

The Increasing Political Power of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel: From Passive Citizenship to Active Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

The immigrants in Israel from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) followed a different pattern of political growth than other immigrant groups. Their increased power began on the national level and moved down to the local level, rather than from the periphery toward the centre – the pattern followed by the Oriental Jewish immigrants. We can trace three stages in the development of their political power.

The first stage was during the 1992 elections when the immigrants attempted to organize their own list. Though they failed, the results of the election strengthened them because they were given credit for the left's victory, giving them a sense of political effectiveness.

The second stage came during the 1996 elections. It was a defining moment for the former Soviet immigrants' political power. In this stage external factors and internal factors reinforced each other. The change in the electoral system made it possible for the immigrants to vote for their community on the one hand and for a national figure on the other, thus resolving their identity dilemma.

The local elections in 1998 marked the third stage in their political strength. They found the immigrant community better organized, with an improved understanding of its local interests, the capacity to put forward a strong local leadership, and a stronger link between the immigrant political centre and the local level.

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Thus, these three stages represent milestones in the transformation of the FSU immigrants from passive to active citizenship, from the centre to the periphery, and from a separatist identity to a legitimately distinct identity within the Israeli political and social mosaic.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other countries of immigration, Israel grants immigrants the right to participate in the political system as soon as they arrive in the country. This right includes both suffrage and eligibility to hold elective office. Its significance, beyond the act of voting, is that immigrants become full and equal citizens the moment they arrive in the country. The immediate granting of this right has never been challenged by non-immigrants – not even in the 1950s, when some of the immigrants were uneducated, did not speak Hebrew, had no prior experience of democracy, and were unfamiliar with Israeli political culture. Paradoxically, throughout Israeli history the political integration of new immigrants has preceded their occupational, social, and cultural integration.

This is the reverse of the process in Western countries, where immigrants must first demonstrate their economic and cultural integration before they are granted citizenship and the right of political participation (Hoskin, 1991).

Though they received immediate citizenship and political rights, from the 1950s new immigrants to Israel never took full advantage of the opportunity to influence the political system. They did not build new political frameworks, and immigrants' parties, if and when established, were not significant with regard to the number of voters or their influence. They generally dissolved after a single election campaign.

In general, the immigrants' preference has been to gain admittance to the existing political system, at least in the first generation. In this respect their behaviour resembles that of immigrant groups elsewhere in the world, who, after receiving citizenship, tend to be conformist with regard to existing structures and institutions. First-generation immigrants are grateful to their new country. If they do in fact introduce changes to its political system, this generally involves a reaction by elements of the host society, manifested chiefly in nationalism and xenophobia voiced by veteran or new right-wing parties.

The immigration from the FSU to Israel in the 1990s changed the immigrants' patterns of political integration. Instead of a wave of immigrants who sought admittance to the existing political system, it featured a large group of immigrants with education and occupational skills who understood how the political system worked and had the ambition to become a significant political power.

Our analysis of the former Soviet immigrants' mounting political strength over the course of the decade has five foci: their political behaviour in the 1992 general elections, 1996 general elections, 1998 local elections, 1999 general elections, and the 2003 general elections. In a democratic country, election results mirror the political, social, and organizational processes that transpire in the interval since the previous elections. Individuals crystallize and summarize their views and feelings during this period. This process may be much more important for immigrants, for whom the act of voting is a rite of initiation into their new society – a rite that may leave them alienated or with a sense of full partnership.

Views and attitudes

To understand the political behaviour of the former Soviet immigrants in these three election campaigns we must first consider their political attitudes and views. Their attitudes about issues of state and society are part of the baggage that immigrants bring with them to their new country. This predisposition may remain with immigrants until the end of their lives and explain their political and social behaviour; other immigrants discard it as soon as they arrive in their new country. The extent of such desocialization from old values and resocialization to the new values depends on a number of factors: the compatibility between the cultures of the “old country” and the new homeland, the extent of their social and economic integration into the new country, and (at least to some degree) individual traits.

Immigrants from the Soviet Union in the 1970s held on to their social and political attitudes and ideas for a long time after arriving in Israel and were absorbed into its economic and social system. Research conducted then found distinct traces of their socialization to the Communist regime, with “Homo sovieticus” at its centre. The immigrants tended to evince obedience, accept authority without challenge, and view work as a contribution to society. They were marked by a collectivist worldview and low level of civic culture (Gitelman, 1995; Horowitz, 1996).

One of the explanations for the persistence of their attitudes is the depth of their internalization of the prevailing norms and values of Soviet society, such that they could not be shed easily; another is that the similarities between Soviet society and Israeli society in the 1970s, especially in the socio-economic sphere, did not force them to shed their old attitudes quickly.

The 1990s immigrants came from a political and social reality that was much less monolithic than that which produced the 1970s immigrants. The Communist Party was no longer dominant, the political structure and its legitimacy had been transformed, democratic procedures had become part of the political system, privatization had struck deep roots in the economy, collectivism had given way to moderate individualism and the definition of the collectivity had changed, and several republics had demanded and received independence.

The immigrants of the 1990s, unlike those of two decades earlier, experienced a situation of political discontinuity (to use the terminology of Dawson and Prewitt, 1969) in which there was an incompatibility with their former socio-political culture, exposure to situations of inconsistency, and contradictory messages from different systems. Some immigrants may have found it difficult to build a new political outlook because they came from a situation of uncertainty. But not only did they come from a different background; they also came to a different situation than that which confronted the immigrants of the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, the Israeli political culture and economy were transformed. Society became more multicultural, structures such as the Histadrut and political parties changed dramatically, and much of the economy was privatized.

As a result, the 1990s immigrants had to integrate into a much less structured culture and society. An analysis of the 1990s immigrants' attitudes yields a picture that is less coherent, especially if we analyse attitudes by age. Older immigrants have views that are more "subject-oriented" and less "civic culture" oriented, to use the terminology of Almond and Verba (1963). They also tend to see themselves as less effective politically. All the immigrants, young and old, are more individualist than collectivist; they believe in a market economy tempered by a certain amount of social and economic planning. Civil rights, which Westerners see from three perspectives – freedom, democratic procedures, and social justice – tend to be viewed chiefly through the lens of freedom, in its various guises, and democratic procedures (while giving short shrift to social justice and individual welfare). For this reason, the political, social, and economic encounter between the immigrants from the FSU and Israeli society today is different from the encounter that took place in the 1970s (Horowitz, 1996).

