

Russian Immigrants in Israeli Politics:

The Past, the Recent Elections and the Near Future



Forum Israel

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and the Near Future**

by
Arkadi Mazin

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the large-scale immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, Israel's community of Russian speakers has played an dominant role in Israeli politics. Some maintain that it has tipped the balance and decided the final outcome in all the elections since then, perhaps with the exception of the most recent ones. Nevertheless, as will be shown, the Russian-speaking community's vote played a major role in these elections, too.

From this, it may be concluded that the electoral behavior of the Russian-speaking community in Israel differs from that of the majority of the Israeli population. And indeed, as has been observed in various areas of life, such as consumer behavior, media and entertainment, as well as from the political-electoral perspective, the Russian-speaking community in Israel is commonly viewed as a separate sector, alongside two other important minority sectors – the ultra-Orthodox and Arab – and the “general Israeli population.”

The “Russian Community”

The term “Russian-speaking community” (this term and the term “Russian community” will be used alternately in this paper for reasons of convenience alone) is also the product of an evolution of many years. It was preceded by other definitions and descriptions of this group, such as “Russian immigrants,” “immigrants from the FSU (former Soviet Union),” “immigrants from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States),” and so on. The most precise definition is “immigrants from the FSU,” but this has an archaic and cumbersome sound to it, among other reasons because we are gradually forgetting what the Soviet Union was. It is difficult to delineate the actual boundaries of the Russian community for two main reasons. First, because there are “dropouts” from this community into the general Israeli population, especially among those aged 18-35. Second, the community itself has “sub-communities,” such as the immigrants

from the Caucasus, Bukhara and Georgia, whose electoral behavior may be completely different from that of the general Russian-speaking community. For example, many immigrants from Bukhara vote for the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party.¹ There is also some controversy regarding the question of whether it is appropriate to include the immigrants of the 1970s, who number about a quarter of a million people, in this community, although it is clear that many of them share characteristics that make them part of the community, such as the consumption of Russian-language newspapers.

Despite its ambiguous nature, the term “Russian community” has taken root in the political arena, alongside the awareness that this community needs to be dealt with separately. In all election campaigns, ramified Russian-language activities have developed, including advertising campaigns using all the existing channels of communications, in addition to overt and subtle public relations campaigns. This will be further elaborated on below.

Socio-Economic Background

The community of Russian speakers in Israel numbers almost 1.5 million people, if the immigrants that arrived in the 1970s are included, or about 1.25 million people without them. This is a relatively older community, due to two main reasons: Many retirees immigrated to Israel alone, without their children, who remained abroad; and also, the birth rate in the Russian-speaking community is low. A socio-economic analysis shows that the majority of the community belongs to the middle and lower-middle class despite their high average level of education. A Russian-speaking upper class is virtually nonexistent, mainly because the vast majority of immigrants arrived in Israel fairly recently with nothing to their names. There is much poverty in the community, especially because of its high proportion of retirees

¹ The Shas Party (Hebrew Acronym for “Sephardic Torah Guards”) represents the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic community.

and single-parent families. Many households are somewhere on the borderline between the lower-middle class and poverty. Few immigrants have job tenure, which also contributes to the economic instability among these households. The percentage of owners of homes, cars and other durable products is about 15-20 percent lower than among the general Israeli population. The disparity is especially evident in households with one or two people, most of whom are young people, pensioners, young couples or single-parent families. This is because young immigrants benefit less than their Israeli counterparts from their parents' help and from inheritances, and immigrant pensioners have not accumulated savings. In general, the Russian-speaking community in Israel can be described as one that works hard and survives with dignity.

The theoretical electoral value of the Russian community comprises the equivalent of 20 Knesset seats (17-18 when considering the relatively low voting percentage). It should be noted that this community is almost entirely secular in nature.

2. First Political Steps

The political preferences of the community have also changed over time. Its enormous impact was first felt in the 1992 elections – perhaps the most important elections in the history of the state, those that brought us the Oslo Agreements. In those elections, the Russian-speaking community could be divided into two parts: Immigrants that had already developed clearly informed political views voted mainly for the right-wing and extreme right-wing parties, whereas the majority voted for the Labor Party. This vote took on more of a social-welfare nature than a political one – it was a protest vote against the poor treatment of the mass immigration in its first two years. The Labor Party exploited the considerable frustration felt by the immigrants and made extravagant promises to them in the area of housing and welfare, which during Labor's term in office proved for the most part

to be unfounded. Conventional wisdom has it that it was the newest immigrants that tipped the scales and brought the electoral victory to the Labor Party.

A sectoral “Russian” party, DA (yes in Russian) – a Hebrew acronym for “Democracy and Immigration” – headed by Dr. Yuli Kosharovski, a well-known immigration activist, participated for the first time in these elections. Kosharovski was not perceived as a suitable representative of the immigrants, the young party lacked funding as well as political and public relations experience and acumen, and the immigrants themselves were not yet ripe for political independence. Consequently, most of them pinned their hopes on the large, veteran Labor Party. As a result, the DA Party failed to cross the minimum qualifying threshold needed to be elected to the Knesset and subsequently ceased to exist.

