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Final Report Guidelines

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Svoi or Rodnoi? Citizenship, Belonging, and Post-Soviet Mobilities in Moscow

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Research Abstract: Analyses of the political landscape of post-Soviet states have granted much attention to the notoriously strong new nationalisms of the region. As the city of Moscow has become a primary destination for education and labor-driven migration from the former Soviet republics, it constitutes a key site to examine whether Soviet-era ideals of commonality and shared supra-ethnic nationalism persist today, despite the role of new ethnically-oriented nationalism in contemporary Russia. This research probes the dimensions of citizenship and belonging among a sampling of college-age students in Moscow from the Republic of Kazakhstan. I propose that in the post-Soviet context there are blurred distinctions and contradictory meanings ascribed to notions of homeland and place of origin—in part a legacy of Soviet-era ideology and infrastructure—and that within contemporary migration patterns and perceptions of national boundaries one can observe the collapse of traditional distinctions in the social sciences between ethnic and civic nationalism.

Research Goals: This project, which constitutes the first phase of my doctoral dissertation research in the field of Anthropology, has undergone various changes in aim and scope since its initial conception and proposal in the fall of 2018. I had originally formulated a project dealing with undocumented migrant populations from the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan in Saint Petersburg. I was particularly interested in how the relatively recent history of unified Soviet statehood, infrastructure, education, and so forth impacted the contemporary dynamics of "illegal" personhood and labor among migrants. A substantial portion of undocumented migrants in the Russian Federation—one of the major migrant-receiving countries in the world—were born

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in 1991 or prior and thus, were born as citizens of the country in which they now resided as undocumented. This, among other factors I believed, complicated the boundaries between "foreigner" and "native" or insider/outsider that underpin the international migratory experience. Furthermore, there has been a substantial rearrangement of demographic makeups across all former Soviet Republics. This is largely due to the enactment of "return" migration patterns and resettlement programs aimed at bringing "back" people of the titular ethnic group from minority populations other former Soviet Republics and neighboring countries. (For instance, there are migrants from Tajikistan who are ethnic Russians who have repatriated to Russia through migratory resettlement programs.) Thus, I wished to explore the contours of contemporary nationalism, social allegiances, and migratory movements that are specific to the post-Soviet space and that have the potential to complicate many classic concerns in migration studies.

However, before commencing my intended project, I was ultimately required to conduct my research in Moscow, where I did not have existing research contacts, due to university affiliation issues. In addition, I was limited to research subjects affiliated with Moscow International University (henceforth MIU), where I had been able to obtain academic affiliation myself. As per these stipulations at MIU, I was required to report the names and contact information of any person I was to interview for my research project. As this conflicts with the standard protocol for research subjects in ethnographic research, I made the decision to restrict my interviewees to individuals who worked or studied at MIU.

Research Activities: Due to the aforementioned unexpected events, I had an initially slow start to finding research subjects and adapting my research plans as I was required to change my research location to a place where I had previously spent very little time and had no existing

research contacts. Initially, I had planned to conduct interviews with members of the cleaning and custodial staff of Moscow International University, who consisted primarily of female migrant laborers from the Central Asian republics and the North Caucasus regions of the Russian Federation. However, I was informed by the woman in charge of this department at MIU that these women did not speak sufficient Russian to communicate with me. Instead, she suggested that I interview MIU students employed in office-based work-study programs. With her help in identifying willing participants, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with these students, who were born and raised in Kazakhstan (with the exception of one student, who was from Kyrgyzstan.) These informants included 6 ethnic Russians, 6 ethnic Kazakhs, 1 ethnic Kyrgyz, and 4 students of mixed Russian-Kazakh, Russian-Tatar, Tajik-Kazakh, and Kazakh-Uzbek backgrounds. I conducted all interviews in Russian and used a questionnaire as a guide, though this template contained open-ended questions in an attempt to avoid guiding the content of the interviews too much or inadvertently "feeding" my interview subjects any responses or opinions. (e.g. "Describe the reasons why you decided to study in Moscow" and not "Did you always dream of living in Moscow?")

I used this opportunity to explore the contours of racial and ethnic differentiation in the post-Soviet reality of one of the most ethnically diverse republics of the USSR, and how these dynamics play out in the context of student networks in Moscow. In addition, I was eager to explore how "foreignness" operated in the context of the relocated citizens of this former Soviet republic. Kazakhstan is "ground zero" for examining many of the issues linked to return migration in the former Soviet Union, as it has both 1) a large ethnic Russian minority (with some majority-ethnic Russian regions) and 2) neighbors countries with significant Kazakh ethnic minorities (notably China, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan). Therefore,

Kazakhstan both experiences significant *in-migration* of ethnic Kazakhs (known as *oralman* or "returnees"), and has made major efforts to implement return-migration programs. At the same time, the country experiences substantial *out-migration* of ethnic Russians through Russia's return migration policies, which also extend to ethnic Volga Tatars and other ethnic minorities native to Russia. It is worth noting that much of Kazakhstan's ethnic diversity can be attributed to the extent of forced deportations to the region (Cameron 2018). Therefore, I was eager to explore how these citizens of Kazakhstan of different ethnic backgrounds viewed their migration to Moscow, where their loyalties lied and senses of boundaries operated, and what the constellations of constraint and possibility existed for those who were seeking to become Russian citizens.

