

## Russian Speaking Workers in Non-Governmental Organizations

Assia Istoshina

In the last decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have risen in significance in public life in Israel. The NGOs engage in diverse projects within the fields of education, technology, environment, medicine, and protection of human rights. Many NGOs aim to promote social justice, pluralism, and democracy in Israeli public life. The largest obstacle to achieving this goal is inequality within Israeli society, making it vital to include voices of marginalized communities in the public discourse. However, regarding the hiring practices, many NGOs do not always follow the principles of equality, which becomes obvious when one explores the place of Russian-speaking employees in these organizations. It is important to note that within Israeli NGOs, the number of employees from the former Soviet Union, who work on “non-russian” projects, is very small. During the hiring process in these organizations, priority is often given to Ashkenazi native-born Israelis, while immigrants from the former Soviet Union face a disadvantage. For the purpose of this study, the information regarding Russian-speaking employees within NGOs came from Shatil, an organization focused on promoting social change in Israeli society. Shatil supports more than 1,000 partner organizations; and, within these organizations, only a few dozen employees are Russian-speakers, which does not reflect the proportion of former Soviet immigrants in Israel (about 15% of the general population). Additionally, only one organization is headed by a Russian-speaking woman.

The lack of Russian-speakers in Israeli NGOs is extremely problematic. For multiple reasons, the inclusion of Russian speaking employees remains imperative. Primarily, it is important that an organization’s employees’ identity reflect the values and mission of the organization through appropriate employee representation. Therefore, factors such as skin color, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, and more, should not represent a barrier to employment.

The diversity of an organization's team has practical implications. Today, within public organizations, the voice of the Russian-speaking community is lacking. NGOs who do not employ Russian-speakers limit themselves in their ability to influence and understand Russian-speakers in Israel.

This article was created within the framework of a working group organized by Shatil. The group met throughout 2010 and worked on a project entitled: “Perception of Democracy and Pluralism within the Russian Speaking Community in Israel.” The study demonstrates the benefits of including and increasing the number of Russian speaking employees within NGOs. In addition to providing immigrants from the former USSR with increased employment opportunities, including Russian speakers in NGOs would allow them to play a role in shaping the social collective narrative, as well as to create a platform for Russian-speakers to influence Israeli NGOs agenda. Ideally, Russian-speaking

employees could function in Israeli organizations as equal partners, as well as in government and private sectors.

This article aims to answer the following questions related to the low percentage of Russian-speaking employees in NGOs.

- Why are the numbers of Russian-speakers from the former USSR so low in NGOs?
- What are the consequences of this situation?
- How does the presence of Russian-speaking employees affect the organization?
- What is the influence of NGOs on Russian-speaking community?
- What can be done to increase the number of Russian-speaking employees in Israeli-NGOs

T

his article is based on twelve in-depth interviews of employees from Israeli-NGOs (six interviews with native Russian-speakers and six native Israelis). In the following text, cited interviews with Russian-speaking respondents will be marked using the letter “R” and excerpts from the interviews with Israelis will be marked using the letter “I.”

### **Reasons for low employment of Russian-speaking employees in NGOs**

How do native Israeli employees perceive the lack of Russian-speaking employees? It often goes unnoticed or is not perceived as problematic: I: *“I didn’t even think about the fact that in 2005, in our organization, [consisting of 150 people] there was not a single Russian,”*. Sometimes, there is even an assumption that Russians are not interested in NGO fields of work; I: *“Russians themselves do not want to go into third sector jobs as they are more interested in financial stability; they have a lower economic status.”* These perceptions alone do not account for the lack of Russian-speaking employees; however, they do highlight the unwillingness among Israeli employees to actively seek a solution or even simply acknowledge the relevance of the situation.

In Israeli society today, the key to finding a job often depends on having friends and acquaintances in the particular field, something many Russian-speakers lack. Employers (many of whom are native-Israelis), do not know many Russian-speakers. As a result, they don’t come up as potential candidates for the job.

