

# **Finding Bonds that Unite: Russia's Compatriot Policy and the Identity of Young Russian Speakers in Kazakhstan**

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## Abstract

This study examines the conflicting process of identity formation of young Russian speakers in Kazakhstan within the context of evolving Russia's compatriot policy discourse. In order to uncover the nuances of contemporary identificational trends of Russian minorities and the contradictory external and internal pressures on their identities, the study takes as a starting point the triangular interplay between the minority, the external homeland and the nationalising state. Accordingly, this research turns to focus group discussions in order to understand the potential influence of the Russian compatriot policy and the stances of Kazakhstan over the identificational patterns of Russian speakers, which are commonly overlooked by analyses of top-down discourses in isolation. Through the assessment of discrepancies and commonalities between Russian speakers this research sheds light on the degree to which Russians look towards the North for their future direction. Based on the analysis of the qualitative data it will be argued that the inseparable bond between Russia and Russian speakers in Kazakhstan is in fact more ambiguous than one would have imagined. Despite Russia's recent calls to safeguard the rights of and strengthen the ties with its diaspora abroad, for now young Russian speakers seem to have stronger attachments to their state of residence.

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## Introduction

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014, just a few months after the incorporation of the Crimean Peninsula into the Russian Federation, President Putin took the floor during the conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives:

I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means – from political and economic to operations under international humanitarian law and the right of self-defence.<sup>1</sup>

The event presented Putin with an opportunity to reinstate that the developments unfolding in Ukraine at that time were nothing else but Russia's reaction to the threat posed by *hunta*<sup>2</sup> on Russia's compatriots, their language, history and rights. Over and over again, as Putin said, attempts were made to deprive Russians "of their historical memory, even of their language and to subject them to forced assimilation".<sup>3</sup> Russia, in turn, saw it important to assure Russians and Russian-speaking citizens abroad that it will not leave them in the lurch and will continue helping upholding their rights by all means at its disposal. What is interesting about this speech among many others of similar content is a peculiar emphasis on Russia's role as a defender of the rights of people it has come to refer to as its compatriots.

However, whilst the policies and discourses projected from above are important, one should not fall into a trap of assuming that all Russian speakers<sup>4</sup>, who are considered to be the main targets

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<sup>1</sup> President of Russia "Conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives" (July 1, 2014), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131>, accessed on May 25, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In Russia the word is used to refer to a group of nationalists and radical militants, who by force took over the control in Kiev.

<sup>3</sup> President of Russia "Address by President of the Russian Federation", official presidential website of the Russian Federation (18 March 2014), available at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6889>, accessed on April 29, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The term Russian speaker encompasses ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as well as a variety of non-Slavic but heavily *Russified* ethnic groups (e.g. Tatars, Jewish). Throughout this work I will refer to the Russian-

of Russia's messages, would outright recognise Russia as the rightful protector of their rights. Instead, it is necessary to take into account the diverse experiences and perceptions that Russian speakers might hold. This study therefore seeks to prioritise the everyday reality of the individuals and community over the top-down approaches to be able to gain a more thorough understanding of the nature of the identificational trends of Russian speakers. Essential to this work is then to establish how Russian speakers in the near abroad feel in the context when Russia is actively calling to protect their rights and how they perceive the messages directed at them. Finally, do they have more attachments to their host state or do they rather consider themselves as Russian compatriots with strong links to a historical homeland – Russia?

The idea of the Russia Federation being the historical or “external homeland” to all those Russians, who practically overnight found themselves residing abroad, was first brought to the centre of post-communist ethnic studies by Rogers Brubaker. In his book, Brubaker posits that Russia naturally sees itself as a historical homeland to those Russian speakers and might thus seek to exert the influence on the people it considers as its own.<sup>5</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and up until recently Russia, however, has had a rather complex relationship with its so-called diaspora abroad. From the outset the record of actions under various programmes to support Russians seemed to be far from sufficient, giving out more promises than actually fulfilling them.<sup>6</sup> Despite hardening policies of nationalisation in the Soviet successor states the diaspora question remained only marginally relevant to Russia's foreign policy, leaving many Russian speakers with

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speaking community in different ways, e.g. the diaspora, Russian minority, compatriots, Russians. The purpose is to raise awareness of the heterogeneity of this group. Calling them simply Russians or Russian speakers is taking a risk of overstating a collective label which denies the possibility that identities in fact might be multiple and fragmented.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers Brubaker “Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Nozhenko “Motherland is Calling You! Motives behind and prospects for the new Russian policy on compatriots abroad”, *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* 18, 2006, available at: <http://www.lfpr.lt/uploads/File/2006-18/Nozhenko.pdf>, accessed on April 28, 2015.

a feeling of abandonment. Left with a limited choice Russians started adjusting themselves to the changes imposed upon them by the states of residence. As some observers noted, this has contributed to the development of very specific identities of Russian speakers, who became civically more attached to the host states with Russia gradually losing its hold over them.<sup>7</sup>

Although authors like Laitin and Zevelev argue that the identity of the members of the Russian diaspora became more salient after 1991 with a growing focus on their states of residence, identity is in fact a malleable quality.<sup>8</sup> Its direction and depth is influenced by economic, political and social changes unfolding within a specific cultural and territorial context.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore important to bear in mind that in relation to the changing situational context members of the diaspora might reassess their sense of self and belonging. The increased emphasis on the Russian minority question since the Crimean annexation and the attempts to restore the weakened ties with its diaspora could in fact all potentially affect the self-understanding of Russian speakers, eventually leading to a shift in their identities.

Yet the role the Russian minority ascribes to Russia should not be seen in isolation from the political practices of their states of residence. Brubaker is one of the few to recognise the importance of the interactive dynamic between the minority, the external homeland and the nationalising state.<sup>10</sup> The links between the three fields are however relational and open to change when the environment is altered. By adopting supportive policies towards its diaspora Moscow could reinforce a sense of identification with Russia, especially if there is a sense that Russian

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<sup>7</sup> David Laitin “Identity in Formation: the Russian-speaking population in the Near Abroad”, (London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Igor Zevelev “Russia and Its New Diasporas”, (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001); Laitin “Identity in Formation”.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Poppe & Louk Hagendoorn “Types of identification among Russians in the ‘Near Abroad’”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 53:1 (2001), pp. 57-71.

<sup>10</sup> Brubaker “Nationalism Reframed”.

speakers are underprivileged and marginalised in their nationalising state. This, in turn, could estrange Russians from the majority population, hindering their further integration into the host society, or even potentially increase the fears among the dominant group of the possible *revanche* that Russians might pursue.

Against this background, to uncover the nuances of contemporary identificational trends of the Russian minority within the context of evolving Russia's compatriot policy discourse and to establish the contradictory external and internal pressures on their identities, the study turns to explore individual narratives of Russian speakers. Such people-centred approach will allow us to explore the meanings that people themselves attach to different policies and practices of their state of residence and Russia. The approach adopted will also help dissolving a myth that all Russian speakers are a potential fifth column that is ready to easily abandon the links to their state of residence in a quest for reunification with Russia. Drawing upon the qualitative data collected in the focus groups, this research highlights the need to avoid a crude external homeland – nationalising state dichotomy in favour of recognising the diversity in opinions and attachments (be it political, economic or social) among Russian speakers.

Empirically, this research will focus on the experiences of the Russian-speaking community in Kazakhstan. The choice in favour of Kazakhstan was motivated by several reasons. First of all, the size and location (the majority of Russians is distributed around the North and East of the country) has attracted a lot of political attention and raised concerns especially within Kazakhstan itself. Such concerns do not seem surprising given that Kazakhstan was a subject to harsh collectivisation policies directed at the ethnic nationality, and by the time the Soviet Union



collapsed it was the only independent state where the titular nation was in the minority.<sup>11</sup> Second, due to the nationalising policies since its independence Kazakhstan would seem a prime candidate for what Cheskin terms the “Rossiisification” (change in political allegiances) of Russian speakers.<sup>12</sup> Whilst concrete actions against Russians cannot be pinpointed that easily, there have been some changes in language policy, which became less accommodating towards the Russian-speaking community. In addition, there have been numerous other governmental changes which highlight that the status of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan has not improved with time. Finally, the open statements by the prominent Russian nationalists, such as Solzhenitsyn and Zhirinovskiy, who openly disputed the “artificial” borders between Russia and Northern Kazakhstan and insisted to include a historically defined “Russian zone” into the Russian Federation, were also taken into account.<sup>13</sup>

As will be discussed below, albeit the Russian leadership seems to recently attempt to reinforce a sense of identification with Russia by strengthening ties and insisting on the need to protect their rights, the compatriot policy still remains complex and in some cases contested. The narratives of the individuals drawn from the focus groups rather challenge the image of the Russian Federation as the only possible solution to the problems they might experience. In fact, the inseparable bond that some believe to exist between Russia and Russian speakers abroad, appears more ambiguous than one would have imagined. As will be argued further, in the current context

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<sup>11</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse “Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia. The Russians in Kazakhstan”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 59:3, (2007), pp.481-501, p.482.

<sup>12</sup> Ammon Cheskin “Russia’s compatriot policy: The consolidation and ‘Rossiisification’ of Russian speakers abroad” (2015), available at: [https://www.academia.edu/9517418/Russia\\_s\\_compatriot\\_policy\\_The\\_consolidation\\_and\\_Rossiisification\\_of\\_Russian\\_speakers\\_abroad](https://www.academia.edu/9517418/Russia_s_compatriot_policy_The_consolidation_and_Rossiisification_of_Russian_speakers_abroad), accessed on April 29, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “The Russian question at the end of the 20th century”, (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995); Tengrinews “Viskazivaniya Vladimira Zhirinovskogo o Kazahstane rassmotryat v Gosdume RF”, (January 8, 2014), available at: [http://tengrinews.kz/kazahstan\\_news/vyiskazyivanie-vladimira-jirinovskogo-kazahstane-rassmotryat-267982/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazahstan_news/vyiskazyivanie-vladimira-jirinovskogo-kazahstane-rassmotryat-267982/), accessed on May 25, 2015.

Russians in Kazakhstan seem to be loyal to their state of residence, with the majority seeing Kazakhstan as their true “homeland”. Still, cultural and economic lure of Russia remains present and therefore cannot be ignored. Although this research indicates a potential for a development of hybrid identities among Russian speakers in Kazakhstan, there is also a sense that the levels of attachment will fluctuate depending on the social, political and economic environment around them.

The research is structured in a way to best accommodate the argument pertaining to the complexity of the contemporary identificational trends among Russian speakers in Kazakhstan and involves several steps. I will begin the first section by revisiting Brubaker’s triadic nexus as a relevant starting point for this study. As mentioned above, to understand the current trends in the trajectories of Russian-speaking identities it is necessary to focus on the triadic relationship between the minority, their state of residence and the external homeland. However, to see how the developments proceed in a more causal manner this chapter simultaneously elaborates on the changes to Brubaker’s model proposed by Ammon Cheskin.<sup>14</sup> The improved version of the nexus could arguably help us better understand contradictory identity pressures that Russian speakers might experience and has been therefore further utilised when constructing the questionnaire for the focus groups.