The immigrants of the 1990s have been more flexible in their efforts to be absorbed into the Israeli economy than the immigrants of the 1970s, evincing a willingness to modify attitudes about their employment and profession. At the same time, these immigrants have endeavoured to preserve their social and cultural identity, to be absorbed as a distinct group in the Israeli social and cultural mosaic, and to be integrated as slowly as possible.

Ben-Raphael, Olstein, and Geist (1994) found that new immigrants tended to aspire to integrate into Israeli society from the economic and social perspective, but were not giving up their identification with their own group and viewed themselves as a distinct group that should receive allowances in various areas.

The immigrants have developed social groups and organizations to assist their economic integration by establishing lobbies for economic advancement on the one hand and for business activity on the other. They have also developed organizations with social objectives, support groups with a social interest, and groups that work to preserve their social and cultural heritage.

The immigrants have also established a ramified system of newspapers and periodicals that have served as nuclei for social circles, such as *Twenty Two*. At first these activities were the product of joint initiatives by 1970s and 1990s immigrants, but the latter quickly formed their own organizations.

Here, then, we have a group that is more open, politically and socially, than the 1970s immigrants, even though the political socialization of the Communist regime can still be identified among them. Nevertheless, they display a greater need for distinctiveness and identity.

POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN THE 1992 ELECTIONS

In 1992 there were about 375,000 recent immigrants in Israel – 7 per cent of the population; 240,000 of them were eligible to vote. Of these potential voters, about 80 per cent told pre-election surveys that they intended to exercise their right to vote (Fein, 1992). The declared proclivity to exercise their right to vote can be ascribed to continuity in the behaviour that was the norm in the Soviet regime and not necessarily to a sense of political effectiveness. Pre-election surveys of this group revealed their sense of low effectiveness and lack of belief in their ability to affect government actions (Horowitz, 1996; Gitelman, 1995).

Two immigrants' lists contested the 1992 elections: Da, based on members of the Zionist Forum, and Tali, an outgrowth of the Associations of Immigrants from the Soviet Union. But these lists, which did not crystallize until shortly before the elections, did not pass the threshold, even though in April 1992 some 20 per cent of immigrants told pollsters that they would vote for an immigrant party (Fein, 1995a). Gitelman believes that the two lists failed because their leaders were not well known, the candidates had scant political experience, the internal schism was blatant, and the Russian-language media published in Israel did not support them or see them as representing the immigrant public (Gitelman, 1995). The vast majority of immigrant voters supported veteran parties on the right or the left, especially Labour and the Likud.

The fundamental question is whether the immigrants were responsible for the change of government, from the right to the left, produced by these elections. Polls conducted from April 1991 until right before the elections in 1992 revealed a progressive shift of potential voters from a tendency to vote for right-wing parties and immigrant parties to an inclination to vote for the existing veteran parties, with a preference for the left and especially Labour (Fein, 1995a). The trend toward change in the immigrants' voting patterns was only slightly different from that of the voting public at large. Analysis of voting statistics in districts with high concentrations of immigrants, such as Upper Nazareth, Karmiel, Qiryat Yam, and

Ashdod, reveals that in these localities the swing toward left-wing parties was no more than 8 per cent to 10 per cent greater than among all voters (Fein, 1995); that is, the immigrants' voting in the 1992 elections did not produce a sweeping change toward the left, but only tilted the balance slightly more toward the left in the near parity between the two blocks: the left-wing parties with 61 seats, the right with 59. Both Fein (1995a) and Zemach (1995) believe that the immigrant vote gave the left an addition of only two to three seats.

Fein (1995), Gitelman (1995), and Horowitz (1995) offer various explanations for the immigrants' voting patterns in 1992.

Protest vote. According to Gitelman and Fein, the immigrants' voting was motivated by their growing sense of frustration with how the Government of Prime Minister Shamir, with Ariel Sharon as head of the Absorption Cabinet, was responding to their needs. Gitelman also notes that the absorption portfolio had been given to the Shas party (religious Oriental party).

Remember that in 1992, 24.2 per cent of 1990 immigrants, 32.2 per cent of 1991 immigrants, and 26.5 per cent of 1992 immigrants who had joined the labour force were unemployed (Sicron, 1998). The immigrants who arrived in Israel during this period had trouble finding rental housing and lived in relatively difficult and crowded conditions (Borochov, 1998). The financial assistance provided as part of the absorption basket, in the context of "direct absorption", was eroded in real terms and had not been updated by the authorities (Leshem, 1998).

The public agenda. According to Fein and Gitelman, as election day approached, the left-wing parties regaled the immigrants with the ostensible contradiction between two key goals of the public agenda – immigrant absorption and the construction of settlements in the West Bank. This argument was supported by the stance of the US Administration, as presented in the Israeli media, including the immigrant press. The Administration had made \$10 billion in loan guarantees to help the integration process, conditional on the willingness of the Israeli Government to make concessions and show flexibility in the Israeli-Arab conflict and the return of the occupied territories. The left emphasized that it was more willing than the right to do so. According to Fein and Gitelman, the contradiction between these issues spurred some of the immigrants who supported right-wing positions about settlements and the territories to vote for the left. Fein reports that in a survey conducted in April 1991, about two-thirds of the immigrants said that territories should not be returned; a year later, however, shortly before the elections, only 54 per cent of the immigrants were opposed to giving back territory. Gitelman asserts that the results of the 1992 elections expressed a temporary and ad-hoc deviation by the immigrants, who, although fundamentally right wing, voted for leftist parties when issues of immigrant absorption and economic

consolidation were contrasted with the fate of the territories. At this time, when immigrants were asked what concerned them, 43 per cent said problems of integration in Israel and 35 per cent said economic problems; only 15 per cent referred to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Ideological voting. Based on a study of immigrants' voting patterns and their positions on social issues, Horowitz (1994) offered another explanation. She asserted that leftist immigrant voters, as opposed to the right-wing voters, could be characterized by a belief in a social-democratic solution to the socio-economic problems of modern industrial society. They viewed equality as a positive value and aspired to a society that gave weight to social considerations alongside economic ones. They were more likely than rightists to believe in the average citizen's capacity to influence the political system. They contended that the level of social justice in Israel was inadequate and criticized the Government's efforts with regard to equal opportunity.

By contrast, those who voted for right-wing parties had less faith in the social-democratic welfare state and the effectiveness of government, put more credence in the symbols of authority, and were more nationalist and more closely identified with the State of Israel than leftist voters. Horowitz believes that, on both left and right, the 1992 voting reflected ideology more than frustration or an ad-hoc coincidence of factors.

