

# THE OTHER TRIBE: ISRAEL'S RUSSIAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY AND HOW IT IS CHANGING THE COUNTRY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The over one million people who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union in a wave from the beginning of the 1990s have changed Israel to its core — socially, politically, economically, and culturally. Within the first six years, they formed what became a large secular nationalist political camp that secures right-wing rule to this day. Experts both in Israel and Russia define the socio-political profile of the first generation of these immigrants as a prototype of “Homo Sovieticus”; its leading political representative, former foreign minister and defense minister Avigdor Lieberman, who heads what is still perceived as the only “Russian” sectarian party, is often seen as a “post-Soviet” leader, void of ideology, promoting an agenda of fear and incitement. Lieberman’s newly adopted anti-Orthodox agenda appeals to the younger Russian-speaking generation and empowers — at present — parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition to his former ally, longstanding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The paper examines the emergence of the younger generation (Generation 1.5) of the Russian-speaking community, now in the process of redefining their political agenda and carving their role in Israeli politics and public sphere. The process can be defined as a transition from being “guests” in a host society to active hosts themselves.

This wave of immigrants finds itself on two unresolved collision courses. First is the unbridgeable gap between the Zionist secular Law of Return that allows all Jews to settle in Israel, and the rabbinical Orthodoxy in charge of their absorption, which defines hundreds of thousands of members of the Russian-speaking community as non-Jews under Halachic law. They become victims of the empowerment of Orthodoxy by the political alliance they formed with Netanyahu. The other collision course, between the Jewish Law of Return and the total denial of Palestinian right of return, is a constant source of friction and animosity between the two communities and their leaders. Both collision courses shape Israeli society and politics, with Netanyahu and Lieberman in particularly using tensions to drive wedges between sectors of the population.

Three decades since the onset of this wave of immigration, there is still a distinct Russian-speaking community, culturally and politically, often misunderstood by veteran Israeli society and politicians. While Israel's shrinking political left continues to perpetuate its detachment from the community, leaving the arena to right-wing indoctrination, gradual changes in the political affiliations of the community can still be detected in recent years. The terms "right" and "left" within the Russian-speaking community differ from their definition in veteran Israeli society, a factor often overlooked by politicians.

The paper underlines the profound differences between this huge wave of immigration and preceding immigrations to Israel, arguing that unlike others, the Russian immigrants never aimed for "absorption," as perceived for decades, but rather for leadership. Some political scientists presume the Russian community will be Israel's future elite.

## INTRODUCTION

The first direct flight from Moscow, carrying 125 new immigrants from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on board, landed in Israel on January 1, 1990. That was the official beginning of what was to become the huge wave of over one million immigrants who were about to change Israel socially, economically, culturally, and politically. This group still deserves special attention as a mostly integrated but still distinct group in Israel. This paper deals with this distinction, its roots, and its impact.

A short remark: Throughout this paper, I will alternate between different terms, universal and specific — the universal "immigrants" and "immigration" and the Israeli terms *olim* and *aliyah*. These latter terms have no equivalent in any language other than Hebrew and are loaded with broader meaning. Both derive from the root meaning "ascension," making the *olim* people who are moving to a spiritually higher level by relocating to the Land of Israel. The very use of this terminology is under debate. Most *olim* feel offended when referred to as just "immigrants." Others, among them Russian-speaking sociologists, claim it is time to normalize the terminology and allow immigration to be just what it is — a complex process, very different from the mythology of elation attached to *aliyah* as the cornerstone of the Zionist ethos<sup>1</sup> — even more so since a huge majority of the post-Soviet Jews were motivated to come to Israel by neither Zionism nor a strong connection to Jewish heritage. In Israeli everyday discourse they are simply referred to as "Russian-speaking," "the Russian street," or simply "Russians," with no distinction between those who arrived from Russia or from any other former Soviet republic. (According to the Jewish Agency, about 400,000 *olim* arrived in Israel both Russia and from Ukraine; plus 42,000 from Georgia and 6,000 from Kyrgyzstan — but all are considered "Russians" in colloquial Hebrew).<sup>2</sup>

After the spectacular Israeli victory in Six-Day War of 1967, there was a limited revival of Zionist and Jewish sentiment among Jews in the Soviet Union. Under domestic and international pressure, especially by American Jewish and human rights organizations, Soviet authorities allowed about 150,000 Jews, mostly troublemaking activists, to leave for Israel. They were ardent Zionists, some religiously-observant Jews in an empire where the only religion was communism. Their personal profile and motivation were very different from those to come in the large immigration of the 1990s, who mostly just wanted out from the collapsed and ailing Soviet empire. These unrecognized differences caused confusion and misconceptions among Israeli leaders — and the Israeli public — who expected a replica of the 1970s immigration. Cooperation between the two groups



of Russian-speaking immigrants played a major role in empowering both, and in the formation of early political structures.

The exodus from the former Soviet Union (FSU) was nurtured by mutual myths. Most of them soon turned into frustration. The initial one came as a shock to Israeli establishment when over 80% of those allowed to leave as early as 1989 — mainly through Vienna as a transit point — chose the United States over Israel. They were welcomed as refugees by the George H.W. Bush administration under the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974. The Israeli establishment, left and right, was outraged. It was not just about prestige, but rather mainly about demography. FSU Jewry was perceived as the most important source for Jewish demographic growth compared to a growing Arab population in Israel and the Palestinian territories. In a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir successfully argued that the amendment did not apply to the FSU Jewry, since “there are no Jewish refugees since the establishment of the State of Israel.”<sup>3</sup>

The gates of America closed, and the emigrants were redirected to Israel only. Both left and right in Israel dismissed the moral issue of freedom of choice and movement by justifying this coercive circumstantial “cruel Zionism.”<sup>4</sup>

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The working assumption of the governing unity coalition in Israel was a wave of 100,000 over the first three years. The coalition’s leaders, Shamir on the right and Shimon Peres on the left, dismissed data presented to them suggesting a much higher number. The only one to take seriously the enormity of the historic event seemed to be Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The late member of Knesset (MK) Israel Hasson, former deputy head of internal Israeli intelligence service, the Shabak (or Shin Bet), which was “in charge” of Arafat, claimed that the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was quick to realize the future impact of this huge wave of immigrants, one of the main reasons he decided to proceed with Oslo Accords before they arrived and changed Israel.<sup>5</sup>

The wave in fact turned into a tsunami when 400,000 immigrants arrived between 1990 and 1993; by 1996, the number of *olim* reached about 600,000.