The following second chapter will then be devoted to justify and describe the methods and procedures used in this study. The task in the third section will be to analyse based on the review of the scholarly literature the actual policies and practices directed at Russians both from Russia and Kazakhstan. Special attention is paid to the ways Russia has been trying to reach out to its

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<sup>14</sup> Ammon Cheskin “Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States: A framework for Analysis”, *Ethnopolitics* 14:1, (2015), pp.72-93.

diaspora abroad and how Kazakhstan has been responding to the presence of numerous Russian minority on its territory. Here, as well as throughout the whole work, the emphasis is put on the young educated population. Examining the young is especially important given the focus of Russia's compatriot policy. In fact, Russia has demonstrated an increased interest in young Russian speakers and attempts to attract them to its territory either through resettlement programmes or through offering grants for education. Those who have received their free education in Russia could later help shaping a friendly attitude towards Russia in their own countries. Besides, young educated Russian speakers could be potentially integrated into the Russian society to fill the demographic gaps the country is experiencing. Most importantly, in order to successfully include its compatriots into a greater "Russian World"<sup>15</sup>, the compatriot policy must reach beyond its former Soviet citizens to the next generation of Russian speakers, who were born outside of the Russian Federation.

Finally, the last chapter is devoted to the analysis and interpretations of the data obtained from the focus groups and will investigate different levels of attachments both to Russia and Kazakhstan. I will open this section by exploring the nature of cultural self-identification among Russian speakers, in particular how they perceive their nationality. In what follows I will discuss the perception of policies directed at the diaspora from Russia, the extent of their ties to Kazakhstan and the consistency of the existing attachments.

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<sup>15</sup> "Russian World" refers to a so-called supranational, spiritual, ethnic and linguistic space that goes beyond ethnic and geographical boundaries of the Russian Federation and that is believed to help forge a common bond between Russia and its emigrants.

## Chapter 1. Revisiting Brubaker's Triadic Nexus

To date, the predominant framework employed in the literature on ethno-politics in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe is Rogers Brubaker's triadic nexus. Many scholars focusing on Russian speakers especially in the Baltic States and Kazakhstan have utilised this framework.<sup>16</sup> Whilst it has almost become a cliché, the nexus nevertheless remains a useful template and a good starting point for many studies including this one. In his book *Nationalism Reframed*, Brubaker states that in order to understand minority nationalism and the trajectory of their identities, three categories are of central importance: the national minorities, the newly nationalising states in which they live, and the external homeland to which they belong by ethno-national affinity.<sup>17</sup> According to Brubaker, as a legacy of long induced discrimination under the foreign control after attained independence the nationalising states usually seek the “remedial” action by using state power to promote the specific interests of the core nation. In turn, when the nationalising states impose policies that favour their own majority group at the expense of minorities, the external national homeland arise in direct opposition to those practices and assert their obligation to protect the rights and interests of “their” ethno-national kin. Against the resistance from the nationalising states, the “homeland” states nevertheless claim their responsibilities *vis-à-vis* its diaspora, which transcends boundaries of territory and citizenship. Caught between both the nationalising state and the external national homeland, the national minorities are then faced with a difficulty to define their ethnic belonging and self-identification.

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<sup>16</sup> See for example David Galbreath “Nation-building and minority politics in post-socialist states: Interests, influences and identities in Estonia and Latvia”, (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2005); Lowell Barrington, Erik Herron & Brian Silver “The Motherland is calling: the views of homeland among Russians in the near abroad”, *World Politics* 55:2 (2003), pp. 209-313.

<sup>17</sup> Brubaker “Nationalism Reframed”, p.4.

As Brubaker notes, for many Russian speakers, living in the post-Soviet states, Russia is considered a “natural external homeland”, for it not only plays an important role in their identity formation but at a certain point in time might also attempt to exert a stronger influence on the people it considers as its own.<sup>18</sup> In his work, he compares Russia with inter-war Europe to illustrate how the tension emerged between nationalising Poland with the sizeable German minority and the homeland nationalism of Germany that sought to exercise influence on its co-nationals abroad. In the post-Soviet settings, the clash along these “fault lines” is, according to Brubaker, even more evident between the homeland nationalism of Russia and the nationalising states that are attempting to consolidate their statehood either through restrictive citizenship policies like in Estonia and Latvia, or through hardening policies of nativisation in Kazakhstan.<sup>19</sup> In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that Russia would see itself as eligible to claim a right or even a duty to monitor the treatment and status of its so-called diaspora living in the post-Soviet region.

How do then the fields in this triadic nexus exactly interplay? Or in other words how can, for example, Russia’s policy affect its so-called diaspora abroad or cause a shift in their identification with a state of residence? Despite a very convincing assessment, it has been observed that identifying how exactly the axes work is almost impossible, explaining why the nexus has remained a conceptual rather than a causal model.<sup>20</sup> Pettai is, for example, convinced that knowing that the three players in the model have subjective perceptions of each other and diverse opinions within each pole undermines any reality in the triadic nexus.<sup>21</sup> Brubaker, however, himself points out that the three fields should not be seen as an analytically irreducible entity, but rather as a relational

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 108-09.

<sup>20</sup> Vello Pettai “Explaining ethnic politics in the Baltic States: Reviewing the triadic nexus model”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 37:1 (2006), pp. 124-36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

field, an “arena of constant struggle among competing stances”.<sup>22</sup> In fact, his insistence on the importance of *stances* and competing *representations* in the triadic interplay has surprisingly received little academic attention.<sup>23</sup> Stances in this case are seen as practices and concrete policies adopted within a given discursive field. Representations, on the other hand, can be understood as a selective interpretation of the developments in an external field. In other words, representations are the ways in which the external policies are conceived by its recipients.

From Cheskin's perspective, combining or even merging the stances with perceptual elements can help us better utilise Brubaker's nexus in understanding the conflicting process of identity formation among of Russian speakers.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Brubaker emphasises, it is less important to understand whether the policies and practices of the nationalising state are really discriminatory, as opposed to whether the state is in fact *perceived* as nationalising.<sup>25</sup> Hence the importance of studying the people at whom the policies are directed. Viewing the triadic nexus from the angle of perceptions could allow us to examine the identification trends of Russian speakers more thoroughly: How do they perceive the nation-building stances of Kazakhstan? What incentives push Russian speakers to identify with Russia or estrange them from it?

Furthermore, Cheskin goes on to suggest that there are certain stances from the nationalising state and the external homeland that are generally perceived positively, whilst others negatively.<sup>26</sup> To make the argument conceptually clearer, he expands Brubaker's nexus to add three different poles of attraction to each of the aforementioned fields: *political* that manifests itself in Russian speakers' territorial identification and their support or opposition to the independence of their

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<sup>22</sup> Brubaker “Nationalism Reframed”, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>24</sup> Cheskin “Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States”, p.81.

<sup>25</sup> Brubaker “Nationalism Reframed”, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Cheskin “Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States”.

country of residence; *economic* through socio-economic push/pull factors; and *cultural* sub-field that refers to cultural memory, linguistic practices and traditions, which affect individual's identification with either the external homeland or draws it closer to the nationalising state.<sup>27</sup>

Although the sub-fields are themselves contested and generalised, they are inferred from a thorough analysis of the integration strategies of Russian speakers in the Baltic States which clearly demonstrates the contradictory influences of each of the nodes of the nexus. For example, the study concludes that the sub-fields of politics and economics generally exert a positive pull factor on Russian speakers towards the Baltic States, whereas Russia continues to hold very strong cultural influence over its diaspora abroad.<sup>28</sup> Having said this, one must acknowledge that such approach is not necessarily conclusive, as there is the danger of grouping all Russian speakers (who are in fact differentiated by competitive visions and positions) into one identity group that shares seemingly similar perceptions of the fields. Nevertheless, the reframed nexus could help us identify contradictory identity pressures that Russian-speaking communities might experience. Such approach has been therefore utilised by this study to draw up a questionnaire for the focus group discussions and will be later on reflected both in the methodological and empirical sections.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

This research explores the conflicting process of identity formation of young Russian speakers in Kazakhstan in the context of the crisis in Ukraine. It does so by studying the contradictory external and internal pressures on their identities within the interactive triadic dynamic. First, it follows a macro-level framework and analyses the actual policies and practices directed at young Russian speakers both from the external national homeland Russia and the nationalising state of Kazakhstan. To understand how Russia has been trying to reach out to its diaspora abroad I utilise the secondary literature on Russia's compatriot policy and a few public speeches by the Russian authority. To examine Kazakhstan's nationalising policies and how it has been responding to the presence of the numerous Russian minority on its territory I similarly utilise the secondary literature. Then, to gain a people-centred perspective and get a clearer idea of the identificational trends among young Russian speakers (the third field in the triadic nexus) in Kazakhstan this research turns to the empirical analysis of the interviews derived from the focus groups.

The empirical study on which this research is based took place in Astana and Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan, in April 2015 amongst the resident ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking community (excluding ethnic Kazakhs). To understand the potential influence of the Russian compatriot policy discourse and stances of Kazakhstan over the identities of Russian speakers, it seemed necessary to investigate its reception and its recontextualisation in concrete life-worlds. In fact, there is still little known about behavioural strategies selected by the Russian diaspora in everyday life, their individual aspirations as well as differing identificational patterns.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the method of the

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<sup>29</sup> Natalia Kosmarskaya "‘Deti imperii’ v postsovetskoi Centralnoi Azii: adaptivnie praktiki i mentalnije sdvigi", (M: Natalis, 2006), p. 20, available at: <http://nkosmarskaya.narod.ru/>, accessed on May 24, 2015.



focus-group discussion, which allowed to collect qualitative data from Russian-speaking individuals, was chosen as the most appropriate tool for such an ethnographic research.

Data were gathered from a total of 39 Russian speaking residents through semi-structured focus groups. The first four focus groups were conducted in Petropavlovsk ( $n_1=7$ ), ( $n_2=7$ ), ( $n_3=6$ ) and ( $n_4=4$ ). The other two took place in Astana ( $n_6=8$ ) and ( $n_7=7$ ). All focus groups were taped and later on fully transcribed and analysed in Russian. The participants were all undergraduate students at various universities accessed through academic contacts in Astana and Petropavlovsk and via snowballing techniques. The exception was only group ( $n_4=4$ ) that consisted of the recent graduates from a university in Petropavlovsk. Overall, the respondents came from the following universities: the Nazarbayev University, Agro-Technical University of Kazakhstan, Moscow State University (Kazakhstani branch) and Turan-Astana University (all in Astana); and the North Kazakhstan State University in Petropavlovsk. At the beginning of each focus group the participants were asked for the basic demographic data including details of nationality and a place of birth. Whereas the majority of respondents stated their nationality to be “Russian”, other nationalities were also present – “Tatar”, “German”, “Polish” and “Ukrainian”. The ratio of female to male respondents was 17:22 and their ages ranged from 17 to 25 years old.