The Elections in 1996 and the First Successes of Sectoral Politics

The immigrants quickly caught on. The dearth of solutions to their most elemental problems, the increase in Palestinian terror, the growing influence of the Israeli Russian-language press, which then as now was characterized by a clear right-wing tilt, and of course, the Soviet-imperialist mentality all took their toll: In the 1996 elections, most of the immigrants voted for Netanyahu. Considering the tiny margin by which Netanyahu won, it can be determined with a high degree of certainty that in this case too, it was the Russian immigrants that made the difference. There is no way of knowing how Israeli history and that of the Middle East might have developed differently had Shimon Peres been elected prime minister and continued the policy of dialogue with the Palestinians.

Another surprise in these elections was the Yisrael b’Aliya Party, founded by former Prisoner of Zion² and chairman of the Zionist

² A prisoner of Zion is someone who has been imprisoned because of his Zionist activity in a country where such activity is illegal.

Forum³ Natan Sharansky. Yisrael b'Aliya was a sectoral party par excellence that exploited the immigrants' feelings of frustration and promised to find solutions to their painful problems. The party's campaign spoke about the "dignity of the immigration," of social-welfare housing, welfare payments, professional placement for the immigrants and so forth. Yisrael b'Aliya managed to rally numerous celebrated immigrant figures around its banner, thereby fostering its image as a worthy representative of The Big Immigration from the FSU. Among these figures were Yuli Edelstein, Marina Solodkin, Yuri Stern, Roman Bronfman, Michael Nudelman and others. The party swept in with seven Knesset seats and joined the Netanyahu coalition government.

Barak and the "Russian Vote" in the Elections of 1999

In the next elections, which were held ahead of schedule in May 1999, the "Russian vote" once again shifted over to the other side of the political map, and about half of the immigrants voted for Ehud Barak as Prime Minister (it should be recalled that this was the second time in Israel in which the prime minister was elected by a direct vote, in a vote separate from the vote for the Knesset). It would not be true to claim that this fluctuation occurred due to a fundamental and conscious ideological change among the Russian-speaking community. Ehud Barak exploited the period of relative calm in Israel's relations with the Palestinians, characterized by a significant decrease in the level of terror, and diverted the national agenda to civil and social issues, such as the war on religious coercion, an increase in welfare payments and lower university tuition.

Barak's campaign in the Russian community focused even more attention on these issues than it did among the general Israeli population, obscuring the subject of peace and the withdrawal from Lebanon as much as possible. The struggle against religious coercion, for example,

3 The Zionist Forum is an umbrella organization of Zionist former Soviet dissidents.

was one that was very close to the hearts of the immigrants and one that garnered Barak many votes (the new Shinui Party⁴, which had split off from Meretz⁵, focused on the same issues and achieved an impressive six Knesset seats). The security issue was “covered” by emphasizing Barak’s glorious military past. For example, one of Barak’s Russian-language campaign slogans was “Lt. Col. Barak understands security better than Capt. Netanyahu.” One of the “hits” of the campaign was a book, a biography of Barak, “Soldier Number One,” which was translated into Russian and distributed free in wholesale quantities.

3. Differentiation of the Political Scenery

The 1999 elections brought about far-reaching changes in Israel’s sectoral politics. The situation of the Yisrael b’Aliya Party before the elections appeared shaky after the party had failed to come through on its election promises. It became engulfed in internal conflicts and lost the public’s trust. Complaints of cronyism and of the party chairman’s high-handed control of the party abounded. The surveys predicted a defeat for the party, and Moti Morel, a top campaign expert was recruited to save the day. The campaign he came up with was based on a demand that appeared to many to border on racism – that the Ministry of the Interior be removed from the “clutches” of the Shas Party and handed over to Yisrael b’Aliya. The general anti-religious atmosphere that prevailed in these elections only served to further fan the flames. A clamorous dispute broke out between Shas and Yisrael b’Aliya, causing many immigrants who no longer wanted to vote for a “Russian” sectoral party to come back to it. Consequently, Yisrael b’Aliya lost only one Knesset seat in the election and received six seats in the 15th Knesset.

4 Shinui (“Change”) is a secular, anti-clerical party with a strong accent on economical liberalism.

5 Meretz (“Vitality”) is a left wing social democratic party. In Dezember 2003 Meretz merged with the Shahaar Movement of Yossi Beilin (see below) and is now called “Meretz-Yahad”.

*Israel is Our Home - Yisrael Beiteinu*⁶

However, the strength of the Russian community in the Knesset grew, following the appearance of yet another sectoral party – Yisrael Beiteinu headed by Avigdor Lieberman. Lieberman had arrived in Israel as a young man from Moldavia in 1978, and after completing his studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Hebrew University embarked on a brilliant political career. A talented political functionary, he was appointed Director-General of the Likud Movement, after which he served as Director-General of the prime minister’s office during Netanyahu’s term as prime minister. After the elections, Lieberman left the Likud, established his own party and managed to recruit two prominent Knesset members from Yisrael b’Aliya – Yuri Stern and Michael Nudelman – for his party. Unlike Yisrael b’Aliya, which deliberately obscured its approach to foreign policy, Yisrael Beiteinu positioned itself squarely in the right, and resultantly won the votes of those immigrants that preferred to vote not only for a “Russian” party, but also for one that had a clear-cut approach to foreign policy. The new party won four Knesset seats – a significant achievement. It should be noted that Benjamin Netanyahu refused to openly support Lieberman’s party, creating bad blood between them that would last for many years.