**R:** *“I am 40 years old. In Israel, everyone is built up on connections, and I did not know many people. Who am I? Who knows me?”*

**R:** *“The social change organizations often employ people from their own small circle, who have their own language and very rigid principles. They sign the “right” petitions, go to the “right” demonstrations. And oftentimes, they choose to offer the jobs to the ones they know already.”*

Another hindering factor for Russian-speakers during the hiring process is their lack of experience required for the the organization.

**R:** *“They look at skills and whether the person has worked in similar organizations in the past. Russian-speakers often lack this necessary experience.”*

Other important considerations in the hiring process include an employer's preconceived notions and stereotypes about Russian-speakers, which may contribute to the low number of Russian-speakers in NGOs

**R:** *“The hardest part in passing through the interview process is that they look for people who are like them: native-born Israelis. And, because there are few Russians in leadership positions, this becomes a vicious circle. In high-tech industries this is less of a problem.”*

**I:** *“The accent matters. Believe it or not, when I hear [a] Russian accent, I feel a sort of distance, like this is not “one of us.”*

Additionally, many of these organizations associate themselves with the political left, and Russians are considered to be right-leaning, sometimes perceived as racists.

**R:** *“For several years I worked in an organization where I conducted studies about democracy, and before every election people would ask me, ‘so, you are voting for Leiberman?’” (a right wing Russian speaking politician)*

Many consider Ashkenazim to be able to work with all groups and identities. And Russians are considered to be suitable to work only with other Russian speakers. This is especially true for higher posts within an organization's hierarchy.

**R:** *“They consider Russians to be suitable for low-status work, not as leaders of organizations.”*

There is also a cultural factor at play. In the Soviet Union, it was considered immodest to praise. And during an interview, the candidate is expected to discuss their achievements in detail. As many employers are products of a Western / Israeli culture, they apply their norms on all candidates. A Russian employer could take into consideration this difference in cultural background.

**R:** *“(Herself holds a managerial role) I interview candidates for the position, and I can see from her CV that this young woman has more experience and knowledge than other candidates, but she is very shy when speaking about her experience. She will say - I don’t know, could I, will I manage, and other such things. An Israeli employer would not have understood the difference in mentality and would not have hired her, whereas I did understand and hired her.”*

### **Do Russian speakers choose to look for a job in the third sector?**

There are many factors causing the limited number of Russian-speaking employees in the staff of NGOs. It is partially explained by barriers in the hiring process, and also by the fact that Russian-

speaking people are not eager to work in the third sector. This applies to all Russian speakers, especially men, who are often expected to "bring home the bacon." Five out of the six Russian-speaking NGO workers I interviewed were women, and it more or less reflects the typical gender ratio.

In the third sector, jobs and salaries often depend on the availability of grants, wages are often low and employment is unstable. This problem affects all workers, but can be particularly challenging for immigrants - many of whom do not own an apartment, have a mortgage, and often lack savings or support from parents.

**R:** *"I was lucky - I was able to finish my graduate studies because my parents were able to support me, which enabled me get into a research institute."*

**R:** *"I paid a high price for working in the third sector. Other immigrants were buying cars, apartments, and I went to courses, studied, worked for long hours. I did not look for high salaries. My husband always supported me "you will not work as a cleaner", he used to say".*

Many Israelis begin as activists; they gain experience, knowledge and connections, then continue as employees. But for many Russian-speakers, the question of economic stability is so important that they have little to no time for it, and often face a crossroads between activism and economic survival.

Even if Russian speakers are interested in a certain position, they often do not apply, believing they will not be accepted anyways. There are several factors that can explain this behavior: First, their perception is often realistic - their chances of being accepted are lower. Second, the general attitude towards Russian-speaking people as second-rate people in Israel influences their self-esteem. Third, they often fear that their Hebrew language skills are not strong enough.

