

Russia and Its New Diasporas

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• • • • **Its New Diasporas** • • • •
Igor Zevelev



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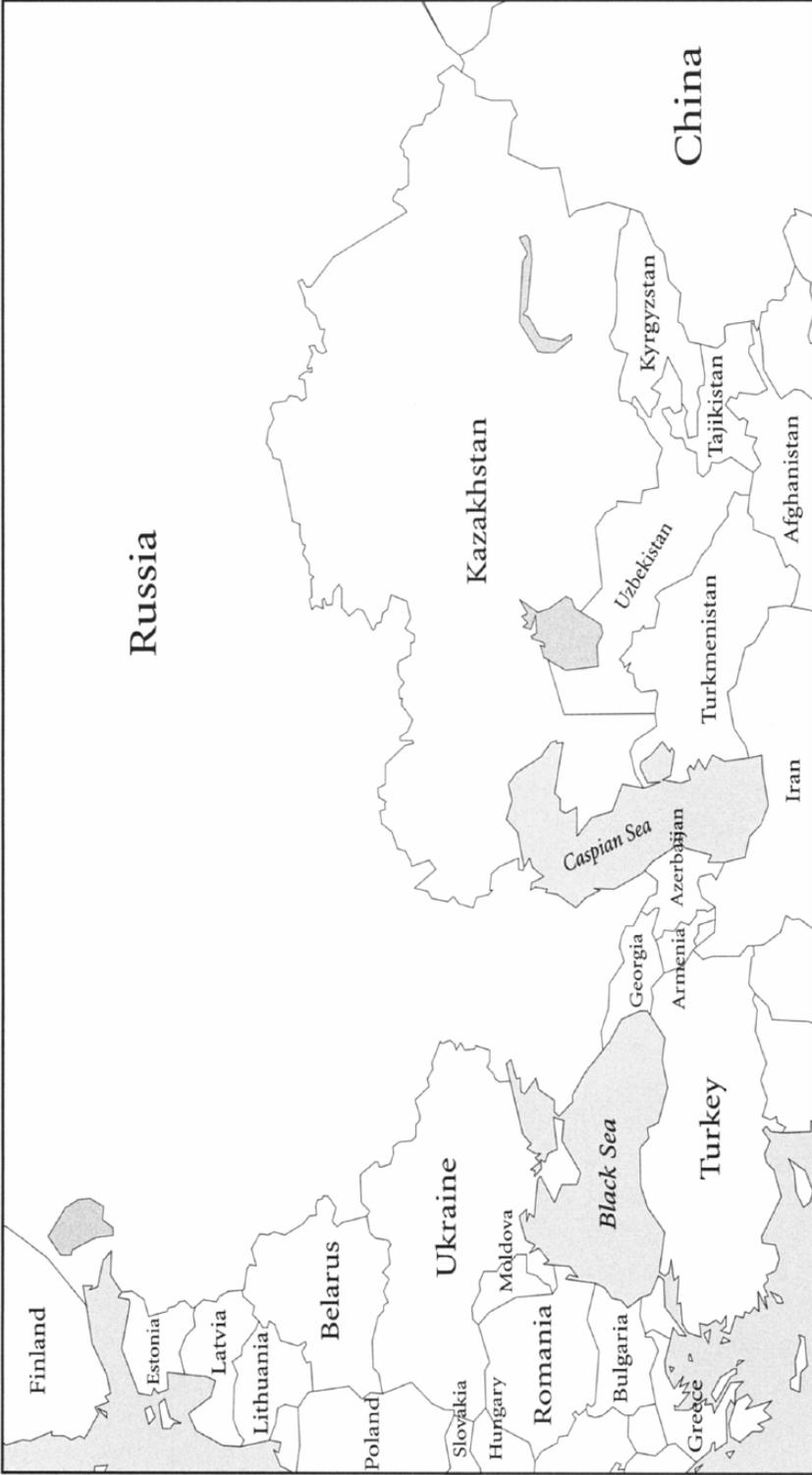
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••••• Foreword •••••

IMAGINE YOU WOKE UP ONE MORNING and discovered you were in a different country—not physically transported there; in fact, you have awakened in the same place, along with the same neighbors. But the name of your country has changed, you’re supposed to salute a different flag, your loyalty is supposed to be for a different president.

This is the situation millions of ethnic Russians—more than twenty-five million by some estimates—found themselves in on December 26, 1991, when the Soviet Union was dissolved, heralding the independence of its fifteen constituent republics. Among the fifteen, Russia seemed first among equals, assuming the role of leader of the former Soviet space.

Indeed, ethnic Russians over many, many decades spread—through migration and political offices—throughout the imperial and Soviet territory, locating mostly in the urban centers and enclaves in neighboring lands and, later, Soviet republics. Their presence was unquestioned: After all, people in the Soviet Union owed their allegiance to the capital of the “socialist federation” in Moscow. Russians and the non-Russian republics’ indigenous nationalities were “Soviets” rather than members of specific ethnic groups. With the USSR’s sudden demise, have these sources of identity really changed?

