

AY20 // Russia Foreign Policy

Paper Assignment

- *This will be a 6-8 page analytical essay on a Russian Foreign Policy topic as proposed by you and approved by the instructor.*

Security Implications of the Russification Policy

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The forgotten conflict of Transnistria is one of the latest frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet era. Today, a ceasefire is in place and life is relatively peaceful; there is no ongoing fighting, but the situation is far from stable. In the 1990s, regional actors such as the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have misunderstood the causes of the conflict, and thus have promoted unsuccessful solutions. Later, in 2008, the instruments employed by Russia in the Transnistrian conflict were also used in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the Georgian conflict.¹ Considering that a similar situation is currently underway in Ukraine, we must understand the roots of the ethnic conflict within the former Soviet Union space.

For centuries, the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, employed with varying degrees of effectiveness, a policy of Russification aimed at different ethnic groups within the occupied territories, using different forms, which generate a substantial impact on today's security environment. The instruments used ranged from the employment of political apparatus, industrialization, culture, and education, to migration and deportation of different populations based on ethnic criteria. Although the initial factors that triggered the Russification policy changed throughout history and the actual process evolved, it developed into a series of major security implications that influence regional stability. Today, Moscow takes advantage of the existence of Russian compatriots, especially ethnic Russians and Russians speakers to gain influence, to challenge the sovereignty of other states or even to occupy territories.² Moreover, significant vulnerabilities exist in countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that affect public policies or the country's economic stability. A series of frozen conflicts are managed by Russia

1. Jakub Lachert, *Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge for European Security*, Warsaw Institute, 14 March 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Post-Soviet-Frozen-Conflicts-Special-Report-Warsaw-Institute.pdf>

2. Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea. The New Russian Empire*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 3.

and alter the foreign policy of Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine, most of these originating, at least partially, from the Russification policies.

Russification is a process of cultural assimilation, a method of imposing the Russian language, culture, different ideals and beliefs to various ethnic groups or minorities. The targets of Russification were non-Russians communities that, voluntarily or involuntarily, gave up their culture and language in favor of the Russian culture. The process originated as early as the 14th century, it became more centralized and directed during the 19th century, continued throughout the 20th century at an extended scale, and under various forms continues today. The 1897 Russian census data shows the scale of ethnic minorities but also part of the problem that the Russian Empire had trying to control the entire population to maintain unity.

The data shows from the total population around 13% living in the urban area, while the rest is rural. This distribution will have a significant role when correlated with the massive industrialization programs and population migration. The census also shows a level of education at only 29% of the male population (literacy, 13% female), again a factor that will amplify the effects of Russification through formal education. The significant aspect of the multiethnicity is that the Russian Empire included more than 150 different ethnic groups, as determined by language. The Russians themselves were less than a half of the total population, while other populations were: Ukrainians - 22 million (17%), Poles - 8 million (6%), Belarusians (a.k.a. White Russians) - 6 million (5%), Jews (Yiddish speaking) - 5 million (4%), Kirghiz – 4 million (3%), Tatars - 3.7 million (3%), Georgians, Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Moldavians - 1-2 million each (1.6%).³ The high numbers of minorities, which are actually the size of different countries today, demonstrate the highly complex demography of the Russian Empire and later

3. Elizabeth Wood, *Visualizing the 1897 Census in Pie Charts*, posted on May 26, 2016
<http://russianhistoryblog.org/2016/05/visualizing-the-1897-census-in-pie-charts/>

the Soviet Union. Even more, when the religion factor is added, the complexity increases exponentially. Orthodox Russia had a different approach in regions with an Orthodox population (today's countries like Ukraine or Georgia) than when approaching populations with different denominations. From the ethnicity perspective, instead of embracing the diversity, instead of accommodating the multiethnicity, the State, with the Russification process, created substantial tensions between different ethnic groups.

