

Russia's Diasporas:

The Case of the Russian-speaking Community in Israel

By

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Introduction

The Greek term “diaspora” was first applied to the dispersion and settlement of the Jews outside of ancient Palestine.¹ Subsequently, the term was extended to the Greek and Armenian dispersion and to other migratory phenomena, although scholars continue to refer back to the original meaning.² Indeed, particularly since the fall of the Soviet bloc and the acceleration of globalization processes, governmental bodies, NGOs, and academic institutions have devoted considerable attention to defining and studying the various migratory processes and the effects of clusters of immigrant populations on countries in the developed world.³

In trying to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions to merit usage of the term “diaspora” beyond the Jewish meaning, some scholars have advocated a broad application whereas others have questioned the value of a too expansive definition. In an introduction to the first issue of the journal *Diaspora*, editor Khachig Tölölyan expressed the belief that the term “now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.”⁴

Some restrictions are necessary, however, or else the term becomes too diffuse. Thus, in a fundamental article, William Safran applied the term diaspora to a group of peoples that

¹ According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, it refers to voluntary dispersion and differs from exile, forced dispersion, referred to as “galut” or “golah.” The Diaspora thus referred to “Jewish settlement outside the land of Israel during periods of Jewish independence or compact settlement in their land.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 6, column 8. This distinction, however, is not consistently adhered to today.

² For allusions to the original context see for example, “Jon Stratton, “(Dis)placing the Jews: Historicizing the Idea of Diaspora,” *Diaspora* 6, no.3 (1997):327; Martin Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora(s),” *Diaspora* 6, no.3 (1997): 385, 392-395.

³ The journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* was founded in 1991 to deal with theoretical and practical aspects of diaspora issues. A Russian-language journal *Diaspory* was founded in 1999 with the support of the JOINT and Russian Jewish Congress. In addition to the large amount of published material available, the international organization Metropolis has been holding annual conferences since 1996 that bring together academics, policy-makers and practitioners in the fields of immigration, integration and ethno-racial diversity. Its

have settled outside of their ancestral homeland and share several of the following characteristics: 1) dispersion from an original center to two or more “peripheral” regions; 2) retention of a collective memory, vision or myth about the original homeland; 3) a feeling that they are not fully accepted by the host country and therefore feel partly alienated from it; 4) a view of the ancestral homeland as the ideal home to which they hope eventually to return; 5) a belief that they should be collectively committed to upholding or restoring the well-being of the homeland; and 6) maintenance of some relationship with the homeland that is an important element in the definition of their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity. Robin Cohen enlarges the number of categories, distinguishing between dispersal that is often traumatic and expansion from a homeland for economic reasons.⁵

James Clifford, who favors including a wide range of phenomena in the characterization of diaspora, suggests that the connections linking diasporas need not necessarily focus on a real or symbolic homeland. “Decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return. And a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin.”⁶ Tölölyan emphasizes that in order to be considered a diaspora, the segment of society must represent a “collectivity rather than a scattering of individuals” that “labors to remain in interaction with the larger transnation which includes the homeland and other diasporic segments.”⁷ Clifford’s and Tölölyan’s qualifications are useful in considering the situation after the collapse of the Soviet empire.

web site (www.international.metropolis.net) contains research and policy publications in the areas of immigration and integration; listings of immigration-related events; and links to partner organizations.

⁴ Khachig Tölölyan, “The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface,” *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 4.

⁵ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997), p. 26.

⁶ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3(1994): 302-338; this essay was reprinted in Clifford, *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 250.

⁷ Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Movement,” *Diaspora* 5, no.

In another, more metaphorical extension of the term, diaspora is associated with essential post-modernist qualities of contemporary individuals in which they “feel themselves strangers in the concrete place where they find themselves and, in a certain way, strangers to themselves insofar as they now have the responsibility of constructing their own identities...”⁸ The connection has also been made between the Jew as both a prototypical diaspora individual and post-modernist.⁹

The breakup of the Soviet Union brought the issue of diasporas to the forefront in a large part of the world, creating some novel situations. Perhaps the most unusual were what Safran referred to as “beached” or “stranded” diasporas, the communities in Russia’s so-called “near abroad” that became “diasporized” without leaving their homes because of the division of the USSR into 15 sovereign states. These diasporas, as Rogers Brubaker observes, belong not so much to a post-national world as to a post-multinational one. They exist in countries that proclaim “not the rejection of the principle of the nation state but its triumph.”¹⁰ Some scholars use the broad notion of diaspora, or the “new Russian diaspora,” to designate significant Russian ethnic minorities abroad. Others, however, use a more restrictive definition, asking whether all these minorities succeeded “in organizing themselves and in creating a diaspora that is capable of pursuing a purposeful policy in their own interests or whether they remained an amorphous ethnic minority?”¹¹ The latter consider that being a significant ethnic minority is not sufficient; in order to form a diaspora this minority must also have “a pivotal idea that consolidates the ethnic group, as well as organizational structures”

⁸ Dominique Schnapper, “From the Nation-State to the Transnational World: On the Meaning and Usefulness of Diaspora as a Concept,” *Diaspora* 8, no. 3 (1999): 251.

⁹ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Enquiry* 19 (1993): 711.

¹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, “‘Diasporas’ of Cataclysm in Central and Eastern Europe and their Relations with the Motherland,” *Diaspora*, no. 3 (2001), p.6.

¹¹ See V. A. Kolosov, ed., *Geopoliticheskoe polozhenie Rossii: predstavleniia i realnost’* (Russia’s Geopolitical

that act to implement this idea and to support the diaspora.¹² This distinction is important in examining the situation in the near abroad.

Another interesting case is that of the Russian-speaking Jews that immigrated to Israel—on the one hand, a returning Jewish diaspora, on the other, the seeds of a new Russian one. This paper will discuss post-Soviet diasporas in general while focusing on Israel, which presents some new challenges to the existing definitions.

The Near Abroad

Twenty-five million Russians unwillingly found themselves abroad after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even if Russia calls it the “near abroad,” it is still abroad, that is, beyond the borders of the Russian state. A characteristic common to this population as a whole is that neither their ancestors nor they themselves ever emigrated or were exiled from their own country.

The Russians started settling territories that are now parts of the near abroad as early as the 17th century. This process, in fact, paralleled that of the formation of the Russian empire and its territorial aggrandizement. It was essentially an internal migration, generated by various causes, among them escaping from serfdom. Many of the migrants went to territories that historically were the ethnic homelands of Ukrainians and Belarusians, thereby settling among peoples with whom they shared the same religion and had a close ethnic and cultural affinity. Later, the migration extended to territories with a very different ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural environment, such as the Baltics, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Nevertheless, the settlers did not regard themselves as emigrants from their country, but rather as migrants within the borders of the centralized Russian empire.

¹² . . .

Much later, in Soviet times, the internal migration received a strong impetus and even achieved a partly organized character in the process of industrialization and post-World War II economic recovery and development. The main increase in the number of Russians living outside the administrative borders of the RSFSR took place in that period in Central Asia (including Kazakhstan)—from more than 1.7 million in 1926 to almost 8.2 million in 1959, that is, by around 375 percent; in South Caucasus—from 338 thousand to 965 thousand, that is by 185.5 percent; and in Ukraine—from 2.7 million to almost 7.1 million, that is by almost 162 percent.¹³ After the war, the main increase was in the Baltics—from 336,000 in 1939 to 1.725 million in 1989, that is, by 413.4 percent.¹⁴ In some cases, significant numbers of Russians suddenly found themselves living beyond the borders of the RSFSR without leaving their place of residence, as happened following the inclusion of some regions into Ukraine when it became a Soviet republic and after the transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine.

