nature of the post-Soviet oligarchs' activity in Israel because most of the time it is kept low-profile. Although Israeli media regularly reports, for example, on the shockingly expensive property purchases made by 'Russian' billionaires, information on their social, business and political activity is rarely shared. For example it was only the BBC's investigative reporting in 2020 that revealed that in 2005–2018 companies associated with Roman Abramovich, incorporated in tax havens, had donated almost US$100 million (sic!) to the Elad Foundation, which is involved in offering ideological and material support to Jewish settlers in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem.[47] In addition, the oligarch has offered a total of almost US$80 million to the Chaim Sheba Medical Center (Israel's biggest hospital)[48] and US$30 million to a project involving the creation of a nanotechnology centre at Tel Aviv University.[49] These donations had originally been kept anonymous, but were revealed once Abramovich relocated to Israel in 2018. In addition, he is said to have offered US$5 million to the Jewish Agency for Israel (to support the worldwide fight against anti-Semitism) and to have provided funding to the Yad Ezer La-Haver foundation, which is involved in helping Holocaust survivors.[50]

In addition, business tycoons from the former USSR have offered generous support to the Yad Vashem Institute. Its prominent donors include the Genesis Philanthropy Group, Mikhail Mirilashvili, Viacheslav Moshe Kantor, the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, Ihor Kolomoyski and Hennadiy

[46] 'Леонид Невзлин: «Нормальный израильтянин Путина не любит, а к России относится хорошо»', Голос Америки, 18 June 2019, golosameriki.com.
[47] 'Israeli settlers' Chelsea boss backer', BBC, 21 September 2020, bbc.com.
[48] H. Levi Julian, 'Billionaire Donates $20m to Israel's Sheba Hospital for Nuclear Medicine, Research Center', Jewish Press, 3 March 2018, jewishpress.com.
[49] G. Fay Cashman, 'Billionaire Roman Abramovich revealed as $30m. Tel Aviv University donor', The Jerusalem Post, 25 January 2018, jpost.com.
[50] 'Roman Abramovich donates $5m to Jewish Agency', Globes, 16 June 2019, globes.co.il.

Boholyubov.[51] Since 2019, Kantor has been Chancellor of the Yad Vashem Council.[52]

Moreover, Kantor has founded the Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University. It is headed by Prof. Dina Porat, who at the same time serves as chief historian at Yad Vashem. Since 2011, the Center has published annual global reports on anti--Semitism. These reports are among the main analytical materials upon which basis the EJC, another organisation headed by Kantor, makes its assessments regarding the spread of anti-Semitism in Europe.

Historical memory is another area in which Russian oligarchs are active. For example, they offer regular financial support to initiatives focused on building monuments connected with the Soviet past in various locations in Israel, for example the huge wing-shaped Victory Monument in Netanya and the memorial to the victims of the siege of Leningrad (see further).[53]

As regards business undertakings, Russian-speaking billionaires (first and foremost Roman Abramovich)[54] frequently invest in Israeli start-ups and companies operating in the new technology sector. For example, Viktor Vekselberg invested in the Fifth Dimension company, which is active in the cyber security sector and used to be headed by Benny Gantz, former Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces and the current defence minister. The fact that the US imposed personal sanctions on Vekselberg is thought to be one of the reasons behind the closedown of this company in 2018.[55]

51 See ‘Donors’, Yad Vashem, yadvashem.org.
52 ‘Mr. & Mrs. Moshe Kantor, Russia’, Yad Vashem, yadvashem.org.
53 ‘ביקור פוטין: מי הם האוליגרכים היהודים של הנשיא הרוסי?’, The Marker, 1 April 2012, themarker.com.
54 A non-exhaustive list of his investments is available in the article by S. Griver, ‘Roman Abramovich: Britain’s loss is Israel’s gain’, Globes, 5 June 2018, globes.co.il.
55 For more on Vekselberg’s business undertakings see S. Shulman, ‘המיליארדר שמחבר בין פוטין, טראמפ, גנץ, הייטק ויד ושם’, Calcalist, 7 June 2019, calcalist.co.il.

The hardest information to obtain involves the details on the connections between the Russian billionaires and the Israeli political world. In this context, the Israeli media has mainly focused on Mirilashvili and his close ties with, for example, Aryeh Deri, Israel's longtime interior minister (representing the ultra-Orthodox Shas party), and Ze'ev Elkin (a former close collaborator of Benjamin Netanyahu). In 2017, Mirilashvili and his son Yitzhak were interrogated by the police over donations worth more than US$500,000 they had offered to religious organisations run by Deri's wife. Other reports in the Israeli media suggested that major donations (worth US$3 million) had been offered to Shas and various Sephardic ultra-Orthodox institutions related to it.[56]

To sum up, it should once again be emphasised that the publicised reports regarding the activity of Russian oligarchs are most likely just the tip of the iceberg. This makes it impossible to precisely assess the genuine status of these individuals and the scale of their influence. However, there is no doubt that this group's activity has been under close scrutiny by Israeli special services.

[56] See *idem*, '"רצו שאהיה חבר של כמה אנשים, לא רציתי, אז הרשיעו בלי הוכחות"', Calcalist, 19 December 2019, calcalist.co.il; S. Sadeh, 'אב ובנו, מיליארדרים, במסע רכישות בישראל: האוליגרכים שלא רוצים שתשמעו עליהם', The Marker, 16 June 2017, themarker.com.

II. THE 'RUSSIAN STREET': AN ATTEMPT AT A DESCRIPTION

The Russian-speaking Israeli population, which mainly formed following the 1990s *aliyah*, differs from the rest of Israeli society in terms of language, culture, socio-economic status, their views on Jewishness, their political behaviour, historical memory and the specific problems affecting this group. Each of the aspects determining the otherness of the new Israelis was most evident in the period immediately following their arrival in Israel. Over time, as they integrated into Israeli society, this otherness diminished – but all its aspects continue to exist. Analysing these issues will help to understand what the 'Russian street' is and how it impacts on the life of the state.

1. The Russian-speaking socio-cultural enclave and its place in Israeli society

The 'great Russian *aliyah*' of the 1990s was unprecedented in the history of Israel, not only due to its size but also to the type of its immigrants. Despite the deeply embedded anti-Semitic stereotypes among the Soviet public, and various forms of discrimination by the Soviet state administration bodies, most of the new immigrants were firmly rooted in Soviet reality in terms of their culture, career and private life. Unlike in the 1970s *aliyah*, which mainly comprised inhabitants of the Soviet regions, the representatives of the 1990s *aliyah* usually came from the USSR's Slavic republics, principally Russia and Ukraine. Most of them were members of a fully secularised urban middle class: physicians, teachers, engineers, scientists, musicians, sportspeople, etc., who most likely would not have emigrated if the USSR had not collapsed. For most of them, no matter which post-Soviet state they came from, Russian was their native language, and the Russian-language Soviet culture was their cultural background.

In this context, Israeli researcher Larissa Remennick writes that as a result of decades of forced secularisation, most Soviet Jews had departed from their religion and from the Yiddish culture. "If they had any deities at all, these were Pushkin and Chekhov, Pasternak and Bulgakov (as the icons of Russian high culture), on one hand, and social mobility (expressed in the cult of education and professionalism), on the other".[57] This is why American historian Yuri Slezkine referred to them as "the most Soviet and most successful of all Soviet communities",[58] and Remennick described them as "a perfect sample of the social type known as *Homo Sovieticus*".[59]

Due to this unique socio-cultural attitude, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the vast majority of the around 1.4 million Soviet Jews[60] had left their old homeland (and relocated mainly to Israel, the US and Germany), this group continued to maintain the feeling of belonging to "a unique extraterritorial community held together by its common past"[61] (see Appendix 2).

Upon their arrival in Israel, most 'Russian' immigrants knew little about their new homeland. However, at the same time many of them felt that although the country they had come from was characterised by lower living standards and a more limited availability of consumer goods, it boasted a much more advanced spiritual and technical culture. A journalist from the Russian-language *Vesti* daily wrote: "The secular Israeli culture, even if it has major achievements, is not particularly impressive to well-educated Russian immigrants because it is a young, mostly imitative and parochial culture".[62] Immigrants from the former USSR,

[57] L. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2007, p. 49.
[58] Y. Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2019, p. viii.
[59] L. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents…*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[60] According to the 1989 census, at that time the USSR had 1.37 million Jews.
[61] 'Израиль. Между украми и колорадами', Хадашот, November 2015, hadashot.kiev.ua.
[62] Quoted from M. Friedman, 'Israel's Russian Wave, Thirty Years Later', Mosaic, 2 November 2020, mosaicmagazine.com.

who associated Jewishness with university education – or at least aspirations towards such – were appalled with the fact that in Israel some Jews were poorly educated, had a low professional status and were not very cultured. This impression was particularly strong during their contacts with representatives of the Sephardic portion of Israeli society who had come from the Arab states. The Russian-speaking immigrants tended to perceive them as ignorant and primitive, but had no choice but to interact with them in the outlying residential districts and while doing the low-paid jobs which most of them took up on their arrival in Israel.