The new Yisrael b’Aliya Faction was less experienced and charismatic than the previous one, and the party soon suffered another blow when two of its Knesset members, Roman Bronfman and Alexander Zinker, split off from the party and established an independent faction called “Democratic Choice.” The Democratic Choice Party positioned itself as left-centrist, unlike the right-centrist position of Yisrael b’Aliya and the rightist stance of Yisrael Beiteinu, and offered a civil-social-welfare agenda.

⁶ Meretz (“Vitality”) is a left wing social democratic party. In Dezember 2003 Meretz merged with the Shahar Movement of Yossi Beilin (see below) and is now called “Meretz-Yahad”.



Rishon LeZion

Photo: Katharina Kötke

Settlers' Policies

As for Yisrael b'Aliya, it apparently did not learn the lessons of its past mistakes and failed to restore the credit it had previously enjoyed among its electorate this second time. The immigrants were less than thrilled by Natan Sharansky's performance as minister of the interior. During his term as minister, the interior ministry's position on subjects of major importance to the immigrants, such as its immigration policy, did not become more flexible, some even maintained that it was made even more stringent.

In the second government of the 15th Knesset, namely in the government of Ariel Sharon, which was established after the prime ministerial elections of 2001, Sharansky served as minister of housing, and he managed to disappoint the immigrants in this role, too. Suffice it to say that rather than appoint an immigrant as director-general of his ministry, he appointed an extremist settler named Avi Maoz, who invested considerably more time and effort in construction in the occupied territories (including in illegal settlements, as may be learned from the report authored by attorney Talia Sasson) than at building housing for the new immigrants. Sharansky's behavior does not appear strange to those that are familiar with his strong ties to religion and the religious establishment. His wife Avital Sharansky is religiously observant, as are his right-hand man Yuli Edelstein, his personal aide during that period, Eli Kashdan, the party treasurer Bezalel Schiff and numerous other figures among the leadership of the Yisrael b'Aliya Party. Retrospectively, Yisrael b'Aliya appears to have been more a religious party in disguise than an immigrants' party. The other immigrants' party, Yisrael Beiteinu, on the other hand, increased its support base among the immigrants, mainly among those disappointed with Yisrael b'Aliya. Yisrael Beiteinu joined the Sharon government and Lieberman served as minister of national infrastructures. In this role, Lieberman launched a number of important projects and made a name for himself as a persistent and capable man of action that knew how to get things done. However, Yisrael Beiteinu resigned from the Sharon government in March 2002 due to its opposition to Sharon's "concessionary policies," as it termed them.

Supporting Ariel Sharon

The prime ministerial elections of 2001 came in the wake of the crumbling of the Barak government, and were held on the backdrop of the intifada. This time, the immigrants fell in line with the rest of the Israeli population and supported Ariel Sharon for prime minister. Barak's "Russian" campaign was characterized by dirty tricks, a thin

line separating good taste from bad and a focus on Sharon's health and age in an attempt to prove that Sharon was not capable to run the country as prime minister. Sharon's campaign, on the other hand, was conservative and low key and mainly underscored Sharon's military past.

The Knesset elections of 2003 (the first following the abolition of direct elections for prime minister) did not lead to an upheaval, especially not among the new immigrants. Whereas a certain shift to the left was apparent (sometimes the gap between Labor and the Likud in the surveys narrowed to as few as four to five Knesset seats), the Russian community did not change its position. Despite the fact that many immigrants voted for the big surprise of the elections, the Shinui Party (which received four "Russian" seats), as they repudiated the national security agenda, the left received very little support from them. At the same time, ideologically, a change in the position held by the immigrants could be discerned. Support for the "two-state solution" increased considerably, as did the awareness of the inevitable need to make territorial concessions and dismantle settlements. Ultimately, the Likud headed by Sharon won a dizzying success. It may be concluded that the ideological change among the Russian immigrants was not sufficient for them to overcome their loathing for the left "which brought the intifada crashing down upon us," and consequently did not cause them to make a significant electoral shift.

However, the sectoral political picture once again radically changed. The Yisrael b'Aliya era was over and Sharansky's party barely managed to cross the minimum qualifying threshold, gaining only two Knesset seats. Because the expectations had been far higher, the party, whose voters finally settled accounts with it, sank into heavy debt and acceded to Likud's⁷ proposal to merge with it. In return for a full merger between the two parties, the Likud agreed to pay Yisrael b'Aliya's debts, to the tune of 14 million shekels. Natan Sharansky was

7 The Likud ("Union") is a centre-right political party. In November 2005 Ariel Sharon, then Israeli Prime Minister and party leader of the Likud, parted from the party because of missing support for his disengagement plan from Gaza and formed the new Kadima Party ("Forward").

appointed minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora affairs, and he resigned from the Knesset, enabling Marina Solodkin, the next candidate on Yisrael b'Aliya's list, to be sworn into the Knesset.

The Influence of the Russian Community Declines

Avigdor Lieberman, who before the elections had already combined his party with the hawkish National Union, went to the elections at the head of a united National Union, which now included three parties – Yisrael Beiteinu, Moledet⁸ and Tekuma⁹. This was Lieberman's attempt to realize his dream of becoming an all-Israeli rather than sectoral politician. However, his voters paid a hefty price for the realization of his dream: Due to the agreement signed between the three National Union Parties, which divided up the Knesset seats on the party list equally among Yisrael Beiteinu and its two partners regardless of their actual electoral strength, only four representatives from Lieberman's party entered the Knesset, despite the fact that the immigrants had given the joint list 5.5 of the seven Knesset seats that the party had won. Moreover, one of Yisrael Beiteinu's representatives, Eliezer (“Cheeta”) Cohen, was not even an immigrant, and Lieberman himself resigned from the Knesset when he was appointed minister, making way for the next candidate on the list, a representative of Moledet, to enter the Knesset, thus reducing the immigrant Knesset members on the list to just two.