**R:** *"My colleague urged me to apply, I would not have applied if he did not insist, I would have felt that I have no chance."*

**R:** *"We [Russian speakers] do not know how to promote ourselves. That's considered like excessive bragging."*

**R:** *"It never even occurred to me to apply for the job. I would not dare. I applied [for the position of the director] only because I was offered and my colleagues insisted."*

**R:** *"When they offered me the position, I listed all my shortcomings - my Hebrew is not so good, I lack the connections, I don't understand the Israeli mentality, I don't tolerate sloppiness."*

Many organizations in the third sector deal with the themes of pluralism and social justice, but too often it is assumed that people from the former Soviet Union are ideologically opposed to these topics, which is often untrue.

### **What increases the motivation of Russian speakers to apply for positions in third sector organizations?**

There are several factors that increase the motivation of Russian speakers to apply for jobs in NGOs. Most of all is the chance to engage in work in accordance with one's values in order to make an impact and influence society.

**R:** *"It is very important for me to feel that my work matters; and that i am able to promote positive changes in our society."*

Another factor is the opportunity to meet new people, to find friends, to realize the basic human need for belonging.

**R:** *"Over the years I have met many people. Now I feel part of a community, a large group of women who share my worldview. As an immigrant, this sense of belonging is very important to me."*

The economic factor is also important; and, for many immigrants, the wages of the third sector can look quite attractive.

**R:** *"Maybe for some Ashkenazi woman this is not such a good salary: this is a part-time job and a lot of hard work. Usually among the native Israelis those who agree for these conditions are either very young women who only begin their career before they move to something more highly paid, or the married women, who [are already supported by] their husbands. For us, the chance to receive five thousand shekels for a part-time job is good, because we have far fewer opportunities."*

Some believe that there will be future opportunities.

**R:** *"If you work in the Russian sector all the time, your possibilities are limited. If you work in an Israeli NGO, you acquire connections, then you [are] more likely to find [a better] job in the future. "*

### **What factors contribute to the organization hiring Russian-speaking employees?**

Russian-speakers have a better chance to find employment in organizations that promote ideas of diversity, social justice, affirmative action, and feminism in particular.

**I:** *"It is not fair and not moral that only one group has power and resources, and jobs are a resource. We must deal with the privileged position of certain groups not only at the level of ideology — we need to implement this in the daily practice of our organizations."*

Sometimes it can be a matter of luck - a colleague noticed a talented person and invited him to work.

**R:** *"I gave a presentation about Russian speakers at the seminar while studying for the second degree . My teacher worked in the Institute of Democracy. My presentation seemed interesting and original, and he contributed to the fact that I was accepted into the organization."*

Sometimes an employee begins to work in the "Russian project" within an organization, then later switches to a general one.

*I: "At first, one of our activists, Sivan, got to know Lena as an acquaintance. Sivan recommended her when we were looking for someone to work with Russian-speaking people. And later on we offered Lena the position responsible for working with volunteers."*

Often there is a snowball phenomenon - one Russian speaking employee joined the organization, recommended another one, and so on.

*R: "First, the Russian-speaking general coordinator started working in the coalition. Thanks to her, a group of Russian-speaking activists emerged, then the Russian-speaking woman from this group also took on the role of fundraiser."*

### **Russian speakers at work in an NGO**

Russian-speaking people who have overcome the barriers to recruitment and who have become employees of NGOs still face various challenges on the inside. For some, working in a non-native language is stressful. This is particularly relevant for those who came to Israel as adults. For them, public speaking, and especially writing, can be challenging.

*R: "I told them: 'How can I be your boss, I am not a native Hebrew speaker!'"*

*R: "If I chose who would represent the organization, who would be its face: a person who makes mistakes in Hebrew or does not make them? Of course, I would take a person who does not make mistakes."*

Russian speakers come from a culture in which correct speech is seen as extremely important. Israelis, on the other hand, usually do not attach as much importance to speech mistakes

*I: "My texts have to be edited [and] texts of our Israeli colleagues also need to be edited."*

For them the accent makes much more difference than mistakes.

*I: "If a person has an accent, it means he is not one of us. We need to get used to it."*

Furthermore, reading materials and writing reports, for example, often take more time for Russian-speaking employees.

