



## ORIGINAL PAPER

### Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy

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#### Abstract

After the Soviet Union collapsed about 25 million ethnic Russians and Russian speakers that were located in former Soviet Republics during the Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia for various reasons, mainly for imperial ones, gained minority status in one night. Russian Diaspora living as minorities abroad out of Russian Federation especially in former Soviet Republics was regarded as a means of Russian foreign policy to reestablish Russian influence over the region. The main aim of this study is to evaluate how the Russian Diaspora became a tool for Russian foreign policy from historical perspective. This study emphasizes the activities conducted related to Russian Diaspora and the increased importance of Russian Diaspora in Russian foreign policy during Putin's term. This study is also of high importance since it deals with the relationship between soft power politics Russia mentioned among her current foreign policy concepts and Russian Diaspora.

**Keywords:** *Russian Diaspora, Russian Federation, Soviet Union, Russian Foreign Policy, Compatriot Policy*

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### **Introduction**

Cold War ends with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and an era when conflicted zones were frozen, the demands of different ethnic groups and peoples were rejected and when two different ideological poles were in competition for about fifty years. The collapse of the Soviet Union shows that an imperial period that started by the Russian Empire on its territory had finally come to an end. After the collapse of the Soviet Union other Soviet republics declared their independence one after another, which was followed by a period for reconstructing the nations in the former Soviet republics. However, this period accompanied several problems such as political, economic, social and demographic ones. An important one of these problems is the Russian diaspora consisting of Russian people and other Russian speaking communities in the former Soviet Republics.

Russian people and Russian speaking other ethnic communities, who were settled in the Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), the Southern Caucasia (Georgia and Azerbaijan), the Baltics (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia), Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova turned into minorities after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The borders between the former Soviet republics achieved an international status with the Minsk and Almaty Agreements in 1991 consequently leaving 60 million people, 25 million of whom were Russians, out of their home countries (Tumbetkov, 2004: 52).

Minority status of these Russian people brought about discrimination against them and they were regarded as an ‘other’ in these newly independent states that are recreating their national identities. These problems that Russian people and Russian speaking communities encountered in the former Soviet states started to influence domestic politics of the Russian Federation (thereinafter will be called as Russia). The Russian and Russian speaking minority living in the near abroad played a key role in increasing Russia’s power in the region helping her to reconstruct Russian political life and to recreate Russian national identity (Dağı, 2002: 209). In addition, the concept of Russian diaspora is closely related to Russian foreign policy towards countries having Russian minorities (Sasaoglu, 2015: 1).

The aim of this article is to deal with Russian diaspora from a historical perspective and determine the effect of Russian diaspora on Russian foreign policy. The article consists of two main parts. The first part gives an historical perspective about the Russian expansion on its near abroad. The second part deals with the question how Russian diaspora has turned into a means of foreign policy.

### **The Birth of Russian Diaspora**

Russian settlement in the former Soviet republics around Soviet Russia and on the lands out of Russia today started with the migrations from the Tsarist Russia for several reasons. Russian people started to migrate from their homeland to the east and the west starting from the 16th century (Tumbetkov, 2004: 53). The conquests and expansionist activities during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the Russian Empire had strategical reasons, yet the main reason was economic exploitation because the huge lands of the east and west offered furs and various resources for the Russian (Oliner, 1982: 28). This kind of movement of peoples increased till the end of the Tsarist Era.

Before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 millions of people from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were settled in Kazakhstan.

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The aim of these settlements was to ensure the Russification of the southern regions with the help of the Russian peasants by the Tsarist Russia (Tumbetkov, 2004: 53). Besides, Russian people also migrated to the Baltics and the Central Asia. The Old Believers in Russia, for example, emigrated into Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with the start of a reform period in the Russian Church (Simonyan, 2013: 162). The Russian Old Believers arrived to the north of Kazakhstan and the Ural Region during the 17th and 18th centuries (Peyrouse, 2007: 498). The re-settlement policy started in the Tsarist Russia continued severely and thousands of Russians were settled in three Baltic states, in the Muslim states of the Central Asia and Siberia in small groups consequently establishing their own cities there (Oliner, 1982: 32).