Whatever the explanations for the immigrants' voting patterns in 1992, and in spite of their relatively small absolute contribution to the size of the left-wing bloc, the 1992 elections proved to be a watershed in the consolidation of their political power. They won a permanent place on the Israeli political map because of the belief that they were responsible for the change of government, even though they were not the only cause thereof. But the public perception that they were gave them a sense of power whose results were evident in the 1996 elections.

Until the 1992 elections, the immigrants were accompanied by the sense of alienation that they brought with them from the FSU, to the effect that citizens cannot influence political activity, on the one hand, reinforced by the belief that Israel was totally controlled by the "old-timers". The 1992 elections changed this. If we are assessing their contribution to the Israeli political system, we may argue that in 1992 they brought about a chance political deviation more than a profound structural change.

POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN THE 1996 ELECTIONS

The 1996 elections produced a profound change in the political system. In a number of respects they can be seen as a turning point not only in the immigrants'

parliamentary representation but also in the Israeli political and cultural structure. This section will attempt an in-depth analysis of these cultural and political processes. The 1996 campaign was the first in the history of Israel that produced an effective immigrants' party, Yisrael ba'Aliya, which returned seven Knesset members, or 6 per cent of the house. If the votes given to a second immigrants' party, Ihud va'Aliya, had not been wasted (the party failed to reach the threshold), the immigrants would have won eight seats.

About 400,000 immigrants went to the polls in 1996, of whom about 200,000 were voting for the first time in Israel. Of these 400,000, just under 175,000 (43%) cast their ballots for Yisrael ba'Aliya. What lists were supported by the other 57 per cent? We will try to answer this on the basis of two types of data: the results in polling stations with a preponderance of immigrant voters (Weiss, 1996) and pre-election polls conducted by Gallup.

If we look at polling stations where more than 95 per cent available voters were immigrants, we find that 11.7 per cent voted for Labour and Meretz (left-wing party), 13.2 per cent for religious parties, 25.7 per cent for the Likud and Moledet (extreme right-wing party), and 41.6 per cent for Yisrael ba'Aliya. There are grounds for maintaining that this reflects the distribution of votes among all immigrants because the figure of 41.6 per cent who voted for Yisrael ba'Aliya is very close to the 43 per cent mentioned above (Weiss, 1996).

As for the race for Prime Minister, in precincts with a very high concentration of immigrant voters (95%), the result was 30 per cent for Peres and 70 per cent for Netanyahu, compared with the general Israeli population who voted 49.5 per cent for Peres and 50 per cent for Netanyahu.

If we compare the voting profile of the Israeli population in general with the results in heavily immigrant (95%) precincts, we find that, countrywide, Meretz and Labour received 34.2 per cent of the vote, but only 11.7 per cent among the immigrants. About 19.7 per cent of the general population voted for religious parties, but only 13.2 per cent in the "immigrant" precincts.

Another source is a poll conducted by Gallup before the elections, in April 1996. This found that 27.8 per cent of the immigrants said they would vote for the immigrants' party, 19.8 per cent for Labour, 25.2 per cent for the Likud, and 11.8 per cent for other parties; 12.2 per cent said that they had not yet decided and 2.8 per cent said they did not plan to vote.

The voting in the heavily immigrant precincts resembles the Gallup poll findings, especially with regard to the Likud (25% and 27.8%, respectively). But it is quite different when it comes to the immigrants' party and Labour. In the Gallup poll,

27.8 per cent said they would vote for immigrant parties and 19.8 per cent for Labour; on election day, however, the results were 11.7 per cent for Labour and 41.6 per cent for Yisrael ba'Aliya.

This suggests that two months before election day, Likud supporters already knew how they would vote. But there was evidently vacillation between Labour and the immigrants' party. It may be conjectured that Yisrael ba'Aliya's effective campaign, as compared to that of Labour, which was conducted in a desultory fashion, produced the change. As for the race for Prime Minister, in April, 44.6 per cent of immigrants said they would vote for Peres; 40.3 per cent said they would vote for Netanyahu. This was also the picture given by other polls, in which the gap between Netanyahu and Peres was not as great as that between Likud and Labour.

We shall see look at the social profile of those who voted for the Likud, Labour, and Yisrael ba'Aliya, according to the Gallup poll.

A breakdown by level of education found that Yisrael ba'Aliya voters were better educated. About 40 per cent of immigrant Likud and Labour voters attended university, compared to 63 per cent of Yisrael ba'Aliya voters. Yisrael ba'Aliya voters were also older – 54 per cent were older than age 55, as opposed to 38.6 per cent of Labour voters and 18 per cent of Likud voters. As for the distribution between women and men, the proportion was more balanced for the immigrants' party. For Labour and the Likud, the proportion was 45 per cent men and 55 per cent women.

Thus, Yisrael ba'Aliya voters came from among the older and better-educated immigrants, whose capacity for economic integration was evidently relatively lower and who were presumably more frustrated.

As for republic of origin, 24.1 per cent of voters from the Central Asian republics said they would vote for the Likud; the corresponding figures were 15.1 per cent for Labour and 12.3 per cent for Yisrael ba'Aliya. Yet, proportionally more immigrants from the Baltic republics planned to vote for Labour and Yisrael ba'Aliya than for the Likud. The proportions were similar among immigrants from Ukraine – more than 35 per cent of Labour and Yisrael ba'Aliya supporters came from Ukraine, compared to 25 per cent among Likud supporters. As for religious observance, 39 per cent of the putative Likud voters said that they were "traditional", as compared to 36 per cent of Labour voters and 31 per cent of Yisrael ba'Aliya voters.

There was no great difference in the educational profile of the supporters of the two candidates for Prime Minister. Netanyahu voters were younger: 42 per cent

of those who planned to vote for Peres were older than 55, but only 25 per cent of Netanyahu voters. Immigrants from the Russian Federation preferred Netanyahu, while those from the Baltic states preferred Peres.

An important question in the Gallup poll was, “do you feel that you belong to the right-wing or left-wing camp”?

Among potential Likud voters, about one-quarter could not define themselves, 42 per cent thought that they were oriented to the right, and 13.5 per cent to the left. Among potential Labour voters, 21 per cent thought that they were oriented to the right, and 27.9 per cent to the left. As for Yisrael ba’Aliya, about 25 per cent said they were right wing and 17.8 per cent that they were left wing. It seems that the immigrants did not unambiguously identify the parties on a left-right axis. But there were more immigrants who said that they would vote for the Likud and defined themselves as right wing than potential Labour voters who said they defined themselves as left.

