Israeli Russian Voting Trends in the 2009 Knesset Elections

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The mass immigration of Soviet and post-Soviet Jews to Israel began in 1989. Since then, the country has absorbed almost one million Russian Jews who in time have established their brand of independent Russian–Jewish community politics. Their presence has dramatically changed Israel's political landscape, which before their arrival was composed primarily of the four camps: the Labor (Avodah) Party and extreme leftist parties; the Likud (lit. "Consolidation")Party and the far rightist movements; various religious Jewish groupings; and the Arab parties. The former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrants not only created their own community movements — mainly, centrist and moderate right — but also greatly impacted on "mainstream" party politics. The voting power of this group, whose members comprise some 16 or 17 percent of the Israeli electorate (750,000–780,000 voters, corresponding to approximately 20 parliamentary seats) became critical, and even decisive, for any aspirant to the prime minister's office.

Thus, the voting behavior of the Russian immigrants was a critical factor in the Labor Party's electoral success in 1992, in Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu's direct prime ministerial victory in the 1996 elections, and in the comeback of the Labor-led One Israel bloc and its leader Ehud Barak in 1999. The new immigrant vote also significantly affected Ariel Sharon's election as prime minister in 2001, as well as his Likud Party's unprecedented 2003 victory. The support of Russian-speaking Israelis was again critical in the 2006 electoral campaign. Similarly, before the 2008–2009 electoral campaign was officially announced, the "wooing" of the Russian vote began, well before that of other groups. For this, there were two basic reasons.

The first figured in Ariel Sharon's decision to establish Kadima (lit. "Forward!") as a strong party at the center of the Israeli political spectrum and to return the local political system to the not exactly democratic pre-1977 model, when the moderate socialist Mapai Party dominated local politics. Already in

2007, it became obvious that the Israeli political system was returning to the classic competition between the two overriding blocs, Right and Left, with their different approaches to the basic political divisions in Israeli society.

There are the parties of the Left — the center-left Labor Party, the radical left-wing Meretz (lit. "Energy") Party, and some moderately left sectarian movements, as well as the formerly centrist, but now also moderately left Kadima Party — that lobby for the peace-for-territory resolution model of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Meanwhile, the parties of the Right — the center-right Likud Party, the rightist National Union Party (Ichud Haleumi) and the Jewish Home Party (formerly Mafdal, the National Religious Party), plus some sectarian, communal, and Orthodox religious parties—insist on the peace-for-peace model as the only solution to the conflict. The left-wing parties normally support the concept of a social welfare economic policy, as opposed to the liberal market-oriented platforms of the right-wing constellation, together with the existence of important pro-capitalist and socialist lobbies in the left- and right-wing blocs, respectively. Finally, the Israeli Left demands a reduction in the role of religious communities in civic issues and affairs, while the Right usually supports the preservation of the secular–religious status quo.

Due to the near equal split of the political forces supporting the two main blocs, the ability of any one political party to gain the upper hand in an election, thereby being called on to form the government coalition normally depends on a relatively small number of "floating" seats in the Knesset. In this situation, it is quite dangerous to underestimate the power of the Russian "swing" vote.

The second reason for courting the Russian vote stems directly from lessons learned from past mistakes made by Israeli politicians and campaign managers. During the 2003 Knesset elections, Russian-speaking Israelis predominantly voted for the mainstream parties, mostly the moderately right-wing Likud, the center-left, anti-clerical Shinui, and the National Union bloc further to the right. That brought these people to the incorrect conclusion that the Russian party politics game in Israel was over, and there was no need to regard the FSU immigrants as an independent and influential political force. Naturally, the mainstream party leaders were very surprised when three years later almost half of Russian Israelis voted for the Israel Beiteinu Party (lit. "Israel is Our Home"), which despite its all-Israel aspirations had an obvious Russian communal image. Thus the FSU immigrants, having found a niche for their votes, became an important political force once again.

The Political Structure of the Israeli "Russian Street"

The model of political behavior, which seemed to best serve the FSU immigrants in Israel, stabilized in the second half of the 1990s and since then the Russian-speaking community has split almost equally into two subgroups. The first subgroup casts its vote with the hope that a solution can be found to ease its socioeconomic distress (housing, employment, welfare,

etc.), while the members of the second subgroup vote in accordance with their ideological views (foreign policy/security problems, the national identity of the Israeli state, etc.). Another important intra-communal cleavage divi-des these voters into supporters of the mainstream parties *vs*. the Russian immigrant parties. Finally, three political camps have come to dominate the Israeli "Russian street" from the mid-1990s forward into the present decade.