The parameters for these focus groups were chosen in order to focus on young well-educated Russian speakers. Naturally, the narrow focus on students limits the generalisation of this data to the general population. The rich qualitative data captured from these focus groups were nonetheless insightful and provide clear parameters for future research. The reasons to focus particularly on the young educated people were several. Having limited contacts in Kazakhstan, universities were the most accessible institutions willing to put me in touch with their students. Yet, the matter of accessibility was not the most important factor explaining why I opted for the young. Importantly,

young Russian speakers have been brought up within the context of independent Kazakhstan under entirely new social conditions. Exploring the group that has never undergone the drastic psychological changes from majority into minority represented a particular interest for this research, as my assumption was that they would be potentially more inclined to adapt to their state of residence. Furthermore, their retrospective self-identifications reflect what was taught to them at school, at home or at universities. Thus, we could argue that these self-identifications reflect a mediated collective vision. Finally, as discussed in the introduction, studying young people is particularly important given the increased emphasis of the Russian compatriot policy on the next generation citizens of the near abroad. People attending universities have therefore potentially more chances of encountering the programmes offered under the compatriot policy.

Two cities Petropavlovsk and Astana were chosen particularly for the comparative purposes. In Astana, where Russian-speaking population constitutes just above 25 per cent student have more opportunities for inter-ethnic contact which could positively affect their identification with the host state, as opposed to Petropavlovsk, where Russian-speaking community reaches 70 per cent. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that a high number of inter-ethnic contact is a prerequisite for positive attitudes and improved relations between ethnic groups.<sup>30</sup>

During the focus groups I asked participants a number of questions about their attachment to Kazakhstan and Russia and about their sense of belonging. In many ways the questions were based on previous research on identities of Russian speakers<sup>31</sup>, and accommodated three sub-fields (political, economic and cultural) from the reframed triadic nexus. Under political identification

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<sup>30</sup> Jüri Kruusvall & Maaris Raudsepp “Perspectives of inter-ethnic relations in different contact conditions between minority and majority groups”, in Vetik, R. (ed.) *Nation-building in the context of post-Communist transformation and globalisation. The case of Estonia*, (Bern: Peter Land Verlag, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Ammon Cheskin “Exploring Russian-speaking identity from below: the case of Latvia”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44:3 (2013), pp. 287-312.

this paper understood territorial attachment and loyalty to the state, whereas self-identification and a sense of belonging to a particular nationality was used to describe the cultural axis. Beside this, further questions were posed to identify how Russian speakers perceive the ethnic "self" and "other". Scholars who are engaged with studies of identities consider the discourse of similarity and difference as the dynamic principles of identification process.<sup>32</sup> This, in turn, could help us establish the extent of their ties to ethnic Kazakhs as opposed to Russians in Russia, and *vice versa*. Finally, I was also interested to see whether Russian speakers were aware of the term "Russian compatriot", whether they envisioned themselves as a part of the "Russian world" and how they interpreted the notion that Russia will protect their rights.

One area of potential concern for these focus groups was my own role as a researcher in leading the discussion. Although on the one hand I am a Russian speaker myself, which could have created some common ground and trust between me and my respondents. On the other hand, I could have been well taken for a representative of Europe, who rather perceived Russian speakers as unloyal to their state of residence. To ensure that the respondents were genuine in their answers and not just inclined to dispel cautious European attitudes, similar questions were posed several times during the focus groups. Furthermore, the discussion was primarily taking place between the participants themselves, which limited my own active presence and importance in the conversations.

On the whole, this research provided a detailed analysis of the discourse and policy practices of Russia and Kazakhstan that all have an important bearing on Russian speakers' identities. Furthermore, it presented an opportunity to conduct a micro-level in-depth analysis of how young

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<sup>32</sup> See for example, Stuart Hall "Introduction: who needs identity?" in S. Hall and P. du Gay (ed.) Questions of cultural identity, (London: Sage, 1996); Richard Jenkins "Social Identity" (3rd edition), (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Russian speakers in Kazakhstan have been able to form their identities within the triangular interplay in the context of the complex and often diverging narratives surrounding them. It also allowed to gain a clearer vision of the meanings Russian speakers themselves attach to the stances directed at them both from Moscow and Astana.

## Chapter 3. Top-down Policies and Practices

### 3.1. From Moderate to Assertive? Russia as the External National Homeland and its Policy on Compatriots Abroad

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 the question of Russian-speaking community, residing in the post-Soviet borderland states, and the role that Russia as the “natural external homeland” should play in ensuring their well-being have become widely examined areas.<sup>33</sup> From the outset, post-Soviet Russia has had a rather complex relationship with the people it has turned to refer as its “compatriots”.<sup>34</sup> One of the major problems that the Russian government faced was how to precisely conceptualise approximately twenty-five million of ethnic Russians, who following the demise of the USSR found themselves living “abroad” within the newly independent states traditionally populated by non-Russian people. In addition to these twenty-five million of ethnic Russians, as Pilkington and Flynn note, there was a further eleven million of people who were not Russian, but who are culturally Russified and thus hold strong ties to Russia.<sup>35</sup> Connected through the Russian culture it is now practically impossible to draw a line between ethnic Russians and other Russian-speaking populations in the near abroad. Meanwhile, one must also emphasise that the differences between this vast community are numerous, ranging from the degree of integration into the host country through economic well-being and future aims to considerable differences in political rights.<sup>36</sup> As Smith and Wilson conclude, Russia therefore faces a rather difficult task of combining such diffuse assemblage of people into a meaningful homogenous

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<sup>33</sup> See for example, Neil Melvin “Russians Beyond Russia: The Politics of National Identity”, (UK: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995); Paul Kolstoe “Russians in the former Soviet republics”, (London: Hurst & co/Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Cheskin “Russia's compatriot policy”.

<sup>35</sup> Hilary Pilkington & Moya Flynn “From 'refugee' to 'repatriate': Russian repatriation discourse in the making.” in R. Black and E. Koser (ed.) *The End of The Refugee Cycle? Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 171-97.

<sup>36</sup> Zevelev “Russia and Its New Diasporas”, p. 92.

group, who would share a coherent “diasporic identity”, as desired by many nationalist intellectuals.<sup>37</sup> The confusion of how to lump these groups of people together is, in turn, reflected in various terminology employed by the Kremlin at various points in time, such as Russian citizens, Russian speakers, Russian diaspora and Russian compatriots.

Despite the initial difficulty to group such diverse community together, Russia nevertheless attempted to support its so-called diaspora. The images of “compatriots abroad” being systematically discriminated against turned the issue of Russian-speaking population in the former Union Republics into a prevalent debate inside Russia, with the country increasingly seeing its role as the guarantor and protector of the rights of these “compatriots”.<sup>38</sup> One must however emphasise that such images of Russia as the protector were not purely the top-down projections, but were also often reinforced through bottom-up rallies and pleas of the local lobbying actors, insisting not turn the blind eye on the unfair treatment of their co-nationals. Especially pressing this need seem to be in Estonia and Latvia, who took considerable unilateral measures to reinstate the ethno-political dominance of ethnic Estonians and Latvians, whilst excluding Russian speakers from the state-building process in their republics. Partially in response to that, and perhaps also as a way to ensure that Russia still plays an important role in the identity formation of Russian speakers in the former Soviet republics, the idea to protect Russian speakers manifested itself already by the second half of the 1990s. In his address to the Federal Assembly in 1997 Boris Yeltsin stated that the “utmost priority of the Russian foreign policy was and would be the protection of rights of our compatriots living abroad”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Graham Smith & Andrew Wilson “Rethinking Russia's Post-Soviet Diaspora: The Potential for Political Mobilisation in Eastern Ukraine and North-east Estonia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49:5 (July 1997), pp.845-864.

<sup>38</sup> Nozhenko “Motherland is Calling You!”.

<sup>39</sup> Boris Yeltsin “Order in the Government Means Order in the Country”, *Annual Message to the Federal Assembly*, (6 March 1997), available at: [http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie\\_prezidenta\\_rosii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnomu\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_porjadok\\_vo\\_vlasti\\_\\_porjadok\\_v\\_strane\\_1997\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie_prezidenta_rosii_borisa_elcina_federalnomu_sobraniju_rf_porjadok_vo_vlasti__porjadok_v_strane_1997_god.html), accessed on April 28, 2015.

Now, who are exactly these compatriots that Russia claims to protect? A proper definition to the concept “compatriot” was given and approved in May 1999 in *the Federal Law on State Policy of the Russian Federation with Regard to the Compatriots Living Abroad* (Article 1).<sup>40</sup> The notion is composed of four categories of people: a) citizens of the Russian Federation living abroad; b) former citizens of the Soviet Union; c) individuals who emigrated from the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation; and d) descendants of compatriots, excluding the descendants of the titular nationalities.<sup>41</sup> Whilst the notion of “Russian compatriot” seems to foremost apply to ethnic Russians residing abroad, further amendments to the law in 2006 have broadened understanding to include other non-titular Russian-speaking groups, who had been brought up following the Russian culture and wanted to further preserve their connection with Russia.<sup>42</sup> Thus, when Russia now speaks of its “compatriots abroad” it primarily refers to all Russian-speaking populations residing in the former Union Republics, who freely chose to self-identify themselves with Russia.

However, it was not until Putin came to power that the strategy towards compatriots seems to have become more proactive. Along with numerous documents adopted on the compatriot issue, the term “compatriots” became a prominent figure in 2013 the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, turning into an important element of the foreign policy objectives. For example, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept insists on ensuring comprehensive protection of the “rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad”.<sup>43</sup> The recent years have also witnessed increased Russian state funding to cultivate cultural links with compatriots living abroad. In addition, there was a considerable expansion of Russian-funded

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<sup>40</sup> Federal Law, No. 99-FZ, “On State Policy of The Russian Federation With Regard to Compatriots Abroad” (24 May 1999), available at: <http://www.carim-east.eu/2963/2963/>, accessed on April 28, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Igor Zevelev “Russia's Policy Towards Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union” *Russia in Global Affairs* 6:1 (March 2008), pp.49-62, p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> Nozhenko “Motherland is Calling You!”, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, (12 February 2013), available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D), accessed on April 29, 2015.