In general, it can be said that, unlike the 1992 elections, in 1996 the immigrants’ vote tended rightward. Nevertheless, the main switch was from Labour to Yisrael ba’Aliya, which at the time was not identified as a right-wing party, since some of its people voted for Peres.

An analysis of the immigrant vote raises three key questions:

1. Why did the immigrants create an immigrant party?
2. How can we explain their voting patterns?
3. How did the change in the electoral system affect the immigrants’ voting?

WHY DID THE IMMIGRANTS CREATE AN IMMIGRANT PARTY?

Perception of strength related to their number and professional skills

In the years from 1989 to 1996, 620,000 persons from the FSU arrived in Israel – 12 per cent of the population of Israel. If we add to this the 180,000 that arrived in the 1970s, we have the largest group of immigrants in Israel’s short history. This group had the ability to adapt to Israel’s modern industrial society. More than two-thirds of the immigrants had higher education and the professional skills that allowed them to function in a modern economic system. They also had political awareness and understood the significance of their numbers and their ability to have an impact in a modern democracy. They realized that integration into the existing political structure would not provide them with true representation.

High levels of political efficacy following the 1992 elections

After the 1992 elections and the public's perception that the new immigrants were fueling major political change, the immigrants were imbued with a feeling of political power. The perception of alienation from the former Soviet regime and their inability to exert influence (Gitelman, 1982; Horowitz, 1996) was replaced by a sense of empowerment and influence in the Israeli political environment.

The new immigrants required self confidence and political confidence in order to pave the way for 1996; one of the manifestations of this newly acquired self confidence was the establishment of Yisrael ba'Aliya. The immigrants' party did not arise out of weakness and frustration, but out of a feeling of political consequence and belief in their ability to bring about change.

Organizational infrastructure

In the middle of the 1990s it became clear to immigrants that political mobilization based on existing organizational infrastructures was not the way to achieve real power. The immigrants of the 1990s, in their five years in Israel, had established numerous voluntary organizations.

The most important immigrant organization, the Zionist Forum, was established in 1988 by a group of immigrant activists and former Prisoners of Zion. The Forum went through a process of self-institutionalizing, moving from a small-scale voluntary institution that dealt with individuals to a lobbying organization that worked on the local municipal and national levels and had the ability to orchestrate large-scale political demonstrations; from consumer-based organizations to an organization that generated economic projects and political and cultural activities; from a semi-familial basis to an umbrella organization that gave political representation to many different immigrant factions; from an organization that functioned as a limited administrative framework to one that functioned as a bureaucratic system with control mechanisms. In 1995 its membership comprised 42 immigrant organizations with 60,000 members. At the head of the Forum stood Natan Sharansky, Soviet dissident and refusenik, whose vibrant personality had become the symbol of the organization.

The idea of an immigrant party appeared among immigrants long before the election. They viewed it as an effective tool to solve their problems but also recognized the price they would have to pay in terms of integration into Israeli society.

In 1992 and 1993, Zionist Forum activists were preoccupied with the dilemma of whether to establish an immigrant party, some of whose members would be Forum members, or to remain content with the existing format of the Forum,

which had become a powerful central organization. At the time, Sharansky did not foresee himself establishing an immigrant party. He advocated integration within the existing political system. In addition, some Forum members claimed that if Sharansky established an ethnic party, he would become "the David Levy of the Russian immigrants" (an ethnic political figure who is not respected).

In March 1996, after long debates among the Forum members, Yisrael ba'Aliya party was established. For the founding meeting, 1,500 delegates who had been active in the different organizations of the Forum convened and chose their future representatives. Significantly, these representatives were characterized by a variety of socio-cultural and political activities. They were the products of diverse backgrounds and career patterns. They did not align themselves with either the left or the right but intended to represent the interests of Russian immigrants.

It is important to note that the immigrant activists were highly skilled prior to the formation of the immigrant party. They all had political training from their activities with previous organizations. Some had been active in organizations in the Soviet Union, and this allowed them to mobilize the new immigrants with ease. On election day itself, the rallying of the immigrants around the Yisrael ba'Aliya party was especially effective; they succeeded in pulling together nearly 13,000 immigrant activists.

Russian-language press

The immigrants from FSU had a strong tradition of a periodical press. This tradition did not fade with their arrival in Israel. The new immigrants currently publish almost two dozen different kinds of papers. These papers are written in Russian; most of their contents chronicle the Russian immigrant experience. Surveys indicated that only 10-20 per cent of new immigrants read Hebrew papers. The others read strictly from the Russian press (Fein, 1994). It is estimated that 200,000 immigrants, half the immigrants, read *Vesti* (Rogovin, 1996). According to the editors of that daily, their readership is relatively young, between 24 and 48 years old. Their readers are financially stable, employed, and own apartments and cars (Rogovin, 1996). *Vesti* is a right-wing newspaper, rightist-to-centre on the peace process, and close to Likud on internal issues. *Nasha Strana*, another Russian immigrant paper, is closer to Labour policies. Established in the 1970s, its circulation failed to increase after the new wave of immigration in the 1990s. Another significant paper is the *Novosti*. It has a more Israeli and internationalist bent, with a centrist political orientation. Conceived as an Israeli paper in the Russian language, its weekend circulation is almost 44,000.

In general, the Russian press revolves more around the Russian community and less around Israeli society. It serves as an intermediary between the immigrant and Israeli society. The immigrants experience Israeli society through the filter of

their press more than any other group of immigrants in the past. Another significant element of the mass media is the "Immigrant Absorption Station" (*Reka*) for Russian immigrants. Sixty-three per cent of the immigrants listen to this station on a regular basis (Fein, 1994).

These Russian-language mass media were centres of mobilization and campaigning for the new immigrant party. For example, *Vesti*, the most popular paper among Russian immigrants, supported Sharansky, in addition to its overall rightist message. This was noted by Szewach Weiss in his analysis of the 1996 elections: "Most of the Russian press that had and still has a key influence on the everyday lives of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union seem to have a rightist, nationalistic tendency. In some aspects they started the chapter from an introduction to a Zionist indoctrination in a similar manner to the first generation following the establishment of the country. . . . The peace-process governments of Rabin and Peres were painted by the press as something post-Zionist. Around *Vesti* was shaped a cultural and political experience that we define as right-wing, yet describe the Labour Party leaders as left-wing and Bolshevik" (Weiss, 1996: 135).

