

Russia's Diaspora Policy (1)

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Readers will have noticed the term "Russian Diaspora Policy" or "Russian Compatriot Policy" in my previous articles. It's time to define this policy's history, the reasons why it is important to Russia, its legal basis and its goals. The next article will discuss the practical implementation of this policy in Latvia. The text is based on research by Arthurs Kvesko at the University of Latvia for a master's thesis in political science, both topical and unique in Latvian-Russian relations research. His work does not explore Russia's active economic or energy policy in Latvia.

What is the Russian-speaking diaspora?

A.Kvesko defines diaspora as "... groups of people who have a relationship with an imaginary or real homeland to which they are emotionally or politically oriented." The bases of diasporas are ethnic homogeneity, a sense of belonging to an indigenous nation, a strong sense of togetherness among the members of the diaspora, and an orientation to their ethnic homeland while living abroad. Diaspora formation and its strength depend both on the host countries and the diaspora homeland's character and the strength of the relationship between the diaspora and its homeland. Homelands usually are interested in the diaspora if it can provide economic or political benefits. Host countries can see foreign diaspora as potential threats. Recently Latvia has realized the economic and cultural value of its own Latvian Diaspora.

A.Kvesko continues, "Mobilizing the diaspora with an internal hierarchy is the most promising model because it is the most effective way for the homeland to influence the diaspora in a desired direction." To define the Russian Diaspora we must look at recent history. With the collapse of the USSR, about 25 million Russians found themselves outside their homeland. We must understand the new diaspora's relationship with its homeland and the diaspora's role in Russian foreign policy. Russia defines its diaspora widely, also including Latvians. All former Soviet citizens who live in a previous Soviet republic are deemed Russian compatriots, thereby artificially extending the definition of the diaspora.

N.Kosmarska claims that the Russian-speaking diaspora is politically constructed with the aim of restoring Russia's political and economic power. Because of this wide definition, A.Kvesko uses the term "Russian-speaking diaspora" as it best describes the Russia's policy towards compatriots living abroad. It is a subsidiary of Russia's geopolitical interests, so it is correct to name the diaspora as Russian-speaking. This coincides with Machiavelli's assessment – to preserve power one should not only use aggression, but also deceptive and fraudulent means.

A.Kvesko is correct in his assessment of Russian Diaspora Policy as "hard" rather than "soft" power as post-Soviet Russia continues to exercise a dominant and aggressive policy. Why does Russia need aggressive dominance? After the collapse of the USSR, it became clear that Russia was not ready to give up its imperial superpower ambitions and wanted to restore economic, military and political supremacy in the former Soviet space. The diaspora outside Russia was assigned a new important role. In 2006 Russian President Vladimir Putin noted that "cooperation with the diaspora, legal advocacy and support for them is one of our national priorities." The Russian-speaking diaspora is politically constructed with the aim of restoring Russia's political and economic power, and is subject to Russia's geopolitical interests.

Compatriots abroad are a resource through which to influence international processes. Latvia is part of the 'near abroad' with a significant Russian-speaking minority, which allows Russia more easily to pursue its foreign policy towards that country. A.Kvesko thinks "insufficient attention is being paid to resources used to implement diaspora-Russia cooperation and the policy's real aims."

Historic Development of Russian Diaspora Policy

The foundations of Russian Diaspora Policy can be traced to Nicholas' I slogan "Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality". An aggressive Russification policy by Tsarist Russia began in the mid-19th century with the aim of strengthening the Russian language as the basic lingua franca throughout the Empire. Following a similar policy, the Soviet Union was aware that a multinational state cannot exist as a single country, so national territories were not granted autonomy for it would mean that Russians and the Russian language would no longer have a privileged position throughout the Union, but only in certain areas. Thus ethnicity in the Soviet Union was de-emphasised until language remained the main characteristic of any ethnicity i.e. ethnic identity was replaced by linguistic identity. Language became the basic criterion for personal identity and the more the Russian language dominated, the greater the impact and status of Russians in the Soviet Union.

If the Tsarist Empire did not pay serious attention to its diaspora, the Soviet Union, especially after the Second World War, considered it to be a threat because it was mostly non-Russian. Thus, the Soviets developed an aggressive diaspora policy with the aim to weaken the diaspora so it would be unable to act against the USSR. Culture proved to be a useful tool against exile or diaspora organizations. Cultural ties to the diaspora served as a pretext to gain access to exile communities and then undermine the operation and existence of their organizations from within. One institution to accomplish this was established in 1964, the "Latvian Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries".

