

The Israeli Case: Lessons from Integrating Russian and Ethiopian Immigrants, 1989–1992

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The paper presents the Israeli government's response to a massive wave of Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia between 1989-1992. A country of fewer than 5 million accepted almost 400,000 Jewish refugees and discouraged granting of political asylum to thousands of mostly Muslim refugees from East Africa and prevented family reunification involving Israeli Arab citizens who married Palestinians living outside of Israel (including the occupied territories). Various policies designed to provide housing and education to the two major immigrant groups are analysed. Policies favoured immigrants from the Soviet Union than the Ethiopians. While the national government and the Jewish Agency controlled immigration policy, mayors had some input in implementation. The

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absorption policies were not coordinated. The key to the Israeli success was political will favouring immigration of Jews regardless of where they were from. The successful absorption of refugees lies in the attitude of the host country toward immigration.

Keywords: Israel, Jewish immigrants, absorption policy, Russians, Ethiopians, education policy

1. Introduction

This paper examines the Israeli experience of absorbing (integrating) over 400,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union and 20,000 Black African Jews from Ethiopia between 1989 and 1992. The Israeli government and society faced serious challenges in absorbing these diverse immigrant groups. Was this nation of fewer than five million persons, capable of successfully absorbing so many immigrants?

Defined as a Jewish state, Israel and Israeli leaders wanted Jewish immigrants.¹ From independence in 1948 to the present they sought to increase a Jewish majority; they feared a growing non-Jewish population. Thus, Jewish identity is a crucial issue for new immigrants. Not being Jewish for potential immigrants/refugees can mean exclusion and rejection by the Israeli government.² For example, since 2003, Israeli law prevents residents of the occupied territories who marry Israeli Arabs from living in Israel.³ The government also discouraged the granting of asylum to mostly Muslim refugees from East Africa.⁴

¹ The Law of Return (1950), grants Jews and their descendants free entry to the country and automatic citizenship. The law's liberal character reflected the desire by Israeli leaders to facilitate the mass immigration of Jews.

² For Soviet Jews the issue of their Jewish identity was on an individual basis. An estimated 1/3 of the Soviet Jewish immigrants were not Jews according to Halacha (Jewish Law) – born to a Jewish mother or to a woman who converted to Judaism. The issue of Jewish identity for Ethiopians concerned the entire community.

³ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/191711/knesset-extends-law-forbidding-palestinians-married-to-israelis-from-living-in-jewish-state> (last visited June 9, 2017).

⁴ In 1977, Prime Minister Menachem Begin authorized citizenship for 66 Vietnamese refugees travelling on an Israeli ship (<https://972mag.com/i-remember-when-israel-rescued-non-jewish-refugees/55387/>)

An important question concerns the relevance of the Israeli experience of absorbing Russian and Ethiopian immigrants for the EU and member nations dealing with the massive immigrant/refugee following the civil war in Syria. Furthermore, there is the question of 'what can mayors in Europe learn from the Israeli experience'?

2. The Absorption of Russian and Ethiopian Immigrants 1989-1992

In the early 1950s, Israel transferred responsibility for immigrant absorption to the Jewish Agency, an NGO representing world Jewry.⁵ Symbolically, world Jewry became responsible for Israel's immigrant absorption. Formally, the role of the government became minor.

Massive waves of immigrants drove national and economic development as new immigrants doubled the population by 1952 and tripled it by 1960. Following independence, fearing a concentration of its Jewish population in the coastal strip, the government pursued a policy of population dispersal which sent new immigrants to "development" or "new" towns in thinly populated peripheral areas. Several of the new towns were located in areas along the border with Israeli Arabs. During the 1950s, the Jewish Agency resettled immigrants directly into new, furnished housing in development towns and rural cooperatives (*moshavim*). Immigrants of means settled themselves in the major cities (Aharoni, 1991, p. 116).