One thing that hasn’t changed are the ethnic Russian communities in these newly independent states. These “diasporas,” as Igor Zevelev explains in the following pages, are not “refugees”; nor are they displaced people. In fact, they continue in their role as valued members of the work force in most of these newly independent states. There have not been any serious ethnic clashes with titular ethnic groups. There has been no mass exodus of ethnic Russians back into the Russian Federation, although there has been a steady stream of such migration.

What is of greater concern, though, is on the other side of these borders—that is, in the Russian Federation. The ethnic situation in these Soviet successor states remains generally stable, but the situation offers considerable political capital for Russian politicians who seek to tap into a spirit of nationalism, of Russian “greatness” that once held sway over these neighboring lands. The neo-imperialist bombast of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is rivaled by that of a considerable number of other, subtler Russian politicians who realize the potential to run on political platforms that could tap an otherwise inchoate nationalist sentiment.

Most Russian officials realize the potential of the diasporas issue slightly differently, considering these ethnic Russian communities as a distinct component in constructing the post-Soviet Russian nation-state. The *problematique* of contemporary international relations is that the political construct of the state and the historical and cultural construct of the nation have rarely converged on the same territory—certainly not the way they did in nineteenth-century Europe—and Zevelev provides here an excellent historical and intellectual survey of Russia’s ongoing quest to define both concepts as part of a congruent whole, despite the country’s cultural affinity for universal values and the manipulation of national identities during the Soviet period.

Up to now, moderation has served as the leitmotif of Russian policy toward ethnic Russians in the “near abroad,” the term most of the Russian Federation’s citizens use to describe the neighboring Soviet successor states. Since the beginning of the post-Soviet era, Zevelev tells us, successive Russian governments have been ambiguous in their attitudes toward the Russian diasporas. The resulting policy has reflected, on the one hand, the fear of mass migration of Russians back into the federation and an inability to provide jobs and welfare to this sizable contingent of potential citizens and, on the other hand, the appeal of an issue that could be used to exert considerable influence over the former Soviet republics. Russian president Vladimir Putin may be dramatically changing this policy, as suggested in his mid-November 2000 comments about bringing Russians home from the near abroad and strengthening the country’s borders.

Such influence may be welcome in economically tenuous Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russians constitute a sizable presence in the country’s northern provinces, but the Baltic states view their ethnic Russian communities with suspicion at best; at worst, they have decided to settle a

historical score with what could be called discriminatory language and citizenship policies against the generations of ethnic Russians who moved to these states after the Soviet Union annexed them during World War II. As prospective candidates for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the former Soviet republics of Estonia and Latvia compound the Russian Federation's aggravation over the prospect of NATO's expansion so close to its borders with domestic policies that appear decidedly anti-Russian.

If there is a constructive way to view the Russian government's policies toward the ethnic Russian diasporas, it lies in the concept of integration. Yet there are as many motives behind integrative schemes as there are programs—ranging from disguised proposals to re-create the centrally controlled Soviet political space to Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbaev's economically driven Eurasian Union concept. Each proposal for such integrative schema, of course, puts a premium on a different dimension of integration. The Russia-Belarus union, a treaty initiative concluded during the Yeltsin administration and given a renewed mandate under Putin, seems to be the Russian government's ideal for such an integrative approach. Yet, despite the union's apparent exclusivity, Putin seems to envision the extension of the union to other Soviet successor states with large ethnic Russian and "Russian-speaking" populations.

If integration is the key to Russia's future as a positive member of the international community and as a way to construct a coherent nation-state, we should look for an emphasis on economic integration and open borders, not for a menacing and quite familiar pattern of bringing members of a scattered ethnic group "under one political roof." To dispel the air of suspicion surrounding any such attempt at integration that is led by Russian officialdom, Zevelev appeals to the West to view such positive attempts as not bolstering the Russian state or nation, but as reiterating the historical fact of an extensive Russian-speaking civilization across Eurasia.

Igor Zevelev's work is the Institute's first in-depth examination of ethnodemographic security challenges on the Eurasian continent, and it joins quite a few closely related Institute initiatives and studies published by the Institute's Press. Among the former is the Working Group on the Future of Europe, bringing together veteran analysts on Soviet and Russian politics and how they affect European and transatlantic security

institutions. The latter constitute a long line of publications on Russia's post-Soviet transition and its impact on global and Eurasian security, including Kenneth M. Jensen and Leon Aron's edited volume *The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy*, Martha Brill Olcott's *Central Asia's New States*, Anatol Lieven's *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*, James Goodby's *Europe Undivided*, and Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski's *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against Democracy*. Undoubtedly, the issue of Russia's evolving role in the international community is one we will continue to address.

RICHARD H. SOLOMON
PRESIDENT
UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

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