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Day Tripping in Jerusalem: 
The Curious Case of How Russian Orthodox Christians Became the Same-Day Religious Tourists in the Holy Land

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Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians have emerged as an overlooked sector showing unexpected growth among same-day religious tourists to the Holy Land. How do they come to total over 200,000 unique guests and make up 35% of all single-day visitors to Israel when they come from so far away? Researchers need to rethink first what constitutes same-day religious tourism. Marketing mechanisms attract Russians and Ukrainians to Cyprus, and then facilitate opportunities to sample religious heritage sites in nearby Israel. Together this sequence comprises a specific causal chain which triggers one-day, round trip excursions from the Cypriot coast for an hour-long flight to Tel Aviv/Yafo, a day of motoring and dining, and back again. Over one-third of all Russian visitors to Israel now complete their trip to the Holy Land in under a day, and these day trippers represent a quarter of that nationality which chooses to vacation in Cyprus. The implications for airlines, tour operators and providing heritage access to other locales are huge. Tourism manipulated for geopolitical advantage is the greater lesson.

Key Words: same-day religious tourism, day trip pilgrimage, Russian-Cypriot relations, Holy Land

Introduction

Over the past decade, the State of Israel has experienced a boom in tourism, with over 4 million reported visitors in 2018 and a projected total of 4.7 million in 2019. This number is considerable given that the population of Israel itself is about 8.9 million. This means that tourist traffic equals half the resident population. One-third of tourists were Jewish, a little over half were Christian, less than five per cent were Muslim and close to one-seventh reported no religious affiliation. Around one-quarter of these tourists came for religious reasons (pilgrimage), one-fifth came for sightseeing and a little less than one-third came to visit friends and family. The average length of stay was 10 days.

Day trippers were 5.3% of the total tourist numbers, or approximately 220,447. In contrast to their longer-term counterparts, almost all of these day trippers were Christian, and among the Christians, 93.2% self-identified as Orthodox. Per the Tourism Ministry, ‘the vast majority of these same-day tourists were European, with Russian and Ukrainians being the most prominent [italics added for emphasis]’ (Israel Ministry of Tourism, 2019). An important note must be made here – most Europeans are not Orthodox Christians. They are mostly Roman Catholic or belonging to a Protestant denomination. A strong claim can be made that over nine-tenths of day trippers are Russian and/or Ukrainian given the high number of self-identified Orthodox Christians in the surveys. Statistical reports provided by Israel’s Ministry of Tourism indicate that the tourist arrival numbers from Russia and Ukraine dwarf the number of visitor arrivals from Greece and Cyprus.

There are several other general characteristics for same-day tourists to Israel. Close to half of day trippers in 2018, travelled by themselves, a little more than a third travelled as couples, and the remaining in groups of three or more. Additionally, a little less than half of one-day travellers were between 25 and 44 years of age, whereas one-fifth were between 45-54, less than one-fifth were 24 and younger, and 55 and older, respectively. Almost all respondents reported that travel agencies were the main factor that influenced their decision to visit Israel for a day and that they came as part of a tour, ostensibly organised through a travel agency, though the report does not make that clear. A little less than half came through Ben Gurion Airport (Tel Aviv/Yafo), whereas most of the remainder came through the land crossings near the town of Eilat in southern Israel. The most visited months were May, October, and December.

All day trippers were first time visitors to Israel. This contrasts with multiday tourists where a little over half visited Israel for the first time. Almost all single-day
tourists visited Jerusalem, the Dead Sea region and Bethlehem. The Tel-Aviv/Yafo region was visited by one-sixth of one-day tourists and the city of Eilat and adjoining Red Sea region by one-seventh of these tourists. This is interesting, as close to half of visitors came through the land crossings near Eilat, yet only a smaller number visited the city of Eilat itself. However, the report details that over 90% of the visitors visited the Wailing Wall. Close to the same number visited the Church of the Holy Resurrection (Sepulcher) as well. Visitors crossing by land near Eilat were interested in travelling to Israel to view religious sites more than in visiting the coastal areas of the Red Sea region.

Overall, these statistics paint a picture of the typical same-day tourist for Israel – early to mid-30s Russian citizen who identifies as an Orthodox Christian, and came to Israel for religious motivations, either as a religious tourist or as a pilgrim. They travelled either by themselves, or as a couple, and it was their first visit to Israel. As one-day travellers, Russian Orthodox tourists booked travel through an agency, making the reservation for the day trip less than one month in advance. This contrasts with regular tourists to Israel in 2018, where 99.6% made reservations up to one month before the trip, with some over six months in advance.

When taking a longer view of same-day tourism to Israel, a picture emerges. Overall, same-day tourism fluctuates over time, however, the same is not true for Orthodox Christian day trippers. From 2011 until 2019, there was an increase of 276% in Orthodox same-day tourists to Israel. Per the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, approximately 576,100 visitors from the Russian Federation and Ukraine visited the country in 2018. Of these, 35% were same-day tourists. This is a considerable number and indicates that the as the percentage of same-day tourists becomes increasingly more Orthodox, the percentage of Russians & Ukrainians visiting Israel for just one day is also rising. This is even more interesting when one considers that same-day tourist arrivals declined somewhat in 2018 compared to the preceding five years.

