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

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# Metropolis British Columbia

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# **METROPOLIS BRITISH COLUMBIA**

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## **Working Paper Series**

### **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, MANDATORY CITIZENSHIP, AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN-SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS IN VANCOUVER, CANADA**

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## PREFACE

This project has taken shape over nearly three years with financial support from Metropolis BC. Irina Jilina, head of the Vancouver based Russian-Canadian Cultural Association, generously agreed to act as the NGO sponsor of the project. Irina Bochkarova, at the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, kindly suggested important contacts early on in the research. I could not have conducted the research without the invaluable insights provided by Raya Ostrogolow and her wide-ranging connections to Russian speakers in Vancouver. At her invitation, I often took part in relevant events—from a turn-out-the vote conversation with Gregor Robertson held at a Russian deli to a Roma/Gypsy music performance heavily attended by Vancouverites of Slavic origin to a Russian disco night—that made me aware of the vibrant, if not centralized, nature of this community. My research assistants for this project, Elena Yugai, Maria Beliaeva, and Ekaterina Verzilova, provided essential support in making contacts in the community, conducting interviews, and transcribing hours of taped interviews. Maria Beliaeva also made important contributions in the preliminary analysis and write-up of the data.

I am most grateful to those study participants who were able to take time out of their busy lives to take part in interviews. In some cases, this meant setting aside demands of work, and in many cases, this meant juggling schedules around family and community commitments. From the perspective of the research, these were invaluable conversations; moreover, I enjoyed getting to know a few people who self-identify in one way or another with “Russian-speaking” Vancouver. I am humbled by the challenges faced by people leaving the former Soviet Union for Canada, and very impressed by the lives many people have built for themselves.

While the interpretations presented in this working paper are my own, I hope those who took part in the research will consider my analysis to resonate, at least in some way, with their accounts of Russian-speaking Vancouver. I also hope the findings will be of use to those seeking to better understand the current state of civic engagement in this community, and the ways shifts in policy can make a difference for Russian-speaking Vancouverites.

The range of backgrounds among those interviewed posed a challenge to terminology. I have chosen to refer to “Russian-speaking” Vancouver as the focus of this research for several reasons. The group of people among whom the research was conducted (Russian-speaking immigrants who arrived in Canada in the last 20 years) sometimes identify as “post-Soviet” and sometimes do not. Many people are not ethnically Russian, and yet speak Russian and identify with Russia as a homeland. Others are ethnically Russian but migrated from Central Asia. Still others, for instance from Latvia, identify as Russian and Latvian, but speak Russian. Language (i.e. being Russian-speaking) and immigrant wave (i.e. arrived in Canada since 1998) were the primary criteria for recruiting participants for the study. No matter how people self-identify, all participants use Russian as a lingua franca and, at least sometimes, identify as Russian-speaking.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of work exploring how people in diaspora envision a future grounded in a range of transnational connections, and often a sense of community, spanning a range of locations (Ong 1999; Fournon and Glick Schiller 2001; Rouse 2002; Clifford 1994). In this literature, transnational connections are portrayed in unproblematic terms suggesting that people who are outside their countries of birth will inherently seek ties to an ethnic or re-

ligious diaspora. Here I explore how the case of a Russian-speaking diaspora in Vancouver, Canada complicates the picture of immigrants seeking links to their homeland. This research suggests that we need to pay attention to what travels in transnational movement and to how the specific receiving country may shape both relationships to transnationalism and to forms of citizenship or civic participation. While a Russian-speaking diaspora has much in common with other immigrants, here I examine some of what this group of people has to teach us about the way we understand the experience of transnationalism and its links to shifting relationships between citizens and states.

The research has several policy implications. First, recent Russian speakers' accounts of their experiences as immigrants in Canada suggest that multiculturalism sits uncomfortably with them. Not only is the idea of ethnic cohesion shown to be problematic, but also the idea of mobilization among a community of co-ethnics is not well received. In order to address common immigrant concerns around recognition of degrees and professional experience, or government concerns with immigrant civic engagement, it is necessary to pay attention to the divergent ways that Russian speakers embrace being Canadian. They tend to have diverse understandings of "community," sporadic and generally tentative commitment to belonging to any one group, and anxieties around political participation that might be demanded of them as a group.

