Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Israel's System of Competing Solidarities

Introduction and Problem Statement

Israeli society possesses a unique social structure best understood as a **"territory of competing solidarities."** Different groups—religious and secular Jews, immigrants from Europe (Ashkenazim) and the Middle East (Mizrahim), Russian speakers, Arab citizens, and others—hold fundamentally incompatible visions of the state's character and national identity. This leads to a situation where Israel has no single, universally accepted version of the national narrative; instead, different groups coexist through fragile compromises and status quo arrangements.

The absence of a formal constitution in Israel reflects this phenomenon. Israel is one of the few states without a constitution, and this is not accidental but rather a consequence of deliberately avoiding "final solutions" to questions of state identity.[1] Any attempt to establish a single definition of what constitutes a Jewish state, who counts as a Jew, or what the state's borders should be would immediately encounter irreconcilable disagreements between groups (religious and secular, left and right, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, etc.). Therefore, instead of a constitution, there exist scattered Basic Laws and tacit agreements. As Israeli political scientist Hanna Lerner notes, the non-adoption of a constitution and ambiguous status quo arrangements represent a deliberate strategy by Israeli elites to avoid conflicts over fundamental questions of state identity. As a result, each group maintains its own version of what Israel is, while stability is maintained through a balance of power and mutual veto.

The problem this paper examines is **the position of Russian-speaking immigrants (from the USSR/CIS)[2] within this system of competing solidarities**. The Russian-speaking *aliyah* of the 1990s (the so-called "Great Aliyah") brought approximately one million people, constituting ~15% of Israel's population.[3] These immigrants made enormous contributions to the country's economy, science, and defense capabilities. For example, more than a quarter of Israeli university faculty are Russian speakers, and immigrants from the USSR are disproportionately represented among engineers, doctors, and scientists. Over 60% of immigrants from the USSR had higher education, significantly above the Israeli average.[4] Their arrival in the 1990s provided a demographic boost to the Jewish population and human capital for Israel's high-tech surge. However, despite the functional integration of Russian speakers into the country's economy and military, their **symbolic integration** into the nation remains incomplete. More than 30 years after the beginning of the Great Aliyah, many Russian-speaking Israelis feel insufficient recognition of their culture and status in the general Israeli narrative.

The purpose of this analytical paper is to analyze the causes and mechanisms of why Russian-speaking immigrants remain on the periphery of Israel's symbolic space, despite their undeniable economic and demographic significance. We will examine the historical

[1] trtworld.com
[2] ridl.io
[3] ynetnews.com
[4] gov.il

transformation of Israeli society (the Mizrahi revolution), the position of the "Russian *aliyah*" in the new configuration, existing tensions, and scenarios for further development. In conclusion, we propose **recommendations** for strengthening the integration of Russian-speaking immigrants—both social and symbolic—with reference to research experience and data.

The Structure of Competing Solidarities in Israel

To understand the situation of Russian-speaking Israelis, it is first necessary to describe the general structure of Israeli society. It is characterized by several intersecting axes of identity, none of which is singularly dominant. Key fault lines include:

• **Religious-Secular Axis.** Society is divided into ultra-Orthodox (*Haredim*), religious Zionists, traditionalists, and secular Jews. These groups radically diverge in their views on the sources of authority and law: for some, the main legislation is *Halakha* (religious law); for others, democratic principles. For example, *Haredim* believe that the Torah replaces the constitution, therefore *"there is no place for a man-made constitution when we have the God-given Torah."*[5] Secular Jews, however, insist on the separation of religion and state. **Consensus between these poles is absent**, and this is one reason why a unified constitutional agreement cannot be adopted.

• **Ethnocultural Axis.** Historically, the Israeli elite was **Ashkenazi** (immigrants from Europe), and the country's first decades passed under the banner of European cultural norms. However, after the 1970s, the role of **Mizrahim**—Jews who came from Middle Eastern and North African countries—strengthened. Mizrahim were long socially and culturally peripheral, subjected to discrimination, and viewed through the lens of the "melting pot," with the assumption of assimilation into a Western model. Beginning in the 1970s, Mizrahim managed to mobilize and achieve *cultural rehabilitation* of their Middle Eastern identity (more on this in the next section). Additionally, society includes **Ethiopian Jews** (*olim* from Ethiopia, also experiencing integration difficulties) and **Arab citizens of Israel** (Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship), whose national belonging and loyalty are considered separately from the Jewish majority. **Russian-speaking immigrants** form another large community with its own language and culture. Thus, Israeli Jewish society itself is heterogeneous (Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, "Russians," Ethiopians, etc.), and also includes non-Jewish groups.

• **Ideological Axis.** Israel's political spectrum encompasses **left-wing Zionism** (formerly hegemonic, now weakened), **right-wing nationalism** (currently dominant), **liberal-cosmopolitan** circles, and **ultra-conservative religious** parties. Each ideological group answers differently the question of what matters more—the Jewish character of the state or democratic values, the territorial integrity of all of Eretz Israel or compromise with the Palestinians, etc. There is often overlap between ideology and ethnocultural affiliation (for example, Mizrahim are disproportionately represented among right-wing voters, while Ashkenazi intellectuals are among left-liberals). But overall, ideology adds another dimension to the competition of solidarities: a dispute about the state's goals and paths of development.

