

ISSN: 2587-2532 | e-ISSN: 2587-1862  
<http://www.filistin.org>

FAD- Filistin Arařtırmaları Dergisi  
Sayı: 3 (Yaz 2018)

Yayın Geliř Tarihi: 02.03.2018  
Yayına Kabul Tarihi: 24.07.2018

BPS- Bulletin of Palestine Studies  
Issue: 3 (Summer 2018)

Submission Date: 02.03.2018  
Acceptance Date: 24.07.2018

### The Russian-Speaking Community of the State of Israel

Tatiana MOSHKOVA / <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4425-9180>

**To cite this article:** Tatiana Moshkova, "The Russian-Speaking Community of the State of Israel," *Bulletin of Palestine Studies*, no. 3 (2018): 1-19.

**Bu makaleye atıf için:** Tatiana Moshkova, "The Russian-Speaking Community of the State of Israel," *Filistin Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, no. 3 (2018): 1-19.

FAD- Filistin Arařtırmaları Dergisi  
BPS- Bulletin of Palestine Studies  
Tarandıęı Uluslararası Indexler/ Abstracting & Indexing

INDEX COPERNICUS | SCIENTIFIC INDEXING | CEEOL | DRJI | İSAM

INDEX COPERNICUS  
INTERNATIONAL



Tatiana MOSHKOVA\*

---

## The Russian-Speaking Community of the State of Israel\*\*

**Abstract:** This article studies the characteristics of the Russian-speaking community of the State of Israel. The author examines such aspects of the topic as the nature of the community ties that have taken shape among the Russian-speaking Israelis and the status of the Russian language in Israel. Attention is also paid to the factors that contributed to the formation of a unique Russian-Israeli identity, to the main stages of the evolution of the Russian-speaking community in the political life of Israel, and to the formation of the Russian media space. The Russian-speaking community is rightly regarded as a long-term phenomenon that is currently also an important player in the political arena of the country. The main contribution of this study is a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of the "Russian Israeli." It argues that the following factors have been effective in the unification of the Russian-speaking community of Israel: territorial localization, the preservation of the cultural environment of the country of origin, the special status of the Russian language in Israel as well as its place in the media space, the maintenance of the symbols peculiar to the community, and the program of socio-political development.

**Keywords:** Integration, Subculture, New Immigrants, Media Space, Russian Street

---

## İsrail Devletinde Rusça Konuşan Kesim

**Öz:** Bu makale, İsrail Devletinde Rusça konuşan kesimin başlıca özelliklerini konu almaktadır. Yazar, konuyu Rusça konuşan İsraililer arasında şekillenen topluluk bağlarının niteliği ve Rusça'nın İsrail'deki statüsü gibi boyutlarıyla incelemektedir. Ayrıca kendine has bir Rus-İsraili kişiliğinin şekillenmesine katkıda bulunan faktörler, Rusça konuşan topluluğun İsrail siyasi hayatındaki gelişim evreleri ve bir Rus medya alanının ortaya çıkması da ele alınan konular arasındadır. Rusça konuşan topluluk, haklı olarak ülkenin siyasi arenasında önemli bir rol de üstlenen uzun dönemli bir olgu olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın temel katkısı, "Rus İsraili" olgusunun kapsamlı bir analizidir. Çalışmada, İsrail'deki Rusça konuşan topluluğun birleşmesinde şu faktörlerin etkili olduğu savı ortaya konuyor: Bir bölgede yoğunlaşma, geline ülkedeki kültürel çevrenin muhafazası, Rusça'nın İsrail'deki özel konumu ve medya alanındaki yeri, topluluğa has sembollerin devamı ve sosyo-politik gelişim programı.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Entegrasyon, Alt kültür, Yeni Göçmenler, Medya Alanı, Rus Sokağı

---

\* Graduate Student, Saint Petersburg University, The Department of Theory and History of International Relations, [tata.midge@gmail.com](mailto:tata.midge@gmail.com).

\*\* This study is a reworked and extended version of two short papers that were previously published in Russian: Tatiana Moshokova, "Faktory formirovaniya sovremennoi russkoyazychnoi obshchiny gosudarstva Izrail'," *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* 6, no. 2 (2017): 16-24; idem, "Politiko-elektoral'naya struktura russkoyazychnoi obshchiny Izrail'ya," *Politika i obshchestvo* 15, 2 (2018): 57-65.

## Introduction

Israel is a unique state, because the majority of the population of the State of Israel is made up by immigrants or descendants of those who have undertaken the Aliyah. At the same time, the Russian-speaking community amounts to about one million people (out of the eight million people in the country), and accordingly makes up the largest group in the Israeli population. The immigrants of the "Great Aliyah" from Russia, which began in the 1990s, brought along the traditional way of life as well as the cultural heritage of the country of their origin. From the first day of their lives in the new state, they did not accept the notion of the "melting pot" and the ideology of Zionism, but instead sought to preserve their national identity and create a Russian-speaking community.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the factors that contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon of the Russian-speaking community, or the "Russian street," of Israel. This subject is relevant due to a number of factors. Firstly, the Russian-speaking community is today an autonomous entity within the Israeli society, with its own distinct characteristics. Its integration into Israeli society has its own specific traits. Secondly, the Russian-speaking community occupies an important place in the political life of modern Israel. Thirdly, this community has extensive ties abroad, including those with Russia.