The first camp was represented by the former supporters of the Russian immigrant, welfare, centrist Yisrael Ba'aliya Party (lit. "Israel in Assent"), founded in 1995 by the one-time Prisoner of Zion and prominent human rights activist, Natan Sharansky. This party debuted with great success in the 1996 Knesset elections, winning seven seats. In the following 1999 elections, Yisrael Ba'aliya won six Knesset seats, representing its "home electorate." This camp preserved itself even though Yisrael Ba'aliya experienced defeat in the 2003 elections, whereupon the its leaders, Natan Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein decided to merge their shrunken faction with the mainstream Likud Party. This camp's overwhelming majority, however, did not follow their leaders into the Likud, but remained on the "open political market," thus making themselves a desirable target of other sectarian and mainstream political movements.

The second camp is a rightist, mostly market-oriented voting bloc, constituting the loyal core of Israel Beiteinu. This camp was formed in 1999–2001 by the Likud's former director-general and later head of the Prime Minister's Office, Avigdor Liberman, a veteran Russian immigrant, on the basis of two secessionist factions. The first was a group of right-wing Yisrael Ba'aliya activists, headed by MKs Mikhail Nudelman and the late Yurii Stern, who left their party due to ideological and personal differences with Sharansky and Edelstein. The second faction was a large group of Russian-speaking, former Likud members, who felt that their demands were being ignored by the Likud leadership and were disappointed with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the far-reaching concessions he made to the Palestinians during the 1998 Wye Plantation summit.

Though as noted, most of Liberman's supporters were left disappointed by their experience with the mainstream movements, they were still not ready to vote for a purely ethnic, sectarian movement, like Yisrael Ba'aliya, and thus easily adopted Liberman's idea of the "Russian party with an Israeli accent." In addition to his Russian immigrant supporters, whose electoral weight corresponded to three or four Knesset seats, Liberman's camp also included a one-to 1.5-seat component of native and veteran Israelis, attracted by Liberman's appeal to "historical Revisionist" values which, in his opinion, had disappeared from the traditional right-wing parties.

The third camp is the Russian faction of the so-called "Sharonists." This group consisted of the voters that previously "floated" between the Likud and other

moderate right-wing, mainstream, sectarian parties, and who, attarcted by leadership charisma of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, became his personal supporters. This camp's Russian faction, whose electoral potential corresponds to six parliamentary seats, placed their full support behind Sharon's victorious campaign in the 2001 direct prime ministerial elections. They followed their leader, who at that time reminded them of his Russian roots, first to vote Likud, and then after the Likud's breakup in November 2005, they divided their sympathies between the center-right Likud and Sharon's newly formed neo-centrist Kadima Party.

A combination of these three streams of Israeli Russian politics — ethnocultural, socioeconomic, and political—complicates the map of electoral behavior among the FSU immigrants even more. Thus, the nationalist group is better represented among the electorate supporting mainstream Israeli parties, while the social welfare-oriented voters generally back their own community movements. The ideological split within the latter is apparently the same as in the Russian community as a whole, meaning that one-third ally themselves to the Left of the political spectrum, and two-thirds to the Right. However, social welfare interests may cause these people to compromise on their ideological agenda.

Thus, in the 2006 parliamentary elections, ideologically oriented Russian voters divided themselves between the nationwide parties of the Right and Left, while another segment of the strong ideological core supported Liberman's Russian communal Israel Beiteinu Party. As for the majority of the social welfare-oriented group in the 2006 polls, they either united behind the social camp of Israel Beiteinu or the social–liberal Kadima Party.

As far as the political camps are concerned, the first two—the moderate Right together with the socially welfare-oriented former home electorate of the quondam Yisrael Ba'aliya Party, and the politically conservative, liberal market-oriented "Libermanists" — included the overwhelming majority of those who were ready to support a Russian-based communal party. In 2006, due to the lack of any serious alternative, both camps united under the umbrella of the "Russian party with the Israeli accent," Israel Beiteinu. As a result, of the 11 Knesset seats the party won in the elections, Russian voters provided more than nine. These voters represent "one half," or roughly around 50 percent, of the entire Russian Israeli electorate.