Two additional immigrants entered the Knesset on the Shinui list: Victor Brailovski, a veteran Knesset member who had been a Shinui Knesset member in the previous Knesset, and the relatively young and inexperienced Yigal Yasinov. The Likud list, which received at least five Knesset seats from Russian immigrants, had only one representative of the Russian community, Michail Gorlovski, who

8 Moledet (“Homeland”) is a small right-wing party which advocates the notion of forceful transfer of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

9 Tekuma (“Resurrection”) is a hawkish right-wing party that broke away from the National-Religious Party in 1999.

later became embroiled in the double-voting scandal. The Labor list did not have a single Russian immigrant in a realistic slot on its list. Roman Bronfman, one of the most experienced and esteemed sectoral politicians, entered the Knesset on his third term, this time on a joint list with Meretz and Yossi Beilin's Shahar Movement¹⁰. However, Bronfman's sharp swerve to the left was not to his voters liking and there is serious doubt as to whether Bronfman brought Meretz more than half a Knesset seat.

4. The Previous Term and the Situation before the Beginning of the Election Campaign

At that time, many experts claimed that sectoral politics was dying out. The oldest sectoral party, Yisrael b'Aliya, had shrunk and merged with the party forming the government; a right-wing block lacking in any sectoral nature had been established on the foundation of the other sectoral party, Yisrael Beiteinu; the larger parties did not seem fit to give the immigrants appropriate representation. It appeared that sectoral politics was dying out even in the Russian community itself thanks to the immigrants' integration into Israeli society.

Despite the quite respectable representation of immigrants in the Knesset and cabinet (nine MKs including MK Amnon Cohen of Shas, and two ministers), the Knesset Members were scattered among a number of different factions, each of which had their own political interests, and they lacked the ability or desire to undertake a concerted effort to work together to handle the immigrants' problems. The treatment of these issues was concentrated mainly in the hands of two MKs: Marina Solodkin (Yisrael b'Aliya-Likud) and Yuri Stern (Yisrael Beiteinu-National Union).

¹⁰ The Shahar Movement (Hebrew acronym for "Peace, Education and Welfare") was established by two members of the Labor Party, Yossi Beilin and Eyal Dayan, in resistance to the "National Union" government by Labor and Likud after the elections to the 15th Knesset.

The Heirs of Yisrael b'Aliya

In 2003, municipal elections were held in most cities and towns in Israel. In the previous municipal elections, held in 1998, Yisrael b'Aliya had made significant achievements and managed to elect a large number of representatives to city councils, as well as deputy mayors and even mayors. However, the Yisrael b'Aliya representatives on the municipal councils, like their counterparts in the Knesset, for the most part did not produce the expected results and lost the confidence of their constituency. In 2003, the situation in the municipal elections was entirely different from that in 1998: Yisrael b'Aliya had ceased to exist, leaving behind an extensive local infrastructure. Some of its functionaries joined up with Yisrael Beiteinu, which ran in these elections separately from its Knesset partners Moledet and Tekuma, and some established independent lists. In most cities, this split of resources, combined with the bitter rivalry between the lists and the lack of public interest in the elections, led to a drastic drop in the representation of immigrants on the municipal councils. Despite the quite disappointing results, Yisrael Beiteinu managed to establish its own power base in the cities, which served it well in the 2006 Knesset elections.

Unlike Natan Sharansky, who filled a chiefly representative function in the cabinet, Minister of Transport, Avigdor Lieberman was given a post involving a great deal of activity. It is notable that neither of them asked for the absorption portfolio¹¹. So far, only one Knesset term has seen an immigrant serve as head of the Absorption Ministry (Yuli Edelstein in 1996-1999). Since then, the immigrant representatives in the Knesset have not taken any interest in this job, preferring more prestigious functions that they feel advance their individual political and public standing. An exception to the rule is Marina Solodkin, known as the “Mother Theresa of the immigrants,” who twice served

¹¹ Since Israel is a state with a strong immigration policy, the state maintains a specific ministry of immigrant absorption.

as deputy minister of absorption. She is the only one that really wanted this job and she hoped to receive the absorption portfolio once again after Kadima's election victory, only to see it given to Ze'ev Boim.