Preserving a distinct cultural identity

The establishment of Yisrael ba'Aliya was linked to the desire to preserve the immigrants' distinct cultural identity. This factor is noted by Ben-Rafael and Olstein (1994), who claim that "the immigrants do not have a tendency to produce a model of isolation and separatism, but they also do not have a tendency to assimilate either. On the one hand, they ask for legitimization of their cultural distinctness and on the other hand they ask for integration as a secular community with a distinct identity."

In the 1996 Gallup survey, it became clear that the immigrants viewed themselves more as new immigrants than as Israelis. More than 25 per cent of the immigrants placed themselves on the two lowest levels of the Israeli identification scale. There is a strong desire among the immigrants to preserve the Russian language as a second language for their children, to read in the Russian language, and to establish a press and other Russian cultural organizations. Some immigrants complained of a cultural deficiency in Israel, as well as expressing strong disappointment that they failed to learn to speak fluent and correct Hebrew.

Other elements of their identity were reflected in the manner in which Israeli society related to them. Israeli society forced an identity upon them just as it had done to other immigrant groups in the past. Many felt that Israeli society thought of the immigrants in stereotypical terms and its desire to integrate them was eroded. In the context of these stereotypes, we must note the statement by Ora Namir, the then-minister of Labour and Social Affairs. Six months before the 1996 election,

she commented that “instead of coming themselves, the young Jews in Russia sent their old parents in order to enjoy the Israeli welfare services”. This remark generated outrage in the Russian community and in the Russian press, which was played upon in the election campaign. Negative statements by the Minister of Public Security, Moshe Shahal, about 100 Russian immigrants as a “group that brings an element with links to the Russian Mafia”, had a similar impact. Immigrants pointed out, ironically, that “Begin established the Likud, Ben-Gurion established Labour, and Shahal and Namir established Yisrael ba’ Aliya.” It seems, however, that the comfort level of the immigrants in their cultural frame prompted the idea that they would feel more comfortable in political terms when they have their own party.

The lack of immigrant representation in the existing parties

The two large parties did not include new immigrants near the top of their lists of Knesset candidates. In the first stages of election organizing, there was little awareness about the strong Russian immigrant will to influence the political system. Only during the second stage of organizing for the elections did the parties include new immigrants on their candidate lists. In the Likud, the immigrants’ representatives were well known in the Russian community but were not placed in prominent positions. Yisrael ba’ Aliya was established because of feelings of power and political effectiveness, on the one hand, and the major parties’ unwillingness to integrate the immigrants, on the other.

HOW CAN WE EXPLAIN THE IMMIGRANTS’ VOTING PATTERNS?

Several possible explanations can be offered.

Frustration

A survey conducted by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption in March 1996 found that 70 per cent of the respondents were optimistic about their future in the country; six months earlier, however, only 61 per cent were similarly optimistic. That is, their satisfaction with their situation in the country had increased. Unemployment among immigrants in late 1995 was down to 9.6 per cent; by then, about 70 per cent of 1990s immigrants owned their own apartments. In the survey, which is cited in Weiss’s book about the elections (Weiss, 1996), 40 per cent of the immigrants said that they had improved their standard of living over what it had been in the FSU; 81 per cent said that they were satisfied with it. Nevertheless, only 30 per cent of the immigrants were employed in the professions in which they worked abroad. Employment outside their former professions seemed to be a source of frustration, particularly among immigrants with a university education.

In general, the satisfaction level seemed to be reasonable even among immigrants who had not found work in their profession. Where there were dissatisfaction and frustration, however, they were not identified with or translated to the partisan political level.

It is difficult to assert an unambiguous link between the decision to vote for a particular party and the level of frustration. Frustration may be a secondary rather than a primary factor. The immigrants still saw themselves in the midst of the integration process and evidently were giving Israeli society the benefit of the doubt.

Ideology

Here we must consider ideology as it relates to two different planes – foreign and domestic issues. Since the 1970s (former) Soviet immigrants have been tagged as having a predominantly right-wing ideology, yet, both Gitelman (1982) and Horowitz (1996) argue that there is no clear-cut proof that most in the 1970s and 1980s were right wing. What can be said is that the immigrants have a negative attitude toward Arabs, based on an unfavourable stereotype of Arabs and of Islam as a religion. According to a survey conducted by Weizman and Vadana (Weiss, 1996), 80.3 per cent of the immigrants did not believe it was possible to make peace with the Arabs; 56 per cent said that peace would not contribute to the economic development of the country. In surveys conducted by Gallup in 1993, 73.5 per cent of the immigrants said that Arabs could not be trusted; nevertheless, 46 per cent said that the territories were an obstacle to peace.

In a 1992 survey, Yohanan Peres (Peres, 1992) asked immigrants “whether the state of Israel should guarantee equality to the Arabs”. He found that 46 per cent said it should, but 54 per cent were opposed. The immigrants expressed feelings of personal and public insecurity in Israel. According to the 1996 Gallup Poll, about 60 per cent of the immigrants did not feel safe in Israel.

We may assume that the 25 per cent of the immigrants who voted for the Likud were ideologically right wing. It may also be assumed that some of those who voted for Yisrael ba’Aliya preferred the right-wing path. This proclivity can be identified in their support voting for Peres (30%) versus Netanyahu (70%). Another figure that may hint at the immigrants’ ideological bent is that *42 per cent of the immigrants thought that they belonged to the political camp of the right, against only 13 per cent who thought they belonged to the left camp*. It seems that at least 50 per cent of the immigrants were consciously right wing.

As for domestic affairs, the Peres’s survey found that 16 per cent of the immigrants favoured a capitalist society, 43 per cent a liberal society, 30 per cent a social-democratic society, and 10 per cent a socialist society. Similarly, when

asked whether the economy should be in private hands, 33 per cent responded in the affirmative. Yet, when asked whether the economy should be largely in private hands, but with essential services left to the government, 81 per cent agreed.

As for ideological voting on domestic issues, we have no data on the 1996 elections to compare with those for the 1992 elections. We do not know what motivated those who voted for Labour, the Likud, or Yisrael ba' Aliya and whether their impetus on matters of domestic policy was close to the social-democratic ideology. In general, however, we can say that ideological votes by immigrants from the FSU went to the right and not the left.

