



Title: Civic Engagement, Mandatory Citizenship, and Post-Soviet Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Vancouver, Canada

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Research Question:

The 2006 Canadian census reported that 92,360 people in British Columbia identified their “ethnic origin” as Russian. Despite the numbers, this group has not mobilized to bring about improvements in such pressing areas as the recognition of credentials or access to affordable education. This ethnographic project explores the conundrum of the relative lack of political mobilization and civic engagement among recent immigrants arriving from the former Soviet Union to Vancouver, Canada. The research sought to answer three related questions: How do immigrants who share a language and sociopolitical history, but not necessarily ethnic belonging, interact in their new country of Canada? What are the spaces, institutions, and cultural organizations that draw people together or create new forms of division? Finally, what mechanisms could foster a greater sense of civic engagement among immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in the Greater Vancouver area?

Importance:

This project directly addressed a federal policy research priority: to promote citizenship and social, cultural, and civic integration in Canada. Drawing on ethnographic research and qualitative interviews, the research examines the range of ways in which a Russian-speaking community does exist in Vancouver, and considers the points of intersection, which could be key for building a stronger sense of community among Russian speakers. The research also identifies some of the divisions within the community, including some shaped by a shared experience of Soviet civil society, and points to areas that demand attention for policy aimed at improving civic engagement among new immigrants.

Research Findings:

The two primary research findings are: first, Canadian policies aimed at civic engagement in ethnic communities sit uncomfortably with recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union; and, second, civic engagement demands a careful assessment of the ways apparently homogeneous groups consist of multiple communities with defined spaces of interaction, potentially for “civic” engagement.

Implications:

In order to address immigrant concerns around recognition of degrees and professional experience, it is necessary to pay attention to the ways in which people are forging community, not always in a single ethnically defined group, but sometimes according to other shared histories and concerns.