There is a point of view according to which the peak of activity of the "Russian street" occurred at the end of the 1990s, after which the process of absorption of the community into the Israeli society began<sup>1</sup> –with complete absorption expected within one or two generations.<sup>2</sup> However, the current situation makes it possible to assert that the Russian-speaking community still endures as a long-term phenomenon, even though it is not clear to which extent the "Russian" Jews in Israel still retain the structural features inherent in their original communities.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that the community has a specific character and a number of atypical parameters: A system of informal relations with high intensity, family support functions, and a clear boundary between the community and the external environment.<sup>4</sup> Natives of the former Soviet Union have formed a community that amounts to a special society. In this special society, the Russian-speaking Israelis create their own cultural and behavioral autonomy that is characterized by the isolated nature of the communication environment as well as by forms of social and

---

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Khanin, *"Tretii Izrail": russkoyazychnaya obshchina i politicheskie protsessy v evreiskom gosudarstve v nachale XXI veka* (Moscow: Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 2014), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Elazar Leshem, *The Russian Aliya in Israel: Community and Identity in the Second Decade* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publ. Inc., 2007), 283.

<sup>3</sup> Larisa Remennik, *"Russkie" izrail'tyane glazami sotsiologa: kul'tura i obraz zhizni* (Moscow: IV RAN "Natalis", 2008), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Elazar Leshem and M. Lissak, *Development and Consolidation of the Russian Community in Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), 139.

cultural life that differ sharply from those of the indigenous Israelis, known as the *sabras*.<sup>5</sup>

This article considers several aspects of the Russian-speaking community of Israel: the factors behind its formation, the phenomenon of the Russian media, the problem of the Russians' self-identification, the community symbols, and the evolution of the "Russian lobby."

### **The subculture of the "Russian street" and the factors behind the formation of the modern Russian-speaking community**

Because of all the diversity of the associations of immigrants from the countries of the former USSR, the subculture of the "Russian street" is not homogeneous and does not cover 100% of the immigrant community. However, despite the fact that some part of the community remains outside the framework of the subculture, the mere existence of the phenomenon of the "Russian street" allows its representatives to feel their importance and offer their potentials to the entire Israeli society rather than developing it only within the community cell. Therefore, the broad involvement in politics of the immigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union does not seem coincidental. The only question is the search for an adequate form of institutionalization for the Russian-speaking community, with the aim of turning it into a full-fledged "Russian lobby."

This issue is also debatable today among the political elite of the Russian-speaking Israelis. Since 1993, two groups have emerged in this milieu. The first group was convinced of the need for a purely sectoral party, believing that only such a party would be able to consolidate the forces of the community, prevent their dispersion, stop the confrontation among the newcomers, and fully lobby the interests of the community and of its emerging elites. The second school spoke only of the need for the existence of a "Russian branch" within the framework of the general Israeli parties and political movements, and intended to use the mechanisms of the latter to achieve the goals of the Russian Israelis. Ten years later, in 2003, Russian immigrants seemed to attach more importance to the structural and ideological differences within their community cell than to the integration tendencies present in it.

What factors contributed to the unification of the "Russian street" then? The "big wave" of repatriation or the "Great Aliyah" of the 1990s coincided with the legitimization process of "multiculturalism" in Israel. This in turn contributed to the legitimization of the public institutions of the "Russian" community, and played a role in shaping a unique identity for the representatives of the "Russian street." The Israeli political establishment positively perceived the subculture of the "Russian" immigrants.<sup>6</sup> The main condition shaping the culture of the Russian-speaking

---

<sup>5</sup> E. Fel'dman, *"Russkii" Izrail': mezhdru dvukh polyusov* (Moscow: Market DS, 2003), 178.

<sup>6</sup> Fel'dman, *"Russkii" Izrail'*, 125-155, 351-415.

immigrants was their concentration in a relatively small number of cities. Among the settlements in which the "Russian" Jews are represented by communities of more than forty thousand people, one finds Ashdod, Ashkelon, Bat Yam, Beer-Sheva, Jerusalem, Netanya, Tel Aviv and Haifa. Moreover, immigrants of the last wave tend to live in the same cities and areas, where they have acquired real estates after moving to Israel. For immigrants from the countries of the former USSR, the main criterion in choosing a place of residence is the proximity to their family members who have migrated earlier.

A study conducted in conjunction in 2011 by the Ministry of Aliyah and Absorption and the Ariel University of Samaria revealed a concentration of immigrants from the former USSR within certain blocks. A quarter of the respondents claimed that the majority of the residents of their micro-district was made up by "Russian" immigrants. In such areas community-forming ties are established, arguably in compensation for the negative consequences of the absorption of the "Great Aliyah."<sup>7</sup> In turn, these communal ties have helped to increase the level of cultural self-sufficiency among the representatives of the "Russian street" and increased the desire to preserve and perpetuate their habitual forms of social, cultural and professional interaction. This can be confirmed by a study conducted in 2006 by the Joint Israel organization, according to which 90% of the "Russian" immigrants responded that 15 years after their repatriation they continue to live in an immigrant quarter. Moreover, 90% of the young respondents aged between 18 and 29 indicated that they continue to speak Russian at home despite having some degree of Hebrew language skills.<sup>8</sup>

Another illustrative example for the cultural self-sufficiency of the immigrants from the countries of the former USSR was the fact that only one third of the respondents turned out to have family members who had not married a member of the "Russian street."<sup>9</sup> A study of civil identity also showed that among young immigrants aged 18-28 years, the highest percentage was made up by those who indicated that their four closest friends out of five were representatives of the "Russian street." Moreover, 57% of the respondents stated that they were in constant contact with their "Russian" friends. All of these responses point to the effective functioning of social ties within the Russian-speaking community.

However, it would be wrong to say that the "Russian" community is a kind of a "Russian ghetto," because, according to the same poll by the Mutagim agency, young immigrants are also actively involved in Israeli reality and stand in contact with indigenous Israelis as well as with the immigrants from other countries. On the other

---

<sup>7</sup> D. Khakokhen, *Ha shita shel klita yashara ve toladoth shela: ha integratsiya sotsiyalit ve tarbutit shel olim me khever hamedinot haatsmairot be hatkhala shel 1990s* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Study of Israel, 1994), 106. [In Hebrew]

<sup>8</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail", 25.