## MODELS OF CITIZENSHIP, MULTICULTURALISM AND POST-SOVIET MIGRANTS

While much of the literature on diaspora and transnational communities features the ways in which communities *maintain* connections transnationally (Ong 1999; Kearney 1995; Glick Schiller 2001; Rouse 2002), here I am also interested in the disconnections. Why is it that some migration streams are

not about transnational connection, while others (Haitian, Mainland Chinese, or Filipino, for instance) seem to feature this (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001; Ong 1999; Pratt 2008)? What is it about the community of people on the move from the former Soviet Union that appears to feature *disconnection*, *distanting*, and *fragmentation*, despite energetic efforts on the part of a number of people to create possibilities for connection, political mobilization, and community? How does the case of post-Soviet migrants contribute to understanding challenges to multiculturalism and immigrant civic engagement in Canada?

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted over a two-year period (2008-2009 and 2010-2011) in Vancouver, BC, in this paper I examine what understandings about citizenship travel along with people on the move and how these fit with dominant models of state and society that circulate in Canada today. One of the core ideas that has “traveled” along with post-Soviet/late Soviet migrants revolves around what type of relationship should exist between citizens and the state. These ideas, in turn, circulate today within the broader context of contemporary Canadian understandings of citizenship.

The relationship between citizens and the state in Canada has taken a particular slant in the past 20 years or so as Canada has prided itself in creating a “multicultural” society. Those writing about models of citizenship in Canada (i.e., Bloemraad 2007: 61-62; Kymlicka 1995) write of “multicultural citizenship” in contrast to “ethnic” or “civic” citizenship. While ethnic citizenship models only allow *jus sanguinis*, or “blood”, ways of figuring citizenry (as in Japan), models of “civic” citizenship, it is argued, err in the other direction since they assume that a person’s primary attachment to a country is “political rather than ethnic or cultural” (Bloemraad 2007: 60). With a “civic” model of citizenship there is an assumed assimilation process; while this model is based

on a foundation of liberal equality, it in fact has some issues, which a model of “multicultural” citizenship seeks to address.

The model of multicultural citizenship, which emerged in Canada in the late 1990s, challenges classic liberal models for citizenship through a different understanding of accommodation and immigrant incorporation. A policy of multiculturalism in Canada operates on the premise that public institutions are not culturally neutral; given this, it is very likely that receiving society principles will be imposed on immigrants in the process of immigrant incorporation. Instead, under a model of multiculturalism, the aim is explicit political recognition of cultural minorities and accommodation of some of their practices. For instance, sociologist Irene Bloemraad argues that multiculturalism policies “facilitate immigrants’ legal and participatory citizenship”, and that “ties based on ethnicity are surely among the strongest and most deeply felt,” (p.65); . . . she continues, “shared origins, similar migration experiences, common language, cultural habits, dress, and food all create a sense of common identity and potential collective mobilization . . . .” For immigrants who have arrived from the former Soviet Union, this is exactly where the rub lies.

Post-Soviet migrants have shared origins, many common migration experiences, a common language, common appreciations for foods that were widely available in the former Soviet Union, and sometimes a common migration trajectory. However, there is virtually no collective Russian-speaking mobilization. My research in Vancouver, Canada suggests that the ideas that have traveled with many post-Soviet migrants position them to value not only a “politics free” life in Canada, but a life where they are not defined by “*national’nost*,” what could be glossed as ethnicity (Matthews 1993).<sup>1</sup> As one case worker seeking to assist Russian speakers in Vancouver explained, “There are lots of common challenges, for instance, getting academic cre-

dentials recognized, but recent Russian-speaking immigrants [in contrast to others] are really hesitant to mobilize, let alone seek assistance." The model of citizen/state relationships immigrants have inherited from their experience in the former Soviet Union widely positions them to avoid being framed as citizens who might benefit from social services, or citizens who might mobilize by drawing on a collective past that could fit into a multicultural present.