It is important to emphasize: these solidarities do not form a single hierarchy. One cannot say that one group absolutely dominates in all spheres—rather, each has *its own sphere of influence*. For example, **Haredim** (ultra-Orthodox) are relatively few in number but have a

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decisive voice in matters of religious policy (*kashrut*, marriage, Shabbat, etc.), often dictating terms to coalitions. **Mizrahim** now constitute the demographic majority of the Jewish population[6] and are politically influential (traditionally supporting right-wing parties, primarily Likud). **Secular Ashkenazim** remain strong in the economy, high-tech sector, and judicial system, but their symbolic influence on defining national culture is no longer what it was in the state's early years. **Religious Zionists** occupy an intermediate position between the ultra-Orthodox and secular, combining religious practice with active participation in state life. Religious Zionists are the most armed social group in Israel, largely due to their active participation in the settlement movement. Political commentator Amit Segal of Channel 12 (himself a religious Zionist) estimated the proportion of casualties among religious Zionists in October 2024 at over 60%.[7]

Russian-speaking Israelis have significant electoral weight (~15% of the population) and high representation in highly skilled professions, but do not possess their "own" institutional sphere of influence, except perhaps the Ministry of Absorption or Russian-language media.

This society maintains stability through **consociational democracy** (in Lijphart's terms)—essentially a series of elite compromises across different groups. Each major group receives certain guarantees: religious parties preserve *Halakha's* influence (Shabbat status, *kashrut*, no civil marriage); secularists maintain liberal rights in economics and private life; Mizrahim gain government representation and cultural recognition; Russian speakers receive favorable absorption conditions, etc. These informal "deals" and status quo arrangements replace unified rules. The price for such flexibility is **institutional uncertainty and constant "renegotiation"** of rules. For example, the question of drafting the ultra-Orthodox into the army has remained unresolved for many years, periodically renegotiated with each new coalition formation; the balance of powers between religion and state remains in suspension, causing periodic crises (the most recent example being disputes around the 2023 judicial reform, which partly touched on the theme of religious influence on legislation).

In the context of this paper, Russian-speaking immigrants are one of the competing solidarities, not fitting entirely into any of the traditional axes and therefore occupying a special place. Next, we will examine the historical reasons for this phenomenon.

Historical Context: The "Mizrahi Revolution" and New Social Configuration

The position of Russian-speaking immigrants was formed against the backdrop of a fundamental transformation of Israeli society that occurred in the 1970s–80s, which can be called the Mizrahi revolution. To understand the integration difficulties of the "Russian *aliyah*," one must consider that by the 1990s, Israel had already ceased to be the "Ashkenazi" state it was in the 1950s–60s—the old order had collapsed by then, and a new balance of power was established.

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[6] 972mag.com

[7] https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-religious-zionist-idf-casualties-rise-so-does-resentment-of-haredi-exemption-bill/

The first decades (1948–1970s): An Ashkenazi socialist elite governed the country (MAPAI/Labor party, Histadrut trade unions, kibbutz movement). Jews arriving from Arab countries (Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, Egypt, etc.) were accepted but effectively relegated to the social periphery. Authorities placed Mizrahim in transit camps and outlying "development towns," provided inferior education, and excluded them from power structures. The ideology of the "melting pot" prevailed, which in practice meant a demand to abandon Eastern culture in favor of adopting European norms (language, dress style, music, etc.). Mizrahi traditional culture was considered backward and subject to modernization. Thus, a system of Ashkenazi cultural hegemony and Mizrahi marginalization was formed.

The turning point came in the early 1970s. The young generation of Mizrahim, born or raised already in Israel, raised their voice against discrimination. In 1971, the **"Black Panthers"** movement emerged—a group of activists of Moroccan origin who openly compared the position of Eastern Jews in Israel with that of Black people in America (hence the movement's borrowed name). The Panthers pointed out that the problem was not individual but systemic: Eastern Jews were deliberately kept in poverty and ignorance, and this needed to change.

The establishment's reaction was revealing: Prime Minister Golda Meir, after meeting with activists, called them "unpleasant people" (also interpreted in the press as "not real people"). Although Meir later softened her rhetoric, her words became a symbol of the authorities' arrogance toward the disenfranchised Mizrahim. The state first tried to suppress the protest, then partially co-opt it—social benefits were increased, opportunities opened for some leaders. But the underlying causes—inequality and lack of symbolic recognition—remained.

1977—"Ma'apach" (upheaval): For the first time in elections, the right-wing Likud party (Menachem Begin) won, crushing the left-wing Labor. This political revolution was directly related to Mizrahim: Eastern Jews massively voted for Begin, seeing him as "one of their own." Begin, unlike the socialists, showed respect for ordinary people from Eastern communities, used rhetoric of patriotism and traditional values. He offered Mizrahim recognition instead of assimilation: no need to become European to be Israeli—it's enough to be a patriot and a traditional Jew. In the 1980s, the religious Shas party (Sephardic *Haredim*) emerged, giving Mizrahi identity religious legitimacy as well, affirming that the Eastern (Sephardic) version of Judaism is no worse than Ashkenazi.

Results of the Mizrahi revolution by the 1990s: Eastern Jews won their place in the Israeli "grand narrative." They took important positions in politics (ministers, mayors, rabbis), in the army (Mizrahi generals ceased to be rare), in the business elite. Mizrahi culture transformed from marginal to mainstream: Eastern music (*Mizrahit*) began playing on every radio, Eastern cuisine and family traditions entered the national fashion, Mizrahi TV stars and writers appeared.