The national policy elements of the Tsarist Empire and the USSR can be summed up as: culture, education and consolidated diaspora organizations to be used to influence policy abroad. In today's Russia "...we can talk about the diaspora policy as deliberate, targeted measures aimed at maintaining the status quo. Russia's economic and political superiority would allow it to maintain great power status".

A.Kvesko divides the Russian Federation's Diaspora Policy development into three phases:

1991-1994. The main feature of this period is the inability to find a suitable means of maintaining links with the diaspora. Yeltsin did not pay serious attention to diaspora issues since they were initiated by communists and USSR supporters. Diaspora policies failed because of wrong tactics, mechanisms for cooperation with the diaspora were moderate and interaction with the West did not allow full development of policies to regain Russia's great power status.

1994-1999. In these years, Russia developed the main ideas how to support and defend its countrymen. There were private initiatives to improve diaspora policy, but the Russian diaspora was not at the top of the political agenda and no one had yet defined who exactly is a Russian compatriot.

1999-2011. A Russian Diaspora Policy became operational only after Vladimir Putin came to power. In 1999 a law was passed defining Russia's relations with compatriots abroad. 2008 is a reference point for two reasons. First, in that year the Russian compatriots held their first Latvian conference, which marked the beginning of the activation process of the Russian Diaspora Policy in Latvia. Second, the 2008 World Conference of Russian Compatriots defined the focus for cooperation between the Russian state and its compatriots abroad.

The hallmark of this period is Putin's coming to power, at a time when oil prices rose sharply improving Russia's economy. This conjuncture sought to restore Russian dominance, at first in the "near abroad" using the Russian diaspora in these countries with the Diaspora Policy being one of the essential ingredients. Putin declared compatriots as an important component of Russian foreign policy stating "a threat to compatriots abroad should be viewed as a threat to Russia's security", thus including the protection of Russian citizens abroad as part of Russia's security military doctrine.

The Legal Basis of the Diaspora Policy

In 1999, "On the Russian Federation national policy on compatriots living abroad" was passed into law. It prioritises the diaspora to Russia, defines what a "Russian compatriot" is, and formulates the main directions in cooperating with it. This law, says Kvesko, makes it clear that the diaspora is an integral part of Russian domestic and foreign policy. Compatriots can rely on Russia to protect their fundamental rights. The law mentions the Coordination Council, indicating that Russia sees its compatriot policy as a coordinated and coherent process with diaspora organizations in host countries. As explained above, the deliberate extension of the term "Russian compatriots" allows Russia to usurp the right to defend as wide a group of people as possible. The Compatriots law also states that cooperation will be at the organization, not individual level and defines the areas in which Russia will cooperate with the diaspora, and where it can expect support: economy, society, culture, language, religion, education, and media.

The Russian Compatriots Act provides strategic guidelines and objectives for the practical implementation of the measures set out in its Work Programme and names the necessary activities and responsible authorities. Its primary task is the organization and consolidation of the diaspora because success depends on coordinated action.

Preserving Russian culture in a foreign environment for the Russian-speaking diaspora is a key feature of this program, to create a "Russian world". Responsibility for implementation rests on both Russian authorities and diaspora organizations. Culture is listed with language in the same section, because the interaction of these two elements ensures the creation of loyalty to Russia. Russian cultural hegemony was also used to increase identity with the Tsarist Russian Empire.

A new area of cooperation with the diaspora is supporting young people. Russia in relations with the diaspora has long-term goals, so young people are one of the top groups designated for co-operation, for they shape the future active part of the diaspora. Russian speakers must receive information directly from Russia. Here, the host country's existing Russian language media plays an important role.

The program also includes the defense of Russian compatriots' rights and freedoms, as well as support in the social field. Another major target group are seniors - diaspora war veterans and pensioners. A number of Russian institutions and officials are engaged in the Diaspora Program with a specific division of responsibilities and accountability: the Russian President, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Compatriots Policy Coordination Centre, which must implement the President's plans and intentions. Program implementation also involves Russia's regions and municipalities.

My next article will discuss A.Kvesko's analysis of Russia's Diaspora Policy's practical manifestations in Latvia: 1. Promoting the consolidation of the Russian-speaking diaspora, creating preconditions for the development and consolidation of the institutions involved in the promotion, 2. Strengthening Russian language and cultural expansion in Russia's efforts to create a "Russian world" for the diaspora in host countries and ways used to promote and strengthen this policy in Latvia, 3. Russia's activities in the field of education, and 4. Russia's foreign policy long term goal co-operating with Russian-speaking youth: Diaspora, the next generation.