Up until 1989, the percentage of Russians in the population of some republics reached or exceeded 30 percent—30% in Estonia, 34% in Latvia, 37.8% in Kazakhstan (down from 42.7% in 1959).¹⁵ Moreover, a characteristic of what was to become the Russian diaspora in the near abroad was the existence of compact groups of Russians and Russian-speaking populations that formed the majority in some areas. They, for instance, constituted more than two thirds of the population in Crimea and the Donetsk regions, almost two thirds in the Lugansk region, and more than half of the population in two other regions of Ukraine. They formed two thirds of the population in eastern Kazakhstan and northern Kazakhstan regions, almost a third in the Karaganda region, and almost a half in four other regions.¹⁶ With some exceptions, the trend up to 1989 was of a permanent growth of this population (see Table 1).

¹³ Calculated from Kolosov..., pp. 148-149, Table 18, "The number and the percentage of Russians within the borders of former USSR republics that have become independent states (1719-1989)."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kolosov... Table 18

Table 1. Russians on the territory of former non-Russian Soviet republics in correlation to the total number of Russians.¹⁷

Year	Total Russians (thousands)	Russians in Russia (thousands)	Russians on the territory of former non-Russian Soviet Republics	
			thousands	% of total
1858	34783	33347	1236	3.55
1897	55457	50956	4501	8.11
1917	75508	68855	6643	8.79
1926	78379	72611	5768	7.35
1939	100609	89928	10681	10.61
1959	114114	97864	16250	14.22
1979	136974	113522	23452	17.12
1989	144990 ¹	119866	25124 ¹	17.32 ¹

¹ The figures for 1989 are calculated taking into account the revision of the 1989 census made later by Kazakhstan.

For Russians in the near abroad, their new status—whether of ethnic minorities in independent states or of a diaspora—came as a sudden shock. “To Russians, accustomed to feeling themselves masters of their own country, the demotion of their status to that of an ethnic minority and the need to defend their rights were a surprise,” a painful loss of identity.¹⁸ Western authors, in fact, describe the situation in stronger terms. For instance, Denis Shaw’s assessment, although referring specifically to Central Asia, may be applied more broadly: “With their predominantly urban lifestyle, jobs mainly in industry and white collar professions, ignorance of local languages and numerous privileges, the Russians of

¹⁶ Kolosov..., p. 150.

¹⁷ Calculated from Kolosov..., pp. 148-149, Table 18, “The number and the percentage of Russians within the borders of former USSR republics that have become independent states (1719-1989).” These charts were compiled by my colleague at the Mayrock Center, Vladimir Zaharescu.

¹⁸ ...

Central Asia seemed even more of a colonial elite than was the case in other republics. Their loss of status has come as a shock to which they find it hard to adjust....”¹⁹

Despite the local differences, there are some common traits characterizing, to various degrees, the situation of the Russian diaspora in the near abroad: economic hardship, a decline in living standards, diminution of social status, linguistic difficulties, losing out politically, problems in access to higher education and jobs and so forth. In many places there are fears of growing local nationalism, of Islamic fundamentalism, and of civil disorder.²⁰

The reaction to all these factors was the tendency toward a quite massive return to Russia. This was a major, although not the only, cause of a decline in the absolute numbers of Russians in the near abroad and in their percentage in the total population of the respective countries, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The decline of the Russian population in the independent states that were part of the FSU.²¹

Country	1989		1999		Total decline	Migration decline*	Other causes of decline**
	Thousands	%	Thousands	%			
Ukraine	11355.6	22.1	9100.0	18.2	2255.6	296.0	1959.6
Belarus'	1342.1	13.2	1141.7	11.4	200.4	17.0	183.4

¹⁹ Denis J. B. Shaw, *Russia in the Modern World* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 260.

²⁰ For a further discussion of the variable factors affecting the situation of Russians in the near abroad see Igor Zevelev, *Russia and its New Diasporas* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001); Rogers Brubaker, “Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples,” in *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building*, eds. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) pp. 170-175. For a discussion of the situation in specific near abroad diasporas see, for example, *Nation-Building and Ethnic Integration in Post-Soviet Societies: An Investigation of Latvia and Kazakhstan*, ed. Pål Kolstø (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Beate Eschment, “Problemy russkikh Kazakhstana—etnichnost’ ili politika?” (Problems of Kazakhstan’s Russians—Ethnicity or Politics?), *Diaspora*, no. 2-3 (1999) at www.archipelag.ru/text/157.htm; Ken Aldred and Martin A. Smith, “Imperial Ambition or Humanitarian Concern, Russia and its ‘Near Abroad,’” July 4, 1997, <http://www.jha.ac/articles/a025.htm>.

²¹ Composed and calculated from Kolosov..., pp. 148-149, Table 18, “The number and the percentage of Russians within the borders of former USSR republics that have become independent states (1719-1989)” and

Moldova	562.1	13.0	501.0	11.6	61.1	52.0	9.1
Armenia	51.6	1.6	8.0	-	43.6	32.0	11.6
Azerbaijan	392.3	5.6	141.7	1.8	250.6	188.0	62.6
Georgia	341.2	6.3	140.0	Less than 3.0	201.2	158.0	43.2
Kazakhstan	6062.0	37.4	4479.6	30.0	1582.4	1032.0	550.4
Kyrgyzstan	916.6	21.5	603.2	12.5	313.4	215.0	98.4
Tajikistan	388.5	7.6	68.2 ¹	1.1	320.3	220.0 ²	-
Turkmenistan	333.9	9.5	240.0 ³	Around 5.0 ³	93.9	84.8	9.2
Uzbekistan	1653.5	8.3	1150.0	-	503.5	425.0	78.5
Estonia	474.8	30.3	350.7 ⁴	25.6 ⁴	124.1	59.0 ⁵	65.1
Latvia	905.5	34.0	699.5 ⁴	29.4 ⁴	206.0	94.0 ⁵	112.0
Lithuania	344.5	9.4	280.0	8.0	64.5	44.7	19.8

* Difference between the no. of Russians who migrated to Russia and the no. of migrants from Russia to the respective country.

** Natural decline (no. of deaths exceeding no. of births), assimilation, destination of emigration other than Russia.

¹ January 20, 2000 census.

² 1989-1998.

³ According to the January 10, 1995 census, there were 298,000 Russians in Turkmenistan (6.7 % of the total population), which gives a decline of 35,900 for the years 1989-1994. The figure of 240,000 for the beginning of 1999 represents an estimation by Tul'skii, based on data regarding the migration and natural decline.

⁴ March 31, 2000 census.

⁵ 1989-1999.

Russia officially took upon itself, by a November 1992 presidential decree, the role of protecting the ethnic Russians living in the near abroad, a protection that sometimes, specifically with regard to the Baltic republics, did not resist the temptation of interfering in the affairs of other states, using the existence and the situation of the Russian minority as an excuse. Although problems certainly remain, thus far, however, the situation of Russians in the near abroad has not turned out to be the explosive factor that some feared it might become.

In fact, Russia's heavy hand has been particularly evident in those countries where Russians represent less than eight percent of the population such as in Georgia, Azerbaijan or Tajikistan. In contrast, the Russian government came under criticism for not coming to the aid of Russian citizens affected by the revocation of a 1993 bilateral agreement between Russia and Turkmenistan on dual citizenship. It is still too early to gauge the consequences of the revocation, which went into effect on June 22, on the approximately 100,000 people holding dual citizenship, but there were reports indicating that it could infringe upon the rights of this population.²²

At first, the Russian government favored persuading Russians to remain in the near abroad countries. The great difficulty of accommodating them in Russia was probably only one of the reasons. More recently, statements by President Putin and top government officials, as well as numerous comments in the Russian media, indicated a change of heart caused by the view that Russia needs the migrants in order to alleviate its demographic situation, which many experts describe as catastrophic.²³ In February 2001, the government adopted the "Concept of Russia's Demographic Development," which indicated that Russia's population is declining by 700,000 a year and Russia needs the three-four million migrants that, according to experts, are ready to move to Russia from the near abroad.²⁴ Deputy Federation Affairs Minister Belan Khamichev declared that Russia would accord a priority status to Russians living abroad who wish to return.²⁵ Russia will, however, have to make a genuine effort in terms of housing and employment in order to give real meaning to the concept.

