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## **‘Diaspora Space’ as Heard and Observed**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the results of analysis of migration narratives, internet forums and interactions in urban space for my thesis research on Russian-speaking Israelis in Tel Aviv. The Russian-speakers in Israel are a large group of migrants using exclusive right to obtain Israeli citizenship, but they are also frequently stigmatized and stereotyped by the press and the general public in the host society. Their memories, ‘civilizational’ position-takings and identity-management strategies help them cope with the disadvantage. Firstly, the paper looks into how first-generation ethnic migrants present their stories and construct notions of collective cultural belonging, transnational identity, and citizenship. Analysis of Internet discussions on political topics reveal in which ways individual narratives of belonging in the new country (Israel) are made public and shared. Participant observations in both richer and impoverished neighborhoods in Tel Aviv show the importance of cultural institutions, such as the Russian Cultural Center, various ‘nostalgia shops’ (selling goods reminding of the ex-USSR) and bookstores. Secondly, the paper addresses the advantages and limitations of narrative analysis vis-à-vis participant observation, media monitoring and other methods, by showcasing how narratives construct a favorable presentation of the self and symbolic distance from relevant ‘others’.

### **Keywords**

ethnic migration; Russian-speakers in Israel; ex-USSR; migrant integration

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## **‘DIASPORA SPACE’ AS HEARD AND OBSERVED**

This chapter presents an analysis of my fieldwork<sup>1</sup> results obtained using interviews, participant observation and media analysis. The central research questions were how Russian-speaking ethnic migrants in Israel perceive the disconnection (or connection) between their experience in the former USSR and in their new homeland, as well as how they see themselves in their new country and situate themselves in its economy and politics.

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All of the chosen methods captured the processes of identity restructuring, enthusiasm for integration or disillusionment with its prospects, and various patterns in which Russian-speakers share their 'cultural codes' and common ideas about their new homeland. While the methods complemented each other in my fieldwork, I could also see that the results obtained using each of them were rather different.

This article attempts to provide a meta-analysis of the ways in which diverse research methods captured parts of the picture in my fieldwork. After explaining the particularities of migration from the former USSR to Israel, it proceeds to a theoretical and methodological discussion and then presents the analysis of diaspora spaces and cultural codes, using the earlier insights.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING ETHNIC MIGRATION TO ISRAEL**

Over the past two decades ethnic migration to Israel has been admittedly called a laboratory for theories of ethnicity. By ethnic migration, or diaspora migration, I mean migration to a country that specifically invites members of a certain ethnic group and grants them privileges, such as citizenship or easier access to its labor market. Ethnic migration as such can be polycentric. Diaspora migration is based on a perception of an ethnically defined group having one center (a nation-state) and a presence elsewhere. Israel was built as a country for 'ingathering of exiles' – any person with Jewish ancestry up to the third generation and spouses thereof have the right to settle in Israel and obtain its citizenship. Jewish ethnic migration also took other directions (to the US and Germany), where they were considered refugees.

According to Joppke (2005), diaspora migration, although a unique phenomenon, is still a border-crossing movement of non-citizens, so in legal terms and everyday perception this movement still constitutes migration. In her critical reflection on diaspora studies, Ang points at the problematic points of the way diaspora is conceptualised, including rupture with the past rather than continuation, focus on heritage as a constraining factor instead of hybridity and transformation, and the notion of non-belonging, which contributes to the perceived inferiority of the diaspora vis-à-vis the nation state (Ang, 2011). Due to a complex set of circumstances Russian-speaking ethnic migrants in Israel have effectively resisted the pressure for assimilation and produced a distinct cultural space they can call home. On the other hand, stereotypes associated with the former USSR followed them to their new homeland. People from the former USSR were construed as 'inept or handicapped' vis-à-vis the demands of capitalist economy (Eriksen, 1991, p. 136), pragmatic rather than patriotic, and resistant to full cultural integration.

Migration of eligible persons from the USSR to Israel started already in the 1970s, but at the time it was an exceptional right, whereas in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the breakup of the USSR, social and economic insecurity pushed eligible individuals to try this migration route, as other traditionally popular routes (the US and Canada) became unavailable. The context of their migration was changing together with pressures against the so-called 'caretaker state', which was a key mechanism in Israel for integrating Jewish immigrants.