In addition, during my time in Moscow I made weekly visits to the State Historical Library, where I made use of the periodical sections to read newspapers and journals to situate my research questions. I recorded and analyzed the ways in which the "national question" had shifted since the late Soviet period, comparing with how these issues are framed in contemporary online media such as YouTube comment sections on political videos. During these six months in Moscow I also fine-tuned my qualitative note-taking skills by documenting my regular interactions with migrant populations at the restaurants, stores, and beauty salons that I frequented. In public spaces, I drew attention to and documented the securitization of public places, particularly in monitored public places such as Red Square or the Moscow city metro system. Lastly, I underwent two hours per week of academic Russian-language instruction, which greatly benefitted my formal speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Important Research Findings: My primary research findings revolve around the

complexities of national affinities among my research sample of students, which have implications both for the Republic and Kazakhstan and Russia. Firstly, it is important to note that my informants unanimously agreed that economic factors in their home country, Kazakhstan, had impacted their decision to obtain a degree in Moscow, where more opportunities existed for scholarships and work-study than in Kazakhstan. While Russia suffers from similar economic and political woes as Kazakhstan, there are nevertheless significantly more opportunities in Moscow, particularly for students whose English-language skills are not sufficient to complete academic programs in North America, Western Europe, or the Gulf States.

All informants, regardless of ethnic background, claimed that they primarily socialized with other people from Kazakhstan. While some of them had existing friends at MIU, many of the interviewees did not, thus these social circles cannot be attributed to prior networks. The ethnic Russians I spoke with articulated that the desire to obtain Russian citizenship was in fact a difficult decision. For instance, 19-year-old Larisa[1], an ethnic Russia from the city of Taraz in southern Kazakhstan, stated that "It really hurts to think of giving up my Kazakhstani citizenship, it's like I'm betraying my homeland." ("*Kak budto by ya predayu svoyu rodinu*".) In addition, across nearly all interviews there was a repeated assertion that what binds people from Kazakhstan is a similar *mentalitet,* this was particularly emphasized on the subject of ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan being in some ways more similar in mentality (*po mentalitetu)* to compatriots rather than ethnic Russians from Russia. This shared *mentalitet* was referred to as a vague set of values and habitus that at times also included other migrants in Moscow from other former Soviet republics or non-predominantly ethnic Russian regions of Russia. Timur, a 19-year

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[1] I have changed the names of any informants in this report and will do the same in any future publications or writings on this research material.

old from Karaganda of half-Russian half-Kazakh origin, pointed out that his friends were primarily from Kazakhstan, but felt an easier time engaging with other "outsiders" in Moscow, such as Chechens or Dagestanis, because "their mentality is more like ours than Muscovites." ("Potomu chto mentalitet s nimi bolshe pokhozhe, chem s moskvichami.") However, racial disparities were apparent in both the interviews I conducted with MIU students and those with other migrants around the city with whom I had informal interactions. For instance, the increased securitization of public space in Moscow has largely targeted those with "non-Slavic appearance" (*neslavyanskaya vneshnost);* there are obvious increases in security in public places, such as metal detectors in Red Square, which are experienced differentially by those who can "pass" as an ethnic Russian or not. Furthermore, on Russian housing sites such as avito.ru, one frequently encounters requirements that a potential tenant be a "slav" or of "Slavic appearance".

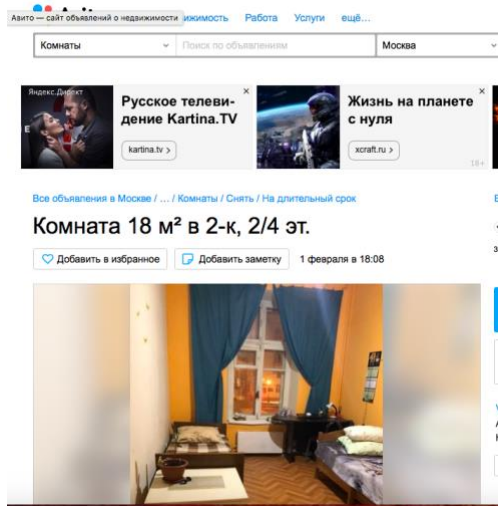*Image I. taking a break from people-watching in Red Square*

Image II. Listing for a room for rent on avito.com, specifying

that only individuals of "Slavic appearance" (red underline added by me) will be considered.