It is difficult to regard the Russians in the near abroad as a diaspora since they did not arrive there as a result of dispersion and they regard their residence—not the Russian Federation—as their homeland. Their self-identification in the past was as Soviet citizens

²² See *RFE/RL Newslines* reports for May-August, 2003.

²³ Graeme P. Herd, "Russia's Population Crisis: Demography as Destiny?" *RFE/RL Newslines*, no. 213, Part I, November 8, 2001.

²⁴ See *Moskovskie novosti*, July 30, 2001.

rather than as a Russian ethnos. They did not nurture any myth of return or feel any particular need to uphold Russia's well-being. Nor has Russia, in fact, done that much to advance their welfare. Members of these communities complain that despite Moscow's rhetoric, their needs are neglected, and commentators support their contentions.²⁶

The various Russian communities in the near abroad already underwent changes in the Soviet period under the influence of the milieu of the particular republic in which they resided. Their desire to immigrate (not return) to Russia in the past decade was fostered by their newly aroused feelings of alienation and discrimination as a result of the post-Soviet situation. Since the breakup of the USSR, they have not developed strong horizontal ties nor, it is estimated, are they likely to do so.²⁷ They have not succeeded for the most part in consolidating as a political force in their new states even when they have given prominence to sensitive issues such as language rights.²⁸ The nationalist ethnic Russian groups in Ukraine were not able to mobilize Russian speakers and did not receive more than two percent of the vote in the Ukrainian elections of 1998 and 2002.²⁹ The "diaspora" Russians have not exerted any significant political or cultural influence on the "Russian homeland."³⁰

An interesting development has been a shift from concern about ethnic Russians outside of the RF to focusing on the issue of the Russian-speaking population. The shift can be attributed to several factors both within and outside the RF. It is commonly accepted that one of the basic problems that the Russian state has faced is the need to mold a new national

²⁵ RFE/RL Newslines, no. 181, September 24, 2001.

²⁶ For example, Iana Amelina, "A Rossiia vse smotrit iskosa" (But Russia Continues to Look Askance)," *Russkii Zhurnal*, March 15, 2001, at russ.ru; "Tajikstan's Russians Complain They are Abandoned," RFE/RL Newslines, no. 182, September 26, 2002; Natal'ia Airapetova, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, April 24, 2002, p. 7, June 11, 2002, p. 1,3 and June 26, 2002, p. 10.

²⁷ Zevelev, p. 8.

²⁸ Taras Kuzio, "Russian Nationalism Comes Under Attack in Ukraine," RFE/RL Newslines, no. 25, Part 1, February 7, 2002.

²⁹ Taras Kuzio, RFE/RL Newslines, no. 25, Part 1, February 7, 2002 and RFE/RL Newslines, no. 172, Part 2, September 12, 2002.

³⁰ —

identity to replace the former imperial one.³¹ The problem is complicated by the fact that Russia never cultivated the identity of a nation-state built on ethnic foundations; both the tsarist and Soviet empires were multiethnic. President Vladimir Putin seems to be favoring a model that is civic (*rossiiskaia*) rather than ethnic (*rusaskaia*) and cultural-historical rather than territorial-imperial. The search for a model entails an attempt not only to weave together elements from the tsarist and Soviet past but also to include elements from émigré communities during the Soviet period.³²

The post-Soviet diaspora in the broad sense is a significant part of this new concept because it serves to assuage Russians' wounded pride over the loss of empire and to build up the country's international standing. Russia is viewed as the center not only for ethnic Russians but also, more loosely, as the center and source of pride for the entire international Russian-speaking community of "compatriots" (*sootchestvenniki*). In the "Concept of the Russian Federation's State Policy toward the Compatriots Abroad," which was developed (but not adopted) in 1997, the definition of compatriots was quite broad. It included those who "are understood to be all individuals who live outside the Russian Federation and consider themselves to be connected to Russia by historical, ethnocultural and spiritual links and those who wish to maintain these links irrespective of their citizenship, ethnicity, language, religion, social and economic status."³³

In May 2003, President Putin appointed Eleanora Mitrofanova as deputy foreign minister responsible for maintaining ties with Russians living abroad. According to a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mitrofanova will head a new department within the ministry

³¹ Vera Tolz, "A Search for a National Identity in Yel'tsin's and Putin's Russia," *Beyond Empire: Reevaluating the Post-Soviet Crisis*, forthcoming.

³² See Greta Slobin, "The Homecoming of the First Wave Diaspora and its Cultural Legacy," *Slavic Review* (Fall 2001):513-529.

³³ Draft of "Konceptsiia gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v otnoshenii zarubezhnykh

for liaison with ethnic Russians abroad and a new Russian Center for International Cultural Cooperation (Roszarubezhtsentr).³⁴

Putin's goal in currying the favor of "compatriots" has a strong pragmatic side as well. He views them as the backbone of a support mechanism that, like the Chinese diaspora, will promote the motherland's economic and political interests abroad.³⁵ Various congresses of compatriots have been organized as, for example, the Congress of Compatriots in Moscow in October 2001 in which almost 700 Russian speakers participated³⁶ or the conference of the Worldwide Association of the Russian-speaking press that met in Israel in December 2001.³⁷ The city of Moscow hosted a roundtable "The Foreign Diaspora—Russia's Economic Potential" in February 2002, attended by businessmen from 90 countries in the hopes of attracting outside capital investment.³⁸ The Federation Council, the upper house of parliament, has also discussed ways of better organizing contacts with the Russian diasporas.³⁹ It would seem, however, that the intentions are unlikely to bear fruit unless the appropriate government bodies invest in better organization and create a more stable legal and physical infrastructure. Moreover, Russian businessmen in the near abroad have not led the way in developing a worldwide lobby of "Russian speaking" business elites.⁴⁰ In this context, the far abroad, especially Israel, has become the focus of greater attention.

The Russian-speaking Community in Israel

Beyond the near abroad, the State of Israel contains the largest concentration of Russian/ex-Soviet citizens. Unlike the Russian-speaking community in the near abroad that,

³⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, Part I, 28 May 2003.

³⁵ This view was expressed by Sergei Yastrzhembskii, an adviser to Putin, to Israeli Knesset Deputy Yurii Stern. Interview with Yurii Stern in *Okna*, the weekly supplement of *Vesti*, July 12, 2001, p. 4; see also Arkadii Gaidamak, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 11, 2002, p.2.

³⁶ Baruch Klain, "Rossiia i diaspora," *Vesti*, October 18, 2001, p. 8.

³⁷ *Vesti*, December 6, 2001, p. 3. According to an official of the organization, a Russian press exists in 62 countries; 72 Russian newspapers are published in the U.S. alone (*Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 10, 2002, p. 9).

³⁸ Natal'ia Airapetova, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, February 7, 2002, p. 5.