1996 was a turning point: that was the year the number turned into a critical political mass with the creation of Yisrael B’Aliyah, the first “Russian” sectarian party, headed by Natan Sharansky, the legendary “Prisoner of Zion,” a Soviet dissident imprisoned for Zionist activity. The party was formed out of frustration with what the *olim* saw as failures of absorption, particularly in housing and employment, a sense of humiliation associated with loss of social status many of them held in the Soviet Union, and political outrage at the Oslo Accords signed with the PLO in 1993. The political profile of the *olim* was until then unclear; both the right and left political camps aimed at appropriating them.

The *olim* themselves projected an air of independence and lack of commitment to any political camp. However, in the absence of Zionist roots and detached from Jewish tradition in the secular Soviet Union, they created a large, new, mostly nationalist camp, affiliated with Israeli right wing. Sharansky translated the immediate success of his new party — seven seats, or over 5% of the 120-seat Knesset — into an alliance with the newly elected prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in the first elections after

the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The left made a historic mistake assuming they were the immigrants' natural choice and never made a serious effort to reach out to them. Based on their predominantly Ashkenazi ethnicity and high education, the left just waited for them to join what they considered their exclusive club. To this day, the left has failed to make this effort. The *olim* were — and still are — exposed mainly to right-wing messaging based on fear. A made-in-the-USSR disdain towards minorities was translated in Israel into bigoted attitudes towards Arab citizens.

By objective criteria, the absorption of one million newcomers into a society of then five million veteran Israelis can be defined as success, despite initial hardships in housing and employment. This critical mass of people challenged Israeli society — and it still does — in ways no previous immigration wave did. It was the first *aliyah* — here meaning a wave of *olim* — of a dawning online age, and a belated recognition that the “melting pot” was mostly an illusion.

The main source of aggravation was — and still is — the collision course between the Zionist-secular Jewish Law of Return, based on a broad definition of “who is a Jew,” and the Rabbinical Orthodox laws that govern some aspects of Jewish Israelis' personal lives. 350,000 non-Jews according to the Halachic definition, mostly spouses and children of mixed families, feel humiliated by the state they consider their home. This paper deals with the political and social implications of this persistent sentiment.

The new generation of the *olim* community — sociologically defined as Generation 1.5 — is now in the process of carving out their role in the Israeli political and public spheres. They are fully integrated into Israeli life, yet choose to preserve their social circles and subculture, which is making its way into the mainstream. They have already made a breakthrough into the tight-knit Israeli ethos, making rapid steps from guests in a host society into hosts in their cultural sphere. The political profile of this generation is not yet clear. Unlike the older generation, who split their votes loyally between Netanyahu's party Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), the party of former foreign minister and defense minister Avigdor Lieberman — which is still considered a “Russian” sectarian party — they have no set loyalties. This is a generation that former U.S. President Bill Clinton described a decade ago as an “obstacle to peace”<sup>6</sup> and that Russian President Vladimir Putin sees as a cultural reservoir.<sup>7</sup> While shaping Israel their way, they remain a distinct grouping nurturing both divides and multiculturalism.

## SETTLING IN

Israel was born out of a sense of shared fate among the Jewish people. After decades of statehood, common fate does not suffice, and the new state is now in the search of a mission statement to define its identity and role in the years to come. That might explain the many schisms and growing tensions between what are often referred to as Israeli society's different tribes — secular, Orthodox, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and others. The “Russians” or “Russian street” — terms used in Israel to define immigrants from anywhere in the FSU — form a distinct tribe. In their ethnic identity, they often define themselves as neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi, but rather a third entity. As such, they play a crucial role in the shaping of the Israel-to-be. Thirty years into the onset of this wave of immigration, this community forms a distinct group in every age cohort. Understanding their particular characteristics and needs is therefore vital to better understanding and predicting the country's future politics.

The first encounters in the 1990s between the newcomers and the veteran Israeli society were based on a series of misconceptions. Contrary to myth, not all of veteran Israel was eager to welcome the newcomers. The Orthodox sector doubted their Jewishness, with then-Orthodox Minister of Absorption Yitzhak Peretz (of Shas, a Sephardi-Orthodox party) openly calling to stop this wave of emigration. The same call was issued by Arab citizens of Israel, who were concerned about competition for jobs and housing and afraid of land confiscation to settle the immigrants and drastic change in the political climate.<sup>8</sup> Also unhappy were some among the Sephardi second and third generation, who had just gained a demographic majority and political power. They, like a small representation of Israeli Arabs, sent urgent messages to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to halt the emigration.<sup>9</sup> Segments of the Religious-Zionist movement, particularly the settlers in the occupied territories, were suspicious of the newcomers' commitment to Zionism. The settlers did not want the newcomers to move to their settlements.

Over the years mutual sentiment changed. More Russian speakers moved to settlements open to secular residents. Shlomo Neeman, the current head of the Gush Etzion Regional Council, administering a cluster of rather politically consensual settlements in the West Bank, came to Israel as a child (in 1990) from Birobidzhan in Russia's Jewish Autonomous Oblast in Siberia. Ultimately, only a minority of the immigrants, most of whom were urban by nature, chose the settler life. Even those Russian-speaking *olim* who did move to settlements choose to live mainly in the urban-style settlements around Jerusalem, like Ma'ale Adumim or Ariel. Ariel University Center of Samaria, previously a public college, was the first academic institution to absorb high numbers of Russian-speaking academics. The motivation of the institution, located in the West Bank, was mainly political, but it paid off to both sides. Contrary to Russia's official anti-occupation policy, Russian-speaking academics from Ariel have close working relations and publications with colleagues in Russia.

Warm welcomes were mostly reserved to the ruling elite, who saw the immigrants as making up a significant addition to Israel's Jewish demographic, and to those among the Ashkenazi elite who were terrified by what they saw as Levantization of the country.

This immigration was different. The numbers soon turned into a critical mass translated into patterns unknown to Israelis from former waves of immigration. This was also the first wave of immigration to occur in the new era of the internet and, later, social media. Previously, immigrants were forced to cut all ties with their countries of origin and become "Israelis." The critical mass of people allowed these *olim* the freedom to set their own pace of integration. A few years into the mass *aliyah*, every third or fourth resident spoke Russian in towns like Ashdod in southern Israel or Upper Nazareth in the northern Galilee region. Russian speakers had their own media, contacts with the people and culture they left behind, higher average levels of education, and the diligence of immigrants in need. These people survived the Soviet Union, lived through perestroika, and witnessed the collapse of their empire. Many had belonged to the intelligentsia in the FSU, and one major source of frustration in Israel was the immediate loss of status.