In my reading and documentation of Russian nationalism and return migration since the fall of the USSR, it has become apparent that the dominant Russian nationalist framework rests on a central contradiction, as it simultaneously claims two things. 1) that Russians are wrongfully mistreated in former Soviet republics and therefore must abandon their native, beloved *krai* (edge, border, region). However, this framework claims at the same time that 2) there is something natural and even morally right in their moving to their *rodina* (homeland). So they

(Russians leaving Kazakhstan, or other former republics in the Soviet Union) must be simultaneously portrayed as refugees—forced to flee against their will—and also as people simply exercising their nationalist right to self-determination. In other words, going back to the land is simply a reflection of a biological reality, that one wants to live on the land that corresponds with their blood, so to speak. This contradiction cuts to the core of how decidedly *not* black in white the views of homeland, citizenship, rightful place of residence, and boundaries of collectivity are among the mixed-background Kazakhstanis whom I interviewed.

Scare-tactics and visceral post-truth identity politics exist on the internet and in state media, there are numerous videos on YouTube with names such as *Pochemu Kazakhstan gonit russkix?* ("Why is Kazakhstan driving out Russians?") with anxious, hijab-clad Russian women and packed bags.

Image III. Sensationalistic nationalist media on YouTube

   At the same time, the internet is also a space where people's grievances regarding mixed loyalties are shared and aired. These opinions were also apparent among the mixed-ethnic group of Kazakhstani students that I interviewed at MIU, all of whom referred to Kazakhstan as their *rodina* regardless of ethnic background. While I did not conduct any formal interviews with

migrant populations of older age groups, I regularly visited markets and bazaars, where I chatted with fruit and carpet vendors who are often older migrants from former Soviet Republics. The shared experiences of universal Soviet education and military conscription for men seemed to continue some sense of shared (post)Soviet *byt* among these interlocutors.

Image IV: Carpet vendors at Izmailovo Market

Policy Implications and Recommendations: There is substantial emphasis in both academic and policy-oriented publications on the political implications of nationalism in Russia and the broader region that draw on the analytic distinctions between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism, and particularly on how the latter is a driving factor behind the authoritarian politics of Russia, Kazakhstan and the Central Asian republics. I am convinced that in everyday lived realities, these categories are murky at best, due to 1) return migration (for instance, are ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan that repatriate to Russia "locals" or "migrants"?) and 2) the clearly

defined, perpetuating notion among my informants that the "Near Abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezhie*) is a gray zone that is not *rodnoi* (native)*,* but still *svoi* (one's own). Perhaps the insights gleaned from this period of research that have the most direct implications for US policy and security interests are the following: I approach with skepticism accounts that paint alarmist pictures describing the situation of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan as a "Ukraine situation" that is ready to "explode" at any minute, and also those that pit the issues of language and nationality in Kazakhstan as a "Kazakh vs Russian" matter and that fail to address the distinctions between, say, Russian-language and Russian media (Auyezov 2016)(Goble 2016).

It is crucial for US policy makers to be keenly attuned to the extent to which YouTube, VKontakte, and other social media platforms are key actors in nationalist and political sentiments in Russia and the former Soviet Republics. I believe excessive emphasis is placed on the role of official state media in these matters. For instance, much attention is given to policy analysts on the role of government restriction of certain types of cable television, for instance Kazakh state restriction of Russian-language and Russian media (Goble 2016). An increasing number of people's political sensibilities are shaped by user-created/distributed content on platforms such as YouTube and the messaging applications Telegram and WhatsApp. This is not to say that the content of such media is necessarily entirely different than that of state-sponsored news (it may or may not be), but that these media operate within a largely different context of authorship, regulation, and circulation.

Co-Curricular Activity: I did not engage in any co-curricular activities that involved US government officials, NGOs, or any such state or non-state institutions.

Conclusions: Though this research was largely preliminary and focused on obtaining qualitative, rather than large-scale quantitative data, I nevertheless was able to come to some precursory conclusions regarding the convoluted nature of in-group/out-group boundaries in Central Asian populations in Moscow, including ethnic Russians that have repatriated. Much of the relatively sparse academic and policy literature on Central Asian migration focuses on seasonal, male-driven, under-the-table labor and there exists very little research on student migrant communities, despite the fact that education is a large draw of mobilities from the former Soviet Republics to Russia. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the section on policy recommendations, there is very little research on the impacts and implications of so-called "return migration" in the former Soviet republics, despite the fact that these programs have been a factor in significant demographic shifts in the region. Much of the information available on these matters exists on journalistic platforms (Casey 2016; Pannier 2016), and the topic warrants more sustained qualitative and quantitative research.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications: The findings from the ACTR-funded portion of research that I report here shall form the basis of several research conference paper submissions that I am currently in the process of preparing, and will inform my upcoming research agenda. The six months of research I conducted constitute the first phase of approximately one and a half years of doctoral dissertation research for an Anthropology PhD. I shall conduct another 9-12 months of dissertation research beginning in the spring semester of 2020, which will be carried out primarily in the Republic of Tajikistan, in addition to a period of follow-up research in Russia, on the impacts of contemporary migration to Russia on Tajik

nationalism and on the impacts of contemporary Central Asian migration on Russian

nationalism(s).

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