A pattern of ethnic concentration and separation developed among the Jews of Israel. Almost 90 per cent of veteran Jewish Israelis were Ashkenazi (European) and their descendants. They were concentrated in areas in the larger cities or in *kibbutzim*, *moshavim*, and small towns. A small number of veteran Sephardim resided in the larger cities. Many post 1948 European Jewish immigrants settled in *maabarot* (transit camps), cities, and towns all in central Israel.⁶ Jews from Arab lands (Oriental or Sephardim) arriving after 1948 became most of the inhabitants in new or devel-

⁵ Founded in 1929 under the League of Nations Mandate the Jewish Agency sought to establish an independent state for the Jewish People in the British Mandate of Palestine. The Agency represented the Jewish community in the British Mandate and Jews in the Diaspora. Its funding came from Diaspora communities. Since independence, the Agency has existed as an international organization.

⁶ The Jewish Agency provided relatively expensive subsidised housing in the centre of the country for Polish Jews who arrived after 1956 (Stock, 1988, pp. 128-129). Over the

opment towns in the periphery. Others settled in peripheral *moshavim* and in transit camps in Israel's centre which developed into neighbourhoods in cities or towns.

Despite the relatively small size of the country, residents of the development towns did not have access to jobs in the centre where most economic development occurred (Sharkansky, 1997, p. 7). Moreover, the level of educational, social, and health services in the new towns became second- and third-rate in comparison to those in central Israel.

3. The Ministry of Absorption

The government established a Ministry of Absorption in 1968 after it failed to convince volunteers in the 1967 Six Days War to remain and become Israeli citizens. The government proposed that the Jewish Agency transfer its absorption functions to the new ministry. The head of the agency's absorption department, a member of the labour party, refused. It won the Prime Minister's approval to retain its absorption responsibilities (Stock, 1988).⁷ The Jewish Agency continued to bring immigrants to the country and absorb them for the first year. Thereafter, the new ministry tried to coordinate immigrant services provided by other ministries.

4. The Experience of Soviet Jewish Immigrants

After WWII, the USSR had the world's second largest Jewish community.⁸ Soviet Jews were diverse. In the western (European) areas were mostly Ashkenazi Jews. Many were well educated, highly skilled and integrated into Soviet society. In the eastern Islamic Republics were mostly non-European Jews, who resembled the Jews of Iraq and Kurdistan. Some Ashkenazi "Russian" Jews whose families migrated during the Soviet regime also lived in the Soviet Islamic Republics. The Jews of the East remained more traditional, less assimilated, and much less western in orientation. Also in

years most of the European Jews in development towns left to join relatives and friends in central Israel.

⁷ The United States tax laws also influenced this decision.

⁸ By 1988, its Jewish population stood third behind that of the US and Israel.

the southern central Soviet Union, there was the traditional Jewish community of the Republic of Georgia.

Following the Communist Revolution Jewish emigration almost stopped completely. After an initial fertile cultural period for Jews, Stalin pursued a policy of cultural genocide, executing thousands of Jewish writers, poets, Rabbis, and teachers. During WWII, German soldiers murdered two million Jewish civilians in the Baltic States, Byelorussia, Ukraine, and Russia.⁹ During WWII Stalin used “Jewish identity” to encourage support at home and abroad for the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany. After the war, policies of suppressing Jewish culture and identity and purges resumed.

In 1948, the USSR recognized Israel and both countries established diplomatic relations. When Israeli minister, Golda Meir went to New Year (*Rosh Hashona*) services at a synagogue in Moscow, she caused a near riot. Tens of thousands of Jews cheered and greeted her on the streets. This spontaneous public outburst challenged a broadly held assumption that Soviet Jews had lost their Jewish identity and assimilated.¹⁰

The 1953 “doctor’s plot” led some to expect increased persecution and massive deportations. Stalin’s death on March 5th, 1953 stabilised the situation. Thereafter, the regime suppressed Jewish life, culture, religion and almost any form of social/political organization. In Georgia and the eastern Muslim republics, Jewish religious practices survived.

In the early 1950s, the Israeli government established the *Liaison Bureau* in the Prime Minister’s Office to encourage the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. Initially its agents fostered Jewish culture and identity among Soviet Jews.¹¹

The USSR broke diplomatic relations with Israel after the June 1967 Six Days War. The War inspired a Jewish nationalist/Zionist resurgence amongst Soviet Jews. A small but considerable number filed requests to leave for Israel. Later some Jewish activists were arrested and sent to prison. They became known as the Prisoners of Zion.

