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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REMOVING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS FOR RUSSIAN SPEAKING ISRAELIS

Conversion, Civil Service Representation and Access to Rights for Older Adults

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dvora Abramzon Brosh, Inna Orly Sapozhnikova, Dganit Levi



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Executive Summary

Thirty years have passed since the large wave of Jewish immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union. This wave of *aliyah*, which took place predominantly throughout the 1990s, was unique in many aspects – though the immigrants were young and educated compared to immigrants from other countries and to residents of Israel at the time, they had a difficult time integrating into Israeli society and faced numerous challenges and obstacles.

The One Million Lobby is an organization established to represent the needs of Russian-speaking Israelis. The organization commissioned the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research to carry out a study examining three aspects of the relationship between Russian-speaking Israelis and government institutions: (1) the conversion process in the wider context of religious services; (2) representation of Russian-speaking Israelis in the civil service; (3) access to rights for Russian-speaking older adults. This study included a literature review, interviews, focus groups and attitude surveys. The findings from these informed the policy proposals set out in this document.

The table below presents the policy recommendations by topic and is followed by a detailed explanation of each recommendation.

Topic	Policy Recommendations
Conversion Process	Creating a process which caters to the convert's personal situation
	Preparing a protocol document regarding cultural sensitivity and appropriate service for converts
	Making information more accessible, improving transparency and standardizing the process
	Drafting official legislation to provide a single point of reference for all facets of conversion and institutions involved
	Appointing an ombudsman to investigate complaints

Topic	Policy Recommendations
<p>Civil Service Representation</p>	Setting targets for fair representation of new immigrants and of Russian-speaking Israelis
	Raising awareness regarding civil service employment opportunities, especially among residents of the periphery
	Providing managers and other senior civil servants with cultural sensitivity training
	Increasing transparency regarding the application process for jobs and public tenders
	Diversifying representation on the "board of directors team"
	Establishing a flexible employment model that allows for remote work
<p>Access to Rights for Older Adults</p>	Establishing a shared government-wide system for proactively ensuring access to rights
	Allocating dedicated positions and work hours in local social services bureaus for helping people access their rights
	Government ministry websites: translation into Russian and ongoing maintenance

1. Conversion Process

The main research question regarding the conversion process was – what organizational and legislative solutions can the establishment adopt to provide more effective and appealing state conversion services?

The survey conducted reveals that while 94% of Russian-speaking Israelis define themselves as Jewish, only 78% indicate that their Judaism is recognized by *halacha* (Jewish law). Moreover, a high proportion of Russian-speaking Israelis whose Judaism is not halachically recognized expressed an interest in the Orthodox conversion process, with 44% of them indicating openness to considering conversion in an official Orthodox framework, subject to the implementation of certain changes.

As such, this report proposes the following recommendations for improving Israel's official Conversion Authority:

➤ **Creating a process which caters to the convert's personal situation**

In the interviews and focus groups, many people claimed that if the conversion process were more personal, there would be a higher chance of converts remaining observant after completing the official process. It is therefore necessary to create a tailored conversion process that recognizes the complexity of each convert's story and is based primarily on trust, rather than on criticism and surveillance.

➤ **Preparing a protocol document regarding cultural sensitivity and appropriate service for converts**

The Conversion Authority is a governmental authority and must therefore adopt a suitably respectful approach toward converts while maintaining high standards of public service. Cases where converts claim to have experienced humiliation or disrespect from the Rabbinate or *ulpan giyur*—conversion schools—should be studied. Such incidents would be instrumental in formulating a protocol document regarding cultural sensitivity and appropriate service for converts. There is also a case for establishing cultural sensitivity training programs to address the cultural differences between the conversion court and the converts. We recommend initiating a public outreach program for public servants who work in the Conversion Authority and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. The protocol document resulting from this process should be adopted in rabbinical courts, in Nativ (the Liaison Bureau) and other conversion programs, with hands-on oversight.

➤ **Making information more accessible, improving transparency and standardizing the process**

The survey revealed that only 40% of Russian-speaking Israelis whose Judaism is not halachically recognized indicated a high degree of familiarity with the conversion process, while 60% indicated a low or moderate degree of familiarity. This figure highlights the need to make information about the conversion process and the requirements at its different stages more accessible. There are several advantages to making the information as accessible, clear, and detailed as possible: (1) it would allow conversion candidates to make an informed and knowledgeable decision, which is likely to reduce frustration during the process and prevent them from giving up before completing it; (2) it would strengthen the commitment of those who choose to convert with the official Conversion Authority, and perhaps even substantially

increase the number of converts; (3) an open and transparent process accessible to the public would further obligate adherence on the part of the Conversion Authority.