NGOs and cultural organisations all aimed at enabling the preservation of cultural and ethnic identities of the Russian diaspora.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in 2007 Russian authorities established the *Russkii Mir Foundation* (Russian World) aimed at popularising the Russian language and culture as a “crucial element of world civilisation”, and developing cross-culture dialogues between people.<sup>45</sup>

This notwithstanding, the record of actions under various programmes as well as allocations previously envisioned for them seem to be far from sufficient. The factors that have been identified to explain such disparity between the actions and promises are numerous. First of all, as discussed earlier, limited capacity to influence political events unveiling in successor states could be linked to prevailing uncertainty in Russia over who exactly constituted the diaspora, which it claimed to protect.<sup>46</sup> Considering the ill-defined nature of the Russian ethnic community and the on-going search for identity in Russia itself, difficulty to define Russians in the near abroad does not come as a surprise. In fact, since the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia has been largely occupied with the quest of trying to define what exactly Russia is and who belongs to it. For Andis Kudors, the multi-ethnic composition of the Russian population can help explain why the proponents of Russia's compatriot policy could not base their concept solely on ethnicity.<sup>47</sup> Overemphasising the “ethnicity” feature might have caused problems for the policy both internally and externally. Another explanation for a lack of a tougher stance on the problems of Russian communities outside Russia is arguably country's own federative structure.<sup>48</sup> Had Russia supported in 1994 the calls of the Crimean Peninsula for reunification with Russia or demands for greater autonomy, it could

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<sup>44</sup> Nicu Popescu “Russia's soft power ambitions”, *CEPS Policy Brief* 115, (October 2006), p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Jaroslaw Cwiek-Karpowicz “Limits to Russian Soft Power in the Post-Soviet Area”, *DGAPanalyse* 8, (July 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Charles King & Neil Melvin “Nations Abroad: Diasporic Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union”, (USA: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Andis Kudors “‘Russian World’-Russia's soft power approach to compatriots policy”, *Russian analytical digest* 81/10 (2010), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Zevelev “Russia's Policy Towards Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union”, p. 55.



have faced serious problems with the demands of its own separatist regions in the North Caucasus. Finally, Ziegler suggests that whilst promoting the interests of Russians abroad was important among a political elite, yet other foreign policy issues, especially economic, often outbalanced the plights of thousands of compatriots.<sup>49</sup>

Against this backdrop, some observers turned to argue that despite the exclusionary policies of the new nationalising states the growing inaction of Russia in support of Russian-speaking communities has left them no other choice but to start politically adjusting to their state of residence. In his book, David Laitin, for example, even proposed that Russian speakers have developed a special way of accepting their minority status by showing passive loyalties to their new states, culturally and linguistically assimilating themselves and developing new identities that are associated predominantly with their state of residence.<sup>50</sup> Later studies have however questioned Laitin's perspective pointing to his neglect of numerous regional aspects and differences in integrational tendencies of Russian speakers, adding that one should not completely downplay the links the diaspora holds to Russia.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, whilst during the 1990s early 2000s Russian speakers seem to have, at least politically, distanced themselves from Russia in the event if Russia tries to re-start the relationship with them the levels of attachment could be potentially reversed.

In 2014 the problem of Russian communities abroad seems to become for the first time the top priority of Russia's political agenda. Then Russia not only incorporated Crimea but continued its military incursions into the Donbas region of Ukraine. Importantly, the Kremlin's justifications for Russia's action in Crimea rested largely on the need to protect the lives and rights of Russian

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<sup>49</sup> Charles E. Ziegler "The Russian Diaspora in Central Asia: Russian Compatriots and Moscow's Foreign Policy", *Demokratizatsiya* 14, (2006), pp. 103-26, p. 119.

<sup>50</sup> Laitin "Identity in Formation".

<sup>51</sup> Eduard Ponrain "The prospect of assimilation of the Russophone population in Estonia and Ukraine: A reaction to David Laitin's Research", *Europe-Asia Studies* 52:8 (2000), pp. 1535-1541.

speakers.<sup>52</sup> Putin then officially spoke of a tragedy of millions of people who practically overnight became ethnic minorities in the former Union republics, whilst “the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders”.<sup>53</sup> Previously, the notion of the “divided Russian nation” has been already voiced by the radical opponents of the moderate rhetoric insisting on Russia's right and need to reunite with its people beyond the geographical body.<sup>54</sup> Yet such ideas until recently were marginalised by the Kremlin. During the Ukrainian crisis Russia for the first time officially recognised the gap between its territorial border and cultural domain.<sup>55</sup>

Whether or not such increased emphasis on the “compatriots” issue will become a routine in Russian foreign policy decisions is still too early to establish. However, Russia's impact on the Russian-speaking community abroad cannot be dismissed. According to Cheskin, with the help of various media sources Russia still continues to project more assertive signals on Russian community in the near abroad, aiming to consolidate and unify fragmented Russian-speaking groups around a core of traditional “Russian” values, such as spirituality, collectivism, Orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the same study emphasises that the messages projected onto Russian community abroad are that of a shared discrimination and threat posed by titular nations.<sup>57</sup> Inevitably, projecting such discourses might initiate a process of “othering” and a growing distance between Russian-speaking communities and their host society. In other words it could potentially lead to the changes in political identification of Russian speakers, by causing a shift in their loyalty and territorial attachment to the state of residence. Clearly, such disposition has stirred a negative

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<sup>52</sup> President of Russia “Address by President of the Russian Federation”.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Zevelev “Russia's Policy Towards Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union”, p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> Marlene Laruelle “Russia as a 'Divided Nation,' from Compatriots to Crimea”, *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, (2015), pp. 88-97, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Cheskin “Russia's compatriot policy”.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

political atmosphere in the countries like Estonia, Latvia and Kazakhstan, densely populated by Russian speakers and fearing their reactions to Russia's "calls".<sup>58</sup>

Overall, we can conclude that since the collapse of the Soviet Union the concept "Russian compatriot" has undergone a change from an inactive component towards an explicit rhetoric employed by the Kremlin. The 2014 symbolised the increased emphasis on the compatriot issue with Russia becoming more assertive in defending the rights of Russians abroad. As Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for President Vladimir Putin, said "Russia is the country on which the Russian world rests upon" and thus "may not remain indifferent [a]nd will not remain indifferent"<sup>59</sup> when it comes to Russian world's security. For the time being, this statement symbolises a considerable change in official perception of the Kremlin's zone of responsibility and signifies a shift from a policy of abandonment of Russian claims to a larger homeland towards a more concentrated and politicised rhetoric. Whether or not Russia's compatriot policy discourse is perceived positively and whether or not Russian speakers are ready to abandon their links to the state of residence is something that the empirical section seeks to explore.

### 3.2. The Russian Minority Question in the Nationalising State of Kazakhstan

As have been previously mentioned, the identity formation of Russian speakers might not only be affected by the stances and discourses projected on them by the so-called external national homeland but also by the state of their residence. Thus, before we can actually indulge into the analysis of how Russian speakers feel in the context when Russia is actively seeking to protect

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<sup>58</sup> Abdujalil Abdurasulov "Could a 'Ukrainian scenario' play out in Kazakhstan" (March 12 2014), *BBC*, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26549796>, accessed on April 29, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> ITAR-TASS "Peskov: Putin is guarantor of Russian world's security", (March 7, 2014), available at: <http://tass.ru/en/russia/722667>, accessed on April 29, 2015.

their rights, it is necessary to examine the second field of the triadic nexus, namely the policies of Kazakhstan directed at the Russian-speaking community since country's independence.

In Brubaker's view, Kazakhstan is the nationalising state that under the Soviet regime has undergone decades of repressive treatment of the ethnic population. For this reason it might therefore seek remedial action by promoting the specific interests of the core Kazakh nation whilst marginalising the Russian-speaking minority. Notwithstanding the expectations, since the collapse of the USSR and the country's independence Kazakhstan pursued a fairly ambivalent nationalisation strategy, which gave rise to different scholarly interpretations of its ethnic policy. For example, scholars like Melvin suggest that the initial peaceful transition to the independent sovereign state gave a misleading impression of harmonious inter-ethnic relations, which disguised numerous difficulties in the country.<sup>60</sup> Others, however, point out that despite demographic upheavals during the Soviet times along with other reasons why ethnic Kazakhs could feel victimised, the ethnic policy pursued by the Kazakhstani leadership is radically different from that in the Baltic States.<sup>61</sup> In contrast to Estonia and Latvia, which adopted restrictive citizenship policies, Kazakhstan tried to foster a policy of “inclusive civic nation-state-building”.<sup>62</sup> The attempts to include Russians as the rightful citizens of Kazakhstan were arguably based not only on their size, but also on their importance for the state economy. Close economic links between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation also played a significant role. Indeed, one cannot pinpoint concrete discriminatory actions of the Kazakhstani state against Russians that easily. In most of the

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<sup>60</sup> Melvin “Russians Beyond Russia”, p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> Kolstoe “Russians in the former Soviet republics”, p. 246.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

cases the decision by political authorities affect all Kazakhstani citizens, who attempt to contest country's political orientation, without an ethnic exception.<sup>63</sup>

Based on this, Arunas Juska describes the policies pertaining to the nation state—building process in Kazakhstan as a mixture of both consociationalism and ethno-centrism.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, numerous efforts have been made to ensure that the important political positions are occupied by ethnic Kazakhs, thus limiting Russians' participation in the government and state bureaucracy. Migration and administration policies, aiming to attract more Kazakhs to the northern parts of Kazakhstan are also often perceived as being used to dilute the presence and dominance of Russians there. To date, perhaps the most obvious demographic change was reflected in the government's decision to relocate the capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997. Although the leadership stressed the earthquake danger as the main reason to move the capital, some have rather conceived it as a further attempt to consolidate Kazakh political control over the northern regions.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, one must acknowledge that Russians continue to enjoy cultural autonomy and equal voting and citizenship rights. Since its independence Kazakhstan turned to be politically more accommodative and by pursuing a zero-sum option policy ensured that all permanent residents, regardless of their ethnic origin, were automatically identified as citizens of the republic.

The ambiguity of the state policies towards Russian-speaking minorities is further noticeable in both the Kazakhstani national and linguistic questions. Regarding the former, the constitution of 1993 opens with a reference “We, the people of Kazakhstan”, symbolising that the Kazakhstani state is imagined not in the ethnic but in the civic terms.<sup>66</sup> The use of the “Kazakh nation” in the

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<sup>63</sup> Peyrouse “Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia.”, p. 485.

<sup>64</sup> Arunas Juska “Ethno-Political Transformations in the states of the former USSR”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22:3 (May 1999), pp. 524-553.

<sup>65</sup> Ziegler “The Russian Diaspora in Central Asia”, p. 111.

<sup>66</sup> Kolstoe “Russians in the former Soviet republics”, p. 249.

Article 1 puts however a civic understanding of a nation into question. In the second constitution of 1995 the ambiguity in wording also provoked similar polemics by affirming “We, people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on the indigenous Kazakh land”.<sup>67</sup> Here again, on the one hand by saying “people of Kazakhstan” Kazakhstani leadership seems to be moving away from the ethnic principal in the process of nation-building. Yet on the other hand, such wording as the “Kazakh land” could be interpreted in very ethno-centric terms.