⁹ After the German/Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939, Stalin deported several hundred thousand Polish and Baltic Jews into the Soviet Union

¹⁰ Many Soviet Jews whose families lived outside the Soviet Union (Poland, Romania and the Baltic States) until 1939 often preserved their Jewish identity (Gitelman, 1997).

¹¹ They worked from the Israeli Embassy in Moscow until 1967. Israel beamed radio broadcasts to the Soviet Union.

In the 1970s, the Soviet government allowed over 200,000 Jews to leave on visas for Israel.¹² In the absence of direct flights, most went to Israel via Vienna. Beginning in 1975 many “dropped out” in hopes of resettling in the United States and elsewhere. At the time, the Soviet government only allowed Soviet Jews to apply for visas to Israel. In the aftermath of the Western reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union halted emigration of Soviet Jews in 1982.

The Jewish Agency absorption department resettled most Soviet Jewish immigrants arriving between 1967 and 1982 in absorption centres all over the country. They placed many in furnished units in new apartment buildings. Adult immigrants studied Hebrew and children went to school. The government supplied immigrants with various economic benefits and subsidised the purchase of appliances and automobiles at less than half the Israeli market price. Many Soviet immigrants utilised large mortgages to purchase apartments throughout Israel. Fear that the Soviet immigrants might leave and go to the United States motivated the provision of many of the benefits.

Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. He soon realised that the United States Government required free emigration of Soviet Jews as a condition for détente. By 1987, the Soviet Union began to allow free emigration for Soviet Jews. At the time almost 95 per cent of those wanting to emigrate preferred to resettle in the United States. However, the American and Israeli governments and leaders of the American Jewish community opposed the resettlement of several hundred thousand or more Soviet Jews in the United States. In negotiations involving the White House, Department of State, Immigration and Naturalization Service and members of Congress (with consultations with American Jewish leaders, Israel and the Soviet Union) limited the annual refugee entry from the Soviet Union to 50,000; Soviet Jews would receive up to 40,000 of these visas. All refugee visas would be given in Moscow.

The new quota of 40,000 created a dilemma for the almost one million Soviet Jews that wanted to leave. Most decided to go to Israel rather than wait for years for an American visa and the future re-closing of the gates of the Soviet Union. The prospect of waiting for years, and the risk that Soviet authorities might close the gates, led the overwhelming majority to leave for Israel.

The expected massive wave of immigration in 1988, led the Israeli government to pursue “direct absorption” which privatised the absorption process. It did not use absorption centres. After a short stay at a hotel or

¹² A desire to score points with the US and West Germany may have influenced the Soviet decision to let both Jews and Germans emigrate in the 1970s.

with relatives, the immigrant receives resources to rent private housing and to be self-sufficient for a year. The immigrant then gets a job or joins a subsidised job-training program. The Jewish Agency continued to absorb some Soviet immigrants (mostly elderly, handicapped, and single parent families) in absorption centres.

Several reasons explain the change in policy. The Jewish Agency had begun to leave the field of absorption. Its overseas funders did not want to get involved in the large project. Second, the existing absorption centres could not cope with the size of the immigration. Finally, many Soviet Jews may have preferred the innovative approach and authorities wanted to please them. Some could leave and most would soon be able to vote.¹³

The policy had mixed results; two and three families often shared a single apartment. Others found cheaper housing in peripheral areas or in slum neighbourhoods with poor schools, public services and few jobs. Unemployment was rampant and TV reported on PhDs, classical musicians and soccer coaches sweeping streets. In a 1996 interview about the massive Soviet immigration (1989-1992) former Prime Minister Shamir suggested that the government had no policy to absorb them. We realised, he argued, that once they arrived then solutions were found. He thought that idea of preparing ahead of time to be anachronistic.¹⁴ Within a decade, most Soviet Jews found permanent housing and employment.

5. The Ethiopians

Prior to 1977, only 100 Ethiopian Jews “had been grudgingly allowed... (to immigrate) ... by either Ethiopian or Israeli authorities” (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994). Previously, government leaders (of the Labour party) opposed their immigration. Also, Orthodox Jewish religious and political groups argued that the Ethiopians were not authentic Jews. In 1973, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef recognized them as descendants of the Tribe of Dan and eligible to immigrate under the Law of Return.¹⁵

¹³ Discontent by new Soviet voters contributed to the 1992 defeat of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud. By 1999, Jews from the former Soviet Union became Israel's largest Jewish minority and a very effective political lobby.

