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## **Avigdor Lieberman's policy towards the European Union**

### **Introduction**

On 10 II 2009, early elections to 18th Knesset took place in Israel, after Ehud Olmert resigned from his position as the leader of Kadima party and his successor, Tzipi Livni, was unable to form a coalition and a government. Holding new elections was not anything new in Israel, the between 1990 and 2015 the citizens of Israel voted every 2 years and 8 months on average (more frequent were only elections held in Greece and Japan<sup>1</sup>). Surprising may be the fact that the elections from 2009 are still influencing the policy of this country.

Binyamin Netanyahu, who was the head of *Likud* Party since 2005, had a chance to form the coalition and the government, even though they did not win the elections (*Likud* had 27 representatives, compared to 28 from *Kadima*). In the public eye, Avigdor Lieberman and his party *Yisrael Beytenu* (in Hebrew – Our Home Israel) were perceived as the truly winners of the elections. The acquisition of 15 seats in Knesset and becoming the third greatest force in the Parliament allowed Lieberman to take the seat of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Taking into account Lieberman's controversial commentaries regarding the peacemaking process, EU's politicians realized that the relations between Israel and the EU will enter a new, much more difficult phase in 2009. Particularly interesting would be the historical outlook on the elections, i.e. Operation Cast Lead ended in 2009 in the Gaza Strip, as well as the comparison of the policy lead by Tzipi Livni, who was perceived by Brussels as a pro-European politician.

The main goal of this work was to characterize Avigdor Lieberman as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel in 2009-2012 and 2013-2015 and to provide the analysis of his policy towards the Israeli-EU relations. The timeline of the article is corresponding to Lieberman's holding of the position as minister.

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<sup>1</sup> *How Often Elections Are Called in Israel and Around the World*, <https://en.idi.org.il/press-releases/12776> (14 V 2017).

The research also aims to answer the questions of what the main reasons for the moderately confrontational policy towards the EU were and what the aim of Israeli diplomacy in relations with the EU was. It is also crucial to consider if Lieberman realized his political aims and what its influence on the nation of Israel was.

The hypothesis that will verify the article is that Lieberman's policy towards the EU led to a cooldown of the relation. Moreover, the sceptic attitude towards the European institutions led to higher support for the Palestine cause.

The behavioral approach was employed to analyze the political decisions made by Avigdor Lieberman. Representatives of behaviouralism concluded that „the foreign policies are influenced by the characteristics of the nations, such as the political system, the degree of economic development and internal stabilization”<sup>2</sup>. Israel's foreign minister during the considered period, has been not only one of the leading politicians on the Israeli political scene for almost two decades, but also a representative of the Russian-speaking community in the country. The behavioral approach is intended to help understand Lieberman's actions in the context of relations with the European Union and taking into consideration his. The most important aspect of the behavioral approach is the analysis of the Israeli press. The magazine „Israel Hayom” was particular interest, as it is considered a means of propaganda for the Prime Minister Netanyahu and the ruling government, so author has used critical analysis of the source.

### **Lieberman – Russian voice on the Israeli political scene**

It is estimated that the overall number of Russian immigrants to Israel is approximately 1,140 million people (on 2010), out of which nearly a million came along with Aliyah (Hebrew for *ascent*; literally – emigration to Israel), which took place in 90s. Taking into account factors and effects of the Israeli self-absorption policy, we should conclude that the project of assimilation of new emigrants from the Soviet Union succeeded, as they became a part of the society. The proportion of emigrants to the whole population is worth noting, as the Russian Jews became as high as 20% of the population. However, it did not mean that Jews that came from the Soviet Union did not have their own opinion on how the Jewish nation should look<sup>3</sup>.

Political parties that have a program dedicated for Russian speakers are a relatively new phenomenon in Israel. Despite a significant inflow of Jews from the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Czaputowicz, *Teorie stosunków międzynarodowych. Krytyka i systematyzacja*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 93.

<sup>3</sup> A. Oz, *Wielokulturowy Izrael*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 207-208.

former Soviet Union in the 70s, the representatives of this Aliyah never decided to form a strong, united political movement, that could represent them directly in Knesset. During the elections in 1977, 1981 and 1984, various lists of candidates of Soviet Jews did appear, but none of them managed to get more than 1% of votes. It was mainly caused by the fact that the Russian speaking Jews were not able to create a joint list. Additionally, there were significant political frictions within the group, which led to the voices being cast for the most popular parties of Israel instead. That trend was also visible during the beginning of the great Aliyah of 90s<sup>4</sup>.