<sup>9</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail", 26.

hand, only 34% of the middle-aged respondents and 15% of the older respondents were revealed to have contacts with all Israeli citizens, without distinction of origin.<sup>10</sup>

### Russian language and Russian media

The key aspect of the subculture of the "Russian" Jews, and the chief factor behind their unity, is the preservation of the unique status of the Russian language in Israel and its important place in the media space of the country. It has become a legitimate means of communication within the community.<sup>11</sup> The Ministry of Aliya and Absorption is tolerant to the use of the Russian language in the state institutions and the media. The Russian language has been introduced as the third language into the curricula of Israeli schools. The Ministry of Education gives Russian-speaking immigrant pupils the opportunity to use Russian texts at the TANAKH (Jewish Scripture) examinations, as well as the opportunity to pass their examinations in the native language under the secondary school program. In addition, curricula and textbooks have been prepared and published for the study of Russian as a foreign language from classes 7 to 12. In the school year 2011-2012 the Ministry of Education decided to increase the hours of study of the Russian language by 25%. It also increased by 50% the hours allocated for teachers of the Russian language for passing the refresher courses. These initiatives of the state bodies of Israel correspond to the needs of the Russian-speaking community who use Russian and Hebrew equally.

In the 2011-2012 academic year 7500 schoolchildren studied Russian in one hundred and fifty Israeli schools. 95% of these students were born in the countries of the former USSR or in the families of the Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel. Their length of stay in Israel ranged from zero to seventeen years. Their level of language proficiency differed, but for the majority Russian was a language of their "cultural heritage" rather than a native language.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian of the immigrants is largely different from the Russian of Russians.<sup>13</sup> It should be viewed not as evidence of assimilation or of "Russian universalism," but as a proof of the integration of the Russian-speaking immigrants into Israeli society without subsequent acculturation. Russian-speaking immigrants see it as their goal to preserve the cultural baggage with which they have moved to Israel.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 127.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Niznik, "Osobennosti kul'turnoi integratsii vykhodtsev iz SSSR/SNG v Izraile," *Diaspora* 1 (2003): 49.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Niznik, "Russian Language in Israel — Is it Half Alive or Half Dead?" paper, presented to the *National Challenge — the Third Ashdod Conference on Aliya and Absorption* (Ashdod, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> S. Donnitsa-Shmidt, "Ha shimmer shel sapha o hitpakhut shela? Ha sapha rusit shel olim me khever hamedinot haatsmaiot be hatkhala be Israel" *Ed Kha-ul'pan kha-khadash* 85 (2007): 57. [In Hebrew]

<sup>14</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 32.

The involvement of the immigrants from the former USSR in the Israeli information environment occurs through the Russian media in Israel. The Russian *Israel Plus* Channel (or The Ninth Channel) enjoys a strong position in Israeli media. The rating of the channel in 2009 was higher than the rating of the most popular channels in Israel: The Second and The Tenth.<sup>15</sup> The target audience of the channel consists of the immigrants of the older generation. In 2011, 78% of the respondents answered that they watched it at least once a week, and more than 50% indicated that they watched the channel every day. *Israel Plus* occupies a leading position among 78% of immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are over 55 years; among immigrants aged 35 to 55, 50% prefer it to other channels, and only 18% of those under 35 occasionally watch it. Thus, about half of the Russian-speaking citizens of Israel regularly watch *Israel Plus*, about 30% prefer it to other channels, and the entire audience of the channel amounts to about 80% of the "Russian" immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

In the large representative survey of the preferences of the Russian-speaking Israelis in 2014, the respondents were asked whether they saw a need for the existence of a Russian media space in Israel. Despite the fact that most respondents in each of the categories answered affirmatively, the following tendency was observed: The younger the respondents, the longer their stay in Israel, and the higher their income level, the less interested they were in the existence of a Russian media in Israel. Holders of academic degrees were supporters of the "Russian" media, and their share exceeded the average share of the sample<sup>17</sup>.

The interest of the immigrants in the existence of the Russian media space contributes to the development of links with their country of exodus. The opportunities for expanding these links are provided not only by the Russian media, but also by the Israeli Internet in Russian, whose peak of development was reached in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Based on a research conducted in recent years, we can conclude that the permanent audience of the Russian media is 75% of the members of the "Russian street" of age 18 and higher. A significant proportion of immigrants from the countries of the former USSR are voters of the Israeli parties with a "Russian accent" who are interested in expanding their electorate.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 133.

<sup>16</sup> I. Rosenblum and T. Hershman, *Media Consumption among Immigrants from the CIS* [Research Report] (Tel-Aviv: PORI, 2013), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenblum and Hershman, *Media Consumption*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> N. Elias and M. Zel'tser-Shorer, *Bli gvolot: itonut on-line shel yotsim me brit hamoatsot ve khever hamedinot haatsmaiot be Israel* (Jerusalem: Institute for Democracy in Israel, 2007), 147. [In Hebrew]

<sup>19</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 40.

## Russian Israelis' self-identification and the community symbols

Another factor rallying the Russian-speaking community is the preservation of unique symbols, some of them mythical in character, that support the special self-identification of the "Russian street." Among these latter, there is the belief in the existence of certain "unique" values of Russian Jewry. The current notions of the superiority of the culture of Russian Jews over the culture of indigenous Israelis make it possible to speak of the existence of the phenomenon of sector snobbery.<sup>20</sup> The models of behavior of the immigrants from the countries of the former USSR largely depend on the mythical symbols of the community.<sup>21</sup>

However, there are also real community symbols, which can be classified as follows: The first category includes symbols related to the socio-economic development of the country. First and foremost, it concerns the role of the immigrants in the development of the high-tech sphere. A large number of highly qualified engineers immigrated in the 1990s, during the "Great Aliyah." This made a significant contribution to the development of the science-intensive industries in the country. In addition, among the immigrants there were also professional programmers who received a fundamental education in Russia and ensured the rise of the hi-tech industry, which now provides more than a half of Israel's exports.<sup>22</sup> The importance of this factor is confirmed by the current situation in the country: The immigrants from the countries of the former USSR make up a quarter of all the citizens who work in the sphere of high technology. Thus, the Russian-speaking community had a decisive influence on the development of the Israeli economy, which, in turn, legitimized the aspirations of the "Russian street" to participate in the political life of the country and to share the power.

