

How Immigration Aids Russia's Transformation into an Assimilationist Nation-State

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Immigration is often discussed in the framework of political economy and security studies. When discussed in the context of national identity, immigration is invariably depicted as a “challenge” or an “obstacle” for a nation-state. However, I argue that the impact of immigration on nation-building is contingent upon state policies toward ethnic diversity, something I call an “ethnicity regime.” Depending on the ethnicity regime in place, immigration can be a resource and a key instrument in support of new nationalist projects. I argue that this may have already been the case in Russia since the end of the Cold War. In Russia, mass immigration is aiding Russia's transformation from a multiethnic state to an assimilationist one.

Regimes of Ethnicity

“Regimes of ethnicity” is a concept I developed in a recent book, referring to the combination of state policies and institutions that regulate ethnic diversity.¹ Ethnicity regimes are defined along axes of membership and expression. If a state employs discriminatory citizenship and immigration laws to limit membership (i.e., citizenship) to one ethnic group only, then it has a “monoethnic” regime. Denmark, Germany, Greece, Japan, and many other states around the world exemplify monoethnic regimes. If a state grants citizenship to multiple ethnic groups but does not allow the legal and institutional expression of ethnic diversity, then it has an “antiethnic” regime. “Assimilation” of ethnic minorities summarizes the overall strategy toward ethnic diversity in these countries. Algeria, Burkina Faso, France, Turkey, and many other states around the world exemplify antiethnic regimes.

If a state grants citizenship to multiple ethnic groups and supports the legal and institutional expression of ethnic diversity found among its citizenry, then it has a “multiethnic” regime. Belgium, Canada, India, Nigeria, and many other states around

¹ Şener Aktürk, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey* (Cambridge 2012).

the world exemplify multiethnic regimes. Both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation definitely exemplify multiethnic regimes, but changes in key policies under former President Boris Yeltsin and President Vladimir Putin indicate that Russia has been moving toward an assimilationist antiethnic regime, and, as I will argue below, mass immigration aids Russia's transformation as such.

The Soviet Union and Its Multiethnic Regime

The Soviet approach was based on the official promotion of ethnic diversity through a number of policies including ethnic territorial autonomy given to "titular" ethnic groups (Tatars in Tatarstan, Armenians in Armenia, etc.), recognition of multiple official languages, education in native languages, affirmative action policies in employment, and the codification of ethnic identity in individuals' passports. Many political claims and rights were tied to ethnic differences, and territorialized ethnicity was the norm. The assumption that most members of each ethnic group inhabit a specific territory where they have ethnic territorial autonomy underpinned the Soviet multiethnic model, and this assumption was reasonable in the absence of mass migration. However, the kind of mass immigration Russia has been receiving in the last two decades, combined with a conscious shift away from emphasizing ethnic identities in state policies, is likely to erode this model.

Challenges of Immigration to Regimes of Ethnicity and the Case of Russia

Whether mass immigration strengthens or threatens a particular ethnicity regime depends on the state policies that govern immigration and naturalization, as well as the ethnic and linguistic composition of the immigrants. Immigration will strengthen a monoethnic regime if most immigrants are ethnic kin, but it will threaten a monoethnic regime if most immigrants belong to different ethnic groups. Immigration will strengthen an antiethnic regime if most immigrants already speak the official national language of the state and are unlikely or unable to claim ethnic autonomy or linguistic rights, whereas immigration will threaten an antiethnic regime if most immigrants share the same ethnicity with a large and territorially compact ethnic minority already existing in the country such that immigrants are likely to exacerbate claims for ethnic autonomy or linguistic rights. The opposite is true for the role of immigration in multiethnic regimes, such as in the case of Russia. Namely, immigration is likely to threaten a multiethnic regime if most immigrants already speak the primary official national language of the state (Russian) and if they do not share the same ethnicity with large and territorially compact ethnic minority groups already existing in the country (which, in Russia's case, correspond to titular ethnic groups in the ethnic republics).

Russia: The Second Largest Immigrant Country in the World

The collapse of the Soviet Union constituted the largest loss of territory and population that Russia has suffered in its history. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became the second largest recipient of immigrants in the world after the United States. Russian statistics report that 10.7 million total immigrants moved to Russia between 1992-2001, while UN data indicates that 13.2 million immigrants were living in Russia in 2002.² Looking at more recent data, Russia had 11 million immigrants in 2013, although annual net migration declined somewhat between the 1990s and the 2000s from 453,000 to 389,000.³ Immigrants constituted 7.7 percent of Russia's population in 2013. This is not surprising. As large polities such as the Soviet Union break up, the core state (in this case Russia) receives many former subjects, especially ethnic or religious kin, as immigrants.

Another structural reason for Russia's continuing intake of high numbers of immigrants is its unprecedented demographic deficit due to low fertility and high mortality rates. Russia's demographic deficit makes it similar in this respect to Germany, the third largest country of immigration worldwide. Just as Germany needed non-German guest workers in addition to absorbing millions of ethnic German immigrants after World War II, Russia has been receiving millions of both ethnic Russian and other immigrants.

Who Immigrates to Russia? How Does It Affect Russian Nation Building?

What does being the second largest country of immigrants in the world mean for post-Soviet Russian nation-building? Mass migration is hastening Russia's transformation into an assimilationist nation-state, creating a Russophone "melting pot."

The two key variables determining the impact of immigration on nation-building are the ethnolinguistic characteristics of the incoming immigrants and the overall state policy on ethnic diversity that is being pursued, which I previously defined as its "ethnicity regime." In Russia, both factors currently support a gradual erosion of the formal multiethnic structure of the Russian federation, which is a Soviet legacy, in favor of a more assimilationist nation-state, as in France, Turkey, and the United States.