Even if the 'Russian immigrants'' self-image as high-culture enthusiasts, book lovers and theatregoers was somewhat exaggerated, and in practice their contact with famous 'Russian literature' frequently equated to their association with post-Soviet popular culture rather than the literary classics, they were genuinely proud of the grand culture of their country of origin[63] and did not intend to distance themselves from it. The size of the new *aliyah* precluded any attempts to pressurise its representatives into accelerating their assimilation into Israeli society.

In addition, while in previous *aliyah*s the immigrants had "joined a society that had built a robust system of values focused on a quick formation of a nation", the 1990s immigrants arrived in an Israel that was divided into a religious and a secularised portion of society, into Mizrahi Jews and Ashkenazi Jews, the left and the right. In fact, each of these camps had its own vision of the state's future, and the political and cultural hegemony of the secular Zionist Ashkenazi elite was being challenged.[64] Shimon Peres of the Israeli Labour Party offered a symbolic summary of this process in 1996, when he was defeated by Benyamin Netanyahu as candidate for prime minister; in a subsequent interview, one of his remarks was interpreted to mean that 'the Jews had beaten the Israelis'.

[63] W. Laqueur, 'From Russia with Complications', *Jewish Review of Books*, summer 2013, jewishreviewofbooks.com.
[64] A. Shapira, *Historia Izraela*, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

The spirit of the age – involving 'the end of history', the triumph of liberal democracy and the market economy – was among the factors that contributed to Israel abandoning its policy of centralised management of the integration of new citizens using the so-called 'absorption centres', which it had pursued in previous decades, and focusing on the 'direct absorption' model. In this variant, on arrival in Israel each immigrant received an 'absorption basket' from the state and decided on their own how to use it, which equated to them becoming integrated into society on their own terms.

As a consequence, although a large portion of the newcomers from the former USSR did gradually adapt to the new reality, they did not change their Slavic-sounding first names and surnames, continued to speak Russian in their everyday life, read Russian books, followed the Russian-language and Russian media, and attended shows by Soviet/Russian stars on tour in Israel. This indicates that unlike any other culture of any other group of immigrants from the Jewish diaspora (including the Yiddish culture, not to mention the Polish, Hungarian and Romanian culture) the Russian speakers managed to preserve their language and distinct culture, and formed an autonomous community within the Hebrew-speaking Israeli society.

Social organisations, cultural institutions and the media are the backbone of the Russian-speaking Israeli population. In the 1990s and the 2000s, in Israel there were around 130 various Russian-language newspapers and magazines (including five or six dailies), and several TV channels and radio stations broadcasting Russian-language content.[65] It should be emphasised that regardless of their very diverse ownership structure,[66]

[65] At present, aside from the Russian-language press there are Russian-language TV channels (Channel 9, RTVI), radio stations (REKA, Pervoye Radio) and websites (newsru.co.il, vesty.co.il, mignews.com, 7kanal.co.il).

[66] For example, Radio Reka is state-owned, while Pervoye Radio and the Vesty website are owned by Israeli media companies, Channel 9 is owned by the Ukrainian-Israeli businessman Alexander Levin (president of the World Forum of Russian-Speaking Jewry), and the newsru.co.il website by the Russian NewsRu.com website; this

these were and continue to be Israeli media, focusing on issues which are important for Israeli citizens and presenting the national Israeli point of view.

As a result of the rise of the Internet, the crisis affecting traditional media outlets and the gradual integration of the 'Russian street' into the mainstream of Israeli society, the number and importance of the Russian-language media has decreased (for example, not a single Russian-language daily is currently being published). Despite this fact, this niche in the Israeli media landscape continues to exist, and it seems unlikely that this situation will change in the foreseeable future.

The emergence and continued existence of 'Russian-speaking' Israel has also been facilitated by a number of additional factors which have helped the immigrants to nurture interpersonal contacts and to maintain their cultural links with their countries of origin. These factors included the popularisation of satellite TV and the Internet, and the increasing availability of air travel. Another important fact involved significant, economically motivated concentrations of immigrants from the former USSR in several urban centres including Bat Yam, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Beersheba.[67] In 2015, the share of these cities' Russian-speaking population was 30, 25, 24 and 22 percent respectively.[68]

To sum up, it should be stated that the emergence of the 1990s *aliyah* has resulted in the formation of a unique, Russian-speaking socio-cultural enclave in Israel. It has its own media outlets, associations, cultural institutions, respected figures and even political parties (more on this further in the text). It exists parallel to the mainstream of Israeli culture, and the

belongs to Vladimir Gusinsky, a Yeltsin-era media tycoon who has resided outside Russia since 2000.

[67] S. Lan, '30 שנה חלפו מאז גל העלייה הגדול מרוסיה: כך השתנתה ישראל לבלי היכר', Globes, 24 January 2020, globes.co.il.

[68] 'Русскоязычные израильтяне – кто мы? Какие мы? Сколько нас?', 9 Kanal, 22 August 2017, 9tv.co.il.

rest of Israel's citizens de facto know very little about it.[69] At the same time, involvement in the life of this enclave does not stand in contradiction to one's more broadly understood Israeli identity. In an interview, Ze'ev Hanin, chief expert at the Israeli Ministry of *Aliyah* and Integration, said that in Israel there is a "Russian-language subculture, but there is no Russian ghetto". According to him, this subculture is "firstly Jewish, secondly Israeli, and only thirdly Russian".[70]

At present, i.e. thirty years from the beginning of the 1990s *aliyah*, the immigrants from the former USSR form a unique category of Israelis, and one of the many elements of the local cultural mosaic. They continue to speak their language, observe their culture, run their media outlets and social organisations, preserve their political uniqueness, while at the same time most of them remain ardent Israeli patriots. The boundaries between this group and the mainstream of Israeli social life are becoming increasingly blurred. Although there are categories of problems typical of the Russian-speaking population (more on this in subsequent paragraphs) and some of the newcomers still do not speak Hebrew (25% in 2015)[71], it should be stated that, contrary to a popular cliché, this group is well-integrated into Israeli society as a whole, and does not cause the problems that frequently emerge as large immigrant communities adapt to their host country.

2. The socio-economic status of Russian-speaking Israelis

Many of the new citizens who arrived in Israel from the former USSR back in the 1990s were educated and competent professionals (according

[69] The Tel Aviv-based Gesher Theatre is a rare example of an institution created by and for Russian-speaking Israelis that has entered the mainstream of Israeli culture. Initially it performed in Russian only, but at present it performs in both Russian and Hebrew, and is among the most important institutions of this type in Israel.

[70] 'Русский переулок на израильской улице', Хадашот, 19 December 2014, hadashot.kiev.ua.

[71] See footnote 68.

to various sources, 55–70% of them held college or university degrees). For example, this group included more than 80,000 engineers (compared to the 30,000 local engineers who had completed their education in Israel),[72] 15,000 physicians and 14,000 research/other scientists. At the same time, these individuals were used to living in an economic system in which the state, a global empire reliant on heavy industry, was their employer. The process of becoming accustomed to the capitalist labour market was painful: the country and the language were new, and the degrees they had been awarded in the USSR were frequently not recognised or even considered worthless. In addition, the newcomers' skills were adequate to the size of the Soviet Union and the needs of its economy; professions which were considered prestigious and guaranteed a high standard of living in the USSR frequently turned out to be useless in Israel. As early as 1991, a representative of the Israeli government said: "For example, thousands of dentists have arrived in this immigration. What do you do with thousands of dentists? You have to find them other jobs. You have to retrain them. We [also] have hundreds of mining engineers who have come from the Soviet Union. Hundreds. What are we supposed to do with them here? We have no mines".[73] The situation was similar for members of other highly regarded Soviet professions such as metallurgical, gas and hydropower engineers. The immigrants were offered simple jobs in agriculture, the construction sector and the service sectors which had been held by Palestinians before the first *intifada* (1989–93).[74]

As hundreds of thousands more new citizens kept arriving from the former Soviet republics, the problem of their professional skills being

[72] *International Migration to Israel and its Impact*, OECD, 2011, oecd.org, p. 235.
[73] 'Soviet Jews' Disappointing Move to Israel', Journeyman Pictures, 1991, youtube.com.
[74] Due to the declining security situation and the Jewish population's increasing anti-Arab bias, the number of Palestinians employed in the Israeli economy fell from 115,000 in 1992 to 40,000 in 1995, and the construction, agricultural and service sectors began to experience a major workforce shortage. Data after David V. Battram, 'Foreign Workers in Israel: History and Theory', *International Migration Review*, Vol. 32, Issue 2 (summer 1998), p. 303–325.