The next category of the "Russian" symbols includes cultural projects. The central place is traditionally occupied by the Geshar Theater, which stages performances in Russian, and "Mofet," a network of physical and mathematical lyceums, where teaching is also conducted in Russian. Originally a project of immigrant teachers from the former USSR, these schools surpassed Israeli educational institutions as the quality of teaching in them was much higher.

The third category of communal symbols consists of holidays that were originally celebrated only by the "Russian street," but later came in demand by the rest of the Israeli society as well. The Civil New Year, along with the traditional Jewish Rosh Hashanah, is celebrated today not only by the 80% of the Russian-speaking families

---

<sup>20</sup> Fel'dman, "Russkii" Izrail', 169-174.

<sup>21</sup> M. Al-Haj, *Soviet Immigrants as Viewed by Jews and Arabs: Divided Attitudes in Divided Country* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 211.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Khanin, "Aliyah from the Former Soviet Union: Contribution to the National Security Balance," position paper presented on the behalf of the Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption to the 10th Annual Herzliya Conference: *Israel's National Security Balance* (IDC Herzliya, 2010), 43.



(according to the *Israel Plus* Channel),<sup>23</sup> but also by indigenous Israelis. Moreover, the Civil New Year is the only traditional holiday of ethnic communities that has been adopted by indigenous Israelis. For example, an attempt to turn the "Memuna" holiday of the Moroccan Jews into a general Israelite holiday was not crowned with success.

The factors listed above gradually produced another common symbol for the Russian-speaking Israelis, functioning as a cohesive tool as well: the infrastructure of "self-help."<sup>24</sup> It has become one of the key dimensions of the subculture of the "Russian street" and includes the business sector of the Russian-speaking Israelis, public institutions, and a system of cultural, educational, professional and social ties. This sector, due to the *de-facto* use of the Russian language in its institutions in the free market (banks, intermediary offices, retail chains, etc.), has provided jobs to a quarter of the newly arrived immigrants.<sup>25</sup> The "Russian" business sector still preserves its niche within the Israeli economy. Half of the small businessmen are the "Great Aliyah" immigrants with an engineering education, and 70% of the small business owners exclusively employ their compatriots. 72% of the clientele are also Russian-speaking Israelis, and Hebrew is necessary only for external contacts in the enterprises of the "Russian" sector.

The development and the strengthening of the "Russian street" has also contributed to a number of programs of socio-political development. Firstly, there are the projects launched by the initiative of Israeli institutions (in particular *Sohmut*, the Jewish Agency for Israel, state institutions, trade unions and political parties) with the aim of completing the absorption of the newly arrived immigrants. The community has also come up with its own cultural and political initiatives. And, thirdly, with the support of the Jewish diasporas around the world, as well as of the international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, new institutions have been founded.<sup>26</sup>

The dominance of the first kind of programs was especially noticeable even before the beginning of the "Great Aliyah" period, in the 1970s. In contrast, the initiatives of the immigrants of the 1970s-1980s, including the appearance of the first "Russian" party lists, were not effective even though they were exceptionally independent. After the beginning of the "Great Aliyah" the initiatives of the immigrants grew in importance beside the resources of the state structures, primarily

---

<sup>23</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 43.

<sup>24</sup> S. Cohen-Goldner and M. D. Paserman. *The Dynamic Impact of Immigration on Natives' Labor Market Outcomes: Evidence from Israel* (London: CEPR, 2005), p.38.

<sup>25</sup> Larisa Remennick, "Transnational Community in the Making: Russian-Jewish Immigrants of the 1990s in Israel," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 3 (2002): 515.

<sup>26</sup> E. Feldman, "Pragmatic Isolation of the FSU Immigrants in Israel," paper presented at the International Conference *Russian-Speaking Jewry in Global Perspective: Assimilation, Integration and Community-building* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2004), 43.

the Ministry of Aliyah and Absorption, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the municipal authorities.

It should also be noted that the external factor played an important role both during the 1970s and the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Jewish organizations in the United States (the Joint and UJA), as well as non-Jewish organizations (for example, the movement of Christian Zionists) played a significant role in the formation of community institutions of Russian-speaking Israelis. In the post-Soviet space, in the US and EU countries, the theme of "Russian Israel" occupies the same niche in the media as other local themes. Due to the efforts of the Russian-Jewish diasporas in the CIS countries, in the USA and in Western Europe during the 2000s, several new institutions appeared in the coordinate system of the "Russian street." In particular, a group of Russian businessmen, active participants of the Jewish community in Russia, established in Israel the International Foundation "Genesis" (the foundation for the development of the Russian-Jewish culture and identity).

### **The political and electoral structure of the Russian-speaking community and the evolution of the "Russian lobby"**

#### **The early period**

Since the 1970s (the period of the so-called "first wave" of immigration) the Russian-speaking community is legitimately regarded as a platform for political initiatives. It should be noted that throughout the period of the phenomenon's existence, the alternative models for institutionalizing the "Russian street" has remained unchanged: lobbying for the interests of "Russian Israel" by creating sectoral, purely communal, parties; forming the "Russian flank" (a group of Russian-speaking party activists) within the framework of the national parties; and avoiding to conduct a communal party policy, using instead the resources of the general Israeli parties, primarily Likud.

The first political initiatives were launched by the Russian-speaking immigrants before the "Great Aliyah" period. After the first wave of migration in the 1970s-1980s, several attempts were made to create "Russian" party lists. In 1977 the sectoral party Nes was founded, and in 1981 the List for the Russian *Olim*.<sup>27</sup> However, these parties were not popular, and most of the sectoral political projects were created every time from scratch and carried out by trial and error. On the other hand, it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of the first projects of the Russian-Jewish policy.