In fact, Mizrahim managed to change the criteria of "true Israeliness." If previously the standard was the Ashkenazi *sabra* (kibbutz-born, Hebrew-speaking without accent, secular and Western-oriented), by the 2000s an Iranian or Moroccan Jew attending synagogue, listening to Eastern pop music, and voting for the right was considered equally "truly" Israeli.

Thus, by the time of the Russian-speaking wave of immigration (early 1990s), Israeli society was already living by new rules. Ashkenazi hegemony had been broken, and a system of divided identity was established, where no single group could monopolize the concept of "who is an Israeli." Mizrahim consolidated their achievements but did not completely replace the

former elite—instead, a **pluralism without integration** emerged, where different groups agreed "not to touch" each other's sacred themes (religion, culture, language).

This is important context: Russian-speaking immigrants arrived in an already transformed society. The channels of advancement that existed for previous waves (for example, integrating into the Ashkenazi establishment) no longer existed, and the new mechanisms of recognition that worked for Mizrahim did not extend to "Russians." Below we will examine why this happened.

The Russian-Speaking Aliyah of the 1990s: "Cold War Trophy" and Utilitarian Integration

Mass immigration from the former USSR in the 1990s became possible due to an external factor—the fall of the Iron Curtain. Israel largely perceived this *aliyah* as a geopolitical victory: the long-awaited Soviet Jews, whose departure had been sought for years, could finally come. About 900,000–1 million immigrants poured into the country over 10 years (estimates vary, but usually about ~950,000 over the decade). This increased the country's population by more than 15%—an unprecedented demographic leap (equivalent to the US accepting 50 million migrants over a decade). Israel transformed from a small Middle Eastern state into the world's largest center of Russian-speaking Jewry (about 40% of all Jews from the USSR now live in Israel).

The socio-economic portrait of this wave sharply differed from previous immigrations:

• **High level of education and qualifications.** As mentioned, more than 60% of adult new immigrants had higher education. Many were engineers, scientists, doctors, musicians, teachers—that is, possessed significant human capital. In fact, a "brain drain" occurred in Israel's favor, which even economists acknowledged: "we should thank Mother Russia for allowing them to come," one Israeli expert cynically remarked.

• **Secular and European cultural background.** The majority of immigrants were non-religious (products of the Soviet secular environment). They spoke Russian, were familiar with Russian/European culture, often didn't know a word of Hebrew upon arrival. In other words, by mentality they were "Soviet people," largely carriers of European Enlightenment culture, though having lived their lives under the USSR's specific conditions.

• **Weak ideological motivation.** Unlike many immigrants of earlier years (1940s–50s), who often came due to Zionist convictions or fleeing persecution, the 1990s *aliyah* was largely economic in character. People sought a better life from the collapsing post-Soviet space. Zionist ideology was far from first place. This manifested in the fact that a significant portion of new citizens did not immediately strive to "dissolve" in Israeli culture and language, preferring to preserve their native language, create their own media, literature, etc. (more on this below).

• **Mixed marriages and blurred Jewish identity.** Due to USSR policy (where Jewish nationality often carried social risks) and widespread mixed marriages, many arrivals had incomplete Jewishness: about a quarter of new immigrants were not considered Jews by *Halakha* (i.e., their Jewishness was only through the paternal line or only a grandfather/grandmother was Jewish). Under the Law of Return, they received Israeli citizenship (having a Jewish grandfather is sufficient), but for rabbis they were not Jews,

creating a huge personal status problem: people could not marry in Israel (where marriages are religiously regulated), creating a "class" of citizens without religious affiliation.

The receiving society's response to the new *aliyah* was **pragmatic and utilitarian**. The state valued them for solving demographic and economic challenges:

• **Strategically**, the arrival of 1 million Jews strengthened the Jewish majority in the country, especially against the backdrop of high birth rates among the Arab minority. This had both security and political significance (Arab citizens became a smaller share of the population).

• **Economically**, the new wave brought a consumption surge (a million new consumers of goods and housing) and an influx of qualified labor. Some analysts claimed that "Russians saved Israel's economy," injecting both demand and personnel into the stagnating late-1980s economy. Particularly noted was the boom in high-tech: the combination of highly educated Soviet engineers and experienced IDF technologists led to rapid growth of Israel's high-tech industry in the 1990s.

• **In defense terms**, it is also noted that hundreds of former Soviet officers and soldiers strengthened the ranks of the Israeli army and defense industry. One report notes that USSR immigrants even increased Israel's combat potential indirectly, as their mass arrival frightened the Arab world and accelerated acceptance of the peace process idea (the PLO realized it couldn't demographically defeat Israel).

Despite all this, **at the symbolic level**, the establishment was slow to accept them as "one of us." The thinking was that giving them jobs and housing would be enough—they'd assimilate over time. Immigrants' cultural demands were perceived as secondary. In the 1990s, Israelis joked: "We expected working hands, and people with brains arrived." This joke acknowledged that immigrants were needed primarily as workers—engineers, doctors, teachers—not as carriers of a different culture. Many in the Israeli establishment indeed viewed them as economic migrants who simply formalized immigrant status.