*R: "I work an insane amount of hours."*

*R: "It was hard with the language, I invested a lot of time."*

*I: "It was necessary to be flexible, for example, to give the Russian-speaking employee more time to write the report."*

Many often lack the understanding that the economic situation of Russian-speaking employees is more difficult than those of Hebrew speakers. In third sector organizations, there is often an added expectation that employees will engage in volunteering and activism outside of working hours.

**R:** *"I am expected to do my job during working hours, and then also invest on a voluntary basis - this may be normal for a well-off woman, but not for a Russian. If they only provide me with a part-time job, I need another source of income to complement my salary."*

In addition, Israeli employers feel that Russians need to be educated about democracy, tolerance, human rights, etc. Sometimes a new employee must gain additional knowledge and skills, but this is considered by many as a "Russian problem" and not something common to all new employees. It is important to note that, although the former Soviet Union had its share of problems, the view that "Russians do not understand democratic principles" is quite problematic.

**I:** *"I don't want to say that we made her pass through the "resocialization" process, but actually this is true. She does express some racist views, she brought it from Russia."*

Hebrew-speaking employees and employers often have the feeling that those born in Israel, especially Ashkenazi Jews, are somehow better by default.

**R:** *"This condescending attitude remains the same, even after immigrants spend decades in this country. One woman said to me - 'my children are melah haaretz' (salt of the earth; meaning people of the best quality). So I am not the salt of the earth. {Emotionally} And my children are not the salt of the earth. It hurts."*

**I:** *"If we would have employed an Ashkenazi woman, she would be perceived as a "neutral person". Learning from the past experience, now I would prefer to hire an Israeli {and not Russian}. On the other hand, our goal is to attract clients, volunteers. A native Israeli would not be able to attract Russian speakers. "*

There is also an issue of the atmosphere within an organization. The more diverse the organization, the less alienated the Russian-speaking employee.

**R:** *"We have a Palestinian, an Ashkenazi, two Russians, a Mizrahi woman, so everyone is different from each other, and I don't feel that I am an exception."*

If the majority of employees are Ashkenazi Jews native to Israel, and there is one Russian-speaker among them, then she may experience discomfort unnoticeable to most natives.

**R:** *"I often feel like an outsider - I do not fit into a conversation. During the lunch break, when they share stories about various people, I don't know who they are talking about. I feel like a stranger, everyone knows everyone, but I do not. "*

How does a Russian-speaking employee affect the organization and how does the organization affect her?

### Organization

When a Russian-speaking employee joins the team, the organization and the employees themselves change. The degree of change depends on the number of Russian speakers in the organization, their position, and status within the organization, etc.

One of the most important changes is the increased access of the organization to the Russian-speaking community.

**R:** *“Before I started working [in the Rape crisis center], there were actually no calls in Russian, no requests for help for the Russian speaking victims of sexual violence, and this is an huge problem among new immigrants. Now 50% of the calls to our center come from Russian speaking women. I have given lectures in Russian about these issues, and actively looked for Russian-speaking volunteers. We publish and distribute promotional materials in Russian.”*

The employment of Russian-speaking women in the Rape crisis centers resulted in interviews by mass media and attendance of lectures, marking a major shift in the attitudes towards sexual violence that were previously considered unimportant or even shameful. Thus, it affected not only the number of complaints, but also the perception of sexual harassment by the Russian-speaking community. Previously seen as innocent flirtation, sexual harassment is now accepted as a serious problem.

**R:** *“Before I came to work in the Institute of Democracy, there were no studies about Russian speakers. Now, such studies are an integral part of the work of the institute. In 2009, the annual research was devoted to the Russian speakers in Israel.”*

It is obvious that the presence of Russian-speaking people in Israel significantly affected the political situation in the country. It seems necessary that this be taken into account in the field of political research.

Sometimes the changes can be more subtle.