incompatible with the needs of the Israeli economy and labour market continued to worsen. This resulted in the temporary or permanent downgrading of many of these individuals. The still popular cliché of the immigrant from the former USSR who is working in a simple job for which they are highly overqualified – as security guards, cashiers, cleaners or street musicians – arose when such situations were at their commonest. Over time, some of the immigrants who had initially been forced to take up low-paid jobs managed to return to their original professions once they had learned Hebrew and completed additional training. However, this applied to just a small portion of this group (e.g. around a third of the engineers)[75]. Those who did not succeed began to feel abandoned, useless, degraded and cheated by people who prior to their departure from the USSR had told them that Israel needed 'repatriates' and would welcome them on its soil. This sentiment became evident as early as during the 1992 elections, when the vast majority of the new citizens (then numbering almost 400,000) voted against the Likud party government, whose policy towards the influx of immigrants was viewed as ineffective, and supported the Labour Party which had promised to offer them welfare benefits and housing assistance (see further). Some of the immigrants who failed to adapt to the new reality decided to return to their country of origin or re-migrated. According to official statistics, 100,000 out of 1.1 million individuals (i.e. around 10%) who relocated to Israel from the USSR and former Soviet republics in the period 1989–2018 have since left Israel permanently.[76]

A study conducted in 2015 by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics showed that over the 25 years since the beginning of the great Russian *aliyah*, the financial standing of its representatives had improved considerably, but at the same time the Russian-speaking Israelis continued to differ from the rest of society in numerous aspects. For example, in 2014

[75] L. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents...*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
[76] 'Soviet-Jewish Refugees and Their Political Preferences in the United States and Israel', *op. cit.*

the average monthly income in a household run by repatriates was 14,000 shekels (around US$4200), whereas the corresponding figure for a household run by citizens who had been living in Israel for a long time was more than 20,000 shekels (around US$6000). The proportion of apartment owners was 51% for the newcomers, whereas it was 70% for Israeli-born citizens. Employment statistics confirm that the immigrants' social status has improved: in 1995, 38% of these individuals were employed as skilled workers in the agricultural, industrial and construction sectors; 20% worked illegally as unskilled workers; 21% worked in office jobs, and 11% were employed in jobs that required a university degree. In 2015, the corresponding figures were 20%, 8%, 29% and 24%.[77]

The immigrants from the former USSR were particularly successful in the sectors in which energy, diligence and determination are necessary, i.e. in small and medium-sized business and in the high-tech sector. In the latter, the proportion of the 1990s immigrants is more than twice as high as the proportion of these individuals in society as a whole; they account for almost 25% of all specialists working in this branch.[78] The IT sector has seen the most spectacular examples of representatives of the 1990s *aliyah* achieving major professional success. These include Yevgeny Dibrov (the co-founder of Armis Security) and Shahar Weisser (the developer of the Gett taxi app). In Israel, it is believed that the rise of the new technology sector would not have been possible if its educated technical workforce had not immigrated from the former Soviet republics.[79]

At the same time, still relatively few immigrants from the 1990s *aliyah* work in public administration as higher-ranking military officers, academic teachers, in state-controlled companies and in major law firms

77 All figures quoted after 'Русскоязычные израильтяне – кто мы? Какие мы? Сколько нас?', *op. cit.*
78 See footnote 67.
79 Э. Шлеймович, 'Именно «русские» инженеры подняли израильский хайтек!', Детали, 1 December 2020, detaly.co.il.

and media outlets.[80] In all these sectors, they have encountered barriers which they perceive as 'glass ceilings'.

To sum up, it should be stated that although Russian-speaking Israelis continue to earn a smaller income than Israeli-born citizens and are underrepresented in numerous sectors of the economy, their financial standing has improved significantly compared to the situation back in the 1990s and – with the exception of the difficult situation affecting many 'Russian' pensioners (see further) – no longer poses a serious social problem. Alongside this, the increasingly frequent opinions expressed which emphasise this group's contribution to the development of the Israeli economy should be viewed as symbolic gestures of appreciation.

3. The definition of Jewishness

One of the most difficult and still unresolved problems connected with the large-scale influx of immigrants from the former USSR involves the definition of Jewishness.

According to Jewish religious law, Jewishness is inherited matrilineally, or can be acquired by way of converting to Judaism. This means that a Jew is a person whose mother is Jewish (regardless of her own views on her Jewish identity). In the USSR, however, nationality was a purely secular legal category specified in each citizen's passport documents. It was passed on from parents to their offspring. Prior to 1974, if one's parents represented two different nationalities, nationality was passed from the father to the child. After 1974, when citizens aged sixteen and older applied for their first passport (the so-called internal passport), they were allowed to choose – on a one-off basis – either of their parents' nationalities. If the nationality of one parent (e.g. Jewish or German) could potentially expose that person to discrimination, they frequently chose the other, 'safer' one (i.e. Russian, Ukrainian etc.).

[80] See footnote 70.

A separate problem involved this person's self-image and the way in which they were perceived by other people. This was to a certain degree independent from what the official documents stated. For example, individuals who had one Jewish parent and who were not considered Jews according to Jewish religious law and Soviet state rules could identify themselves as Jews. On the other hand, some individuals who met the religious criteria (i.e. their maternal grandmother was Jewish) did not care much about this fact. There was an element of arbitrariness and randomness in how a person's ethnic identity was perceived by other people. An individual whose nationality was Russian according to official documents but whose surname and patronymic were Jewish-sounding could be perceived as a Jew (and discriminated against on this basis), no matter whether they considered themselves to be Jewish.

Migrants from the USSR relocated to Israel on the basis of the 'Law of Return' passed in 1950, which guaranteed each Jew from the diaspora the right to come to Israel and settle there. The law defined Jewishness according to religious criteria (a Jew is a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism); however, its 1970 amendment granted the right to return to Israel to "a child and a grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew" as well.[81] In this way, the right to relocate to Israel was expanded to cover categories of individuals who were not Jews from the religious point of view. These included people who did have Jewish ancestors but on the 'wrong' side of their family tree, as well as individuals who had nothing in common with Jewry, e.g. spouses of another nationality. At the same time, in matters relating to one's 'personal status' (i.e. marriage and divorce) Jewishness was and continues to be defined according to religious criteria alone. These matters are dealt with exclusively by rabbinical courts. As a consequence, major inconsistencies have arisen between the laws defining the rules for granting Israeli citizenship and the Israeli marriage laws.

81 See the Law of Return 5710 (1950), the Knesset, knesset.gov.il.

The problem became evident during the 1990s *aliyah*, when a huge group of new citizens who failed to meet the religious criterion came to Israel (according to estimates this group numbered 300,000–400,000 individuals, or around 30% of all immigrants).[82] Due to the magnitude of this phenomenon, the Jewish identity of this group of immigrants as a whole started to come into question, especially by the religious portion of local Israeli society. As a consequence, individuals who had been discriminated against on ground of their Jewishness in the USSR started to be referred to in Israel as Russians (read: non-Jews).

One development that was to the new immigrants' disadvantage was the fact that back in 1993, for the first time in history, supervision of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel was transferred from rabbis associated with religious Zionism (with a nationalist and pro-state orientation) to ultra-Orthodox rabbis. Although the reasons behind this change were unrelated to the 'Russian *aliyah*' *per se* (the left-wing government headed by Yitzhak Rabin was attempting to weaken the influence of the religious Zionists, who were opposed to the peace process with Palestinians), it had long-term consequences for this group. Ultra-Orthodox rabbis did not view the building of the Jewish state and the Jewish national community as their duty. Instead, they toughened the rules regarding conversion to Judaism and centralised its procedure, and tightened their regulations for verifying the Jewishness of applicants for marriage.[83] These decisions had a direct impact on hundreds of thousands of newcomers from the former USSR, and continue to hamper their full integration into society.