The Disengagement Plan Splits the Russian MKs

The dispute over the unilateral disengagement from Gaza caused additional cracks in the immigrant bloc in the Knesset. In the Likud, Marina Solodkin supported Ariel Sharon, whereas Natan Sharansky (who, it will be recalled, was a minister but not an MK) and Yuli Edelstein were emphatically opposed. Ariel Sharon apparently viewed this position on the part of Sharansky as a personal affront and betrayal (after all, Sharon had solved Yisrael b'Aliya's debt problem and given Sharansky a role as minister and deputy prime minister). Vindictively, Sharon sabotaged Sharansky's attempt to be elected chair of the Jewish Agency. At the same time, in Yisrael Beiteinu, Michael Nudelman, who had always held moderate political views, also decided to support the disengagement plan, in opposition to his party's official position. It should be noted that the question of Nudelman's party affiliation is somewhat more complex, since he and Yuri Stern officially belong to the Aliya Party, which joined Yisrael Beiteinu before the 1999 elections. Towards the end of the last term, a legal dispute erupted between Nudelman and Stern regarding the use of party funds, but this point will not be elaborated upon here. Ultimately, Nudelman officially quit his faction and established one of his own. Roman Bronfman of the Meretz-Yahad Party expressed enthusiastic support for the Disengagement Plan and even convinced his party to throw its support behind Ariel Sharon. Thus, the Russian core group in the Knesset was divided almost equally between supporters of the disengagement (Bronfman, Nudelman, Solodkin, Brailovski, Yasinov) and its opponents (Edelstein, Stern, Gorlovski, Cohen).

As noted, the immigrants were represented in the cabinet by two ministers, Sharansky and Lieberman. Notwithstanding that neither

wanted nor received a role that would enable them to concentrate their efforts on the problems of the immigrants, their presence in the government was important to the Russian community. Unfortunately, both quit the government due to their opposition to the Gaza Disengagement Plan. Lieberman was dismissed in June 2004 after only 14 months as minister, and Sharansky resigned in May 2005. This put an end to nine years in which the immigrants were represented almost continually in Israel's governments. The current government has not even one representative of the Russian-speaking community in the cabinet.

5. The Last Campaign

The “big bang” that led to the establishment of the Kadima Party also changed the face of sectoral politics in Israel. During the 16th Knesset, the views of the Russian community became increasingly moderate and most supported the Gaza Disengagement Plan. Nevertheless, the general distribution along the political spectrum did not change: There were still strong blocs in the right and center and an almost total absence of support for the left. Ariel Sharon enjoyed broad support among the Russian community, which was also translated into electoral support for his new party, Kadima. Of the 30 Knesset seats the new party was expected to win at the beginning of the election campaign according to the surveys, eight were “Russian.”

One of the most dramatic phenomena related to the big bang was the disintegration of the Shinui Party. A party with 15 Knesset seats disappeared from the political map with lightening speed. Most of Shinui's supporters from among the Russian community moved their support over to Kadima, while others shifted to the Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu.

Most of the Likud voters among the immigrants also moved their support over to Kadima. At the same time, almost all of Yisrael b'Aliya voters gave Lieberman their votes. Kadima and Yisrael

Beiteinu were then the two main beneficiaries of the big bang, among both the Russian community as well as the general Israeli population. Shinui disappeared, the Likud crashed, Labor did not take off, the right and left lost votes and neither the ultra-Orthodox nor the Arab parties flourished. The third beneficiary, as it emerged only the morning after the elections, was the new pensioners' party, Gil.

Kadima versus Yisrael Beiteinu

Among the Russian community, Yisrael Beiteinu and Kadima were the two main players. From the outset, the surveys predicted that Avigdor Lieberman's party would gain somewhat in strength, but at the first stage of the campaign, this gain was viewed as being in the range of no more than one to two Knesset seats, bringing his party to a total of five to six seats. In other words, at the start of the election campaign, Kadima was leading the race with its eight "Russian" Knesset seats. It should be underscored that the distribution of Knesset seats was influenced by an especially large proportion of undecideds in the Russian community (about 40 percent at the beginning of the campaign). The significant gains made by Yisrael Beiteinu in the campaign came mainly from the pool of undecided votes rather than from its competitors. However, about two Knesset seats did move over to Yisrael Beiteinu from Kadima and one from the Likud.

As noted, at the beginning of the campaign, Kadima's status in the Russian community was excellent. It appeared to represent exactly what many immigrants were looking for: a pragmatic and sane centrist party, headed by a popular and charismatic leader. But Kadima suffered a major blow after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was admitted into hospital: It quickly lost the equivalent of 2.5 "Russian" seats, who moved their votes mainly to Lieberman, but also to the Likud and the undecideds. It appears likely that the drop in support for Kadima among the Russian community may have been even more significant,

but was offset by votes coming from additional disappointed former Shinui supporters.

The Aberrant Electoral Patterns of the Russian Community

Here it was proven for the first time that the electoral behavior of the Russian-speaking community was still different from that of the general Israeli population: Whereas Kadima lost power among the Russian community, the response among the general Israeli population was just the opposite. The feelings of empathy Israelis harbored for their ill prime minister caused Kadima to soar in the polls to a record 40 Knesset seats and more. Kadima tried to restore the lost “Russian” votes to the fold, but soon realized that this was to no avail. Those that had left Kadima after Sharon’s stroke had only supported it because of Sharon’s strong image, and there was no one else who could bring them back to the new party. This is also the reason why the majority of these voters moved their support over to Avigdor Lieberman; after all, to many immigrants, he represents a “mini Ariel Sharon”: a strong, charismatic figure who exudes self-confidence.

In addition, Kadima was facing other problems, especially the low recognition level of many other figures in the party among the immigrants. Simply put – no one really knew who Tzippi Livni, Haim Ramon and Avi Dichter – and even Ehud Olmert – were! Only two Kadima candidates were well known to the immigrants: Shimon Peres, whom they viewed as a leftist and who was not particularly popular among them, and Shaul Mofaz, whose image had been seriously tarnished due to his zigzagging between the Likud and Kadima.