¹⁴ Interview with Yitzhak Shamir, July 17, 1996.

¹⁵ Wagaw, 1993, p. 57. He ruled that they must undergo “strict conversion procedures” for marriage.

While the Israeli government began to foster their immigration after 1977, the issue of the legitimacy of their Jewish identity remained.¹⁶

Following the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 and up to 1984, almost 6,500 Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel (Szulc, 1991, p. 292). A covert airlift Operation Moses brought another 8,000 Ethiopians by way of Sudan between November 1984 and June 1985 (New York Times (NYT) 2 November 1990). In Operation Solomon, the Israeli Air Force brought 14,160 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Israel in a 36-hour period in May 1991 (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 65ff).¹⁷ By 1992, almost 50,000 Ethiopian immigrants lived in the country.

The Jewish Agency handled their absorption during their first year in Israel. Thereafter, the Ministry of Absorption and the government took over. The Jewish Agency placed new arrivals in absorption centres. When these filled in the late 1980s, it placed them temporarily in hotels and caravan sites along with Russian immigrants.

Ethiopian immigrants became dependent on the Jewish Agency for shelter, food, health care, and income. Their absorption resembled the paternalism experienced by Moroccan Jewish immigrants in the 1950s. For example, unlike fellow immigrants from the Soviet Union, they could neither participate in direct absorption nor send their children to a school system of their own choice.

Absorption authorities claimed that the Ethiopians could not be absorbed directly because of their low levels of education, skills, and resources and appropriate culture to obtain housing on their own. Not mentioned were the vested interests of the Jewish Agency, Diaspora agencies and the government in keeping the Ethiopians under their care and control. First, if the Ethiopians participated in "direct absorption", the Jewish Agency and the political parties that controlled it risked losing tens of millions of dollars received from the US government and Diaspora Jewry. This also served overseas fundraisers: "They could be displayed as a unique and exotic group; black, Jewish and poor" (Hertzog, 1995). Most importantly, care for Ethiopians justified the Agency's continued role in absorption

¹⁶ Until about 1985, Israel denied Ethiopian immigrants citizenship and registration as Jews unless they converted. Until today, many private Jewish religious schools only accept Ethiopian pupils that have undergone formal conversion. In response to protests by Ethiopian activists, the Jewish Orthodox religious establishment has shown a degree of flexibility (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 74 ff).

¹⁷ The pandemonium and excitement of the crowds at the Israeli airport reminded many of the joy at the homecoming of rescued hostages of Entebbe in 1976.

despite a commitment to transfer of its absorption responsibilities and facilities.¹⁸ Finally, The Jewish Agency funded 100 per cent of absorption centres with overseas moneys. In contrast, direct absorption required the government fund 50 per cent of the cost.

We now turn to issues of permanent housing and education involved in the absorption of Ethiopian Jews. The two are intertwined as where people lived often determined the quality of education that their children received.

6. Housing for Ethiopians

The Absorption Ministry had responsibility for providing permanent housing for Ethiopians with resources provided by the Israeli government and Jewish Agency. The government urged the purchase of apartments in communities with “strong infrastructures” more in the centre than the periphery. They hoped to integrate Ethiopian immigrants within Israeli society in groups whose size enabled observance of community life while not creating “congregational pockets”. Despite these policy objectives “... the economic realities of the country continued to favour the ‘ghettoization’ of the immigrants in poorer neighbourhoods” (Wagaw, 1993, p. 138).¹⁹

Most available vacant public housing and private units existed in development towns and poorer neighbourhoods in the centre of the country. Many of the units occupied housing Ethiopian immigrants were located often in the same neighbourhood, street or building.²⁰ In many of these same neighbourhoods, the authorities turned temporary absorption centres into permanent public housing, which created instant mini-ghettos of Ethiopians. Later arrivals followed their relatives and friends to these poorer environments despite the urging by officials to seek housing elsewhere. Costs of existing apartments and construction of new housing in “better” areas in central Israel were prohibitive (Lazin, 1997). Finally, the initial mortgage policy failed. Very few Ethiopian families obtained mortgages

¹⁸ In the late 1980s the Jewish Agency agreed again to transfer its absorption functions and facilities to the government.

