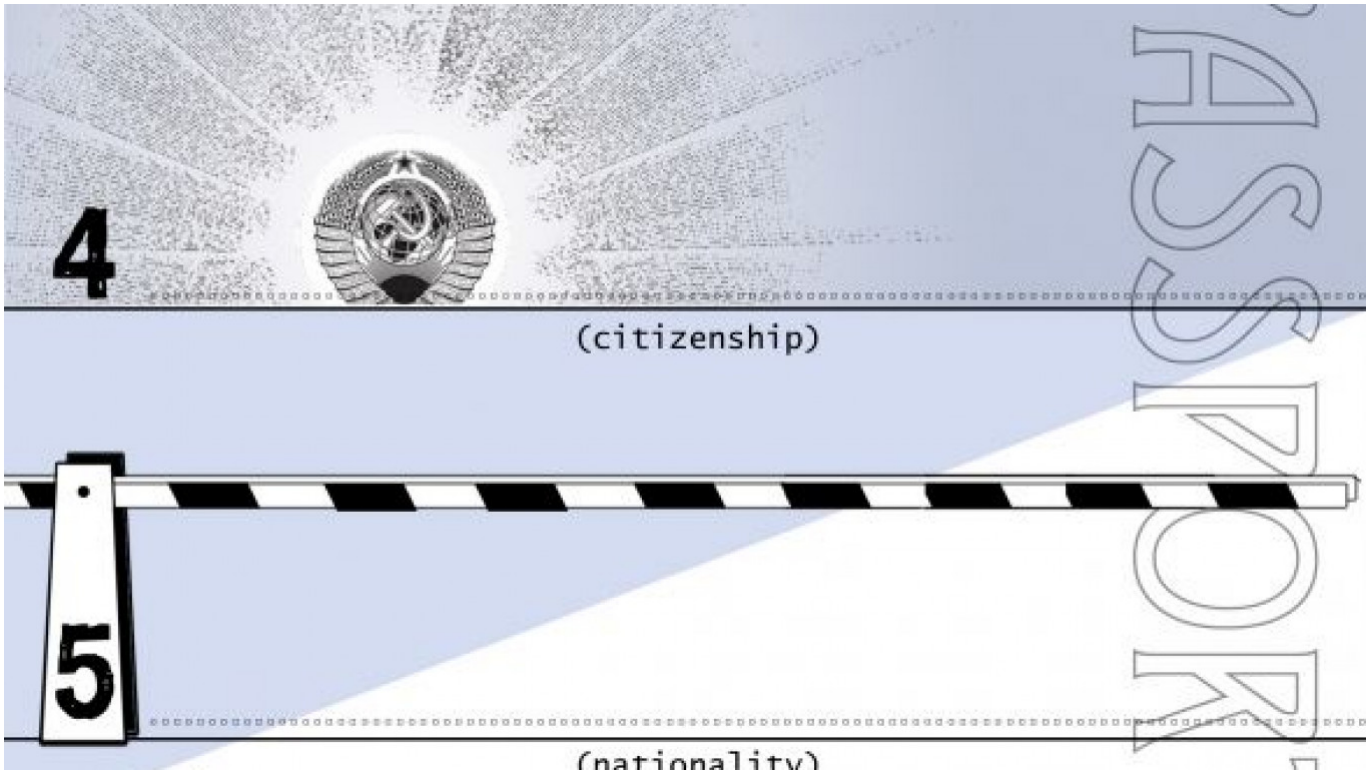
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Returning Nationality to Passports Is a Bad Idea

By Georgy Bovt

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According to a survey published last week by the Public Chamber, 54 percent of ethnic Russians would like to stipulate on Russian passports a citizen's "nationality," or ethnic origin, as was the practice during Soviet times. At the same time, 34 percent of Russians admitted that they feel "denigrated." Both of these results confirm what observers have been asserting for some time — that Russian nationalism is on the rise.

Nostalgia for practically any symbol, rule or tradition from the bygone Soviet period is also growing. Not only has a new reverence for the country's "glorious Soviet past" strongly permeated official state propaganda and found its way into countless television miniseries, movies and political speeches, but it now seems to have become a permanent fixture in the its psyche.