The merit of the so-called "First Israel" (the emerging political elite of the Ashkenazim that formed the nucleus of the Israel's establishment) consisted in accumulating experience by exercising influence on the groups of sectoral interests

---

<sup>27</sup> Leshem, *The Russian Aliya*, 333.

that were part of a nationwide policy even before the "Great Aliyah" period. Subethnic groups in the framework of political movements participated in the activities of the first pre-parliament (Assembly of Deputies) of the Jewish Yishuv already during the time of the British Mandate in Palestine.<sup>28</sup> After the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel, the sectoral lobbies, along with the party lists, have always acted as pressure groups, even without being able to overcome the electoral barrier<sup>29</sup>.

Since the beginning of the "Great Aliyah" the political behavior of the Russian-speaking voters has undergone certain changes. In the 1992 elections, the right-wing party DA and the left-wing party TALI fought for the votes of the Russian-speaking electorate. These parties were founded by the activists of the organizations Zionist Forum and the Association of Natives of the USSR, which were rival immigrant associations. These parties acted as *de-facto* satellites of the big parties, Likud and the Israeli Labor Party.<sup>30</sup> The Party of *Olim* and Pensioners, of a centrist orientation, also existed at that time.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is legitimate to conclude that even during the "Great Aliyah" the "Russian Israel" could not be united by one ideology, having already been split into the same political camps as the entire Israeli society.

### **The «Great Aliyah» and political breakthrough**

The year 1995 was critical for the Russian-speaking community because Natan Sharansky founded the sectoral party Yisrael BaAliyah, which enjoyed great popularity among the Russian-speaking Israelis in the first years of its existence. Yisrael BaAliyah received a large number immigrant votes (175,000) and 7 seats in the 1996 elections, and consolidated its success in the 1999 elections by receiving 172,000 votes and 6 seats. This was the evidence of the readiness of the "Russian Israel" to use their resources and take up their own niche in the Israeli political system.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the success of Yisrael BaAliyah, ideological differences within the community soon came to the fore. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, the Sharansky party virtually disintegrated on account of the complex problems in Israeli society. As a result, there were three sectoral parties in the Knesset: the centrist Yisrael BaAliyah, the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu, oriented toward building a market

---

<sup>28</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 48.

<sup>29</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 48.

<sup>30</sup> Y. Glikman, *Russian Jews in Canada: Threat to Identity or Promise of Renewal?* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996), 192.

<sup>31</sup> Leshem, *The Russian Aliya*, 360.

<sup>32</sup> E. Ben-Rafael, M. Lyubansky, O. Glöckner, P. Harris, Y. Israel, W. Jasper, and J. Schoeps, *Building a Diaspora: Russian Jews in Israel, Germany and the USA* (Laiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 55.

economy in the country, and the left-wing socialist party "Democratic Choice," headed by Roman Bronfman.<sup>33</sup>

For the next elections in 2003, the parties of Lieberman and Bronfman had already come within the national political blocs, the left-wing Meretz and the right-wing National Unity. Yisrael BaAliyah, which used to have a monopoly on the "Russian street," lost two-thirds of its electorate. Some of the immigrant voters in this election supported the party Shinui, and some Likud. As a result, Yisrael BaAliyah received only two seats in the parliament and, after a while was absorbed by Likud, disappearing altogether from the political map of Israel.<sup>34</sup>

For a large number of Russian-speaking Israelis, this was an argument in favor of cooperation with the all-Israeli parties. During the 1990s several attempts to find a compromise with the national movements had already been made, but none of them had been crowned with success.

Summing up the results of the first ten years of activity of the Russian-speaking immigrants on the Israeli political stage, it is possible to draw the following conclusions: Firstly, the "Great Aliyah" of the 1990s did not lead to a restructuring of the lobbying institutions of the "Russian Israel" due to the low level of representation of the community at all levels of government in the state as well as to its limited influence on Israel's domestic and foreign policies. On the other hand, the fact that the Russian community grew conscious of its political potential during this period is important, as it led to the acquisition of a sufficiently high status among indigenous Israelis and local political elites. Entering the political orbit of Israel, the representatives of the "Russian" establishment formed the core of the "Russian street," which was structured around several political camps by the year 2003.

The first camp included the supporters of A. Lieberman and his right-wing party Yisrael Beiteinu, which had 5 seats after the elections.<sup>35</sup> The second camp comprised the supporters of Ariel Sharon. This camp was formed in 2001, when the citizens of Israel did not choose who would enter the new Knesset, but cast their vote for the candidates for the post of prime minister. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assert that the Russian faction of the Sharonist camp supported Likud. Their slogan was rather "Sharon is the head of Likud."<sup>36</sup>

### **The post-Yisrael BaAliyah era**

After the split in Likud in 2005, the supporters of this political party followed Sharon and joined his new centrist party Kadima. And after Sharon was no longer

---

<sup>33</sup> Remennick, "Transnational community," 530.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Khanin, "The Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party between the Mainstream and 'Russian' Community Politics," *Israel Affairs* 16, 1 (2010): 105.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Khanin, "The Israeli 'Russian' Community and Immigrants Party Politics in the 2003 Elections," *Israel Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2004): 146.

<sup>36</sup> Khanin, "Israeli 'Russian' Community," 150.

able to participate in the political life of the country, disillusioned with the new leaders of Kadima, they returned to Likud.<sup>37</sup> Since 2008, therefore, this group of voters is under the influence of Likud.