Like many diasporic subjects, Russian-speaking immigrants are linked to a homeland through a circulation of money, goods, information, and services. Also like many diasporas, Russian-speaking diasporas have proven to be fractured with fissures running along ethnic, religious, political, and class lines (see also, Goldring and Krishnamurti 2007; Parreñas 2001). It is striking, however, that the Russian-speaking community in Vancouver exhibits some patterns of disjuncture that are very similar to those of Russian speakers in other cosmopolitan spaces including London, Amsterdam, New York, Toronto, and San Francisco (Markowitz 2003; Kopnina 2005; Gold 1996; Remennick 2007). In examining migration stories among Russian-speaking immigrants in Vancouver, distinct narratives on the obligations of a state and the disappointments of migration punctuate these accounts. As Fran Markowitz found among Jewish Russians in New York, interviewees in Vancouver shared a dislike for bureaucracy and suspicion of institutions (1993: xii). My research suggests that for Russian speakers in Vancouver this amounts to a lack of political action and a reluctance to identify common causes among recent immigrants. The experience of state power as something tangible and potentially dangerous (either crumbling in the Soviet Union of the early 1990s, or resolute and impenetrable under Putin's rule of the late 1990s and beyond) shapes attitudes toward state power. This research suggests that we need to pay more attention to the cultural experience of the state among recent migrants.

## METHODS

Based on ethnographic research conducted among Russian-speaking immigrants in Vancouver who arrived in Canada in the last 20 years, this working paper examines how post-Soviet understandings of citizenship play out as people encounter the policies of incorporation in Canada. The research for this project began in the spring of 2008 and extended through winter 2009; after a brief hiatus, the research again extended from summer 2010 through winter 2011. The methods employed over the nearly 30 months in which this ethnographic research was conducted include a literature review, media analysis, expert interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation, as described below.

1. The literature review considered histories of Russian-speaking migration generally, with a focus on migration out of the former Soviet Union since the early 1990s, and trajectories into Canada.
2. Media analysis involved several components, including:
  - \* Surveying major topics covered, events announced, audience, and types of advertisements in four Greater Vancouver Russian language newspapers or magazines. Two newspapers, *Vankuver i My* (Vancouver and Us), published bimonthly since 1998, and *Vancouver Express*, published weekly since 2004, are widely available in Russian delis, at least seven of which are located throughout Vancouver. The magazine *Kaleidoskope* is published monthly and is less widely circulated. Finally, the newspaper *Eurasian Times*, which has a broader audience than just Russian speakers, is published monthly and is distributed throughout businesses in the Lower Mainland, especially on the Eastside of Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby, and Coquitlam.

\* Identifying major Vancouver-based Russian-language websites and social media sites (such as [www.odnoklassniki.ru](http://www.odnoklassniki.ru) and [www.Mirtesen.ru](http://www.Mirtesen.ru)) frequently accessed by Russian speakers. Two significant local sites are [www.Arbetov.com](http://www.Arbetov.com) and [www.Vancouverovka.com](http://www.Vancouverovka.com). Both of these are sponsored by local Vancouver businessmen and provide forms of networking; interviewees spoke of consulting the Arbetov site in particular for seeking employment, while the Vancouverovka site provides a local and national news digest translated into Russian.

\* Surveying Russian language television and radio shows in Vancouver and providing an overview of types of programming, issues covered, and target audiences. There are currently three Russian-language radio shows, each airing for about one hour per week: *Ruski Chas* (Russian Hour, aired on 93.1FM); *Nasha Volna* (Our Wave, aired on 101.9FM and 90.1FM) and *Russkii Golos* (Russian Voice, aired on 96.1FM). There are also two Russian-language television programs, United Voices and United Vibe, which air weekly on Shaw's Multicultural Channel 109.

3. Participant observation, the method at the center of ethnographic research (DeWalt 2002), was conducted in a wide range of locations. Our research team attended church services where Russian speakers are concentrated, frequented "Russian" delis where Russian speakers shop, and took part in a wide range of community events, such as Easter and Christmas celebrations, piano recitals, and Russian-language theater productions. In addition, we also attended "Russian" club and disco nights advertised widely in the community newspapers, hung out in lounge areas of language schools where Russian speakers study, and visited beauty salons popular with Russian speakers.

