

The Empowerment of the Russian Immigrants in Israel: Towards Successful Integration and the Role of Integration in Minimizing Discrimination and Hostility¹

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Today's lecture deals with the empowerment of the Russian community in Israel. JDC has chosen Russian immigrants as an example of a group that underwent an extraordinary process of community empowerment, due to special circumstances and conditions which I shall try analyze. I hope that this analysis will help us understand processes that other immigrant communities are going through, and perhaps point to some directions for the future.

The main purpose of the lecture is to examine how the strengths and the organizing capacity of the Russian immigrant community contributed significantly in three areas:

- *Their integration into the Israeli society*
- *Minimizing discrimination and hostility against them*
- *Israel as a host country*

The talk will review the following aspects: first, I will provide background to the immigration issues in Israel. Next is a review of the Russian immigrant profile in Israel. After that, I will provide an overview of the Russian integration processes in Israeli society, as well as an analysis of the elements that promote and hinder Russian immigrant integration. Finally, I will describe the efforts of the JDC as an NGO to help overcome remaining major challenges to long-term integration.

Aliya to Israel in the 1950s – the Law of Return

Israel is a state of immigrants. It was founded in 1948 with a largely homogeneous population. Within three and a half years, by the end of 1951, the population had doubled after a wave of immigration. These immigrants completely changed the demographic makeup of the population. A substantial number of them came from countries in Asia and Africa; they tended to have large families (many had six or more persons per family), many children and elderly, and most had relatively low levels of education. A significant gap often existed between their occupational background and labor market needs in Israel.

¹ This lecture is based on "Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel 1999 – 2003," research conducted by Professor Eleazar Leshem, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, prepared for the America Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Israel, 2003.

Thus, from the first days of statehood Israeli society has faced challenges of social and intercultural gaps, and processes of integration.

Official immigration to Israel is based primarily on the Law of Return, which states that anyone with one Jewish grandparent is eligible to immigrate to Israel, regardless of financial status, educational background, age or health.

In the past 15 years or so, Israel has seen great variety in the immigration flows. It absorbed a mass immigration of one million persons from the former Soviet Union; a smaller but very unique group of immigrants from Ethiopia with a totally different socio-cultural profile and different needs and other immigrant groups under the Law of Return. At the same time Israel has become host to labor migrants, victims of trafficking, asylum-seekers and refugees.

This lecture focuses on the integration processes of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel from the start of the wave of immigration from this region in 1989.

The Russian Aliya in the 1990s

The wave of immigration from the FSU actually began at the end of the 1980s.

Immigration to Israel: 1989-1991

Year	Immigrants	Comments
1989	24,050	Start of 'Operation Exodus' from Ethiopia
1990	199,516	35,629 in the month of December alone from around the world
1991	176,100	152,142 from Europe/Asia 20,251 Ethiopia

In 1989 Israel received only 24,000 immigrants. Over the next two years, the majority of the immigrants were from Russia. From 1989 to the present, more than 1 million Russian immigrants arrived and are now living in Israel, and they constitute 14% of the total Israeli population.

Most of these immigrants arrived from the European republics of the Former Soviet Union, especially Russia (297,763) and the Ukraine (306,453). The wave also brought a sizeable group from Bukhara (78,193) and the Caucasus (54,833)

Socio-demographic statistics

Immigrants from the FSU differ from the nativeborn Israeli population in family size, age and marital status. Overall, the immigration from the FSU is characterized by rich human resources. Close to 60% of the immigrants who had arrived by the end of the year 2000 had post-secondary school education, in comparison with 40% of the general Jewish population in Israel.

This wave of immigration added over 100,000 engineers and architects to the Israeli professional class, as well as 22,000 physicians, dentists and dental practitioners, and 24,000 nurses and paramedical staff. The number of professionals working in each of these fields doubled with the addition of the immigrants.

Israeli society had great difficulty absorbing immigrants within their professions. Among other reasons, one main factor was the relatively small Israeli market and economy, which became oversaturated with such a large number of professionals.

Even today, the human capital of the immigrants from the FSU is only partially utilized in the Israeli labor market. A relatively large portion of immigrants are employed in blue-collar jobs, including those with 16 years of schooling or more.

Russian Immigrants – The Communal Aspect

It is interesting to note that the immigrants from the FSU arrived with no tradition of civic culture and organized community activity. Despite this, in a process of community empowerment that was unusual compared to other immigrant populations in Israel, the former Soviet community crystallized within a decade of its arrival into a highly complex and diversified formal and informal structure, both on the local and national levels.

The immigrant population can now be clearly defined as a cohesive community. It is distinct from its social and cultural environment within Israeli society, but also integrated through complex mechanisms of integration.

How can we characterize the community cohesion and distinctiveness of the immigrants from the FSU in Israel? There are in fact six basic dimensions for examining the cohesion and distinctiveness of immigrant communities in general:

- *Geographical settlement*
- *Continuity of ties with home country*
- *Intensive social relations (exclusive informal networks)*
- *Shared values and norms, distinctive way of life*
- *Unique multi-sphere institutional structure*
- *Distinct self-identity*

Let us examine the immigrants from the FSU in Israel through each of these dimensions.