The third camp was the former electorate of Yisrael BaAliyah, which, as noted above, was one of the most popular in 1996, but ceased to exist after the defeat in the elections in 2003. Israeli political practice had not witnessed any other case in which a party that had disappeared from the political arena was able to retain its home electorate. The infrastructure of Yisrael BaAliyah could not be taken over by any of its political competitors. To win over this group of voters, equivalent to six mandates, there was intense rivalry between Yisrael Beiteinu, the narrow-sector parties of the Russian community, and the all-Israeli parties that had a "Russian accent" in one way or another.

Thus, the next decade (2003-2013) following the unsuccessful elections of the "Russian street" was the time to find an organizational platform that would be adequate for all the camps and activists who spoke on behalf of these groups.

In the mood that the results of the 2003 elections created among Russian-speaking Israelis, the disproportion between the high level of support that they rendered to Israel's political movements and parties, and the very low level of access to their resources, appeared all the more striking. The idea of returning to the political arena with a new sectoral party became very popular again in the Russian-speaking environment.<sup>38</sup> A poll conducted one year after the election showed that 50% of the respondents spoke about the need to revive the effective Russian political lobby, 30% of the respondents declared their readiness to support the national parties in case there were strong repatriate factions within them, and only 12% believed that the all-Israeli parties could adequately represent the interests of the community in any given situation.<sup>39</sup>

These data indicate that among the Russian-speaking Israelis in 2004, the same situation obtained as in the 1990s when the sympathies of the community were divided between sectoral and all-Israeli parties. This alignment stimulated the activity of the inner-party community organizations.

Nevertheless, the activists among the political elites of the immigrant community did not put forward new ideas in principle. Discussions were held about already well-known models. The first of these was to occupy a niche of community policy within the framework of sectoral parties, the second was to enter the all-Israeli parties within the framework of organized immigrant groups and lobby the interests of the community using existing mechanisms, and the third was to form community branches in the form of satellite organizations within all-Israeli parties. This last was

---

<sup>37</sup> Khanin, "Israeli 'Russian' Community," 161.

<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Khanin, "'Russkaya' obshchina, vybory i vlast' v Izraile: itogi i perspektivy," *Blizhnii Vostok i sovremennost'* 29 (2006): 245.

<sup>39</sup> Khanin, "'Russkaya' obshchina," 250.

to be carried out using the remaining infrastructure of the sectoral parties of the Russian-speaking community of the "Greater Aliyah" of the 1990s.

The most relevant among these models was the first one, chosen by the members of the political groups of the "Russian street" who managed to preserve the infrastructure of the community. Supporters of N. Sharansky, A. Lieberman and R. Bronfman became adherents of the first model.

The results of the participation of Yisrael Beiteinu in the National Unity block disappointed Lieberman's supporters, and after the 2003 elections the party decided to act independently rather than within the bloc.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the party leaders did not want Yisrael Beiteinu to be perceived by the society as a "Russian" sectoral party, and abandoned the self-definition dating from before the 2003 elections: "The party in which all the constituents speak Russian."<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, they set out to establish a "Russian party with an Israeli accent."<sup>42</sup> This fact proves that Lieberman and his supporters sought to get votes from not only their home electorate, which was always a part of their traditional sphere of influence, but also from the former supporters of Yisrael BaAliyah who, after its disappearance from the political arena, had not yet decided about their political preferences.

It should be noted that the former leaders of Yisrael BaAliyah, Nathan Sharansky and Yuli-Yoel Edelstein (the current speaker of the Knesset), did not exclude the possibility of occupying a new niche with an independent communal party policy. A large number of the middle-level activists were also dissatisfied with the withdrawal of the party from the political arena of Israel, arguing that a huge number of problems of the "Russian street" associated with socio-economic development had yet to be solved, and that it was accordingly not right for Yisrael BaAliyah to disappear from the political field of the country or to become a part of Likud. In this regard, a year after the election, N. Sharansky organized a meeting with former party functionaries in which the possibility of resuscitation of the infrastructure of the communal "Russian" party was discussed.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, for some time there was the idea of creating a joint party with both Sharansky and Lieberman, and the leaders of the "Russian street" discussed it. This party was conceived as an alternative to the Likud party, which, according to Lieberman, had already become populist and lost its ability to influence effectively the internal political situation.<sup>44</sup> Like the previous initiatives, this project was not developed further for the reason that neither Lieberman nor Sharansky were ready to play the role of the second man.

---

<sup>40</sup> Y. A. Zubarev, "Vstavaite, lyudi 'russkie'," *Russkii izrail'tyanin* 43 (2004): 1.

<sup>41</sup> Zubarev, "Vstavaite," 12.

<sup>42</sup> Zubarev, "Vstavaite," 13.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Khanin, "Russkie" i vlast' v sovremennom Izraile (M.: IIIiBV, 2004), 290.

<sup>44</sup> Vladimir Khanin, *Vokrug razmezhevaniya: obshchestvo i politika Izrailya v 2005 godu* (M.: IBV, 2006), 119.

In 2005, at the next congress of Likud, the final merger of Yisrael BaAliyah with this party was proclaimed. Former party functionaries received 128 seats in the Party Center.<sup>45</sup> Sharansky commented on this event:

A powerful group of the Russian-speaking Israelis in Likud Central Committee is a huge success for the Aliyah ... Now we have completely different opportunities, and we can rest assured that we will use them for the benefit of Aliyah and Israel ... I do not think that in representing Aliyah [I] should forget the interests of the whole state its Jewish character and security. We will no longer be a party with our program, but we will influence the change of Likud program in such a way that it corresponds to the interests of the immigrants.<sup>46</sup>

After the merger of their party with Likud, Sharansky and Edelstein concentrated their efforts on cooperating with the rest of the lobbying groups within the party rather than on dealing with the problems of immigrants. Clarifying his position on filling the Russian quota in the Party Center, Natan Sharansky openly declared the necessity of creating an effective block of activists within Likud that would work for the benefit of not only the Russian-speaking immigrants, but of the entire Israeli people.<sup>47</sup>

Marina Solodkina, a former deputy of Yisrael BaAliyah, did not support her former colleagues. She believed that it was necessary to create a satellite party of Likud, which would have broad autonomy and direct its efforts toward solving the problems of the "Russian Israel." Thus, the quota of 128 seats in the Party Center for the former functionaries of Yisrael BaAliyah would function as the headquarters of such an intra-party grouping. According to Solodkina, this quota ought to be supported by the municipal leaders rather than by Sharansky and Edelstein in the party leadership.<sup>48</sup>

This prospect was certainly attractive for a large number of the middle-class activists, especially in the cities on the periphery of Israel where Solodkina had enormous influence. These activists argued that in case of an open conflict with Sharansky they would be ready to follow Solodkina into any Israeli party, even Shas.