³⁹ *Vesti*, December 6, 2001, p. 3.

without moving, suddenly found itself in a new political entity that was trying to define itself as a nation-state of the titular (non-Russian) ethnos, this group voluntarily left its home in order to settle in another state. Yet, using the term diaspora in reference to the Jews who emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel in and of itself seems almost like a contradiction in terms. Can this word be applied to those who left the land where they were born but immigrated to Israel, the ancestral and now revived Jewish homeland? In fact, in some literature, this group is referred to as a Returning Diaspora.⁴¹ The Hebrew language has a special word, “aliya,” or “ascent,” that applies to the process of Jews’ settling in Israel; the newcomers themselves are referred to as olim, those who ascend.

In contrast to the situation in the Soviet period, in their relationship to Russia, this group now meets some of the conditions ascribed by Safran to a diaspora. The Russian state’s willingness to enter into a dialogue with its departing citizens has set the stage for the development of a diaspora mentality. Those who leave may retain Russian citizenship; some participate in Russian elections at special sites in Israel, including voting for a representative from a particular Moscow district. This Russian State Duma representative announces his visits to his constituency in the Israeli Russian-language press.

Whereas the immigrants of the 1970s-1980s were usually strongly anti-Soviet and often professed ideological, Zionist motives for their aliya, the more recent group is propelled more by “push factors” such as economic interests and concern for their children’s future.⁴² They pursue various forms of contact with Russia and with other Russian-speaking diaspora groups. A significant number experience some feeling of alienation in Israel and see their “Russianness” as an element in their communal consciousness and solidarity.

⁴⁰ Tat’iana Poloskova, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, April 10, 2002, p. 7 and June 26, 2002, p. 10.

⁴¹ Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Elite Olshtain, and Idit Geijst, “Identity and Language: The Social Insertion of Soviet Jews in Israel,” *Immigration to Israel: Sociological Perspectives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 333.

⁴² Majid Al-Haj and Elazar Leshem, *Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel: Ten Years Later* (Haifa:

Despite certain similarities to communities elsewhere in the world, the Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel is rather unique. Unlike older groups of emigration from Russia/the Soviet Union, such as those after the Russian Revolution and after World War II or most of the Russians in the near abroad, this one is not ethnically Russian, although the percentage of ethnic Russians among the immigrants to Israel has been increasing with time.

The immigrants are coming to a place in which both their expectations and those of the host country depend to some extent on views of inherent national, ethnic or religious affiliation. Israel regards them as part of the Jewish diaspora that is returning home. As long as they qualify according to the Israeli Law of Return, they, unlike immigrants in most other situations, do not have to meet criteria of age, professional qualifications, etc. They become citizens of the state automatically upon arrival. Because Israel officially encourages “aliya,” it supports numerous programs to facilitate the newcomers’ absorption in the country. These include free Hebrew language study programs, help in finding work, professional retraining courses, subsidies for rental or purchase of homes, tax exemptions for purchasing household goods and various special social and communal programs.

There is no equivalent scope of activity or aid in other countries. Russian-speakers that immigrated to other popular locations such as the United States or Australia, are not seen by those countries as “repatriates” but merely as one more group of foreign immigrants. Their identification with the new country thus has to be built on grounds of civic identity alone. Germany is, perhaps, closest to the Israeli case; its basic law provides for the return of ethnic Germans (Aussiedler) and grants them automatic citizenship. Since 1993 Germany has restricted the numbers that may immigrate annually and limited the benefits to which they are entitled. Studies suggest that although Germany, like Israel, formally welcomes its ethnic

compatriots, the host society regards them as foreigners and they have serious difficulties in adjusting psychologically.⁴³

Another unique aspect of the Russian-speaking community in Israel is the sheer numbers, particularly in proportion to the resident population. The mass exodus of Soviet Jews began in 1989. It has slowed down in the last few years; the Jewish Agency reported that about 19,000 FSU olim arrived in 2002, a drop of 45 percent over the same period last year. Approximately 11,000 olim are expected to arrive in Israel in 2003. The total number of immigrants to Israel from the FSU (from 1989 through December 2002) is over 939,000. From 1989-2001, over 297,500 came from Russia alone.⁴⁴ Adding on the approximately 170,000 immigrants from the Soviet Union in the 1970s and early 1980s produces a total of well over one million people in Israel (over 17 percent of the Israeli population) from the FSU. (For comparison, approximately 137,000 Jews immigrated to Germany since 1991; around 300,000 went to the U.S. since 1989. Germany received about 2.2 million ethnic Germans from the Eastern bloc between 1989-1996, which represents only about 2.2 percent of the total population.) The size of the community and its percentage of the total Israeli population means not only that it has greater potential to influence the host country in the political, economic and social spheres, but also, the presence of such a large bloc of former citizens in one country has the potential to modify Russia's relationship with the country in question.⁴⁵ Moreover, the size of the group means that it possesses greater possibilities for preserving some characteristic features from the country of origin. The Russian-language media play an important role in this process.

⁴³ Judith Shuval, "Israel in the Context of Post-Industrial Migration," *Routes and Roots: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective*, ed. Shalva Weil (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), pp. 234-235; Nelli Khrustaleva, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 11, 2002, p. 10.

⁴⁴ "FSU Aliya Update: Summary for December 2002"; "Summary for June 2003," The Jewish Agency for Israel. The cited source for the information is the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Absorption.

⁴⁵ Because almost the entire group, including those from other FSU countries, is Russian-speaking and was raised on Russian culture in the Russian-centered Soviet Union, there is a certain tendency to regard the broader

The immigrant group of the 1970s-80s left the USSR with a sense of an irrevocable break in their lives. Israel at that time officially promoted the assimilationist or melting-pot model of integration that encouraged shedding the attributes of one's country of origin and adopting Israeli modes of behavior. The newcomers diligently studied Hebrew and, in many cases, spoke only Hebrew to their children. As a whole, the group achieved economic success but it did not develop an independent, formal community or political framework.⁴⁶

The aliya of the 1990s rejected the melting pot assimilationist option and considered other varieties of integration or separation.⁴⁷ On the one hand, these new ways enabled the group to have a more noticeable effect on the host society; on the other hand, the collective forms that it entailed, made it possible to regard it as, to some degree, a Russian diaspora in Israel. This is most applicable in the cultural sphere.

Political Integration

The developments in the political sphere are instructive in terms of the organizational development of the Russian-speaking community in Israel. Based on the fact that the immigrants (olim) from the FSU had arrived without experience in western-style non-governmental social or communal organization and were entering into a rather consolidated society that was alien to them, experts originally estimated that the integration of Russian olim into Israeli society in the 1990s would be an amorphous, individual process. However, within the course of about a decade, this group succeeded first in consolidating as a community and then in achieving notable success on the local and national level in the political sphere.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Tamar Horowitz, "The Absorption of the Soviet Jews in Israel 1968-84: Integration without Acculturation" in T. Horowitz, ed. *Between Two Worlds* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 9-30.

⁴⁷ For purposes of simplification, our discussion will not touch on the subgroups in the aliya that differ most markedly in terms of integration from the main group of immigrants. This refers, in particular, to those from the Caucasus. Separate studies have dealt with their characteristics and particular difficulties. See, for example, Judith King, *The Absorption of Immigrants from the Caucasus in the 1990s* (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale Institute, November 1998).

⁴⁸ For a general description of the process see Elazar Leshem and Moshe Lissak, "The Formation of the

For the sake of comparison, it should be noted that all those entitled to immigrate according to Israel's Law of Return automatically and immediately receive citizenship and the right to vote. In the West, the immigrant normally has not only to wait a certain period of time but also to demonstrate some familiarity with the new homeland in order to attain citizenship and voting rights.