Doubts regarding the Jewishness of the new immigrants were fuelled by the fact that this group also included cases of persons who had relocated to Israel on the basis of fake documents, and thus had nothing in

[82] See L. Galili, 'Analysis: The Jewish nation-state vs. non-Jewish immigrants from the former USSR', i24 News, 29 July 2018, i24news.tv; 'Русскоязычные израильтяне – кто мы? Какие мы? Сколько нас?', *op. cit.*

[83] В. Чернин, 'Причины и следствия антисионистской активности Главного раввината Израиля', Институт Ближнего Востока, 1 February 2020, iimes.ru.

common with Jewishness or Judaism. In Israel, this phenomenon was and continues to be an open secret, but was never the subject of a systemic reaction from the state. Any attempt to carry out a large-scale verification would be risky in political terms (it could provoke outrage from Russian-speaking voters), would deepen the divides within society, would require the state to admit to certain mistakes, and finally would call into question the future of those individuals who would be found to have obtained Israeli citizenship illegally but later became exemplary citizens, had families etc.[84]

In addition, the suspicions that the newcomers might not be Jews were aggravated by the fact that on the one hand, they were almost entirely secular and had limited (or no) knowledge of Jewish holidays and traditions, and on the other, they continued to observe Soviet customs and ate non-kosher food (including pork). Over time, as this group became integrated into Israel's social landscape, other citizens grew accustomed to certain traditions which had initially shocked them (for example New Year celebrations around a Christmas tree), and the newcomers' limited religious knowledge was treated humorously, e.g. in satirical shows.[85]

However, prejudice against immigrants from the former USSR and doubts regarding their Jewishness are still there. In 2016, Ksenia Svetlova, a Moscow-born Knesset member, said: "The majority of native-born Israelis think Russian Israelis are not Jews".[86] In January 2020, a scandal broke out when Yitzhak Yosef, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, said that "hundreds of thousands of gentiles" had come to Israel on the basis of the Law of Return, many of whom were "religion-hating Communists".[87] Similarly, the feeling of being treated unfairly, which large

[84] For more on this see e.g. М. Котлярский, '«Поддельные евреи»: как с ними борется МВД Израиля', Детали, 21 April 2021, detaly.co.il.
[85] G. Zinger, 'ליל הסדר הראשון', 26 March 2018, youtube.com.
[86] A. Borschel-Dan, '25 years later, Russian speakers still the 'other' in Israel, says MK', The Times of Israel, 1 September 2016, timesofisrael.com.
[87] 'Chief rabbi: Immigrants from former Soviet Union are 'religion-hating gentiles'', The Times of Israel, 7 January 2020, timesofisrael.com.

numbers of Israelis share because they are not allowed to get married on the territory of the state they are citizens of, remains widespread (see further).

4. Historical memory

The 1990s Russian *aliyah* came to Israel with a historical memory which had been shaped by the official Soviet narrative, focused on the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and on the celebrations of Victory Day on 9 May. In their new homeland, the immigrants encountered another type of historical memory of World War II, one that emphasises the Holocaust. In the new immigrants' view, the contribution of the Soviet Union and the Red Army to the triumph over Nazi Germany was not sufficiently discussed and appreciated in this model. In addition, the newcomers were critical of the insufficient knowledge Israeli society had regarding the details of the conflict (aside from the aspect of the Holocaust) and the many hundreds of thousands[88] of Soviet Jews who had fought in the ranks of the Soviet army. In addition, they were appalled by the fact that thousands of Soviet World War II veterans[89] who had relocated to Israel were not granted any officially-recognised status and did not receive assistance from the state. This is why representatives of the Russian *aliyah* made active attempts to correct the local culture of remembrance. Simply put, they intended to expand the martyrological narrative of the Holocaust by adding to it a heroic account of the armed struggles contributed by the Jews to the victory over Nazi Germany, and by promoting the fact that the establishment of the State of Israel was an indirect result of the Allied victory (with the USSR being the most important of those Allies).

[88] According to various estimates, there were between 350,000 and 500,000 such individuals. See 'Jews in the Red Army, 1941–1945', Yad Vashem, yadvashem.org.

[89] Since 1964, almost 23,000 veterans have come to Israel. At present, this group includes around 3500 individuals. Data after '75 годовщина победы над фашистской Германией Этот год объединил нас больше, чем когда-либо', 31 May 2020, gov.il.

The initiatives they carried out to achieve this goal were varied; they were launched at various levels by individuals, social organisations (e.g. veteran associations), local authorities and 'Russian' political parties (see further).

At the central level, these efforts have resulted in two successes. The first involved the Knesset enacting the 'Status of World War II Veterans Law' in 2000 which made veterans eligible for a number of welfare benefits.[90] The law defined veterans as persons in the active military service of the Allied armies between 1 September 1939 and 2 September 1945, members of resistance movements and survivors of the siege of Leningrad. The other success involved the Knesset declaring in 2017 Victory in Europe Day a national holiday, to be celebrated on 9 May.[91] For example, the act stipulates that history classes focused on victory in World War II should be organised in schools and military facilities, local authorities should receive funding to organise Victory Day celebrations, and a special meeting of parliament and a ceremony in which members of government participate should be held each year on Victory Day.

At the local level, the tradition of organising collective celebrations of the victory in World War II is considerably longer. For example, more than fifty monuments commemorating World War II in the spirit of Soviet-Russian remembrance culture have been built on Israeli soil since 1989. Although some of them are dedicated to the victory over Nazi Germany in general and do acknowledge the contribution of other Allies, the Russian-language inscriptions and the emphasis placed on the Red Army and its Jewish servicemen suggest that it is the Soviet contribution that is considered the most important. In this context, the following monuments are worth mentioning: the monuments to Jews who fought in World War II (in Haifa, Eilat, Ashkelon, Beersheba, Rehovot, Karmiel, Bat Yam) and the monuments to the victims of the siege of

90 'День Победы 9 мая', the Knesset, knesset.gov.il.
91 'Knesset passes bill declaring Victory in Europe Day a national holiday', Knesset News, 27 July 2017, knesset.gov.il.

Leningrad (Ashdod, Jerusalem) and to victory in World War II (Netanya, Ashdod, Ofakim).[92] Victory Day celebrations had been held in numerous cities in Israel, including Jerusalem, long before the Knesset declared this day a national holiday. These included marches of veterans, special concerts and wreath-laying ceremonies, all of which continue to be held. Since 2014, marches commemorating the Immortal Regiment,[93] modelled on the Russian event, have been held across Israel (in 19 locations in 2019).

Despite the above-mentioned achievements, the 'Russian street' remains unsatisfied with the present situation; its representatives emphasise Israeli society's insufficient knowledge of history and the fact that the state authorities are inconsistent and lack enthusiasm in many of their initiatives. For example, despite the fact that the legal act declaring 9 May a national holiday contained such a provision, no special history classes are held in schools, and the Ministry of Education has failed to prepare relevant materials.[94] The construction in Latrun near Jerusalem of a museum dedicated to Jews who fought in World War II has been ongoing since 2002, and the government has not shown any great will to finish it.[95] This facility is intended to be a museum of 'military glory' and the main centre commemorating Soviet veterans. Other

[92] A non-exhaustive list of such monuments alongside photos of them is available on the website of Russia's embassy in Israel: 'Сохранение исторической памяти в Израиле. Общие памятники наших народов', Посольство Российской Федерации в Государстве Израиль, israel.mid.ru.

[93] The 'Immortal Regiment' ('Бессмертный полк'): this refers to a regular event organised during Victory Day celebrations on 9 May. It was organised for the first time in 2012 in the Russian city of Tomsk, and later spread to other Russian cities, former Soviet republics and other states inhabited by groups of emigrants from the former USSR. Its participants march in columns carrying portraits of Soviet soldiers who fought in World War II (usually their ancestors and relatives). Although originally the 'Immortal Regiment' was a grassroots initiative intended to cherish the memory of the victims and veterans of this conflict, as it gained momentum over time, it increasingly became a state-sponsored event and a tool in the Kremlin's domestic and foreign historical policies.

[94] К. Светлова, 'Неизвестная война', Детали, 9 May 2020, detaly.co.il.

[95] See *idem*, 'יום עצוב לווטרנים', Zman Israel, 8 May 2020, zman.co.il; website of the Museum of the Jewish soldiers in World War II, jwmww2.org.

problems include the fact that Victory Day celebrations are supervised not by the president's or the prime minister's office but by the Ministry of *Aliyah* and Integration which seems to specialise in 'serving' the Russian-speaking population. In addition, the official government delegation taking part in the Victory Day celebrations on 9 May has not as yet included the PM or the president,[96] which suggests that this national holiday has a different status than Independence Day, Holocaust Remembrance Day and the Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers of the Wars of Israel and Victims of Acts of Terrorism.

However, from the external perspective, the Russian-speaking population's achievements thus far in shaping Israel's remembrance culture should be assessed as positive. Considering the fact that the 1990s *aliyah* arrived in a country which had its own specific historical narrative of World War II, which served as one of the pillars of the state's identity, the scope of corrections/amendments introduced to this narrative in such a short period is impressive. Although Victory Day celebrations are not as festive in Israel as they are in Russia or Belarus, and a portion of Israeli society seems to be indifferent to this holiday, it is nevertheless an official national holiday which is celebrated at the central level and in numerous locations across the country. Marches of Soviet veterans are attended not only by the veterans themselves and their families but also by local residents and young Israeli army soldiers of different ethnic origins. Compared to the beginning of the 1990s, this is a major change suggesting that although the Russian-speaking Israelis do not form a group which could effectively impact the state's policy in a coordinated way (see further), in historical issues their political representation has proved relatively successful.