¹⁹ Emphasis added (Ministry of Absorption “The Ethiopian Immigrants: Report of Their Situation and an operative plan to establish their absorption in February 1987,” 9 February 1987 and Memo, Aryeh Barr to Ariel Sharon, 16 June 1991).

²⁰ Ministry of Absorption regulations urged the placement of a maximum of three Ethiopian families per apartment building entrance.

before 1991. Importantly, the largest mortgages did not provide sufficient funding to allow the recipient to buy a unit in a decent neighbourhood in central Israel. Consequently, most Ethiopians found permanent housing in peripheral development towns and in poorer neighbourhoods of less well to do cities and towns in central Israel. These communities had fewer economic opportunities, and problematic educational systems.

7. Education: Ethiopians

While some Israeli leaders and educators wanted to provide Ethiopians with educational opportunities, government officials were most concerned about their religious needs. Minister of Education and head of the National Religious Party, Zevulun Hammer favoured a religious education for all Ethiopian Jews who had been isolated from Rabbinical Judaism for centuries.²¹ In the early 1980s, Hammer required Ethiopian pupils to attend state religious schools during their first year in Israel. This policy prevented them from exercising their legal right to choose either the state secular or religious system (Schwartzwald, 1984, p. 105).²²

Importantly, even if most Ethiopian parents had no idea of the differences in the school systems, many may have preferred that their children attend religious schools (Gdor, 1996, p. 28), but they had no choice in the matter.

Upon arrival in Israel, many Ethiopian children had little or no formal schooling. A large number could neither read nor write in any language and initially knew little Hebrew. They also had minimum support from very poor

²¹ No similar policy was deemed necessary for the assimilated Soviet Jewish immigrants who had lived under Communism for several generations. The Labour Party supported Hammer's decision hoping to avoid the absorption "errors" made in the 1950s that forced religious Jews to send their children to secular schools (Zameret, 1992). Some viewed religious schools as being less threatening, more supportive and contributing to their acceptance as Jews.

²² The educational reforms of the early 1950s created two public school systems, state secular and state religious. Pedagogy in the latter is controlled by the National Religious party. There are also recognized schools operated by the ultra-Orthodox. Arab pupils have a separate school system which is part of the state secular system.

Hammer's decision increased resources for his party's state religious school system. Moreover, the parents of the pupils provided potential voters for his party. Officials of the state religious system saw educating Ethiopian children as a spiritual and national challenge. The influx of Ethiopian pupils in 1991 overloaded the religious school system and led to "white flight". While claiming to understand and respect the traditions of the Ethiopian pupils, religious educators wanted the immigrants to adopt "... mannerism, language, traditions, cultural mores and values of the host society" (Eisikovits & Beck, 1990, p.178).

parents who did not know the language, curriculum or host culture (Wagaw, 1993, p. 28ff.; JDC, February 1997; Youth Aliyah, 1995, p. 8, 22).²³

The educational level of the state religious school system and professional training of its pedagogical staff is less that of its secular system. It has fewer schools and pupils.²⁴ It has more than twice the percentage of low performing and problem pupils who are two thirds of the student body (Schwartzwald, 1984, p. 102). Also, the quality of schools varies significantly from place to place. The level of teaching, resources, and pupil performance is much higher in central Israel, especially in the more well-to-do areas (Iram & Schmida, 1988, pp. 37-42).

In general, the placement of Ethiopians in peripheral towns and in poorer communities in central Israel resulted in most Ethiopian children being assigned to schools serving low income and disadvantaged Jewish Israeli pupils. Rather than spread the Ethiopian pupils out, schools in the larger secular system were excluded (Kaplan & Salamon, 1998, p. 3). Moreover, some municipalities refused to assign Ethiopian pupils to study at the "stronger" or "better" state religious schools and concentrated them in their weaker schools.²⁵ In many cases, schools accepting Ethiopian pupils assigned them to special preparatory classes for the first year, in accordance with Ministry guidelines. Here they remained for several years. Often, teachers in these classes were poorly trained, part-time, and lacked certification (State Comptroller 1985, p.700). Finally, several municipal school systems assigned many normal Ethiopian pupils in special-education classes, "the educational equivalent of a death sentence" (Gdor, 1996, p. 31).