The elections of 1996 brought crucial changes on the Israeli political scene; finally, Russian-speaking part of the society was convinced to vote for Natan Sharansky's party *Yisrael BaAliyah*. The votes of more than 50% of the ex-Soviet Jews secured 7 seats in Knesset. It was a great astonishment to all the observers, who failed to predict that Sharansky would be able to galvanize such a vast electorate. Since then, up to the latest elections in 2015, approximately 45-55% Jews of Soviet origins votes for „Russian” parties<sup>5</sup>.

To briefly characterize that electorate, should be underlined their strong conservatism that animosity towards the Arab society. They often perceive Arabs that the Israeli counterpart for the Asian nations, which were always held in disregard. The researchers also concluded that a large number of Russian Jews utilized their Soviet past, regarding themselves better than the other, non-white people. Additionally, due to the long years of communism, the Soviet Jews were used to centralized and despotic ruling, which explains why the group looks out for strong, distinctive leaders, such as Ariel Sharon, Josef Lapid, Binyamin Netanyahu or Avigdor Lieberman<sup>6</sup>.

During the turn of XX and XXI centuries, Natan Sharansky's party started losing the support due to internal divisions, resulting in *Yisrael BaAliyah* being incorporated into *Likud* in 2003. Alongside the declining influence of Sharansky's party, *Yisrael Beytenu* became the voice of the Russian Jews, with Avigdor Lieberman as their leader<sup>7</sup>.

The path to big politics of Lieberman was particularly complicated. At the age of 20, in 1978, he migrated from Kishinev to Israel. He joined the army, became an executive member of a real estate company and started publishing a weekly magazine in Russian. He later met Binyamin Netanyahu, with whom he worked closely ever since. In 1996 when Netanyahu and his party *Likud* won the elections, Lieberman served as Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office until

<sup>4</sup> V. Khanin, *Israel's „Russian” Parties*, [in:] *Contemporary Israel. Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Security Challenges*, ed. R. O. Freedman, Philadelphia 2009, pp. 99-100.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 100.

<sup>6</sup> A. Oz, *op.cit.*, pp. 242.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 103.

1997. Despite their strong characters, both politicians managed to benefit mutually from their relationship – Netanyahu gained the support of the Russian Aliyah, while Lieberman strengthened his position in the Russian speaking society in Israel, thanks to such an influential ally that „Bibi” was<sup>8</sup>.

In 1997 Lieberman was forced to resign from his position, due to the ongoing legal action against him (one of many yet to come in the future). Using Netanyahu’s dropping support, Lieberman formed *Yisrael Beytenu* on 3 I 1999. During the elections in the same year, his party received 4 seats and in 2000 a coalition for the elections was formed between *Ichud Leumi* and *Yisrael Beytenu*<sup>9</sup>.

Lieberman’s party based their election program chiefly on opposition of the Russian part of the society to the peacemaking process with Palestinians. In the election campaign in 1999, *Yisrael Beytenu* added the slogan of fighting against the oligarchy and political elites to their program, which attracted more Russian migrants<sup>10</sup>. In addition, *Yisrael Beytenu* is not only a lay party, but openly anti-religious, against compulsory military service for the religious Jews and for abolishing many privileges that the ultraorthodox Jews had. *Yisrael Beytenu* also proposes to establish a new „Green Line”, i.e. the border between Israel and the West Bank<sup>11</sup>. It proposes to return the Arab establishments on Sharon and the region of Wadi Ara, which in 1949 was acquired by Israel. That would lead to 1/3 Muslims inhabitants of Israel losing their citizenship. The rest of the Arab society would be encouraged to migrate, along with a corresponding compensation.

Basing on the political ascent of Lieberman, it can be easily observed how unstable the political scene in Israel is. Moldavian-born politician was changing his political function very often. Putting him aside in 2001 resulting in annexing *Yisrael Beytenu* into a new coalition named *Ha-Ichud ha-Leumi* (Hebrew for The National Union) in 2002 and taking the position as Minister of Transportation in Ariel Sharon’s second government in 2003. In late 2004, it was decided that the Lieberman’s party should dissect from the National Union and participate in the upcoming elections on its own. It gave Lieberman the positions of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategic Affairs<sup>12</sup>.

