



Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy

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The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 after about fifty years of competition between two very different ideological poles. During that period, conflict zones became frozen, and the demands of different ethnic groups and peoples were quashed and rejected. The imperialism that had been started by the Russian Empire on its own territory had finally come to an end.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many former Soviet republics declared their independence, one after another, and a period of reconstruction for those nations began. However, this reconstruction was hindered by political, economic, social, and demographic problems. Foremost of these problems was Russian diaspora: Russian people and Russian-speaking communities in the former Soviet republics.

The borders between the former Soviet republics were internationally recognized with the Minsk and Almaty Agreements in 1991, consequently leaving sixty million people, twenty-five million of whom were Russians, out of their home countries.¹ Ethnic Russian

people and other Russian-speaking ethnic communities who had settled in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), southern Caucasia (Georgia and Azerbaijan), the Baltics (Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia), Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia became minority groups after the breakup of the Soviet Union (see figure, page 44).

As these newly independent states are re-creating their national identities, their Russian and Russian-speaking populations are facing discrimination and marginalization. However, the problems these minority communities are facing in the former Soviet states have started to affect the domestic politics of the Russian Federation (thereinafter referred to as Russia). Additionally, the Russian and Russian-speaking minorities living in Russia's "near abroad" (the term used by Russians to describe the newly independent states created after the fall of the Soviet Union) are playing a key role in increasing Russia's power in the region by influencing Russian politics and helping Russia re-create its own national identity.² Russian diaspora is clearly tied to Russian foreign policy toward countries having Russian minorities.³

This article will first consider Russian diaspora from a historical perspective, examining Russian expansion into its near abroad. The second part

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Previous page: A group of peasants gather in front of a Russian settler's house in 1911 in the village of Nadezhenskii near Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii Collection)

deals with the question of how Russian diaspora has turned into an instrument of Russian foreign policy.

The Birth of Russian Diaspora

Russian settlement in the former Soviet republics around Soviet Russia and on other lands outside of Russia today started in the sixteenth century, with migrations of Russian people from their Tsarist Russia homeland to the east and the west.⁴ While the conquests and expansionist activities during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the Russian Empire had strategic benefits, the main reason for this migration was economic exploitation; the vast lands of the east and west offered seemingly limitless furs and various resources for Russia.⁵ This movement of peoples increased until the end of the Tsarist Era.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, millions of Russian peasants from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were settled in Kazakhstan by Tsarist Russia with the intention of ensuring the Russification of Kazakhstan's southern regions.⁶ Russian people also migrated to the Baltics and to Central Asia. The *Old Believers* (members of the Eastern Orthodox Christians who refused revision of older forms of Orthodox liturgical and ritual practices) in Russia, for example, immigrated to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia with the start of a reform period in the Russian Church.⁷ The Russian Old Believers arrived to the north of Kazakhstan and the Ural region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸

Subsequently, implementation of Tsarist Russia's resettlement policy continued and intensified. Thousands of Russians were settled in small groups in the three Baltic States, in the Muslim states of Central Asia, and in Siberia, where they established their own cities.⁹ By the end of the eighteenth century, Russians occupied most of the lands around what is the Kazakhstan border today, the Altai Mountains, and the whole basin of Ural River.

Russian expansionism increased in the twentieth century in Central Asia with the sociopolitical changes in the Russian Empire brought on by the Russian Revolution.¹⁰ During the Revolution, approximately 250,000 peasants were sent to neighboring communist states under the policy of "collectivization."¹¹ Russians who migrated to these parts of what had become the Soviet Union played an important role after the 1930s as they helped to industrialize these remote regions.¹²

The Russification process gained momentum during the Second World War, as one-fifth of the factories

located on the front line in Russia were moved to Central Asia.¹³ This made it necessary for Russian skilled workers to be settled in this region.¹⁴ Another great migration occurred after World War II, brought about by a land development program known as The Virgin Lands Campaign. Started by Nikita Khrushchev, this program authorized mostly Russians and other volunteering Russian-speaking communities from Ukraine and Belarus to settle in Kazakhstan.¹⁵