4. Two types of interviews were conducted: one set involved specific people in the community, and another larger set focused on a wide range of people who answered our call for participants. The expert interviews were conducted at places of work, such as delis, or churches. The interviews with those answering our broad call for participants were mostly conducted at the Central Branch of the Vancouver Public Library, with two of them also conducted in rooms reserved in UBC libraries. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by one of three research assistants. Copies of these transcripts were provided to participants for their review.
- \* Ten expert interviews were conducted with key people in the community, including the owners of five "Russian" delis, church leaders, and the heads of cultural organizations. Of the ten, three interviewees were women and seven men. While they were all "Russian speaking", one of them migrated from Ukraine, one from Georgia, three from Israel, and before that from Ukraine; five of them migrated from different cities in Russia. Interviewees ranged from mid-30s to mid-60s in age, with most respondents over 50.
- \* Twenty-five people participated in twelve focus groups, ranging from two to five people each. Participants were recruited through two primary means. First, at the Russian-speaking delis we hung posters describing the study and inviting participants to contact us. Second, we distributed this same poster via an electronic list-serve maintained by a community center with a Russian-speaking base of support. About equal numbers of participants contacted us as a result of each of these efforts. Of the twenty-five people participating, twenty of them were women.

Those interviewed for this project arrived from a wide range of former Soviet locations, including Estonia, Latvia, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg), as well as from Ukraine (including via Israel), and

most of them have lived in Vancouver for 10 to 15 years, with three people arriving only 5 years ago, and two people arriving nearly 20 years ago. The interviewees are quite diverse in terms of age, with six of them under 25, three of them 25-35, nine of them 35-50, four of them 50-65, and three of them in their 70s. Overall interviewees had a high level of education, ranging from PhDs in biology and mathematics, to university degrees in economics, political science, engineering, Russian language and literature, theater, or philosophy; although two younger interviewees were also taking community college courses at the time of the interview. Most had from 4 to 20 years of work experience prior to immigration, including as a university researcher, school director, multinational business staff, bank personnel, seamstress, engineer, children's librarian, helicopter pilot, actor, and English interpreter. All but two of the interviewees no longer work along the lines of their former profession. All of them speak Russian fluently, and most consider it their native language. Very few of them return regularly to visit with relatives, but most have had at least one visit home since their arrival in Canada. All maintain regular contact with home, either via Skype or phone calls, most often with close relatives and friends who remain there.

## BACKGROUND

The growing Russian population in Vancouver exists in the broader context of a multi-cultural Greater Vancouver, where since 2008 more than 50 percent of the residents speak English as a second language, and the largest ethnic groups are Chinese and Indian (mostly Punjabi).<sup>2</sup> While the Russian-speaking segment of the Vancouver population is comparatively small, focusing on it sheds light on broader questions about citizenship and discussions of multiculturalism in Canada. Interestingly, while the 2006 Canadian census

counted 47,935 residents in the Greater Vancouver Regional District as ethnic Russians, it also noted that only a quarter of these people identified Russian as their mother tongue.<sup>3</sup>

Russian-speaking Vancouver raises two interesting issues. First, it appears that people who may not speak Russian fluently, and so have some distance from the country of Russia, still identify with being Russian. Second, only one-quarter of those identifying with Russian heritage speak Russian as a “native” language, so a wide range of challenges around community building emerges. In the course of this research people frequently quipped: “There is no community!” Scholars have identified a common sentiment among recent Russian immigrants in London, Amsterdam, and New York (Kopnina 2007; Markowitz 2003). This “invisible” group of people, prompting one scholar to term it a “Community in spite of itself” (Markowitz 2003), shares a range of characteristics that include language, social history, geography, and sometimes migration trajectory.

Recent scholarship on Russian-speaking migration into North America is growing, but all of the substantial research concentrates on the United States (i.e., Gold 1996; Markowitz 2003; Shasha and Shron 2002). Within Canada, the work that does exist has focused on Toronto, and gives particular attention to the wave of Jewish migration out of the Soviet Union (Remennick 2007; Anisef et al. 2005; Brym 2001).<sup>4</sup> In an earlier era there were two widely distributed publications dedicated to Russian-speaking immigrants in Canada, both existing for nearly 30 years, until the early 1970s; there is also one monograph on the same topic published in Russian (Okulevich 1952).<sup>5</sup> Research conducted in British Columbia, and specifically Vancouver, is virtually nonexistent, except for a notable work on the history of Doukhobor settlement in British Columbia (Hartwick 1993).<sup>6</sup> As the 2006 census indicates,

having “Russian” heritage clearly has meaning for many people, and these connections to a Russian-speaking community are enacted in different ways by recent immigrants.

