Israel’s elections and the “Russian street”

The “Russians” are coming

The issue of “Russian” Israelis has reemerged in the Israeli media as the early parliamentary elections scheduled for January 22 approach and Likud allies itself with the Russian party, Israel Our Home.

More oil was poured on the fire by the early December report about the formation of a new Russian party, Ha Yisrael (“The Israelis”), which is led by David Cohn, a former star of the Russian-language channel 10 in Israel.

I should point out that the idea of a “Russian” Israeli party is not new. There was the Yisrael Hamithadeshet (Renewed Israel) party that participated in the 2009 elections, Our Home Israel and, of course, Yisrael Ba’aliya, the Israeli Russian street’s pilot project that was established in 1996. Now we are witnessing a “rebirth” of that idea.

More than one lance has been broken in the lists of the Israeli media about the advisability of forming a “sectoral” party for immigrants from the former Soviet Union, beginning with notice of registration of Cohn’s party (literally 10 minutes before the deadline).

Some, like Marina Solodkin, the veteran of Israeli politics and a former assistant professor of Moscow State University’s Department of Economic and Social History, believes that such a party should exist “in theory.” After getting the unelectable eighth spot on the Kadima Party’s slate, she emotionally told the Russian-language portal IzRus that it was an “insult to the entire returnee community” and that “a new ‘Russian’ party would definitely emerge” in future Knesset elections.

Others, like the well-known journalist and author Nelly Gutina, believe that means taking a step backward, returning to a “sectoral sandbox” instead of “becoming integrated into the highest echelons of power.”

In any event, the issue is being discussed constantly. Everyone understands that the distribution of seats in the next Knesset will depend primarily on the Russian electorate.

The Russian street

There are two main aspects to the situation. First, the way Israeli society was formed contributed to it, and, second, there is the nature of the “Russian” Aliyah itself.

I should point out here that “ethnicity” in Israel has always been a means of defense against attempts to integrate all returnees into a single Israeli melting pot.

As the noted Israeli historian Saul Friedländer has said, “tribal” structures in Israel exhibit a kind of “reverse evolution”: Instead of becoming more moderate and integrating with national movements, they become more militant and aggressive and are guided by their own internal principles.

This has contributed to the fact that Russian Jews in Israel live according to different social norms than the Jews who
moved to Europe or the United States from the former Soviet Union.

Vladimir (Ze’ev) Khanin, a recognized expert on the Israeli Russian Street, has said that the Russian Jewish emigrant groups in host Western countries (the United States, Canada, Germany, etc.) usually become politically institutionalized in local Jewish communities that avail themselves of an established formal mechanism for lobbying local authorities.

The situation in Israel is fundamentally different. In this country, where returnees from the CIS countries comprise about 16% of the population, a powerful institutional Russian community infrastructure has formed that constitutes one of the most important aspects of the country’s political process.

Therefore, there are no lobbyists between the Russian community and the authorities in Israel to direct the community’s interests along a particular ideological path.

As a result, the Russians have been a key factor in virtually every electoral campaign since the last major Aliyah in the 1990s. They will actually determine whether the next Knesset is leftist or rightist. As the leading Israeli publication Haaretz aptly pointed out recently, there is no party in Israel that can take power without the support of the Russians, and the members of various parties are tensely watching what is happening on the Russian street. The statistics show a particularly revealing picture.

**“The key” electorate and electoral manipulation**

According to various sources, IzRus in particular, the number of Russian-speaking immigrants entitled to vote lies between 750,000 (as estimated by Vladimir Khanin) and 850,000 (from an estimate by Israel’s Central Election Commission). This equates to between 27 and 30 of the 120 seats in Israel’s parliament.

In reality, because their turnout is relatively low in comparison with the ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs, Russians will win about 10 seats fewer than that (18 to 21). However, even that number is enough to tip the scales towards either the left or the right.

Realizing that, political forces of various stamps have been trying to use the Russian electorate to benefit their electoral campaigns. It is easiest for those on the right, of course.

First of all, the overwhelming majority of the “Russian million” live beyond the so-called Green Line — in the Golan Heights, in Galilee on the border with Lebanon and in Sderot or Ashkelon near the Gaza Strip. People living in the Palestinian territories or near the border with Lebanon or the Gaza Strip obviously will be more radical than the residents of relatively prosperous Tel Aviv and its suburbs.

Second, a strong antipathy to liberal views was ingrained in Russian Jews during their past life in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the liberal media widely believes that immigrants from the Soviet Union are “most aggressive” because their “Soviet-Russian” mode of thought makes them unable to adapt to a new life in Israel, and because they brought a Trotskyite-Stalinist brutality with them to Israel.

Third, opinion polls say that, far from holding right-wing views, almost half of the Russian-speaking electorate votes for Israel Our Home or Likud out of habit because they see no alternative.

And many analysts believe this generated the idea of taking votes away from the clear favorite in the current electoral campaign — the Likud and Israel Our Home alliance (Likud Beiteinu) by establishing another “lure” for the country’s Russian-speaking electorate. Obviously, it currently is the Ha Yisrael party of David Cohn.

There is also a great deal of interest outside Israel for eroding the habitual Russian vote for right-wing parties — primarily in Washington.

Given the likelihood that relations between the United States and Iran will improve, the White House probably is not ecstatic about the growing strength of the Likud Beiteinu alliance “hawks,” who will continue pressuring Washington for airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Given that the Likud Beiteinu alliance’s rating has been steadily declining in recent weeks, the campaign to steal the votes of the Russian Aliyah is yielding results.

This means the Israeli “Russian million” with its potential to decide the country’s destiny is once again at risk of becoming the instrument of another electoral maneuver.
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