In 2004, Lieberman decided to reform *Yisrael Beytenu* from a right-wing Israeli movement, whose main electorate were the Russian Jews, into „Russian” party with Israeli accents. That move attracted the votes of a significant number of people of ex-Soviet origin, who used to vote for the most prominent parties of Israel, but now they decided they do not represent the will of the minority. In May

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<sup>8</sup> A. Oz, *op.cit.*, pp. 219.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 219.

<sup>10</sup> V. Khanin, *op.cit.*, pp. 104.

<sup>11</sup> L. Hoare, *Israel’s Soviet Political Party*, <http://forward.com/opinion/139097/israel-s-soviet-political-party/#ixzz46TWQyf5m> (21 IV 2017).

<sup>12</sup> A. Oz, *op.cit.*, pp. 220.

1999, during the Knesset elections Our Home Israel won 4 seats, in 2006 there were 11 representatives and in 2009 the group was 15 people large, each time getting the votes of the majority of the Russian part of the society<sup>13</sup>.

To manifest their opposition to the peace talks with Palestinian National Authority in January 2008, Lieberman along with his party decided to leave the ruling coalition and resigned from the position as Minister of Strategic Affairs<sup>14</sup>. 15 seats won during the elections of 2009 unexpectedly made *Yisrael Beytenu* the third political force of Israel, following *Kadima* with 28 representatives and *Likud* with 27 seats<sup>15</sup>. The then President, Shimon Peres, entrusted Binyamin Netanyahu and his party *Likud* with the task of creating a government. Because of good relations in the past between Netanyahu and Lieberman, *Yisrael Beytenu* again joined the ruling coalition and its leader was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs<sup>16</sup>. The fact that Lieberman was not born in Israel and is an immigrant from the Soviet Union (which is underlined by his strong Russian accent) greatly influences his political behavior. Using Russian political patterns, wanting to be recognized as a tough and decisive politician, Lieberman and his party, are eagerly referring to unequivocal resolution of the Palestinian question, not seeking to any compromise. This political behavior is commonly liked among Russian speaking voters in Israel.

### **Avigdor Lieberman as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel (2009-2012, 2013-2015) and his attitude towards the EU**

Appointing Lieberman as Minister of Foreign Affairs was a controversial move, as such a decision made by Binyamin Netanyahu indicated the halt of the peace-making process and further Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip<sup>17</sup>. It is worth mentioning that Lieberman lives in an illegal, as far as the international laws are concerned, Jewish settlement called Nokdim, which lies outside the „Green Line”, i.e. the demarcation line set in 1949, which divides Israel and Palestine. Journalists repeatedly enquired Lieberman about that fact, who in turn made promises

<sup>13</sup> L. Remennick, *Russian Israelis: Social Mobility, Politics and Culture*, New York 2011, pp. 63.

<sup>14</sup> M. Mualem, *Lieberman blasts Arab MKs, pulls party out of government*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080119111615/http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/945299.html> (25 IV 2017).

<sup>15</sup> *Final Election Results: Kadima 28 Seats, Likud 27, Yisrael Beiteinu 15*, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/final-election-results-kadima-28-seats-Likud-27-yisrael-beiteinu-15-1.270020> (25 IV 2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Elections in Israel-February 2009*, [http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/History/Pages/Elections\\_in\\_Israel\\_February\\_2009.aspx](http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/History/Pages/Elections_in_Israel_February_2009.aspx) (25 IV 2017).

<sup>17</sup> N. Gordon, *Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's shame*, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2009/mar/25/avigdor-lieberman-binyamin-netanyahu-israel> (29 IV 2017).

that he would be willing to leave Nokdim for the price of the peace<sup>18</sup>. However, he still lives on the territory.

