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Book Review:

Coming home: Media and Returning Diaspora in Israel and Germany,
by Nelly Elias. State University New York Press, Albany, New York 2008

The book by Nelly Elias entitled “Coming home. Media and returning Diaspora in Israel and Germany” is a comparative study of two groups of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU). It is based on qualitative approach that is 100 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Russian speaking immigrants who emigrated from FSU between years 1993-2003. In each country there were conducted 50 interviews (p.10). Besides, the author presents in-depth analysis of socio-demographic and cultural features of each group as well as describes immigrants adaptation strategies influenced by local policy of each host country.

The declared topic of the book is “comparison between media consumption patterns of Russian – speaking immigrants in Israel and Germany” (p.7). Indeed the author systematically describes first the development of Russian-language media in Israel and Germany and then media in the life of returning Diaspora in Israel and in Germany. These two chapters have symmetrical construction: at the beginning the author characterizes social and cultural patterns of adaptation among FSU immigrants in each country. These patterns, constructed both by immigrants themselves and the host society, influence immigrants’ attitude towards acquisition of home-country language as well as strategies of adapting in new environment. As a result, immigrants focus their attention on these media, which in the best way fulfill their needs. Therefore the author in each chapter begins from presenting the most popular media and she gradually moves on towards the least popular. Thus, Israeli immigrants prefer to watch Russian TV channels, read Russian language newspapers, read Russian books and finally, listen to Russian radio. Although they understand the necessity of learning Hebrew, at the same time they do not feel pressure to acquaint it by rejecting their mother tongue. The immigrants’ attitude is supported by contemporary Israeli integration ideology that promotes cultural pluralism. Thus, Russian immigrants (it should be added that most of investigated persons had academic degrees – about 70%) realize the need of cultivating their culture of origin and the language skills are defined here as one of important items of the cultural heritage. However it does not mean that they do not identify themselves with the Israeli state and the Jewish identity. On the contrary, when preserving their own culture at the same time they strongly identify with their new (old) homeland – “Israel is a Jewish country. Therefore it is our country” (p.43). This fact can be well recognized in FSU immigrants attitude towards Hebrew media that are much more difficult to deal with. Nevertheless the immigrants try to follow Hebrew news reels and

political programmes especially in face of important political and local events like e.g. *Aqsa Intifada*. In such case they appreciate Hebrew media estimating them as more objective and better describing difficult situation of Israel state than the Russian media.

In case of FSU immigrants to Germany the situation is quite different as the integration ideology is. Immigrants with German descent repatriating themselves to Germany are expected to totally and effectively assimilate with the German society. German language is in this process one of the most important means. Therefore FSU immigrants reject their Russian cultural roots and especially Russian language skills which they identify as an obstacle in the process of successful assimilation (here the Author associates this strategy also with the level of education, in the investigated group only 17% had academic degrees). As a result FSU immigrants in Germany prefer German media, especially German TV channels, newspapers and books, sometimes radio and they limit their contacts with Russian media in order not to be influenced by the Russian language. Nevertheless this situation causes some paradoxes. Firstly, FSU immigrants have problems with integration as they are labeled by locals as Russians or newcomers and not homecomers. Secondly, the more they get involved in modern German culture the less they identify with it, defining it as full of low values and commercial patterns. As a result although they feel Germans they do not identify themselves with the German society and culture.

Due to the lack of space I have referred just to the main research results reported by the author in details and supported by number of interviews' quotations illustrating each step of the analysis. Nelly Elias presents the results of her research in a very interesting way, but in my opinion it is not the only reason to find the book as an important source of information and research analysis. Although media seem to be the main theme of the book, for me they are just a pretext to discuss such socially and theoretically important problems as: integration ideologies and their consequences, attitudes of a host society towards homecomers and vice versa, problems of being defined as a stranger or a homecomer etc. Nelly Elias' book delivers material to investigate these problems both in theoretical context and in relation to social history of a certain society, here the German and Israeli one.

In the case of German society, the book shows contradictions between the policy of assimilation due to *Jus sanguinis* criterion and FSU immigrants reception by the German society. German immigrants are identified as those who try to pass as Germans whereas they represent other, alien, culture. It would be worth comparing this situation with other immigrants in Germany e.g. the Turkish ones who cannot benefit from the right of blood criterion. Such contradictions involve general questions about social and cultural consequences of integration strategies.

As for the Israeli society, the study shows social history of following waves of immigration – *Aliyah* constituting the Israeli state and its society. On the basis of these findings we may observe how Israeli integration ideology has changed and what are the consequences of this shift. When Israeli state was in the process of establishing the dominant strategy of assimilation by no means made Jewish immigrants from different parts of the World (but mostly from Europe) lose their cultural roots very often together with their language skills. Post-war ideology aimed to reject social and biographical background and build a new society based on common values related to the myth of *Erec Israel*. Nowadays Israel promotes the politics of cultural pluralism and FSU immigrants can benefit from it by cultivating their cultural roots.

We should consider that the shift from assimilation to multiculturalism seems to be a general strategy of integration ideology within most of West European countries. Nelly Elias' study inspires to put questions about universal and particular (that is culturally and socially contextualized) features of this process in relation to problem of contemporary migrations within Europe. Therefore the book may be interesting not only for those scholars who study German or Israeli societies but also for those who analyze processes of migration and assimilation, especially (although not only) in the European context.

Citation

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