A characteristic incident occurred in November 2025, when a representative of the Manufacturers Association at a Knesset hearing on labor migration called USSR immigrants "guest workers who became *olim*." The phrase sparked outrage and accusations of racism, forcing an apology. But crucially, such views aren't isolated—this simply made explicit a widespread underlying attitude: Russian speakers are seen primarily as economic migrants who formalized immigrant status, not as an organic part of the Jewish people. The very fact that this was said in the Knesset, in a committee on foreign workers, says much. The restrained-formal apology is also telling: "misunderstood," instead of acknowledging the thought's erroneousness. In fact, a signal sounded: I can think this way, just shouldn't say it publicly.

Conclusion: The 1990s Russian-speaking *aliyah* was an enormous practical windfall for Israel but created deep ambiguities around identity. Officially greeted as "brothers returning to their historical homeland," they were treated more like economic migrants. This produced the current model: Russian speakers achieved rapid functional integration—studying, working, serving in the military, paying taxes—while remaining culturally separate from the mainstream.

The Closure of the "European" Integration Path and Russian-Speaking Isolation

Why didn't Russian-speaking immigrants "merge" into the Israeli mainstream over time, as one might expect? Here it is necessary to return to the context of the Mizrahi revolution and general competition of solidarities. Essentially, the traditional path of assimilation through adoption of European-Ashkenazi norms no longer worked in the 1990s. The "Russians'" arrival two decades after the "Mizrahim" predetermined their cultural anachronism relative to the new Israeli reality.

Main reasons for such isolation:

• **The "European" image lost its prestige in Israeli discourse.** By the 1990s, "Europeanness" no longer automatically conferred elite status. On the contrary, the image of the arrogant European Ashkenazi who looked down on Easterners had acquired negative connotations among the masses. Mizrahim, becoming a new political force, largely contrasted their Middle Eastern authenticity with the old Western elite. In these conditions, Russian immigrants—mostly secular, with diplomas from Moscow and Kyiv universities, loving classical music and European literature—didn't look "their own" to any group. The Ashkenazi left-wing intelligentsia had already lost influence and was suspicious of "Soviets" (different mentality, right-wing views among many). For Mizrahim, arrivals from the Union seemed like another wave of "white Europeans" looking down and trying to impose their culture. Thus, immigrants' cultural baggage, which previously could have been an advantage (education, European culture), in renewed Israel became rather neutral or even aroused suspicion among broad strata.

• **Absence of own niche in the solidarity system.** Russian speakers were not a religious group to integrate into, for example, the religious camp. On the contrary, their secularity and *Halakha* problems made them objects of distrust from religious parties. They were not an ethnic group connected to the country's history, like Mizrahim (who could appeal: "our ancestors lived in the East near Eretz Israel for millennia, we are autochthonous Middle Eastern culture"). Soviet origin didn't give them new "capital of suffering" for the Israeli narrative (unlike Holocaust survivors among Ashkenazim or expulsion from Arab countries among Mizrahim). Yes, many had ancestors who survived repressions or the Leningrad blockade, but these stories didn't form the basis of Israel's national mythology. Simply put, Russian speakers had nothing to "evoke an emotional response" from other solidarities. Their experience didn't fit any familiar lines (neither Shoah, nor expulsion from Arab countries, nor religious feat, nor pioneering settlement of Palestine).

• **Ethnic party vs. national politics.** Facing difficulties, Russian speakers went the path of creating their own political parties (starting with Nathan Sharansky's "Yisrael Ba'Aliyah" in 1996, then mainly Avigdor Lieberman's "Yisrael Beiteinu"). On one hand, this gave the community a loud political voice and resources—Russian-speaking ministers, budgets for absorption and pension programs. But on the other hand, it cemented the image of "Russians" as a separate group pursuing narrow interests. Moreover, one can state that competing solidarities of Ashkenazim and Mizrahim did everything so Russian speakers wouldn't become a consolidated group influencing political decisions. Including tying Russian speakers' political ambitions to narrow ethnic parties like Yisrael Beiteinu. An ethnic party in a coalition is not a symbol of integration but a sign that the group demands its "special place." As a result, although personally several USSR immigrants achieved high posts (Foreign Minister Lieberman, former

Knesset Speaker Y. Edelstein, etc.), mass consciousness continued to perceive them as a "Russian party" and "Russian lobby." This ghettoized immigrants' political representation, instead of dissolving it in national parties.

• **Cultural autonomy and language barrier.** Russian-speaking immigrants largely did not abandon their native language and cultural practices. In Israel of the 1990s–2000s, a parallel Russian-speaking space formed: dozens of newspapers and magazines, a TV channel (even Channel 9 positions itself as Russian), numerous websites, forums, book publishers, theaters, clubs. This largely facilitated immigrants' lives—reduced stress from immersion in a foreign environment, allowed not losing professional skills (scientists continued reading Russian literature and publishing, doctors exchanged experience in a language they understood better than Hebrew). The state partly encouraged such autonomy, considering it temporary. However, the paradox is that the more successfully the Russian community provided itself with its own culture, the less incentive the rest of society had to include this culture in the common pot. Russian speakers lived somewhat "in a separate world": they celebrate their holidays—for example, May 9 (Victory Day), which became for them the main war memorial day; watch their films (Soviet classics or Russian series); read their authors. Meanwhile, May 9 only recently received official memorial day status in Israel (since 2017) and still remains rather a "Russian" holiday,[8] and the Soviet soldier-victor was never inscribed in the Israeli pantheon of WWII heroes, where the theme of the European Jewry Catastrophe still dominates. The language barrier was also long significant: many first-generation immigrants, especially elderly, never learned Hebrew at the proper level. Their children and grandchildren are already bilingual or Hebrew-speaking, but the family language often remains Russian. Up to a quarter of the country's population speaks Russian at home, but in public space this language is almost unused (except bank announcements are duplicated). This creates an effect of visibility/invisibility: Russian speakers are noticeable as a sociocultural segment, but at the national culture level, the Russian language and content received no significant niche.