Operation Solomon in May 1991 almost tripled the number of Ethiopian pupils overnight. State religious schools in the periphery and in poor neighbourhoods of central Israel absorbed most of them. Many schools became more than 60-70 per cent Ethiopian.²⁶ Finally, the entire educational sys-

²³ Most Ethiopian immigrants "came from one of the most conservative, rural regions of Ethiopia ..., illiteracy among the adult population was more than 90 per cent ..." (Wagaw, 1993, pp. 26-28). Also, between 25 and 38 per cent, compared to 9 per cent for Israeli families, were single parent families (Ibid, 1993, p.74).

²⁴ From the mid-1980s until the late 1990 between 15 to 20 per cent of Israeli Jewish pupils attend the state religious system, 68 to 75 per cent in the state secular and 5 to 10 per cent in the recognized private religious schools (Wagaw, 1993, p. 131; Israel Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 117).

²⁵ This probably reflected concern with "white flight" (Halevi, 1996, p.19).

²⁶ In 1996-97 at least 60 schools had more than 25 per cent Ethiopian pupils; in 1997 18 schools had above 40 per cent (Algazy, 1998; Kaplan & Salamon, 1998; Gdor, 1996, p. 28).

tem and state religious schools suffered from a lack of planning, preparation, space, and resources to absorb both Russian and Ethiopian immigrant pupils.²⁷

The poverty of most Ethiopian families exacerbated this situation. While public education is free, parents must purchase books and supplies. Upwards of 40 per cent of families may have lacked funds for books (Sever, 1997, p. 519). Placing students with poor educational backgrounds and weak family situations into weak schools with weak pupils resulted in minimal learning experiences (Gdor, 1996, pp.28-31; Wagaw, 1993, p. 144ff).²⁸

If education is the key to success for any group, it is the more so for the Ethiopians. It affects their chances for upward mobility and plays a crucial role in their integration into Israel's mainstream-modern, technological and mostly urban society (JDC, 1997).

8. Local level activity – the role of a mayor

In general, the government and Jewish Agency made absorption policy at the national level. Mayors had minimal input. In housing, many mayors objected to the placement of temporary housing camps consisting of caravans ("mobile homes") in their communities. These were intended for new immigrants from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Powerful mayors kept them out of their municipalities and others had them placed on the outskirts and provided a minimum of services.

The mayor of Beer-Sheva in the peripheral South pressured for and received a maximum number of Soviet immigrants. He believed that government funding and resources would follow.

In 1991, the Israeli government set up a temporary immigrant housing "encampment" called *Nachal Bekka* on the southern edge of the City of Beer-Sheva. This community of 2,500 units soon housed 1,613 Soviet and 302 Ethiopian families. It included three hundred units for Ben Gurion

²⁷ Protocol of Ministerial Committee for Immigration, 14 July 1991.

²⁸ After June 1992, the newly elected Rabin government let Ethiopian pupils attend state secular schools. (JP 18 June 1991). In 1993, approximately 95 per cent of Ethiopian pupils were in the State religious' schools. The percentage dropped to 85 per cent in 1995 and 76 per cent in 1996 (Jerusalem Post 18 June 1991).

University students, who performed community service. Their housing may have served as buffers between the Russians and Ethiopians.

Each 45-square meter unit was divided into two apartments, each with a kitchenette, toilet, shower, bedroom, sitting room, running water and electricity. Public transportation, a subsidized coin operated laundry, grocery stores, kindergartens and public phones served the community. Within a year or two, a few of the residents from the former Soviet Union had purchased automobiles and many had installed telephones, washing machines, and air conditioners. At the far end, two small buildings served as kindergarten facilities; one for religious and the other for secular pupils respectively. Immigrant children from the former Soviet Union occupied one and Ethiopian immigrant children the other. In commenting to an American visitor, a Ben Gurion University professor explained: "One is 'black', one is 'white'; but it's not like in the United States. It's more complex. A combination of race, religion and politics explains the separation in educational institutions."