Alongside this, it should be emphasised that although the processes discussed above are a result of grassroots efforts by the 'Russian street' and a manifestation of its genuine beliefs, they are happening with Moscow's

[96] See '75 годовщина победы над фашистской Германией…', *op. cit.*

full approval. The fact that the Soviet-Russian World War II narrative is gaining ground in Israel provides additional legitimacy to Russia's own historical policy. Russian officials say with great satisfaction that unlike in Eastern European states, where monuments to the Red Army are being removed, in Israel new ones are being built. This creates a unique synergy between the grassroots actions carried out by Russian-speaking citizens and the Kremlin's deliberate historical strategy. The fact that Moscow is not only actively supporting this group but also trying to use it as a tool to promote its own historical policy has been confirmed – both by individuals who are critical of Russia[97] and by those who support Russia and its vision of the past, but are opposed to being treated as the enforcers of another state's political initiatives.[98]

By making 'concessions' to the Soviet-Russian culture of remembrance, the Israeli leadership is hoping to satisfy an important portion of their electorate and win favour with Moscow (which is necessary in the context of the situation in the Middle East). Examples of such situations included Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin joint unveiling of the huge monuments commemorating the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany (in 2012 in Netanya) and the victims of the siege of Leningrad (in January 2020), and the Israeli Prime Minister's participation in the Victory Parade in Moscow in 2018 as one of the two foreign guests present (the other was Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić). The Russian oligarchs holding Israeli citizenship discussed earlier in this text are the link between the two states in the field of historical policy, and have also sponsored numerous initiatives to promote the Kremlin's World War II narrative.[99]

97 S. Weinglass, S. Sokol, 'Meet the Jewish activists who want Israel to support Ukraine against Russia', The Times of Israel, 13 April 2020, timesofisrael.com.

98 See e.g. Э. Шлеймович, '«Российскими соотечественниками» в Израиле управляет Кремль', Детали, 8 October 2020, detaly.co.il.

99 One of them, German Zakharev, was the *spiritus movens* behind the introduction in 2014 of Victory Day to the Jewish liturgical calendar as the Day of Salvation and Liberation celebrated on 26 Iyar. The Kremlin is now taking advantage of this fact. See 'Greetings on 26 Iyar, Day of Salvation and Liberation', President of Russia, 19 May 2020, en.kremlin.ru.

5. Political views and impact on the state's political life

The arrival in Israel of hundreds of thousands of new citizens from the former USSR, whose votes could translate into between 12 and 20 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, have had a decisive impact on Israeli political life and its political scene. Contrary to popular belief that the Russian-speaking electorate has an inherently right-wing orientation, this group did not show any consistent electoral behaviour for a long time after its arrival. As a consequence, at the turn of the 2000s the 'Russian vote' kept shifting between the left-wing Labour Party, the right-wing Likud and the centrist Kadima. Much indicates that the 'Russian vote' contributed to the electoral victories of Yitzhak Rabin in 1992, Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, Ehud Barak in 1999, and Ariel Sharon in 2001 and 2003.[100] This fluctuation was not due to this group's changing political views. It was caused by the fact that each campaign was dominated by a different set of issues (in 1992 these involved social affairs, in 1996 foreign policy and security, in 1999 the relationship between the state and religion, in 2001 again foreign policy and security, etc.); the Russian-speaking voters chose to support the particular party whose agenda was ideologically closest to their own views on specific issues.

Following the period in which the 'Russian vote' had been fluctuating between the left and the right, at the beginning of the twenty-first century most of the 750,000–800,000 new voters permanently switched to support the parties of the right-wing bloc; this has contributed greatly to the hegemony of the right that has been ongoing for almost 20 years.

The views of a major portion (around 70–80%) of the Russian-speaking electorate can be described as various shades of secular nationalism filtered through their (post-)Soviet cultural background.[101] A voter whose

[100] See A. Mazin, 'Russian Immigrants in Israeli Politics: The Past, the Recent Elections and the Near Future', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Israel, 2006, library.fes.de.

[101] One example of a combination of Israeli patriotism with a unique Soviet aesthetic taste and grandiloquence is the song 'Иерусалим' by the Russian bard Alexander Rozenbaum, which he wrote for the Israel Our Home party.

roots lie in the 1990s *aliyah* stereotypically supports the view that the state should be strong and should defend its national interest, regardless of any external criticism. They have patriarchal views on social norms and are suspicious of terms such as 'liberalism', 'tolerance', 'pluralism' and 'human rights'. They have a hostile attitude towards (or at least are distrustful) not only of Palestinians but also Arab Israelis. They also have a sceptical attitude towards Israeli citizens from the Middle East and Ethiopia. They are also strongly opposed to ultra-Orthodox Jews 'tyrannising' the country and increasing their impact on public life.

Obviously this description is a great oversimplification, and should not be viewed as a precise and exhaustive illustration of the political views of almost a million individuals. However, according to liberal Israeli commentators, the arrival of immigrants from the former USSR – who (allegedly) were used to authoritarian rule and great-power chauvinism, and had little understanding of the principles of liberal democracy – served as a catalyst for the anti-liberal and ethnocentric turn that has occurred in Israeli public discourse over the last two decades.[102] However, it is difficult to assess whether these 'Russian' voters were a decisive factor in this process, or whether they simply were an element of a broader social trend.

Paradoxically, many Russian-speaking Israelis argue that their social group – which is secular, nationalistic and attached to European culture – is closer to the roots of the Zionist movement than Israel is in its present form (i.e. a country in which immigrants from the Middle East, ultra-Orthodox Jews and post-national liberals play prominent roles). In this situation, the 'Russian street' views itself as a guardian of secular national values. Back in 1996, Yuri Stern, a member of the Knesset said: "We, the Russian Jews, founded the State of Israel. Now we are back to fix it".[103]

102 See e.g. D. Shumski, 'ולדימיר זאב פוטין', Haaretz, 23 November 2011, haaretz.co.il.
103 Quoted after L. Galili, *The other tribe...*, *op. cit.*

Another change that was triggered by the arrival of the immigrants from the former USSR involved the emergence of political parties targeting this electorate. Previous attempts to form such parties in the 1980s and at the start of the 1990s had failed.[104] 1996 saw the first success for a 'Russian' party: it involved the centrist Yisrael BaAliya party (or 'Israel on the up'; the name is an untranslatable pun based on the word '*aliyah*'), led by Natan Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein, which won seven seats in the Knesset. In its election campaign, it mainly emphasised everyday problems and the difficulties the new citizens encountered in adapting to life in Israel. However, the party's leaders were not representatives of the 1990s *aliyah* (although they had been residing in Israel for just a decade), but in fact were legendary *otkazniks* and 'prisoners of Zion', i.e. individuals who were much more strongly attached to the Zionist idea than most of their voters. Yisrael BaAliya existed until 2003. Although it joined two governments (the Barak government and the Sharon government) over that period, and Sharansky held posts which potentially enabled him to fix many important issues relating to his electorate (he served as minister of internal affairs and minister of housing & construction), overall its voters viewed this party's achievements with disappointment.

1999 saw the creation of another 'Russian' party, Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home, mostly known under its Russian acronym NDI) led by Avigdor Lieberman (see footnote 14), which still exists. This secular nationalist party has become known for its highly aggressive, or even racist, rhetoric targeting Palestinians and Arab Israelis. At present, it is focused on criticising the increasing influence of Jewish ultra-Orthodox parties. Since the beginning, Lieberman has positioned himself as an uncompromising defender of the Russian-speaking population. This political platform has contributed to NDI securing itself a permanent place on the Israeli political scene and gaining the status of the party of choice for a major

[104] These include the Samekh party, formed by the former Soviet dissident Eduard Kuznetsov, and the DA (Democracy and Aliyah) party established in 1992 by Yuli Kosharovsky, another well-known *otkaznik*, which ceased to exist in the same year having won less than 0.5% of votes in parliamentary elections.

portion of the post-Soviet electorate (although it should be noted that the size of this group has been gradually diminishing as its members get older).