Can a day tripper be a religious tourist or a pilgrim? The answer is yes, though there has been discussion on the sincerity of these tourists, in particular as short-term, also referred to as weekend tourism, is often associated with public holidays (Shinde, 2014). A proper response to this question requires definitional clarification. A day tripper is a tourist who does not incorporate an overnight stay in their plans. They are also referred to as excursionists, same-day visitors and same-day tourism (Volo, 2017; Surinach, 2018). For this article, I define a day tripper as a person who travels to and completes their desired tourism activity within a 24-hour period, regardless of means of transportation.

Tourism activity is understood by the World Tourism Organization as travel by people outside of their usual environment for leisure, business, or other activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total # of Same-Day Tourists to Israel</th>
<th>Estimated # of Same-Day Arrivals – Orthodox Christian</th>
<th>Estimated % of Same-Day Arrivals – Orthodox Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>72,900</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>201,033</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>415,900</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>350,100</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>477,500</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>304,700</td>
<td>100,916</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>383,400</td>
<td>219,298</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>305,600</td>
<td>172,306</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>212,385</td>
<td>142,276</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>94,999</td>
<td>63,839</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>195,486</td>
<td>147,752</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>220,447</td>
<td>201,758</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All data taken from Ministry of Tourism Annual Tourist Arrival datasets and Annual Incoming Tourism Surveys

**Data are not available
The concept of a usual environment is crucial in understanding how to define day trippers. In a 2008 UN report, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs defined usual environment as ‘the geographical area (though not necessarily a contiguous one) within which an individual conducts his/her regular life routines’ (United Nations, 2010). This definition is meant to exclude those who commute regularly for work and/or frequently visit places within their regular life routines. Depending on the geographical area, particularly within the visa-free Schengen zone of Europe, some forms of commuting, even for work, could theoretically be considered tourism. To avoid such conflation, the UN strongly recommends that each country define what is meant by regular and frequent to disentangle the phenomena of tourism and travel for work and life routines.

The dilemma that arises from this discussion is how are day trips or same-day tourism delineated from travel within a regular life routine? Surinach, et al. (2018) discuss this issue at length and determine that the endogenous approach to defining a usual environment should not be left up to the respondent, or the tourism organisation, whether municipal nor national. Instead someone’s usual environment should be defined in terms of their ‘urban system’, which is operationally defined as someone’s functional areas, areas of labour mobility and commercial areas. Movements outside of these areas could be classified as tourism.

How does this then fit with current iterations of religious tourism? Shinde and Rizello (2014) recount Turner’s explanation of the three elements that are used in conjunction when discussing pilgrimage and religious tourism and how it is separate from leisure tourism:

**Motivation:** or the desire for spiritual or religious fulfilment

**Journey:** separation from one’s daily existence to fulfil spiritual obligations, accompanied by an overall improvement of self well-being

**Destination:** a ‘centre out there’, or a sacred place where the journey takes one to

From this, the authors develop a working definition of religious tourism

> *Visitors who use tourism as a means to fulfil a predominant religious motive in visiting a destination that they value for reasons related to religious practice or sanctity of a place* (Shinde, 2014:20)

The authors’ discussion of Turner’s ‘centre out there’ is probably the most relevant element for their work on weekend tourism. By ‘centre out there’ Turner (1973) means that the location is often outside a city’s or urban centre, often on the periphery. It is far away enough that it is no longer part of normal life, or part of the usual environment as discussed above. Some distance is necessary for a pilgrimage to occur, though with the increase in residential density around pilgrimage centres and religious sites and the increase in cheaper transportation options, the concept of distance has shifted. Rinschede (1992) identifies short-term religious tourism as travel to nearby sacred sites. However, what constitutes nearby? Does that mean only driving distance, which is what many of the above authors imply? Could it possibly include short flights given how inexpensive flights have become with low-cost airline carriers? The simple answer to all three questions listed above is yes. Many countries or regions within countries have recognised the importance of tourism to the development of their national economies. Indeed, Dinu (2018) notes that tourism and transportation are interdependent industries. Since tourists pay for tourism out of their own budget, they prefer that their transportation be safe, fast, and comfortable. For example, 77% of all tourist journeys are by car transportation. Countries therefore have invested in road transportation, particularly to pilgrimage and religious destination sites. And depending on their geography, countries may also invest in their land crossings and border stations to facilitate travel and tourism.