During the 19th century, the Russification became a general governmental policy. Russification policy became part of the reaction against the growing national sentiments of different minorities that threaten the unity of the Empire. On the other hand, the rising nationalism throughout the Russian population also added to the causes.⁴ The nineteenth century is considered the “Golden Era” of Russian literature: is the time of Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov; later, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky became central figures of literature and Russian culture. Militarily, after the Napoleonic era, Russia gained the status of great power. All these factors added to Russian nationalism and influenced the government's policies towards different minorities.

In 1881, Alexander III ascended to the Russian throne after the assassination of his father. His views were of an autocratic leader that tried to suppress the revolutionary movement. His reign and the reign of Nicholas II are characterized by deepening crises and different efforts to maintain power. As Alexander III believed that, the role of the state is to maintain the law, order, stability, and unity among people, an autocratic regime that increased the policy of Russification and the pressure on non-Orthodox denomination was the solution. During this period, Russification went hand in hand with the Orthodox Church. For example, by law, the children of

4. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 386.

mixed marriages (one Orthodox, one other denomination) automatically became Orthodox.⁵ In conclusion, a growth of the Russification policy because of rising nationalism, Russian and other ethnic groups, and the use of the Orthodox Church to amplify it, characterize the 19th century in the Russian Empire.

The beginning of the 20th century is characterized by the rise of Marxist ideology and the revolutionary movements throughout the empire. From the beginning, Lenin understood that the multitude of ethnic groups creates a vulnerability in the Empire and the key for a successful revolution is to have their support and loyalty. One of the ideas of the time was Otto Bauer's theory that "cultural autonomy" was the key to the essence of nationalism.⁶ Lenin disagreed with this theory as contradicted the class struggle: from his perspective, the proletarians and the capitalists could not share the same cultural foundation. Consequently, he asked Stalin to find an answer to the nationality question. The result was the idea of "national self-determination" that said, "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."⁷ During the Soviet Era, the right to self-determination continued to be under attack by the Russification policy. All these elements will be affected: the primacy of language by imposing Russian language, territory through deportation or migration of workforce, economic life by means of industrialization and economic dependencies.

In 1917, as the Revolution succeeded, the Bolsheviks proclaimed "The Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia," recognizing the equality of all nationalities and the sovereignty

5. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 389.

6. Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble. Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 73.

7. Irfan Habib, *Emergence of Nationalities*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 4, No. 1, The National Question in India Special Number (Aug., 1975), pp. 14-20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3516387?seq=1>

of all people. The policy was actually that minorities could secede and create their own state, as long as their nation had a Communist Party under the control of the Russian Communist Party.⁸ The Bolsheviks view this as a higher form of exercising control over different nations. The result was that several nations, as Moldova or the Baltic States, were able to break the chains of the former Russian Empire and pursue their own sovereign rights. Later, after WW II, as Russia gained again control over these territories, the Russification process intensified, including numerous elements as the political communist apparatus, industrialization, education, migration of workforce, and deportation.

Stalin introduced a new economic policy to include reforms in agriculture, collectivization, and *dekulakization*,⁹ but also an industrialization plan, heavily centralized, with five-year plans. Because of the industrialization programs, Stalin's regime displaced millions of workers, shaping different regions. For example, the Baltic States due to geographic location had significant economic opportunities. Sankt Petersburg was the capital city of the Russian Empire and an economic center in the region. The Baltic Sea provided maritime connections with the western world. The transportation infrastructure and the transit routes generated significant urban development. The Tsarist regime implemented a series of social and educational policies, combined with economic programs, aimed to suppress the Western influence in the Baltic States. The urban development generated migration of Russian workers that influenced even more the industrial growth, the process becoming cyclical. As a result, a significant number of Russian workers moved into the Baltic territories.

8. Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble. Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 75.

9. Dispossessing and deporting hundreds of thousands of wealthy peasants (*kulaks*). Idem, 78.

The process of Russification through industrialization continued during the Soviet regime. The industrialization was accelerated and the heavy industry emerged. Russian workers mostly controlled the energy sector, while the manufacturing industry heavily relied on resources and raw materials from Russia. As a result, today Estonia has a Russian minority of almost 24%, concentrated in the capital city and Ida-Viru county (the main energy producer region in the country).¹⁰ The main tactics to Russify the Baltic region were to create economic dependencies (local manufacturing industry depending on Russian raw materials) and the intense demographic shifting. However, after 1990 the Baltic State gained again their independence and now are part of the European Union and members of the North-Atlantic Alliance, proving a limited success of the Russification policy in the region.