With the exception of the 2009 election, when NDI won 15 seats (in the 120-seat Knesset) and became the third-largest parliamentary grouping, its representation usually amounts to 5–8 deputies. Based on these figures, this party should be viewed as a small or medium-sized party. However, in Israeli democracy, in which government coalitions are principally composed of many parties and parliamentary majorities frequently depend on just a handful of MPs, NDI has repeatedly tipped the balance. As a consequence, in 2003–2018 Lieberman served as minister in five consecutive governments, including as foreign minister and defence minister. In November 2018, NDI's exit from the Netanyahu government triggered a political crisis which resulted in four parliamentary elections being held over slightly more than two years.

At the same time, regardless of his competence, Lieberman came under criticism from representatives of the Russian-speaking population who argue that, just like Sharansky, he is more interested in central-level politics and his own career than in solving specific problems affecting his electorate. This criticism seems justified. Moreover, it demonstrates that the 'Russian' parties in Israel are not sectoral parties, as is typical of Israel's parliamentary system.[105] Unlike for example the ultra-Orthodox parties, which view the meeting of their electorate's very specific demands (both financial and political) as the only criterion impacting on their support for the government, NDI positions itself as a party representing Russian-speaking Israelis, but it does not focus on acting on behalf of this group alone, and does not treat its interests as its priority during political negotiations.

[105] Sectoral parties are a phenomenon typical of the Israeli political scene. This is political parties are formed in order to win the votes of and mainly (or exclusively) represent the interests of a specific group (such as the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Jews, in the case of the Shas party).

When summing up and assessing the genuine influence and importance of the Russian-speaking electorate, the following facts should be considered:

1. At present (in 2021), the potential combined 'Russian' voting power is estimated at around 15–16 seats, or 12% of all the seats in the Knesset.[106]

2. Average voter turnout recorded for Russian-speaking voters is lower than that recorded for Israeli society as a whole (around 60%, compared to around 70%).

3. In the 2019–20 electoral season (which included three consecutive parliamentary elections) the 'Russian' electorate voted for NDI (5–6 seats), Likud (4–4.5), Blue and White (2.5), religious-national parties (one seat combined), left-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties (half a seat each).[107]

4. Since the end of the 2000s, there has been a consecutive decrease in the number of Russian-speaking members of the Knesset. The biggest number (16) was recorded in the 2006–9 term, whereas the Knesset elected in March 2021 has a mere eight Russian-speaking members, accounting for less than 7% of its line-up.

5. Out of these eight members of the Knesset, only three can be considered as prominent representatives of their respective political camps. These are Yuli Edelstein (Likud), Ze'ev Elkin (New Hope) and Avigdor Lieberman (NDI). The former two position themselves as central-level politicians; they do not emphasise their 'Russianness' and – unlike most members of the 'Russian' electorate – are openly religious. The other five – three from NDI and two from Yesh Atid – are less prominent figures who are mainly known to members of

106 В. (З.) Ханин, 'Русскоязычные израильтяне на выборах в Кнессет в 2019 и 2020 гг.', Институт Ближнего Востока, 21 March 2020, iimes.ru.
107 *Ibid.*

their community.[108] The Russian-speaking members of the Knesset include five individuals born in Ukraine, two in Russia and one in Moldova.

6. In matters of major importance to the 'Russian street' (such as the introduction of civil marriages), these members of the Knesset are not unanimous, and vote in line with their specific party's agenda.

To sum up, it can be said that the Russian-speaking electorate does not form a homogenous group of voters, and its support is split between several (albeit mainly right-wing) political forces. The 'Russian' NDI has the highest level of support and garners around 40% of this group's votes. The remaining portion is split between nationwide parties, mainly Likud, even though most of these parties do not pay any particular attention to this voter group.

The size and influence of the 'Russian' Israelis' parliamentary representation are much smaller than this group's statistical potential. This results from its lower electoral mobilisation, vote dispersion, and – as it seems – increasingly weak conviction that it has its special interests which are different from the interests of the rest of society, and that it should therefore necessarily be represented by Russian-speaking politicians. This means that in the political sense the newcomers from the former USSR do not form an influence/interest group that could encourage politicians to solicit its votes and which is capable of deliberately impacting the state's policy. Occasionally, this group is considered important from the point of view of parliamentary arithmetic, which results in politicians showing interest in it, preparing campaign materials in Russian and including Russian-speaking candidates (frequently selected at random) on their electoral lists.

[108] A full list of Russian-speaking members of the Knesset alongside short biographies of each of them is available in the article '«Русский» голос в кнессете станет тише: обидные потери и новые имена', Вести, 26 March 2021, vesty.co.il.

On the other hand, at the local level (in particular in those locations with a large proportion of immigrants from post-Soviet states) this group has a broad representation: for example many cities (including Haifa and Ashkelon) have Russian-speaking deputy mayors.

6. The unresolved problems of 'Russian' Israel

In Israel, there are numerous problems affecting Russian-speaking citizens specifically. Finding solutions to these problems has been a permanent and still unmet demand of this electorate. The most important issues include pensions, marriage procedures and the impact of religion on society.

Pensions

In Israel, pensions are composed of two elements: a state-funded old-age pension of a fixed amount paid to every citizen upon reaching retirement age (at present it is 62 years for women and 67 years for men), and a pension from a privately-funded scheme. As many immigrants from the former USSR were no longer young upon their arrival in Israel, had spent a major portion of their professional life in another country, and had problems finding a legal job (or any job) in their new homeland, the situation of this group of pensioners has often been much worse than that of other pensioners. A mere 13% of pensioners representing the 1990s *aliyah* receive a private pension, and on average the amount they receive is nine times lower than the amount paid to an average Israeli; in 2018, these amounts were 277 shekels (around US$80) and 2477 shekels (around US$740) respectively. The remaining 87% (around 150,000 individuals) receive the state-funded pension alone. Considering that most of them have no savings and almost half of them (70,000) live in rented flats, their living standards are often very low.[109]

[109] Data after 'Нищета «русских» пенсионеров: цифры и факты', Детали, 7 October 2020, detaly.co.il.

In this context, representatives of the Russian-speaking population are outraged by the fact that this group of financially disadvantaged pensioners includes numerous Holocaust survivors who came to Israel in the 1970s and 1990s, but are ineligible for the compensation paid to victims of Nazi crimes as stipulated in two laws enacted back in the 1950s, due to the time limits specified therein.[110] The newcomers from the former USSR account for around 36% of the c. 190,000 Holocaust survivors resident in Israel,[111] and at the same time they account for the vast majority of Holocaust survivors living in poverty.

Marriage

As mentioned above, Israeli citizens include several hundred thousand individuals who are not Jews from the point of view of Jewish religious law, meaning that they cannot get married in a ceremony performed by a rabbi, and the institution of civil marriage is non-existent in Israel (although civil marriages entered into in another country are recognised). As a consequence, many Russian-speaking immigrants are forced to get married outside Israel and to apply to the Israeli Interior Ministry, which is strongly influenced by Sephardic ultra-Orthodox Jews, to have their marriages registered. At present, this group's situation has been additionally aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions regarding international travel. Before the pandemic, popular 'marriage tourism' destinations included Cyprus, the Czech Republic (Prague) and Bulgaria. Couples who could not or did not want to leave Israel can get married in Paraguay, where marriage can be entered into when only one spouse is present, or in El Salvador, where proxy marriage ceremonies can be performed in absentia for both spouses.

[110] E. Schwartz, *Holocaust Survivors Living in Israel. Data and Characteristics*, the Knesset, Research and Information Center, 20 January 2014, knesset.gov.il.
[111] D.R. Edmunds, 'There are 192,000 Holocaust survivors living in Israel', The Jerusalem Post, 18 January 2020, jpost.com.

The situation in which so many citizens, who have otherwise fulfilled their civic duties including military service, are not allowed to get legally married in their own state, is a frequent problem raised by the 'Russian street'. However, it seems that due to consistent opposition from ultra-Orthodox parties, which over the last two decades have been a key element of almost all the government coalitions, the initiatives calling for the introduction of civil marriage to the national legal system have so far been unsuccessful, and the situation will likely remain unchanged.

Opposition to 'religious diktat': the example of the Sabbath

Most of the Russian-speaking population view themselves as secular (50–60%) or atheist (12–17%).[112] As a consequence, any decisions and regulations that they interpret as an attempt to impose a religious lifestyle on them provoke their outrage. For example, this relates to whether shops, cinemas, public transportation etc. can operate during the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was officially recognised as a day of rest under a compromise between secular Zionist movement and religious parties in the early stages of Israeli statehood. However, there is no clear legal definition of the Sabbath in its practical and secular rather than religious aspect. Similarly, there is no legal definition of the activities that are allowed during the Sabbath. The issues relating to the Sabbath were only regulated in the 1951 Hours of Work and Rest Law, and in the 1991 Transport Regulation and in regulations introduced by local authorities. As a consequence, the scope of activities that are permissible during the Sabbath may vary in different locations, depending on the composition of the local population and on the views of the local politicians. Alongside this, the increasing political significance over the last two decades of the ultra-Orthodox parties, which are working to have strict Sabbath

[112] В. (З.) Ханин, 'Религиозная идентичность выходцев из бывшего СССР в Израиле', in *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом* 2015, no. 3 (33), p. 266.

restrictions imposed nationwide, has translated into the local authorities' freedom to act being significantly limited.[113]

As mentioned earlier, this trend has provoked major dissatisfaction on the part of the Russian-speaking population, and matters relating to trade and transport restrictions during the Sabbath and to the need to stop the 'tyranny' of ultra-Orthodox Jews are important factors determining this group's political choices.