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The more ideological and Zionist Russian-speaking immigrants of the 1970s facilitated the hardships of absorption. They set the infrastructure for the creation of a cultural-ethnic enclave and the rapid formation of “Russian Israel,” constantly changing but still very much alive. That was — and still is — the very basis of “Russian” sectarian parties. Thirty years into the “great *aliyah*,” most *olim*, the younger generation included, believe a “Russian Israel” and “Russian street” still exists, and an overwhelming majority supports some kind of communal representation — be it a “Russian party with an Israeli accent” or “nationwide party with a strong ‘Russian’ wing.”<sup>10</sup> The socio-cultural enclave remains a separate political constituency, often overlooked by parties and politicians. The often-patronizing attitude of Russian-speaking elites towards Israeli culture was best put on the Hebrew-language satirical TV show “Eretz Nehederet,” or “Wonderful Country.” Responding to some domestic development, the comedian portraying Avigdor Lieberman categorically stated: “this is not why we came here 15 years ago and founded the state.” The year was 2011, 63 years after the founding of the State of Israel.



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These variations on the theme of ethnicity and citizenship are embedded in the Soviet socio-political culture. Republics in the Soviet Union were based on a linkage between the indigenous nation and its ethnic territory. Minorities were considered “lower class.”

Coming to Israel, Russian immigrants realized that for the first time they are no longer “Natzmen” — members of an ethnic minority — but rather part of the Jewish majority in a land of their own.<sup>11</sup> As such, in the words of the late MK Yuri Stern, of the Yisrael B’Aliyah and later Yisrael Beiteinu parties, they came ready to contribute the inner power they gained in a long struggle as a minority to the empowerment of the Jewish nation-state. These are the roots of the Russian-speaking community’s often misunderstood nationalism.

The attempt to attribute the ideology and political conduct of the immigrants to their Soviet legacy and the post-Soviet experience is a controversial issue among sociologists. Dmitri Shumsky, one of the most prominent voices of the small “Russian left” and a 1990 immigrant from the Ukraine, tends to attribute the ills of Russian politics in Israel to the imported Soviet legacy. In a 2011 op-ed in Haaretz titled “Vladimir Ze’ev Putin,” he argues that the made-in-Israel anti-democratic legislation could not have reached that level without the reinforcement coming from FSU legislators “who proudly carry the post-Soviet legacy in Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Sociologist Julia Lerner rejects this deterministic approach and suggests one focused more on agency. She argues that the perceptions of the immigrant-collective are not necessarily the product of imported “cultural baggage,” but rather the product of encounters with a different social and cultural system.<sup>13</sup> One of the most immediate experiences was the transition from a huge empire to a tiny country, trying to apply the same criteria towards territory. “*Olim* from the FSU had no sense of a small country,” said the late President Shimon Peres; “they thought the Jordan River was another Volga, and not just a stream with good public relations.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the questions often asked about Israeli society is how much its profound changes over the past three decades can be attributed to — or blamed on — the immigration.



The country took a sharp turn to the political right; the huge wave of immigrants was certainly not the only reason, but it did play a significant role in this political climate change and the legitimization of the use of force. (Use of force was always under debate and scrutiny by segments of Israeli society. The Russian-speaking community gave it automatic, undebated support.) Israel has become a flawed democracy not because of the “Russian immigration,” but certainly with its help. Much of the anti-democratic legislation over the last decade was either proposed or promoted by representatives of the Russian community in the Knesset. They still hold a set of values more radical than most veteran Israelis. In the Russian discourse, compromise is a shameful surrender and weakness is unacceptable.

The most prominent Russian-speaking politician of the decade, Avigdor Lieberman of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu, himself became victim of this perception. Contrary to Lieberman’s brutal image and rhetoric (see the next section), he turned out to be a cautious, not trigger-happy minister of defense between 2016 and 2018. His restraint was ridiculed as weakness in the Russian-speaking community. The politician sometimes portrayed as a proto-fascist and a bully, dubbed “the Israeli Putin” by the Israeli left, could not afford to be seen as a weakling.<sup>15</sup> Some political analysts claim that image was one of the reasons Lieberman resigned as minister of defense and quit the government in November 2018. He re-invented himself for the April 2019 elections as the protector of Russian immigrants from the brutality of the Orthodox establishment, empowered by its alliance with Netanyahu.

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## RUSSIANS, ARABS, AND AVIGDOR LIEBERMAN

Avigdor Lieberman played a major role in corrupting Israeli political discourse. For many post-Soviet immigrants, “political correctness” is just another form of infringement on freedom of speech. Lieberman certainly took this attitude to the extreme. Long before he adopted an anti-Orthodox agenda, he built his career on overtly bigoted campaigning against Arab citizens of Israel.

Lieberman believes — or at least says — that Israeli Arabs pose a greater threat to Israel than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He refers to them as a “fifth column” and tells their representatives in the Knesset to join the parliament in Ramallah, “where they belong.”<sup>16</sup> On TV talk shows, he refuses to shake hands with Ayman Odeh, head of the predominantly Arab Joint List, nor would he sit next to him in the Knesset plenary. In May 2006, some Arab legislators met with Hamas leadership. In response, Lieberman expressed the hope they will be put on trial “like Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg trials.”<sup>17</sup> At an election conference at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya he said: “Israeli Arabs who are disloyal to the State of Israel should have their heads chopped off.”<sup>18</sup>

For many years, ferocious verbal attacks on Arab citizens and their representatives were Lieberman’s recruitment call for his Russian-speaking voters. He did it because it worked. A few years into the 1990s immigration, the Russian-Israeli sociologist Alek Epstein said in that context, “the more Arab-hating the immigrant is — the more Israeli he becomes.”<sup>19</sup> “Arab-lover,” on the other hand, is a curse, usually directed at the Israeli left.

There is a disagreement between analysts whether some FSU immigrants imported bigotry from the Soviet Union and planted it in a very different Israeli reality, or if it is locally grown in fertile Israeli ground. A widely-discussed issue in the earlier years of the 1990s immigration, this is less relevant in 2020 when so many in Israel have adopted more anti-Arab vocabulary and legislative agendas. Lieberman's contribution to the process was mainly in legitimizing bigoted discourse, now adopted by others, including Prime Minister Netanyahu himself.