In the end, the situation developed precisely as in this scenario. Solodkina supported Sharon's plan for a unilateral disengagement and followed him into Kadima. Within the new party, Solodkina attempted to implement her project, mobilizing the efforts of the immigrants.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Solodkina succeeded in luring to Kadima a fairly large proportion of the Yisrael BaAliyah activists, who formed the

---

<sup>45</sup> Khanin, *Vokrug razmezhevaniya*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Khanin, *Vokrug razmezhevaniya*, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 63.

<sup>48</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 64.

<sup>49</sup> Khanin, "Tretii Izrail'", 64.

“Russian headquarters” of the party. Then the municipal leaders were selected from amongst this group. In the meanwhile the supporters of Shimon Peres, who had not managed to win elections for the leader of the Israeli Labor Party,<sup>50</sup> also moved to Kadima.

During the struggle for the post of leadership in Kadima, Solodkina took a neutral position. At the same time, she began implementing a plan to create her own camp. She stopped her activities within the party, explaining this by the lack of resources to help returnees through the governmental bodies, as well as her disappointment in the leadership of «Kadima». In fact, Solodkina proposed the restoration of the «Yisrael BaAliyah», which would mean the claims of the reanimated party, firstly, for those mandates of the «Russian street» that «Kadima» party won in the elections; secondly, to the votes of those Russian-speaking Israelis who, after the collapse of «Yisrael BaAliyah», supported «Yisrael Beiteinu».

It should be noted that another “Russian street” project was developing within Kadima, reminiscent of the one that Sharansky and Edelstein had tried to implement in the framework of Likud. At the head of the project was Ze'ev Elkin, who proposed to register the Russian-speaking Israelis *en masse* in order to influence the decisions of the party leadership, as the immigrants' share in the party would then grow very large. With successful implementation, this model could develop into the platform of an all-Israeli political movement within the Russian wing. Examples of such development had already been present inside the parties Moledet and Shinui, but then the leadership of those parties had not allowed the completion of similar projects.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the fact that the restoration of Yisrael BaAliyah seemed unlikely, Lieberman's camp reacted to the possible threat quite seriously. One of the leaders of Yisrael Beiteinu, Yuri Stern, sent Solodkina a letter in which he said that he was indignant at her numerous calls in the press to create a new immigrant party, since such a party, Yisrael Beiteinu itself, already existed.<sup>52</sup> Lieberman's Party, according to Stern, was the only community party capable of fully representing the interests of the “Russian street.” This seemed to be proven true in the last elections where Yisrael Beiteinu achieved a rare success, obtaining 11 seats in the Knesset.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, in the opinion of Stern, any attempt to create another sectoral party would only lead to a split of the “Russian Israel” into two camps, whereas the task of the leaders of the “Russian street” was precisely to prevent any such dissipation of the community's forces.

Solodkina, accepting Stern's arguments, nevertheless stated in her response letter that it was impossible for almost one and a half million people who made the Russian-speaking community to hold the same point of view and therefore there

---

<sup>50</sup> Khanin, “Tretii Izrail'”, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Remennik, “Russkie” izrail'tyane, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Remennik, “Russkie” izrail'tyane, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Remennik, “Russkie” izrail'tyane, 181.



ought to be several community parties.<sup>54</sup> As an alternative, Solodkina proposed the convening of a nonpartisan forum of the "Russian Israel," which would include not only professional politicians, but also businessmen, cultural figures, and workers of public organizations. Such a structure, according to Solodkina, would be much more effective than the "Russian" party.

This conception of Solodkina was built, in fact, on the principles held by Yisrael BaAliyah in the years of its existence. Despite the fact that Solodkina's camp mainly comprised the middle-level activists in peripheral cities, her personal authority was so great that the leaders of Kadima could not allow her to leave the party and create an independent project. Accordingly they made every effort to keep Solodkina in the party.

Thus, Kadima and Likud were the main all-Israeli parties for the "Russian street." Sharing the voice of the "Sharonists of the Russian Israel" between themselves in a continuously changing proportion, they tried to prevent a situation whereby all the Russian-speaking voters would vote for Lieberman's party.

Thus, the models of institutionalizing the "Russian street" throughout the entire period of the evolution of the "Russian lobby" were the same: representing the interests of the community through the mechanisms of a sectoral community party, forming a "Russian wing" within the framework of general Israeli parties, or using national parties.

## **Conclusion**

The "Russian street" was formed due to the following unifying factors: territorial localization, the creation of its own unique cultural environment, the preservation of the special status of the Russian language in Israel, the development of the Russian media space, and the preservation and maintenance of the community symbols. Their combination led to the preservation and development of the distinctive features of the community, inherited from their country of exodus. But it also became possible to constitute an organic part of Israeli society and play some role in it.

The political tools developed by the pressure groups in the "Russian street" are diverse. The Israeli establishment seeks to regulate the behavior of the sub-ethnic communities and to develop a certain electorate. However, it should be noted that the leaders of the sectoral parties, despite the apparent revolutionary phraseology, are ready to cooperate with the national forces, and do not strive to monopolize the power in the country. Initiatives to create a socially-oriented party of the "Russian Israel" may end with the promulgation of a number of social slogans, but an organized political grouping will not be created as proven by the existence of such unrealized projects in the past.

