RESEARCH REPORT
Patterns of Integration into Israeli Society among Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union over the Past Two Decades

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Executive Summary

1. Background

Since the early 1990s, over one million of the 1.5 million Jews who lived in the former Soviet Union (according to the 1989 Soviet population census) have immigrated to Israel. On average, the immigrants were relatively young and educated when they arrived in Israel, but many did not know Hebrew or English and many, particularly in the early years, had meager resources. Naturally they had no social contacts in Israel. The situation in Israel at the time of their arrival also posed difficulties for their successful integration: the policy of curbing expansion in the public sector forced many educated immigrants to take jobs that were not commensurate with their qualifications, and the rising housing costs meant that they had only a remote chance of owning their own home. In addition to these difficulties, were the problems of integrating their children into the education system, and health and welfare problems (particularly the older immigrants). Those who were not Jewish according to Jewish law experienced additional difficulties of their own.

More than two decades have passed since the mass immigration wave began, and since then, the situation has changed somewhat. The main goal of the current study was to use statistical data to analyze the changes in various aspects of the lives of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) since the early 1990s, as well as the factors that led to these changes.

Since the influx, numerous studies have been published about the immigration from the FSU and the integration of the immigrants. However, most have focused on a specific aspect (education, employment, housing, social integration, etc.) or a particular point in time. The current study attempts to present a multidimensional perspective of the integration of the immigrants over time – from the early 1990s to the present – and to cover demographic aspects, the acquisition of essential skills for living in Israeli society, education, employment, financial status, physical and mental health, and satisfaction with life in Israel.

2. The Study Population and Sources of Information

The study population consists of immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have arrived in Israel since the early 1990s. The study was based on a broad range of sources of information: Data from the 1989 Soviet population census on the Jewish population and its socio-demographic composition in the then Soviet Union; annual data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption on the number and socio-demographic composition of the FSU immigrants at the time of immigration; files from the CBS Labor Force Surveys from 1991-2011; files from the 1995 and 2008 Israeli population censuses; files from social surveys conducted every year since 2002; files from surveys of household incomes and

1 Not all the immigrants were registered as Jews in the Soviet Union.
2 While Israel's Law of Return recognizes and grants rights to immigrants with a Jewish father or grandfather, religious law recognizes only the sons and daughters of Jewish mothers.
expenditure from 1995 onwards; files from the CBS health surveys for 1996/7, 1999/2000 and 2003/4 (national health survey) and 2009; a file of a survey of immigrants conducted by the CBS in 2010/11; a study of immigrant employment conducted by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute in 1995; Ministry of Education files on students and educational institutions as well as matriculation files for 2000-2013; statistical reports from the Student Authority from 1993/4 to 2010/11; data from HIAS on the number of Jewish immigrants from the FSU to the USA by republic of origin from 1990-2005, as well as a file of the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) conducted in 2000/1; data on FSU Jewish immigrants to Germany including official data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees; data from a survey conducted in 2005/6 by the Russian-language German newspaper Partner; and data from studies.

Most of the data were analyzed by sex, age, age at time of immigration, republic of origin, and other characteristics. Some of the data were also analyzed in a multivariate analysis (regression). Multiyear files were created for this purpose. Based on the characteristics of the immigrants, the study team defined 4 immigration periods: 1990-1991; 1992-1995; 1996-1999; and 2000 onwards, although it was not always possible to observe this distinction.

Where data were available from the 1989 Soviet census on the socio-demographic composition of the Jews in the then Soviet Union and on the immigrants at the time of immigration, we used them in order to assess the factors affecting the decision to immigrate to Israel and the changes that occurred in Israel. We also decided to compare the FSU immigrants with the general Jewish population of Israel. Wherever possible, comparisons were also made between Jews who left the FSU for Israel and those who went to the USA and Germany.

3. Main Findings

The study revealed some encouraging findings, including:

- The great majority of the immigrants feel at home in Israel and plan to stay in the country.
- The birthrate among female immigrants has risen.
- Hebrew proficiency and computer literacy have improved, particularly among the younger generation.
- The percentage of immigrants aged 20-34 who served in the IDF is similar to that of all Israelis of the same age.
- The percentage of FSU-born students eligible for a matriculation certificate has increased in recent years; among the Israeli-born children of immigrants, the percentage is higher than the national average.

3 To be precise, with a group defined by the CBS as Jews and others, which also includes non-Jewish family members who immigrated to Israel.

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The number of immigrant college students and their percentage among young immigrants have increased rapidly even though most of them are no longer eligible for support from the Student Authority.

The professional/occupational status of the immigrants has been steadily improving and today over half of the immigrants with a higher education are working in an occupation commensurate with their education.

The longer they remain in the country, the closer their standard of living is to that of other Israelis.

Nevertheless, the FSU immigrants are still experiencing a considerable number of difficulties:

- Many (particularly the elderly and middle-aged) are still not proficient in Hebrew and English.
- The dropout rate from school among FSU-born students remains higher than that among total Jewish students.
- Many of the immigrants (particularly among the more recent arrivals in Israel) are not working in their profession.
- A significant proportion of the immigrants are experiencing financial hardship, by subjective and objective indicators.
- About half of the immigrants do not have permanent housing, although the percentage declines the longer they are in the country.
- A significant proportion of the immigrants (particularly the elderly and older adults) are in poor health.

The findings have been presented to the Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption, the Jewish Agency, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services. The extensive scope of the findings can provide the foundation for a better understanding of the difficulties facing the immigrants and for improving programs developed for them.
Acknowledgments

Warmest thanks to my colleagues at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute, particularly the director, Jack Habib, and the head of the Engelberg Center for Children and Youth, Miriam Navot, for their organizational and professional assistance with the study. Thanks to my fellow researchers: Dalia Ben-Rabi, for her assistance writing the report and obtaining information from the Ministry of Education; Shmuel Be'er, for helping to obtain information from the Central Bureau of Statistics; and Bruce Rosen and Judith King for their advice during the study. I would also like to thank Assaf Sharon for his statistical advice; the chief technology officer Shlomo Kux, and the network administrator Barak Alon for their support during the data processing; and Revital Aviv-Matok for helping with the proofreading; and to express my gratitude to Jenny Rosenfeld and Raya Cohen for editing this report and Leslie Klineman for preparing it for publication.

I am grateful to Leonid Nevzlin Research Center for Russian and East European Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for providing the research grant for this study.

Thanks to the information systems staff at the Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Education for the information I received, in particular, to Avishai Cohen and Ariela Knaani, and to the staff of the social science database, ISDC, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, particularly to Natalia Volchkina.

Heartfelt thanks to my wife Rina, for her emotional support and important suggestions throughout.

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