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RUSSIAN-SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS IN ISRAEL IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Executive Summary

Like the United States, Israel is the state of immigrants. Since 1990, about a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union arrived in the State of Israel. In proportion to its total population of less than 5 million at the time, this would be comparable to the entire nation of France immigrating to the United States. While the overwhelming majority of these immigrants came to Israel on the basis of their Jewish origin, in many aspects their situation is similar to that of immigrant ethnic minorities in the United States, such as Hispanics or Asian Americans, because of their linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and other distinctiveness.

For Israel, it was the first immigration that managed to get around the Israeli ‘melting pot’ and set its own parameters for integration in society. In many ways, their integration has been successful: Russian speakers were able to create their own cultural infrastructure - newspapers, theaters, shops, restaurants, educational institutions, their own political class. In a society divided along many lines, Russian immigrants didn’t take completely any one’s side, but rather added their own dimensions to Israel’s complexity.

However, most of these immigrants’ success stories took place in the coastal strip of the Mediterranean, in the Greater Tel Aviv – the place of residence of most of the old-timers and natives of Israel. Meanwhile, about three quarters of Russian-speaking immigrants live not in this area but in the country’s periphery, next to immigrants from the Islamic countries and the Arabs. In these areas, there are much fewer opportunities and resources, and competition for them is much tougher. There is discontent with the degree and the quality of integration in the Israeli society, yet most of those discontented are not necessarily nostalgic for their lives in Soviet Union or its successor states, or regret their decision to move to Israel.

This study provides an overview of various aspects of Russian immigration: socio-economic, religious, demographic, political. It also pays special attention to the specific problems of the second generation of immigrants who have grown up in Israel, as well as to the problems of the elderly, the issues of criminality, language policy, and the politics of memory. It also addresses issues of special groups within immigrant population, such as World War II veterans and the LGBT community.

The study – a part of the educational and research project of Russian-speaking Community Council of Manhattan and the Bronx - is intended to help understand how migration is inscribed in the contemporary political and social contexts, where it is often viewed as a problem and an object of special attention by governments. This is an attempt to think about migration as part of the complex web of concepts of race, gender, and class, in the overall context of Jewishness, Soviet and post-Soviet colonialism, religion and nationalism, as they help us to understand contemporary migration, or migration allows us to define these concepts more clearly.

Michael Dorfman is a Russian-Israeli-American writer, essayist, human rights activist and activist of Yiddish culture revivalist movement. He is the author of 3 books and about 600 articles and essays.