The drive to once again include citizens'

nationality
in Russian
passports will
only add fuel
to the fire
of Russian
nationalists.

Russians under 25 have no recollection of the Soviet period and, owing to the degradation of the education system, they lack sufficient knowledge to evaluate that period objectively and critically. As a result, they generally think of that period as a "golden age" of superpower greatness, when the country was at the height of its power and influence. One unexpected side effect of this campaign is that it engenders an inferiority complex by suggesting that Russia today has little to be proud of in comparison with Soviet greatness. At the same time, the conviction that many Russians hold that their rights have been "impinged upon" by non-Russians is actually a small manifestation of larger social discontent: a reaction to the poor performance by government, economic hardships and the lack of legal protection in the absence of an effective judicial system.

Both politicians and legislators are trying to borrow whatever they can from the Soviet past without concern for how it can be applied to current conditions. It seems that the authorities are bent on resurrecting the spirit of the Soviet Union. In place of socialism and communist ideology, leaders have created a strange brew of conservative patriotism, Russian Orthodox Christianity and anti-Western sentiment.

The poll regarding the inclusion of citizens' nationality on passports was clearly a trial balloon to learn how society and the authorities would react.

The rigid Soviet passport system was first introduced in 1932, although for many years certain people, such as farmers who had been driven onto collective farms, were not issued a passport at all. Following the death of Josef Stalin, the authorities began issuing passports to all citizens. The nationalities line was introduced in 1974. Before that, it was also necessary to indicate "ethnic origin," but then along with "social status" — laborer, office worker, dependent, etc.

By law, anyone of mixed parentage could decide which ethnic origin to list when receiving their first official passport at age 16. In practice, however, especially prior to the 1970s, the passport office made that decision without even consulting the parents. And once a person's ethnic origin was decided, it was nearly impossible to change. The rule was relaxed a bit in the 1970s, and people could decide their ethnic origin themselves, choosing from among the 120 or so official ethnicities recognized by the Soviet authorities.

In practice, though, people often played it safe by simply listing "Russian." This was especially useful for individuals belonging to "suspect" ethnicities such as Crimean Tatars or, in the 1940s, Chechens. When the government became almost officially anti-Semitic as part of its campaign "against cosmopolitanism" in the early 1950s, Jews were added to the "suspect" category. The nationalities entry in the passport helped authorities bar Jews from certain types of work and from entering certain academic programs in universities.

What's more, employers looked not only at the applicant's ethnicity on his passport, but also examined the ethnicity of close family members. If a person was one fourth Jewish or had Jewish relatives, he may also have been placed in the "suspect" category in certain cases. In addition, Jews were rarely allowed to travel abroad out of fear that they might never return.

Near the end of the Soviet period, the official state policy shifted slightly away from ethnic identification, although the nationalities entry remained in Soviet passports. The Kremlin tried to create a "Soviet identity" in place of the categorization of citizens based on nationality, but that attempt failed miserably. In fact, the Soviet Union collapsed because of the rapid growth in nationalism, including the nationalism of the local ruling elite.

Now, many Russians are trying to go back to the Soviet experience, this time sugarcoating nationalism with the idea that "the Russian people are oppressed." Their argument is that the constitutions of various ethnic regions within the Russian Federation — such as that of the Tatars in Tatarstan and the Yakuts in the republic of Sakha — make mention of the special role played by these ethnic groups. Many Russian nationalists want to include the same provision for ethnic Russians in the Russian Constitution.

For now, Russian authorities remain wary of such proposals. Konstantin Romodanovsky, head of the Federal Migration Service that issues passports, has rejected the ideas of including ethnic origin on passports. But official propaganda continues flirting with imperialist ideas, Russian Orthodoxy as a synonym for nationalism and praise of the Soviet past. The danger is that such "patriotic" games with nationalist overtones can get out of control. What's more, a number of Russia's ethnic regions are increasingly becoming strong nationalist enclaves. This is especially true of regions with predominately Islamic populations. If this process goes unchecked, it will only add fuel to the fire of Russian nationalism.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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