The social agenda

This explanation holds that immigrants vote as a function of issues that are on the social agenda. As we saw, welfare and immigration issues were on the public agenda in 1992; what is more, the election campaign that year hammered home the opposition between settlements and immigrant absorption. That is, domestic policy was the issue and most immigrants voted for left-wing parties. In 1996, foreign affairs and security issues were at the top of the public agenda – peace, security, and agreements with Arab countries. When the immigrants had to decide on the issues, they voted for the Likud and other parties that favoured a harder line vis-à-vis the Arab world. According to Szewach Weiss, “the political agenda is set by the parties, and the Likud made sure that it determined the political agenda, because it knew that a right-wing foreign-policy agenda would produce a Likud victory. The issues that occupied centre stage in the 1996 election campaign were determined more by the Likud, whereas Labour failed, for example, to cast the spotlight on an important issue like the economy, which could have helped it, because most of the public views it as an area influenced for the better by the Oslo accords” (1996: 314).

Rogovin-Frankel (1996) asked herself about the highlights presented to immigrant voters two weeks before the elections. The Likud, she said, highlighted concern about national security; its broadcasts for immigrants featured clips of the terrorist attack at Dizengoff Centre. It also stressed that Peres would divide Jerusalem, return the Golan, and set up a Palestinian state on the West Bank. The broadcasts spoke about “comrade Peres as the head of the Palestinian state”. These propaganda broadcasts also contrasted the bolshevism of the Labour Party to the free economy of the Likud. There was talk about how foreign workers were taking jobs away from immigrants. The Likud said it would strengthen the immigration cabinet and thereby give greater importance to integration issues. The Labour party, by contrast, spoke about the successful integration of the immigrants and about Peres as a man of secular culture. Its slogan was “economy, immigration, and peace”. The broadcasts linked peace with the economy and did not allow the latter to stand alone.

Yisrael ba'Aliya's slogan was, "security in Israel and respect for immigration". Sharansky emphasized that his platform went beyond immigrant absorption and included security issues. He also spoke about following a tougher line in dialogue with Arab countries because the Arab countries do not respect civil rights and democracy.

The right-wing public agenda explains voting for the right-wing parties and to some extent also for Yisrael ba'Aliya, which gradually adopted the right's foreign-policy agenda and attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The elimination of domestic policy as an independent issue diminished the Labour party's relative advantage.

Identity

The new immigrants' cultural integration was slower than that in other domains. Even in the first stages of their presence in Israel the immigrants wanted their own independent organs. Since the mass immigration in the first years of the state, there had never been an immigrant group with so many media outlets. It is no accident that the number of Russian-language newspapers and periodicals is unparalleled. The immigrants saw the establishment of an immigrant party as another forum to express their unique voice. Not all immigrants saw it as a device for separatism, as some immigrants of longer standing claimed, but as an instrument for self-expression. The immigrants set up dozens of cultural associations. Some of them felt a cultural deficiency; the immigrants' party was perceived as moderating this deficiency to some extent. It should be noted they could look to Shas as a positive model of an ethnic party with its own cultural outlook. This explains the massive vote for Yisrael ba'Aliya and to some extent also for Labour, which is more tolerant of cultural pluralism, at least on the declarative level.

The balance-of-power theory

This theory holds that the immigrants understood that they could amass more clout if they constituted the balance of power between the left and the right. From this position they could marshal more resources for immigrants, because their political bargaining power would be greater. This attitude guided the immigrant leadership more than the voters themselves.

Until shortly before the elections, the leaders of Yisrael ba'Aliya attempted to manoeuvre between the big parties and candidates for Prime Minister.

Later, on the eve of the elections, the balance-of-power explanation seemed to be less acceptable. Right before the elections it became clear that Yisrael ba'Aliya had

shifted rightward and accepted the right-wing political agenda of the Likud and its candidate for Prime Minister, thereby eroding its ability to exploit its position between the two parties.

All in all, there seems to be no single explanation for how the immigrants voted. All of the theories are interdependent. There is no doubt that the public agenda factor accounts for the reversal from 1992 to 1996; that the establishment of the immigrants' party reinforces the identity theory; and that frustration explains the least, although it is definitely present in the background (it may be part of the explanation for the 1992 results, but evidently not those in 1996). The balance-of-power explanation seems to lose credibility over time.

HOW DID THE CHANGE IN THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AFFECT THE IMMIGRANTS' VOTING IN THE 1996 ELECTIONS?

As we have seen, identity was a central issue for the immigrants. Thus the possibility of casting two ballots, one (for the Knesset) to express the sectorial principle and the other (for prime minister) to express the national principle, provided a solution that averted dissonance, since all immigrants want to belong to their own community but also to integrate into the national mainstream. When they must choose between the community principle and the national principle, immigrants generally opt for the latter because they view integration into the host society as their future. One may conjecture that in elections according to the old system more immigrants would have voted for national parties than for sectorial parties – as had been the case with all the waves of immigration during the half century that preceded the change in the electoral system.

The 1996 elections highlighted the former Soviet immigrants' new patterns of political integration. Instead of penetrating the existing political system, they set up a strong immigrants' party that did not just seek to hold the balance of power between the left and right – a party that must always practice fancy footwork – but one that had significance for the immigrants' definition of their identity. The party was erected on a stable infrastructure of voluntary organizations and mass media that constitute a powerful tool for exchanging political and social messages with the immigrant population.

The change in the electoral system and the ability to vote on two levels, for prime minister and for a party, moderated the dissonance between group identity and national identity for the new immigrants, with one no longer coming at the expense of the other.

The 1998 local elections

The 1998 local elections marked another stage in the growth of the political power of immigrants from the FSU. In a number of respects the path they followed was the reverse of that travelled by the Oriental immigrants of the 1950s. The Oriental communities first gained power on the local level; their achievements led to success on the national level. The immigrants from the FSU began by consolidating their power on the national level and only then translated that to the local level. The pattern of empowerment of Oriental immigrants in Israel was more like the patterns of empowerment of immigrants and minority groups elsewhere in the world than was the pattern adopted by the former Soviet immigrants.

In the 1998 local elections, the immigrants' increased political muscle was expressed first of all in a relatively high turnout on election day. According to Marina Zeltser (1998), between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of the immigrants in the peripheral localities went to the polls; in the centre of the country the figure exceeded 50 per cent. This turnout was greater than that of the veteran Israeli population. As a result, former Soviet immigrants won disproportionate representation in local councils. Of the 1,049 local council seats at stake throughout the country, the immigrants won 162 seats, or 15.4 per cent, outstripping their percentage of the population. Of these 162 seats, 93 were won by Yisrael ba'Aliya, 31 by immigrants who ran on veteran Israel lists, and 38 by sectorial immigrant lists (Georgian, Caucasian, and Bokharan). The term "sectorial lists" also includes the Yisrael Beitenu lists backed by Avigdor Liberman, which were particularly successful in Ashdod and Ashqelon. A total of 40 immigrants became deputy mayors; in one small town a 1970s Russian immigrant was elected mayor, but by a non-sectorial list.