Lieberman's long anti-Arab campaign goes far beyond verbal incitement. For over a decade, he has promoted a campaign of "exchange of territories and population," aka "Umm al-Fahm first." Umm al-Fahm, with a population of about 60,000, is the largest city in Wadi-Ara, a region southeast of Haifa populated mainly by Arab citizens. According to the plan he presented to Putin's Middle East Quartet envoy as early as 2004, Arab towns in the region were to be annexed to a future Palestinian state in exchange for the Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank. Since then, this land-swap has become Lieberman's slogan and the cornerstone of his comprehensive plan for conflict resolution in the Middle East. He keeps repeating it in different versions: Umm al-Fahm should be part of Palestine and not of Israel; we do not need Umm al-Fahm.<sup>20</sup> On other occasions, he called for a boycott on Umm al-Fahm. Presenting the plan to the United Nations as foreign minister in 2010, Lieberman stressed that he was not advocating population transfer, but rather moving borders to better reflect demographic realities.<sup>21</sup>

Though never really discussed nor adopted before 2020, the plan hangs like Sword of Damocles over the heads of Arab citizens. It had been dismissed in Israeli public discourse mainly as "not doable," until it recently emerged in U.S. President Donald Trump's peace plan. Ten Arab cities singled out in the "deal of the century" could be part of a future Palestine, subject to agreement by the parties.<sup>22</sup> Lieberman met with Trump's envoy to the Mideast, Jason Greenblatt, on several occasions prior to the publication of the peace plan.<sup>23</sup>

The Israeli Arabs' response to Lieberman is a reflection of the built-in tension between themselves and the immigrants from Russia. Whenever offended by Lieberman, Arab legislators or writers keep reminding him they are the original owners of this land, while he is just a newcomer. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, prominent Arab MK Ahmad Tibi said: "We are talking about an immigrant politician who is racist against indigenous people... if someone has to leave, it should be the ones who arrived last."<sup>24</sup>

The theme reflected in the exchange between Lieberman and Tibi does not express their personal opinion only. That is the essence of the very basic struggle between the Israeli Arabs and Israeli Russians over the ownership over the land of Israel: Russian *olim* claim it in the name of ethnicity; Arabs claim it in the name of seniority. It is a rather theoretical struggle. Israeli Arabs, though empowered now by their growing political power, know they cannot resist *aliyah* as a major Israeli ethos. Lieberman is, in this case, an "agent provocateur" in a rather dangerous game.

A small group of Russian speakers in a left-oriented NGO, Morashtenu or Our Heritage — The Charter for Democracy, maintains close ties with Russian-speaking, Israeli Arabs graduates of FSU universities organized in an organization named Arbat, after a famous street in Moscow. They share common language and nostalgia. For the Arabs those meetings are of mainly social value; the Russian-speaking Jewish partners aspire to a more political orientation for this small scale but intriguing cooperation.

Despite electoral close calls, Lieberman's party Yisrael Beiteinu seems to be here to stay. His political life has survived ups and downs, including a long trial on charges of corruption until he was finally acquitted in 2013 and could resume his career. Despite his setback after the third round of elections of 2019-2020 — only seven seats in the Knesset and a unity government that left him in opposition — Lieberman has the talent and the tenacity to re-invent himself. Despite his poor current parliamentary representation, he has a wide grassroots support on the municipal level. Nearly six of his party's seven seats were again provided by the Russian-speaking community in the March 2020 elections, mainly the older age cohort. The number of the non-Russian Israelis that voted for the party was worth only about one seat in the Knesset, or 0.83% of the national votes, with half of this support coming from the Christian Arab and Druze communities. Lieberman makes a distinction between Muslim and Christian Arabs, portraying the former as bad and the latter as good. He frames it under “loyal Arabs” and “disloyal Arabs” — the latter being predominantly Muslim. The slogan on his 2011 election posters and TV spots was “No loyalty — no citizenship: only Lieberman understands Arabic.” He also has a representative of the Druze — a religious sect recognized by Israel as a distinct ethnic group numbering 150,000 people in Israel, which unlike the Arab minority shares mandatory military service with Jews — on his list. This is a declarative act to prove he is not a racist, but rather a realist politician who encourages those “loyal to the country.”

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Lieberman's next mission will have to be strengthening the nationwide dimension of his party without losing his Russian base. Often defined by Israeli and Russian sociologists and political analysts as a “post-Soviet” leader, by some as pragmatic-right, by many as far-right, he will be bound to re-position himself from a complex opposition he now shares with the Arab legislators from the Joint List and with Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid. Lapid's party proves attractive mainly to a younger Russian-speaking generation. Lieberman's asset — as well as his weakness — is the “Russian accent” of his party. It is an asset for many in the Russian community to see “one of their own” in political leadership, but a drawback among large segments of veteran Israelis. For them, the man who emigrated to Israel from Soviet Moldova in earlier wave, in 1978, is forever “a Russian immigrant.” Lieberman seldom talks about it, but when he does, the title bothers him. On the other hand, he knows when and how to use it. Whenever in conflict with law enforcement institutions, he likes to complain that the establishment persecutes the “Russian immigrant who dares to succeed.” Many from the Russian community identify with that sentiment. In recent election campaign rallies the formula is still “them” against “us.”

In 1999, Lieberman launched his party in two languages: in Hebrew he talked about nationwide interests; the slogan in Russian said: “We came to live here, here we decide; Israel is our home — the home needs renovations.” In his 2019 campaign, Lieberman's Facebook page in Russian said: “If not us — no one else” — meaning “we have only ourselves to rely on.”<sup>25</sup> Thirty years after this wave of post-Soviet immigration began, that motif still works — not as effectively as before, but to some extent. On the other hand, too much emphasis on the sectarian dimension of the party is bound to alienate general voters, as well as harm the support of those in the Russian community who believe “the Russian street” does not need an exclusive political representation. In recent years, Lieberman has made an overt attempt to create a new image for his party. He officially

defines it as “national movement with the clear vision to follow in the bold path of Ze’ev Jabotinsky,” the founder of right-wing Revisionist Zionism.<sup>26</sup> In Israeli politics, Netanyahu’s Likud is heir to Jabotinsky’s legacy. By claiming that title, Lieberman also insinuates that Likud is no longer worthy of it.

In 2020, some in the political arena question the very ability of the Yisrael Beiteinu party to survive. Its survival has been questioned — and answered — before. Vladimir (Ze’ev) Khanin of Bar-Ilan and Ariel universities, himself one of the *olim*, believes that specific FSU immigrant groups such as older citizens, representatives of the new (2012-2020) wave of *olim* from the FSU, and other sources of sectarian politics will definitely remain in the party in the medium term, permitting the party to exist as a community movement of “Russian Israel” for another 15 or 20 years.<sup>27</sup>

## TERROR, MILITARY SERVICE, AND ETHOS

In a roundtable with reporters during his 2010 Clinton Global Initiative conference, former U.S. President Bill Clinton claimed that the Russian immigrants had emerged as a main obstacle to peace in the Middle East. He shared with the reporters his concern that Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers of Russian origin, predominantly represented in combat units and at checkpoints in the West Bank, might be reluctant to participate in evacuation of settlers. He defined *olim* from former USSR as “the

hardest core against division of land. It’s a different Israel. 16% of Israelis speak Russian.”<sup>28</sup>

**For young male immigrants from Russian speakers’ families, military service is a crucial stage in the process of their “Israelization.”**

Clinton had the facts right, but the interpretation wrong. The Russian community was then 16% of the population, but the bloc opposing

division of the land or Palestinian state was about three times larger. Yet, there is an element of truth in the intuitive statement. Those soldiers and their families come from a long tradition of an empire where return of territories occupied in war was unheard of; construction of an “enemy figure” as part of ideological unification building process has always been part of Soviet ideology, mostly in the military. Some young immigrants raised in this Soviet ethos transferred it into a very different Israeli reality.

