The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Leave Nationality Out of the Passport

By Michael Bohm

October 06, 2011



Nationalism has become one of the biggest issues in the State Duma election campaign, which kicked off last month.

First, the Liberal Democratic Party adopted its new campaign slogan at its convention on Sept. 13, which is a lot like the old one: "For the Russians, the heroic people, the party will stand for rebuilding an ethnic Russian state."

Then, one of Russia's most popular nationalists, Dmitry Rogozin, pledged his loyalty and that of his 100,0000-member movement, Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities, to United Russia. The movement's chief mission is to "defend the rights of ethnic Russians."

Now, the Communist Party is getting in on the nationalism act. On Monday, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov said at a Duma roundtable discussion that ethnic Russians should be recognized in the Constitution as the founders of the Russian state. Apparently, Zyuganov doesn't like the first eight words of the Constitution's preamble: "We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation ... "

Zyuganov also said he would fight to return the "fifth point" — the line on passports that stipulates a citizen's nationality or ethnic origin. This, he implied, would help promote Russians' rights and pride.

The fifth point had a notorious reputation dating back to the Soviet period. Introduced in 1932, the nationality entry in passports was often used to discriminate against ethnic minorities. In particular, it was used as a tool in state-sponsored anti-Semitism to deny Soviet Jews certain jobs and enrollment in university departments.

In general, the nationalities entry inculcated an institutionally divisive mentality of classifying and stereotyping people by their ethnic origin — a mentality that Russia has had trouble shaking off to this day.

Former President Boris Yeltsin abolished the fifth point in 1997, one of his most important accomplishments during his two presidential terms. Yeltsin understood that ethnicity should not be politically institutionalized — that for many minorities, their nationality was a private matter and had no place in passports, particularly given the importance of this document as the primary form of identification in the country. He also understood that the nationality line could once again help the majority discriminate against and persecute minorities.

If Yeltsin had one overreaching goal as president, it was to reject the worst aspects of Soviet tyranny, introduce democratic principles and values and join the Western league of nations. This is why he introduced Article 13.2 of the 1993 Constitution that "no ideology may be established as state or obligatory." This was a firm rejection of the 1977 Soviet Constitution that established the Communist Party as "the leading and guiding force of the Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system."

The desire to adopt Western principles and values also explains why it was so important for Yeltsin to abolish the fifth point in passports. In the 1993 Constitution, Yeltsin insisted on Article 26, which states, "No one can be forced to determine and state his national [ethnic] affiliation." The nationality entry in passports also contradicted the European Convention and the Council of Europe's Convention on Minority Rights.

In short, Yeltsin understood that the fifth point was a crude, discriminatory leftover from the Soviet Union and had no place in the new, democratic Russia.

This is why Yeltsin reintroduced the term

"Rossiyanin" (or "a citizen of Russia") in an attempt to shift the country's focus from nationality to citizenship. Just like U.S. citizens view themselves as "Americans" regardless of their ethnic affiliation, Yeltsin wanted to achieve the same in Russia, which has more than 100 different ethnic groups.

The inherent problem with the concept of "defending the rights of ethnic Russians" is that nationalists have always had difficulty defining what an "ethnic Russian" is. Even Rogozin has admitted that there is no such thing as a "pure Russian," particularly given the 260 years that the Russia was under the Tatar Yoke.

"Scratch any 'Russian,'" as the saying goes, "and you will find a Tatar."

A more liberal definition of a "Russian" is any Russian citizen for whom Russian culture and values are defining features of their lifestyle and world outlook. This is why Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky are "Russian poets" despite their Jewish heritage, and why citizens with un-Russian names like Rozenbaum, Okudzhava or Khachaturyan, for example, can also be considered "Russian" in this broader context.

The danger for Russia, however, goes far beyond Zyuganov's crude proposals. The entire nationalist agenda of Russia's leading politicians, including the state sponsorship of chauvinism and intolerance toward minorities, can easily lead to more violence against minorities.

It could also threaten Russia's territorial integrity. After all, the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be traced to February 1988, when the Sumgait massacre in Soviet Azerbaijan broke out. The violence and independence movements quickly spread to Armenia, Georgia, the Baltic states and other republics. This instability, in turn, led to the August 1991 failed putsch and the Soviet collapse four months later.

If the nationalist politicians continue their fight for Russians' rights, they could get more than they bargained for. "Russia for Russians" may be a popular slogan in Moscow and other large cities — 43 percent of those surveyed support the slogan, according to a January Levada poll — but this may also ultimately mean a Russia without the North Caucasus, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and other ethnic republics. Even Siberia could be a problem. In the 2010 national census, many residents of Siberia entered "Siberian" as their nationality, underscoring their alienation from Moscow.

The Soviet Union lost nearly half of its territory and population when it collapsed in 1991. Do the nationalists really want an encore of this tragedy?

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/06/leave-nationality-out-of-the-passport-a9993