Russian people also came to the Baltic Soviet Republics after World War II. The first to arrive in the Baltics were Russian intelligentsia who escaped from the political oppression of the Communist Party. Teachers, physicians, engineers, researchers, actors and actresses, journalists, and highly skilled workers soon followed them.¹⁶ And, after them, Russian soldiers and other Russian people were sent to the region for security reasons.¹⁷ The present Russian population in the Baltic Soviet Republics can be explained by this former settlement policy.¹⁸

Similarly, Russians immigrated westward into Ukraine and Belarus for different historical reasons. Belarus, which constituted a part of Kiev Russia in the Middle Ages, later became a part of the Russian Empire and turned into one of the first four members of the Soviet Union.¹⁹

The Principality of Kiev and the Treaty of Pereyaslav are regarded as the foundation of the relations between Ukraine and Russia. The Russians started migrating toward Ukraine in the seventeenth century, and a large number of Russians rushed into Ukraine with its industrialization in the eastern part of the country in the nineteenth century.²⁰ Stalin, who was following rapid industrialization policies, invited Russians and Belarussians to settle in Ukraine.²¹

The history of the relations between Russia and Moldavia goes back to the time of Russo-Turkish Wars. Moldavia was given to Romania after the Crimean War and World War I. However, in 1924, the Soviet Union established the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic in the east of Dniester under Ukrainian sovereignty, and it joined the Soviet Union in 1944. A great number of Russians and Ukrainians moved to the newly constructed industrial zones in the Trans-Dniester region while it was under Soviet rule.²²

The Russian population in the former Soviet republics started to decrease with the collapse of the Soviet

Table. Proportions of Russian Population to the Country Population in the Former Soviet Republics

Country	The percentage of Russians in 1989 (%)	The percentage of Russians after 2005 (%)
Ukraine	22.1	17.3
Belarus	13.3	11.4
Moldova	13.8	5.9
Azerbaijan	5.6	1.8
Georgia	8.1	1.5
Armenia	2.6	0.5
Kazakhstan	37.8	30
Kyrgyzstan	31.5	10.3
Uzbekistan	8.3	6
Tajikistan	23.5	1.1
Estonia	30.3	25.6
Latvia	34	28.8
Lithuania	9.4	6.3

(Graphic by author)

Union, yet the rate of this population was constant in some of them. The table shows the percentage of Russians in the former Soviet republics in 1989 compared to the Russian population in those countries between 1995 and 2005 as determined by Minority Rights Group International.²³

As is seen in the table, the percentage of Russians in the former Soviet republics decreased over time. This

was primarily for economic reasons after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the voluntary resettlement program put into effect after 2000 by Russian President Vladimir Putin. More than 80 percent of the Russian population in Tajikistan, one third of those in Turkmenistan, half of those in Uzbekistan, and one third of those in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan migrated to another country in 1991; this migration caused the population in these countries to diminish, yet helped the indigenous nationalization process gain speed in the former Soviet republics.²⁴ This drastic decrease after 1989 occurred for a variety of different reasons, including discriminatory policies toward Russians and Russian-speaking people, identity development processes in the former Soviet countries, and the Putin government's economic improvements to attract the Russian diaspora back to Russia.²⁵

Russia started to pay close attention to Russian diaspora, whose total number had reached up to 25 million, after the transition of power from the Atlanticists to Eurasianists during the Yeltsin era, and it developed clear-cut policies about its near abroad.²⁶ The second part of this article discusses how Russia began to make use of Russian diaspora as a means of implementing foreign policy starting with the Near Abroad Policy formed in 1993, and how Russia benefited from the Russian population fomenting trouble in its neighboring countries to convince their governments to formulate policies that were favorable to Moscow's interests.²⁷

Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy

The collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia needing to prove itself a power in the international arena. Russians responded to the subsequent period of economic and political instability with nationalistic sentiment and national integration movements as they sought to construct a new identity for their country. Russia's predilection for domestic centralization led to the development of a new foreign policy bearing political, military, and economic aspects regarding the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).²⁸ Right-wing Russian political groups viewed this new policy as a means to reverse political trends and reinstall the unitary state in Russia and its near abroad. Their political programs held imperial tones, and they believed the Russian



(Graphic by Alyson Hurt, National Public Radio. Source: United Nations Statistics Division, CIA World Factbook)

Figure. Percentage of the Population that Identifies as Ethnic Russian

diaspora held an important role in implementing their policies.²⁹ As Pal Kolsto stated in his work in 1993, these right-wing groups aimed to revive the Russian Empire and were convinced they could benefit from the Russian diaspora like Hitler benefited from the German population in Gdansk and in the Sudetenland.³⁰ Moreover, the Red-Brown Alliance also accepted former territories of the Soviet Union as natural borders of Russia, and the statisticians asserted that Russia should assume a dominant role among other former Soviet states.³¹

As the Eurasianist school began to gain power and influence over Russian foreign policy, Russian diaspora was beginning to be seen as a factor that could both help Russia exercise influence over the newly founded states in its near abroad and contribute to the development of its national identity.

The Near Abroad Doctrine and Russian Diaspora

The change in Russian foreign policy from the breakup of the Soviet Union until the end of 1992 was remarkable, as Russia defined its priorities in foreign politics with the foreign policy doctrine of the Russian

Federation and turned its eye to the near abroad.³² The near abroad policy that emphasized Russia's great power and its influence on the region was formulated as the first foreign policy concept of Russia by Andrei Kozyrev.³³ This doctrine, called "the Yeltsin Doctrine" or "the Russian Monroe Doctrine," described Russia's privileged interests and its special role in the former Soviet republics. It also legitimized Russia's military intervention in the region if necessary to protect its own interests.³⁴

The near abroad doctrine affected the Russian diaspora by addressing termination of conflicts in Russia's neighborhood, the protection and human rights of regional Russian-speaking minorities, and the declaration of Russia's vital interests in the former Soviet territories.³⁵ Russia sought closer relations and greater influence with the members of the CIS in economic, political, and military fields.³⁶ The Yeltsin government widened the concept of *Russian nation* so as to include the twenty-five million ethnic Russians in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.³⁷ Therefore, Russian doctrine gave the Russian diaspora great importance between 1992 and 1994, since it gave Russia the asserted right to legitimately intervene in the domestic affairs of

the newly independent states in the interests of ethnic Russians.³⁸ In an attempt to protect the rights of the Russian minorities in its near abroad, Russia offered dual nationality to those people, but this offer was denied by the members of the CIS and the Baltic countries.³⁹

The Putin Era and Russian Diaspora

When Putin became president of Russia, he made it a priority to reintegrate post-Soviet regions to reinforce the claim that Russia would be an important global actor in maintaining the stability of Eurasia.⁴⁰ The “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation” underlined the importance of Russian diaspora in Russian foreign policy; it expressed Russia’s discontent about the borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union by restating the protection of the rights of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad.⁴¹ The term “compatriot” used in the Russian Federation’s State Policy included “Russian Federation citizens living abroad, former citizens of the USSR, Russian immigrants from the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, descendants of compatriots and foreign citizens who admire Russian culture and language.”⁴²

One of the practices that sprang from this compatriot policy was the voluntary resettlement campaign. The intent of the State Program of Voluntary Resettlement was to resettle Russian compatriots into scarcely populated areas of Russia. The program enjoyed a state budget that could cover nearly all the expenses of resettlement, yet only seventeen thousand compatriots benefited from this program between 2007 and 2011.⁴³

The Putin government took its first serious steps regarding Russian diaspora and gave it an important role in Russian foreign policy. The “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation” in 2013 declared that Russia would protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad. Article 45 of the document maintained that Russia could benefit from Russian diaspora, asserting that the Russian Federation would pay special attention to negotiating agreements to protect the social rights of the compatriots living in the member states of the CIS.⁴⁴