As a result, a model developed that researchers characterize as **"functional integration without symbolic recognition."** Russian speakers became an integral part of the Israeli economy, defense, science—it's now hard to imagine Israeli hospitals, universities, or IT companies without them. But in the nation's collective self-consciousness, they are still largely "strangers." They are valued as qualified workers, taxpayers, IDF soldiers—but are not rushed to be celebrated as equal co-authors of Israeli history. For example, few Russian-speaking heroes (generals, politicians) entered school history textbooks or were honored with streets and monuments. Russian-speaking literature of Israel is known and highly valued in this community itself, but is almost untranslated into Hebrew and little known to the general public.

Comparison with Mizrahim: Why Didn't the "Russian" Community Repeat Their Success?

To more deeply understand the reasons for the described situation, it's useful to compare the trajectory of Russian-speaking immigrants with the Mizrahi experience. Both groups faced

[8] jpost.com

initial marginalization, but their outcomes differ: Mizrahim managed to transform national identity, while Russian speakers did not.

Common features:

• Both Mizrahim (1950s–60s) and Russians (1990s) arrived in massive numbers over short periods, dramatically shifting demographics. • Both were initially viewed by existing elites as outsiders carrying "alien culture" requiring assimilation. The Ashkenazi elite scorned "Eastern primitiveness"; the 1990s Mizrahi establishment eyed "Russian atheists" with suspicion. • Both built support networks: Mizrahim through informal community ties and religious institutions; Russians through media and cultural infrastructure. • Both faced stereotyping: Mizrahim as lazy, uneducated troublemakers; Russians as chauvinistic vodka-drinkers (despite many immigrants being non-Russian Soviet nationalities, they're all called "Russians").

Critical differences:

1. Timing. Mizrahim arrived as the state was forming, and their protest coincided with the old system's crisis (1970s). They had time to fight for their place. Russians arrived after the post-Mizrahi revolution settlement. They missed the "cultural pie" division. By the 1990s, secular-right Mizrahi patriotism and the religious ultra-right already dominated the symbolic field. No niche remained for a new major player except integration into existing parties.

2. Religious compatibility. Despite distinct traditions, Mizrahim practiced the same Judaic faith, honored Shabbat, kept *kashrut*—their culture operated within the Jewish tradition. Russians were largely secular, often indifferent to or unfamiliar with Jewish religion. Their arrival strengthened the secular camp, but paradoxically: by the 1990s, secularism itself had lost prestige. Russians added value to none of the established "identity currencies"—not religion, not Middle Eastern authenticity, not left-liberalism (most held right-wing views on security).

3. Authenticity and language. Mizrahim could claim: we're not outsiders, we're from the East, like this land. Their culture—Middle Eastern (Arabic language, Eastern music)—resonated with the surrounding region. Russians brought a geographically distant culture. Russian in Israel represents diaspora, exile—not the Promised Land. "Russian" culture therefore registers as alien and inauthentic to the Israeli project (as does American English-speaking *olim* culture—also outside the mainstream).

• **No compelling narrative of suffering.** Mizrahim had a powerful story: "We survived expulsion from Muslim countries, came to Israel, and were then humiliated by our own people—restore justice!" This resonated deeply: a society built on overcoming antisemitism couldn't ignore internal discrimination. Russian speakers lacked such moral leverage. They could point to Soviet antisemitism, but many Israelis dismissed this ("it wasn't the Holocaust"). Moreover, Soviet Jews were often seen as relatively privileged in the USSR (especially the intelligentsia), generating little sympathy for their "suffering." And they made few claims about discrimination *within* Israel—having integrated economically quite successfully, they faced no glaring poverty or segregation like Mizrahim in the 1950s. Without the image of "victims of injustice," there was no moral imperative for society to respond.

5. Demographics and electoral weight. Mizrahim became (and remain) roughly half the Jewish population. No party can win elections without their votes—as Likud proved in 1977.

Russian speakers represent about 15%. That's significant but not decisive (and they're scattered across parties). They could tip the balance in coalition negotiations (earning the label "kingmakers" in the 1990s),[9] but never controlled outcomes directly. Since the 2010s, their vote has fragmented further: some stayed with Lieberman, others shifted to major parties (Likud, Yesh Atid, etc.). Put simply, Russian speakers never reached the critical mass needed to dictate the agenda themselves, unlike Mizrahim.

6. Integration strategy. Mizrahim integrated through confrontation: they rejected assimilation and forced recognition of their identity. Russians chose adaptation: in the 1990s they largely retreated into their "Russian world," then in the 2000s began dispersing individually throughout Israeli society (through careers, marriages with *sabras*, etc.)—but without making collective demands. Russian protests rarely mobilized for cultural rights (pension battles being the exception). Authorities felt no strong pressure to revise symbolic policies. Politicians could safely ignore the "Russian question" without consequences—unlike the "Mizrahi question," which since the 1970s meant losing power if ignored.