The Russian then occupied most of the lands till the Kazakhstan border today, the Altai Mountains and the whole basin of Ural River in the 18th century. Russian expansionism increased in the 19th century in Central Asia with the socio-political changes in the Russian Empire (Peyrouse, 2008: 2).

During the Revolution approximately 250.000 peasants were sent to neighboring communist states under the policy of “collectivization” (Tumbetkov, 2004: 54). Russians who migrate to these parts of the Union played an important role after 1930s during the Soviet Era to industrialize these remote regions (Tumbetkov, 2004: 53).

The Russification process gained power when the Second World War (WWII) broke out. One fifth of the factories located on the front line were moved to the Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2008: 2). This made it necessary that Russian skilled workers be settled in this region (Dağı, 2002: 209). Another great migration after the WWII stems from the land development program known as ‘The Virgin Lands Campaign’ started by Nikita Khrushchev under which mostly Russians and other volunteering Russian speaking communities from Ukraine and Belarus were settled in Kazakhstan (Peyrouse, 2008: 2).

Russian people came to the Baltic Soviet Republics after the WWII. The first group to arrive in the Baltics was Russian intelligentsia who escaped from the political suppression of the communist party and teachers, physicians, engineers, researchers, actors and actresses, journalists, highly skilled workers and soldiers followed them (Simonyan, 2004). Here, it can be said that Russian soldiers and other Russian people were sent to that region for security reasons (Tumbetkov, 2004: 55). The Russian population in the Baltic Soviet Republics can be explained by these former industrial policies (Tumbetkov, 2004: 61). The physical availability of the Russians in Ukraine and Belarus has 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 (Nygren, 2008: 66).

The Principality of Kiev and the Treaty of Pereyaslav are regarded as the foundation of the relations between Ukraine and Russia. The Russians started to expand towards Ukraine in the 17th century. A good number of Russians rushed into Ukraine with the industrialization in the eastern Ukraine in the 19th century (Nygren, 2008: 49). Stalin, who was following fast industrialization policies, invited Russians and Belarussians to settle in Ukraine (Tumbetkov, 2004: 55).

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 the Great War (WWI), yet after the foundation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 in the east of Dniester under Ukrainian sovereignty it joined the Soviet Union in 1944. A great number of Russians and Ukrainians moved to the newly constructed industrial zones in Trans-Dniester Region under Soviet rule (Yapıcı, 2007: 124). The

Russian population in the former Soviet republics started to decrease with the collapse of the Union, yet the rate of this population was constant in some of them. Table 1 below shows the rate of Russians in the former Soviet republics in 1989 and the ratio of Russian people to local inhabitants determined by the Group of International Minority Rights between 1995 and 2005.

**Table 1. The proportions of Russian population to the country population in the former Soviet republics**

Country	The percentage of Russians in 1989 (%)	The current percentage of Russians (%)
Ukraine	22.1	17.3
Belarus	13.3	11.4
Moldovia	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

Source: Ayman, 1994; International Minority Rights, 2015

As is seen in Table 1, the percentage of Russian population seems to decrease especially because of economic reasons after the breakup and voluntary resettlement program put into effect after 2000 by Putin. More than 80% of the Russian population in Tajikistan and one third of them in Turkmenistan, half of them in Uzbekistan and one third of them in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan migrated to another country in 1991 and this kind of migration movements caused the population in these countries to diminish, yet helped the nationalization processes gain speed in the former Soviet republics (Peyrouse, 2008: 20). This drastic decrease after 1989 has different reasons behind, yet discriminative policies towards Russians and Russian speaking people, identity construction processes in the former Soviet countries and Putin government's economic improvements for Russian diaspora to attract them to Russia can be regarded as some of these reasons (Sasaoğlu, 2015: 2). Russia started to give its close attention to Russian diaspora, whose total number reached up to 25 million (Peyrouse, 2007: 481) and adopted clear-cut policies about its Near Abroad after the transition of power from the Atlanticists to Eurasianists during the Yeltsin era.