➤ **Drafting official legislation to provide a single point of reference for all facets of conversion and institutions involved**

The Conversion Authority in its present guise is based on the renewal of an Ottoman directive from the British Mandate era. This directive is not detailed or written as a current law that takes into account our modern circumstances. The legal bedrock for the Conversion Authority must be updated and grounded in legislation that clearly addresses all stages of the conversion process and the work processes of the Conversion Authority, the Chief Rabbinate, and the rabbinical conversion courts. Such legislation would prevent an arbitrary approach to accepting converts and ensure that intra-organizational behavior adheres to high standards of public service.

➤ **Appointing an ombudsman to investigate complaints**

As raised in the recommendations of Fisher's research (2015), it is appropriate and necessary for every public institution to be accompanied by a supervisory body; this should apply to the Conversion Authority as well. This body would be a place for converts to turn if they experience an incident that does not meet the expected standards of public service. Moreover, public discourse about the Conversion Authority is for the most part political and not rooted in the lived experience of actual converts, which impacts the ability to find practical solutions for improvement. Appointing an official supervisory body would facilitate practical discussion of issues that require change. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of the issue, we recommend that the conversion process be accompanied by a legal practitioner from the Legal Bureau. The legal practitioner would be appointed by the Ministry of Justice and would be tasked with advancing oversight of the process. This would reduce complaints filed after the fact and establish trust on all sides – among judges, clerks and converts.

2. Civil Service Representation

The main research question regarding representation of Russian-speaking Israelis in the civil service was – what policy adjustments would grant this demographic greater access to senior civil service positions?

Administrative data from the Civil Service Commission shows that Russian-speaking Israelis who immigrated after 1989 are underrepresented in the civil service, in particular in senior positions. The survey found that the civil service is an appealing prospect for Russian-speaking Israelis, but that it is generally quite difficult to get promoted to senior positions in the public sector, particularly in the civil service. The survey's participants noted that the main reason for this difficulty is they aren't in the "right club", where members promote themselves to senior positions. Moreover, the survey highlighted the fact that many Russian-speaking Israelis live in the periphery, far from the cities where most civil service positions are located; this leads to a lack of awareness of civil service employment opportunities and programs designed to encourage employment in the civil service.

The following are the policy recommendations regarding the issue:

► **Setting targets for fair representation of new immigrants and of Russian-speaking Israelis¹**

The two demographic groups that tend to be underrepresented in the civil service are immigrants (fewer than 12 years in Israel) and Russian-speaking Israelis (who immigrated from the former Soviet Union after 1989). The first group is defined by the Civil Service Commission as a demographic that requires action to increase civil service representation, but no targets have been established to accomplish this. The second group is not defined as a demographic that requires action to increase representation. We recommend defining the second group as a demographic that requires action to increase representation as well, and establishing targets for both groups.

Furthermore, to promote fair representation for all Israeli society, we recommend performing data segmentation comparing different demographic groups and their level of civil service representation (segmentation along socioeconomic and geographic lines). With more diversity among civil service employees, we can expect fewer voices

¹ This proposal is based on the government's draft proposal on setting targets for appropriate representation of new *Olim*. See appendix C in the full document (Hebrew).

expressing a feeling that in order to work in the civil service, one needs to belong to the “right” social groups – voices that were heard repeatedly in the survey and focus groups.

➤ **Raising awareness regarding civil service employment opportunities, especially among residents of the periphery**

Survey participants were asked to suggest solutions they believed could help Russian-speaking Israelis join the civil service. One solution that was suggested frequently was to provide opportunities to receive information about the civil service, meet employees or other people connected to the civil service, and form relationships with them. The survey also revealed that civil service representation of Russian-speaking Israelis who live in southern Israel is significantly lower than that of Russian speakers in other areas. There is therefore a clear need for increased awareness surrounding civil service positions and programs among Russian-speaking Israelis, especially those living in Israel’s geographic periphery. This exposure could take place within the framework of social events (either in person or on social media) to raise awareness, highlighting positions scheduled to open in the coming year and designated programs such as civil service internships. Additionally, physical meetings with senior civil servants would allow interested parties to network and form initial connections.

➤ **Providing managers and other senior civil servants with cultural sensitivity training**

The solution suggested most often in the survey is increasing awareness among managers on the importance of integrating Russian-speaking Israelis into the civil service.