There are several possible explanations for the immigrants' great success in local elections.

After the Knesset elections in 1996, Yisrael ba'Aliya began to build a political and social infrastructure in cities that had absorbed a large number of immigrants. This took the form of cultural centres and absorption committees. The party directed resources to voluntary organizations and raised money for the election campaigns of Yisrael ba'Aliya candidates. Other parties realized that the immigrant electorate could not be ignored and recruited candidates from among the immigrants, both 1970s and 1990s immigrants, and placed them in realistic spots on their lists.

The success on the national level almost totally dissipated the sense of alienation from the political system, leaving the immigrants from the FSU with the feeling that they played a major role in the political game. Accordingly, candidates for

municipal government saw themselves not only as local leaders but also as potential national figures.

The rise of Shas (the Oriental religious party) intensified the immigrants' desire to counter that party. Because it was clear that daily life in their communities would be affected by how much resistance they could offer to its agenda (issues such as non-kosher meat markets, Christmas parties, and so on), they mobilized for political activity.

Another important factor in their success was their perception of their own identity. The 1996 elections gave practical legitimacy to their flaunting a distinct Russian identity. Israeli society today does not see Russian organizations as expressing a desire for separatism but rather as a reflection of pluralism society. We should also note that the campaigns in the cities with a high percentage of immigrants were very intense and included broad use of local as well as national newspapers.

The 1999 general elections

The growth of the political power of Russian immigrants, which started in 1996, continued through the end of the 1990s. In the 1999 general elections, 84.7 per cent of recent immigrants voted, as opposed to 78.7 per cent of the general population. Their tendency to cast their vote for Russian parties reached its peak in those elections, when 58.9 per cent voted for sectorial parties (44.3% for Yisrael ba'Aliya and 14.6% for Yisrael Beitenu). As for their votes for non-sectorial parties: 7.7 per cent voted for the Labour party; 7.3 per cent for the left-wing Meretz party; 15.3 per cent for the right-wing Likud party; 4.9 per cent for a far-right party; and 7.6 per cent for Shinui, a party representing secular, middle-class interests. In the vote for Prime Minister, 61 per cent voted for Barak and 39 per cent for Netanyahu. Russian voters gave more support to Barak than to Labour, which received only 7.7 per cent of the Russian vote (Zemach, 1999).

A survey by Al-Haj and Leshem (2000) found that the voters for the Russian sectorial parties were older and more educated and had been in Israel for less time than those who voted for the non-sectorial parties. They were more exposed to the Russian media and knew less Hebrew. In other words, they were still more connected to their country of origin. The massive vote for Russian sectorial parties gave six Knesset seats to Yisrael ba'Aliya and four to Yisrael Beitenu.

Frustration is not a likely explanation for their vote. From Al-Haj and Leshem we learn that of those who are satisfied with life in Israel, similar proportions supported non-sectorial and sectorial parties. On the whole, about 80 per cent of the immigrants are satisfied with life in Israel, 85 per cent feel at home in Israel, and more than half have purchased homes.

Another explanation attributes the voting pattern to identity. It was found that 77 per cent of the immigrants felt Jewish, 69 per cent felt like Jews from the FSU, and 43 per cent felt Israeli. In other words, their Israeli identity was weaker than their other identities. As for maintenance of ethnic Russian culture, it was found that immigrants who voted for sectorial parties manifested a positive attitude toward preservation of the Russian language and cultural Russian institutions. Thus, we can conclude that the immigrant vote for sectorial parties in 1999 was an identity-based vote.

Amendment of the electoral system and the 2003 elections

In March 2001, Israeli election law was amended, restoring the previous system and eliminating the direct election of the Prime Minister. This made it possible to verify the hypothesis advanced by Horowitz (1996a) that the immigrants' voting patterns in the 1996 and 1999 elections were influenced to a large extent by the separate votes for Prime Minister and the Knesset. In those elections, about half of the immigrants voted for a national figure for Prime Minister and for a sectorial immigrant list to represent them in the Knesset. Horowitz proposed that the dual-vote system allowed the immigrants to identify with a national figure in the centre while also identifying with their own sector by voting for an immigrant party.

The results of the re-introduction of a one-ballot vote proved Horowitz's hypothesis. The immigrant parties lost their support, and Yisrael ba'Aliya lost four Knesset seats, equivalent to 100,000 of the 167,000 votes it had received in 1999. As for Yisrael Beitenu, between 2001 and 2003, the party underwent a process of Israelization. Its programme became more nationalistic and less oriented to the immigrant community as such. Before 2003 it merged with extreme nationalistic groups and adopted the new name of National Union. Nonetheless, three of the seven seats won by the party in the 2003 elections went to Russian immigrants. According to Zemach (2003), the distribution of the Russian vote was: 3.6 per cent voted for left-wing parties, 25.9 per cent voted Likud, 19 per cent voted Shinui, and 27.6 per cent voted National Unity. Yisrael ba'Aliya got only 17 per cent of the Russian vote, as opposed to 44.3 per cent in the 1999 elections. Another effect of movement from sectorial-immigrant parties to national parties was the accentuation of the immigrants' right-wing inclination. More than one-quarter voted National Unity party and one-quarter voted for the Likud. We can argue that in these elections the Russian immigrants were more ideological oriented than in previous elections.

One week after the elections, Yisrael ba'Aliya decided to stop being a parliamentary political party and to join the Likud. Natan Sharansky, the party leader, explained that the new immigrants are now integrated in Israeli society. They have

been in the country for ten years already, and there is no longer any purpose to an immigrant party (Mazganova, 2003).

This act of symbolic integration into the Likud party does not necessarily mean the break down of Yisrael ba'Aliya party on the local level. There are signs that both Yisrael ba'Aliya and the immigrant section in the National Unity party will still be active on the local level protecting the economic, social, and cultural interests of immigrants.

SUMMARY

The growth of the political power of the immigrants from the FSU followed a different pattern than that of other immigrant groups to Israel. Their political integration proceeded more rapidly than that of immigrant groups elsewhere in the world.

Their increased power began on the national level and moved downward to the local level, rather than from the periphery toward the centre – the pattern followed by the Oriental Jewish immigrants.

The immigrants' increased power was affected by both external and community factors. The interaction among the factors in the five election campaigns can be seen as representing five stages in the growth of their political power.