These differences explain why the "Russian *aliyah*" remained separate. Its contribution gets acknowledged verbally ("you've done much for the country"), but the symbolic field's rules haven't shifted in its favor. Some Mizrahi gains even complicated Russian integration: religion's strengthened role (as part of Mizrahi identity) emphasizes secular Russians' alienness; the shift toward Eastern cultural codes leaves Russian culture exotic.

Hidden Competition and Tensions

Although there are no direct sharp conflicts between Russian speakers and other groups (for example, Mizrahim), there is hidden tension and competition for status, which is rarely spoken aloud.

Some aspects of this tension:

• **Economic competition.** Russian speakers occupied a significant share of jobs in prestigious sectors—high-tech, medicine, science. For Mizrahim descendants, many of whom only in the 2nd–3rd generation began breaking into these spheres, this sometimes evokes a feeling of injustice: "We've been fighting for years to be recognized, and these newcomers arrived and immediately got good positions." Such grumbling is heard, for example, when discussing job distribution in universities or hospitals. Fact: about 25% of university faculty are Russian speakers. On one hand, this is a source of pride (Israel attracted "brains"), on the other—for some a reminder that locals (especially from Eastern communities) get less of the elite positions pie.

• **Symbolic competition "who's a real Israeli."** Mizrahim earned the right to be called "true Israelis"—through army service, through patriotism, through asserting Eastern culture. Russians are also patriots and served faithfully in the army (some heroically died in battles). But they're often perceived as "fellow travelers" in the right-wing national camp. Mizrahi right-wing discourse is nationalism plus traditional Judaic element; Russian right-wingers—nationalism plus secular Soviet style (distrust of Arabs, hard security line, but for a secular state). That is, they're right-wing for "the wrong reason." Hence suspicion: they vote for ours (Likud, etc.), but in their hearts don't fully share our (Mizrahi, traditionalist) Israeliness. This

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gap manifested, for example, when in the 2010s Lieberman opposed ultra-religious over-influence—Mizrahi conservatives were outraged, considering him (and by association, Russians) destroyers of the state's "Jewish character."

• **Cultural stereotypes and everyday frictions.** In mass consciousness, each group has stereotypes about the other. About "Russians" one often hears they "have no tact," "they're cold Europeans," "despise Eastern traditions," "bring Russian chauvinism here," etc. On the other hand, Russian speakers sometimes speak arrogantly about locals: supposedly, "education here is weak, culture primitive (Eastern pop), we came—smart scientific personnel, and we're not valued." Such statements fuel mutual misunderstanding. Everyday conflicts can arise from different habits—from wedding music to attitudes about queues and driving. These are all trifles, but they add up to a background where each side considers the other somewhat alien.

• **Separate attitude of religious establishment.** For the Orthodox establishment, Russian immigrants are altogether a "headache": hundreds of thousands of non-Jews by *Halakha*, demanding marriages, graves in cemeteries, conversion to Judaism. Hostile rabbis directly call them "Russian goyim." This is a completely open front of alienation: almost all attempts by reformers or statists to introduce civil marriage or soften *giur* (conversion procedure) are blocked. As a result, a significant portion of immigrants remain not fully incorporated into the "Jewish family" in formal terms. This carries psychological weight—people understand they're viewed as "second-class" Jews (though Israelis and Jews aren't synonymous, Jewish status matters socially in a Jewish state).

These tensions haven't erupted into open conflict—rather, they maintain distance and separateness. The dynamic resembles **competitive indifference**: groups interact as necessary (work, military service), but beyond official contexts inhabit separate worlds. Russian speakers partly avoided the struggle for a place in the symbolic center, fearing hostility, and preferred the comfort of their diaspora within the state. Others, accordingly, are in no rush to invite them there.

Mechanisms Reproducing Peripheral Status

Why, even after three decades, has the position of Russian speakers in the symbolic sense not changed substantially? Here it's important to understand that the established configuration is supported by certain structural mechanisms—traps of sorts that prevent the situation from evolving.

1. Cultural and linguistic autonomy. As noted, the Russian-speaking community built a full-fledged subculture—"Russian Israel" with its own media, artists, and holidays. While this helps preserve identity and ease integration stress, it also reduces visibility and influence on national culture. Most Israelis simply don't engage with "Russian" life—they don't read those newspapers or Facebook groups, don't attend those events. This comfortable autonomy exists without pressure on, say, Hebrew TV channels to broadcast programming about Russian community life. In effect, autonomy becomes isolation: society tacitly tells Russians—"live as you wish, just don't bother us or make demands." And the community responds: "fine, we're doing well enough anyway."

2. Political segregation (ethnicization of politics). The presence of "Russian" parties (formerly Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, then Yisrael Beiteinu, etc.) led to immigrant problems being

separated into a distinct niche that major parties could ignore. Say, Likud could not particularly care about immigrant pensioners, knowing Lieberman would secure them supplements in the coalition agreement. As a result, the Russian community received benefits and laws, but in return remained a foreign body. Moreover, recently the "Russian" party lost influence—in the 2023 government there wasn't a single immigrant minister.[10] The absence of Russians in the highest echelons of power (which, incidentally, is also partly a result of their own ethnic separation) leads to their agenda not systematically being heard. In the Cabinet, Mizrahi interests are represented by many (Prime Minister Netanyahu himself—half Sephardic by origin, and most of his electorate—Easterners). Ultra-Orthodox interests are defended by their own Shas and United Torah Judaism factions. But Russians in the current coalition are represented by literally 1–2 deputies from other parties, and even they don't necessarily emphasize the Russian theme. This means in coming years there's no one to systematically lobby for Russian culture's symbolic equality at the national level.