The second part of this article offers a chronological order that demonstrates the steps taken by Russia to start to make use of Russian diaspora as a means of its foreign policy starting with the Near Abroad Policy formed in 1993.

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### **Russian Diaspora and the Recent Russian Foreign Policy**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia benefited from the Russian population in its neighboring countries to stir up trouble there and to convince their governments to formulate policies that Moscow appreciates (Ciziunas, 2008: 292). The question how Russian diaspora became a means of Russian foreign policy after the breakup of the Union is discussed below.

### **Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign policy**

The collapse of the Soviet Union led Russia that regards itself as the successor of it to prove its power in the international arena. Russia met with nationalism and national integration movements emerging with the economic and political problems that caused an instable period, which witnessed a domestic centralization and an identity search for constructing a new Russia. However, Russia could formulate a new foreign policy bearing political, military and economic aspects in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Rakowska-Harmstoner, 2014). The right-wing groups in Russian domestic politics attempted to change the recent political setting and to reinstall the unitary state and their political programs included imperial tones giving an important role to Russian diaspora in their policies (Kolsto, 1993: 198). As Pal Kolsto stated in his work in 1993 these right-wing groups aiming to revive the Russian Empire could use Russian diaspora like Hitler benefiting from the German population in Gdansk and in the Sudetenland (Kolsto, 1993). The Red-Brown Alliance also accepted former territories of the Soviet Union as natural borders of Russia and the statistes asserted that Russia should assume a dominant role among other former Soviet states (Değirmen, 2008: 19).

### **A Russian Foreign Policy Aiming Russians**

It seems that Russian diaspora was started to be seen as a factor that could both help Russia to exercise influence over the newly founded states in the Near Abroad and contribute identity construction processes at home when the Eurasianist school began to gain power in Russian foreign policy and succeeded to draw attentions to the potential importance of Russian diaspora. Next title deals with how a Russian foreign policy aiming Russian diaspora was formulated.

### **The Near Abroad Doctrine and Russian Diaspora**

The change in Russian foreign policy till the end of 1992 is remarkable and Russia defined its priorities in foreign politics with the Foreign Policy Doctrine of the Russian Federation and turned its eye on the Near Abroad (Sasaoğlu, 2015: 2). The “Near Abroad” (Rakowska-Harmstoner, 2014: 3) policy that emphasizes Russia’s great power and its influence on the region was formulated as the first foreign policy concept of Russia by Kozyrev (Sönmez: 2010). This doctrine called as “the Yeltsin Doctrine” or “the Russian Monroe Doctrine” admits Russia’s privileged interests and special role in the former Soviet republics. It also legitimates Russia’s intervention there to protect its interest if seen necessary with military ways (Ciziunas, 2008: 293). The main issues about Russian diaspora that became prominent with the Near Abroad Doctrine are as follows: termination of conflicts in Russia’s neighborhood, protection of the Russian speaking minorities and human rights and declaration of Russia’s vital interests in the former Soviet territories (Sönmez: 2010: 288). Russia aimed at close relations with the members of the CIS in economic, political and military fields (Sasaoğlu, 2015: 2). Yeltsin government widened the concept of Russian nation so as to include 25 millions of ethnic Russians in

the newly independent states of the USSR (Değirmen, 2008: 89). Therefore, Russia gave Russian diaspora a great importance between 1992 and 1994 since it was a means of legitimacy within the country and it gave Russia a right for intervention into the domestic affairs of the newly independent states (Değirmen, 2008: 24). Russia aiming at protecting the rights of the Russian minorities in its near abroad made an unsuccessful attempt to offer double nationality to those people, yet this offer was denied by the members of the CIS and the Baltic countries (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 12).

### **The Putin Era and Russian Diaspora**

It became a priority to reintegrate post soviet space when Putin got into the government, for this reintegration was strengthening the claim that Russia would be an important global actor lending stability to Eurasia (Bugajski, 2004: 29). The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation underlined the importance of Russian diaspora in Russian foreign policy and expressed its discontent about the borders after the collapse of the USSR by restating the protection of the rights of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad (Rywkin, 2012: 231-233). The term ‘compatriot’ used in the Russian Federation’s State Policy includes “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” (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 12).