The first stage in the 1992 elections, immigrants from the FSU attempted to organize their own list. Even though they failed at this, the results of the election strengthened them because they were given credit for the left's victory, giving them a sense of political effectiveness.

The second stage came in the 1996 elections, which marked a watershed for the former Soviet immigrants' political power. In this stage external factors and internal factors reinforced each other. The change in the electoral system made it possible for the immigrants to vote for their community on the one hand and for a national figure on the other, thus resolving their identity dilemma. The immigrants could avoid all sense of dissonance and be members of their community as well as active citizens of the state. That is, the new electoral system legitimized pluralistic views of Israeli society. As for internal factors, were it not for the organizational strength of Yisrael ba'Aliya, the infrastructure of the Zionist Forum, and the vigour of the Russian-language media, which supported the establishment of the immigrants' party, the new immigrants would not have attained such sterling success.

The local elections in 1998 marked the third stage in their political strength. They found the immigrant community better organized, with a better understanding of its local interests, the capacity to put forward a strong local leadership, and with a stronger link between the immigrant political centre and the local level.

The fourth stage, the 1999 elections, marked a further strengthening of the Russian immigrant parties, but with no signs of separatism. On the contrary, all indications were that the Russians were integrating gradually into Israeli society. One immigrant party, Yisrael Beitenu, showed signs of moving from a narrow community orientation to a more nationalistic orientation.

The fifth stage was the 2003 elections, after the restoration of the old system. Immigrants no longer had the option of voting both for their community and for a national figure. Without this option, they had to vote either for a sectorial party or a national party, and they chose the national party. In other words, their citizenship does not necessarily have to go through the mediation of an immigrant party.

These five stages represent milestones in the transformation of the FSU immigrants from passive to active citizenship, from centre to the periphery, from a separatist identity through a legitimately distinct identity to an Israeli political identity with no ethnic orientation.

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LA MONTEE EN PUISSANCE POLITIQUE DES IMMIGRES
DE L'EX-UNION SOVIETIQUE EN ISRAEL:
DE LA CITOYENNETE PASSIVE A LA CITOYENNETE ACTIVE

En Israël, les immigrants originaires de l'ex-Union soviétique ont suivi un itinéraire politique différent de celui des autres communautés immigrées. Contrairement aux immigrants juifs orientaux, dont l'ascension politique s'effectue plutôt des milieux périphériques vers le centre, l'influence politique des immigrants de l'ex-Union soviétique est partie du niveau national pour atteindre le niveau local. Trois étapes successives ont jalonné ce processus.

La première étape a été franchie aux élections de 1992, lorsque les immigrants de cette communauté ont tenté de constituer leur propre liste. Bien qu'ils aient échoué, ils sont sortis renforcés de cette expérience car leur contribution à la victoire de la gauche a été reconnue, leur conférant du même coup un sentiment d'utilité politique.

Les élections de 1996 ont marqué la seconde étape. Elles ont été un moment décisif dans l'existence politique de cette communauté. A ce stade, les facteurs externes et les facteurs internes sont entrés en interaction. La modification du système électoral a permis aux immigrants de voter d'une part pour les représentants de leur communauté et d'autre part pour une figure nationale, ce qui apportait une solution à leur dilemme identitaire. S'agissant des facteurs internes, sans la force organisatrice d'Yisrael ba'Aliya, l'infrastructure du Forum sioniste, et sans le poids des médias en langue russe, qui soutenaient la création du parti des immigrants, ceux-ci n'auraient pas connu le succès retentissant qui a été le leur.

Les élections locales de 1998 ont été la troisième étape. A ce stade, la communauté immigrée étaient mieux organisée et comprenait mieux ses intérêts locaux. Elle était en mesure de présenter un leader local fort et affichait un lien raffermi entre le centre politique de la communauté immigrée et le niveau local.

Ces trois étapes ont donc constitué des jalons dans la transformation de la communauté immigrée de l'ex-Union soviétique, en la faisant passer de la citoyenneté passive à la citoyenneté active, du centre vers la périphérie, et d'une identité séparatiste à une identité légitimement distincte dans la mosaïque politique et sociale israélienne.

EL CRECIENTE PODER POLÍTICO DE LOS INMIGRANTES PROVENIENTES DE LA EX UNIÓN SOVIÉTICA EN ISRAEL: PASANDO DE LA CIUDADANÍA PASIVA A LA CIUDADANÍA ACTIVA

Los inmigrantes provenientes de la ex Unión Soviética en Israel siguieron un patrón diferente de crecimiento político en comparación a los demás grupos de inmigrantes. Su creciente poder comenzó a nivel nacional y fue traspasándose a nivel local, en lugar de venir de la periferia hacia el centro – patrón seguido por los inmigrantes judíos orientales. Se puede decir que hay tres etapas en el desarrollo de su poder político.

La primera etapa fue durante las elecciones de 1992, cuando los inmigrantes intentaron organizar su propia lista. Aunque fracasaron, los resultados de la elección los fortalecieron puesto que tuvieron cierta responsabilidad en la victoria de la izquierda, lo que les confirió un sentido de eficacia política.

La segunda etapa ocurrió durante las elecciones de 1996. Era un momento trascendental para el poder político de los inmigrantes de la ex Unión Soviética. En esta etapa, los factores externos e internos se reforzaron unos a otros. El cambio en el sistema electoral posibilitó que los inmigrantes votasen, por un lado, por su comunidad y, por otro, por una figura nacional, resolviéndose así el dilema de identidad. En cuanto a los factores internos, si no hubiera sido por la fuerza institucional de *Yisrael ba'Aliya*, por la infraestructura del Foro Sionista y por el vigor de los medios de comunicación en idioma ruso, que apoyaron el establecimiento del partido de inmigrantes, los nuevos inmigrantes no habrían alcanzado tan brillante éxito.

Las elecciones locales de 1998 marcaron la tercera etapa de su fuerza política. Entonces, la comunidad inmigrante estaba mejor organizada, tenía una mayor comprensión de sus intereses locales y de su capacidad de presentar un liderazgo local fuerte y de establecer un vínculo más sólido entre el centro político de inmigrantes y las instancias locales.

Por consiguiente, estas tres etapas constituyen los hitos en la transformación de los inmigrantes de la ex Unión Soviética, que pasaron de una ciudadanía pasiva a una ciudadanía activa, es decir desde el centro a la periferia, y de una identidad separatista a una identidad legítimamente distinta dentro del mosaico político y social de Israel.