Enormous effort was invested in a Russian-language campaign that, it was hoped, would staunch the leak of votes, balancing the situation. The effort was divided between selling the Kadima “cadre,” namely the leaders of the party as a group, and the promotion of the party’s new candidate for prime minister, Ehud Olmert. In wake of the stepping up of the negative campaign against Olmert conducted

by the competition, it was feared that Kadima's candidate might be delegitimized in the eyes of the Russian public. Consequently, resources were diverted to promote support for Olmert's image. This decision turned out to be the right one: The competing parties failed to further weaken Olmert's image in the eyes of the Russian community and the trend was reversed. Kadima's campaign in Russian had three additional important elements: a strong Russian core group of six candidates, an explicit promise to resolve the problem of those unable to marry in Israel (by instituting civil marriage) which affected about 300,000 immigrants and the concept of a "ruling party," which spoke to the hearts of the Russian immigrants, who were attracted to power, decisiveness and the ability to get things done.

Once again, the Russian community behaved differently from the general Israeli population, a reflection of the continued isolation of the Russian-speaking community in Israel. A second reason for this was that Kadima conducted a separate campaign in Russian, whose messages, points of emphasis and timeline were different from the Hebrew-language campaign. Whereas the general Israeli population showed a consistent plunge in the strength of the party, which continued right up until the elections, the decline in support among the Russian community was not only halted, but was reversed, with a slight rise in support of Kadima. Generally speaking, Kadima conducted a mainly defensive campaign and did not waste resources on attempts to significantly increase its support among the immigrants. According to surveys (both internal and open), Kadima completed the election campaign with six to seven "Russian" Knesset seats. However, on the day of the elections, due to poor organization and the passiveness of its supporters, Kadima lost about 2.5 seats and the result at the ballot box was only about 4 seats. In other words, the percentage of Russian immigrants that voted for Kadima was almost identical to that in the general Israeli population.

Yisrael Beiteinu's Successes

As for Yisrael Beiteinu, the party benefited mainly from the immigrants' lack of confidence in the other parties, especially the new Kadima Party. The many years of hard work with the Russian-language media paid off: Avigdor Lieberman established himself as the "default candidate" of the undecided Russian voter. Were we to conduct an in-depth analysis of the Israeli voters' mind, it would probably show that they are first and foremost looking for security and peace of mind. They want to be sure that their vote has been invested reasonably, if not ideally, and that they will not regret their vote. Yisrael Beiteinu turned out to be the election campaign's Volkswagen – not especially attractive, not especially fast, not the most comfortable or inexpensive, but certainly one that offers peace of mind.

Yisrael Beiteinu hired the services of the well-known American election consultant Arthur Finkelstein. A short time before the elections, Yisrael Beiteinu parted from its partners Moledet and Tekuma. The purpose of this move was to highlight the party's sectoral aspect and to glide from the rightist-religious side of the political spectrum towards the center. Finkelstein built a campaign in the classic American style, in which the campaign is based more on very simple and catchy mantras than on logic, and works on the level of emotions and subconscious. Such a campaign does not necessarily have to be based on reality either. All told, Yisrael Beiteinu's campaign appears to have been the most successful one in the entire election campaign.

During the campaign, the relationship between Kadima and Yisrael Beiteinu changed a number of times. At the first stage, Lieberman identified the leakage of votes from Kadima to his party and launched a negative campaign against Kadima in order to bolster this trend. Towards the middle of the campaign, it appeared that the flow of votes between the two parties had more or less ended, and Lieberman's main rival was now the Likud. Lieberman met with Olmert a number of times, and at these meetings, they apparently discussed cooperation between their two parties after the elections. As a result, Kadima and Yisrael

Beiteinu almost completely halted their mutual attacks, although the negative campaigns continue to “simmer” on back burners in both parties, especially in the way they worked with the media. Here it is notable that Lieberman, who had fostered a relationship with the Russian-language media over the years, enjoyed considerable support. As a rule, according to reports, Yisrael Beiteinu earmarked hefty financial resources to target the media, and this definitely paid off.

Towards the end of the campaign, Kadima identified a certain potential of undecideds among Lieberman supporters. Also identified was the desire to see Yisrael Beiteinu enter the government so that it could influence policy and fulfill its commitments. This led to a media spin campaign on the part of Kadima in the final days of the election according to which Lieberman would not be included in the new government to be formed by Kadima. Lieberman’s quick and intense response sent out a message of concern: He tried to convince his voters that his place in the new government was guaranteed. As can be seen from the conflicting results of the final surveys (two separate surveys carried out on the same day with very different results that predicted that Lieberman would gain 15 and seven Knesset seats), Kadima’s spin campaign managed to undermine the confidence felt by some of Lieberman’s voters. It is not clear if Kadima managed to benefit from this, but the results of the vote show that numerous voters abandoned Lieberman. How then did he manage to get 11 Knesset seats? This was thanks to the especially high voting rate among his voters. On election day, the level of support (not votes) for Yisrael Beiteinu apparently amounted to no more than eight to nine seats.