Over the last decade, Russia has espoused soft power policies, hoping to benefit from Russian diaspora with the help of these policies. Vladimir Mukomel points out that the state policies regarding Russian compatriots living abroad are funded separately

within the federal budget and lists state institutions supporting Russian diaspora:

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
- The Federal Agency for the CIS
- Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rosstrudnichestvo*)
- The Government Commission on the Affairs of Compatriots Living Abroad
- The Interdepartmental Commission for the Implementation of the National Program to Assist the Voluntary Resettlement in Russia of Compatriots Currently Living Abroad
- The Russian Centre of International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation under the Direction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- The Federal Migration Service of Russia
- The Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation
- The Federal Agency for Education Subject to the Ministry of Education and Science
- The Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications
- The Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications
- The Moscow City Government
- The City of the St. Petersburg Government⁴⁵

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs transfers about 400 million rubles to Russian government programs for compatriots through its embassies.⁴⁶

Apart from these state institutions, there is one additional institution, the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian World), which helps develop policies on Russian diaspora and conducts activities related to public diplomacy. The objectives of the Russkiy Mir Foundation are to promote Russian language instruction in Russia and around the world; to introduce Russia’s rich history, art, and culture to the world; and to reconnect the Russian population abroad with their homeland by establishing strong ties with them and supporting cultural and social programs, exchanges, and voluntary resettlement.⁴⁷ Russkiy Mir has approximately sixty-five centers, and its annual budget, funded by both the federal government and private companies, is around 500 million rubles.⁴⁸

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are also instruments of soft power in support of Russia’s compatriot policy objectives. These NGOs together with a network of more than fifty cultural centers called “Russian

House,” which helps Russian compatriots strengthen their ties with their homeland and contributes to the protection of Russian culture and language, ethnic belonging, and cultural values.⁴⁹

While Russia has embraced soft power, developments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Crimea over the last few years show that Russia will also apply hard power in order to achieve its national goals of increasing its authority in the region and reestablishing its spheres of influence under the pretext of Russian diaspora. Jeremy Bender states that since Putin declared that Russia has the right to intervene when Russian minorities are in trouble, a Russian intervention in Eastern Europe or Central Asia could be a problem in the future.⁵⁰

Pranas Ciziunas writes that Russia uses the ethnic and social discontent of the people in the Baltic States to increase its influence over them (and over other countries within its sphere of influence).⁵¹ Janusz Bugajski asserts that Russia tries to exploit political, regional, religious, social, and ethnic conflicts and to influence the foreign and security policies of each country that he identifies as within the spheres of Russian influence (the CIS in Europe—Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldavia—the Baltics, Central Europe, and Southeastern Europe). He adds that Russia is attempting to undermine the military integration processes of these countries with the United States and prevent every other kind of regional cooperation.⁵² One of the ways to achieve these objectives, according to Ciziunas, is to take advantage of ethnic differences. Russian people and other Russian-speaking communities are regarded as sources of regional influence by political decision-makers in Russia, and the Kremlin thinks that creating as many privileges as possible for the Russian diaspora means investing in a loyal social and political structure suitable for supporting Russia’s state policy.⁵³

John H. Herbst writes that Putin wants to rebuild Russia’s sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics and in the former territories of the Russian Empire, and he wants to protect the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking communities in the countries where they live. According to Herbst, Putin waged war in order to change the post-Cold War order and to reshape the borders in Ukraine and Georgia. As Herbst puts it, a great power is for the first time since Hitler trying to find ways to change the borders in Europe.⁵⁴

It is hard to predict what Russia will do in the former Soviet republics under the pretext of supporting

the Russian diaspora. However, it is clear from the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept that Russia has started to adopt seemingly soft power policies. The chapter of the concept titled “Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation and Modern World” states that soft power is a comprehensive means for achieving foreign policy objectives (Article 20), and Russia intends to improve soft power politics.⁵⁵