9. Findings

The findings here show that for most immigrants from the former Soviet Union arriving after 1988, Israeli policy departed from traditional absorption practices. A new policy of "direct absorption" provided subsidies to immigrants for housing, living allowances, job search assistance, and vouchers for Hebrew classes and job training. This group had considerable human capital; many were university graduates, engineers, and doctors. Using the resources provided by "direct absorption", many adapted well to the new society.

The Jewish Agency used the traditional absorption system to provide permanent housing, health care, and pensions for a minority of Soviet immigrants including many elderly, single parent families, the infirm and poor. The actual and potential political clout of Russian immigrants made the system more responsive to their needs. Jewish Agency and Israeli government officials realised that some, unlike most Ethiopians, had the option of going elsewhere.

The Jewish Agency and government housed Ethiopians in poor neighbourhoods in the periphery and in central Israel. The other options were economically unfeasible. The government placed Ethiopian children, most of them with weak educational skills, in the second-rate religious school system. Political party interests determined this policy. There was

little political pressure to act otherwise. The Ethiopians had little if any clout.²⁹ They were more of a captive group.

10. Conclusions

In asking about the relevance of this case study for EU's refugee crisis, it is important to understand that the Israeli government pursued a policy of maximum immigration of Jewish refugees. While they preferred Jews from the Soviet Union, they also accepted Ethiopian Jews. Motivating Israeli political leaders was a perception that a loss of a Jewish majority posed an existential threat to Israel's survival.

The pre-state Zionist ideology envisioned an independent "Jewish" state in part of Palestine with Jews being an overwhelming majority of the citizenry. During the Holocaust, millions of potential citizens were killed. At statehood in 1948, the Jewish state had an Arab population of about 18 per cent. Their higher birth rate threatened the Jewish majority in the long run. Leaders of Israel welcomed the Jews from Arab lands whom they looked down upon as being primitive, less educated, and very different from the Jews of Europe, but they accepted them to preserve the Jewish majority and achieve a critical population mass needed for economic survival.

From the early 1950s Israeli leaders looked for a potential mass immigration of educated, "cultured" (and "Western") Jews. They focused on the almost three million Jews in the Soviet Union. The government established the *Liaison Bureau* to bring the Soviet Jews to Israel. The Liaison Bureau organised Jews and non-Jews in the US to pressure the American government to influence the Soviets to let the Jews go.³⁰ When the gates opened in 1989, Israel pressured the US to close its gates to Soviet Jews.

The Ethiopians faced a similar second or third-class status of immigrant Jews from Arab lands. They were needed and thus accepted, but reluctantly. They did not receive the same opportunities and benefits as many of the Soviet Jews.

The flip side of the demographic concern is the reluctance of Israel to accept the return of the Palestinians. A recent law prevents Israeli Arab

²⁹ By the early 1990s the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel barely numbered 70,000 persons.

³⁰ It also pressured European governments not to accept Soviet Jews who had left Israel.

citizens from bringing spouses from the occupied territories to live in Israel. Israel has also been reluctant to grant asylum to non-Jewish political refugees from East Africa.

The political will to accept and absorb Jewish refugees apparently buffered the lack of a coordinated absorption policy. The Prime Minister did not see the need to plan for the arrival of a massive wave of immigrants. His view was 'let them come and we will find solutions.' In the end, that is what happened.

In the case of the current crisis in Europe, acceptance of immigrants would be facilitated if any member of EU sought to expand its population. Countries that are short of work force might be interested in accepting more refugees. Moreover, refugees arriving with skills and professions might be more easily accepted. Finally, some countries might be more willing to accept Christian refugees.

In the case of Israel, not all mayors favoured the policy of wanting a maximum of Soviet Jews. Some wanted to keep Ethiopians out. With the massive wave of immigrants, the government built temporary caravan communities to house them. Some municipalities objected to a caravan community being placed in their city or town: NIMBY. When these efforts failed, some mayors placed them on the edge of the municipality and did not provide services. In sharp contrast, the mayor of Beer-Sheva wanted a maximum number of Soviet immigrants. He believed that they would help develop the city. He expected that the government, Jewish Agency and Diaspora Jewry would provide resources to facilitate the absorption of the immigrants.