- **Geographical settlement**
The former Soviet immigrant population lives in ecological concentrations, and a sizeable portion lives in fairly homogeneous neighborhoods, especially in areas of low socio-economic levels. In some cities the immigrant population even constitutes between 30% and 40% of the general population.
- **Continuity of ties with home country**
The former Soviet population has a continuous connection with its shared past, which is expressed by its historical and cultural heritage. These immigrants find it important for their children to learn the Russian language and become familiar with its literature and culture. They tend to invest significant efforts in ensuring their children's cultural education.
- **Intensive social relations**
The population of immigrants from the FSU has dense, interlocking social networks of informal, fairly exclusive social relations among themselves. Conversely, very few of the immigrants have brought veteran residents inside their close social circles. Encounters with veteran residents take place mostly at the workplace or in the context of providing service; thus the relationship tends to be largely instrumental.
- **Shared values and norms, distinctive way of life**
The former Soviet immigrants perceive themselves as the bearers of European culture in Israel, and 87% of them would like cultural life in Israel to be similar to that of Europe. However, only 9% believe that this is indeed the situation in Israel.

The immigrants perceive Russian culture and language as superior to Hebrew culture and language. The following statistic is telling: 88% of immigrants evaluate the impact of immigration on cultural life in Israel as positive or very positive, while only 28% evaluate the impact of cultural life in Israel on the immigrants as positive or very positive. In the fields of knowledge, technology, economics, political life and security, a majority of immigrants evaluate their impact on society as positive. This feeling of superiority among the Russian immigrants as indicated by the data above, at least in the abovementioned social and cultural fields, often creates friction and tension between immigrants and veteran residents.

As for the perception of law and government in Israel, there are fairly large gaps between immigrants and veteran residents. For example, the Russian community has displayed different perceptions of certain aspects of the culture of law in Israel. These immigrants maintain different levels of normative commitment to obeying the law; show different levels of confidence in the law and in the institutions of the justice system, and report feelings of discrimination and unequal treatment by law enforcement authorities in Israel. For example:

Level of normative commitment to obeying the law: general Jewish population in comparison to immigrants of the 1990s (percentages) (February 2002)

Statement	True	
	General Jewish population	FSU immigrants
It is permissible to break laws if you do not harm anyone	13.2	38.2
It is unnecessary to obey laws that appear unreasonable	11.2	38.2
It does not matter if you break unimportant laws sometimes	13.1	30.3
When a law is unjust, you do not have to obey it	10.9	33.8

Source: Ratner and Yagil, 2002

The data above demonstrate the different values and norms of the Russian immigrants in comparison to those of veteran Israelis.

- **Unique multi-sphere institutional structure**

The immigrant population maintains a unique organizational system of its own, on both the local and national levels. We find among immigrants from the FSU:

1. Extensive ethnic markets for goods and services, that are now being discovered and used by veteran Israelis.
2. A network of cultural centers and cultural services that is unique to immigrants from the FSU.
3. Supplementary and alternative education networks at the preschool, primary school and secondary school levels.
4. Hundreds of non-profit associations on the local and national levels, in the spheres of society, welfare, health, education and culture, which are grouped under umbrella organizations on the national level.
5. Public Russian-language national radio station (the Reka station).
6. Independent Russian-language Israeli television channel (Channel Nine).
7. Networks of Russian-language newspapers, which include dailies, weeklies, local newspapers and monthlies amounting to 37 regular dailies and periodicals in 1997.
8. Ethnic political parties at the local and national levels.

- **Distinct self-identity**

The immigrant population has a self-perception of group identity with a number of inter-related components – Russian, Jewish and Israeli – while the balance between the three components constantly changes.

In sum, as regards both perceptions of culture – namely, the sense that Russian culture is superior to local culture, and the perceptions of law and government there are large gaps between immigrants and veteran residents in Israel. These gaps are further compounded by differences in the perception of Jewish values, and by different perceptions of religion from a standpoint of observance, as perceived by large parts of Israeli society. All of these gaps indicate a *distinctive set of values and norms* among the two groups, among aspects that are highly significant for the individual, family and society. Beyond these gaps we must note that the stereotypes of each group regarding the values of the other often create imagined gaps, which constitute a barrier to informal inter-group relations.

What will effect the Russians’ patterns of integration in Israel

What affects the patterns of integration of Russians in Israel? First, the situation of the immigrants themselves has a great impact – specifically, the following elements:

- *Socio-economic status*
- *Immigrants’ perception of the society of origin*
- *Immigrants’ perception of Israeli society*
- *Israeli society’s perception of the immigrants*

- **Socio-economic status**

Immigrant populations living with a marginal socio-economic status may undergo slower processes of integration into the receiving society, which contributes to preservation and continuity of their culture of origin. Indeed, a substantial proportion of immigrants from the FSU lives in localities ranked within low socio-economic clusters and peripheral neighborhoods. Immigrants are also over-represented in blue-collar professions. As a result, many immigrants face a powerful sense that their socio-economic status has decreased.