One of the ways to increase awareness is to provide cultural sensitivity training. Such training would improve the experience of Russian-speaking Israeli candidates in the process of applying for a job in the civil service. The training would contribute to the Civil Service Commission’s attempt to encourage cultural diversity. Managers who participate in such training would have greater awareness of the issues and be able to adjust their behavior to ensure an appropriate and sensitive approach, thus reducing feelings of discrimination experienced by Russian-speaking Israeli candidates.

➤ **Increasing transparency regarding the application process for jobs and public tenders**

Many have the impression that being accepted to civil service jobs or tenders for senior civil service positions is a process that requires connections. There is a need

for greater transparency and oversight on the process of locating, issuing tenders, and recruiting employees for senior positions.

➤ **Diversifying representation on the "board of directors team"**

The board of directors team is a database of candidates for membership on the board of directors of governmental companies. The database was established as part of the Government Companies Authority reform and is aimed at creating a competitive, egalitarian, and public process for locating high-quality, professional candidates. The database operates according to the principle of representation as set out in the Civil Service Law. The law states that in civil service positions, "fair representation and expression will be given to members of both sexes, people with disabilities, new immigrants, people with at least one Ethiopian-born parent, and members of the Arab, Druze, Circassian, and ultra-Orthodox communities."

As with the first policy recommendation – relating to the need for diverse representation in the civil service generally – it is also important to diversify representation on the board of directors team, pursuant to each community's percentage of the general population. This would lead to fairer representation of all demographic groups, including Russian-speaking Israelis.

➤ **Establishing a flexible employment model that allows for remote work**

The effect of the pandemic on working conditions over the past year and a half has highlighted the advantages of the hybrid employment model, a model that facilitates working from home as well as the office. Currently, most government offices are located in Jerusalem and central Israel, and they are not expected to expand into Israel's geographic periphery. A flexible employment model would allow Russian-speaking Israelis living in Be'er-Sheva, Karmiel, and similar cities to work in the civil service without needing to relocate. Beyond serving to help Russian-speaking Israelis, a model of this kind would also contribute to strengthening the Israeli periphery as a whole.

3. Access to Rights for Older Adults

The main research question regarding access to rights for Russian-speaking seniors was – what policy adjustments would best help Russian-speaking Israeli seniors to access their rights?

As of 2020, there are 192,200 Russian-speaking Israeli older adults (65 or older), comprising 18% of Israel's elderly population. This demographic faces unique challenges as immigrants, beyond the struggles encountered by all older adults in Israel. The survey found that 76% of Russian-speaking seniors prefer to access their rights in Russian rather than Hebrew, and 31% access their rights exclusively in Russian. Moreover, the survey found that among the younger age group (60-74), there is a clear preference to access rights by phone or internet rather than an in-person appointment, while the older age group (75+) preferred to receive help via an in-person appointment, such as with a social worker or at a help center near their home.

The following are the policy recommendations regarding this issue:

► **Establishing a shared government-wide system for proactively ensuring access to rights**

In a government-wide effort, all relevant ministries – the National Insurance Institute of Israel, the Directorate General of Labor, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Construction and Housing and the Ministry for Social Equality – would work together to establish a governmental rights service center. The service center would employ Russian speakers (as direct employees, not volunteers or contractors) to provide relevant information regarding rights and benefits that the various ministries offer to this demographic.

► **Allocating dedicated positions and work hours in local social services bureaus for helping people access their rights**

The survey clearly raised the need for the older age group (75+) to receive individual support and guidance in the process of accessing their rights. In light of this, we recommend that every local social services bureau employ Russian-speaking social workers or paid interpreters (not volunteers or contractors). These employees would locate Russian-speaking Israelis who are unable to access their rights independently and guide them through the process. To ensure that these social workers can give this work the attention it requires, dedicated positions or work hours must be allocated.

➤ **Government ministry websites: translation into Russian and ongoing maintenance**

Government websites are currently partially translated into Russian, but not all the relevant information for seniors has been translated. Often the translation is not of a high standard, and a large portion of the websites are not properly maintained. To allow Russian-speaking Israeli seniors to access their rights via the internet, action must be taken to expand and improve the translation of relevant websites and regularly update the information in Russian. We recommend investigating the option of collaborating on this with the Digital Israel initiative.

In addition to these policy recommendations, we also recommend following up on the state's response to these issues. This follow-up should be performed by a public body, such as the Knesset Research and Information Center.

The importance of this document and its recommendations extends beyond its potential influence on the lives of Russian-speaking populations. The three issues examined in the document affect the quality of life of many Israeli citizens – new immigrants, long-term immigrants and native-born Israelis – who are faced with inequitable policies. Implementing these recommendations has the potential to help the country improve the service it provides to its citizens, with the hope of promoting a more responsible, professional and equitable public service.

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