In Israel, as opposed to other Russian diasporas, the massive immigration of the 1990s was thus bound to have a fairly immediate and significant effect on the political scene. This did not at first entail the formation of separate olim parties. The first time that immigrant parties were formed, in the national elections of 1992, the two groups, "Da" and "Tali," did not succeed in passing the voting threshold.⁴⁹ A major change occurred with the 1996 national elections that returned the Likud Party led by Benjamin Netanyahu to power. A change in the voting law prior to these elections was instrumental in enabling the olim to let their voice be heard more distinctly. Whereas previously, the prime minister had been chosen by parliamentary voting, a new law called for separate elections for parliamentary (Knesset) deputies and for the prime minister. According to Leshem and Lissak, this afforded the olim a solution to their dual identity problem. On the one hand, in the vote for head of the government, the FSU immigrants emphasized their national Israeli identity and, on the other hand, their vote for an olim party enabled them to emphasize their sectoral identity.⁵⁰

Transition) no. 4 (Jerusalem 2000), pp.47-66.also available in English as "Development and Consolidation of the Russian Community in Israel," *Roots and Routes: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective*, ed. Shalva Weil (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999). pp. 135-171.On political organization see also Zeev Katz, "Olim from the Former Soviet Union in Israeli Political Life: the 1990s" (Hebrew), in *Jews in Transition*, pp.145-157. For a more detailed discussion of the stages in the development of a Russian immigrant party that led to its success in the 1996 parliamentary elections see Dina Siegel, *The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel* (New York: Bergham Books, 1998), pp. 143-188.

⁴⁹ See Tamar Horowitz, "Political Consolidation of the Olim from the Former Soviet Union in Israel: From Passive to Active Citizenship," (Hebrew) in *From Russia to Israel: Identity and Culture in Transition*, M. Lissak and E. Leshem, ed (Tel Aviv, 2001), p. 104.

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In the 1996 elections, the olim party “Israel B’Aliya,” led by Natan Sharansky, obtained seven Knesset seats, receiving roughly 43 percent of the FSU immigrants’ votes.⁵¹ By not announcing support for a specific prime ministerial candidate, the party left the door open for negotiations with either winner. Benyamin Netanyahu apparently received about 62 percent of the FSU immigrants’ votes, a larger percentage than among Jewish voters at large. After negotiations in which the olim were promised benefits in the fields of housing and employment, the party entered Netanyahu’s government with two ministerial posts—industry and trade and immigrant absorption.

In the elections of May 1999, once again the olim seemed to have played a decisive role, this time in determining the victory of Labor’s Ehud Barak and his One Israel coalition. According to the newspaper *Maariv*, the One Israel campaign invested heavily in trying to win the Russian vote, playing particularly on the secular Russian community’s admiration of military heroes and aversion to the Likud’s courting of the religious Shas party.

In the elections of February 2001, the Russian vote again went against the sitting prime minister. Noting that the olim voting pattern of about 69 percent for Ariel Sharon and 31 for Ehud Barak was not that different from that of the rest of the population, some commentators interpreted this as a sign that the Russian olim were now more integrated into Israeli society.⁵²

The future of sectoral Russian olim parties was put into question with the national elections in January 2003 in which the country reverted to the old system of voting for parliamentary deputies, who then form the new government. After a disappointing showing that gave Israel B’Aliya only 2 seats, the party leadership decided to join the Likud faction in the parliament. The rival “Russian” faction of Avigdor Lieberman went into the election as a

⁵¹ Horowitz, *From Russia to Israel*, p. 107.

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part (the main one) of the National Union Coalition and another “Russian” deputy, Roman Bronfman joined the leftist Meretz Party.

Although some commentators suggested that the election results indicated that the olim no longer viewed themselves as a sector distinct from other Israelis, it is still early to deliver the eulogy for sectoral “Russian” parties. Dissatisfaction with their representation and role in the larger parties might in the future lead to renewed activity by "Russian" groupings.⁵³

In the meantime some preliminary observations on their achievements are in order. Israel is the only part of Russia’s far abroad where Russian immigrant parties were formed and developed a voice of their own. In the U.S., for example, not only the smaller number of immigrants but also the basically two-party system impeded the formation of immigrant political blocs. In recent elections in Israel, in contrast, the prime minister and the larger parties had to rely on a coalition of parties in order to form a majority government. Because the immigrant parties had the potential to play a crucial role in any coalition, the major parties and the subsequent governments had to pay greater heed to the needs of the immigrant community. The organized political activity of the Russian community in Israel has been directed at influencing policy primarily in domestic areas related to sectoral concerns such as housing, employment, etc In the social sphere, the appearance of a “Russian” party helped the community develop a sense of empowerment in Israeli society at large.

With regard to the Middle East settlement issue, the Russian voters tend to favor right wing platforms and oppose territorial concessions. When the Barak government seemed to be entering into serious negotiations with Syria regarding concessions on the Golan Heights, Israel B’Aliya, another olim party, Israel is Our Home, and various immigrant organizations were instrumental in organizing protest demonstrations, trips to the Golan and other forms of

consciousness raising.⁵⁴ The campaign was reinforced by polls in the Russian-language press showing strong opposition to a Golan withdrawal.⁵⁵ In the absence of an agreement with Syria, the Barak government never reached the stage of a public referendum but these mobilization efforts spearheaded by the olim affected the public debate.

In most areas of foreign policy, the immigrants' views do not seem different from those of the rest of the population. This group, however, is basically favorably inclined toward active, friendly relations with Russia, an attitude that has had some positive effect on bilateral political relations in various ways. For one, in the past decade, mindful of the "Russian" vote, Israeli political leaders have obligatorily promised to upgrade relations with Russia if elected (although this item was usually dropped later). In addition, they often traveled to Russia and obtained interviews on Russian television stations that are widely watched in Israel in order to attract the local vote. During a trip to Moscow in September 2002, Ariel Sharon again emphasized the importance of Israel's relations with Russia.

Russian-speaking Knesset deputies are the most vocal in urging an improvement in Israel's ties with Russia, and they are more likely than other parliamentarians to pay lip service to the need to involve Russia more actively in the Middle East settlement process. This fits in well with Russia's vision that its diaspora should lobby for Russia's having more of a say on important international issues. For various reasons, the Middle East is an area in which Russia feels that it can gain recognition as an important player.⁵⁶ Thus, Russian commentators and officials suggest that Russia is even more suitable than the U.S. as a mediator in the Middle East settlement process because, on the one hand, it has not lost the

⁵⁴ "The Struggle over the Golan Also Crosses Through the Russian Vote," *Ha'aretz* (Hebrew), September 30, 1999, section A, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Lily Galili, "Building a Russian Immigrant Front on the Golan," *Ha'aretz* (English), October 2, 1999, p. 4.

⁵⁶ I have dealt with this topic in more detail in an article on Russo-Israeli relations that appeared in Russian and in Hebrew. Stefani Hoffman, "Rossiisko-Izrail'skie otnosheniia v poslednee desiatiletie," *Obshchestvo i politika sovremennogo Izrail'ia* (Moscow: Gesharim, 2002), pp. 313-334; Hoffman, "Yachasei Russia-Yisrael: mitsiut mul potentsial," *Yehudei Brit Hamoetsot l'shavar b-Yisrael ubatfutsot*, no. 20-21 (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 241-253.

trust of its former Arab clients and, on the other hand, the presence of a million Russian-speaking citizens in Israel means that Russia wants to assure their security, too. In actual fact, there are too many other factors in play and Russia has not had a major input into recent Middle East moves. It is, however, receiving recognition (if not influence) as part of the so-called Quartet, which also includes the U.S., the U.N. and the EU.

Another area in which Russia is seeking outside political support concerns its campaign in Chechnya, which has drawn considerable international criticism although that has been modified after September 11. Israel is a natural choice of ally not only because of its Russian-speaking community but also because both countries see themselves as fighting Islamic extremist terrorism.