7. Attitudes towards Russia and their impact on foreign policy

Although some immigrants continue to hold Russian citizenship,[114] they should not be viewed as Russians residing in Israel but (as mentioned above) a unique category of Israelis who have maintained their links with the Russian culture and language. Their attitude to their country of origin (in this case Russia) is varied: some experienced anti-Semitism prior to their emigration to Israel and have negative memories,[115] whereas many of those who left Russia for economic reasons have a neutral or even a positive attitude to it.

It is difficult to reliably assess the proportion of individuals who have a positive image of Russia and those with a negative one. The results of an opinion poll conducted in 2015, in which Russian-speaking respondents were asked what stance the State of Israel should adopt towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in eastern Ukraine, provide a hint. 4% of

[113] See S. Friedman, G. Wiener, 'Shabbat in the City', The Israel Democracy Institute, 18 October 2018, idi.org.il.

[114] According to data compiled by the Russian embassy, in 2018 153,000 Russian citizens resided in Israel. It is difficult to determine how many of them have Israeli citizenship, but it is most likely that the majority of them do. See А. Зарубин, 'Выборы президента России состоятся на 14 избирательных участках в Израиле', Федеральное агентство новостей, 15 March 2018, riafan.ru.

[115] 'Member of Knesset Ksenia Svetlova tells the story of her Aliyah', the Knesset, 2 October 2018, youtube.com.

the respondents said that Israel should support Russia, 6% that it should support Ukraine, 13% supported the Russian side in this conflict but argued that Israel should remain neutral, 27% supported the Ukrainian side and said that Israel should remain neutral, and around 50% had no positive feelings for either Russia or Ukraine, or had no opinion on the issue.[116] Interestingly, even among former residents of Russia more respondents supported Kyiv (23%) than Moscow (17%).

A poll entitled 'Israel, its friends and enemies' conducted in 2016 by newsru.co.il, one of the most popular Russian-language news portals, gave similar results. Out of more than 4400 respondents, 27% said that their attitude towards Russia was positive, 43% negative, and 28% neutral. In the 'friend/enemy' category, 10% of the respondents considered Russia Israel's friend, 32% its enemy, and 56% selected the response of 'neither a friend nor an enemy'.[117]

Another indicator of the Russian-speaking Israelis' diverse attitudes towards Russia was a failed social campaign 'Я русский израильтянин' ('I am a Russian Israeli') launched in 2017. The campaign was targeted at immigrants from the former USSR, and was intended to boost their collective identity by emphasising their common features such as language, cuisine, tradition and culture. The campaign's slogan was 'I am a Russian Israeli and I am proud of it'.[118] Despite the campaign organisers' declarations that the word 'Russian' was intended as a reference to the Russian language and culture rather than to the Russian state, the initiative sparked major controversy and fierce criticism. The critics argued that they were Jews and Israelis alone, and strongly distanced themselves from any links with Russia. A hashtag #янерусский ('I am not Russian') began to circulate on social media. In response, the organisers first

116 М. Гольд, 'Израиль. Между «украми» и «колорадами»', Зеркало недели. Украина, 6 November 2015, zn.ua.
117 '«Израиль, его друзья и враги». Итоги опроса', 20 April 2016, newsru.co.il.
118 See 'Я – русский израильтянин (проект 9 канала Израильского ТВ)', 25 October 2017, youtube.com.

changed the campaign's title to 'I am a Russian-speaking Israeli' and then abandoned it altogether.

Although the sources (in particular the results of the on-line survey) and the situations discussed above should be taken with a grain of salt, it seems that they all lead to similar conclusions. Firstly, they indicate that Russian-speaking Israeli citizens are Israelis first (50% of them supported neither Russia nor Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict). Secondly, they suggest that only a small minority of these individuals hold pro-Russian views; and thirdly, they draw attention to the fact that a portion of the 'Russian street' nevertheless does indeed support Moscow and its present policy, and tends to represent the Russian point of view. As a consequence, what emerges is a unique combination of Israeli patriotism and Russian imperialism.[119] At the same time, the fact that a portion of Israeli society has pro-Russian views has only a minor impact on the attitude of society as a whole. The vast majority of Israelis have a negative attitude towards Russia (although at the same time they believe that a good relationship with Russia is important from the point of view of Israel's security).[120]

In addition, the pro-Russian group has no decisive influence on Jerusalem's official policy towards Moscow. However, it should be admitted that Russian matters tend to emerge during electoral campaigns. On such occasions, Netanyahu pays a visit to the Kremlin and ostentatiously demonstrates his good relations with President Putin. Ahead of the 2019 election, Russia handed over to Israel the body of an Israeli soldier who had gone missing in Lebanon in 1982, which gave the Israeli PM a much-needed PR boost. However, these facts are not in themselves sufficiently important to affect the state's policy.

[119] One prominent example of these views is Yaakov Kedmi, the Moscow-born former head of Israel's Nativ service (in 1992–9), a figure well-known to the Russian-speaking population. He has vehemently supported Russia's expansionist policy and President Putin in his public statements in both Russian and Israeli media.

[120] О. Кузнецова, 'Отношение к России скорее отрицательное', Коммерсантъ, 6 August 2015, kommersant.ru.

Jerusalem's attitude towards Moscow is mainly determined by issues relating to regional security. Especially since 2015, when Russia became actively involved in the Syrian civil war and assumed the role of playmaker in this conflict, Israel has begun to view good relations with Moscow as a priority issue. The Israeli leadership believes that these relations should be sufficiently friendly to enable it to operate relatively freely in Syrian airspace and to neutralise the threats posed by Iran and its allies. All the pro-Russian gestures the Israeli government has made in recent years – including avoiding the adoption of a clear stance on Crimea's annexation and the fact that in 2020 in Jerusalem celebrations commemorating the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz were organised with Putin's convenience in mind – should be interpreted primarily in the context of Moscow's rising importance in the Middle East. The intensive interpersonal, cultural, business and religious contacts between the two states, which on the one hand result from the presence of more than a million Russian-speaking citizens in Israel, and on the other from the fact that Russia has the world's sixth-largest Jewish diaspora (around 170,000 individuals)[121], provides the basic infrastructure for bilateral relations, creates a positive atmosphere, and can potentially be used as a screen/justification for specific formats of bilateral cooperation. However, they do not determine the two partners' policies in any way.

[121] S. DellaPergola, *World Jewish Population, 2018*, Berman Jewish DataBank, 2018, jewishdatabank.org.

CLOSING REMARKS

Since the 1990s, more than a million immigrants from the former USSR have arrived in Israel. This group has irreversibly changed the country by contributing to a surge in its Jewish demographic potential (which enabled Israel to maintain the security of the Jewish population outnumbering the Arab minority) and by giving a strong impetus to the development of the Israeli economy (due to both the influx of workforce and the excellent qualifications of many immigrants). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 'Russian' voice had a decisive impact on the results of the most important parliamentary elections. Moreover, it has sealed the ongoing domination of right-wing parties on the political scene and in public debate. The influx of immigrants from the former USSR has contributed to the emergence, for the first time in Israel's history, of a large non-Hebrew-speaking subculture or cultural enclave (excluding the Arab population) with its own institutions, respected figures and hierarchies. In addition, it has left its mark on the state's historical policy, contributed new norms and customs to its cultural mosaic, and initiated certain previously absent social phenomena: for example, it has resulted in the emergence of a large group of Israeli citizens who are not Jews in the religious sense of this word.

At the same time, it is striking that despite its size, strong identity and ability to self-organise, the Russian-speaking population is relatively weak when it comes to agency and political impact. Not only has the 'Russian street' failed to work out an agenda that could unite it and enable it to effectively influence the country's life in both its domestic and external aspect, but it has also proved unable to trigger reforms it considers important, such as the introduction of civil marriage into the Israeli legal system. This group's emergence has boosted several political and ideological currents, mainly the nationalist-secularist one, but it has not initiated any new trends on its own, and is not a driving force in any of the existing trends. Simply put, the Russian-speaking Israelis have become involved and have adopted stances in disputes which

would likely have arisen anyway. This suggests that despite its uniqueness, this group does not view itself as a population that is permanently different from the rest of society, or as one that has a special political interest different from the interests of Israel's other citizens.