Services provided by the state, such as language courses and temporary housing, were facilitating integration before the 1990s. However, with a general move away from welfare principles in most industrialized economies at the time, the Israeli welfare state also witnessed pressures for privatization and more emphasis on individual choice. Among other aspects, the 'caretaker state' was increasingly associated with the failed USSR project, from which Russian-speakers came. With integration services reduced, Russian-speakers were often left alone or dependent on ethnic networks for their integration.

Researchers have observed (e.g. Lissitsa, 2007) that the relatively high average class status of Russian-speakers in their homelands and opportunities they had to contribute to creative arts, academic life and intellectual professions created high expectations in the migrants, but those expectations often failed in the new labor market. Sabella (1993) found that the percentage of persons with academic qualifications was fourfold, comparing to the Israeli population. Among Russian-speakers, there were more female-headed households (Sabella, 1993, p. 37), more single mothers and divorcees (Lemish, 2000, p. 335) and relatively more women entrepreneurs (Kushnirovich, 2007, p. 104). These immigrants were also less religious and had stopped many of the religious practices typical of the local population.

Relatively high education, as well as possibilities to stay in contact with relatives in other countries, contributed to a certain transnational identity that emerged and almost immediately became a popular research topic. More than that, Internet forums, chat rooms and web groups allow discussing their issues with a wider community of reference, united by a common language and a sense of shared system of dispositions (tastes, preferences and reference points, corresponding to Bourdieu's term *habitus* – to be discussed later). Therefore the networking practices and transnationalism of Russian-speakers in Israel has become one of the key topics of recent research.

In addition, Israeli researchers have paid attention to the reactions of the receiving society – stereotypes, as well as integration and acceptance practices faced by newcomers from the early 1990s to this day. Most of the research relies on interviews and narratives, often collected by 'native' ethnographers. Narratives allow putting an individual in his/her context of migration, but they are often clearly structured in order to maximize agency, resistance and prestige. A narrative is in itself a strategy, a choice of presenting oneself. Several reoccurring themes have been found by various researchers: disappointment, acceptance and integration, and prestigious identity. Many Russian-speakers told researchers that Israel was not as 'Western' and not as welcoming as they had expected. On the other hand, they emphasized that they had learned how to deal with the new situation, learned the local language and can shuffle cultural codes as they like. Finally, many emphasized that they were more educated, sophisticated, 'European' and 'Western', compared to native Israelis.

While analysis of narratives and self-presentations is useful and provides us with rich data on how these migrants feel and position themselves, it is not necessarily a full representation of migrants' everyday choices and actions. Faced with this methodological issue, I chose to combine several research methods and focus more on everyday interactions in urban spaces. Yet the findings from these interactions, as it will be described later, also confirmed the importance of juxtaposing them with narratives.

## KEY TERMS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research on integration of new migrant groups and their networking practices cannot avoid the question of identity. On the other hand, recent theoretical thought denaturalizes and questions the concept of identity as prescribing static categories on actually fluid and spontaneous interactions. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) criticize the notion of identity, suggesting that terms as 'categorization' or 'identification' could be used instead in order to highlight their processual nature. Anderson (2001) suggested defining the 'density' of identity, which depends on how much a person's life is structured by identity.