One of the practices that started with this compatriot policy is the voluntary resettlement campaign. The State Program of Voluntary Resettlement aimed at resettling Russian compatriots in scarcely populated areas enjoying a state budget that could hardly cover all the expenses it would have, yet only 17.000 compatriots benefited from this program between 2007 and 2011 (Kosmarskaya, 2011: 65). Putin government took the 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 declares that it will be protecting the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad. The Article 45 puts forward that Russia can benefit from Russian diaspora asserting that the Russian Federation will pay a special importance to negotiate agreements to protect the social rights of the compatriots living in the member states of the CIS (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2015).

Mukomel points out that the state policies regarding Russian compatriots living abroad are funded with a separate fund within the federal budget and lists state institutions supporting Russian diaspora as follows: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, The Federal Agency for the CIS, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*), 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, Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation, 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 Government (Mukomel, 2015). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs transfers about 400 million ruble to this compatriot program through its embassies (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 13).

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Apart from these state institutions there is also one more institution, a foundation called Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian World) that conducts activities for developing policies on Russian diaspora and activities related to public diplomacy. The objectives of the Russkiy Mir Foundation are as follows: to promote Russian language teaching in Russia and on the world, to introduce Russia's rich history, Russian art and culture to the world and to reconnect the Russian population abroad with their homeland, Russia by establishing strong ties with them and supporting cultural and social programs, exchanges and voluntary resettlement (The Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2015). Russkiy Mir has approximately 65 centers and its annual budget funded by both federal government and private companies is around 500 million rubles (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 14).

In addition to this foundation supported by the state and private companies Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) are also elements of soft power in terms of supporting Russia's objectives in line with its compatriot policy. These NGOs together with a network of more than 50 cultural centers called 'Russian House' helps Russian compatriots to strengthen their ties with their homeland and contributes into the protection of Russian culture and language, ethnic belongings and cultural values (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 12).

The activities performed by Russia regarding Russian diaspora within the last decade resulted in Russia's practicing soft power policies. Russia tried to benefit from the issue of Russian diaspora with the help of these policies. However, the recent developments in Georgia and Ukraine for the last couple of years and in Crimea show that Russia can apply hard power in order to achieve its national interests (to increase its power in the region and/or reestablish spheres of influence) under the pretext of Russian diaspora. Bender states that since Putin declared that Russia has its right to intervene when Russian minority are in trouble, a possible Russian intervention in the Eastern Europe or Central Asia can cause problems in the future (Bender, 2015). Pranas Ciziunas states that Russia uses 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) (2008: 296). Bugajski asserts that Russia tries to enjoy the political, regional, religious, social and ethnic conflicts and to influence foreign and security policies of each country that he shows within the spheres of Russian influence (the CIS in Europe – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia – the Baltics, Central Europe and the Southeastern Europe). He adds that Russia is attempting to undermine military integration processes of these countries with the United States of America (USA) and prevents every other kind of regional cooperation (2004: 30). One of the ways to achieve these objectives is, as Ciziunas mentioned, to use ethnic differences. Russian people and other Russian speaking communities are regarded as sources of regional influence by political decision-makers in Russia and Kremlin thinks that creating as much as privileges for Russian diaspora means investing into a loyal social and political structure suitable for supporting Russia's state policy (Bugajski, 2004: 40). As John H. Herbst writes in his article Putin wants to rebuild Russia's sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics and on the former territories of the Russian Empire and to protect the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian speaking communities in the countries they live. According to him, Putin waged war in order to change the post-Cold War order and to play with the borders in Ukraine and Georgia.

As Herbst puts since Hitler a great power is for the first time trying to find ways to change the borders in Europe (2015). It is really hard to estimate what Russia can do in the former Soviet republics in the future on the pretext of Russian diaspora and the practices towards them. However, it is clear from the Russian Foreign Policy Concept

dated 2013 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 aims to improve soft power politics (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2015).