3. Utilitarianism of economic elites. In the Israeli business community (which also mainly consists of Mizrahim and *sabra* Ashkenazim), a view of "Russians" as a resource has taken root. They're excellent workers, engineers, scientists. They're valued for diligence and discipline, for ambition and competitiveness (which "spurs" others to work better). But beyond work functions—they're not interested. The boss cares that talented programmers from Moscow sit in his R&D department, but he's not going to learn about their cultural values. This is an "exchange contract": you give us—work, we give you—money and equal career growth opportunities. Seems fair. But at the societal level, this perpetuates Russians' status as "strangers among equals"—they're interacted with functionally-businesswise, but there's no aspiration to accept them into the family. Moreover, if some Russian speaks about oppression or cultural rights, they might be told: "Isn't it enough for you? Look at what you do, how much you earn—are you really oppressed here?" Economic success paradoxically turns into invisibility of cultural problems, because "successful people don't cry."

4. Absence of allies. As already mentioned, Russian speakers aren't inscribed in any of the major identity coalitions. Ashkenazi leftists could traditionally be close to them in secularity, but value conflict (Russians are mostly right-wing, antipathy to "left-liberals" accused of naivety and concession to Arabs) prevents alliance. Mizrahim and Russians—on the same side of barricades in supporting the right, but culturally dislike each other. Religious—see in Russians a secularization factor. Arabs don't understand Russians' problems at all (they count them among the Israeli nation and see all Jews as one, more "newcomers"). In the Israeli "game of thrones," no force was found that would take the Russian community under its wing not for profit but for ideological closeness. Perhaps the emerging anti-*Haredi* secular coalition (including part of Russian descendants, *sabra* Ashkenazim, liberals) will become such an alliance, but it's not yet formed.

5. Intergenerational assimilation. Finally, it should be noted that each successive generation of Russian speakers is less and less "Russian." The first generation (arrived at mature age)—yes, preserves language, memory, often communicates in their circle. The second generation (children who arrived as teenagers or were born right after immigration)—already bilingual, grew up in Israeli school and army, many associate with Israel first, though Russian isn't foreign to them. The third generation (born in the 2000s and later)—already almost ordinary Israelis by language and mentality, "Russianness" for them—just grandma's fairy tales and Olivier salad on New Year. This is a natural process: over time any emigrant culture dissolves. But

[10] library.fes.de

right now, in the second-third decade after *aliyah*, we're in a situation where the first generation is leaving, and the second isn't yet ready/willing to publicly carry the banner of Russian culture. Many 30–40-year-olds from the USSR want to be simply Israelis, distance themselves from the "Russian accent." This is their right and, seemingly, integration success. But looking broader, it turns out there's no one to demand recognition of "Russian needs," because the young are no longer sure they need it, and the old aren't listened to. Indeed, a number of sociological surveys note that up to 70% of Russian-speaking Israelis believe they have the same interests as all Israelis and don't need to stand out as a "special community."[11] This is a positive integration trend, but it means symbolic problems remain without defenders: "Russians" themselves don't consider it necessary to fight for them, hoping to dissolve in the common pot.

The listed mechanisms form a vicious circle: separateness leads to invisibility, invisibility—to absence of change. Until a serious external or internal push occurs, the system will tend to preserve the status quo.

Possible Scenarios for Further Development

Looking ahead, several scenarios can be identified for the evolution of Russian-speaking immigrants' status in Israel. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive—different elements of them can combine—but for analytical clarity we'll consider them separately:

1. Gradual assimilation and dissolution (baseline scenario). The most likely outcome—in 1–2 generations the Russian-speaking community will cease to exist as a separate entity. Youth born in Israel are already significantly integrated: they study at the same universities, marry non-Russian speakers, speak Hebrew without accent. Russian will be preserved in individual families but will cease to be the language of daily life. Cultural specificities will smooth out: Victory Day will perhaps be officially celebrated alongside other memorial dates; New Year's (the real one, January 1) is increasingly celebrated by *sabras* too, i.e., "Russian" holidays will generalize. Such a scenario was observed with previous *aliyah* waves—for example, from Poland, Romania—their descendants completely merged with the nation. The only difference is scale: Russian speakers are very numerous and the process may take more time, but the direction is already set. It's indicative that already now about 70% of Russian-speaking voters don't vote for "Russian" parties, considering general parties sufficiently representing their interests. That is, the identity of "Russian Israeli" is blurring, people simply consider themselves Israelis.

2. Preservation of sustainable subculture (scenario of "diaspora within the state"). Another option—the Russian community will preserve its distinctiveness for a long time yet, albeit in reduced form. Immigration from former USSR countries will continue (possibly in waves, as unfortunately is happening since 2022 due to the war in Ukraine and mobilization in Russia). This adds "fresh blood" to the diaspora, doesn't let the language disappear. The state is still interested in attracting immigrants, so infrastructure for them (language courses, benefits, media) will be supported. In this case, in 20–30 years it may turn out that Russian is still known by hundreds of thousands of Israelis, just they'll be different people. Culture may evolve toward greater bilingualism: for example, more and more musicians and writers creating works in Hebrew but with Russian roots (this is already happening). Thus will arise a new post-

[11] ridl.io

Soviet Israeli identity, partially comparable to how American Jews preserved some distinctiveness in the US but became an integral part of the nation. Here much will depend on whether there's state-level support for multilingualism and multiculturalism. If, say, Israeli schools add Russian language electives or museums documenting Russian-Jewish history, this will cement the community's role. If instead the trend favors complete suppression of languages other than Hebrew, the subculture will contract to immigrant circles and gradually fade, as in scenario #1.