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LESSONS FROM THE ISRAELI EXPERIENCE WITH IMMIGRANTS FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND ETHIOPIA, 1989–1992

Summary

The paper presents an account of the Israeli government's efforts to absorb and integrate an influx of Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia. With fewer than five million persons, Israel accepted 400,000 Jewish refugees between 1989–1992. At the time, the Israeli government discouraged granting of political asylum to tens of thousands of mostly Muslim refugees from East Africa. Furthermore, an Israeli law prevented family reunification of Israeli Arab citizens who married Palestinians living outside of Israel (including the occupied territories). The paper looks at policies designed to provide housing and education to the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants. Israeli absorption policies were not coordinated. Prime Minister Shamir later told the author "Who needed policy? Let them come and we will make policy." Policies gave preferential treatment to Russian immigrants who had more clout than the Ethiopians. They also had greater social capital. While the national government and the Jewish Agency, an NGO representing world Jewry, set immigration policy, mayors had some input in implementation. One mayor discussed here used absorption of immigrants as a means to foster local economic growth and development. The major finding here is the importance of "political will". Israeli government officials and much of the Israeli population favoured mass immigration of Jews regardless of where they were from. Israeli leaders want to preserve a Jewish majority among its citizens. With respect to lessons for the EU, the findings here suggest that the successful absorption and acceptance of refugees lies in the attitude of the host country toward immigration. Policies and issues of coordination and implementation are secondary concerns. In the Israeli case despite the lack of adequate resources and lack of coordination absorption of immigrants succeeded.

Key words: Israel; Jewish immigrants; absorption policy; Russians; Ethiopians; education policy

POUKE IZ IZRAELSKOG ISKUSTVA S DOSELJENICIMA IZ SOVJETSKOG SAVEZA I ETIOPIJE 1989. – 1992.

Sažetak

U radu se analiziraju nastojanja izraelske vlade da apsorbira i integrira židovske doseljenike iz Sovjetskog Saveza i Etiopije. U doba kad je imao manje od 5 milijuna stanovnika, Izrael je prihvatio 400.000 židovskih izbjeglica u razdoblju od 1989. do 1992. Istovremeno je izraelska vlada nastojala osujetiti davanje političkog azila desecima tisuća pretežno muslimanskih izbjeglica iz istočne Afrike. Jednim od zakona spriječeno je spajanje obitelji izraelskih državljana arapskog podrijetla vjenčanim s Palestincima/kama koji žive izvan Izraela (uključujući i okupirana područja). Rad se bavi javnim politikama kreiranima da bi se ruskim i etiopskim doseljenicima omogućio smještaj i obrazovanje. Izraelske apsorpcijske javne politike nisu bili usklađene. Premijer Shamir kasnije je autoru rada izjavio „Kome trebaju javne politike? Neka oni samo dođu, onda ćemo kreirati politike.“ Javne su politike favorizirale ruske doseljenike koji su imali veću utjecaj i veći društveni kapital od Etiopljana. Središnja vlast i Židovska agencija, nevladina organizacija koja predstavlja Židove u svijetu, određivale su doseljeničku politiku, dok su pojedini gradonačelnici imali određeni utjecaj tijekom njezine primjene. Jedan od gradonačelnika spomenutih u radu iskoristio je integraciju doseljenika kao sredstvo poboljšanja gospodarskog rasta i razvoja svoje lokalne jedinice. Najvažniji nalaz rada jest važnost „političke volje“. Dužnosnici izraelske vlade i mnogobrojni građani Izraela podržavali su masovno doseljavanje Židova bez obzira na to iz koje su zemlje dolazili. Izraelski vođe žele očuvati židovsku većinu među svojim građanima. Rad pokazuje da Europska unija iz izraelskog iskustva može naučiti kako uspješna integracija i prihvaćanje izbjeglica ovisi o stavu zemlje domaćina prema imigraciji. Javne politike i problemi koordinacije i implementacije od drugorazredne su važnosti. U izraelskom slučaju, unatoč manjku odgovarajućih sredstava i nedostatku koordinacije, integracija doseljenika pokazala se uspješnom.

Ključne riječi: Izrael; židovski doseljenici iz Sovjetskog Saveza i Etiopije; apsorpcijska politika; obrazovna politika