Taking into account the election slogans of *Yisrael Beytenu*, Lieberman's takeover of the foreign policies related to the stopping of the peacemaking process with Palestine and intensified critique of Iran. Basing on those two factors, we can conclude that the Israeli diplomacy will be rather confrontational toward the EU, which gave its support to the peacekeeping process and aimed to negotiate the nuclear topics with Iran<sup>19</sup>, while this country is seemed as the „greatest danger” to Jewish people and Israel<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, one could reason that there was a hope of good relations with Brussels after Lieberman's statement from 2007, when he believed that by 2012, Israel had a chance to be a full-fledged member of the EU and NATO<sup>21</sup>. The leader of *Yisrael Beytenu* realized what the benefits of joining both of those organizations were, both in an economic and military sense, but not taking into account the attitude of the leaders of the EU and NATO. Joining the EU would mean greater political influence for Israel, as well as its economic growth. It was believed that it could take place in the upcoming years and the foreign policy should reflect that goal. It was confirmed by *Yisrael Beytenu* political program before the elections in 2009, where we could read:

one of the clear goals of *Yisrael Beytenu* is Israel's joining of the EU and NATO... Membership in the EU would gain Israel greater political influence in an ever-strengthening Europe and contribute much to the economy. We can achieve this goal in the near future and should make every effort to make it come about<sup>22</sup>.

In November 2010, Avigdor Lieberman, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, underlined in the interviews that:

as regards economics, cultural affairs, tourism and human values, we [Israelis] feel part of united Europe, and Israel should become a member of the EU. It is impos-

<sup>18</sup> Lieberman: *I'm Ready to Quit My Settlement Home for Peace*, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/liberman-i-m-ready-to-quit-my-settlement-home-for-peace-1.271118> (28 IV 2017).

<sup>19</sup> M. Apelblat, *Nuclear deal with Iran: Time to restart EU-Tehran relations?*, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Nuclear-deal-with-Iran-Time-to-restart-EU-Tehran-relations-410538> (28 II 2017).

<sup>20</sup> J. Moore, *Netanyahu: World's 'Deafening' Silence on Iran Threat to Israel Will End With Trump*, <http://www.newsweek.com/netanyahu-worlds-silence-iran-threat-israel-will-end-trump-548997> (12 V 2017).

<sup>21</sup> S. Writer, *Lieberman: Israel should join NATO, EU*, <http://www.israeltoday.co.il/default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=10954> (28 II 2017).

<sup>22</sup> S. Pardo, *Views from the Neighbourhood: Israel*, [in:] *Communicating Europe in Times of Crisis. External Perceptions of the European Union*, eds. N. Chaban, M. Holland, New York 2014, pp. 183.

sible to imagine modern Europe... without Jewish spirit. Israel sees itself as part of Europe and does not seek to redivide [territory]<sup>23</sup>.

This short excerpt taken from the ending of an interview for a Russian-based international press agency Interfax, could be used as the key to understanding the foreign policy of Lieberman. While realizing what economic benefits come with joining the EU, they did not agree with the views of the European nations. It is a typical behavior of Israeli politicians, who on the one hand would like to join the EU for its economic merits, but on the other hand do not want to comply with the rules of the EU, putting the sovereignty of the nation above anything else<sup>24</sup>.

The subject of the peacemaking process between Israel and Palestine remained an apple of discord between the Israeli and EU diplomacies. For the public eye, Lieberman's speech from 28 IX 2010 given in front of the United Nations General Assembly, was a straightforward declaration of what the direction of Israel was. The Minister stated that an agreement between Israel and Palestine must be based on an exchange of the territory and people, not talking openly about mass evictions, but rather setting clear boundaries, which was called the Lieberman's Plan. The then head of Israeli diplomacy claimed that both Palestine and Israel should be nationally homogenous<sup>25</sup>.

To improve the perception of Israel, Lieberman invited in 2010 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of France, Germany, the Great Britain, Italy and Spain to visit the Gaza Strip after the land blockade was softened on the territory controlled by Hamas. The chief of the European diplomacy, Catherine Ashton, regarded it a gesture of a good will and the 5 ministers accepted the invitations<sup>26</sup>. However, Lieberman used their visit to point out their own mistakes. The Israeli politician claimed that before the UE is a suitable partner for discussion on the topic of how to resolve conflicts, it should first resolve the issues in Kosovo, Cyprus or Caucasus Mountains. He also stated that the participation of the European nations in the peacemaking process should be dictated by the care for peace, rather than the safekeeping of economic interest<sup>27</sup>. One of the displays of public reluctance towards Lieberman's actions could be observed when one of the European

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>24</sup> S. Pardo, *Between attraction and resistance. Israeli views of European Union*, [in:] *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, eds. S. Lucarelli, L. Fioramonti, London 2009, pp. 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Foreign Minister Lieberman Addresses the UN General Assembly*, [http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/pressroom/2010/pages/fm\\_liberman\\_addresses\\_un\\_general\\_assembly\\_28-sep-2010.aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/pressroom/2010/pages/fm_liberman_addresses_un_general_assembly_28-sep-2010.aspx) (29 XII 2016).

