

Russian Diaspora Policy (2)

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The first article "Russian Diaspora Policy" used Arthurs Kvesko master's thesis (University of Latvia) to define the term Russian diaspora, follow diaspora policy development and examine the program and its ideological content. This article will examine the practical application of the policy in Latvia using Kvesko's analysis.

Russia sees the Russian-speaking diaspora as a means to recover its lost superpower status. The function of the Diaspora is to maintain and expand the Russian-speaking world into the former Soviet sphere, creating support for Russia's foreign policy thereby increasing Russian influence in the world. The question is, how is diaspora policy applied in Latvia?

Consolidation of the Russian-speaking Diaspora

From the Russian viewpoint, a cohesive diaspora abroad is consistent with Russian foreign policy goals. It is strategically advantageous because certain activities can be encouraged, specific views provided, demands to host countries expressed and any necessary public activity organized. Consolidation provides the opportunity to address and interact with the diaspora as a single entity. Practical steps to coordinate and consolidate the Russian diaspora are outlined in the diaspora program. The goal is to set priorities, advance Russia's political and economic interests and to provide the necessary support to ensure success.

Support is not for the individual but the group. The diaspora is to be concentrated into associations and organized hierarchically and coordinated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The global Russian Compatriot Coordination Board (KTKP) to which Latvia elects two representatives indicates the importance Russia attaches to its diaspora in Latvia. Locally the Russian embassy has organized a Russian Compatriots Latvian Coordination Board (KTOLKP). Moscow House in Riga is the base for diaspora organizations and has grown into a major Russian-speaking diaspora consolidation center. Activities include "The Countryman" award, highlighting local Russians, such as Tatiana Ždanoka, who has contributed to the consolidation of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Europe. In 2009 the Russian budget devoted approximately 14 million lats (\$28m) to consolidate Diaspora organizations. The second major source of funding is the "Ruskiy Mir" Foundation.

Financing provides the interest, but problems act as a unifying element around which the diaspora can coalesce. Citizenship, minority rights, and education reform are the issues around which Russia attempts to consolidate its Latvian diaspora. Internationally, Russia regularly criticises Latvia's minority and human rights, citizenship laws etc.

Russia consolidates its diaspora abroad hierarchically, overseeing it from the top. Regular criticism of Latvia is useful to Russia as it expands criticism of Latvia not only at the international but also the national level by adding internal pressure as well.

Russia's support for its diaspora is fragmented and targeted. But sponsoring the view that Russia is concerned about its diaspora is important: it consolidates support around issues of concern to Russia. Nevertheless, Latvian-Russian compatriots are critical of aid. Although Russia is expected to support all endeavours, it supports only those that benefit its strategic objectives. Latvia's Russian diaspora is not a passive observer of the Diaspora policy, but is prepared to participate and to take the initiative to implement it. Russia can count on a certain part of Latvia's Russian-speaking population who are ready to cooperate. Russia's efforts to consolidate its diaspora can be seen as at least partly successful.

Expanding and Strengthening the Russian Language and Cultural Space

If Russia wants to build a "Russian World" in the "near abroad" including Latvia, it needs the Russian language. Therefore, preserving and developing a Russian environment is an important prerequisite for this purpose, mainly among Russian-speaking youth. Russia avoids operating directly in the school environment; instead it cooperates with Russian language school students and teachers by organizing various competitions such as Russian festivals through the "Russkiy Mir" foundation.

An infrastructure is needed to distribute Russian culture, hence the Moscow House in Riga. There are two other "Russian" centers: at the Baltic International Academy in Riga and at Daugavpils University which have been dubbed as "Russian World" embassies in Latvia. These serve as platforms for the Russian-speaking diaspora organizations in Latvia to manage and plan their activities. The Russian cultural centers deal not only with Russian state institutions, but with private ones as well. One of the ways is staging classic cultural events. Other projects emphasize inextricable Latvian cultural links with Russia. Also, the creation of the "Russian world" is a process involving the beliefs and values of individuals using public space, such as showing that Russians have lived in Latvia for centuries. Tsarist and Soviet cultural symbols are used to promote Russian and Soviet military patriotism. May 9 is an example of Russia's use of a military patriotic theme, which is characterized by the custom of wearing a St. George's ribbon (georgievskaya lentochka) on that day.