For young male immigrants from Russian speakers’ families, military service is a crucial stage in the process of their “Israelization.” New data shows a sharp downward trend in IDF enlistment and a growing number of exemptions (the already-exempted Arabs and ultra-Orthodox excluded).<sup>29</sup> The profound changes in Israeli society and the lack of consensus over policy, wars, and any use of force render dodging mandatory service socially acceptable. Until the mid-1980s, military service was generally perceived as an asset, or a badge of honor. The “republican equation” in which the old Israeli elites exchanged military sacrifice for social dominance has since been degraded by lack of consensus and the erosion of the status of the military.<sup>30</sup> That is not the case within Russian speakers’ community and other peripheral groups, which still tend to see military service as a necessity, even if for practical reasons only. The young Russian recruit — and his family — consider military service as a social asset and a tool for social mobility. The proportion of recruits in families of new *olim* is about 10% higher than in general society. Most of them serve in combat units.<sup>31</sup>

A Russian-speaking soldier in uniform is still an object of pride in his community, although not necessarily out of it. Every Memorial Day, a day preceding Independence Day, the IDF chief of staff places a symbolic flag on the grave of the last casualty of the past year. In 2013, that happened to be Yevgeny Tolochko. The chief of staff was Benny Gantz, now minister of defense and head of the Blue and White party. In 2013, Gantz placed the symbolic flag on another grave since Tolchko's Jewish status was "in doubt" and he was buried outside the main military plot on Mt. Herzl, the Israeli version of the French Pantheon. The outraged reaction forced Gantz to apologize, pay a visit to the bereaved family, and update the protocol. Year after year on Memorial Day, Russian-speaker Facebook groups publish pictures of fallen soldiers from their community. Part of the collective, but still members of a distinct community. The prevailing sentiment of the group is they never get enough recognition.

The late Tolochko is part of the Russian narrative being constructed in Israel. Terrorism plays a crucial role in it. Even more so than the military service, terror is a defining factor in the victimhood part of the narrative. Since terrorism, like suicide bombings on buses and markets, has a socio-economic component, low-income new immigrants suffered a disproportionate number of casualties. The most memorable such attack was the June 2001 suicide bombing at the entrance to the Dolphinarium, a Tel Aviv club frequented by teenagers from Russian-speaking families. Twenty-one teens from the Russian community were killed. Many of them were from the same prestigious school established for and by members of the 1990s *olim*, many only children to single mothers, a relatively frequent phenomenon in the Russian community in Israel.

The tragedy encapsulates the dual facets of the position the Russian community holds in Israeli society to this day. The horrific attack was an opportunity for veteran Israeli society to look into the lives of "the other tribe"; over the years, it has become a distant memory marked by the Russian community only. Gone are the officials who used to come to the yearly memorial service. It is now held in Russian only.

For the community itself, it is more than a personal tragedy of families left with grief and guilt towards children they brought here to die. In a way, it was interpreted by them not just a tragedy, but as a badge of honor too. Many believed the location and the victims were not randomly picked. Russian media claimed the "Russian" club was targeted, as the terrorists were aware of the fact that Russian immigrants are the spiritual elite of Israel and ardent supporters of the nationalist camp.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, intellectuals from the Russian-speaking community argued that the bombing was carefully prepared to harm the best and the brightest from an elite school and future officers in the Israeli military.<sup>33</sup> As such, the tragedy was a significant landmark in cultivation of the heroic self-image of the community.

A year before the Dolphinarium bombing, two reserve soldiers were lynched by a Palestinian mob in Ramallah, their bodies mutilated. One of them was Vadim Norzhich, an immigrant from the FSU. Both events occurred during the second Intifada and had interesting political implications. At the end of the 1990s through the early years of 21st century, the younger *olim* community was still seen as a swing vote. In 1999, their vote brought to power the Labor Party's Ehud Barak, or "Israel's Number 1 Soldier," as Israeli journalists Ben Caspit and Ilan Kfir named their biography of him. Barak was indeed the most decorated soldier, and the book was distributed in neighborhoods highly populated by Russian speakers. It worked. In 2001 and 2003, in the wake of these tragedies, the community supported Likud's Ariel Sharon, who they knew as



the legendary general from Yom Kippur War of 1973. The martial, heroic profile of both Barak and Sharon represented the quest for “a strong leader,” one of the main characteristics of “Homo Sovieticus,” the stereotype of a person raised under the Soviet regime and ideology. They even allowed Sharon as “a strong leader” to carry out disengagement from Gaza in 2005 with just mild protest, though most of the Russian speakers opposed it ideologically. In public opinion polls Russian speakers choose “strong leader” over “democracy” as a better and more efficient apparatus to run a country. The incidents described above are not just history; they are, among others, the oral tradition that shapes the Russian community now and in years to come.

The heroic self-image is a necessary component on the road to leadership in Israeli society. One of the most overlooked or misunderstood characteristics of this immigrant group is the role its members want to carve for themselves in Israeli society, culture, and politics. Unlike previous waves of immigration, this group feels they are in Israel not for absorption or acculturation, but to lead or at least be part of the leading corpus. An Israeli establishment that treats every wave of immigration as a “rescue operation” worthy of gratitude failed to detect that difference and respond to it. Even if they are content with their life here, Russian immigrants of any age do not feel “rescued.” They come from a huge, even if failed, empire and preserve and act upon some of the imperial attitude. As early as 1996, with the establishment of the first and successful Russian sectarian party supposedly formed to deal with practical aspects of absorption only, the late MK Yuri Stern openly said: “we, the Russian Jews, founded the State of Israel. Now we are back to fix it.”<sup>34</sup> Israeli political, cultural and social establishment failed to understand that attitude, so very different from the more modest goals of all other immigrant groups after 1948.