<sup>26</sup> *Five EU foreign ministers to visit Gaza after Israel eases blockade*, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/30426> (29 IV 2017).

<sup>27</sup> לייברמן מציג: זיבור לשרי החוץ של צרפת ושל ספרד „Israel Hayom”, 11 X 2010, pp. 9.

journalists accusing him of „crimes of apartheid”, tried to bring him to a police station and provoke home arrest<sup>28</sup>.

Yet another issue that with the EU was due to the fact the Israel constantly supported the process of Jewish settlement. In April 2011, Catherine Ashton criticized the permit to construct 942 buildings in East Jerusalem<sup>29</sup>. When in October 2010 the Ministry of Interior permitted the constructions of 1100 new houses in a Jewish district Gilo (also located in East Jerusalem), Angela Merkel reacted immediately, highlighting its illegal status as per the international laws<sup>30</sup>. Growing Jewish settlements were also debated during a session of United Nations Security Council, where the European countries condemned the steps undertaken by Israel and considered them a breaking the international laws. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted those suggestions as an interference into the internal matters of Israel and demanded a better investigation of the issue, rather than hasty generalization<sup>31</sup>. Tzipi Livni, a leader of the opposition, supported the European governments by criticizing Lieberman and Netanyahu for starting a war with the greatest friends of Israel in Europe<sup>32</sup>. Similarly to Livni, Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak, stressed that the European countries are extremely important and the collaboration with them should be continued, as their help was crucial in the past<sup>33</sup>. Lieberman disregarded the opinions of Israeli politicians and stated that Israel should not apologize to any of the European countries and Israeli government does not need their advice. He also added that Israel should learn how to manage the conflict instead of focusing how to resolve it, as in his opinion the peacemaking process would not end in the next 10 years<sup>34</sup>. The policy of Lieberman regarding Jewish settlements over the „Green Line” was in line with the slogans voiced by the Russian-speaking part of the Israeli society, who constituted around 10% of the population on the occupied terrains (most of them lived in larger cities, such as Ma’ale Adummim or Ariel)<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Brussels reporter attempts citizen’s arrest of Israeli minister*, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/31855> (29 IV 2017).

<sup>29</sup> *Ashton zawiedziona budową izraelskich osiedli*, <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/ashton-zawiedziona-budowa-izraelskich-osiedli/jmb27> (29 IV 2017).

<sup>30</sup> שיחה קשה בין מרקל לרה”מ על הבנייה בגילה, „Israel Hayom”, 2 X 2011, pp. 2.

<sup>31</sup> „גזיגות אירופה במועצת הביטחון מאבדות את אמינותן”, „Israel Hayom”, 22 XII 2011, pp. 3.

<sup>32</sup> N. Hasson, *Israel Plans to Build More Than 1,000 Homes in West Bank, East Jerusalem*, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-plans-to-build-more-than-1-000-homes-in-west-bank-east-jerusalem-1.402159> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>33</sup> B. Ravid, *Barak Slams Foreign Ministry for Calling UN European States Irrelevant*, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/barak-slams-foreign-ministry-for-calling-un-european-states-irrelevant-1.402927> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>34</sup> ליברמן: אין לנו על מה להתנצל בפני אירופה, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1600678> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>35</sup> L. Friedman, *Settlements in Focus: Vol. 1, Issue 16 – „The Russians”*, <https://peacenow.org/entry.php?id=10157#.WQhnIMZdfIU> (30 IV 2017).

Meanwhile, despite of prime minister Netanyahu's appreciation of Lieberman's policy, the Minister of Foreign Affairs was forced to resign from the office. In the middle of April 2011 the prosecutor raised against him the charge of embezzlement and fraud, and in December 2012 corruption was added to the list of accusations. In result of all this Lieberman decided to step back from politics for the time of investigation<sup>36</sup>.