A further ambivalence, as mentioned above, could be traced in linguistic policies. Ongoing since the collapse of the Soviet Union the policy of linguistic and ethnic Kazakhisation is traceable in several fields: the officialisation of the Kazakh language in employment and the decline of the use of Russian; and deterioration of the education for Russian speaking pupils.<sup>68</sup> However, as pointed by Nazarbayev himself, the most important task was to raise the prestige of Kazakh and not to lower the importance of Russian.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, although the constitution of 1995 declared Kazakh as the state language, it stated that the Russian language will be used on equal grounds along with Kazakh in state institutions as well as local self-administrative bodies.<sup>70</sup>

Despite more or less accommodative nature of the Kazakhstani policies towards Russian speakers, between 1989 and 1999 many still chose to immigrate to Russia. Just within a decade more than two million people left the country.<sup>71</sup> The main push factors at that time were especially seen in deplorable economic conditions that people found themselves in and declining living standards. Thus, during the early stages economically Russia was considered as an attractive force capable of drawing its diaspora back to its territory. However, as by the early 2000s the Kazakhstani

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<sup>67</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995), available at: [http://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/K950001000\\_](http://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/K950001000_), accessed on May 24, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Peyrouse “Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia.”, p. 485.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Kolstoe “Russians in the former Soviet republics”, p. 247

<sup>70</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995).

<sup>71</sup> Peyrouse “Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia.”, p. 492.

economy slowly but steadily started to recover the overall activity of Russian-speaking northward migration has sharply slowed down. Some scholars like Peyrouse however argue that the decline in emigration was not due to the economic rise in Kazakhstan, but should be associated with the poor repatriation programmes organised by Russia which in the end failed to impassion the vast Russian community to “return” back to Russia.<sup>72</sup> As has been discussed in the previous section, relative inactivity of Russia in supporting of Russian-speaking groups could be indeed regarded as one of the important reasons why Russians chose in the end to accept their position and a situation within the host states.

In the context when Russia is now actively calling to defend the rights of Russian speakers abroad the difficulties of the political and social processes that are taking place in Kazakhstan become even more apparent. The events in Ukraine have further crystallised the ambiguous policies pursued by the authorities. Fearing the separatist claims in the North of the country (partially in reaction to Putin’s sloppy statement that Kazakhstan had never existed as a state<sup>73</sup>) an immediate change of the legal code was ordered, increasing imprisonment terms to seven or ten years for spreading separatist moods. Simultaneously, the state continues encouraging migration of ethnic Kazakhs from the South to the North of Kazakhstan by offering grants for education and job placements.

Furthermore, though the constitution permits the use of Russian on an equal footing with Kazakh, authors like Commercio insist that the leadership still intends to build a society based solely on the Kazakh language whilst reducing the importance of Russian.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, since the

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 494.

<sup>73</sup> Farangis Najbullah “Putin Downplays Kazakhs Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction”, *Radio Free Europe* (September 3, 2014), available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html>, accessed on May 24, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Michele Commercio “The ‘Pugachev Rebellion’ in the Context of Post-Soviet Kazakh Nationalisation”, *Nationalities Papers* 32:1 (2004), pp. 87-113, p.96.

independence Kazakhstan has been involved in a slow but relentless process of renaming the cities, streets, shops, buildings into a Kazakh manner. For example, Oskeman is now a preferred name used by ethnic Kazakhs to call the city of Ust'-Kamenogorsk (the name in Russian). In addition, a proposal has been made to rename the whole country from Kazakhstan to "Kazakh Yeli" (the Fatherland of Kazakhs). Such changes and propositions have all been met with a growing resentment among the Russian-speaking population fearing to become marginalised. By conducting such policies Kazakhstani authorities put themselves on a slippery slope, as the policies could potentially lead to the weakening of territorial identification and reduce loyalty of Russian speakers towards Kazakhstan. Under such circumstances any possible cultural influence of the Kazakhstani state would also become questionable.

Yet, president's insistence on a multinational character of the country, emphasising the unity and the importance of respecting all ethnic communities, comes in stark contrast to a more ethnocentric approach. After the annexation of Crimea, Kazakhstan has employed several measures to foster tolerance in the country, prevent inter-ethnic clashes and avoid repetition of the Ukrainian scenario. One of the biggest examples is opening up of a number of departments of tolerance at various universities across the country.

Beside this, in light of the regional and global developments the snap elections were held on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2015 aiming to strengthen the position of President Nazarbayev, who is now widely seen as the only politician capable of sustaining calm inter-ethnic relations and maintaining the balance in the country.<sup>75</sup> The Ukrainian crisis has amplified Kazakhstan's several vulnerabilities both

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<sup>75</sup> International Crisis Group "Stress Tests for Kazakhstan", *Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia* 74 (May 13, 2015).



economic and social and keeping 74-year-old Nazarbayev in office is now framed as a matter of national survival.

Whilst Kazakhstani policies towards Russians remain fairly ambiguous, they are yet becoming more concentrated to unify its diverse population in response to Russia's restarted compatriot policy. Against this complex background, how do young Russian speakers in Kazakhstan position themselves in this triadic interplay? Do they still hold strong cultural and economic links to Russia? Is there a predisposition towards stronger political identification with Russia or do Russian speakers prefer to associate themselves with Kazakhstan, despite the ambivalence in its policies? These questions have been all thoroughly examined in the following empirical part of this research. Through the assessment of discrepancies and commonalities between Russian speakers this research hopes to shed light on the degree to which Russians look towards Russia for their future direction or prefer to identify themselves with Kazakhstan.

## Chapter 4. The Responses of Young Russian Speakers in Kazakhstan

In the following sections I present the analysis of the data obtained from the focus groups and discuss different levels of attachment both to Russia and Kazakhstan. The first section takes us into exploring the nature of cultural self-identification among Russian speakers, in particular how they perceive their nationality. In the second and third sections a particular focus is given to the discussion of what the Russian diaspora perceives as its “homeland” and how it interprets the policies projected upon it both by Russia and Kazakhstan.

### 4.1. Understanding Cultural Self-Identification of Russian Speakers

Despite the power of the discourse and policy projected by both Russia and Kazakhstan, individuals from the Russian-speaking community often ascribe their own understanding to these policies and practices. As discussed in the theoretical part of this paper, cultural self-identification is one possible way of assessing these understandings. Encouraged by previous studies into the identity formation of Russian speakers<sup>76</sup> I was interested foremost to see how respondents envision their nationality and a sense of belonging. One of the first questions posed in all of the focus groups was therefore for respondents to characterise their nationality. Before proceeding with the actual analysis, it is important to mention that in Kazakhstan the citizens must indicate their individual nationality in the passports.<sup>77</sup> Nationality is usually ascribed not according to a place of birth,

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<sup>76</sup> Cheskin “Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States”; Moya Flynn “Renegotiating stability, security and identity in the post-Soviet borderlands: The experience of Russian communities in Uzbekistan”, *Nationalities Papers* 35:2 (May 2007), pp. 267-288.

<sup>77</sup> Passports in Kazakhstan are given out irrespective of age and usually serve for identification and travel purposes. From the age of 16 Kazakhstani citizens also acquire ID cards, which similarly contain information regarding one’s nationality.

citizenship or emotional belonging, but rather based on a nationality of one of the parents. Thus, even though one might have a strong attachment to Kazakhstan, according to the ethnic background of their parents they would still be classified as Russian. Furthermore, Kazakhstan is a host to many nationalities that have been intermixing throughout decades, which in itself might feed into a difficulty of young people to outright define their ethnic belonging. The complexity of such categorisation was indeed clearly reflected during all of my focus group discussions:

Though in my passport it says that I am Russian, I think it is hard to associate myself with any nationality so directly, since it is a total mixture (1, Petropavlovsk).

Nationality is such a vague term. A person is generally very individual human being, and you can find similar people absolutely in any nation. Nationality is therefore not important, I struggle to define mine (32, Astana).

I am not really interested in this. For me nationality is so blurred, that I do not connect myself with something purely Russian. Yes, I like Russian folklore, but in the same way I like Kazakh. I am open to anything, I am multi-national (36, Astana).

Notwithstanding the complexity of categorisation, the majority of my respondents still referred to themselves as Russian with a brief indication of a mixed genealogy:

My family is a total mix – Ukrainians, Hungarians, Polish. But when I went to get my ID, proudly said “write Russian”. Spiritually, I am somehow closer to being Russian (30, Astana).

One of the interesting things was that for many, even those identifying themselves with another nationality, Russia still represented an attractive force. In fact, many participants emphasised their cultural, historical, linguistic and spiritual links with the imaginary concept of Russia. The word “imaginary” is used here, because a line was still somehow drawn between the larger Russian World and the Russian Federation: “Russian culture (*rususkaja kultura*) but not of

the Russian Federation (*rossijskaja*)” (1, Petropavlovsk). Furthermore, though the majority conceptualised themselves as Russian, distinctions between themselves and Russians from Russia were outlined in all six focus groups:

There is a difference between us and Russians in Russia (23, Petropavlovsk).

Colossal difference, they are different. They have different attitudes towards life. Even if we are all at a same party, you see it outright – *us* and *them* (24, Petropavlovsk).

I think in Russia they are somewhat stupider, they are much slower in thinking than here. Kazakhs, for example, easily know Russian, Kazakh and English languages or even a forth. *Here*, we aspire to become like Kazakhs or even better, and *there* Russians look at each other and degrade (25, Astana).

For the purposes of this research two things are important. First, respondents distinguish themselves from Russians by affording them particular negative characteristics (aggressive, drunkards, harsh, unfriendly), and through ascribing to “self” positive characteristics that often mirrored those which they attributed to ethnic Kazakhs (openness, kindness, friendliness, politeness, virtues). Second, the sense of “otherness” and a lack of clear self-identification with Russia was further highlighted in the peculiar separating boundaries of “us/them” and “here/there” found among the respondents. The narratives of difference and distance could have been fostered by various reasons. On the one hand, young Russian speakers were all born in Kazakhstan with the majority never even experiencing any kind of life in Russia. Thus, a lack of experience is reflected in the opposition between “there in Russia” and “here at home”. Simultaneously, some students, particularly those from Astana, also acknowledged that growing up in Kazakhstan indiscriminately led to the adoption of various characteristics from the ethnic population, causing a creation of a new form of identification – Kazakhstani (civically belonging to Kazakhstan):

I was born here (in Kazakhstan), therefore feel more Kazakhstani. When you go *abroad* to Russia and see other Russians, you realise that you are different. Inter-connection of various cultures does affect you. Even though at home with my parents I might feel Russian, at the university, where the majority are Kazakhs, you do not feel different anymore. As if we are all together (35, Astana).

We have assimilation of cultures, meaning we are all linked. For example, yesterday Kazakhs came to work and started knocking the eggs (custom of the Orthodox Easter) and saying “Christ Resurrected”. We also celebrate their holidays, Nauryz, for example (Petropavlovks, 24).