During the 2006 campaign, and especially after the elections, it was not very easy for party leaders to find an adequate, balanced platform to attract these factions, which are distributed over the political map, with no consensus on the Arab–Israeli conflict, secular–religious relations, a viable socioeconomic policy, or on civic issues. This dilemma actually resulted in Israel Beiteinu's "zigzag" opposition policy vis-à-vis Ehud Olmert's government in 2006–2008, as well as in Liberman's gradual moderation of his original "far rightist" position, and his decision to push forward

civil marriage and social welfare-oriented issues contrary to his party's original secular–religious status quo and liberal market-oriented platform. Nevertheless, Israel Beiteinu preserved most of the Russian-speaking constituency it had won over in 2006. The losses among right-wing Liberman supporters who, due to the changes in the party policies, shifted their support to the Likud or other right-wing movements, were largely overcome through new gains among the moderate electorate.

The "other half" (the complementary 50% or thereabouts) of the Russian Israeli voting public, who normally prefer to support nationwide parties, consists of two subgroups. On the one hand are those who believe that the community has no need own and control its own political institutions, organizations, and movements because the existing mainstream parties represent national interests, including those of Israeli Russians. This subgroup comprises one-third of this "other half," or about 15–20 percent of the whole Russian electorate (i.e., one-third of 50 percent roughly equals 15–20 percent). On the other hand are those who believe that it is important that the mainstream parties for which they vote have a strong Russian base. This subgroup comprises 30–37 percent of the entire Russian voting public, or some two-thirds of the "other half" (i.e., two-thirds of 50 percent equals 30–37 percent).

Another significant difference between the two subgroups in the latter "half" is that the smaller one often gives their three to four Knesset seats to the parties with a declared and clear right-wing or left-wing platform, while the larger subgroup, including the core of the Sharonist camp, representing six or seven seats, usually concentrate their support around the moderate centrist or center-right zone of the political spectrum.

In what way were these relatively stable trends realized in the 2009 18th Knesset elections?

2009 Knesset Elections Results as Regards the "Russian Street"

Contrary to previous Knesset elections (2006), no nationwide Russian exit polls were conducted in 2009. Consequently, our findings here are based on the representative FSU immigrants' opinion poll that the Mutagim Institute conducted shortly after the 2009 Knesset elections, at the request of this author. The results of this poll then were compared to, and checked against, the data from other sources, including various studies organized by different polling agencies on the eve of, during, and after the elections. Also, we took into consideration the official voting results from polling stations in areas predominantly populated (more then 80%) by the Russian-speaking Israelis.

From an initial point of view, this data showed that the electoral picture of the Israeli Russian community had not undergone major changes. Approximately three Russian Knesset seats were almost equally shared out between the two nationwide party blocs: one seat went to the left of Kadima (Labor, Meretz, and other left and left-of-center parties); a second seat went to the right of the Likud

(the National Union and the Jewish Home Party, the reincarnated National Religious–Mafdal Party); and the third seat went to various non-Russian sectarian and religious–populist lists representing special interest groups. All this corresponds to the number of those 12–15 percent of Israeli Russian immigrants who, according to the polls, believe that the community has no need to operate their own political institutions. Most of this bloc's vote still went to the two main parties whose platforms demonstrated some recognition of FSU immigrant interests.

First, on the Left, the Labor Party apparently won votes amounting to 0.5 but less than one Knesset seat from their traditional Russian supporters. It can be concluded that Labor is so far the only Israeli mainstream party that has its own home-grown Russian electorate predominantly made up of professionally and economically established immigrants from the early 1990s who mostly settled in the prosperous coastal towns along the Mediterranean shoreline north of Tel Aviv. As our study showed, about a fifth of respondents who supported Labor in these elections also supported the Labor leadership's attempts to recreate the intra-party immigrants' association, which used to be very strong, but had almost disappeared by 2001. However, more then a half of this constituency insisted that Russian-speakers in Israel have no need for any special political representation. In the rightist camp, the populist, traditionalist Sephardic Shas Party proved quite popular among FSU immigrants from the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus. This time, as in 2006, Shas received votes equaling about one Knesset seat from this subgroup, as well as from some Russian Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, attracted to the party's aggressive social welfare platform.