The Russian-Language Campaigns of Other Political Parties

The Likud’s Russian-language campaign was similar to its general campaign and focused on the negative, particularly personal attacks on Ehud Olmert. Like among the general Israeli population, among the Russian-speaking community too, this strategy proved to be wrong

(too tough, aggressive and pessimistic). At the same time, there was a certain upward trend early in the campaign, after Benjamin Netanyahu was elected chairman of the Likud and its candidate for prime minister, and this was due to the considerable support Netanyahu enjoys among the immigrants. From a level of support of only half a Knesset seat, the Likud managed to reach 1.5 “Russian” seats, especially from among the undecided votes, although its expectations were far greater. Among other things, the leaders of the Likud overestimated the electoral strength of Natan Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein.

The Labor Party also increased the proportion of its support among the immigrants, but mainly because it started from zero. At the beginning of the campaign, the surveys predicted that Labor would receive minimal “Russian” support – less than half a Knesset seat. Labor made a strategic decision typical of a leftist party: to ignore the issues of security and foreign policy in its Russian-language campaign, and concentrate on social-welfare. This time the decision was backed by the image of the party’s new chairman, Amir Peretz, who is identified with the war on poverty and social injustice. In light of the economic situation in the country and Netanyahu’s economic reforms, which had a considerably adverse effect on numerous immigrants, there was a certain logic to this type of campaign. However, far from being a popular figure among the immigrants, many despised Amir Peretz, as he was first and foremost identified with the major strikes organized by the Histadrut Labor Federation¹² that he headed. Some maintain that Peretz’s lack of popularity among the Russian immigrants also had an ethnic tint, but I disagree with this claim. Even if the “ethnic genie” was involved to some extent, its influence was minimal. In light of the party’s difficult financial situation and the deadlock in the Russian community, Labor made an unprecedented decision: to close its immigrant campaign headquarters. The activities among the Russian community were drastically cut back and mainly concentrated on public relations and the publication of articles in the Russian press.

12 The “New Histadrut” is the largest workers’ organization in the State of Israel.

Nevertheless, the relatively long campaign enabled Labor to get its messages across and the results at the ballot box were slightly better – one Knesset seat.

Shinui, which had won four “Russian” seats in the previous elections fractured into two parties that were forced to wage a fierce battle for survival: In the wake of Tommy Lapid’s resignation from the party, Shinui was left without a popular, charismatic leader; its offshoot Hetz (Zionist Secularism)¹³ was headed by Avraham Poraz. Both parties realized that the majority of Shinui’s former voters would likely move over to Kadima and consequently aimed their attacks in that direction, and naturally, at one another. Shinui and Hetz were identical twins and there was no ideological justification for their separate existence from one another. To Shinui’s sane and sober voters, it was clear that the rupture in the party had been caused by a battle of political egos, which completely undermined any desire on the part of former Shinui voters to vote for either of its new variants. Shinui and Hetz conducted a broad-based campaign in the Russian community, which failed to produce results, as was the case with their campaign among the general Israeli population. The competition between the two parties gave rise to highly aggressive, even ugly campaigns that targeted the ultra-Orthodox community. Due to the lack of proper supervision in the Russian community, the Russian-language campaigns were even more problematic in this respect; for example, Shinui’s jingle in Russian included the words, “Against us are Hamas and Shas.”

To conclude, it should be noted that Roman Bronfman’s party, Democratic Choice, did not participate in the elections and in fact became defunct in wake of Bronfman’s decision to quit political life. Bronfman, one of the most prominent politicians in the Russian community, carefully scrutinized his political options and held negotiations with a number of parties, but ultimately decided not to

¹³ Avraham Poraz left Shinui and founded the Hetz Party (Hebr. Arrow, also acronym for “Secular Zionism”) after a defeat in internal party elections.

risk defeat. It is noteworthy that the Democratic Choice Party has never participated in an election independently.

6. After the Elections

As noted, the elections revealed a number of facts about the Russian-speaking community in Israel. First, this community still has different electoral behavioral patterns from those of the general Israeli population. Second, there is considerable willingness among the community to vote for sectoral parties. Third, the importance of the Russian-language media has not weakened, and may perhaps have grown even stronger thanks to the appearance of two television channels, Channel 9 and RTV. Fourth, campaigns in Russian still need to be different to some extent from those in Hebrew. Only campaign messages that are adapted to the mentality of the Russian speaker are effective. A case in point is that when trying to get across left-centrist and leftist concepts (both on the subject of foreign policy and economic policy), more weight must be given to the practical, pragmatic arguments and less to the moral ones, which are not received well by the immigrants.

Kadima Loses its Support by Russian-speaking Electors

Before the elections, leading figures in Kadima were warned that if they did not relate with maximum seriousness to the promises they had made to the immigrants and to the immigrants themselves, they would soon lose any foothold they had in this community. It was explained that because the immigrants were far less familiar with the Kadima Party leadership than veteran Israelis were, for them Kadima is a new party that will be tested by its actual performance on the ground and the results it produces (rather than by its efforts). The credit the Russian community gave Kadima was given only for a short term and at a very high interest rate. However, despite the warnings, Kadima did everything it could to lose the Russian vote. First, Marina Solodkin,

number six on the Kadima list, did not receive the coveted absorption portfolio, notwithstanding the half-hearted promises she was given, and which also appeared in Kadima's campaign literature. All of the first ten candidates on Kadima's Knesset list received cabinet portfolios, with the exception of Solodkin. This was despite the fact that what she demanded was considered a minor, unimportant post, one that fit her like a glove. The immigrants quite rightly viewed this behavior as patronizing and demeaning and their reactions were intense and indignant. In addition, the failure of the coalition negotiations with Yisrael Beiteinu led to a situation whereby for the first time since 1996, there was not a single representative of the immigrants in the cabinet, despite the fact that the ruling party had an unprecedented number of Russian speakers among its Knesset members – three. Kadima's second mistake was that it appeared to have given up on the matter of civil marriage. According to its coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, the latter has a veto on any legislative initiatives on the subject. Even if a formula that Shas can live with is found in the future, as of now, the public is convinced that Kadima violated its explicit promise to establish civil marriage for those in Israel currently unable to marry.