A small anecdote captures that spirit. In 2000, Prime Minister Barak was conducting short-lived peace negotiations with Syria. The underlying assumption was any agreement would include withdrawal from Golan Heights. The Russian community was then mobilized by their two leaders, Sharansky and Lieberman, who bussed groups of them day after day to the Golan Heights, becoming an active and vocal opposition. One of the groups who came were newcomers from an absorption center, who had spent just a few weeks in Israel. Asked how they found the energy to be involved in such a protest, they replied in defiance that this is what they came for. “We understand; you, veteran Israelis are exhausted by your endless wars. Leave it up to us,” they said.<sup>35</sup> That was 20 years ago. The discourse now might be more sophisticated, but the “it is our turn” motif is very much present.

The community chose a wise, though hard to apply, strategy to penetrate the tightly closed Israeli ethos. Israel has a powerful ethos shaped by the Shoah and a long list of war heroes and ancestors responsible for the establishment of the state. The newcomers have their own highly decorated veterans of World War II, or as it is known throughout the former Soviet Union, “the Great Patriotic War,” they have the day of victory over Nazis proudly celebrated in the former USSR on May 9. That cherished legacy was totally ignored by Israel. For political reasons mainly, the role of the Red Army in the victory was practically unknown to the Israelis. Neither were they aware of the half a million Jews, among them highly decorated generals and admirals, who served in the Red Army. About 8,000 of these veterans arrived in Israel with their children and grandchildren. Their long struggle for recognition and benefits offered by the state was long and painful. Israel, it would seem, had no room for heroes not made in Israel who served another country. Veterans of Red Army refused to donate their war

memorabilia to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem; they offered it to smaller museums of Israeli heroic battles and victory, preferring to celebrate heroism rather than the victimhood of the Holocaust. The war veterans and those supportive of their cause adjusted their strategy accordingly to comply with the Israeli vision: heroic veterans of World War II did not just play a major role in the victory over Nazis; it was their victory — not the Shoah — that allowed the foundation of the State of Israel. Had there been only the Shoah there would be no state. As such, they play a crucial role in the Zionist project. Just like the founders of the state, just like native-born *sabras*.

After years of legal debate, in 2000 under Barak's government, Israeli passed a "veteran law," recognizing their status. In 2017, May 9 was made an official holiday in Israel. Numerous memorials to commemorate the Red Army's triumph over Nazi Germany were unveiled in different locations in Israel. Putin participated in the inauguration of several of them. Commemoration of Red Army soldiers serves for Israel as a means for strengthening Israel-Russia relations, and for Putin as a means of securing his role in what he perceives as his cultural sphere, with Israel hosting the world's third-largest population (after Germany and the United States) of Russian speakers outside of the former Soviet Union.

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## GENERATION 1.5 — THE TRANSITIONAL GENERATION

"Generation 1.5" — the transitional generation — is by now one of most intriguing segments of Israeli society. The generation is not defined by years of birth but by the age at which they came to Israel; the most commonly used definition includes those who arrived under the age of 14, but absorbed some of the culture and educational system of their country of origin. It is estimated that there are about 150,000 young adults in Israel who emigrated from the FSU in their early teens or younger.

This generation — like the Sephardi immigrants of the 1950s — vocally protests the glass ceiling they face. It is highly represented in the Israeli high-tech sector, but still under-represented in the government sector. They often single-handedly carry the financial burdens of the parents and of their own children, with no safety nets of extended families and contacts created over decades. The parents' generation reached retirement age with very small accumulated pensions and needed financial assistance for everyday survival. That is a tremendous issue for both generations and campaign promise to solve it have never been fulfilled.

Yet the cooperation between the generations was of utmost importance to both. The World War II veterans' victory over a stubborn Israeli system has far-reaching implications on the younger generation. Their grandparents got the recognition they deserved, and Generation 1.5 and those to come have inherited a much-needed narrative. Almost every Israeli family has a story of a hero or of a victim in one of the country's wars or military actions. This narrative is still a much-needed ticket to enter

Israeli society. The immigrant children came with none. They acquired it through their linkage with their grandparents. It is not just about pride; it is about gaining power. Now they host veteran Israelis invited to listen to their stories, no longer just guests in host society. They organize traditional celebrations of *Novi God* (New Year) — the only non-state-controlled, family holiday in the FSU void of any Christian connotations — and invite Israeli-born peers. After years of struggle to explain it is not a Christian holiday, today all Israeli politicians (excepting the Orthodox) — including Prime Minister Netanyahu — compete over the most heartfelt and funny *Novi God* greetings to the Russian community. They won, again. That is the underlying collective nature of this immigration: absorption not from weakness, but rather from a standpoint of strength. That is what the Generation 1.5 is aiming at.



**Many of them come from mixed families with the “wrong” Jewish parent — the father. That allows the family to make aliyah based on the definitions of the Law of Return, but the children born to a non-Jewish mother are not considered Jewish in Israel under religious law.**

The younger Russian community is not alone on the fast track to leadership. They meet their peers of Mizrahi (Middle East) origin, now claiming their own share in social and political dominance. No wonder a movement formed to achieve that goal carries the name *The Golden Age — Now It Is Our Turn*, a reference to breaking the monopoly of the old Ashkenazi elite. Another rivaling sector is the equivalent age group from the Religious-Zionist circles. The difference is that what took the Sephardi and the Religious-Zionists decades to achieve, the Russians achieved much faster. One of their advantages was their timing.

Unlike previous immigrations, they arrived at a time of the changing of the guard. The hegemony of the old, mainly Ashkenazi elite is on the decline; what seemed to be a cohesive society is falling apart at the seams. The cracks leave room for others to enter.

The members of Generation 1.5 consider themselves — and actually are — bi-cultural, preserving their Russian identity and Russian as their heritage language. They tend to maintain co-ethnic social networks and close ties with their countries of origin and others in the Russian-speaking diaspora.

One of the main defining factors in the sense of belonging of this age group, and the most relevant one to the process of re-constructing Israeli tribal society, is the way their Jewish identity is treated by the Orthodox establishment and thus by Israel as such. Many of them come from mixed families with the “wrong” Jewish parent — the father. That allows the family to make *aliyah* based on the definitions of the Law of Return, but the children born to a non-Jewish mother are not considered Jewish in Israel under religious law. Even if recognized as Jews, they, like most immigrants from the FSU, are eternally suspect, under demand to prove their Jewishness. This shaky and humiliating status has implications for the everyday life of the younger generation. Israel has no civil marriage, and those who cannot prove their Jewishness cannot get married to Halachic Jews in their own country. In some extreme cases, Israel’s rabbinate has been performing DNA testing on immigrants from the former Soviet Union to check if they are genetically Jewish as a condition for marriage registration.<sup>36</sup> *Shorashim* (Roots), a small NGO established in 2003, sends emissaries to remote villages and cemeteries in the FSU to look for convincing proofs necessary to determine Jewish ancestry of

couples registered to marry. The chairperson of the organization is Ephraim Halevy, a former head of the Mossad.