### **Russia's Soft Power and Russian Diaspora**

Joseph Nye asserts that it is very expensive today for countries to force other countries to do what they want by military power in this self-help system and he adds that at least five factors affect the distribution of power: mutual economic interdependence, supra-national actors, nationalism in weak states, proliferation of technology and changeable political issues (Nye, 1990: 157-160). These factors, therefore, requires another and more attractive ways to use power beyond traditional methods: A country can achieve the results in foreign policy that it preferred when other countries want to follow it or they agree with them about a situation that has similar effects. For his reason, Nye calls getting "other countries to want what it wants" as 'soft power' (Nye, 1990: 166). The new foreign policy concept of Russia emphasizes that Russia will achieve its interests using 'soft power' as described by Joseph Nye above. Accordingly, this new foreign policy concept offers using new Technologies and the potentials of Russian diaspora. The institution called *Rosstrudnichestv* in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was assigned to develop and carry out Russian foreign policy to that end (Jensen, 2015). Russia's open declaration that it will give weight on this matter by 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 struggling to influence Russian diaspora applying its soft power and so it can influence domestic policies of its neighboring countries. Russia's emphasis on the importance of civil society, information, communication and other means of soft power called as humanitarian means as an alternative policy for classical diplomacy is something new in Russian foreign policy (Monaghan, 2013: 6). Besides, Russia seems to have shifted its attention to the east and to have given a high importance to integration paying a great attention to the CIS, the customs union, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the relations with Ukraine (Jensen, 2015).

As a consequence of compatriot policy Russia organizes World Congress of Russian Compatriots every three years and these issues such as voluntary resettlement of Russian diaspora, protection of minority rights, and maintenance of cultural and religious relations with Russia are discussed with the participation of state heads of former Soviet states (Conley, Gerber, 2011: 13). Putin stated during the fourth World Congress of Russian Compatriots in 2012 that Russian diaspora had a common concern for being beneficial towards their historical homeland, introducing socio-economic development of their homeland and reinforcing its international power and prestige, and he also 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 had special roles in strengthening humanitarian and cultural connections of Russian diaspora with their historical homeland (2015).

The activities producing soft power planned by the Russian Federation to help Russian diaspora within the last five years are as follows: the revision of voluntary resettlement program, which 100.000 people benefited from as to the data gathered in



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2012, the implementation of Russian language program aiming to support Russian language especially in former Soviet republics and to protect ethnic and cultural belongings between 2011 and 2015, the introduction of a large-scale program between 2012 and 2014, the employment of Russian diaspora as translators and volunteers during the Summer Universiade in Kazan in 2013, Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, the support for those who wants to study or work in Russia and the establishment of Russkiy Mir Foundation (Putin, 2015).

### Conclusion

The issue of Russian diaspora contributes to Russian foreign policy in two ways. First, Russia makes use of the Russian population and Russian speaking communities that are numbered about 25 million after the collapse of the USSR as a means of foreign policy. In consequence, Russia could establish its control over the newly independent states thanks to the Yeltsin Doctrine after a short time of uncertainties in foreign policy and could influence their domestic and foreign policies. The issue of Russian diaspora gave chance to Russia, which did not want to content itself with the borders drawn after the breakup of the USSR, to help other Russians beyond their borders and to intervene into these countries' domestic affairs on the ground of supporting them.

Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the crisis in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation all reveal that Russia behaving as the protector of all Russians and Russian speaking people beyond its borders can take an aggressive attitude if necessary. Russia's military interventions under the pretense of Russian diaspora leads to interpretations that the Cold War is back again and caused the countries that have a good number of Russian people to be on alert against revisionist actions of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the new foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation is giving more and more importance to the issues related to soft power and Russian diaspora. However, Russia can take an aggressive stance when it comes to Russian diaspora and its regional influence.

Second, Russia that experienced identity crisis for a couple of years after the collapse of the USSR could reinforce its national Russian identity by introducing itself as a historical homeland to the ethnic Russian people and other Russian speaking communities and by emphasizing it at every opportunity. The groups in Russia that state the imperial influence and ambitions of the past should be revived on the ground of Russian diaspora helped Russian identity to strengthen with the issue of Russian minorities.

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