A sense of boundary between them and Russians in the Russian Federation could have been also caused by a lack of acceptance of their Russianness by the local population in Russia. Although Russia, especially in the context of the crisis in Ukraine, presents itself as a solution to the ethnic discomfort that Russian speakers might experience in their republics and encourages their resettlement, the reality in Russia itself is often quite different from the official state discourse. This reality also often contradicts the main determinant of one’s belonging to the concept of the “Russian World”, propagated by the Russian state since 2000s. In fact, speaking Russian language, sharing similar behavioural traits and historical ties might be simply not enough to be considered as belonging to the in-group in Russia. Previous studies of the experiences of Russian returnees in the Russian Federation have highlighted that after the returnees crossed the border into Russia, their true Russianness was contested by the locals, leading to their exclusion from the common Russian ethnic and civic community.<sup>78</sup> Despite their Russian nationality, many newcomers received quite a hostile reaction and were taken by their Russian neighbours as Tajik, Uzbek or Kazakh. Hearing the stories of difficulties experienced by family and friends who moved arguably

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<sup>78</sup> See for example Hilary Pilkington & Moya Flynn “A diaspora in diaspora? Russian returnees confront homeland”, *Refuge* 23:3 (2006), pp. 55-67; Moya Flynn “Reconstructing ‘Home/lands’ in the Russian Federation: Migrant-Centred Perspectives of Displacement and Resettlement”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33:3 (April 2007), pp. 461-481.

accentuates a sense of difference from Russians. During the focus groups many of my respondents expressed very similar grievances with the ways they, their family members or friends have been treated in Russia:

If you are Russian, but they figured out that you come from Kazakhstan, expect quite a different attitude towards yourself (39, Astana).

They look at Russians from Kazakhstan with arrogance. Why? They do not consider us Russian. As if we were some lost, chopped off piece. To them we are Kazakh, Kazakhstani, anything but not Russian (35, Astana).

Perhaps it is not so obvious, but you do notice it. Russians in Russia are somewhat less acceptable towards other nationalities. Even my friends who are currently in Russia from time to time hear such phrases as “go back home”. This is just barbaric. I would never hear anything like “go back to Russia” here in Kazakhstan. It really hurts me (37, Astana).

Whilst some respondents seem to grow somewhat distant from Russia and closer to Kazakhstan by assimilating certain traits adopted from local Kazakhs, we cannot yet assert that they are all becoming fully *Kazakhstanised*. Indeed, some of my respondents also drew similar “them and us” line between themselves and ethnic Kazakhs:

At university I started slowly understanding that I belong to a minority. But this does not mean that Kazakhs make me feel bad about it. I just know, that I am a little different that I belong to a Russian-speaking group (38, Astana).

At least in terms of language, I still believe that there is more connection between the Russian-speaking community, than between us and Kazakhs (15, Petropavlovsk).

Interestingly, the term “Russian speaker” has been previously criticised by some scholars as a faulty label, because different groups either estrange themselves from it or arguably have

disproportionate attachment to it.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, during the discussion my respondents did not resist the term “Russian speaker” and seemed to employ the label particularly in order to emphasise the differences prevailing between them and Russians in Russia and ethnic Kazakhs. When asked what is in fact closer to them, they claimed to have developed a hybrid identification with both their state of residence and Russia:

Some symbiosis, I would say. We respect both cultures and celebrate holidays of both countries. From the early childhood this symbiosis was taught to us, and we never experienced the delineation between the two (4, Petropavlovsk).

The reactions of my respondents reflect how the younger generation makes sense of the changing social environment around them and how they justify their place within it. To this end, we could say that due to shared language, traditions, history Russian speakers in Kazakhstan still continue to hold cultural affinity with Russia. Previous studies on identities of Russian speakers in the Baltic States came to a very similar conclusion stating that Russia’s cultural field still holds strong appeal to many from the Russian-speaking community.<sup>80</sup> Yet, as one of my respondents claimed, the emotional and spiritual bonds that she shares with Russia are in fact with “imaginary Russia, Russia that she hopes to see, Russia that does not exist” (37, Astana), referring to the so-called Russian World. Hearing stories of how their own Russianness is being contested and how they are perceived as the “other” in Russia itself, leads them to problematise the image of the Russian Federation as the true solution to the problems they might experience. Furthermore, being born in Kazakhstan and having spent their entire life surrounded by ethnic Kazakhs, who are often very accommodating, seems to draw them closer to ethnic Kazakhs. Especially such trend is visible

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<sup>79</sup> Lowell Barrington “Russian-Speakers in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Population or Neither?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17:2 (2001), pp. 129-158.

<sup>80</sup> Triin Vihalemm & Anu Masso “Identity dynamics of Russian-speakers of Estonia in the transition period”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34:1 (2003), pp. 92-116.

among Russian speakers in Astana who have more opportunities for inter-ethnic contact. That being said, we can clearly see how the self-identification of young Russian speakers has been transforming in some symbiotic way, with the boundaries and social meanings between their Kazakhstani-self and Russian-self not being entirely fixed.

#### 4.2. The Russia's Influence: How Compatriotic are Young Russian Speakers?

As has been discussed earlier, since the 1990s Russian officials have been actively claiming Russia's right as the historical homeland (*istoricheskaja rodina*) to Russian speakers abroad to monitor their treatment and status in the post-Soviet states. The idea of the Russian Federation as the national external homeland, which was first brought to the fore of post-communist ethnic studies by Brubaker, was soon adopted by many scholars. Yet studies that prioritise Russia as the defining factor in identity formation of Russian speakers, often fail to examine whether construction of homeland is matched by the diverse experiences and perceptions of Russian-speaking communities in reality.<sup>81</sup> Scholars like Barrington et al. criticise much Western research for ignoring the possibility of the state of residence being perceived as homeland or of multiple homelands existing simultaneously for one individual.<sup>82</sup> Seeking to move away from the narratives of Russia being necessarily taken as a true homeland by Russian-speaking communities in Kazakhstan, this research was interested to investigate what the respondents actually envisioned as their homeland(s) in a daily life. Despite a seeming power of Russian state discourse, during the focus groups only few Russian speakers expressed their territorial attachment to Russia. In fact,

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<sup>81</sup> Smith and Wilson are among the first to suggest that Russians outside Russia might consider their state of residence to be their homeland, see Graham Smith & Andrew Wilson "Rethinking Russia's Post-Soviet Diaspora".

<sup>82</sup> Barrington, Herron & Silver "The Motherland is calling".



the bond with Russia they spoke of was primarily based on the cultural and emotional ties or narratives projected upon them by their parents:

I am seriously struggling with this question. Although I was born in Astana, spiritually Russia is closer to me. I do not really know how to explain this (30, Astana).

My granny told me from the early childhood that Orenburg (city in Russia) is our homeland, a place where our ancestors come from. Thus, although I visited this place only once in my life, I still have a strong attachment to it. And Kazakhstan...sometimes my parents say it is a mistake that we are here (35, Astana).

Yet the majority of respondents identified Kazakhstan as their homeland:

I do not know what others think, but for me “homeland” is a place where I was born, where my relatives live – Kazakhstan is my home (6, Petropavlovsk).

Kazakhstan is my homeland. I do not really associate myself with Russia, since my mother is from Belarus and my father from Kyrgyzstan. Apart from the Russian language, there is nothing in common with Russia (38, Astana).

Kazakhstan is my homeland, no doubt. And I have the attachment not only to the North of Kazakhstan but to the country as a whole. If something happens in our country, just anywhere, I am getting worried, as it is my country (19, Petropavlovsk).

Someone once told me “are you not interested in your historical homeland?” But I do not understand what exactly my historical homeland is. Perhaps I do not even have any Russian ancestors. My homeland is for sure Kazakhstan, I was born here...it is not even that. I was brought up here, I was nurtured in this environment. Kazakhstan will always remain my homeland (36, Astana).

The fact of having been born in Kazakhstan, being brought up and having relatives there was clearly important to respondents when explaining their identification with the word “homeland”. Such findings are also echoed in Barrington et al. study on perceptions of “homeland” amongst Russians in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine and in Flynn’s study on experiences of

Russian communities in Uzbekistan.<sup>83</sup> Barrington et al. further note that whilst “birth” to an extent fixes the designation of homeland other experiences are also important, such as security within a territory, length of residence and pride for one’s country.<sup>84</sup> With regards to the latter, many have indeed expressed their pride for Kazakhstan’s achievements: “I am always happy when Kazakhstan’s achievements are mentioned on a TV” (11, Petropavlovsk) or “I was so proud when our sportsman Iliia Iliin won...when he grabbed our flag and shouted “I thank the people for my victory”...what a moment” (24, Petropavlovsk). The effect of state nation-building process is another important factor which might affect a sense of security or belonging to a homeland. In fact, many of my respondents mentioned Kazakhstani state-building policies since independence as something positive, as something which helped foster good relations between different ethnic groups.<sup>85</sup>

Interestingly, for other respondents homeland was neither associated with Russia nor with Kazakhstan as a whole, but with a precise place of birth that was their town or village:

My homeland is not the whole country, but just a village where I was born (5, Petropavlovks).

For me, homeland is not entire Kazakhstan, but Pavlodar. I cannot call some Shemkent (city in the South of Kazakhstan) my homeland (33, Astana).

Others, seemed in turn less attached to a specific territory, but instead expressed material security as important factor for establishing a home base. As Morley suggests, the idea of home and homeland may vary according to social, cultural and economic circumstances.<sup>86</sup> Thus, for some

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<sup>83</sup> Barrington, Herron & Silver “The Motherland is calling”; Flynn “Renegotiating stability, security and identity in the post-Soviet borderlands”.

<sup>84</sup> Barrington, Herron & Silver “The Motherland is calling”, p. 306.

<sup>85</sup> For a thorough discussion on the influence of the Kazakhstani state on and its relation with the Russian-speaking community see the next section of this paper.

<sup>86</sup> David Morley “Home territories: Media, mobility and identity”, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 44.

young Russian speakers home was literally wherever economic situation seemed to be better, where they could secure a job:

Homeland is where your “bottom” feels well (Russian colloquial saying meaning where material conditions are better). If I move elsewhere, there will be my new home (23, Petropavlovsk).

Statements made by my respondents demonstrate the complex understanding of homeland amongst them. Whilst the term *istoricheskaja rodina* is often employed in Russian political, academic and media discourse arguably attempting to bring together and unify the vast Russian-speaking community, the ways in which young Russians in Kazakhstan themselves utilise the term demonstrates a pattern of a general weakening of political and territorial links to Russia. As we have seen, Russia was regarded as homeland primarily in cultural and linguistic terms, and described in terms of emotional and spiritual attachment. The respondents however tended to distinguish between Russia as a political and cultural entity, which seems to summarise the general attitude towards the country. This trend was especially emphasised in the discussion on whether Russia should or should not defend the rights of Russian speakers abroad and interfere into other states in order to safeguard the political equality of Russian minorities (the question was based on Peskov’s statement quoted earlier in this thesis). Whilst some previous studies regarded Russians in the near abroad as a potential fifth column that might engage in counter-hegemonic nationalism and be positively disposed to Russian political intervention,<sup>87</sup> the responses of my respondents rather challenged such a claim.