**R:** *“Now, written materials and publications of our organization are being translated into Russian and there was also a meeting of representatives of the organization with Russian-speaking activists ... I believe it is important to make sure that their specific problems are addressed. The challenges faced by Arab citizens are seen as important, but the problems of other communities are seen as less significant.”*

Sometimes the presence of Russian-speaking employees can cause dissatisfaction among the natives of Israel.

**R:** *"They began to tell me - you hire too many Russians. It is interesting that it rarely occurs to anyone to say that 'we have too many Ashkenazi Jews in the organization.'*

**I:** *"The Arab employees began to feel that there were too many Russian-speaking volunteers, announcements on the board in Russian, etc. They felt that this was not their place anymore. And if there was an Ashkenazi boss, it would be perceived as neutral."*

Often Russian-speaking people, if they adhere to left-wing views, may be less radical in their positions - they communicate with Russian-speaking friends and relatives, read Russian press, and hear other opinions.

**I:** *"There is a closed (left wing) circle with its own language and rigid principles, where members are expected to go to demonstrations and sign the petitions. And now, after a less radical Russian employee joined the team, we feel more comfortable expressing ourselves within the organization."*

This excerpt from the interview suggests that having a Russian-speaking employee can create an atmosphere in which you can voice not only radical views.

The diversity itself has a positive effect on the organization.

**R:** *"Minority representatives are generally more sensitive to various cultural codes, understand discrimination, etc. Therefore, we can work better with other minorities."*

**R:** *"We had a diverse team; it created different perspectives for the organization, promoted mutual enrichment, but it was more difficult to manage. The manager needs to have appropriate skills and sensitivity to different cultures."*

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union are able to contribute to the organization in the professional realm.

**I:** *"He speaks so brilliantly at conferences, very professionally, and you forget about his accent."*

**I:** *"Actually, he knew more than me - and he helped in my research, and taught me a lot. I did not feel that he was not as good as me, probably even better than me, he was very professional, if not better."*

**R:** *"Russian speakers are often highly educated and creative. Since it is very important for them to keep the job, they are loyal. They are responsible and committed to the job."*

## Employees

When Russian-speaking employees join an organization, not only does the organization change, but the employees themselves also change. Work in non-sectoral NGOs in Israel influences attitudes and perceptions of Russian-speaking employees, contributing to their professional and personal development.

**R:** *"This work allows me to establish connections, and to be with people who do not see my identity as a problem: people who share my values."*

As a result, Russian speakers acquire tools of social analysis that allow them to see their own problems in the wide context of power relations and social justice.

**R:** *"I had values and an understanding of the problematic nature of the social structure of Israeli society, but activism and work in the organization helped me to acquire terminology which allows me to better describe these values and attitudes."*

**R:** *"The work has influenced me, I come into contact with people from different cultural and social backgrounds."*

Many people from the former Soviet Union feel that they do not fit into Israeli society, finding themselves in psychologically isolation. Working in third sector organizations gives them a greater sense of belonging.

**R:** *"Over the years in my job, I have met many people. Now I feel part of a community, a large group of women who share my worldview . As an immigrant, this feeling of belonging is very important to me."*

## Recommendations

*What is needed in order to increase the number of Russian-speaking employees in NGOs?*

The interviewees suggested a number of strategies that are necessary to change the existing situation.

**R:** *"Ideally, organizations need to have Russian projects as well as immigrants from the former Soviet Union in "non-Russian" positions. This is necessary to promote work for a Russian audience with Russian clients, but to avoid the situation where the Russian-speaking employees remain only in this niche. "*

It is necessary to expand the search for candidates for various positions.

**I:** *"We used to send the job ads in our newsletters, and on the Shatyl bulletin board (in Hebrew). Now we get in touch with acquaintances from the former Soviet Union , ask them to recommend someone, send out the translated job ads to the 'Russian' organizations. People feel that they are being addressed."*

*I: "This is one of the first cases of us purposefully looking for candidates for work outside the narrow circle of the human rights defenders from Tel-Aviv."*

Organizations exist which adhere to the principle of fair representation and affirmative action, making sure that they hire their employees from various marginalized groups.