Members of Generation 1.5 rarely choose the option of conversion, and most find it offensive. They suffered as Jewish children in the FSU, and suffer as non-Jews in Israel. In the March 2020 election campaign, Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef publicly attacked the non-Jewish Russian immigrants and those in doubt, insinuating that many of them are communists attending church services.<sup>37</sup> Lieberman used this brutal attack to jump-start his campaign, but for the community it re-opened the collective wound that never healed. The issue of their status as Jews is a source of never-ending frustration, estrangement, and alienation. The 25- to 40-year-old age group whose Jewishness is questioned are highly represented among immigrants leaving Israel. Contrary to intuitive expectations, adopting Israeli identity does not have significant effect on immigrants' intention to leave. By contrast, Jewish identity plays a significant role in attenuating the immigrants' tendency to leave.<sup>38</sup>

Constant reminders of their dubious belonging shape the ethnic self-perception of this generation to the Israeli Jewish nation. Two years ago, Israel passed the controversial Jewish nation-state bill that defines Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people only, excluding minorities like Arabs, Druze, etc. Though the bill was obviously not intended to apply to the FSU immigrants, some of those considered non-Jewish under religious law expressed concern that they might become a "third" category, like "Coloureds" in apartheid South Africa.<sup>39</sup>

**The emergence of the younger generation as a dominant age cohort with greater political diversity might provide the center-left an opportunity to rectify its decades-long abandonment of Russian Israelis.**

Just like identity issues, the political affiliation of Generation 1.5 is more complex than the first generation's overwhelming affiliation with the political center-right. According to a recent survey by Larissa Remennick, head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar Ilan University, a third of younger voters noted that their political views differed from those held by their parents, and their voting patterns were more diverse. While 80% of the veteran generation has emerged as part of the center-right, 25% of the younger generation define themselves as left-wing, and 8% say they are more progressive than their parents.<sup>40</sup> This finding is of utmost importance for the future political conduct of all parties to the left of the governing Likud. The 25% in this age cohort who define themselves as "left-wing" are more than double the percentage of those who so define themselves in the Russian-speaking community overall. It is quadruple the percentage of those who actually voted for parties that define themselves as left-wing or are perceived as such. According to the study conducted by Khanin, only 1% voted for the Meretz party in April 2019 elections.<sup>41</sup> The striking gap between the findings can be explained by the fluid definition of parties themselves. Most reject the title left-wing but are considered leftists by the right, which views this as a derogatory term. Left-oriented Russian voters can be found in Blue and White, whose self-determination is centrist, while they have been labeled leftists by opponents. The more than 15% of Russian Israelis (of all age cohorts) who voted for Blue and White in April 2019 may provide an answer to the conflicting findings. Since the split of Blue and White between Benny Gantz's faction which kept the name, now a part of the governing coalition, and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid, now in opposition, it is



important to note that most of Russian votes cast for Blue and White were actually in favor of Yesh Atid's aggressively secular agenda.

Remennick argues that while “the younger generation of Russian Israelis leans to liberal views on many socio-political issues, only a minority support the peace agenda and ending the occupation of Palestinian lands, indicating their deep ambivalence about the core issues of Israel's existence and security.”<sup>42</sup> It's important to note that the definition of left-wing here seems to be different from the one usually applied in Israel, based on views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This left-wing orientation has more to do with civil liberties, religious coercion, LGBT rights, etc.

The emergence of the younger generation as a dominant age cohort with greater political diversity might provide the center-left an opportunity to rectify its decades-long abandonment of Russian Israelis. The left gave up on the “Russian street” too early, based on a misunderstanding of the community, which the late President Shimon Peres described as “a historic mistake.”<sup>43</sup> In the times of the “great *aliyah*,” the left-wing — then mainly Labor and Meretz — expected the new immigrants to simply flock to them based on their Ashkenazi ethnicity and high education. That did not materialize. The emergence of the more pro-active generation as well as the close alliance between Likud and the ultra-Orthodox bloc, provides a new chance to the shrinking Israeli left, desperate for new voters. Generation 1.5 is more diverse and serves as hothouse for younger political-social activists. Its members detest indoctrination but yearn for visibility and attention. They want their voice heard and their particular needs recognized. In order to do that, politicians have to learn the basics and recognize the differences: this generation is integrated but distinct.

## PUTIN'S ALIYAH

While the FSU migration of the 1990s continues to reverberate in Israeli politics and society, there is also a new trickle of immigrants, about 57,000, who have left Russia over the last eight years.<sup>44</sup> They are nicknamed “Putin's *aliyah*” (or the Putin-era *aliyah*), as they decided to leave as soon as Putin resumed the presidency in 2012. They sensed the atmosphere and expected further erosion in what they hoped to develop into more open and liberal society. Their emigration was in a way an act of protest. According to recent data published by the Israeli Ministry of Interior, a majority of these Russians are not Jewish,<sup>45</sup> figures that alarmed the Orthodox and rabbinical establishment and were raised as an issue in the March 2020 elections. Many of them were appalled by the way Netanyahu used his relationship — “friendship” in his words — with Putin in his campaign. So were immigrants from Ukraine, both the newer and the more veteran, for whom Putin is the archenemy after the annexation of the Crimea. “I ran away from Putin knowing where his Russia was heading,” said Alla Borisova, a journalist who left Russia when Putin elected to return to the presidency in 2012. “Netanyahu-Putin posters make me feel Putin is after me in Israel as well.”<sup>46</sup> That was one of the many mistakes Netanyahu made in attempt to court Lieberman's potential voters.

The Israeli left was optimistic toward the Putin's *aliyah* voters, who are known for their more liberal ideology and deep respect for democracy. Though small in number (a cohort that can add up to just one seat in the Knesset), the personal and political profile of those newcomers was an opportunity for the left to break the traditional right-wing-oriented voting pattern of the Russian-speaking community. That did not happen. According to Khanin's recent study, most of them voted for the right.<sup>47</sup>



## CONCLUSION

Any discussion about the policy towards the Russian-speaking community requires a condition *sine qua non* — the simple acknowledgement of the very existence of distinct community with particular needs, ethos, and aspirations.

