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Michele E. Commercio
Visiting Research Fellow, Christopher H. Browne Center for International Politics
University of Pennsylvania
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Kyrgyzstan and Latvia

Contrasting Historical Legacies: Informal Networks and Russian Minority Politics in Kyrgyzstan and Latvia

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

This research project explores how the presence (or absence) of inherited Soviet-era informal networks impacts attempts made by Russians in independent Kyrgyzstan and Latvia to organize on an economic and political basis. Thus, the project examines how informal networks assist ethnic minorities struggling to find a niche in post-communist multiethnic societies. I went to the field to update research on the Russian minority question that I conducted in 2000, and to explore how the presence (or absence) of inherited networks affects Russian mobilization – economic and political – today. I was in the field for approximately seven weeks and spent three in Riga and three in Bishkek.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

This project is a systematic comparative analysis of how the formerly dominant nation of an empire, transformed into a minority in most successor states when that empire collapsed, responds to post-imperial political, economic, and social challenges. It is the first study to take a retrospective in-depth look at the initial stage (i.e. the first fifteen years) of post-communist development, and its effect on ethnic Russian minority populations.

While the social movement and ethnic conflict literatures suggest that minority politics are often marked by violence, mass mobilization, or assimilation, they fail to note that this is not always the case. In fact, frustrated minorities do adopt less extreme measures to redress grievances. The real puzzle of Russian minority politics in post-Soviet states concerns what are theoretically under-explored moderate responses, such as “exit” and “voice,” to post-imperial challenges. In the context of Russian minority politics, exit and voice refer respectively to out-migration and political mobilization.

The Kyrgyz and Latvian cases raise important theoretical questions regarding ethnicity and conflict. For example, why would an ethnic minority in a state that implements accommodating minority policies choose out-migration over political mobilization? And why would an ethnic minority in a state that implements antagonistic minority policies choose political mobilization over out-migration? Which factors encourage peaceful coexistence in potentially unstable multiethnic states, and how do those factors influence political, economic, and social development?

Approach and Research Methodology

The goals of my fieldwork were to update research on the Russian minority question conducted five years ago, and to explore how the presence (or absence) of inherited informal networks impacts attempts made by Russians in post-Soviet states to organize on an economic and political basis. To achieve the first goal, I interviewed representatives of Russians in Riga, Bishkek, and Almaty, and collected materials from

libraries, local scholars, and national statistic agencies. I relied primarily on open-ended personal interviews to achieve the second goal, which involved probing Communist Party, KGB, and *Komsomol* connections to determine whether or not such connections help Russians start their own businesses and establish non-governmental organizations and/or political parties that represent local Russians. In Riga I sought to investigate how informal networks facilitate the development of political parties, non-governmental organizations, and private businesses; in Bishkek I sought to investigate how the absence of informal networks impedes political and economic organization.

In each city I interviewed representatives of local Russians who are affiliated with specific organizations. For example, in Riga I interviewed representatives of the Latvian Association for the Support of Russian-Language Schools, the Russian Party, the Party of National Harmony, and the Socialist Party. I also interviewed a freelance journalist who specializes in tracking Latvia's rich and famous. In Bishkek I interviewed representatives of the Slavic Foundation, the Association of Russian Compatriots of Kyrgyzstan – Harmony, the Public Association of Russians, and the Russian Cultural Center.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

As I suspected, the fundamental dimensions of the Russian minority question in Central Asia and the Baltics have not changed over the last five years. Updating research conducted in 2000 was therefore straightforward. Russians continue to face formal and informal discrimination in Latvia, particularly in the political realm, while Russians continue to face informal discrimination in Kyrgyzstan – in the political and economic realms. In each case Russians are dissatisfied, but in contrast to their counterparts in Central Asia, Russians in Latvia have found a way to thrive economically despite discriminatory policies and practices.

Owing to their strong presence in formal institutions at the end of the Soviet era, Russians emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union as a fairly well-connected group in Latvian society. Recognizing the value of an historic opportunity, Russians quickly tapped into these connections to form political parties, non-governmental organizations, and private businesses. Though they remain estranged from politics, Russians are a vital element of Latvia's business community – and they benefit, financially, from their economic activity. Rather than migrate from a country in which they are thriving, they choose to protest policies they deem discriminatory, such as the new ruling for minority schools requiring that sixty percent of all classes be taught in Latvian. Latvia's recent accession to the European Union, as well as Russian participation in Latvia's business community encourages Russian voice and discourages Russian exit.

In contrast, because they had been ousted from formal institutions by the end of the Soviet era, Russians in Kyrgyzstan emerged from the collapse of the Union as an isolated group. Lacking institutional connections, they were unable to establish private businesses or create sustainable voice. Though there are non-governmental organizations representing local Russians, there are no political parties with the same goal, and non-governmental organizations are far more cultural than political. Today Russians in Kyrgyzstan remain estranged from politics and lucrative business, though they are excluded primarily by informal practices as opposed to formal policies. Rather than protest informal practices they deem discriminatory, Russians in Kyrgyzstan have chosen exit over voice.

Suggestions for Future Research

This project suggests that a dissatisfied minority will avoid out-migration and fight for its rights at home if it can survive economically, but will choose out-migration over political mobilization if it cannot survive economically. This raises the question of how, in a post-imperial context, a minority can skirt formal and/or informal discrimination in order to survive economically. My research suggests that the degree to which a minority is connected to political institutions during the pre-independence period greatly affects the degree to which it is able to organize on a political and economic basis during the initial stage of post-communist development. This in turn affects the degree to which the minority exhibits exit and voice behaviors.

I therefore suggest two avenues of future research. First, the lack of empirical data on who owns what in post-Soviet countries hinders our understanding of post-communist development in multiethnic societies. The creation of such a data base would be a challenging, but rewarding endeavor. Second, my hypothesis could be tested in other post-communist states with large Russian minority populations such as Ukraine, Estonia, Moldova, and Belarus. This would enlighten our understanding of ethnic relations in post-communist societies.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

The most compelling policy question raised by this project is the following: What factors encourage ethnic harmony in potentially unstable multiethnic states, and how do those factors influence political, economic, and social development? My research suggests that economic prosperity can diminish dissatisfaction associated with political and/or economic marginalization. If a multiethnic state such as Latvia marginalizes a minority but offers an ethnic division of labor that satisfies the economic aspirations of that minority, the minority's level of discontent is reduced because the degree of economic competition between groups is diminished. In contrast, if a multiethnic state such as Kyrgyzstan marginalizes a minority without creating an ethnic division of labor that satisfies the economic aspirations of that minority, the minority's level of discontent rises because the degree of economic competition between groups is heightened. This can contribute to a high level of dissatisfaction, as well as a high level of out-migration among the minority in question. In some cases, such as the Kyrgyz case, a high level of out-migration can be detrimental to a country's economic development if the out-migration is prevalent among a highly-skilled population.