

# Too Many Coming to Israel?

*Massive influx of former Soviets is upsetting the public*

by Aryeh Dean Cohen

JERUSALEM (July 2) Calling it “the saddest thing that’s happened to me in the ten years I’ve been in Israel,” Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky yesterday expressed bitterness at the findings of an Israel Radio poll which found a significant number of Israelis had largely negative views of immigrants from the CIS [former Soviet Union].

Sharansky said that of all the unpleasant things going on in the country today, “the saddest and most painful is to see the poll results which clearly show Israelis rejecting immigrants.”

The poll, which was released recently, found that a third of Israelis were “frightened by immigrants,” and that more than 40 percent think that they get too much help from the government, while 63 percent are against encouraging mass immigration from the CIS. Appearing before the Knesset Immigration and Absorption Committee, Sharansky said he was “shocked” by the poll’s findings, and noted the important contributions made by immigrants to Israeli society.

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*Aryeh Dean Cohen is a staff writer with the Jerusalem Post. This report is taken from their Internet Edition.*

He said immigrants were now being seen as a “foreign, dangerous, competitive, and threatening minority.” Sharansky said the poll undermined the fabric of Israeli society, and that the stigmas concerning immigrants from the CIS today were even more serious than in the past, with talk of a “strategic threat,” a Russian mafia, and even of a possible takeover of the country.

The minister called for a “total separation” between various episodes that arise — such as the investigation of Zvi Ben-Ari (formerly known as Gregory Lerner) — and a public which is more interested in getting to the truth.

He also complained that Israeli society now not only tied crime and prostitution to new immigrants, but also attached such stigma to leaders of the Jewish community in the CIS. He complained about media reports hinting that Vladimir Gusinsky, head of the Russian Jewish Congress, and Vadim Rabinovich, head of the Ukrainian Jewish community, had ties to the Russian mafia, adding, “if I meet with them, a story will immediately appear [in the Israeli press] saying that I aided the mafia.”

Committee chairwoman Naomi Blumenthal said “the Lerner episode has worsened the standing of immigrants. Every other Russian immigrant is suspected of being a

mafioso,” she said. “As a result, business-men from the CIS will think twice about investing here.”

Blumenthal added that the survey results showed the failure of efforts to educate the public about the subject. “The Israeli public has not yet internalized the fact that the state has no *raison d’être* without immigration,” she said.

MK (Member of the Knesset) Yossi Sarid (Meretz) said it was the religious establishment which had caused Israelis to grow suspicious about immigrants, because they had questioned their Jewishness. Sarid added that the fact that the Yisrael Ba’aliya Party limited its actions to work on behalf of immigrants indirectly contributed to the negative image of immigrants, and the public’s attitude toward them.

Labor MK Sofa Landver, herself an immigrant from the CIS, told Sharansky: “You said very harsh things about [the plight of immigrants] to the previous government. Why are you quiet now, Natan? Why don’t you, as a minister, get up and say the same things, but in the voice of a minister in the government, the voice of someone in Bibi Netanyahu’s coalition. And if you ask me whom I blame, I blame the prime minister for [the results of] this poll.”

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