- **The immigrants’ perception of the society of origin**

As noted, the immigrants from the FSU are characterized by a substantial degree of commitment and connection to their country of origin, through a sense of identity in which the Russian component is a central element alongside the Jewish component. This bond is reinforced by well-developed ties of commerce and communications, as well as a deep emotional connection to their country of origin. In general, Russian immigrants have a strong desire to preserve, cultivate and instill in the next generations the cultural heritage from their country of origin, which they believe to be superior to the local culture.

- **The immigrants’ perception of Israeli society**

The connection between the immigrants and Israeli society is mainly based not on the sense of closeness, but rather on the sense of common Jewish identity. To the immigrants, it is this identity that grants them legitimacy to live and build their future in Israel, and take part in shaping the public agenda.

- **Israeli society’s perception of the immigrants**

The community cohesion of the immigrants from the FSU, their distinct identity and patterns of integration are not only shaped by processes taking place within their communities, but also by processes within native-born Israeli society regarding immigration and immigrants. In principle, there is a solid ideological and normative consensus in Israeli society as to the essentiality of immigration. Over the years, the attitudes of native Israeli society towards immigrants has taken the form of a U-shaped curve, which characterizes three stages that have been observed in the past in other countries. When the first wave of immigrants arrived, they were received with an attitude of euphoria and curiosity. As immigration continued and intensified, a mood of confrontation developed between native Israelis and the immigrants. The friction was linked to such issues as competitiveness at the work place, and the threat, or fear, that immigrants would change the social fabric, especially in towns and neighborhoods with large concentrations of newcomers. Over time, these negative feelings turned into as more positive attitudes.

Negative stereotypes arose, with some of the veteran population branding Russian men as “criminals” or Russian women as “prostitutes” and so forth. Recently, surveys have showed that Israelis have become more tolerant and acceptant of Russians as part of the social structure.

The following survey findings show how Israelis assess the contribution made by Russian immigrants during two different periods of time.

“How do you assess the effects of immigration from the FSU in the following spheres in Israel?”

Sphere	Economic development		Security		Culture		Science and technology		Political life		Crime	
	9/99 ¹	1/03 ²	9/99	1/03	9/99	1/03	9/99	1/03	9/99	1/03	9/99	1/03
Date of survey												
Attitude												
Very positive	11	19	11	22	11	36	17	48	5	9	2	6
Somewhat positive	43	45	45	44	45	40	59	39	38	45	8	10
No effect	17	2	19	7	19	2	10	1	19	4	14	2
Somewhat negative	13	18	13	9	13	10	2	3	21	23	40	35
Very negative	6	7	6	5	6	7	2	3	5	8	24	38
Don’t know	10	9	6	13	6	5	10	6	12	11	12	9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

As the table above illustrates, native-born Israelis perceive the impact of Russian immigrants on culture, science and technology positively, while also viewing the Russian impact on crime quite negatively.

The findings above indicate a growing recognition of the contribution made by immigrants from the FSU in key areas of life in Israel. At the same time the findings also testify clearly to the sources of tension in the relationship between immigrants and native-born Israelis.

Two additional processes, which have influenced change in recent years, are worth mentioning.

1. There is a general change within Israeli society towards greater pluralism and multi-culturalism.
2. Over the last three and a half years Israel's severe security situation (the *Intifada*) has brought greater unity among the various population groups.

These two points have undoubtedly accelerated the process of acceptance of immigrants among Israelis.

The status of Russian immigrants' integration into Israel is complicated and complex, and it is not one-dimensional. On the one hand, immigrants from the FSU constitute a unified community in Israel, which is distinct from the absorbing society in many ways.

Nonetheless, the communal cohesion among immigrants in Israel from the FSU does not prevent them from becoming integrated into the surrounding society. The pattern of integration that is chosen by individuals, families or groups within the immigrant society is highly dependent on the social level of the immigrants, their perception of and commitment towards their native group, and the attitude of the Israeli society towards the immigrants.

JDC Israel: Modes of Operation

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Israel is a non-governmental organization that works in partnership with the government, focusing on social issues.

In the past, most of the efforts with regard to Russian immigrants were directed towards vulnerable groups such as at-risk children and youth, the elderly, etc.

To date, at the end of more than a decade of massive immigration, there is a greater need to cope with the long-term challenges we face. The wave of Russian (former Soviet) immigration from the 1990s is unique to immigrant groups arriving in Israel, in terms of the strength and social fabric of the community, and the influx of youth and young adults, and it is critical to maximize the potential of this vast human resource.

Those involved in communal work understand that in order to achieve the integration of any large immigrant population, we must look at the attitudes, desires and needs of both the immigrant and veteran population. We must address the employment needs of both the immigrants and veteran residents, and learn the issues involved in being together in the same apartment building or the same classroom. This is true whether the immigrants are from Morocco or Iraq and arrived in the 1950s, or whether they have come from Ethiopia or Russia in the 1990s.

This is the reason that the JDC, of which CIMI is one division, has initiated a strategic partnership with five government ministries, in order to develop comprehensive services for immigrants.

Based on our analysis, and in regard to the integration needs, we will focus our activities in the coming years on the community issue and the ability of different population groups to live together, as well as the issues related to young people and employment.

THANK YOU