While a large number of people identify as “Russian” or having “Russian” heritage, how can one explain the lack of connection so widely voiced by Russian speakers in Vancouver and beyond? Part of the answer lies in the role of “Russianness” for different people. Many Russian speakers regard Russian identity as an ethnic identity, while others, like Belarusians or Moldovans sometimes, choose to self-identify as Russian because it is a simpler way of representing themselves to a wider, non-Russian-speaking populace of Vancouver. Still, others maintain an attachment to a certain former Soviet identity and signify this attachment, in part, through the celebration of Soviet holidays that have come to have meaning for them. These include: the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (International Women’s Day), New Years (January 1), and Russian Orthodox Christmas (January 7). Others find emphasizing the idea of a shared language is a way of grounding their children in a sense of identity, and rather than call it “Soviet”, this identity is combined with a linguistic identity and marks them as “Russian”.

The ethnographic research forming the basis of this project has sought to answer a wide range of questions, including: 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 in this linguistic community? In what ways are “transnational” practices crucial to this community? And if being linked transnationally is important, how does this shape connection to civic connection within Canada? In the course of the research I have been struck by the widespread ambivalence

people have toward the “Russian” community. On the one hand, most want (or wanted) their children to maintain a sense of Russian or Russian-language identity, but on the other hand many insist that they do not seek to connect with people from the former Soviet Union.

*Arrivals: From Refugees to Kolbasnaia Emigratsiia*

One of the most prevalent divisions within the Russian-speaking population is marked by when they departed from Russia or the former Soviet Union. There have been a range of paradigms proposed for the identification of Russian migration streams over the years (Vishnevsky and Zayonchkovskaya 1994; Shasha and Shron 2002; Kopnina 2005). For instance, in Anna Kopnina’s East to West Migration, a study of the Russian communities in London and Amsterdam, she identifies four “waves” of emigration from Russia into, predominantly, North America and Western Europe, culminating in a wave of migrants following the fall of the Soviet Union in the winter of 1991. The first wave, otherwise termed “White Immigration”, consisted of those fleeing the onset of Communist power with the 1917 Revolution in Russia. This wave was defined by aristocratic families, political activists, and generally well-educated immigrants, although there were also more working class and rural immigrants as well.<sup>7</sup> The second wave of emigration prompted by wartime border shifts and Stalinist terror, involved predominantly ethnic Germans, as well as some Russians pressed into forced labour in Germany during the war and fearing return to their motherland (Kopnina 2005: 25). The third wave occurred in the 1970s and early to mid-1980s, with a period of relaxation between the East and the West, and accords between the Soviet Union and the United States allowing Jewish Russians to leave for Israel; at this height of Russian outmigration, it is estimated that as many as 300,000 people emigrated.<sup>8</sup> This third

wave of migrants was in essence a highly educated minority comprised mostly of Jews, but also of Volga Germans and Armenians, among others.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to earlier migration out of this region, the fourth wave of migration (mid-1980s to early 1990s) often identified by scholars was not characterized by any kind of overarching ethnic or political sentiment but, instead, by economic motivation. As one church leader in Vancouver reflected, "They have other interests. . . . When people came here in 1917, they were exiled from their country forever. They didn't come to Canada because they wanted to but because back there they stared death in the face. When they came here they tried to preserve a Russian lifestyle. [...] Now people come for money, careers, a better life." A fifth wave of immigrants leaving after the dissolution of the USSR can be identified; Russian-speaking immigrants themselves often call this wave the "*kolbasnaia emigratsiia*" or salami migration to point to economics as the motivating factor for this migration (this phrase is also sometimes applied to the fourth wave, departing just before and after the fall of the Soviet Union). Some scholars also discuss the most recent wave of migration out of the former Soviet Union in terms of a wave of ambitious young people frustrated by a country lacking stability and prospects for their future (Oushakine 2001: 294).<sup>10</sup> For instance, Marina, who recently arrived in Vancouver after she received her Master's degree in Mathematics with honours from the Urals State University, explained:

It's always the same. You study hard, you get good grades. Then you get a diploma with honours and everyone's like, "Oh Marinochka, so clever, what a good girl!" But when it comes to getting a job... Nothing. Maybe, "We can get you in as an entry-level accountant, but only if you're lucky!"<sup>11</sup>

Clearly depending on generation, gender, place of origin, and migration wave there are a range of motivations which compel Russian speakers to immigrate to Canada.

## CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATION

The growing Russian-speaking population in Vancouver reflects these different waves of migration and exists in the broader context of a multicultural city. In general, interviewees can be grouped according to two waves of migration: pre-1998 and post-1998. Those who arrived prior to the mid-1990s generally identify to one degree or another as Jewish, tend to have come from urban settings in either Ukraine or Russia, and have a high level of post-secondary and graduate level education.<sup>12</sup> Those who arrived after the mid-1990s have a more varied background, but rarely arrived in connection to a Jewish identity. They have a more diverse class and professional background, and prior to immigrating often owned small businesses, worked for multinational companies, or were self-employed.

Interviewees widely reflected on the lack of community among Russian speakers and some proposed reasons for this. For instance, one interviewee pointed to what was seen as a unique temperament of people from the former Soviet Union, saying, "There are various types of collectives, and there's a certain trait . . . among Russians and Ukrainians—they beat down their own, and if he is better than you, then you should bring him down to your level."<sup>13</sup> This person and several others emphasized how one person excelling in the community of Russian speakers tended to rankle others who preferred that everyone equally struggle. As another interviewee explained:

You know, it is just a Russian-speaking mentality. . . . There is an anecdote about this, "When an American hears that his neighbour's house is worth

1 million dollars, he decides to build himself one worth 1.5 million. When a Russian hears that his neighbour's house is worth 1 million, he says, 'I'm going to burn it down!'" This is, of course, an anecdote, but there is some truth in this. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to this unfavourable depiction of "Russian" character, a few interviewees also reflected on the way communities functioned back in their home communities. One woman recounted how back in Uzbekistan,

"[Imagine how it was]. . .if your mother was back from the hospital, the neighbours next door see her walking with difficulty and go to help her take the garbage out or to bring her a meal. People there are so generous—they say, 'Back in the village I have a grandmother, I will treat you just like my grandma.' That is a community. Here, not so much. People are not connected; they are too busy working. . .

Other interviewees also commented on the ways insertion into capitalist relations shaped their experience. In particular, interviewees noted a shift in temperament *between* migration streams that was indexed by degrees of comfort with capitalist "mentality". One respondent who recently immigrated noted:

We do not know how to sell ourselves; they did not teach us that either. . . . Now, Russians—that is—Russian speakers arrive who are tenacious go-getters; they are different from us. Moreover, they are much quicker in getting settled in this life. They are no longer Soviet and they all have facility in English.<sup>15</sup>

Another woman who first arrived in 2005 noted:

Those who have lived here longer are more relaxed; they do not hurry. . . . [But] those people who just arrived aim to earn money by any means possible and take up anything offered. If they have to, they will even step on others to get ahead . . .without any regard for others, they will force their way, even though they know it is unpleasant for you.<sup>16</sup>

Immigrants who arrived nearly 20 years earlier also reflected on how the process of settling in Canada changed people. Choosing his words carefully to reflect on the differences between migration streams, one man used a Russian phrase invoking an image of a bird having its wings clipped when he explained, "We've already been shaped by the local conditions [had our wings clipped according to local demands]; a human is, after all, a social being. . . . I cannot live in society and . . . be outside of it. . . . I remember how Lenin said, 'It is not possible to live in society and be removed from it.'"<sup>17</sup>

### *Contesting the Hyphen*

As Russian-speaking immigrants aim to improve their English, seek jobs at least marginally related to their prior professions, or aspire to educational success for their children, they encounter a Canadian state that invokes the discourse of multiculturalism. They are framed as hyphenated Canadians, as Russian-Canadians, who would naturally desire to remain attached to "Russianness," even as they become grounded in a new identity as Canadian. The challenges that my interviewees discussed of being grouped together with other "Russians" irrespective of migration stream, suggests a challenge to policies of multiculturalism, at least as it is working in Canada. Interviewees often see very real differences between themselves and immigrants who came in earlier or later streams; sometimes these differences are religious, economic, or geographic, or a combination of these. They find an all-encompassing category of "Russian-speaking" as somewhat unwieldy, but use this more readily than "Soviet", a term which does not easily apply to those who arrived in Canada after the late 1990s.

