

Imperial Designs? Citizenship and Russia's Policies in the Former Soviet Union

PONAR Policy Memo No. 240

Prepared for the PONARS Policy Conference
Washington, DC
January 25, 2002

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CSIS

December 2001

The goal of Boris Yeltsin and many of Russia's liberal democratic reformers was not the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the end of Soviet power. Russia would become the center of a new post-Soviet union (the Union of Sovereign States) that would preserve a single economic space, provide for central control over the armed forces and the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal, and ensure the guarantee of human rights throughout the country. Yeltsin's attempts at saving the Soviet empire, of course, failed. Many see the moribund Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as proof that Russia's attempts to reconstruct an empire have been thwarted. Despite initial Russian pressures to create a Commonwealth army and establish Commonwealth citizenship, let alone a true commonwealth of states, no such institutions exist. Russia's consistent attempts to promote greater integration through CIS have been denied, largely through the concerted efforts of Ukraine and Georgia. Institutional integration can be said to have failed.

The idea of empire, however, has not necessarily been discredited in Russia. Although few in Russia advocate actual physical control of the former Soviet republics, many advocate Russian tutelage of Russia's historic imperial territory and the idea of empire remains vibrant in Russian political discourse.

Furthermore, although the states that emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union 10 years ago are independent sovereign actors, many still depend highly on Russia militarily and economically. In addition, Russia has other means to try to bind more closely the former Soviet Union (FSU) with Russia, namely citizenship policies, in both Russia and the FSU. Citizenship policies are one tool that Russian elites can and have been using to promote a homeland myth of Russia as a way to try to regain, at least in part, the unintentional loss of empire. The identity of ethnic Russians in the FSU is an important component of the ability of Russia to give sustenance to this homeland myth and substance to hopes of renewing Russia as a significant political force within the borders of the former Soviet Union. If ethnic Russians abroad have a sense of not just being Russian but also part of the Russian state, an imperial conception of the Russian state would be given credence and the hand of those who advocate such an identity for Russia strengthened.

The continuing significance of ethnic Russians in the FSU is not found in their (relative) numeric strength, which has been declining in almost all of the post-Soviet states, but in the opportunity they afford Russia to maintain involvement in the affairs of these states. The Russian government has pushed for dual citizenship in the former Soviet states and for the elevation of Russian as an official language in republics with sizeable Russian or Russian-speaking minorities.

Citizenship and Identity

All manner of state policies can influence identity formation, but citizenship policy is crucial. Citizenship is the key delineator of political community. It defines who enjoys the rights and undertakes the obligations of being a member of the state. It is also widely seen as an indicator of national community.

The link between political community and national community that citizenship embodies is indicative of why citizenship in the Soviet successor states has been such an issue of Russian concern. All of the post-Soviet states are multiethnic states, and in most of the republics, the Russians are a significant ethnic minority. National identity in multiethnic states cannot be built on a common ethnicity, but it can potentially be built on a common political community, which is defined through citizenship. The denial of citizenship to any minority group is a clear indication that they will be excluded not only from the political community but also potentially from the national community. Noncitizens may be excluded from certain bundles of rights, such as voting rights or the right to own property, which may prevent them from being seen or treated as equals.

The role of citizenship as an identity-building agent may also help explain Russia's interest in extending dual citizenship to ethnic Russians outside of Russia: ethnic Russians could then maintain a sense of being members of the Russian national community. Perhaps for the same reason, most countries of the FSU have refused to agree to dual citizenship with Russia. With the much-noted exceptions of Estonia and Latvia, the new states have adopted liberal citizenship policies, both in deciding who would initially be defined as citizens, and in their requirements for naturalization, which entail unproblematic language and residency requirements.

Citizenship in Russia

Russian citizenship entails no language requirement, no residency requirement, and no test on Russian history, culture, or laws. A former citizen of the USSR can become of citizen of the Russian Federation without ever having been to Russia. All that is required to claim Russian citizenship is registration.

Russia's concern with the political status of ethnic Russians abroad was evidenced in its 1991 citizenship law. Russia adopted the zero-option variant of citizenship, so that all who were residing in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) were considered citizens of Russia. Additionally, Article 18 of the Russian citizenship law provides, "Citizens of the former USSR residing on the territories of states which were a part of the former USSR" can acquire Russian citizenship by way of registration, as long as they have not taken any other citizenship. Presidential edicts have extended registration deadlines from February 6, 1995, to February 6, 2000, and eliminated the need for registration for RSFSR citizens who returned to Russia,

instead delineating the circumstances through which citizenship is to be restored to them and documentation of such provided to them “at their personally expressed wishes.” The Duma further proposed amending the citizenship law to restore citizenship to all citizens of the USSR, and their descendants who were born in an area recognized as Russian territory at the time of their birth (directed particularly at Ukraine and the dispute over Crimea, which was a part of the RSFSR until 1954, when it was given as a gift to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

An integral part of Russia’s citizenship policy has been to promote the institution of dual citizenship in the FSU. Dual citizenship, interestingly, is generally not permitted in Russia. According to the citizenship bill President Vladimir Putin submitted to the Duma in April 2001, dual citizenship is not permitted except for “exceptional cases stipulated in a corresponding agreement signed with a number of countries, predominantly the republics of the former Soviet Union.” Former prime minister Sergei Kiriyenko and oligarch Boris Berezovsky have both been investigated for possessing dual Russian-Israeli citizenship. However Russia continues to seek, largely unsuccessfully, dual citizenship agreements with the former Soviet republics.