First, virtually all of the immigrants coming into Russia, including 99.5 percent of the 11 million that immigrated between 1989 and 2002, are from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁴ A very large majority of these immigrants presumably speak Russian, either because they are ethnic Russians or because Russian is still an official

² Vladimir Iontsev and Irina Ivakhniouk, "Russia in the World of Migration Flows," *World in the Mirror of International Migration* 10 (2002), 51-52.

³ United Nations, *International Migration Report 2013*, New York, 2013, 5, 13.

⁴ Yuri Andrienko and Sergei Guriev, "Understanding migration in Russia," *CEFIR Policy Paper Series* 23 (2005), 14.

language or an unofficial language of interethnic communication in their countries of origin. A Russian speaker is not necessarily an ethnic Russian in this context. The last Soviet census of 1989 recorded 11 million non-ethnic Russians living outside of Russia who nonetheless declared Russian to be their “mother tongue.” This number included 5.7 million in Ukraine, 1.9 million in Belarus, 1.5 million in Kazakhstan, 500,000 in Uzbekistan, and 446,000 in Moldova. This was in addition to the 25 million ethnic Russians who resided outside of Russia, as well as respondents who may have used Russian as their everyday language but nonetheless reported another language as their mother tongue.⁵ Moreover, the majority of the population in CIS states at least has some knowledge of Russian as a second language.

The migration or “homecoming” of ethnic kin often triggers nationalism and xenophobic attacks in the new homeland while also skewing the demographic balance in favor of the ethnic majority. This is what happened in Germany in 1991-1993 when xenophobic attacks against non-German immigrants and asylum seekers more than tripled following the mass immigration of ethnic German *Aussiedler* from the former Soviet Union.⁶ A similar process is underway in Russia with anti-immigrant attitudes on the rise. Moreover, mass immigration of ethnic kin consolidated the large ethnic Russian majority at around 80 percent of Russia’s population, despite the differentially higher birthrate of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups.

Second, and more importantly, since Yeltsin’s time, Russian state policy has been moving toward assimilation and away from the multiethnic nationhood that was the hallmark of the Soviet approach to ethnic diversity. Russian governments since the 1990s have been seeking to deemphasize ethnic differences and erode ethnic autonomy. Under Yeltsin, ethnic identity was removed from internal passports despite strong objections from and popular protests in ethnic republics such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Ingushetia, where citizens feared that its elimination would lead to the gradual loss of their ethnic autonomy and even their ethnic identity. While it used to be compulsory to state one’s ethnic identity in individual passports, since 1997 it has been forbidden to do so, even on a voluntary basis. Ethnicity was also removed from birth certificates under Yeltsin. President Putin continued in the same direction by abolishing the Ministry of Nationalities and merging four ethnic autonomous territories (*okrugs*) with the Russian regions that surrounded them. Putin also eliminated the direct election of presidents in ethnic autonomous republics in an effort to undercut their popular legitimacy.

Mass immigration is likely to further erode the multiethnic model Russia inherited from the Soviet Union for four interrelated reasons. First, immigrants dilute the demographic weight of indigenous non-Russian minorities such as Tatars and Bashkirs. Second, those immigrants who are ethnically Russian augment the size of the ethnic Russian majority.

⁵ Cristiano Codagnone, *New Migration and Migration Politics in Post-Soviet Russia*, Ethnobarometer Programme, 1998, 53-54.

⁶ Şener Aktürk, *Regimes of Ethnicity*, 94-96.

Third, since non-ethnic Russian immigrants overwhelmingly live in cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg as one minority among many ethnic groups without any territorial claims, they offer a deterritorialized ethnic minority profile that challenges the equation of ethnic minority identity with territorial autonomy. Fourth, since immigrants do not have any of the political rights that indigenous, titular ethnic groups enjoy in their autonomous republics, such as native-language education and affirmative action policies, as the number and visibility of immigrants increase, indigenous non-Russian titular ethnic groups' privileges will appear anachronistic and unjustifiable. Russophone immigrants in particular are natural allies of the Russian state in diffusing ethnic separatist challenges from the autonomous republics.

Russia's titular ethnic groups are well aware of the likely negative impact of mass immigration on their status. As such, they display much higher levels of xenophobia against immigrants than other non-Russian ethnic groups in Russia, according to a fascinating study by political scientist Mikhail Alexseev, who notes that "the proportion of titular ethnics who supported wholesale deportation of migrants was more than twice as high as the same proportion among non-titular ethnics (41 vs. 18 percent)."⁷ In other words, the likely losers of mass immigration in Russia, the titular ethnic groups, are aware of the threat it poses.

Conclusion

The impact of immigration on nation-building is contingent upon the prevailing ethnicity regime in a given country as well as the ethnic and linguistic composition of the immigrants. In the case of Russia, mostly Russophone immigration aids Russia's transformation away from a multiethnic regime and toward an assimilationist nation-state. This is not unprecedented. The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century was accompanied by the mass migration of millions of Ottoman subjects, almost all Muslims with some exposure to Ottoman Turkish, from formerly Ottoman Balkan territories into Anatolia, which continued after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. This was followed by the founding of an unabashedly assimilationist nation-state, the Republic of Turkey, in 1923, and its mostly successful assimilation of Albanian, Arab, Bosniak, Circassian, Laz, Pomak, and other ethno-linguistic groups in its territory during the 20th century. Almost a quarter-century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, which became the second largest country of immigration in the world, appears to be on track to become an assimilationist melting pot.

⁷ Mikhail A. Alexseev, "Majority and Minority Xenophobia in Russia: The Importance of Being Titulars," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26, 2 (2010): 101.

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