Short flights across a region, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, have generally come down in price. Given the distance of the airports, the cost of the flights and their timing, such as leaving in the early morning and returning in the late evening, nearby destinations are no longer defined by just driving distance to a ‘centre out there’ on the periphery. Low-cost airline carriers have expanded the conceptual zone of what is the periphery for the same-day tourist. It has become easier to leave one’s usual environment and become a short-term tourist. Indeed, Dinu (2018) points out that low cost air transportation may be becoming more important for short-term tourism, given the poor quality of highways and road conditions, and depending on the country, security when travelling by land. She notes,

> *Therefore, apparently over time the world’s busiest air directions are not long two trips, but short-range trips between cities not more than 1,000 km apart* (Dinu, 2018:186).
The typical description of a same-day tourist to Israel described above – mid-30s, Russian Orthodox who came to visit religious sites fits the working definition of a religious tourist provided by Shinde and Rizello. The question then is, why Russian Orthodox tourists? On one end, Russian and Ukrainian citizens can travel visa free to Israel (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). So, the increase in same-day tourism by Russian & Ukrainian visitors could be a function of this visa regime. However, per travelmath.com, a flight from Moscow to Tel Aviv/Yafo takes 3 hours and 47 minutes. Once you add in wait times at the airports and transportation time to Jerusalem, for most tourists, this flight back and forth would be too long for a day trip to Israel. If Russian and Ukrainian tourists are predominant among day trippers, they must be accessing Israel from locations much closer than their origin country. For day trippers then, accessibility is key! A short-term religious tourist cannot complete their desired activities if transportation consumes a significant portion of the 24-hour period.

Building on Turner, with Shinde and Rizello, I propose that short-term religious tourism involves four interacting elements: Motivation, Journey, Destination and Accessibility. Accessibility involves the use of transportation that allows a religious tourist to complete their journey in a short period of time, again usually a site, centre and/or religious conference that is geographically nearby. This leads to a revision of their working definition of religious tourism into a definition of Short-Term Religious Tourism, which is something the authors implicitly express in their article:

*Visitors who use tourism as a means to fulfil a predominant religious motive in visiting a nearby geographically accessible destination that they value for reasons related to religious practice or sanctity of a place and complete their tourism activity within a 24-hour period, regardless of means of transportation.*

With this, I can then modify Shinde and Rizello’s working definition of religious tourism again to provide a definition for Same-Day Religious Tourism. The new definition incorporates the three traditional elements of religious tourism, plus the element of accessibility provided for short-term religious tourism, and the element of time:

*Visitors who use tourism as a means to fulfil a predominant religious motive in visiting a nearby geographically accessible destination that they value for reasons related to religious practice or sanctity of a place and complete their tourism activity within a 24-hour period, regardless of means of transportation.*

### Theory and Hypotheses

This new working definition is a bit clunky and could possibly be streamlined. Yet, from this new working definition of Same-Day Religious Tourism, we can begin to better understand same-day visitors to Israel. As noted in the 2018 Incoming Tourism Survey, almost half of single-day tourists came through the Taba and Wadi Araba border crossings near the town of Eilat in southern Israel, whereas far fewer used the Allenby and Jordan Valley river bridges. The Taba, or Menachem, border crossing and terminal is the only entry/exit point with Egypt that handles tourists between the two countries. Respectively, the Wadi Araba, or Yitzhak Rabin, border crossing and terminal is one of three entry/exit points for tourists between Israel and Jordan, with the Allenby, or King Hussein, bridge crossing and terminal being the other main entry point. These same-day tourists were already in Egypt and/or Jordan. Through a travel agency, they took advantage of geographic accessibility to enter Israel proper and visit important religious sites, such as the Wailing Wall and the Church of the Holy Resurrection (Sepulcher). This is confirmed in the Ministry of Tourism report where almost all respondents reported that travel agencies were the main factor that influenced their decision to visit Israel for a day, and that an equivalent number came as part of a tour.

This research will focus on the other half of day trippers to Israel, - the half that came through the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv/Yafo as seen in Table 2.

### Table 2: Number of Same-Day Tourist Questionnaires, According to Arrival Points*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departure Stations</th>
<th>Same-Day Visitors</th>
<th>Total Number of Departing Tourists</th>
<th>Percentage of Departing Tourists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben Gurion Airport</td>
<td></td>
<td>96,533</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Crossings</td>
<td></td>
<td>107,001</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>200,500</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information above taken from Table 1.1 on page 26 of the 2018 Incoming Tourism Survey (Israel Ministry of Tourism, 2019)

**Number of questionnaires is lower than the number of total one-day travellers
I hypothesise that same-day tourism to Israel is intricately linked with Russian tourism to Cyprus and that this tourism is directly linked to religious motivations. Increased Russian tourism to Cyprus has created a supply of tourists interested in day trips to Israel. I deliberately set aside day trips taken by tourists arriving by cruise ship because the Israeli Ministry of Tourism specifies that their surveys were taken at the Tel Aviv airport and at the land border crossings, and not at any of the three major seaports of Haifa, Ashdod and Eilat. Previous Visitor Arrivals databases would have separated out arrivals from cruise ships but starting in 2014 the Ministry of Tourism excluded them from same-day statistics.