Assertion that Russia should intervene was unanimously met with the approval in the context of annexation of Crimea, with the situation in Ukraine regarded as “more than extreme” (12,

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Kaiser & Jeff Chinn “Russian-Kazakh Relations in Kazakhstan”, *Post-Soviet Geography* 36:5 (May 1995), pp.257-273, p. 270.

Petropavlovsk). Whether it was a consumption of Russian media or some other factor shaping such an opinion the fact nevertheless remained unchallenged. Yet notwithstanding this, when the situation was projected on Kazakhstan or any other state with the Russian-speaking groups, the respondents outright denied Russia the role of the protector and even questioned its position as the core of the Russian World:

Why should it care whether we have problems in some village? It is none of their business (8, Petropavlovsk).

Interference into another sovereign state is unacceptable and when I am paid for I will also speak in such a way (referring to Peskov's speech)...what are his words really based on? What have they done in the Baltics within the past 20 years (21, Petropavlovsk)?

You can always carp to something, even here in Kazakhstan and if Russia will conduct its policy here...it is just not right (31, Astana).

Some Russian speakers even seemed to get annoyed when contemplating the possibility of such scenario:

Each single story must be handled separately. I will not agree if Russia simply comes here and starts flexing its rights (*kachat prava*). Some might feel good, others bad and when trying to help those who feel bad, you might make everyone feel bad. I am just wondering, if some Russian family wants to strictly follow Russian traditions, if it is so problematic, so hurtful to integrate with other nationalities, why do not they migrate back to Russia, where the environment is more familiar? And you know, I even think that we do not need any Russian organisations here for my rights are not infringed (38, Astana).

Whether Russia should intervene to protect the rights of Russian speakers? It is madness, absolute madness. A person chose himself/herself this country, and he/she lives here under the rules of this country. If Russia meddles into these rules, it is wrong. A person has a choice, you do not like it here, just leave (29, Astana).

Based on such comments we can tentatively suggest that so far Russian speakers in Kazakhstan seem to be committed to their state of residence. Furthermore, the respondents hint at a lack of potential of the Russian Federation to have a significant political impact on Russian-speaking groups in Kazakhstan, which adds a certain ambiguity as to Russia's overall strength to influence the identity formation of these individuals.

A previous study on Russian policy towards its diaspora abroad noted that Russian compatriot policy seeks now to not only strengthen cultural ties with its diaspora abroad, but also to build up concrete political links by distancing Russians from their state of residence.<sup>88</sup> Yet the perceptions of the compatriot policy as demonstrated in the focus groups also appeared to be divergent. On the one hand, the respondents appreciated numerous opportunities presented to them to study in Russia on very good terms and a less competitive basis. They also admitted that some of their friends have indeed followed this programme and moved to Russia to receive their education there. On the other hand, concerns were again voiced with regards to differentiated treatment of Russian speakers on the territory of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, some sounded wary with what Russia had to offer:

Russia is simply interested in cheap labour, that is it. To fill in their demographic gap. To populate their remote villages...I do not really feel like it (21, Petropavlovsk).

Such statement clearly mirrors what has been previously identified as a weakness of Russian compatriot policy. Igor Zevelev, for example, in one of his articles suggests that many programmes are rather aimed at solving the social, economic and demographic problems of Russia's own regions experiencing workforce shortage than at providing adequate help to those compatriots who

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<sup>88</sup> Cheskin "Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States".

decide to resettle in Russia.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Nozhenko criticises Russian policy towards compatriots abroad for not really seeking their repatriation and the “restoration of the family” but instead treating them as a possible source of new human resources which are to be resettled in particular areas.<sup>90</sup> The tendency of sending Russian speakers to the remote areas in Russia, like Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, or even Sakhalin, obviously does not go unnoticed. Therefore, instead of choosing seemingly attractive offer of compatriot policy, young people preferred to stay in a bigger city in Kazakhstan, where they believed chances for a better life might be higher: “better here in the city, than in the middle of nowhere” (23, Petropavlovsk).

As the conversation on the possible resettlement in Russia progressed, some irritation was expressed as to the way Russians in Russia perceive the situation and experiences of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan:

You know, they think that we have no future here, that we are oppressed here. When in the 1990s the people were migrating back to Russia, they were escaping deplorable economic conditions. As far as possible from this economic hole. And now, although the economy has stabilised here, they still think that everything is bad (24, Petropavlovsk).

I do not know. Why should we go somewhere, change our citizenship if our own salaries are not that bad, if the whole situation is actually good (18, Petropavlovsk)?

To this end, the last comments also raise a question as to whether Russia still remains an attractive economic force for Russian speakers in Kazakhstan, as it used to be during the first waves of emigration in the 1990s. Many have in fact challenged the meaning behind going to Russia, especially now when the country has entered the economic recession.

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<sup>89</sup> Zevelev “Russia’s Policy Towards Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union”, p. 53.

<sup>90</sup> Nozhenko "Motherland is Calling You!", p. 15.

### 4.3. “One Nation, One Country, One Destiny” or how Russian Speakers Perceive Kazakhstani Policy Towards Them

“We, Kazakhstani people are a nation of a united future. That says it all. If we are Kazakhstani people, there should be no dividing line between the ethnic groups. We made a significant progress in developing our own model of stability and harmony in the country.”<sup>91</sup>

(N.A.Nazarbayev)

Despite some ongoing changes to ethno-political environment in Kazakhstan following independence in 1991 and Russia’s newest attempts to revive the links to its diaspora abroad, many of the respondents, as has been discussed in the previous section, still expressed strong attachments to Kazakhstan. Feeling a sense of belonging and security within the territory of Kazakhstan was clearly important for Russians to identify with their country of residence and birth as their “homeland”. In addition, often inexplicit and ambiguous policies of nationalisation, which are craftily carried out by President Nazarbayev, left many with the impression that the policies are in fact inclusive towards Russian-speaking groups. Thus, as previously mentioned, young Russian speakers tended to perceive the nation-building process in a positive manner, as something that led to the improved situation of numerous ethnic groups in the country and good inter-ethnic relations. Particular credit to the unity and friendship between nations was given to the wisdom of Nazarbayev. As believed by my respondents, the president like no one else managed to prevent any possibility for inter-ethnic clashes and a split in the society:

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<sup>91</sup> Assembly of people of Kazakhstan, available at:<http://assembly.kz/ru/deyatelnost-assamblei-naroda-kazahastana>, accessed on May 20, 2015.

I am so proud of peace in our country. 17 million people is not that few, but we live in peace. We have two big nationalities – Russians and Kazakhs – and just anything could have happened, but it did not. Our president he holds us together (19, Petropavlovsk).

Our president always sees two steps ahead and suppresses any nationalistic moods just in time. He emphasises a lot that we are a multinational country, and this is our strength (8, Petropavlovsk).

Added to this in every single focus group it was acknowledged that Russian speakers in Kazakhstan always have a freedom of choice and can freely practice their language and traditions without any forceful implantation of the Kazakh culture. Respondents spoke of the numerous festivals and holidays that had been introduced since the 1991, where every nation is not only allowed but also encouraged to represent their customs. More than anything else was praised the Assembly of People (APK) which, according to focus group participants, represents the country's ethnic minorities and was designed to ensure that all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan could safeguard their interests in a multi-cultural environment. Established in 1995, the APK is a presidentially appointed advisory body that consists of 384 representatives of ethnic groups in Kazakhstan (all in all the country is home to around 120 ethnic groups and nationalities).<sup>92</sup> According to its official web-site, the purpose of the Assembly is to ensure inter-ethnic harmony in the Republic of Kazakhstan and to foster the process of formation of the all-inclusive Kazakhstani civic identity on the basis of Kazakhstani patriotism, spiritual and cultural unity of people.<sup>93</sup> The ethnic Kazakh nation is in turn ascribed with a consolidating and accommodating role. Although some scholars<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> John Daly "Opinion: Kazakhstan's unique Assembly of People maintains ethnic harmony", (May 4, 2015), available at: [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2015/05/04/Opinion-Kazakhstans-unique-Assembly-of-People-maintains-ethnic-harmony/5051430316093/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2015/05/04/Opinion-Kazakhstans-unique-Assembly-of-People-maintains-ethnic-harmony/5051430316093/), accessed on May 20, 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Assembly of people of Kazakhstan.

<sup>94</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, for example, insists that in practice the AKP has "distinctly divided the minorities into several groups" by giving the priority to the smallest minorities without a titular state (Kurds or Dungans) whilst leaving the biggest group – Russians – marginalised; Peyrouse "Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia.", p. 483.



voiced concerns with the AKP, its goals and achievements, the young Russian speakers nevertheless perceived it as a way to safeguard their rights. Beside this, the respondents used the organisation to explain why Russia should not and cannot intervene for the sake of their rights.

Generally, when talking about the equality/inequality of rights between them and ethnic Kazakhs, the respondents were keen to avoid claims of discrimination on ethnic grounds, stating that “according to the constitution, everyone has absolutely equal rights and equal opportunities” (5, Petropavlovsk). As the discussion progressed further, some Russian speakers however did express discomfort with the opportunities available to them as compared to ethnic Kazakhs:

To be very honest, even now I can feel some differences. For example, especially if you are a soldier and a better position is offered, we all well know, that *they* have more chances. Or any high position. You know Kazakhstan...all administrative organs should be filled with Kazakhs (21, Petropavlovsk).

A lack of language proficiency in Kazakh was cited as the main reason for hindering Russians from obtaining higher administrative positions. Indeed, since the end of the 1990s numerous policies have been introduced which increased the spheres in which Kazakh language is a must. Nowadays, all state employees are required to pass an exam in Kazakh, similarly all administrative documentation has to be conducted in the state language. This leaves Russians with little choice but to learn the language, which is especially difficult given that in the North they practically stand no chance of practicing it, or to accept that not having a better job is nothing else but their own fault. In contrast, other respondents were convinced that not being able to acquire a higher position is not a matter of a language *per se*, but could be explained in one simple word – *blat* (favouritism). Another word often utilised was *clanism*, which the respondents believed is strongly developed among ethnic Kazakhs and used to prioritise their relatives above anyone else:

Somehow I feel that ethnic Kazakh will rather get a job, not because of his name or language, but because of this *clanism*. It happens fairly often, even in my family, when a person had occupied a high position he was fired and his place was given to a son or a brother of a company owner. This is so not objective, makes me upset (37, Astan).

Yet, whilst showing some frustration over the employment process and favouritism, *clanism* or *blat* was not used as a factor to distance them from Kazakhs but instead as something worth of respect – family ties that Russians are to learn from the titular population.