*I: "Our principle is: if there are two women with the same qualifications, we will hire the one that belongs to a minority. Now, if the candidate for a job is a Russian-speaker, she is more likely to get a job."*

It is also important to create an atmosphere within the organization that contributes to efficient work and a comfortable environment for all employees.

*I: "We conducted workshops on the topic of intercultural differences. It was not easy, but very important."*

Many ex-Soviet / Russian staff members point out the importance of having a mentor, a person (or several) who introduce, explain, and help. Regarding the language issue, there are several approaches.

*I: "I always help my Russian-speaking employee with editing Hebrew texts; I do it on a voluntary basis. We need to help each other. She would help with something else."*

There are organizations where Russian-speaking employees are given more time to finish writing reports, while in other larger organizations, there is an editor. There is also another option:

*R: "I would like a special budget for translation. Writing reports is part of my job. So I could write in Russian, and a professional translator could translate my work."*

Most importantly, it is crucial that the organization comes to an understanding of the need to create a team consisting of representatives from different sectors of Israeli society, both as a value and also in order to reach out to various audiences. **I:** "We need to have diverse teams. It must be a strategic decision."

### **Conclusions**

The goal of this paper was to understand why there are so few immigrants from the former Soviet Union working in Israeli NGOs. In particular, projects that are not related to the Russian-speaking target audiences. Interviews with Russian-speaking employees, their employers, and their colleagues allowed us to draw a number of conclusions. There are a number of barriers encountered by the applicants for various positions. The Hebrew speaking employers often have perception biases and stereotypes regarding immigrants from the Soviet Union. Russian speakers are perceived as people who are suitable for "Russian" projects, but not as people who can work on "general" projects, or in high-ranking positions. In addition, Russian-speakers usually have fewer connections, which makes it difficult to find work and to be recommended for a desirable position.

Additional reasons include economic instability of the third sector. Many Russian-speaking people simply cannot afford to depend on grants and to live in the uncertainty of not knowing whether they

will continue to work in the next year. In addition, many, even if they are interested in a certain position, simply do not apply, as they are sure they will not be accepted. Many are afraid not to cope, especially when it is necessary to work in Hebrew.

*What increases the motivation of Russian speakers to apply for positions in third sector organizations?* First, they value the ability to work in alignment with their values and to have an impact on what happens in the Israeli society. Secondly, they gain the opportunity to expand the circle of acquaintances and connections, to find friends, and to have a sense of belonging. It is important to note that there are more people from the Soviet Union in organizations that adhere to principles of fair representation and affirmative action, such as feminist organizations in particular. Often there is a snowball phenomenon - once there is one Russian-speaking employee, she brings in another, and so on.

With the arrival of Russian-speaking employees, the organization and the employee have an opportunity to change in a positive way. One of the important results is access to the Russian-speaking community. The presence of people from the Soviet Union in Israeli NGOs allows the organizations to have more influence on the Russian-speaking public: on its target audience, on the employee's social circle, and through the media. The organization expands its target audience and forms a more sensitive and informed approach to it. For example, the hiring of Russian-speaking employees during the Rape crisis allowed new employees to spread the organization's message through lectures and appearances in Russian mass media, which helped change the previously held attitudes regarding sexual violence. The addition of cultural diversity also has a positive effect on the organization, as it allows for the expansion of approaches and perspectives.

Aside from the organizations work, the employees themselves are also changing. Work in NGOs influences their worldview, attitudes toward Israeli society, and helps them develop professionally and personally, giving them a greater sense of belonging.

It is important to emphasize that the problems described in this article also apply to other marginalized groups whose access to jobs is limited, such as people with disabilities, Palestinians, members of the LGBT community, Mizrahi-Jews, and Ethiopians.

We believe that it is important for the composition of NGO staff to reflect the values of civil society regarding skin color, sexual orientation, nationality, country of origin, age, gender, health status, etc. These factors should not affect a candidate's chances of getting a job in an organization. In addition, it is important to create a working environment that facilitates comfortable adjustment of people belonging to various marginalized groups.