The view of the two countries as fighting a common battle against Islamic terrorism was reinforced after September 11 and after various terrorist incidents in Russia ascribed to Chechen fighters. In general, in comparison to the Western media, the central Russian press and electronic media often show more understanding of the Israeli position in its conflict with the Palestinians.⁵⁷ The Western media often interview Palestinian representatives who speak fluent English whereas the Russian media seek their commentary from Russian-speaking Israeli political figures such as Natan Sharansky or Avigdor Lieberman. Moreover, Russian officials and media express personal concern and emphasize the fact that Russian citizens are frequently the victims of terrorist acts. There has even been the suggestion that Palestinian terrorists purposely target places frequented by "Russians" with the goal of discouraging further aliya from Russia.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Based on my and other colleagues' random viewing of Russia's RTR and ORT (first channel) versus CNN or the BBC and of central Russian newspapers in comparison to Western ones. The Russian media often use the term "terrorist" in describing attacks against Israeli citizens whereas the Western media prefer the word "militant."

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During his trip to Moscow in September 2002, Sharon related that the Russian president makes it a point to call after every terrorist attack and ask for the names of the victims, to see whether they are Russian immigrants, or even people he personally knew.⁵⁹

The Economic Aspect of the Immigration

In the near abroad, the Russian diaspora population is only one factor in the vast economic problems created by the dismembering of a once highly centralized economy. Soviet leaders, for example, had purposely scattered factories manufacturing different parts of large machines or armaments among the republics in order to retain the center's control over the finished product. After the breakup of the USSR, individual states found themselves highly dependent on Russia for many products. In many cases, under conditions of economic disarray, the new states eventually realized the importance of the Russian-speaking diaspora for their economic development. It was not only that they could be helpful in restructuring economic relations with Russia but also they had an important domestic function. This group, as a rule, was more highly educated and technologically oriented than the indigenous population, particularly in Central Asia and therefore it was vital for the maintenance and development of the country's technological and industrial base. These considerations thus have caused some near abroad states to modify their policy toward the Russian minority in order to discourage them from emigrating.

In the far abroad, economic considerations were different. Initial assumptions in Israel, for instance, were that the Russian immigrants' language ability and familiarity with Russian working conditions on the one hand and their newly acquired knowledge of Western business practices and connections with Western markets on the other would be utilized for the benefit of both countries. There are, indeed, individuals who shuttle back and forth between Israel and

various FSU states on business although it is hard to obtain any official figures. In sum, however, the impact of the Russian aliya on Russo-Israeli economic relations has not been as strong as might have been expected. Several obstacles on both sides have played a role—for example, the lack of mutual guarantees, the absence of a sufficient legal basis for business operations in Russia, etc. In 2002, Russia's export to Israel totaled \$519.9 million; Israel's exports to Russia over this period were \$210.5 million⁶⁰ During Sharon's visit to Moscow in September 2002, it was noted that the annual volume of trade has reached about one billion dollars and that agreements are being prepared in the spheres of technology, health care and agriculture for consideration at a meeting in November of a joint economic commission.⁶¹ A mutual desire to eliminate some of the existing hindrances may facilitate a deepening of economic relations in the future.⁶²

Israeli businessmen were among those participating in the Moscow roundtable in February 2002, "The Foreign Diaspora—Russia's Economic Potential," to encourage outside investment in Russia. Another area in which the Putin government clearly seeks the support of a worldwide Russian-Jewish lobby is in efforts to convince the U.S. Congress to annul the Jackson-Vanik amendment and thereby ensure Russia the status of a preferred trading partner. The topic was raised, for instance, during a visit to Russia of ex-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at a meeting between President Putin and Russian communal rabbis, at a newly founded congress of worldwide Russian-speaking Jewish communities in late June-early July, and on several other occasions.⁶³

⁶⁰ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics at www.cbs.gov.il/sidfilee.cgi.

⁶¹ *Vesti*, October 3, 2002, p. 5; "Sharon discusses Mideast situation with Ivanov, Kasyanov, Jewish leaders," ITAR-TASS, October 2, 2002.

⁶² *Ha'aretz* (English) (August 28, 2001) reported that an Israeli interministerial committee was expected to set a ceiling of \$50-100 million for political risk insurance to be afforded for deals between Israel and Russia.

⁶³ Interview with Netanyahu in *Kommersant*, reprinted in *Vesti-Magazine*, June 20, 2002; *Nezavisimaia gazeta*,

The economic impact of the Russian aliya has been more pronounced in Israel itself. It has been the subject of various research projects but will not be dealt with here.⁶⁴ It is worth noting, however, that there is little evidence that the mass immigration had a negative effect on native employment levels in Israel.⁶⁵ Moreover, the expansion of the labor market caused by the influx of olim apparently resulted in economic growth and increased job opportunities rather than rising unemployment.⁶⁶

Cultural Diaspora

The question of whether the Russian-speaking community in Israel is, indeed, a Russian diaspora is most interesting in the social and cultural spheres. Here the tug of opposing claims—return to the ancestral Jewish homeland versus the Russian homeland left behind—is felt most acutely.

In this connection it should be noted that the aliya of the 1990s, in contrast to the earlier one, contained a higher percentage of people from the Slavic countries of the FSU (about 73 percent from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the period from 1989-June 2001).⁶⁷ Moreover, many of them came from the major metropolitan centers such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev. These people tend to be more highly assimilated into Russian culture and less familiar with the Jewish heritage than either Jews from the provinces, from non-

⁶⁴ For a general picture see Moshe Sicron, "The Immigrants Human Capital and their Integration in the Labor Force," *Profile of an Immigration Wave: The Absorption Process of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, 1990-1995* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998). The article has a large bibliography of articles on the topic. This comprehensive book contains English summaries of the various aspects of immigration policy, absorption, and problematics that are covered in the Hebrew text. See also Nancy Weinberg, "Mass Migration and Labor Market Incorporation: Soviet Immigrants in Israel," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 18 (2001), pp. 266-268.

⁶⁵ Rachel M. Friedberg, "The Impact of Mass Migration on the Israeli Labor Market," Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research in Israel, Discussion Paper Series, No. 98.01 (Jerusalem, January 1998).

⁶⁶ Michael Beenstock and Yitzhak ben Menachem, "The Labor-Market Absorption of CIS Immigrants to Israel: 1989-1994," Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research in Israel, Discussion Paper Series, No. 95.06 (Jerusalem, November 1995).

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Slavic areas or from the Western republics that were annexed by the USSR in 1939.⁶⁸ A growing percentage of olim is not even Jewish according to religious law but is entitled to come to Israel under the Law of Return. Thus in the 1990 group a total of 96 percent of immigrants from the FSU to Israel were officially classified as Jews whereas in 1999, the percentage was 49 percent.⁶⁹

This “russified” aliya was clearly not a candidate for Israel’s former melting pot policy. Indeed, on the official level, Israel now shows more receptivity to multicultural or hybrid approaches, which universally have gained greater acceptance. Nevertheless, tension exists between the official line and perceived reality. The Russian immigrants’ feeling of discomfort or alienation in Israeli society⁷⁰ contributes to the debate that has been voiced in several spheres; in this work we shall look at the linguistic and cultural ones.

A shared language often contributes to the feeling of solidarity of a diaspora; it sets it apart from the new society and reinforces the relationship with the country of origin. In Russia’s near abroad, language issues are often a point of friction between the Russian speakers and the new national states’ policy makers, who are striving to build identity around a national language. Problems in the Baltic States, Ukraine and Moldova are cases in point. In another instance, Russian rather than German was the native language of many of the younger generation ethnic Germans who immigrated to Germany. Their weak competence in German was a factor in their tendency to form migrant cliques with shared linguistic and cultural affinities and in their difficulties in integrating into German society.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Leshem and Lissak, “The Russian Community in Israel,” p. 143.