3. Political mobilization on secular-liberal basis (alliance scenario). There's a probability that Russian-speaking Israelis will become the core of a new secular movement opposing religious diktat and for liberal reforms (civil marriage, Shabbat transport, equality of non-Jews and Jews). Already noticeable is their disproportionate participation in 2023 pro-democracy protests—USSR immigrants value secular freedoms and fear religious radicalism. If this trend intensifies, the Russian community may transform from "special" to the vanguard of secular Israelis in general. Then the identity "Russian" will change to identity "secular patriot." In such a configuration, they'll potentially find alliance with secular Ashkenazi elites and part of the Mizrahi middle class.[12] This scenario will lead not to recognition of Russian culture per se, but to changing game rules in favor of secularism, which will indirectly solve many "Russian" problems (for example, abolishing religious marriage will solve the marriage question for non-Jews). However, this requires serious political consolidation beyond ethnic bounds. Simply put, Russian speakers must stop speaking on behalf of "Russians" and start speaking on behalf of "all secular Israelis." Examples of individual leaders (Avigdor Lieberman partly tried, positioning himself not only as "Russian" but as a fighter against ultra-Orthodox) show this is possible. But so far it's not a mass movement.

4. Surge of aliyah and new conflict (unlikely, crisis scenario). Purely hypothetically, one can also imagine a sharp influx of new immigrants, say, as a result of crisis in Russia/Ukraine. If in a short period hundreds of thousands more Russian speakers arrive, plus non-Jews by *Halakha*, this may sharpen relations with religious and nationalists to open conflict. Populist campaigns against "goyim" (non-Jews) in Israel are possible. The Russian community will be forced to rally and defend itself, emerging from a passive role.

Overall, the most probable is a gradual drift toward scenario 1 (assimilation), partially combining with scenario 2 (subculture). That is, the main mass of Russian descendants will fit into Israelis, and some "Russian island" will still exist, but increasingly less influential.

Signs of this are already visible: according to 2019 data, Russian-speaking voters are dispersed across all parties, and no party can any longer be considered a monopolist of their votes. Even Lieberman's party, which formerly expressed the community's identity, was forced to reorient to a civic agenda because emphasis on "Russian status" ceased to catch the young generation.

So, without external upheavals or internal mobilization, no special path for the "Russian *aliyah*" is visible—it will go the beaten path of previous immigrations, dissolving in the melting pot, which now simmers on low heat (though the melting pot ideology was officially buried, in fact integration through schools, army, and mixed marriages hasn't gone anywhere).

[12] 972mag.com

Conclusion

The concept of competing solidarities proves highly productive for analyzing both Israeli society generally and the Russian-speaking immigrant case specifically. Israel is neither a "melting pot" in the classic sense nor a multicultural federation, but *something else entirely*: a field where different groups, each with its own grounds for legitimacy, must coexist without complete merger. This creates a stable but static system. *Stability comes at the price of refusing to resolve fundamental contradictions*. Russian-speaking immigrants, entering this system, became a kind of **stress test**: their arrival exposed latent problems (the "who is a Jew" question, secularism vs. religion, elitism vs. equality).

On one hand, their story represents **integration success**: they provided demographic growth, strengthened the economy, became functionally integral to the state. Israel absorbed a million people in short order without social catastrophe—itself an achievement. But on the other hand, *this success is one-sided*: the state took what it needed (people, expertise, taxes) without fully giving what nations typically offer new members—the sense of complete belonging. They live "at home, but in someone else's apartment": legally citizens, effectively a diaspora within the country.

Large immigrant communities sometimes remain separate even into the third generation, particularly when culturally and linguistically distinct. But the Israeli case is unique: these are *returnees*—people the country's ideology itself proclaims part of the nation (by right of return). Herein lies the tragic contradiction: *the Zionist dream of gathering all exiles collided with reality—the "exiles" proved too different to merge seamlessly into a single people*. The system of competing solidarities allows such "incomplete merger" to persist. Israel has lived with internal divisions for decades, postponing the answer to "who are we?"

Russian-speaking immigrants embody this uncertainty. They are citizens of the state but not fully members of the *nation* in the spiritual sense. Their fate essentially tests whether Israel can outgrow itself and forge a common civic nation, or remain a conglomerate of tribes, each in its separate corner. Russian involvement in recent pro-democracy protests shows they *are ready to fight for the country's shared future*. The country as a whole should respond by fully embracing their past and culture as part of its diversity.

For now, the trajectory is clear: **without deliberate intervention, assimilation will "solve" the problem**—at the cost of losing unique experience and potential. If Israeli society recognizes the value in the "Russian *aliyah*" experience and diversity, implementing the outlined recommendations could help Russian speakers feel truly at home while enriching Israeli identity with new dimensions. After all, Israel's story is one of weaving different fates and cultures into a unified whole, and the Russian-speaking chapter—one of the largest in this history—deserves to be read and respected.