Even if the leaders of the newly created movement win in the municipal council elections, and then openly declare their parliamentary ambitions, none of the

---

<sup>54</sup> Remennik, *"Russkie" izrail'tyane*, 185.

narrow-sector parties can overcome the electoral barrier. Opinion polls show that 65% of the Russian-speaking immigrants would support the unified Russian party if it were created, but 58% out of these 65% do not believe in the realism of such a project.<sup>55</sup>

The reason for this is the fact that Israel is a state built on the principle of nationalism. This foundation of Israeli society will not allow the development of any single-sectoral initiative, so the first model of institutionalizing the “Russian street” does not seem relevant. In this regard, even Lieberman's party Yisrael Beiteinu, traditionally considered as a “Russian” communal party, has been eventually transformed into an all-Israeli party with a “Russian” accent, constituting an example of the second model. Many Russian-speaking voters cast their vote for the national forces, primarily for the Likud party, which is in power today.

---

<sup>55</sup> Khanin, “*Tretii Izrail*”, 62.

## **Bibliography**

- Al-Haj, M. *Soviet Immigrants as Viewed by Jews and Arabs: Divided Attitudes in a Divided Country*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998.
- Ben-Rafael, E., M. Lyubansky, O. Glöckner, P. Harris, Y. Israel, W. Jasper, J. H. Schoeps. *Building a Diaspora: Russian Jews in Israel, Germany and the USA*. Laiden and Boston: Brill, 2006.
- Cohen-Goldner, S., M. D. Paserman. *The Dynamic Impact of Immigration on Natives' Labor Market Outcomes: Evidence from Israel*. London: CEPR, 2005.
- Donnitsa-Shmidt, S. "Ha shimmer shel sapha o hitpakhut shela? Ha sapha rusit shel olim me khever hamedinot haatsmaiot be hatkhala be Israel." *Kha-ul'pan kha-khadash* 85 (2007). [In Hebrew]
- Elias, N., and M. Zel'tser-Shorer. *Bli gvulot: itonut on-line shel yotsim me brit hamoatsot ve khever hamedinot haatsmaiot be Israel*. Jerusalem: Institute for Democracy in Israel, 2007. [In Hebrew]
- Feldman, E. "'Pragmatic Isolation' of the FSU Immigrants in Israel." Paper presented at the International Conference *Russian-Speaking Jewry in Global Perspective: Assimilation, Integration and Community-building*. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2004.
- Fel'dman, E. *"Russkii" Izrail': mezhdv dvukh polyusov*. Moscow: Market DS, 2003.
- Glikman, Y. *Russian Jews in Canada: Threat to Identity or Promise of Renewal?* Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996.
- Khakokhen, D. *Ha shita shel klita yashara ve tolidot shela: ha integratsiya sotsiyalit ve tarbutit shel olim me khever hamedinot haatsmaiot be hatkhala shel 1990s*. Jerusalem: Institute for the Study of Israel, 1994. [In Hebrew]
- Khanin, Vladimir. "Aliyah from the Former Soviet Union: Contribution to the National Security Balance." Position paper presented on the behalf of the Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption to the *10th Annual Herzliya Conference: Israel's National Security Balance*, IDC Herzliya, 2010.
- Khanin, Vladimir. "Russkaya obshchina, vybory i vlast' v Izraile: itogi i perspektivy" *Blizhnii Vostok i sovremennost'* 29 (2006): 245-273.
- Khanin, Vladimir. *"Russkie" i vlast' v sovremennom Izraile*. M.: IIIiBV, 2004.
- Khanin, Vladimir. "The Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party between the Mainstream and 'Russian' Community Politics." *Israel Affairs* 16, 1 (2010): 105-123.
- Khanin, Vladimir. "The Israeli 'Russian' Community and Immigrants Party Politics in the 2003 Elections." *Israel Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2004): 146-180.

- Khanin, Vladimir. *"Tretii Izrail": russkoyazychnaya obshchina i politicheskie protsessy v evreiskom gosudarstve v nachale XXI veka*. Moscow: Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 2014.
- Khanin, Vladimir. *Vokrug razmezhevaniya: obshchestvo i politika Izrailya v 2005 godu*. M.: IBV, 2006.
- Leshem, Elazar. *The Russian Aliya in Israel: Community and Identity in the Second Decade*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.
- Leshem, Elazar, and M. Lissak. *Development and Consolidation of the Russian Community in Israel*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999.
- Moshokova, Tatiana. "Faktery formirovaniya sovremennoi russkoyazychnoi obshchiny gosudarstva Izrail'." *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* 6, no. 2 (2017): 16-24.
- Moshokova, Tatiana. "Politiko-elektoral'naya struktura russkoyazychnoi obshchiny Izrail'ya." *Politika i obshchestvo* 15, 2 (2018): 57-65.
- Niznik, Marina. "Osobennosti kul'turnoi integratsii vykhodtsev iz SSSR/SNG v Izraile" *Diaspory* 1 (2003): 49-60.
- Niznik, Marina. "Russian Language in Israel – Is it Half Alive or Half Dead?" Paper presented to the *National Challenge – the Third Ashdod Conference on Aliya and Absorption*. Ashdod, 2010.
- Remennik, Larisa. *"Russkie" izrail'tyane glazami sotsiologa: kul'tura i obraz zhizni*. Moscow: IV RAN "Natalis," 2008.
- Remennick, Larisa. "Transnational Community in the Making: Russian-Jewish Immigrants of the 1990s in Israel." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 3 (2002): 515-530.
- Rosenblum, I., T. Hershman. *Media Consumption among Immigrants from the CIS*. [Research Report]. Tel-Aviv: PORI, 2013.
- Zubarev, Y. A. "Vstavaite, lyudi 'russkie'" *Russkii Izrail'tyanin* 43 (2004): 1-13.