Russia's Soft Power and Russian Diaspora

Joseph Nye asserts that at least five factors affect the global distribution of power: mutual economic interdependence, supranational actors, nationalism in weak states, proliferation of technology, and changeable political issues.⁵⁶ He adds that, due to these factors, it is very expensive today for countries to force other countries to do what they want through military force. Therefore, countries require other, more attractive ways to use their power beyond the traditional use of force. A country can achieve preferred foreign policy results when other countries want to follow it or they agree with it about a situation that has potentially negative effects. For his reason, Nye defines soft power as getting “other countries to want what it wants.”⁵⁷

Russia’s new foreign policy concept emphasizes achieving national interests using soft power as described by Nye. Accordingly, this concept offers using new technologies and realizing the potential of Russian diaspora. The institution called *Rosstrudnichestvo* in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was assigned to develop and carry out Russian foreign policy to that end.⁵⁸ Russia’s open declaration that it will consider exercising soft power is very helpful for analyzing Russian foreign policy. When this concept is considered regarding compatriot policy and its implementation, it is obvious that Russia is striving to influence Russian diaspora by applying its soft power so it can influence the domestic policies of its neighboring countries. Russia’s emphasis on the importance of civil society, information, communication, humanitarian, and other means of soft power is something new in Russian foreign policy.⁵⁹ Additionally, Russia

Next page: Pro-Russian protesters in front of the Donetsk Oblast Regional State Administration building remove a Ukrainian flag and replace it with a Russian flag 1 March 2014 in Donetsk, Ukraine. (Photo courtesy of Andrew Butko)



seems to have shifted its attention to the east, placing a high importance on integration and paying close attention to the CIS, the customs union, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and its relations with Ukraine.⁶⁰

In support of Russia's compatriot policy and its shift toward soft power, Russia hosts the World Congress of Russian Compatriots every three years. Issues such as the voluntary resettlement of Russian diaspora, protection of minority rights, and maintenance of cultural and religious relations with Russia are discussed in this forum with the participation of state heads of former Soviet states.⁶¹ Putin stated during the fourth World Congress of Russian Compatriots in 2012 that Russian diaspora was beneficial for its historical homeland, introducing Russian socio-economic development and reinforcing its international power and prestige; he added that supporting Russian diaspora was one of the main policies of the Russian state. Putin also mentioned in his speech that the Russian Orthodox Church played a special role in strengthening humanitarian and cultural connections between the Russian diaspora and their historical homeland.⁶²

Over the past five years, Russia exercised soft power through several activities in support of the Russian diaspora:

- the revision of voluntary resettlement program, of which about one hundred thousand people benefited from as of 2012;
- the implementation of a Russian language program between 2011 and 2015 in the former Soviet republics to support the use of the Russian language and to protect Russian ethnic and cultural identity;
- the introduction of a large-scale state program to support compatriots between 2012 and 2014;
- the employment of Russian diaspora as translators and volunteers during the Summer Universiade in Kazan in 2013;

- the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014;
- support for those who want to study or work in Russia; and
- the establishment of Russkiy Mir Foundation.⁶³

Conclusion

Russia experienced an identity crisis for a couple of years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is emphasizing and reinforcing its national Russian identity by introducing itself as a historical homeland to the ethnic Russian people and other Russian-speaking communities at every opportunity.

Russia makes use of the Russian diaspora—a population of Russians and Russian-speaking communities that numbered about twenty-five million after the collapse of the Soviet Union—as a means of implementing foreign policy. Following the Yeltsin Doctrine, it used the diaspora to influence the domestic and foreign policies of the newly independent states after the fall of the Soviet Union. Not content with the borders drawn up after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia intervened in these countries' domestic affairs on the ground of supporting the Russian diaspora.

The Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the crisis in Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation all reveal that Russia will take an aggressive attitude if necessary when acting as a protector of all Russians and Russian-speaking people beyond its borders. Russia's military interventions under the pretense of Russian diaspora lead some to believe that the Cold War is back again and cause the countries that have a good number of Russian people among their populations to be on alert against revisionist actions by Russia. Nevertheless, Russian foreign policy today is placing more and more importance on the use of soft power in support of the Russian diaspora. ■

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