Demographic processes (mixed marriages, new generations being born on Israeli soil, older people born in the former USSR dying off), combined with the increasing integration of Russian-speaking Israelis into the mainstream of society, will lead to this uniqueness gradually dwindling, including in the political context.

MAREK MATUSIAK

Work on the text was finished in May 2021.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The impact of the Russian-language information space on Israel's Russian-speaking population based on the example of the vaccine-sceptic movement

Many Russian-speaking Israelis follow the Russian media outlets and use Russian social media (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, LiveJournal, the Telegram social network channels) and other Russian Internet resources (e.g. the yandex.ru search engine, the mail.ru e-mail service). No exact and recent figures are available on this subject. A survey conducted back in 2013 among representatives of this group showed that 'foreign Russian-language TV channels' (in practice mainly those originating in Russia) were watched by around half of the respondents, and around 20% of them considered these channels to be their main news sources.[122] A survey conducted in 2017 on the newsru.co.il website brought similar results, although the corresponding figures were lower: 44% of those surveyed said that they watched Russian television.[123] As regards social media, according to 2018 data, the VKontakte social network is used on a regular basis by 3.8% of Israel's Internet users, i.e. around 250,000 individuals.[124] These figures suggest that a significant portion of Russian-speaking Israelis has permanent contact with the Russian information space. However, over the last 30 years, there have been no indications that Russian media outlets and social networks have had a significant, large-scale impact on this group's social and political behaviour.

It seems that one exception to this rule involves the attitude of Russian-speaking Israelis towards the vaccination campaign carried out in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Several independent studies

[122] See В. (З.) Ханин, *«Третий Израиль»...*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
[123] 'Телевизионные привычки русскоязычных израильтян. Итоги опроса', 10 October 2017, newsru.co.il.
[124] See 'Израиль занимает топовые места по использованию смартфонов и соцсетей', IPayLess, ipayless.co.il.

have shown that vaccination refusal rate recorded for immigrants from the former USSR is among the highest for all social groups living in Israel who refuse to be vaccinated. For example, according to a study conducted in January 2021 by the Social Policy Institute at Washington University in Saint Louis, up to 49% of unvaccinated Russian-speaking Israelis did not intend to have themselves vaccinated. Only for the Arab population living in Israel (51%) recorded a higher proportion. Even the Jewish ultra-Orthodox community, whose representatives have largely ignored pandemic restrictions and are distrustful of state administration bodies, had a lower rate of refusal (41%).[125] Other studies have confirmed that representatives of the 'Russian street' have serious doubts regarding vaccines.[126] Their fears were so evident that Israel Our Home tried to take advantage of the situation during the campaign ahead of the parliamentary elections in March 2021. Speaking in public, its representatives expressed doubts about the vaccines' safety and efficacy, and protested against the (non-existent) plans to make vaccination compulsory.

Despite the fact that there is no compelling evidence to support this thesis, there are many indications that one of the most important factors determining high vaccine hesitancy rate among 'Russian' Israelis, which was found to be exceptionally high compared to other groups making up the Jewish section of Israeli society, involved the effect of the Russian information space. The Russian media regularly featured programmes questioning the safety and efficacy of vaccines other than Sputnik V, and the Russian internet hosted intensive anti-vaccination campaigns.

[125] 'Fear of safety and mistrust cause vaccine hesitancy in Israel', Social Policy Institute, the Washington University in St. Louis, 26 February 2021, socialpolicyinstitute.wustl.edu.

[126] T. Heruti-Sover, R. Linder, 'יש שלוש קבוצות של ישראלים שחוששים מהחיסון. איך אפשר לשנות את התמונה?', The Marker, 11 February 2021, themarker.com; '«Русскоязычные в Израиле боятся прививок из-за недоработки минздрава»', Вести, 11 February 2021, vesty.co.il.

The fact that this effect exists has been hinted at for example by representatives of the Israeli health care system,[127] the former member of the Knesset Ksenia Svetlova,[128] as well as journalists and columnists popular with the 'Russian street'.[129] A TV interview with a man who explicitly blamed Russian propaganda for the death of his grandfather, an 80-year--old immigrant from the former USSR who consistently refused to take the vaccine after watching and listening to Russian media, got a great deal of publicity in the Russian-speaking population.[130]

[127] M. Yasur, 'עלייה בהתחסנות במגזר הרוסי', Israel Hayom, 9 March 2021, israelhayom.co.il.

[128] 'Why Israeli Russian Politicians Are Flirting With the Anti-vax Vote', Haaretz, 18 February 2021, haaretz.com.

[129] See e.g. 'Почему «русские» израильтяне боятся делать вакцину от COVID-19', Iton TV, 17 February 2021, youtube.com.

[130] 'Внук в Израиле: дедушка наслушался российской пропаганды и умер от коронавируса', Вести, 14 February 2021, vesty.co.il.

Appendix 2. The impact of the war in Ukraine on post-Soviet Jews and the Russian-speaking population in Israel

Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has become a catalyst for disintegration processes within the community of post-Soviet Jews. Jewish communities living in the two warring states (or at least their prominent public representatives) have supported the stance adopted by their respective state authorities.[131] In this context Yosyf Zisels, head of the Association of Jewish Organisations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD), said in June 2014: "[Since the breakup of the USSR] we have increasingly become Ukrainian Jews, and they – Russian Jews".[132]

The differing stances on the war have resulted not only in increased distance between the Jewish communities of the two states, but also in open conflicts among both secular activists and prominent religious figures.[133] A Ukrainian-born Israeli journalist has written: "The conflict over Crimea, followed by the war in the Donbas, has created a rift valley between many former friends – Jews from Kyiv and from Moscow [...]. They may pray together, but Jews from Kyiv and Dnipro will most likely view those from Moscow and Saint Petersburg as representatives of the aggressor country".[134]

This conflict was also evident at the organisational level. In 2018, the VAAD of Ukraine left the EAJC, having accused its new president Mikhail Mirilashvili of a pro-Kremlin orientation.[135] In the EAJC, the VAAD was replaced with the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress led by Vadym Rabinovych, a pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician.

[131] O. Bagno-Moldavsky, 'The Jewish Diaspora and the Russo-Ukrainian Crisis', *Russie. Nei.Vissions*, no. 83, March 2015, IFRI, ifri.org.
[132] 'Евреи России поддерживают Путина', Iton TV, 17 June 2014, youtube.com.
[133] S. Sokol, 'When Russia invaded Ukraine, the countries' rabbis also went to war', The Times of Israel, 6 July 2019, timesofisrael.com.
[134] Ш. Бриман, 'Раввины Украины: борьба за влияние', 5781 Еврейский журнал, 3 June 2019, jewishmagazine.ru.
[135] Э. Шлеймович, 'Евро-Азиатский еврейский конгресс становится более пророссийским', VAAD of Ukraine, May 2018, vaadua.org.

Similar conflicts have emerged in the Russian-speaking populations living in the US and in Israel; a specific person's native region in the former USSR and the towns and cities where they still have relatives and friends have begun to influence their attitude towards the war, and how other people perceive them.[136] However, the 2015 opinion poll discussed above indicated that although for half of the immigrants living in Israel the war in Ukraine was not an issue of major importance and that they had no specific views on it, the remaining 50% clearly supported one of the warring states (33% supported Ukraine and 17% supported Russia). In this situation, publicly revealing one's views – e.g. in conversation, on social media or on internet forums – may provoke conflicts[137] and facilitate the process of a given group adopting the confrontational language used by the two states' propaganda.[138] There have been reports of isolated acts of vandalism targeting public figures who have expressed pro-Ukrainian views.[139]

[136] For example, during a debate ahead of the March 2021 election, organised by the Israeli Russian-language Iton TV online channel, one of the participants sarcastically highlighted the fact that out of all Russian-speaking candidates running for a seat in the Knesset, only three were born in Russia and the majority of them came from Ukraine, and that should they be elected, they would need to be referred to as 'Ukrainian members of the Knesset' rather than 'Russians'. See 'За тех ли русских голосуют русские?', Iton TV, 21 March 2021, youtube.com.

[137] For more see L. Fialkova, M. Yelenevskaya, 'The Crisis in Ukraine and the Split of Identity in the Russian-Speaking World', *Folklorica* 2015, Vol. XIX, academia.edu.

[138] М. Гольд, 'Израиль. Между «украми» и «колорадами»', *op. cit.*

[139] See for example S. Sokol, 'Car in Bat Yam allegedly defaced over Ukraine war', The Jerusalem Post, 11 February 2015, jpost.com.