In the context of the Russian-speakers' migration to Israel, Bourdieu's terms offer an instrumental theoretical framework. For example, Bourdieu (1993) offers the term 'field' to mean a 'social universe' with its own rules, which is both shaped by different actors and shapes them. 'Capital' in his theory is a 'type of relationship' among actors (Mahar, 2000), while 'habitus' denotes tastes, categories and everyday practices that are taken for granted by individuals (Karner, 2007). 'Field' allows better picturing of the web constituted of government policies, settlement, employment and communication opportunities and stereotypes faced and created by the Russian-speakers in Israel. As noted above, they both adapt to the rules present and actively engage in renegotiating their role in them, if not changing the rules altogether. 'Capital' in this case is the profession-dependent respect brought over from the ex-USSR, ability to take part in the cultural life in the Russian language, and, as it will be discussed in detail further, ability to navigate the space, the field and the web of interactions (constructing their identity as of a successful navigator between the 'Russian' and the Israeli cultures is perceived as significant symbolic capital, which shapes interactions between 'veteran' ethnic migrants and newcomers. The 'veteran' *ethnic migrants* prefer to choose in each situation, how much identity to make visible to others in 'mainstream' spaces (public transport, shops, events, recreational spaces, etc.), but also take pride in immediately recognizing Russian-speaking newcomers. Being able to 'dissolve in the mainstream', but quickly identify other 'Russians' seems to be a part of the identity of a 'veteran immigrant' Finally, as already hinted above, *habitus* is a term to be used when speaking about shared dispositions (jokes, hints, references to famous personalities, etc, style, social memory, cultural consumption and so on). Hence the inter-subjective building of shared identity through encounters seems to rest on pre-defined building blocks.

While culture is often compared to language and shared codes of communication (Hall, 1997), it takes a very elaborate form in the case of Russian-speaking Israelis. Namely, the language is expected to be an expression of a shared *habitus* related to the former USSR. Based on the language, its speakers assume one's 'fluency' in a set of cultural codes, a basic set of which is trans-generational (e.g., among Russian-speakers nobody is expected to explain who Cheburashka, a famous Soviet animation character, is). Therefore, for the purposes of this research, culture is understood as a set of codes that is exchanged and reaffirmed by participants who self-categorize and are categorized by others as belonging to the same ethnic group.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

My thesis research was predominantly based on insights from my fieldwork in Tel Aviv (2009-2010), an urban center where the Russian-speaking population is dispersed, unlike in several smaller towns like Ashdod. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation and in-depth interviews with first-generation immigrants. The observations were carried out in Russian cultural institutions and 'visibly Russian' spaces: shops and cafes. The interviewees were owners, staff and clients of these spaces, as well as very recent Russian-speaking immigrants I met at a Hebrew school and Tel Aviv University. Later, when new research questions emerged, I relied on Internet forums for information, as it was not possible to go back to the informants.

In total, 51 interviews have been carried out, 47 in Tel Aviv and suburbs and 4 in Jerusalem, following contacts of Tel Aviv-based informants. Most interviews were recorded in shorthand rather than audio (as they happened in not very quiet places and/or for the informant's comfort). The participant observations in the Russian Cultural Center and bookstores on Allenby street started in December, and in a Georgian pub in Southern Tel Aviv (a place where citizen ethnic migrants and non-citizen Russian-speaking migrant workers meet, surrounded by a colorful cultural space shared by African, Filipino, Indian and other migrant workers) – around February.

In many cases there was initial contact before the interviews – I interviewed people I regularly met in Tel Aviv. When valuable additional insights were provided after the 'formal' interview, I asked whether I could use it for my research, but the process was not without difficulties, and boundaries between casual chatting and interviewing were blurred. Very often casual chatting provided more valuable insights than the formal interview, and in some cases introducing myself as a researcher changed the communication. The easiest and most transparent way of interviewing appeared to be through mutual acquaintances. One of my informants, a bar owner in Tel Aviv, introduced me to his friends and usual clients, who were trusting because of his recommendation, and at the same time aware from the start that I was doing research.

Collecting narratives had several obvious advantages: they placed an individual in his/her context, allowed clarification and tracing patterns. On the other hand, it soon became clear that informants attempted to construct a favourable image of themselves, presenting themselves either as free border-crossing cosmopolitans or as victims of history, which pushed them out of the collapsing USSR into the tough reality of Israel. In both cases the notion of injustice was clearly shared and borrowed from each other, press and popular culture. Moreover, the narratives only presented issues that were consciously thought about. Knowing the background of the researcher and research questions, informants structured their narratives accordingly, in order to maximize their agency or injustice respectively.