This leads me to generate a hypothesis regarding this relationship, accompanied by a null hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \text{Russian tourism to Cyprus is linked to same-day tourism to Israel} \]

\[ H_0: \text{Russian tourism to Cyprus is not linked to same-day tourism to Israel} \]

These two hypotheses are not meant to be testable as expected in inferential statistics. In other words, they are not set up to test for outward validity and for generalisability to the larger phenomena of tourism. Instead, they are meant to allow for a more focused approach to understanding what may be causing increase in day-tripping tourism to Israel. George and Bennett (2005:8) discuss the importance of within-case analysis in the social sciences to establish causal mechanisms. The authors define causal mechanisms as, ‘independent stable factors that under certain conditions link causes to effects.’ In some research, determining causal mechanisms are more important than developing generalisations. The goal is establishing conceptual validity regarding the element of accessibility in the definition I have provided for Same-Day Religious Tourism.

**Day-Tripping in Jerusalem**

What does a day trip to Jerusalem look like? Varianos Travel, a travel agency located in Cyprus provides a good example of what a one-day trip from Larnaca to the Holy Land/ Jerusalem looks like. Varianos Travel mostly avoids using the term Israel in their webpage, focusing instead on the phrases Holy Land and Jerusalem. This is probably done to avoid any geopolitical issues regarding the status of Jerusalem and of the West Bank. Below is the itinerary for their Jerusalem Private Express Holiday package as provided by one of their travel agents through email correspondence:

**Department from Larnaca airport at 07:00 with arrival in Tel Aviv/Yafo at 08:00.**

* A driver will be waiting for you outside in the arrival hall (after passport control), holding a sign with your names on it. Then drive to Bethlehem: visit the Church of the Nativity, birthplace of Jesus and the Manger square.

* Then, drive to Jerusalem Old City and visit of the 4 quarters, the Wailing Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Via Dolorosa & the famous Souk.

* If time permits, traffic conditions are good and there are no flights delays, we might add more sites to the visit.

* After tour, transfer back to the airport for your return flight back to Cyprus, departing Tel Aviv/Yafo at 22:20 and arriving Larnaca at 23:20 (Varianos Travel, 2020).

The costs for the trip varied depending on the number of paying tourists:

- Based on three people: €515 per person
- Based on four people: €450 per person

Package includes:

- Economy air ticket Cyprus-Israel- Cyprus inclusive of all taxes and with just 1 small hand/ cabin bag.
- Meet, greet and assist upon arrival at Tel Aviv / Yafo, Israel Airport.
- Day tour by private car / Minivan with professional guide in English. For other languages, guides may be arranged upon request.

Varianos Travel lists a number of important notes for travellers, including that no checked-in baggage is allowed and that Muslim clients can visit the al-Aqsa Mosque instead of the Holy Church of Resurrection (Sepulchre). However, one important note was the reference to a PRO visa, which will also be discussed at length later in the paper:

*All clients who travel with PRO visa (mainly Russian and Ukrainian passport holders) should have the relevant documents with them while travelling to Israel. If not, the airline has the right to refuse their check in. In such cases the responsibility lies with the customer and no refund can be made.*
Holy Tours appears to market their tours to Christians coming as pilgrims. For example, their excursion to the Jordan River is marketed as a ‘One-Day Baptism Tour’, where passengers are given the opportunity to be baptised.

Tour: Jerusalem/Bethlehem. Cost: $165 per person.
Duration: 8:30am – 6:00pm
Tour: Nazareth/Galilee. Cost: $265 per person.
Duration: 7:00am – 7:00pm
Tour: Caesarea/Akko. Cost: $255 per person.
Duration: 7:00am – 7:00pm

**Methodology**

To understand how Russian Orthodox Christians became 91% of the one-day travellers in Israel, I use process tracing, a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis in the social sciences. Collier defines process tracing as

> the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator (Collier, 2011:823).

Process tracing is a useful technique when the scholar desires careful description. This description then allows for the temporal sequencing of events, using diagnostic evidence to explain the observed causal process. It is often used in case study research, where researchers are more interested in finding the conditions under which specific outcomes occur, and the mechanisms through which they occur, rather than uncovering the frequency with which those conditions and their outcomes arise (George & Bennett, 2005:44)

Process tracing places emphasis on diagnostic pieces of evidence that allow the researcher to identify ‘novel political and social phenomena’ (Collier, 2011:824). It is meant to explain how events have unfolded over time to understand outcomes. For example, in this study we already know the dependent variable – that Russian Orthodox tourists are estimated to be 91% of same-day tourists to Israel. In addition, we know the context – a good number arrive through the land crossings in Eilat and that the rest go through Ben-Gurion airport. What we do not understand are the mechanisms that set up this tourist phenomenon in the first place. Why is it that Russian Orthodox tourists dominate day trips? How is that possible given that most Russian airports are mostly three hours away by air transport? What has enabled Russians to visit Israel so easily? In other words, what has made Israel more

Most importantly, a flight from the airport in Larnaca, Cyprus to Ben-Gurion airport in Tel-Aviv/Yafo is approximately 55 minutes in length, as is evidenced in Image 1. Larnaca is the third largest city in Cyprus and has the island’s principal airport. This fulfils the key aspect of accessibility when talking about same-day tourism. Similarly, Moscow, Cyprus, and Israel are all in the same time zone, which facilitates travel and can provide a sense of accessibility. Cyprus and Israel also share a common climate, so warm weather casual wear works in both places. As most Israeli businesses accept euros this eliminates currency barriers. Cyprus is in the Eurozone, which means Russian tourists can spend their withdrawn euros and not have to convert the Rubles upon entry. This is a valuable factor for accessibility.

