



The Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora and the War in Ukraine

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,206, July 11, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted political discourse among the Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora around the world. Ukrainian Jewry is almost unanimous in its support of the country's leadership. In Belarus, Jewish organizations have distanced themselves from the subject of the war while individual Jews try to maintain calm. In Russia, a minority of Jews actively opposes the regime's war policy, another small minority openly supports it, but the largest number of Jews are "psychologically alienated" from the issue. In Israel, Russian and Ukrainian Jewish immigrants appear largely willing to put personal differences aside as they forge a new identity as Israelis.

The Russian military invasion of Ukraine (aided by Belarus) on February 24, 2022 not only made a great impact on the Jewish communities of those countries but became an element of Russian Jewish political discourse on least at three levels: among transnational and transcontinental Russian-speaking Jewish (RSJ) organizations and their affiliated regional Jewish umbrella institutional structures; in the national discourse of the host countries; and within specific RSJ diaspora segments around the world.

In the organizational and political strata of the transcontinental umbrella structures, there were visible differences of position among leaders of the member federations and activists in the post-Soviet states. Although these differences do not seem openly antagonistic, there is a different climate among the Jewish elites

of Ukraine, Russia, and the RSJ emigrant communities of Israel, North America, and Europe.

When the Russian-Ukrainian conflict began in 2014, the elites' common ethnocultural Jewish identity coexisted with separate political affiliations. However, disagreements about the war among the leaderships of major Jewish organizations of Ukraine and Russia [prevented](#) these transnational structures from making a univocal statement on the issue during the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress policy meetings, limiting their statement to a call for "prayers for peace." These disagreements also curtailed their efforts regarding humanitarian aid for war refugees, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The impact of RSJ diaspora communities on the policies of Western governments regarding the Russia-Ukraine war remains limited today, but in at least two cases - Germany and Israel - their influence is more apparent. In Germany, the RSJ majority of the local Jewish population gave their backing to the German Jewish Federation leadership in their attempts to reach agreement with the federal government to launch economic and civic accommodation programs for Ukrainian Jewish refugees inside Germany.

This influence is even more apparent in Israel, where, according to some indicators, the authorities see the RSJ community as a sort of "focus group" that can legitimize their decisions and/or update their policies in the field. Israeli government members and top civil servants regularly quote opinion polls like a March 2022 survey by IDI that found that about 70% of RSJs supported Ukraine in the war and saw Putin's Russia as primarily responsible for the conflict. With that said, almost the same proportion (a bit more than 60%) of Russian-speaking Israelis supported the government policy of non-direct involvement in the conflict and limitations on Israeli support for Ukraine to humanitarian and diplomatic aid. (These figures are similar to the [opinions](#) of the general Israeli Jewish public). On the other hand, Israeli Knesset members of FSU origin (especially of the Israel Beiteinu faction), other RSJ Israeli activists, and public opinion in the Israeli RSJ community have been instrumental in upgrading humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Changes have also been introduced into government immigration policies and regulations making them more favorable to non-Jewish refugees from Ukraine.

More complicated is the story inside the FSU, and especially in three conflicting states: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, the collective home of about 90% of FSU Jews and their families. All these states' authorities have demanded unequivocal support for their policies, not only from Jews as individual citizens but also from their countries' Jewish organizations. Attempts have also been made to gain the

support – at least on the declarative level – of Israel in general and Russian Israelis in particular.

The reactions of the Jews of these countries has differed. Ukrainian Jewry, on both the personal and organizational level, is almost unanimous in its support for their country's leadership on the battlefield and in terms of public diplomacy, humanitarian efforts, and all other relevant spheres. In Belarus, where an anti-authoritarian uprising was brutally suppressed by the government less than two years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Jewish organizations have distanced themselves from the Russian-Ukrainian war issue and stressed their loyalty to their country while trying to maintain a calm front. In Russia, where more than half the Jewish population lives in Moscow and St. Petersburg and is generally more liberal, modern, and educated than the average Russian, a minority (albeit significant) of these Jews are "actively" expressing opposition to the war. Many fewer Jews in Russia openly support the regime's war policy. Most Russian Jews either aren't happy with the situation but are too scared to speak out or prefer to remain "psychologically alienated" from the issue.

On the institutional level, two prominent Jewish community leaders reflect this diversity. The first is RF Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar and the Chabad-affiliated Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia, which has managed to establish a relationship with the regime of President Vladimir Putin and develop an impressive system of Jewish religious, educational, cultural, and charitable institutions in Russia. After the invasion of Ukraine, Rabbi Lazar and his federation refrained from either open support or condemnation of the Russian action on the grounds that they must keep up a "[delicate balancing act](#) aimed at maintaining safety and access to Jewish life for the country's nearly 200,000 Jews".

Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt, on the other hand, openly and strongly condemned the Russian military invasion, and he and his community assisted refugees from Ukraine. Within a short period he had to resign his position (in order "not to endanger the community") and left Russia for Israel.

If media reports and discussions on social networks reflect a mainstream trend, the post-February 24, 2022 cleavage over the war within the FSU emigrant Jewish communities in the "remote abroad" was no less dramatic. This leads to an uneasy question about the future of the transnational RSJ diaspora as a political body and in general. What will become of this diaspora, which is scattered among dozens of countries around the world?

This question is not new. It was asked after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, upon the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and at the outbreak of war with pro-Russian separatists in Donbass in eastern Ukraine. Researchers analyzing material gathered from Facebook, blogs, internet discussion forums, correspondence, and direct observation discovered that attitudes toward events in Ukraine have turned into a litmus test in personal relations, sometimes leading to the breakup of friendships and families. This division reflects a split within the Russian-speaking diaspora in general, including its Jewish component.

In the largest RSJ community, however - that of Israel - the situation is not so worrying. This can be concluded from two comprehensive surveys of Russian-speaking Israelis conducted by the PORI Institute in 2014 and 2017 (with 1,014 and 950 respondents, respectively) that used a questionnaire developed by this author. According to the first survey, held just a few months after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of war in eastern Ukraine, only 10% declared active support for either side and insisted that Jerusalem do the same. Forty percent passively supported one side but believed Israel should not interfere. Half the respondents either did not support Russia or Ukraine and believed Israel should not take a side or said they were not sufficiently informed to express an opinion. Three years later, carriers of the first opinion dropped to 5% while passive supporters of either Russia or Ukraine and those who supported neither side were 27.5% and 67.5%, respectively.

Some claim that due to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the cleavage among members of Jewish communities in the post-Soviet space, Israel, and the West, and even within individual RSJ families, has reached a grave level. According to [observers](#), "Putin's invasion of Ukraine caused turmoil within Russia and in Russian-speaking diasporas around the globe" and "has radically ruptured the millions-strong Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora". They even go so far as to speculate "whether the ex-Soviet Jewish world is now broken for good".

But even if we assume the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war creates a new reality, let us not forget that relations within and between the two most prominent FSU Jewish communities - those of Russia and Ukraine - may not represent the RSJ world in general. This transnational entity has another major focus: Israel. This means another kind of political identity can develop.

A survey of 977 Russian-speaking olim (immigrants to Israel) from 1988-2017 (26 years' average tenure in the country) conducted by the Ruppin Academic Center in May-July 2022 showed that 47-55% report disputes in their immediate families over the war. However, 87% of Ukrainian olim and 76% of Russian olim were on

the Ukrainian side. Only 5% and 2%, respectively, supported Russia, and 8% of Ukrainian and 22% of Russian olim did not express sympathy for either side. This is not dramatically different from the data of 2017.

It is also indicative that according to an opinion poll conducted in 2022 by the influential Israeli Russian-language news portal NEWSru.co.il (not quite representative, but due to its coverage of a very large number of respondents, reflective of the general trend), only 3% of respondents defined Israeli policy toward the war in Ukraine as their most important issue in the parliamentary elections that were upcoming in November of that year. This was despite the great emotional involvement of Russian-speaking Israelis in what was going on in Ukraine and their active participation in social diplomacy, collecting of humanitarian aid, and other pro-Ukrainian activities.

As for members of the “war aliya” themselves, clashes between new immigrants from Russia and Ukraine in Israel based on their view of the war largely failed to materialize. While individual cases of this kind took place and will likely continue to occur from time to time, these immigrants appear to be either united in their opinions about what is happening in Ukraine or prefer to put their disagreements out of bounds of personal relations as they forge a new identity in a new country. In a study conducted in April and May 2022 by the Israeli Ministry of Aliya and Integration, two-thirds of the olim interviewed from Russia, Ukraine, and other FSU states (mainly Belarus) during the military conflict period already saw Israel as “their own country” within a few months or even weeks of arrival.

If, as has tended to happen in the past, the political and other public discourse of “Russian Israel” continues to make a significant impact on the collective worldview of other segments of the transnational Russian-Jewish subethnicity, it has every chance to take hold in the RSJ diaspora as a whole, though it is too soon to draw any final conclusions.

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