Another example of Russification is the case of the Republic of Moldova, a small country with only 4 million inhabitants. The territory is between Ukraine and Romania and despite its historical and cultural background is now a forgotten country in Europe. Russia's interest in the region was mainly access to the Danube River and a secured Black Sea. Moldova faced Russification policies during the Tsarist regime and massive deportation that led to a 30% decrease in the ethnic population. After WW II, the country came again under Soviet control and the communism struggle of the classes became more against ethnic groups.¹¹ Native Romanian language was eliminated from the official use, while the Cyrillic script, derived from the Russian alphabet, was introduced. The Moldavian language was born, being actually the Romanian language, a Romance language, but with Cyrillic alphabet. As the educational system developed, the Russian language was implemented; Russification policy aimed especially the higher education and as a result, the Russian-speaking population replaced the social elites. Today, the

10. Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea. The New Russian Empire*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 158.

11. Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România, *Raport Final*, Bucuresti, 2006, p.576.

Russian language is the facto language of communication. Today Russia's compatriot policies continue the Russification policies as we see educational and cultural events promoted.¹² The Russification policy, the Communist Party, the industrialization of specific regions (Transnistria), migration of workforce, combined with substantial deportation, successfully created a separate identity that is now exploited in the region, generating regional instability.

The Russification policy throughout the Russian Empire was extensive. The process affects numerous ethnic groups from the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, to countries in Central Asia. In the past years the reimperialization track that Russia embarked on, became more aggressive. In the case of countries like Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, as the countries developed pro-western political views and pursued closer relations with NATO or the European Union, Russia rapidly intensified its actions, escalating even to armed conflict. The legacy of the Soviet era is now continued, for example, by Putin's "compatriot protection". Russia can influence public policies in countries like Estonia or Latvia because of the higher concentration of Russian minority and Russian-speaking populations in certain areas. Russia is still highly active in managing the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet countries. In the Transnistria region, the Russian forces are declared as peacekeepers, essential to maintain stability in the country.

Frozen conflicts exist in countries where the legitimate government has no longer control over specific regions. In some of the former Soviet countries, the existing frozen conflicts impede the pursuit of independent foreign policy and the development of international relationships. Countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia cannot pursue an independent foreign policy, especially if this is Euro-Atlantic oriented. On the other hand, neither the North

12. Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea. The New Russian Empire*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 158.

Atlantic Treaty Organization nor the European Union permits membership of countries that do not have full control of their territory.¹³

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, because of the russification process, at this time the country has a high percentage of Russians and Russian-speaking populations, especially in the Transnistria region. In 1990, as the country was seeking independence from the Soviet Union, and the Russian minority expressed their desire to further be part of the Soviet Union resulting in an armed conflict with pro-Transnistrian forces supported by the Russian military (components of the 14th Army). Today, the conflict is still unresolved, and even if a ceasefire exists in the region, the existing non-violent solutions are limited. Russia's measures and hostile actions have been viewed as political warfare or gray zone warfare.¹⁴

Undeniably, Russia is trying to restore its status as a global great power, looking to reinstate its influence in Europe and near its borders, especially over the former Soviet countries. Russia's strategy in Europe is comprehensive, including different regions and a multitude of instruments, counting military and soft-power instruments. The Black Sea region is one of these regions where Russia is looking forward to rebuilding its influence and control while limiting the effect of neighboring countries' integration into the Euro-Atlantic community and the increased influence of NATO. The Russification process developed in the course of centuries and affected numerous ethnic groups. Different tactics were used in different regions. The results of Russification were also more or less enduring but created a significant impact on regional stability.

13. Jakub Lachert, *Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge for European Security*, Warsaw Institute, 14 March 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Post-Soviet-Frozen-Conflicts-Special-Report-Warsaw-Institute.pdf>

14. Idem.