Avigdor Lieberman's withdrawal from government in December 2012 has coincided with shortening of the Knesset's term and announcing new parliament elections. The creation of a joint electoral list of *Likud* and *Israel Beiteinu* has been a clear sign that both sides are content with co-operation, despite the definite restraint of Lieberman's political career connected with the charges that have been raised against him. A slight victory of this formation enabled the creation of government once again being done by Netanyahu. One of the most important offices to be filled was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. „Bibi”, who has declared his believe in Lieberman's innocence, awaited for his ally to be cleared of charges and in the meantime combined the role of Prime Minister with temporary function of the head of Israel's diplomacy, independently exercising both functions.

The trial against Lieberman, that lasted from February till November 2013, resulted in clearing him from all charges<sup>37</sup>. Lieberman's return to Israeli politics coincided with an extraordinary proposal from Brussels for Israel and Palestine citizens. The European Union, urging to take a greater part in peace process between those two countries (the negotiation renewal that took place in summer 2013 has been assisted by American mediators, while the EU was not invited to participate in negotiations), has proposed both sides „special, privileged relations” with the Union in exchange for reaching the peace agreement. It would be guaranteed that both countries would have access to the European markets on preferential conditions, closer cultural and academic relations, as well as facilitations in trade and investments. At the same time, the EU warned that further Jewish settlement on the occupied territories, acts of violence and devastation in the Gaza Strip will be considered as breaking the international laws, which could block future negotiation on „special and privileged relations”<sup>38</sup>. The proposal of the EU was not followed by any concrete solutions, hence they were not taken into account by the Israeli and Palestine politicians.

The most difficult moment in mutual relation in recent years between Israel and the European Union was the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict also known as

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<sup>36</sup> J. Rudoren, *Hard-Line Israeli Foreign Minister Resigns*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/world/middleeast/avigdor-lieberman-israeli-foreign-minister-resigns.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/world/middleeast/avigdor-lieberman-israeli-foreign-minister-resigns.html?_r=0) (30 IV 2017).

<sup>37</sup> חוזר למש רד ההרץ, „Israel Hayom”, 7 XI 2013, pp. 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> *Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process*, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/140097.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/140097.pdf) (30 IV 2017).

Operation Protective Edge. Following the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas members, the IDF conducted Operation Brother's Keeper to arrest militant leaders, Hamas fired rockets into Israel and a seven-week conflict broke out. The conflict in Gaza led to the deaths of some 2,100 Palestinians (of which about 70% were civilians according to the United Nations), 74 Israelis, and over 17000 Palestinian houses were destroyed. The European Union (and in particular Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Germany) has sharply criticized both sides for reintroducing bloodshed in the Middle East<sup>39</sup>. Netanyahu's actions were also criticized by Avigdor Lieberman, who represented one of the most confrontational positions among Israeli politicians, demanding a definitive solution to the problem by completely destroying Hamas in the Gaza Strip and then launching any peace talks<sup>40</sup>.

Significant weakening of Israeli positions on the international scene as a result of the conflict in Gaza led to increased support for the idea of Palestinian state among European countries. Great backing for the Palestinian's case came from Sweden, when they decided to recognize the statehood of Palestine in October 2014. However, this decision sparked an avalanche of criticism from representatives of all political options in Israel<sup>41</sup>. Sweden's actions prompted a similar decision by Great Britain, France and the European Parliament<sup>42</sup>. Despite the fact that the European Union as an international organization has no direct opportunity to recognize the state, as it remains sovereignty of the member states, the common voice of Europe in favor of one side could be a clear signal to the Israelis and the Palestinians. The first talks on the recognition of Palestine took place in November, but after a heated debate the voting was postponed to December<sup>43</sup>. During the December's meeting, with 498 MPs in favor, 88 votes against and 111 abstentions, Members of European Parliament supported „in principle the recognition of the Palestinian state and the two-state solution”, which should be accompanied by further peace talks. The EP has also launched an action under the motto „Parliamentarians for Peace”, aimed at actions supporting the cooperation of Members of Parliaments from both countries<sup>44</sup>. However, the removal of Hamas by the

<sup>39</sup> *EU Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process*, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140907145918/http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article\\_15300\\_en.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20140907145918/http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_15300_en.htm) (30 IV 2017).

<sup>40</sup> M. Azulay, A. Solfalvi, *It's time to abandon truce talks, reach decisive victory over Hamas*, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4560499,00.html> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>41</sup> *Sweden officially recognizes Palestinian state*, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Sweden-set-to-officially-recognize-Palestinian-state-380242> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>42</sup> הפרלמנט בצרפת קרא לממשלה להכיר במדינה פלסטינית, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2502445> (30 IV 2017).