⁶⁹ Mark Tolts, “Jewish Demography of the Former Soviet Union,” *Papers in Jewish Demography 1997*, eds. Sergio Della Pergola and Judith Even (Jerusalem 2001), p. 116.

⁷⁰ See Elazar Leshem, “The Israeli Public’s Attitudes toward the New Immigrants of the 1990s,” *Immigration to Israel*, pp. 307-330.

⁷¹ See Barbara Dietz, “Post-Soviet Youth in Gemany: Group Formation, Values and Attitudes of a New Immigrant Generation,” *From Pacesetters to Dropouts: Post-Soviet Youth in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2003); Ada Gorbacheva, “‘Vessi’ i ‘russi,’” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, February 4, ----

Language issues have also been important in Israel. The revival of Biblical Hebrew as a modern language was a factor in consolidating a society with a diverse population of immigrants. For decades, at the core of the immigrant experience was attendance at an ulpan, a special program of Hebrew language instruction. The educational system, workplace, cultural establishment and society in general expected the newcomer to divest himself of his native language and to plunge into the Hebrew-speaking world if he/she wanted to succeed.

The massive aliya of the 1990s presented the novel situation of a group that insisted on retaining its linguistic heritage. Research has shown that for this group, the Russian language represented a positive value independent of the individual's interest in acquiring Hebrew.⁷² For the overwhelming majority of FSU immigrants to Israel, Russian is more than just their native language. This feeling was expressed most poignantly in the 1970s by the writer Boris Khazanov in a samizdat article in which he debated whether to leave or stay in Soviet Russia. Despairing over the state of affairs in Russia at that time, Khanazov wrote that, nevertheless, "I cannot imagine myself in an environment where Russian speech is silent. For me, the Russian language is my sole fatherland. I can reside only in this invisible city."⁷³

Khazanov left the USSR in 1982 for Germany. Ironically, had he gone to Israel instead, he would eventually have found the Russian language very much alive. In the 1990s, the very abundance of language opportunities made it easier for the olim to remain in a Russian cocoon. This holds true today from the most mundane to elevated spheres. Major food manufacturers include labeling in Russian on many products; salespeople in stores are often Russian speakers; several Russian television channels are readily available by cable or satellite; a local channel began broadcasting in Russian at the end of 2002; an official radio station and several pirate ones broadcast locally in Russian; a few major dailies and dozens of

⁷² Bella Kotik-Friedgut, "Motivational-Affective Complex in New Language Acquisition: Russian-Speaking New Immigrant Adolescents," *From Pacesetters to Dropouts: Post-Soviet Youth in Comparative Perspective*.

weeklies and other popular and literary magazines are published locally.⁷⁴ There are also several Israeli internet sites in Russian.

The language aspect is but one facet of a larger complex of issues concerning the identity of the Russian-speaking olim in Israeli society. As Rafael Nudelman, a well-known critic who arrived in the 1970s immigration commented, the immigrants' struggle "acquires nationwide significance because it is taking place under conditions of a crisis of the former Israeli collective identity."⁷⁵ In other words, the country in which the Russian-Jewish community wants to secure its place has itself been undergoing a post-Zionist identity crisis in which it questions the old values of the nation-state and a collective Jewish identity and the assumptions that it can be both western liberal and Jewish at the same time.

The reaction of Russian-speaking immigrants to these challenges takes on various forms. In this context, it is worth keeping in mind, as ethnographer Michael Chlenov has pointed out, that, as a result of both tsarist and Soviet policies, Jews in Eastern Europe tended to define their Jewish identity in ethnic or national terms rather than religious ones.⁷⁶ In some periods, Jews experienced their Jewishness mainly as a negative attribute associated with discrimination and hostility. They identified with Russian culture and knew little about the real content of Judaism; in fact, their very concept of Jewishness was colored by their Russian cultural background.⁷⁷ Only in the perestroika period was it possible openly to learn about and practice Jewish traditions, culture, etc.

⁷³ Boris Khazanov, "The New Russia," (Russian) *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 7 (May-June 1974) reprinted in *Jewish Samizdat* vol. 10 (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, 1976), p. 114.

⁷⁴ For the influence of the Russian-language media see Narspy Zilberg and Elazar Leshem, "Russian-language Press and Immigrant Community in Israel," *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 12, no. 3(1996): 173-190; also Hanna Adoni, Akiba Cohen and Dan Caspi, "The Social Construction of Hybrid Identity: Media Use in Russian Cultural Minority," ms. (July 2000).

⁷⁵ Rafael Nudelman, "Israeli Democracy and the 'Russian' Aliya," (Hebrew) in *The Jews of the Former Soviet Union in Israel and in the Diaspora*, no. 20-21 (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 105.

⁷⁶ Michael Chlenov, "Patterns of Jewish Identity in the Modern World," *Midstream* (September/October 2000), p.5.

⁷⁷ Rafael Nudelman, "An Attempt to Renew Zionism: Aliya of the 1970s and of the 1990s," (Hebrew) *Jews of*

At one end of the spectrum of views are those who reject the post-Zionist outlook. They do not see themselves as part of Russia's diaspora, their orientation is toward Israel. Characteristically, they see a parallel between the Russian-Jewish experience and the Biblical Jews' sojourn in Egypt; they are the generation of the wilderness and the goal is very clearly the Promised Land. Indeed, according to critic Mikhail Weiskopf, a central theme of Russian Israeli literature of the early 1990s was the Exodus as a mythical event.⁷⁸

Yet these Russian-Jewish Zionists often experience a wary or cool reception from Israeli society in general and the cultural establishment in particular. Perhaps in reaction to this rebuff, intellectuals from the Russian aliya attribute some kind of uniqueness to Russian Jewry. They contend that precisely the Russian-Jewish community is more patriotic than the rest of the Israeli population and is thus most suited to lead the Zionist revival.⁷⁹ Nudelman notes that a characteristic feature of the "Russian" group in Israel is "the almost messianic confidence in its salvational mission for Israel."⁸⁰ Indeed, facilitating worldwide solidarity with Israel is one of the declared goals of various recently organized international organizations of Russian-speaking Jewry.⁸¹ At the same time, these organizations reaffirm the validity and importance of Jewish communities outside of Israel. Russian officials are favorably disposed to these groupings as long as they are willing, at the same time, to fit into the framework of their goals for a Russian-speaking diaspora, i.e., encouragement of investment in Russia and support of its policies. At present, these objectives do not clash.

Adopting an approach similar to that of Russian nationalists in appraising Russians versus Westerners, the religious Mahanaim organization, with its ideological leader Pinchas

Democracy and the 'Russian' Aliya," pp. 105-143; Also Stefani Hoffman, "The Russian Path toward Jewish National Identity," ms. Delivered at VI ICCEES World Congress, August 2000.

⁷⁸ Cited in D. Slivniak's introduction to a recent anthology of Russian-Israeli literature, *Orientatsiia na Mestnosti* (Jerusalem, 2002).

⁷⁹ The political parties of the Russian olim advance similar claims. See, for instance, an interview with Knesset deputy Yurii Stern reprinted from *Inostranets* in *Vesti's* political magazine, November 29, 2001, pp. 4-5, 10.

⁸⁰ Nudelman, "Israeli Democracy," p. 127.