Other travel agencies offer one-day tours, but often without the inclusion of airfare. For example, one company, Elbow Holy Land Tours, offers eight one-day tours that vary by interest and location on their website. When contacted, the travel agent listed three of those eight one-day tours. The agent indicated that Elbow Holy Land Tours would be unable to book flights on behalf of their customers but would be able to pick up passengers from the terminal at Ben-Gurion airport. The agent wrote:

> If you can book flights and let us know the arrival / departure time then we can build a tour for you to cover sites within either Jerusalem / Bethlehem (or Nazareth / Galilee or Caesarea / Akko if flights arrive really early and depart late).

Each one-day tour itinerary and price the agent suggested was based on four paid passengers and included private coach and private Christian tour guide. Information for each suggested day tour is provided below (Elbow Holy Land Tours, 2020). Elbow Land
accessible? This puzzle and related research questions lend themselves well to within-case study work and the use of process tracing to claim causal inference.

**Russian Tourism to Cyprus through the Perspective of Geopolitics**

To determine if evidence exists for these hypotheses, the first step is to trace modern tourism from Russia to Cyprus. Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was little tourism to Cyprus, with an annual average of 1,666 arrivals from 1980 till 1985, and no recorded arrivals for four years from 1986 till 1989. In 1990, in the penultimate year of the Soviet Union’s existence, 11,595 tourists were admitted. Again, from 1991 till 1993, there were no recorded arrivals, though this may either be a consequence of the turmoil following the fall of the Soviet Union, or a lack of reliable statistics as the country broke apart (Republic of Cyprus, 2020).

In 1994, the Cyprus Ministry of Tourism began measuring tourist arrivals from ‘Russia and ex-Soviet Union countries’, with 60,000 tourists visiting that year. By 1997 that number had jumped to 221,854. Starting in 1998, Cyprus began不同iating between the former Soviet Republics, with Russia, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine grouped in the Other European Countries column, and former Soviet Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania in the Europe column. In the 2000s, tourism from Russia and Ukraine reached the tens of thousands, with the bulk from the Russian Federation. But, after 2010, the numbers had surged. Close to 825,000 tourists arrived from Russia in 2017, whereas Ukrainian tourism peaked in 2018 with close to 70,000 arrivals. Anywhere from 800,000 to 900,000 tourists arrived from Russia and Ukraine to Cyprus in 2018. Overall, Russians and Ukrainians form the second largest number of tourist arrivals to Cyprus. British tourists have always numbered more, averaging around 1.3 million since 2000. Coincidentally, tourist arrivals from Israel have increased as well, particularly in the last five years (2014-2018). Averaging between 30,000 and 50,000 tourists from 1993 till 2013, this number has peaked, with 261,966 Israelis visiting Cyprus in 2017, making Israelis the third largest group of tourist arrivals (Republic of Cyprus, 2020).

Russian tourists overwhelmingly visit the Republic of Cyprus, governed by the ethnic Greek Cypriot community. Historically, any tourism to the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was limited, outside of visitors from mainland Turkey (Ekici & Caner, 2018). As Turkey is still the only country to recognise the self-declared TRNC, tourism to this area has traditionally been through airports in mainland Turkey. Recently, tourists can now visit the northern part through the Republic of Cyprus for a limited time. Though, as discussed below, travel to the TRNC is not allowed for tourists on certain visas, such as Russian travellers in the PRO visa regime.

Cyprus is also part of the Orthodox Crescent, which lances north from Palestine all the way to Finland. The resurgence in religion in post-communist Russia has also seen a rise in the demand for religious tours by the faithful (Pew Research Center, 2014; Yakunin, et al., 2016). This not only includes historic sites within Russia, but also other locations in the former Soviet Union as well as major Orthodox destinations in other countries. Such sites include Mt. Athos in northern Greece, St. Sava Cathedral in Belgrade, Rila Monastery in Bulgaria, Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, the major religious sites in and around Jerusalem, as well as numerous monasteries that have been revived in Eastern Europe. In Cyprus, religious tourism is part of the itinerary when Russians visit the island. The Kykkos monastery in the Troodos mountains, the Faneromeni Church in the capital of Nicosia, and numerous other churches in other cities, such as Larnaca and Limassol are all popular attractions. The sacred sites cater to Russian tourists, and are staffed with guides, icons, and gift shops with religious paraphernalia in Russian.