Internet forums provided different insights, but also drew my attention to other methodological issues. The key ethical question was that of trust. Using publicly available material does not raise ethical issues, but it does not allow directing the interaction. So far I only used publicly available forum posts. The advantage was that, like narratives, the forums provided some context - links, pictures and other hypertext could be posted, and users'

public profiles could be seen to analyze their self-presentation. Often forum posts were more spontaneous than interviews and were reacting to topics considered important by the subjects, not the researcher. On the other hand, the users of forums were conscious that their posts were public and most likely refrained themselves from more personal messages that were available in interviews. In addition, possibilities of direct interaction and clarification of the informants' points were very limited.

Using multiple research methods allowed seeing the advantages and limitations of each of them when researching several interrelated topics, such as diaspora space and cultural codes. Narratives exposed how individuals felt or wanted to show that they felt, but not necessarily practiced in everyday interactions, whereas observations showed what behavior was normalized and mainstreamed, but, of course, did not offer any insights whether the participants were willingly accepting these practices.

### **DIASPORA SPACE**

The findings of the fieldwork suggest that urban space is not only affected by interactions, identity-building and establishment of community activities. It also structures the outer boundaries of identity. In this empirical case, the Northern (more affluent) and central part of Tel Aviv facilitated defining one's identity vis-à-vis the mainstream population. Most informants said they had learned the 'Israeli ways' of living. They maintained their identity through more sophisticated cultural consumption and networking with other Russian-speakers. Meanwhile, in Southern Tel Aviv (poor, allegedly dangerous neighborhoods) space was shared with migrant workers, refugees and many people living in poverty and exclusion. The effects of downward class mobility were particularly harsh and shared with the other groups mentioned above. 'Us', the collective, was defined not only vis-à-vis the 'mainstream' population, but also in relation to the 'double Other' (of theirs and of the Israeli population at large). Both frameworks of identity building (and translation of *habitus* into ethnicity-based solidarity) are likely to be sustainable, as (a) living in relatively privileged areas and having contacts with mainly native Israeli population produced class and 'higher culture' awareness, and ethnic migrants from the former USSR wished to sustain their intellectual, transnational identity for generations; (b) poorer, unprivileged Russian-speakers, who were driven to disadvantaged and conflicted neighborhoods were likely to maintain their identity and group boundaries when being 'bombarded' with difference from the 'double Other'. Interestingly, the inner boundaries of the latter group were more blurred, sub-ethnic boundaries (differences between Russian-speakers from the European part of Russia, Central Asia, Ukraine, the Baltic States, etc.) played a much lesser role.

Those more economically and socially challenged Russian-speakers in particular drew a sharp distinction between 'culture' and 'no culture' along the dividing line between Occident and Orient. One middle-aged Russian informant ironically exclaimed: 'It's not that the culture is different from Russia. There's no culture here! It's anarchy.' A young informant of mixed heritage (Jewish mother, but grew up as a majority ethnic in Latvia) had a more nuanced view: 'Here eastern mentality prevails: less culture, unsophisticated communication.'



I got used to it and learned to behave accordingly, but still, cultured communication, being considerate of the other, are closer to my heart.' A well-travelled informant from Latvia also drew the line between the sophistication of Europe and the primitivism of the 'Orient': 'We Europeans see things differently than the locals here. For many people [here] it's enough to know a few brands of cars and where to party.'

The ex-USSR *habitus* in Israel is constituted of diverse cultures and 'liminal' spaces, which are present 'here', but recreate the world of 'there'. The *habitus* consists of shared dispositions, such as tastes, jokes, manners and cultural consumption patterns. These patterns are dependent on their sharing in the so-called 'Cyrillic space'. This way the language as such becomes a portable 'home' to migrants, which connects them to a shared favorable memory of cultural life in the USSR: accessibility of 'high' culture and good education, which are contrasted with the situation in Israel. The migrants do not idealize the regime of the former USSR, but remain nostalgic to its cultural life and ambivalent to 'home' (as the country left behind). This way the memory of the 'lost' cultural world is sustained in these 'Cyrillic spaces', whereas, in the perception of the migrants, this world was lost in the USSR successor states. One of the informants working in a Russian-language bookstore summarizes it: 'I watch Russian TV, listen to the radio... I don't have a feeling that I've lived in Ukraine. I'm a Russian person. I don't even feel Jewish. I am Jewish, but it's not so interesting for me. Meanwhile, I really love Russian culture – literature, art. That's where my homeland is. But not as a place, rather as a language, culture...' (interview in Central Tel Aviv)

It is mostly the *habitus* that creates the sense of simultaneous *here* and *there*. A young immigrant from Tajikistan explains, 'People come from all kinds of places, but here we are all Russians. We were Jews there and Russians here. In any case, we feel that we have something in common, we all came from *there*' (interview in Central Tel Aviv).