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Polonskii, regards Russian Jews as more spiritual than their western counterparts. Moreover, it is suggested that Russian Jews possess a deeper love for the land of Israel than other Jews and, in contrast to the overly individualistic Westerners, they may be best suited to find and preserve a desired balance between “the perception of ones individuality” and “the perception of oneself as a cell of the people.”⁸²

Others contend that, in its century-long opposition to despotic regimes, Russian Jewry upheld traditional Jewish values that can serve as an inspiration to reinvigorate Israeli society. Both Alexander Voronel, an ideological leader of the 1970s aliya, and Vadim Rotenberg note the importance of ethical and cultural components in the Jewish self-identification of Russian olim and advocate their legitimation as part of Israel’s Jewish identity.⁸³

Anna Isakova, who was former prime minister Ehud Barak’s adviser on the Russian aliya, looks to Russian Jews as a potential source for the development of a genuine secular Jewish culture. In an article “Russian Jews as a Cultural Community” she criticized Israeli Hebrew culture not only for trying to assert its dominance over that of other ethnic cultures in Israel but also for rejecting the culture of the Jewish diaspora.⁸⁴

At the other end of the spectrum are those—often writers—whose Russian cultural identity seems stronger than any Jewish one. Immigrating to Israel was a convenient way of escaping a chaotic Russian situation in which an ethnic Jewish label was never an asset. In the post-Soviet period, as Russia sought to define its own national identity, many writers questioned the validity of non-ethnic Russians participating in the Russian literary scene and they targeted the Jews, in particular, as interlopers who were spoiling the purity of national Russian expression. Intellectuals “of Jewish origin,” who had always considered themselves

⁸² P. Polonskii, *Vesti*, March 8, 2001 cited in Nudelman, “Israeli Democracy,” p. 140.

⁸³ Vadim Rotenberg, “On the Self-Definition of Jews from the FSU Now Living in Israel” (Hebrew), *Jews in Transition*, no. 4(19), pp. 213-218; Aleksandr Voronel, “On the National Character” (Russian), *Sion*, no. 16 (1976): 58-72 and essays in *V plenu svobody* (Russian), (Moscow-Jerusalem: Nevo Art, 1998).

⁸⁴ Anna Isakova, “The Russian Jewish Community,” (Hebrew) *Jews in Transition* no. 4(19), pp. 85-99; also

above ethnic distinctions and as part of a supra-ethnic Russian cultural grouping felt like outsiders and left the country.

These writers now have a niche as part of Russia's newly conceived diaspora of compatriots. Israel, with its large and concentrated Russian-speaking population is a major link in this diaspora that can be viewed as a transnational Russian-language diaspora.⁸⁵ Israeli Russian-language journals publish works not only by the immigrants from Russia but also by other writers residing in Russia, Germany or the U.S.; works by local writers are similarly published in those locations. Local writers travel to Russia to publicize their works, which are reviewed in important Russian publications. In Israel they host writers from all the Russian-speaking centers, whose works are readily available in the innumerable Russian-language bookshops around Israel. Aleksander Goldstein, on the editorial board of a local Russian-language literary magazine, *Zerkalo*, was even awarded Russia's prestigious Booker Prize when he was already living in Israel.

The situation in the literary world is replicated in other spheres of culture and entertainment. The local press abounds with reviews and advertisements for musicians, theater groups, artists and entertainers who regularly tour Israel; similarly, the Russian media publicize reciprocal visits (on a smaller scale) by Russian-speaking counterparts from Israel.

Some question whether the existence of this separatist community is a transitory phenomenon as the next generation is likely to be absorbed more completely in a Hebrew-language milieu. Interestingly, the answer is not unambiguous. Studies and polls of the Russian-speaking community in Israel have shown that children who arrive at an early age, even if they first seem to shun Russian, tend to wind up in cliques of immigrant youth in

⁸⁵ For a more general discussion of transnationalism as it applies to the Russian community in Israel see Larissa I. Remennick, "Case Study in Transnationalism: Russian Jewish Immigrants in Israel of the 1990s," eds. R. Muenz and R. Ohliger, *Migration and Ethnic Diasporas in late XX Century Europe*, forthcoming; Tamar Horowitz, "The Integration of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union," *Politics and Identity in Transformation: Europe and Israel*, Munich Contributions to European Unification, vol. 5 (Munich: Europa Union Verlag, 2001), pp. 59-71.

which they again speak Russian.⁸⁶ The reasons for this isolation are another story,⁸⁷ but the effect is to preserve a market for consumers of Russian-language culture beyond the first generation. Moreover, another phenomenon that worked in this direction might be called the re-Russianizing of the 1970s wave of immigration. The new wave of immigration thus revitalized literary enterprises that had been founded by the earlier group.⁸⁸

At the same time, there are signs of an incipient hybrid culture in which native Russian speakers are beginning to write in Hebrew.⁸⁹ *Ha'aretz* featured Elana Gomel, a lecturer in English literature at Tel Aviv University, whose mother, Maya Kaganskaya, has earned the reputation of the “high priestess of the immigrant intellectuals.”⁹⁰ Gomel provides an interesting example of this new direction, which seems on the seam between hybrid, i.e., a mixing of Israeli and Russian cultures, and transnational. On the one hand, Gomel stated that she rejected Russian culture with its “metaphysical passion”; on the other hand, she expressed her views on Russia in a Russian-language journal in Israel (*Solnechnoe spletenie* or Solar Plexus) that appeared also for the first time in Hebrew translation under the title *Maftach Halev*. Gomel claimed that she feels at ease with Russian and Israeli identities simultaneously and she thought that the younger generation felt the same way as she did. As an example, she alluded to the largely Russian-speaking youth who were victims of the Dolphinarium terrorist attack. Although the incident aroused widespread discussion about the basic identity of these youth, she viewed them as easily moving between both identities.

Yet, studies do not reveal this supposed ease with a hybrid identity but rather a growing alienation from Israeli society that is manifested in higher crime rates, school drop

⁸⁶ Lily Galili, “Hard Landing,” *Ha'aretz* (English), August 31, 2001, section B, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Some of these problems were dealt with at a conference on “Post-Soviet Youth: A Comparative Study” that was held from May 23-25, 2000 and sponsored by the Mayrock Center of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The book *From Pacesetters to Dropouts: Post-Soviet Youth in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2003) is based on articles from the conference.

⁸⁸ See the interview with Aleksandr Voronel, “Breath of the Long-Distance Runner,” *Okna*, March 30, 2000, pp. 12, 14.

⁸⁹ See the interview with Elana Gomel, “The Seam Between Hybrid and Transnational,” *Okna*, 2001, pp. 10-11.

out rates and other social problems among youth from the FSU.⁹¹ Perhaps the answer lies in a transnational attitude, which Gomel asserted was typical of her Russian-Israeli university students who “do not want to ‘fit in here,’ as the prevailing Israeli perception would have it; they are at once Russians, Israelis and all kinds of things.” She views this as a post-modern “healthy process of fragmentation.”⁹²

At this stage, there is no definitive answer to the question, “Whose diaspora is it?” in reference to Israel’s Russian-speaking community. On the one hand, there are strong forces in Israel trying to pull the Russian immigrant community into the Israeli orbit. Voluntary organizations sponsor seminars and programs designed to familiarize newcomers with the Jewish tradition, discuss differences, and find ways to bridge the gaps between “olim and vatikim” (immigrants and old-timers). In the same spirit, official and unofficial bodies have begun to sponsor translations from Russian to Hebrew and from Hebrew into Russian aimed at enhancing familiarity among each group with the literary traditions of the other. On the other hand, the growing percentage of non-Jews among the immigrants, the sheer size of the community as a whole, the indifferent or cool reception they receive from much of Israeli society and the ease of interaction with Russia and Russian-speaking diasporas reinforces the feeling of belonging to a transnational Russian-centered entity.

⁹⁰ Lily Galili, “Mother Russia’s Rebellious Daughter,” *Ha'aretz (English)*, June 22, 2001.

⁹¹ Lily Galili, “Hard Landing.”

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