Gorsuch (2011) writes that in the early formative years of the Soviet Union, international tourism, both to and from the country, was discouraged. This changed after premier Khrushchev assumed power in 1955. He liberalised travel for Soviet citizens and for travel within the Soviet Union by foreign tourists. Khrushchev saw tourism as part and parcel of the normalisation of relations with outside countries after the death of Joseph Stalin. Yet, even though the increase in tolerance and the reaching out to neighbours by Khrushchev may have heralded his plan for peaceful coexistence, it did not necessarily mean that the Cold War had subsided. On the contrary, many Soviet diplomats saw the goal of tourism as ‘expanding international connections’ (quote taken directly from Gorsuch, 2011:14), and saw tourism as a new political arena from which to combat American influence.

This understanding that tourism is closely tied to geopolitics and international strategy, has deep roots. Weaver (2015) has noted that tourism is a wholly geopolitical activity. Tourism between countries requires coordination and functional relationships that allow for such travel to even take place. Mobility only
comes through political action. It has been said that while tourism is largely a function of economic decision making, border control and accessibility to a country and its cultural and religious sites is inherently political. Hall (2017:15-24) also notes that tourism has traditionally been subject to geopolitical pressures. Original scholarship on this relationship focused on state activity, with the management of tourist flows and the use of tourism as economic development policies. States often looked to increase their political and economic capacity, especially vis-à-vis their neighbours, and / or potential regional rivals. More recent research has focused on the resurgence of geopolitics within the large discourse of globalization, with a number of authors providing more critical insights. Hall cites Craggs’s work on how hospitality is a principle component of political practices. It takes diplomatic coordination and political will to create the sets of spaces – bars, clubs, hotels and tourist sites – that tourists have come to expect (Craggs, 2014).

A strategic relationship between Cyprus and Russia based on geopolitical interests has developed over time. Melakopides (2016) comments that Moscow employed a pragmatic idealistic approach to Cyprus, with what he describes as a mix of strategic interests with dimensions of idealism. While the strategic interests will be explained in detail, the author postis that the Soviet Union / Russia has been ‘faithful to the original values and norms of the United Nations’. This means that Moscow has used international institutions, such as the UN Security Council, to promote Cypriot positions, particularly when related to comments and posturing made by successive Turkish governments. This is even true after the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974, where Moscow assertively used international diplomacy to defend the rights and needs of the Greek Cypriot people afflicted by the violence and displacement of the subsequent Turkish occupation.

As an island in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus has always held a strategic position. Its proximity to the Middle East, Suez Canal and major land and sea trade routes, led to British occupation and colonisation in 1878. Greek Cypriots chaffed at being a crown colony, using both violent and nonviolent means to attain independence. The Soviets supported the independence movement, both out of cultural affinity and out of their pattern of support for revolution, mostly through the active Cypriot Communist Party, or AKEL as it is known in its Greek initials. Indeed, Stergiou (2007) notes that AKEL represented about 30% of the Greek Cypriot vote, and was at the forefront of the independence struggle. After independence in 1960, the two countries recognised each other, though the USSR was hesitant in a full-throated support of Cyprus. Soviet policy was ambiguous at times towards Cyprus in an effort to balance regional interests with Turkey. From the Cypriot point of view, the relationship was always one of support. Indeed, Archbishop Makarios, the ethnic Greek president of Cyprus post-independence even suggested that the Soviets become militarily involved to counter a potential Turkish invasion.

The attempt at enosis, or unification, with Greece in 1974 prompted Turkey to invade the island. Under Article IV of the Treaty of Guarantee, Greece, Turkey and the UK reserved the right to intervene in Cypriot affairs to re-establish the state of affairs that previously existed. Turkey, however, did not re-establish the previous government, instead partitioning the island into a northern Turkish part and a southern Greek part. During the invasion, Greece mobilised to confront the Turkish military, which would have led to a military engagement between two NATO allies. As this was during the depths of the Cold War, the US and other NATO allies had no desire to see two NATO members go to war, so they stopped Greece from completing its mobilisation. The intervention by NATO and the US to prevent a Greco-Turkish war provided more context for the Soviet Union to exert more influence. This is despite the neutral stance the Soviet Union took during the invasion and evidence that Moscow may have known in advance (Stergiou, 2007).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed for a reset of relations. Freed from Cold War politics, bilateral ties have deepened between the two countries. Russia and Cyprus have signed over 23 agreements on numerous issues. Melakopides (2016) suggests that a ‘special’ relationship exists between Russia and Cyprus. He states,

Most Greek Cypriots bestow gratitude on Moscow, for its prolonged, consistent, and multi-layered protection of their Republic, through diplomatic, political, economic, and psychological support.

He notes that there are strong relations in trade, banking, energy, tourism, culture and defence. He also further notes that Russia has historical, religious, and spiritual sentiments towards Cyprus, primarily given Russian affection for Orthodoxy and Hellenism.