<sup>43</sup> א. לאון, „Israel Hayom”, 27 XI 2014, pp. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Rezolucja Parlamentu Europejskiego w sprawie uznania państwowości Palestyny*, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/pl/news-room/20141212IPR01105/Rezolucja-Parlamentu-Europejskiego-w-sprawie-uznania-panstwowosci-Palestyny> (30 IV 2017).

EU Court of Justice from the list of terrorist organizations can be regarded as another unfavorable step towards Israel. In this way, according to the Israeli public opinion, the European Union has officially supporter the Palestinian side in this dispute. The Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, stated that Europe did not draw any conclusions from the Holocaust<sup>45</sup>.

Lieberman's attitude to European countries revealed once again during a meeting with Israeli ambassadors in Europe, which took place in January 2015. Israeli Foreign Minister after UN vote on the withdrawal of Jewish settlers from the occupied territories said:

Our biggest challenge is not the Palestinian Authority and the Arab states, but Western countries ... The best example here is the [UN] Security Council vote. Of its members, three EU countries participated in the vote and two voted with the Palestinians, France and Luxembourg, while one country, Britain, abstained<sup>46</sup>.

Lieberman also pointed out that while maintaining close relations with EU countries due to significant trade relations is very important, he accused some European politicians of anti-Semitism<sup>47</sup>. These events were eagerly reported by the newspaper „Israel Ha-Yom”, which openly supports *Likud's* government and in this case – Lieberman attitude towards EU. The same newspaper as one of the few press titles has avoided discussing any potential Israeli membership in the European Union before, what is kind of confirmation of their opinion about EU.

The year 2015 brought further parliamentary elections and changes to the Israeli political scene. The winner was again *Likud* with Binyamin Netanyahu at the helm, which could not provide a significant opportunity to improve relations between Israel and the European Union. This time, the *Yisrael Beiteinu* decided not to create a joint list with *Likud*, as Lieberman was aware that staying close to the Netanyahu could led to the marginalization of his party. The Russian immigrant party in the parliamentary elections in 2015 received only 5,1%, what gave them only 6 seats in the Knesset, becoming little significant political force<sup>48</sup>. Netanyahu has decided to share the function of being the head Foreign Ministry with being prime minister, thus on 14 V 2015, Avigdor Lieberman's term of office as Minister of Foreign Affairs has ended.

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<sup>45</sup> גמניהו בתגובה זועמת: האירופאים צבועים, לא למדו דבר מהשואה, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2514906> (1 V 2017).

<sup>46</sup> A. Rettman, *Israel: EU support for Palestine is 'biggest challenge'*, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/127093> (1 V 2017).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> בדרך הקשה, „Israel Hayom”, 15 V 2015, pp. 2-3.

## Summary

Despite the ups and downs during Lieberman's political career, he has accustomed all observers of the Israeli political scene that he is capable of returning to the world of politics and playing a significant role at any moment. Since June 2016 he has served as Minister of National Defense in the next Netanyahu government. For many Israeli citizens, he is seen as a charismatic leader and tough player, almost like Vladimir Putin in Russia, but unfortunately for Lieberman, the Israeli voters are not the only immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Lieberman's confrontational policy towards relations with the European Union was the result of the willingness to fulfill Israel's specifically defined national interest, which was aimed at creating resistance to Palestinian diplomacy in the international organizations. The Moldavian-born Lieberman also realized demands of his voters who supported the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. It should be emphasized that these objectives of supporters of both *Yisrael Beiteinu* and *Likud* were fully realized, because despite the critique of the international community, Jewish settlements were still built outside of the „Green Line” and they critically approached any peace talks with the Palestinians. However, we should not take Lieberman's comments seriously on Israel's potential membership in the EU, because he did not make any strides towards accession to the Union, but rather he constantly criticized the EU.

When analyzing Lieberman's actions in the context of relations with the EU, it must be admitted that he was not recognized as a respectable person in Brussels. The political relationship between Israel and the Union in the period 2009-2015 was one of the worst in history. This has led to increased European support for the Palestinian cause, and consequently the marginalization of the EU in the context of the potential peace process. Therefore, the article positively verified both hypotheses, which were set at the beginning of the paper.

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