### CULTURAL CODES

Cultural life based on the Russian language is considered a refuge when facing challenging socio-economic situations (a middle-aged respondent admitted that communicating with highly educated Russian speakers and, as much as possible, taking part in cultural life helps her feel she is 'not at the lowest level'). A survey in the late 1990s found that nearly all respondents found their language 'respectful and cultural', 'beautiful' and, paradoxically, relating to their Jewish identity to a higher extent than Hebrew (Ben Rafael, Olshtain & Geijst, 1997, p. 371). Therefore the language is not only the link to one's country of origin. It also becomes a link to one's current life in Israel.

Russian language can as well be the language of dissociation as it is of association. The varying degrees of integration, or absorption, as it is called in Israel, produce differences in power. The power of a 'cultural juggler' (an immigrant able to pass as a native), as opposed to that of 'the ethnic' (clearly identifiable), is to 'dose' one's identity and only reveal as much as necessary in a given situation. Especially young immigrants found it important to show how they have become successful 'cultural jugglers', able to balance and freely use multiple sets of cultural codes. These sets entail not only the 'Russian' and the Israeli *habitus*, but also

identify, for instance, a Russian-speaking cosmopolitan who possesses an Israeli passport. Young middle-class Russian-speakers liked to emphasize that they like reading in Russian, Hebrew and English; many took pride in knowing other languages, keeping in touch with friends and relatives in other countries (mainly the 'nodes' of Russian-speaking diaspora) and considering an international career. Learning other languages was also considered important by older individuals.

The solidarity and networks available due to linguistic affinity strengthened their position in negotiations for a higher status in the receiving society. This created an autonomous space with an infrastructure for not only preserving the respect and cultural capital enjoyed in the former USSR, but also for alternative employment opportunities. Most authors (e.g. Remennick, 2007) have discussed at length the thriving Russian-language press, cultural and education institutions.

One of my fieldwork sites, the Russian Cultural Center in South Tel Aviv, is funded by the Russian embassy, but employed local Russian-speakers. Its Russian language, computer, art and other lectures create an infrastructure that serves several purposes. Firstly, it created a stepping-stone to the Israeli society, allowing individuals to learn from acknowledged 'co-ethnic' experts. Secondly, it provided a feeling of community, which is both a community of memory and a community of *habitus*. Russian-speakers assembled to watch Soviet or Russian films, appreciate art, which is perceived to be different from modern Israeli artistic trends, and feel the pulse of culture in their former homelands. Thirdly, it created employment opportunities to artists and educators who might otherwise face downward class mobility in Israel.

Both a researcher and a newcomer in Israel can easily be lured into the assumption that the Russian language is an equalizing factor and a 'home' for everybody meeting the cultural requirement. My participant observations in various cultural and consumer spaces showed exactly that. My method of learning about the Russian-speakers through everyday interactions with them may easily lead to constructing a rather romantic picture of solidarity and shared belonging. Yet interviews with rather random individuals, met in those spaces, tell the story of absence and disconnection. Many ethnic, cultural and status hierarchies were brought along from the former USSR as immigrants arrived in Israel. High culture to a large extent was produced by Muscovites and Peterburgers. They had better chances of having their education recognized in Israel, and hence more opportunities for class mobility (or, rather, class sustainability). While provincial Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians may also be active consumers and to some extent producers of the Russian-speaking cultural production in Israel, they were sometimes awarded a slightly lower position in the inner cultural hierarchy. Marina Niznik (2003) cites a humorous poem by Gennadii Usim, which contains a confession of looking down on people speaking Russian dialects ('impure' Russian), becoming religious in Israel or displaying signs of 'provincialism'. While the not so abundant population of immigrants from the Baltic States have European identity as a reference point to claim recognition (middle-aged informant explains, 'When I tell them I am from Latvia, it's always met with an 'Ohhh!', and I tell them, yes, it's not your Ukraine or Belarus'), whereas Caucasians and Central Asians often face orientalist attitudes of immigrants from the