According to available data, the number of FSU immigrant votes for parties that either that failed to win any seats, or did not want to specifically cater to Russian interests, or did not believe that wooing the Russian vote would help them, corresponded to approximately one seat. Thus, the leadership of the far leftist bloc led by the amalgamated New Movement–Meretz Party, as in the past, preferred not to invest any significant resources aimed specifically at Russian-speaking Israelis. It was believed that FSU immigrants would not vote for Meretz, which they still identified with the most negative effects of the bankrupt Oslo peace process. Consequently, the total number of Russian votes for this bloc and other extreme leftist lists, as well as for the Ale Yarok Party and other "green" movements did not extend beyond a few thousand.

Second, at the other end of the Israeli political spectrum, the number of Russian votes received by the National Union (Ichud Leumi) bloc, the Jewish Home (New Mafdal) Party, and other far right lists, which failed to achieve the minimum electoral threshold, as well as the ultra-Orthodox Torah Judaism (Yahadut HaTorah) alliance, corresponded to a half, or maybe slightly more, of a Knesset seat. In other words, those Russian voters, who think that the existing mainstream parties satisfactorily, represent Israeli Russian interests,

tended to support lists representing the "margins" of Israeli politics. For instance, among our respondents, this opinion was shared by 80% of Russian voters of the National Union Party and almost 70% of Russian supporters of Meretz.

A much more substantial portion of the electorate — more then one-third of the Russian vote, including the majority of the Sharonist camp — as in the past cast their ballots for the nationwide parties with a declared "Russian component," viz., Likud and Kadima. In contradistinction to previous elections, however, a larger share of the voters within this group this time favored the moderate rightist, liberal market-oriented Likud Party, with commensurately fewer voting for the previously centrist, but now center-left, social-liberal Kadima Party. In February 2009, Likud was able to take advantage of party leader Benjamin Netanyahu's popularity among the Israeli Russian community and benefited from a deep crisis in relations between FSU immigrants and the new, post-Sharonist Kadima leadership. As a result, compared with the 2006 elections, Likud doubled its support among Russian voters in 2009, winning between 25 and 30 percent of the Russian community, which corresponds to between 4.5 and five Knesset seats.

Meanwhile, according to polls conducted in September 2008, Kadima's support in the Russian community was forecast to drop from the four or five Knesset seats it secured in 2006 to less then one in 2009. However, shortly before the elections, due to a substantial investment in advertising directed at FSU immigrants and playing the feminine voting card (which worked among the Russian community almost in the same way as among native Israelis), the party's campaign managers succeeded in improving the picture. At the end of the day Kadima, whose candidate for prime minister was a woman, won 1.5 to 2.5 Russian-supported Knesset seats — about half as many as in the 2006 elections, according to different estimates.

Finally, the Russian-interest parties garnered half of the FSU immigrant ballots. Almost all of these, according to our and other polls, went to Avigdor Liberman's Israel Beiteinu Party. All other communal and sub-communal "Russian accented" sectarian lists — the Israel Mitchadeshet Party (Renewed Israel, formerly Aliya), Israel Beiteinu, Kadima's MK Michael Nudelman, the Russian Sephardic party Lev Le'olim (Heart for the Immigrants), and the ethnic Slavic Leeder (lit. "Leader") Party, combined — received less then one percent of the Russian immigrant vote, and thus were unable to challenge Israel Beiteinu's commanding lead.

The Phenomenon

At the beginning of the electoral campaign, Israel Beiteinu's leaders focused on native and veteran Israelis, which was clearly reflected in the candidates who made up the party's Knesset list. However, it soon became clear that the party was loosing electoral backing from the FSU immigrants; as the polls suggested in mid-January 2009, Likud was only 1.5 or two Russian-supported seats behind Israel Beiteinu. However, by early February the trend had changed dramatically, and Israel Beiteinu

received at least a half of the Russian community's votes, translating into approximately 9.5 to 10.5 seats, which constituted around two-thirds of Israel Beiteinu's record 15 Knesset seats in this election.