Although Russia’s promotion of dual citizenship rights seems thus far to have been a failure, several heads of state, including President Askar Akaev of the Kyrgyz Republic, President Robert Kocharian of Armenia, and President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, have been discussing constitutional changes that would allow dual citizenship. Shevardnadze has not ruled out “certain amendments” to the Georgian constitution, which government officials have disclosed could entail dual citizenship. Kocharian has been more upfront, stating that an article on dual citizenship should be added to the constitution. The primary motivation for such an argument is probably more related to the issue of the Armenian diaspora than Russian pressure, especially given the small number of Russians in Armenia.

Russia’s claim to all former Soviet citizens is likely disconcerting for the FSU. For Russia to claim to be the USSR’s successor state and assume the Soviet Union’s property abroad, its debt, and so on is one thing. Claiming to have the same citizenry, with obligation to protect that citizenry, is another thing.

Pressure from Putin

Under Putin, the tumultuous nature of Russian domestic politics seems to have quieted. As Putin consolidates his power, expecting that Russia’s compatriots abroad will continue to be an important part of domestic political rhetoric in Russia is reasonable. As prime minister, Putin said that one of the priorities of his cabinet would be to protect compatriots abroad. The Russian state, he said, must use all measures, ranging from the political to the economic, to ensure their real protection. In an address to the Russian Security Council as acting president, Putin, declared: “It is necessary to act more attentively and considerately and at the same time more aggressively in protecting the interests of our compatriots abroad...” The foreign policy blueprint put forth in March of 2000 was different from the previous foreign policy concept, according to Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, due to, among other factors, the increased attention it gives to the protection of the “rights and interests of Russian nationals and compatriots abroad...”

In an address in October 2001, Putin acknowledged that Russia has done “little to help” Russian speakers abroad in the past decade and further stated, “No obstacles should prevent us from feeling that we are a unified people.” Putin recently declared (December 2001), “Lately the government as a whole and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in particular have

occupied a much more active position in protecting the interests of the Russian-speaking population residing abroad and primarily, naturally, in the CIS countries.”

Renewed criticism has been directed specifically at Estonia and Latvia. In June 2000, I. Ivanov said that he would reexamine Estonia’s and Latvia’s citizenship and language policies and the discrimination that still persists against ethnic Russians there. The following month, Russian government sources told *Interfax* that “flagrant human rights violations against some of its population” continue in Latvia, along with the “enforced assimilation of non-Latvian ethnic groups.” Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov’s greeting to the World Russian Press Association said, in part, “Even those of you living far away from Russia but preserving the Russian language and culture, continue to be Russia’s representatives.” In December 2001, Putin suggested that Russians in the Baltics should be afforded the same political considerations as Albanians in Macedonia, where Albanians (who comprise 20 percent of the population) have the right to representation in proportion to their share of the population.

Both its own citizenship policies and the citizenship policies of Estonia and Latvia have given the Russian government an easy pretext by which to try to maintain some influence in the domestic affairs of these two states. However even in states without exclusionary citizenship policies, Russia has used claims of discrimination due to alleged unfair language policy, and lack of cultural autonomy for ethnic Russians, to justify continued intervention in the politics of independent and sovereign states. Currently Moldova, with its Russian population of some 585,000, is facing a delay in the Russian troop withdrawal scheduled for 2003. Before any deal to end the conflict there, Putin must be satisfied Moldova will “firmly ensure the rights of all those who consider that Russia can be a guarantor.”

Many in Russia, Putin apparently among them, cannot abide the concept of Russia in its current borders. Ethnic Russians outside the state are widely seen as belonging to Russia. Policies have been adopted that have the aim of promoting close ties between Russians in the FSU and the Russian state. Russia’s citizenship law, its pressure on the FSU to adopt dual citizenship and give official status to the Russian language, the creation of state organizations and promotion of the creation of nonstate organizations that focus on the plight of ethnic Russians abroad (including having government officials at the highest level, Putin among them, speak to these groups), indicate that the threat of imperial creep is a real one. Just because CIS integration efforts receive less play than in the past does not mean that the Russian elites and public are content with Russia’s borders. Russia cannot expand its physical borders, but it can and is expanding its political borders. Protecting ethnic Russians when they are being discriminated against is valid, but is best left to international organizations that have such protection as their mission. Russia’s continued interference in the domestic politics of the FSU is something altogether different and bears close watch.