Delanoe (2013) highlights that these bilateral ties have become stronger since Vladimir Putin became president. For example, in addition to the cultural
affinities that exist between the two countries, Russian citizens invested heavily in Cyprus during the late 2000s and 2010s. In 2010, the president of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev and the president of Cyprus, Demetris Christofias signed a key agreement that eliminated double taxation. This accord was in recognition of the increase in Russian investment in Cyprus and allowed for further development and cooperation on economic and financial issues (Associated Press, 2010). A major critique has been that the close relationship between the two countries has allowed for Russian oligarchs to use Cyprus as a way to avoid domestic taxation in Russia as investment is no longer taxed. Yet, this close relationship has manifested in other industries as well. For example, when Cyprus Airways declared bankruptcy in 2015, Charlie Airlines, a subsidiary airline of the Russian carrier S7 (Siberian) Airlines bought the rights to Cyprus Airways and restarted flying in 2017. A visit to Cyprus Airways website lists Tel Aviv/Yafo as one of their major international destination sites. Similarly, Russia has opened a dedicated visa centre in Nicosia for travel to Russia, as investment by Cypriot businesses in Russian industries has increased as well (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Cyprus, 2020).

Russians who invest €300,000 are eligible for permanent residency in Cyprus. Those that invest €2 million in a Cypriot property or business are eligible for citizenship. The latter scheme is officially referred to as the Cyprus Citizenship Investment Programme (Henley & Partners). This has transformed parts of the island, in particular Limassol, a port city that has become a haven for the Russian wealthy. Locals have begun calling it ‘Limassolgrad’ as the already 50,000 strong expatriate Russian community there is benefitting from Russian money pouring in. Many of these folks are ‘buy to leave’ investors who invest in Cyprus as way to gain an EU passport for themselves and their families. Finance Minister Harris Georgiades quoted that the controversial program has brought in €4 billion in foreign investment, or close to 25% of all foreign direct investment in the country (Smith, 2018).

**The PRO Visa for Russian Tourists**

The lead up to the adoption of the visa-free regime between Russia and Cyprus helps us to understand the potential causal mechanism that has led to Russians becoming the predominant one-day travellers to Israel – the provisional (PRO) visa regime. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Cyprus, the PRO visa is a special visa program intended only for Russian citizens who intend to travel to the Republic of Cyprus. This refers to Russian citizens who travel directly from the Russian Federation, and not through a third country [italics added]. A PRO visa is valid for a single-entry trip to the Republic of Cyprus, for a maximum duration of 90 days within any 180-day period. There is no charge for the PRO Visa, which makes it attractive, particularly in comparison to a Schengen visa, where the fee is €60 for each adult and €35 for children aged 6 to 11. As noted below, there is no guarantee that a Schengen visa will be provided, whereas the PRO visa is automatic. Below is the official description from the Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

As of May 2009, a simplified system of granting permission to enter the Republic of Cyprus - PRO VISA has been introduced. It applies only to holders of Russian passports who intend to travel from Russia to Cyprus by a direct flight. Pro-visa is a provisional visa which is issued upon completion of an electronic application at the Consulate of the Republic of Cyprus. The final entry permit (visa) is placed in a tourist’s passport at the airport upon arrival to Cyprus (Republic of Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). PRO visas are not valid for travel to the Turkish occupied northern part of Cyprus. In addition, travel to the Republic of Cyprus through the closed airports and ports (i.e. all the airports and ports in the occupied areas), are in breach of national law of the Republic of Cyprus.

The PRO visa application can be accessed through the Internet at https://www.provisa. mfa.gov.cy/russia. The website asks a potential applicant to select from one of five Cypriot consulates in the Russian cities of Krasnodar, Samara, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Moscow, then followed by the number of applicants. The process is straightforward and simple, asking only vital information, such as full names of all applicants, home addresses, telephone numbers, passport numbers, current occupation with company contact information, the address of your residence in Cyprus, and a functioning email address. Within one working day, the visa application is processed and then emailed directly to the applicant. The Russian tourist prints it out and shows it at the check-in desk.

The PRO visa has had an astounding effect on the number of Russian tourists arriving to Cyprus. Tourist arrivals have increased at least eightfold between 2005 and 2018 (Table 3).
The adoption of a PRO visa was important for Russia, particularly given that visa requirements for Russians entering the Schengen area are far more stringent than those for the PRO visas from Cyprus. To obtain a Schengen visa, Russian citizens need to collect a number of documents, including proof of round-trip tickets, accommodation details for the entire trip, documentation of financial means, which indicate that the tourist has the desire to return home, as well as proof of the paid visa fee, which as indicated above could cost €190 for a family of four. It should be noted that in case of rejection of an application for a visa, the visa fee is not refundable.