At the end of the day, Israel Beiteinu won 394,577 votes, or 11.7 percent of the general returns, which was about 40% more than three years earlier. With 15 MKs, Israel Beiteinu became the third largest Knesset faction, thus making the party a key element in any government coalition. This success was a result of a combination of six major factors:

Firstly, despite all the ups and downs of its policies in the previous years, in absolute figures Israel Beiteinu lived up to its 2006 Russian potential, which it also maintained in the November 2008 municipal elections and again in 2009, when the party continued to enjoy the solid support of the FSU immigrant vote.

Secondly, Liberman succeeded in attracting some of the moderate Sharonists, who formerly voted for Kadima, because after Kadima shifted leftward, they preferred to support Israel Beiteinu and its strong, charismatic leader rather than to vote for Likud, Shas, or other center-right parties.

Thirdly, the Israel Defense Force's Operation "Cast Lead" against Hamas and other terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip played its part. This operation, despite its obvious military success, left many Jewish Israelis deeply disappointed and angered by its very limited and confusing political and diplomatic outcome. It seems that Liberman, better then anybody else, succeeded in expressing the public's feelings of frustration regarding the government's decision to stop the operation "twenty seconds" before the total dismantlement of the Gaza-based, radical Islamist regime could be achieved.

Fourthly, Liberman came to symbolize the interests of the various peripheral (in both its social and physical meaning) groups in Israeli society, many of whom responded to his call "to change the situation in which underprivileged social groups are alienated from power and deprived of property." This in part explains an unexpected wave of support for Liberman by certain groups among the Sephardic traditionalists, who normally divide their ballots among the Likud, Shas, Kadima's right wing, and the rightist religious parties.

Fifthly, Liberman "caught the wave" of rising anger among many Jewish Israelis across the political spectrum, who, as they put it, had become concerned by the "unpatriotic behavior" of the leaders of Israel's Arab sector. These feelings were encouraged by the internal Israel-based Islamic movement which, as many Israelis believe, is in fact a branch of the Palestinian radical Islamist Hamas Movement, inside the Green Line, i.e., within Israel's pre-1967 borders. Adding to the Jewish Israelis' sense of outrage have been incidents of participation by not a few Israeli Arab citizens in terrorist attacks against Jews during the Second Intifada (Uprising), as well as the fact that some Israeli Arab community

leaders have increasingly identified with Israel's enemies, particularly Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Gaza's Hamas. Thus, Israeli Arab demonstrations against the Gaza war and their support of Hamas also lent additional relevance to the shibboleth "No loyalty, no citizenship" and other "pragmatically right" Liberman slogans.

Finally, despite his existing stereotype as a criminal and racist demagogue, Liberman at a certain stage stopped being *persona non grata*, even among some circles of the so-called "First Israel" (Ashkenazi old-timers; the prosperous middle-class population living in prestigious neighborhoods in the center of the country), some of whom have moved rightward due to the disappointing results of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Even the concept of a transfer of territory inhabited by Israeli Arabs who refuse to pledge loyalty to Israel to a new Palestinian state in return for Israel's maintaining some Jewish settlements on the West Bank was only recently unanimously regarded by this group as "extremely rightist." Yet now, many Jewish Israelis accept these views as part of the Israeli "mainstream consensus," although more on a symbolic rather than on a practical level.

Conclusion

Thus, the 2009 Knesset elections showed a substantial change in traditional party affiliations and loyalties of Israelis originating from the FSU, who previously identified almost exclusively with major, well-established Russian community political camps.

At any event, the predominant majority of the Russian votes were divided fairly evenly between two moderate right-wing parties: the nationwide Likud Party with its strong Russian wing and the "original" Russian Israel Beiteinu Party. However, the latter's constituency has experienced significant transformations. It now not only includes those who voted for this party in its capacity as the only serious Russian force in the local political market. Not a few of those who supported Israel Beiteinu did so seeing it as a desirable, fully fledged nationwide party, "but with a Russian accent." And many FSU immigrants, who voted for Israel Beiteinu and its platform, were voting for it as the "party of Liberman" — without any specific ethnic or communal connotation.

Obviously, the rivalry between the Likud and Israel Beiteinu is going to become the major factor in Israeli Russian community politics in the next few years.

Note:
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