That recognition is surprisingly difficult for Israeli politicians and large segments of Israeli society. Most of the immigrants have been in Israel for 25 to 30 years, and judged by the criteria of previous waves of immigration they should be just “Israelis like the rest of us,” as is often stated. This attitude reflects the residue of the unifying Zionist ethos and a misunderstanding of the uniqueness of this immigration. This paper has analyzed Israel’s Russian speakers as a distinct sociological community and political cohort. Misunderstanding of this phenomenon perpetuates wrongful policy and harms not only the generations of FSU immigrants now living in Israel, but the generations to come as well.

The tectonic plates of Israeli society and politics are both in constant motion, unfortunately not always in the same direction. There is a growing disconnect between society and politics. Even more so, there is an active attempt by Israel’s leadership to “divide and conquer.” That is relatively easy, and especially dangerous, in a society composed of immigrants from many different cultures competing with each other for the attention and resources of the political system and attempting to shape Israel in their own image. Both phenomena — the disconnect and the divisive tendency — have soared during COVID-19 era. Like terrorism, the coronavirus is not an egalitarian agent — the weakest links in all societies are more vulnerable to both illness and economic implications of the pandemic. In Israel, those are — among others — the relative newcomers, who lack the support mechanisms available to others. The social-economic crisis and political upheaval triggered by the pandemic shed light on the particular hardships of the Russian-speaking community. The level of unemployment caused by the pandemic was higher among the most recently arrived immigrants;<sup>48</sup> the isolation and stress in housing clusters populated for decades by older generation of *olim* from the FSU were ostensibly worsened by the long months of social distancing. Their needs have not been met.

The “Russian” immigrants are a distinct entity with their own radio, TV, news websites and journals, and social media, and their own particular social needs. Yet, unlike in the earlier days of “Russian” politics, they have no socially-oriented representatives. The MKs of Russian origin choose to deal with politics, security, and diplomacy issues rather than to cater to the particular needs of their older constituency. The answer could, or maybe even should be, full adoption of this segment of the community by the national social system. That is not always the case, partly due to assumptions that they have their “own” representatives to take care of them. Israeli civil society tends to have a “blind spot” where Russian-speaking citizens are concerned. The Catch-22 situation in times of emergency, from wars to pandemic, proves that a particular support system for the Russian speakers is still very much needed, not at the expense of others, but rather for the common good of all Israelis.

At the same time, a better understanding of the particular needs of Generation 1.5 and the second generation is crucial to the future of Israeli society. These generations serve as a litmus test of Israel’s tricky balance between the state’s self-definition in the Declaration of Independence as “Jewish” and “democratic.” Thus far, this test

and others have proven that Jewish trumps democratic. While the Russian community has been a victim of this process, they might be the solution. Previous attempts to offer partial answers to hardships caused by the rabbinical system and the Ministry of Interior under Orthodox control, like some form of civil marriage, have failed miserably. There must be a renewed search for alternatives pertaining to issues of personal status trampled by the establishment, before the estrangement of this particular group turns into detachment. This is an issue of national magnitude and has to be dealt as such.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added further urgency to this quest. Based on their criteria and information, both the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption expect a large wave of immigration from Jewish communities struck by coronavirus and the spike of anti-Semitism linked to virus — including from the United States.<sup>49</sup> As in the FSU, mixed marriages are a widespread phenomenon in Jewish communities all over America. If those individuals or families do indeed choose to immigrate to Israel, they are bound to face the very same issues of personal status of spouses and children considered “non-Jewish” and deprived of basic rights in their new homeland. This very recognition may have far reaching implications on the very decision to “make *aliyah*,” on the complex relations between Israel and the diaspora, and thus even on the “special relationship” between Israel and the United States.

Separation of church and state is an ambitious goal to be considered in the future. A much more modest goal is to take the Ministry of Interior out of control of the Orthodox Shas party, now headed by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri. That once relatively moderate party itself has undergone a process of radicalization; the immigrants and their children pay the price. In June 2020, the ministry denied the Jewish status of over 2,000 children born in Israel to FSU immigrants. The ministry claimed its drastic act was based on further investigation conducted into the documents provided by the immigrants upon arrival to Israel.<sup>50</sup> In the current political climate and balance of power in Israel, no rival politician has bid for the interior portfolio. Parties that are more liberal should be encouraged to rectify this mistake in the future and sanctioned for forsaking it. This key portfolio cannot and should not be considered a natural birthright of the Orthodox party.


Israel's Law of Return is an issue under constant debate. It reserves automatic citizenship to Jews only and provides a vague definition of who is a Jew. Both aspects of the law are source of endless political and social conflict. Suggestions to revoke the Law of Return or replace it with a law on immigration are occasionally raised and rebuffed. The Israeli political and social scene is certainly not ready at present to take such major step.

The formation of a unity government could provide an opportunity to revise the concept of “sociological conversion.” The concept was born with this wave of immigration from the FSU to substitute for religious conversion, for which the younger generation rarely opted. Then-Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, who named it “secular conversion,” was the first to openly suggest it. The essence of the concept is an ability to become part of Israeli Jewish society by adopting the culture, local customs, duties, and even the observance of the high holidays, preserving a Jewish secular majority in Israel without requiring religious conversion. It is a bold idea that can be promoted only by a

strong, self-confident leader in a cohesive society. At this point, Israel lacks both that kind of leadership and is not that type of society. Yet, this is a concept to remember even so because it has been unofficially adopted by large segments of Generation 1.5 and their children. Making it official may heal an open wound.

In politics, the growing diversity of the younger generation open the doors for a wider spectrum of politicians to reach out to the younger generation of Russian speakers, not just as potential voters, but as real partners. The instrumental approach applied by Israeli politicians competing over the “Russian vote” without ever conducting a real dialogue with a generation eager for real partnership, is a source of constant frustration for these voters. Those willing to make the effort have to learn the specific characteristics of this age cohort. Few politicians do. Unlike the Orthodox, the Arabs, and the Ethiopians, the Russian speakers look like the average Israelis and thus attract less particular attention. This “optical illusion” results in misunderstanding.

The unprecedented emergence of organized groups of Generation 1.5 in the tumultuous mass demonstrations in front of Netanyahu’s residence in the midst of the COVID-19 health and economic crisis is a meaningful landmark. Russian speakers of all generations have rarely taken to the streets. Most of the protesters focus either on the prime minister’s corruption, the erosion of democracy, or the incompetence of the government as exposed by the pandemic; the Russian-speaking protesters demand rights denied to them by Orthodoxy and some even question the very decision to make Israel their homeland.<sup>51</sup> That might be a political turning point and opportunity for all politicians to open a new dialogue with a generation of Russian speakers eager to lead. They and their offspring are an important component in shaping the future of Israel.



**The instrumental approach applied by Israeli politicians competing over the “Russian vote” without ever conducting a real dialogue with a generation eager for real partnership, is a source of constant frustration for these voters.**

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