Inquiring into the rights and opportunities of Russian speakers is detrimental for establishing political identification with the country. Though there was some slight dissatisfaction, on the whole the respondents seemed to be convinced of their equality with ethnic Kazakhs, which in turn potentially strengthens their territorial identification with Kazakhstan. Another possible way of measuring how integrated young Russian speakers are, which pertains both to the cultural and political sub-fields proposed by Cheskin, was to understand the attitudes hold by Russians towards the members of a larger society. In fact previous studies often found a link between inter-ethnic friendships, continuous communal transactions and improved intergroup relations. As the intergroup contact theory suggests, more positive contacts with the representatives of the other group could facilitate the alleviation of negative attitudes towards the other group, reduce conflict potential and increase tolerance in the country.<sup>95</sup> Knowing how Russian speakers perceive contact and communication with ethnic Kazakhs could enable us to establish their overall feelings towards integration into a wider society.

Although in the course of the focus groups the overwhelming majority of participants acknowledged to have a lot of very good friends among ethnic Kazakhs, the responses towards

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas Pettigrew “Intergroup Contact: Theory. Research and new practices”, *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1998), pp.173-185.

possible marriages between the two groups were highly debated. There were those who admitted that their parents were absolutely against mixed-marriages – “God forbid” (15, Petropavlovsk):

My blood is my blood, and my father also thinks so. Why should we, pardon the expression, ruin our nation. I respect Kazakhs, I really do. We live with them, yes...but I do not indent to ruin my nation. Well damn, if you are told from your childhood on – Russian, Russian, Russian, you even stop looking at other nations (19, Petropavlovsk).

Nevertheless, others expressed a discontent with such opinion, claiming that in a personal relationship it does not really matter whether a person is Russian, Tatar or Kazakh. Beside this, respondents were also convinced that mixing of blood is not only good but in fact necessary to make a nation genetically stronger. Clearly such statements remind us that Russian speakers are in fact not a unitary group but one divided in their opinions and levels of integration into the Kazakhstani society.

In light of the Ukrainian crisis, lack of identification with the Kazakhstani state among some Russian speakers is precisely what the leadership is trying to prevent, and from the observation does it so far well. One of the interesting points that emerged from all focus group discussions was a clear spirit of pride for multi-culturalism and multi-nationalism that their country pursues. “One nation, one state, one destiny” a slogan derived from the Doctrine on the National Unity is now like a motto often employed in the video clips and even became an often cited line in Nur Otan’s (Nazarbayev’s party) pre-election campaign. The main strategic priority of the “One country – one nation” is the achievement of the national unity, whereas this unity is seen in its diversity.<sup>96</sup> According to the Doctrine on the National Unity, the main goal is “regardless of the ethnic origin to unite and become one great nation that will be carefully preserved and passed on to descendants

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<sup>96</sup> The Doctrine on the National Unity, available at: <http://assembly.kz/ru/docs/doktrina-nacionalnogo-edinstva>, accessed on May 21, 2015.

as the most precious thing”.<sup>97</sup> In other words, in order to achieve the unity all prejudices and imagined barriers that still hinder this unity must be overcome. When almost every official state or news web-site emphasises that Kazakhstan embraces “all people of all nations and faiths”<sup>98</sup>, it is then perhaps not surprising that young Russian speakers, who accumulate their knowledge from the media, family and above all universities with direct links to the state, consequently project similar opinions.

Mostly Russian speakers expressed general optimism with regards to their social and political standing and the current atmosphere in Kazakhstan. Yet one must not stay with the impression that young Russian speaker expressed no concerns pertaining to their situation in the country. In fact, some respondents did voice some worry for the future. The unity that is believed to have been built by Nazarbayev was feared to disappear if he is to be replaced by someone else:

As long as Nazarbayev is our president everything will be smooth. But he is not eternal and we all know that. And what happens then? That is why people are in some state of limbo, fearing what to await (36, Astana).

The worst case-scenario offered was that of a politician from the South of Kazakhstan coming to power and changing the whole legislation to marginalise Russian speakers.<sup>99</sup> Especially worrisome seemed to be the linguistic issue and the future status of the Russian language in the country:

If a new president comes and says “only Kazakh language”, we will not even get the jobs here anymore (11, Petropavlovsk).

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> See for example the web-site of the Astana’s Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, available at: <http://astana-piramida.kz/>, accessed on May 21, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> During the focus groups the respondents often mentioned profound differences between the North and the South of Kazakhstan, with the Northern Kazakhs being more Russified and accommodating towards Russians, whereas the Southerners were seen more nationalistic and aggressive towards those who spoke Russian.

As has been noted in the section on “The Russian minority in Kazakhstan”, pursuing a policy of prioritising Kazakh language, could potentially lead to the weakening of attachment of Russian speakers to Kazakhstan both politically and culturally. So far, however, a scenario of the dramatic changes in the linguistic sphere remains only a possibility. Indeed, extending the Kazakh language into further domains is far more complex than one would imagine. Given that many ethnic Kazakhs themselves still use Russian as their main language of communication they will not necessarily support the idea of a mono-national state based on a single language.

## Conclusion

This research and the interviews with the young Russian speakers in Kazakhstan provide us with an opportunity to observe some important nuances of identificational trends among Russian speakers within the context of evolving Russia's compatriot policy discourse. Such micro-level trends are often neglected by the focus on the top-down policies or media discourses in isolation. Although recently the Russian leadership seems to attempt to reinforce a sense of identification with Russia by projecting certain messages of common discrimination of Russian speakers and the need to protect their rights, the narratives of the individuals have rather questioned the image of the Russian Federation as the only true solution to the problems they might experience. The inseparable bond with Russia, which automatically serves as the “centre of freedoms”<sup>100</sup> for Russian speakers, appeared in fact more diverse and complex than one would have imagined.

The main objective of this study was to identify the different levels of attachments Russian speakers hold to Russia and Kazakhstan. By studying the contradictory external and internal pressures on their identities through triangular interplay whilst focusing specifically on the different poles of attraction we are able to see which direction the political, economic and cultural identification of Russians is nowadays taking.

This research focused on a small section of young Russian speaking students. Naturally, the narrow focus on university students limits the generalisation of this data to the general population. One must, in fact, bear in mind that Russia's compatriot policy and projection of the common

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<sup>100</sup> The inseparable attachment to Russia is discussed in an article of the Ruvek web-site, a so-called portal for Russian compatriots organised by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Elena Efimova “Nam vseleenuju podavaj, ne menshe”, *Ruvek*, (March 16, 2015), available at: <http://www.ruvek.ru/?module=articles&action=view&id=9612>, accessed on May 26, 2015.

Russian world, albeit prioritise, are not solely directed at young Russian speakers. Therefore, to test the validity of the interpretation of the data obtained from the focus groups further studies should try to present a more representative sample of Russian speakers along the axes of age, education, gender and class. Interviewing a group of Russian speakers outside university may well have led to different conclusions. This study is therefore limited by its relatively narrow demographic sample-bias. Furthermore, this study has also demonstrated the need to include into the research the Southern parts of Kazakhstan, where Russian speakers might encounter negative or even nationalistic attitudes towards themselves. The rich qualitative data do, however, offer important insights into how young Russian speakers perceive the nation-building stances of Kazakhstan and calls from Russia to safeguard their rights.

The participants generally expressed the affinity with Russia due to shared language, traditions and history. A sense of being Russian both culturally and linguistically serves as an important component of the identities of many Russians in Kazakhstan. This said, Russia's appeal in the cultural field is challenged by the treatment of the resettled Russian speakers on the territory of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, one must also acknowledge the growing importance of Kazakhstani traditions in the lives of young Russian speakers and some symbiotic development of their cultural self-identification, which is inevitable under the conditions of close inter-ethnic contacts and friendships with ethnic Kazakhs.

Despite Moscow's attempts to increase political alignment of Russian speaker with Russia, the focus groups have demonstrated that in the current context Russians in Kazakhstan seem to be committed to their state of residence. In line with the previous studies, many respondents have also challenged the notion of Russia as their true "homeland", expressing their territorial attachment to Kazakhstan. Of course, we need to bear in mind that the general weakening in political attachment

to Russia is not only due to its ineffectiveness in the past or perhaps some inconsistency even today. What is more important, as also acknowledged by my respondents, is the policies of the Kazakhstani state directed at them. In fact the state legislators and precisely president Nazarbayev himself, though do follow some ambiguous policies of nationalisation, seem to have so far managed to avoid the marginalisation and a sense of discrimination among the Russian minority. Indeed, not only the state narrative remains inclusive in terms of national identity, but young Russians themselves seem to perceive the Kazakhstani leadership as trying to embrace and even favour the multi-ethnic character in the country by providing equal rights and prohibiting the expression of radical Kazakh ethno-nationalism.

In the economic terms, the attractiveness of Russian compatriot policy was similarly questioned especially given its recent economic recession. Notwithstanding this, the importance and quality of Russia's compatriot policy should not be entirely overlooked. Many still choose to follow resettlement or education programmes organised under its auspices, and as many of my respondents have acknowledged, the lure of Russia is still present both economically and culturally. The economy can in fact become soon a much stronger pull factor to many seeking employment if Kazakhstan is to fail preventing its economic decline. Laruelle in her recent article, for example, argues that the current economic situation clearly intersects with the regime's successful legitimacy and if not tackled will threaten "the social trust established between the authorities and the population".<sup>101</sup> Similarly, as demonstrated by this study, this social trust might be undermined if Kazakhstan is to pursue hardening linguistic policies that would largely sideline the minority population struggling to learn the state language. Thus, as some observers believe, it would take

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<sup>101</sup> Marlene Laruelle "The Power of Soft Power in Kazakhstan", *PONARS Eurasia* (May 1, 2015), available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/power-soft-power-kazakhstan>, accessed May 26, 2015.



“just a spark” to ignite inter-ethnic tensions if Kazakhstani leadership is to fail tackling the internal vulnerabilities which became more visible during the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>102</sup>

Currently however, young Russian speakers, as it would seem, are more attached to their state of residence that apparently allows their cultural self-determination than to the Russian Federation. Based on this, the study tentatively suggests that the fears of Russian speakers being a potential fifth column are overstated, at least in the present Kazakhstani context. The state’s strong emphasis on multi-ethnic and multi-dimensional national identity, especially in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, seems to so far avoid any profound inter-ethnic cleavages, providing ethnic groups with some grounds for unity. Thus, even if one is to imagine Russia’s intent to replicate the Ukrainian scenario in Kazakhstan, at least for the moment that would be highly unlikely given a lack of political support that my focus group participants have demonstrated towards Russia.

Yet the boundaries of self-identification and a sense of belonging are not entirely fixed, and perhaps never will be. Whilst this research indicates that there is a potential of a development of a hybrid identity among Russian speakers, the levels of attachment will fluctuate depending on the social, political and economic environment around them. This makes continuous studies of these dynamics necessary, as they might provide an opportunity how to influence the changes occurring for the benefit of the society at large.

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<sup>102</sup> International Crisis Group “Stress Tests for Kazakhstan”.

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