Cyprus is not part of the Schengen area. The PRO visa has enabled Russians to holiday in the Mediterranean far easier. Geopolitically, the PRO visa has become even more important after the 2014 Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea. The number of Schengen visa applications lodged at Russian consulates has dropped dramatically, with a 47.2% drop in applications. Close to 7 million Russians applied for visas in 2013, the year before the invasion. In 2018, that number was about 3.7 million. Image 2 graphs the yearly drop.

The PRO visa does not include the growing number of Russians who have come to Cyprus on other visas. For example, citizens of Russia that have obtained a valid Schengen visa type ‘C’ and have entered the Schengen region at least once, can enter and stay in Cyprus within the validity of their Schengen visa. Yet it appears that if Russian nationals come to Cyprus, they come on a PRO visa.

### Conclusion

This essay has attempted to answer a puzzle that has emerged – how have Russian Orthodox Christians overwhelmingly become the one-day travellers to Israel? Given that most major Russian airports are at least three hours away, with the major national airports in Moscow closer to four hours away, visiting Israel is not an activity often completed in one day. Research suggests proximity and accessibility are key variables in understanding same-day tourism. An increase in Russian tourism to Cyprus is linked to same-day tourism in Israel. The PRO visa regime instituted in 2009 clearly led to a dramatic increase in Russian tourism to Cyprus. This in turn has more than likely led to an increase in the number of Russian tourists taking advantage of the close proximity between Larnaca and Tel Aviv/Yafo to travel to Israel for the day as a number of airlines provide same-day round trip flights.\(^1\)

This causal process observation inductively shows the internal validity of the proposed hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arrival of Tourists from Russia</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arrival of Tourists from Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>97,600</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>474,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>114,763</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>608,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>145,921</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>636,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>180,926</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>524,823**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>148,740</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>781,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>223,861*</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>824,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>334,083</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>783,631</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Year PRO visa went into effect  **Effect of Sanctions from Annexation of Crimea
Studies indicate that same-day tourism can be beneficial to the tourism industry. Same-day visitors spend significantly on items other than accommodation, such as food and drink, retail, local transport, leisure and entertainment, and other services. While they are sometimes not as impactful economically as overnight stays, same-day tourists are noteworthy in that they can be repeat visitors. In a study on the impact of tourism on Barcelona, Murillo (2013) analyses that many day trippers reside relatively close to Barcelona and are much more likely to visit more often. Proximity matters to one-day travellers, and repeat tourism could play a role in expenditure, particularly when looking at spending outside of hotel stays.

If a link does exist between same-day tourism, proximity and repeat tourism, then it may be in a country’s interest to develop and promote the day-traveller industry. Murillo, et al., (2011) in another working paper, suggest that policymakers need to consider same-day tourists in their policy decisions. Day trippers account for more than 50% of visitors to Barcelona yet, generate 10% of visitors’ direct expenditure. The discrepancy indicates that there may be room for growth in this sector. This observation I believe is more relevant for a country such as Israel where same-day tourists are clearly motivated by religious reasons, either as a pilgrim (28.2%), or to see religious sites (87.9% visited the Church of the Holy Resurrection), making them unique in comparison to other same-day tourists.

When looking at expenditure by tourist group, spending by one-day travellers amount to $166 per day, beyond what they spent on their travel package. This is higher than the expenditures of multi-day tourists, at $124 a day, particularly those who did not come as part an organised tour (referred to as foreign individual tourists). And it approaches the expenditure of multi-day tourists, at $178 a day, who visited Israel on a tour package (Israel Ministry of Tourism, 2019). As day trippers are only 5.3% of the overall tourist population to Israel, there is potential for growth in the same-day religious tourism market in a country noted for its religious heritage sites. 100% of day trippers reported visiting Israel for the first time. This could be an example of desperation tourism, where for most people, one pilgrimage is a lifetime supply. Still, the possibility of repeat tourism should be explored. If these same Russian tourists visit Cyprus on a regular basis, then return tourism is plausible. Same-day visitors also reported their satisfaction level average at 4.0 (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being highest), with close to ninety percent describing their overall satisfaction as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’. This suggests that motivation and proximity may induce Russian tourists to visit Israel again.

Repeat same-day tourism might appeal to some Russian tourists as the itineraries offered by the travel agencies in Cyprus do not specifically mention stops at Russian heritage sites in the Holy Land. Those which would have meaning for Russians in Jerusalem include the Holy Trinity Cathedral, or the Church of Mary Magdalene located in the Mount of Olives, or the Church of Saint Alexander Nevskiy within the old city walls. These sites are popular with multi-day Russian tourists to Israel, and more than likely are visited when touring the old city. Developing and / or listing these sacred sites in the itinerary could possibly lead to even more Russian same-day tourism.

References


1. Airlines that have offered direct trips from Larnaca to Tel Aviv/Yafo include Aegaean Airlines, Aeroflot-Russian Airlines, Arkia-Israeli Airlines, Bluebird Airways, Bulgaria Air, Corendon Airlines, EL AL Israel Airlines, Hahn Air Systems, Royal Jordanian Airlines, Smartwings, and Tus Air. This list does not include Charter companies.


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