The Return to Sectoral Politics

After the coalition talks failed, Avigdor Lieberman focused on attacking Kadima on ethnic grounds, both joining and leading the wave of criticism of the party. It comes as no surprise that according to the surveys, Kadima has already lost about half of its immigrant voters. Yisrael Beiteinu, on the other hand, has grown significantly stronger and at present, about half of the immigrants support it, placing Yisrael Beiteinu on an equal standing with Yisrael b'Aliya in 1996. In other words, today, like ten years ago, half of the immigrants support a sectoral party. This in my opinion is indicative of the failure of absorption and that the "Russian ghetto" indeed exists. After the elections, the ghetto's walls only grew stronger. At the same time, it

is noteworthy that the other half of Kadima's supporters among the Russian community has not been and apparently will not be affected by its policy towards the community. These are people who demonstrably do not want to be identified with sectoral politics.

In another two years, Israel will once again enter into a period of municipal elections, giving the parties the opportunity to strengthen their standing in the cities and towns. A foothold in the field guarantees political longevity and provides an advantage over other parties – in the Knesset elections too. The enormous influence of the “Russian vote” will once again become evident in these elections. Yisrael Beiteinu has already started to plan for the municipal elections by rallying immigrants around its banner on the background of ethnic identity. Kadima is still in a respectable second place in the Russian community, but the Likud is already moving in (eleven percent and eight percent support respectively, according to the most recent survey by the Mutagim Institute, conducted on June 5, 2006).

Finally, the war in the north in all likelihood has further weakened Kadima's standing among the immigrants, who are dissatisfied with Israel's military achievements. Lieberman's strong influence is once again evident in the Russian media, and he has decided to exploit the situation and deliver Kadima yet another blow. Kadima's campaign activities in the Russian-speaking community are fairly weak, and genuine party activity is virtually nonexistent, among other reasons due to the power struggles and conflicts among the party activists and Knesset members. If this trend continues, we can expect a period of increasing political and ideological isolation of the Russian-speaking community in Israel.

At the same time, we have recently seen an interesting development - a significant rise in the strength of Yisrael Beiteinu, which is now reaching the 20-seat mark, making in the country's second largest party. This phenomenon is the outcome of Yisrael Beiteinu's positioning itself as the “default party,” which is not unequivocally identified with either the Right or the Left, and as yet has not made any mistakes

in leading the country (since it has not yet played a leadership role), and also the upshot of Liebermann's strong image. The phenomenon further reflects the painful feelings being experienced by Israelis in light of what they perceive as the Kadima party's powerlessness, and the lack of progress in all those areas where the Israeli voter so longs for forward movement. Large numbers of people are currently pinning their hopes on Liebermann, and it will not be long before it will become clear whether this is a passing phenomenon or drastic, long-term change to the political map.

Glossary

DA	First sectoral party that recruited its voters mainly from the Russian-speaking community in Israel. DA means yes in Russian and is a Hebrew acronym for “Democracy and Immigration”.
Hetz	(Hebr. “Arrow”, also acronym for “Secular Zionism”) Secular party, founded by former Shinui member Avraham Poraz after a defeat in internal party elections.
Histradrut Labor Federation	The “New Histadrut” is the largest workers’ organization in the State of Israel.
Kadima	(Hebr. “Forward”) Centre-right wing political party that was formed by Ariel Sharon, then Prime Minister and chairman of the Likud Party, as a reaction to missing support for his Disengagement Plan from Gaza in the Likud.
Likud	(Hebr. “Union”) A centre-right political party.
Meretz	(Hebr. “Vitality”) A left wing social democratic party.
Moledet	(Hebr. “Homeland”) A small right-wing party which advocates the notion of forceful transfer of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
Prisoner of Zion	Someone who has been imprisoned because of his Zionist activity in a country where such activity is illegal.
Shahar	The Shahar Movement (Hebrew acronym for “Peace, Education and Welfare”) was established by two members of the Labor Party, Yossi Beilin and

Eyal Dayan, in resistance to the “National Union” government by Labor and Likud after the elections to the 15th Knesset.

Shas	The Shas Party (Hebrew Acronym for “Sephardic Torah Guards”) represents the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic community.
Shinui	(Hebr. “Change”) A secular, anti-clerical party with a strong accent on economical liberalism.
Tekuma	(Hebr. “Resurrection”) A hawkish right-wing party that broke away from the National-Religious Party in 1999.
Yisrael b’Aliya	(Hebr. “Israel by Immigration”) Moderate right-wing party that focused mainly on Zionism and representing the interests of Israel’s Russian Immigrants. Yisrael b’Aliya merged with the ruling Likud Party in 2003.
Yisrael Beiteinu	(Hebr. “Israel our home”) Right wing political party that recruits its voters mainly from the Russian-speaking community in Israel.
Zionist Forum	Umbrella organization of Zionist former Soviet dissidents.