European ex-USSR republics (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2007, p. 208). These attitudes were captured by two researchers in interviews or seen as 'bird's-eye view'. These attitudes were hardly observable as one engages in participant observation either in cultural events, which feature an Azerbaijani or a Kazakh once in a while, or observes shops and pubs in South Tel Aviv, run by Georgians and Central Asians. When asked about the presence of people from Caucasus and Central Asia, employees of Russian-language bookstores were always certain that these groups had equal access to Russian cultural consumption. Therefore the observatory analysis of space can easily miss the processes when repressions, persuasions and compulsions are normalized into everyday life (Karner, 2007, p. 38).

Participatory analysis reveals the patterns of spontaneous interaction and presents a rich context of the research questions. It also includes other actors that may be invisible in the narratives, available through interviews or reconstructed from forum posts. It also shows the relevance of such factors as gender, age, infrastructure and others, which may be invisible in the narratives. Space 'tests' the beliefs and values presented in the narratives, for example, when the ways in which individuals bargain in marketplaces are compared to what they say in the notion of 'Israel as an oriental market'. On the other hand, the need to adjust to others and the complexity of interaction does not allow seeing how individuals actually feel about participating in the processes observed. Using multiple methods, such as interviews, internet forums and participatory analysis allows grasping a fuller picture of the integration of Russian-speakers in Israel. This methodology questions the widespread belief in the cosmopolitan transnationalism of the Russian-speakers, which has very clear class and citizenship boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Russian-speaking Israelis are framed as deterritorialised and detached subjects, cosmopolitans and global citizens. They often prefer to see themselves this way as well and present their migration stories using two main frames: either active choice/ agency or victimhood in the hands of history. Their narratives also reflect notions of being *here* and remembering *there*: memory of their old homeland is expressed through their cultural consumption: this way the practices that establish group identity and solidarity are depoliticized and emptied of potential disagreement regarding the current position in the new society, its development and key conflicts.

On the other hand, learning to be an Israeli and actively participate in social and political life entails making use of the new socio-political opportunities and ideologies to maximise one's social prestige and agency. The specific way of sharing and celebrating heritage of *there* is a stepping stone into claiming full citizen rights in the multicultural society of Israel and in some cases even mobilizing individuals for collective action. Nostalgic items, rituals and networking patterns is a process of appropriating the new country's space, making it comfortable and liveable.

Yet participant observations of space suggest a picture of negotiated spaces, full of internalized hierarchies and role-playing. Being able to pass as a native and switch codes are prized, but the skill of recognizing members of the same group is sought after. Furthermore,

narratives and short comments presented in virtual space, such as internet forums, stand somewhere between the two other methods: positions are taken so as to present a favourable image of oneself, but at the same time interaction follows the rules similar to those in urban space, where some voices create the image of this space for the outsider, whereas others are silenced.

This meta-analysis of my thesis research showed how different methods capture the 'voices' of vocal and silenced members of a certain group. Urban space fosters the group's cohesion: its members' sharp differences make the group feel more united among themselves, and daily interactions allow normalizing inner and outer hierarchies. For their part, narratives reveal what is absent in the observable space, yet they are also constructed to maximize individualism – individual agency or destiny. It will thus be useful to build future research on these considerations and develop new methods to capture how the old homeland is remembered and how this memory is used to participate in the social and political life of the new country. For this purpose, walking with interviewees in their urban spaces, following them as they visit places of cultural consumption and engaging in their activities together would be the most appropriate methods for interviewing. They, however, pose additional challenges relating to recording and distinguishing between research material gathering and simple, trusting communication that often develops in those interactions.

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