So-called modern popular culture events such as the music festival "New Wave" and seemingly innocent Russian humor and satirical club performances are also important. Russian cultural expansion is based on the number of Russian cultural centers in Latvia, as well as on "Russkiy Mir" funded projects. However, the question remains – what motivates diaspora activity, an opportunity to fully integrate into Russian culture and language or generous "Russkiy Mir" and other institutions' financed programs?

Russian Activities in Education

Support for diaspora education was one of the first forms of support provided by Russia as educational environments contribute to strengthening the position of the Russian language. Educational institutions are designed to develop values and attitudes of young people. Already mentioned is the support for Russian language school teachers and teaching materials from Russia. The diaspora program also promotes youth involvement in educational institutions at all levels in Russia, also supported by "Russkiy Mir".

There are no co-operation agreements between Latvian and Russian educational institutions, and no co-operation between higher education institutions. However, Russia provides specific support for individuals and organizations, bypassing Latvian authorities and not always informing them of book shipments to Latvian schools. Thus delivered history textbooks ensure that diaspora children are exposed to Russia's official vision of history.

How to interpret such Russian behavior? On the one hand it can be viewed as common practice in order to support ones diaspora abroad, but on the other, Russian activities are focused on offering an alternative to the Latvian school curriculum.

Organizing contests and competitions to diaspora students is another form of support. For example, the Russian Consulate General in Daugavpils announced an essay contest for students. The competition terminology is contrary to that used in Latvian educational standards. The competition's offered essay topics: "Fascism destroyed, but is it beaten?," "Latvian population in the fight against fascism", "The blockade of Leningrad - heroic defenders and models of masculinity", etc. Because such Russian activities are not known to the Latvian educational supervisory bodies, only vague assumptions as to the actual scope and content can be made.

Each year Russian-speaking students receive scholarships to study in Russia and significant numbers return to become active in the Russian-speaking diaspora and become members of its organizations. Former Latvian KSAŠ student activists demonstrated in Strasbourg against Latvian education reform. Russia supports education due to its desire to become a superpower again as modern superpowers are characterized not only by military but also by economic and scientific parameters.°

Co-operation With Russian-speaking Youth

One of the International Association of Young Russian Compatriots (SJKTOA) primary goals is to "keep the Russian people's ethnic identity, as well as its spiritual and cultural heritage." However, attempts to consolidate diaspora youth from the top down have not been particularly successful, for the Diaspora youth organizations are not homogeneous and submissive to centralized command.

There are also successes. During the Latvian educational reforms, Russia attempted to show to diaspora youth that it is ready to take radical steps, including introducing economic sanctions against Latvia. The protests identified new leaders willing to take a more active role in the diaspora environment. After the protests they remained active in society and became involved in politics. During the establishment of the T. Ždanoka led "Russian-speaking Youth Alliance" office in Riga in 2010, they took the initiative to hold the "Baltic Russian-speaking Youth Organization" forum and set up the organization "9.maijs.lv". Russia closely follows this diaspora youth consolidation.

In 2011 diaspora youth organizations founded "LatRusMol" which differs from previous attempts at consolidation. "LatRusMol" demands are political: education in the Russian language, and the introduction of Latvian citizenship on demand. Although this organization styles itself as a youth association its membership includes diaspora adult organizations.

Under the aegis of cultural exchange, Russian-speaking youth often go to Russia, where they participate in various competitions and youth summer camps, a popular activity for all Russian foreign Diasporas. There they get an education, meet other Russian youth and meet Russian government officials. It is significant that Russian-speaking young people from all over the "near abroad" almost simultaneously and in a similar manner support Russia's position on certain foreign policy issues. Russia considers diaspora youth a priority partner who will in the future surely assist in promoting Russia's foreign policy goals.