Many spoke of desiring a "community" that would be supportive in finding jobs, learning English, and facing typical newcomer challenges like learning

appropriate types of affect for interacting with colleagues or socializing with “Canadians”, a term interviewees invoked in reference to Euro-Canadians or “White” Canadians, who they singled out as being at least second generation. However, they did not see this community in terms of ethnicity, as “Russian”, but simply as a collective to which they could turn. The Russian-speaking community is generally not framed as a single resource that a politics of multiculturalism would assume. As one church leader explained, “There is no organized community as such. There are separate, even I would say, private organizations, circles of common interest. But to say there is a Russian Community... I would have to say no.” Most interviewees are, nevertheless, involved in one of these “circles of common interest”—such as a Russian-speaking chess club, a Russian children’s choir, or an Evangelical church with Russian translation. As another religious leader elaborated, “We [the circles] reach out to each other, of course we do. We reach out to a common way of life we are used to, a common identity.” Paradoxically, this question of a common identity is what continues to draw Russian Vancouver together in various configurations, while also causing people to recognize the multiple webs of connection that overlap but also exist separately from a single whole, in a Venn diagram type of configuration.

### *Spaces of Engagement*

While Russian speakers widely disavowed shared spaces of engagement as a single community, there are a wide number of spaces in which Russian speakers connect with one another. These include: leisure activities, such as a men’s soccer league, chess clubs, and specific types of children’s athletics, like rhythmic gymnastics and ballet for girls; academic programs, like children’s courses in math, physics, and Russian language and literature; places for at-

tending to shared beauty and health concerns, such as a sauna (in Coquitlam) and beauty parlours catering to Russian speakers; and cultural activities, like music and theater performances, Russian literary events, and celebrations of significant holidays; and even professional gatherings, for instance, of what many referred to as the “exclusive” Russian Business Club. Some of the most frequented physical spaces include cultural centers, as well as “Russian” delis, small businesses, and churches.

### “Russian” Delis

“Russian” delis are an important site for recent immigrants to purchase familiar food, but also to locate Russian language videos and reading material, and to connect via community message boards with fellow Russian speakers. Located throughout Greater Vancouver, Russians do not always run these “Russian” delis, and they are not always simply delis. Some of these businesses are bakeries with a deli counter, or supermarkets with a deli counter, or primarily video stores with a few food items for sale. The names of these businesses include: Russian World, International Sausage House, International Deli Style, King’s Food Market, Zia’s Deli and Cafe, Yumico Catering Service, Maple Leaf Deli, Tri-City Foods, Alenka European Food, Eurofood Plus, and European Breads Bakery. As the names indicate, businesses rarely choose to mark themselves as simply “Russian” and, instead, invoke “European” or “international” images. The owners of the seven delis interviewed for this project identified with a wide range of ethnic and national backgrounds, including Russian, but also Georgian, Ukrainian, and Israeli.

The delis carry a range of foods that are reminiscent of what was available in a Soviet- era grocery store and can often still be obtained in Russia and other former Soviet countries today. The food sold at these businesses

varies widely, with the supermarket size stores able to offer a wide range of goods, mostly imported from Russia and Ukraine, but also produced domestically, both in Vancouver and across Canada. Examples of very popular items that are typically found in the delis are: homemade *pel'meni*, which in form are reminiscent of ravioli and contain either a sweet filling or a savory one of cheese, potatoes, or mushrooms; *tvoreg*, a sort of farmers' cheese which is difficult to find in chain grocery stores; and *sushki*, small unsalted, pretzel-like rounds.

In addition to food, in many cases, these businesses also carry Russian language books and videos, and they all serve as distribution points for Russian language newspapers and magazines, as well as community announcements. People post business cards and seek employment and, as several owners attested, seniors especially tend to linger in the stores and strike up conversation with people for extended periods of time. Some people clearly look to food through a lens of nostalgia, but the space itself is important as a place of actual connection. As one interviewee, Viktor, the owner of a Vancouver food establishment, reflected:

In the end, the question is this: What is a nationally defined community. . . Through what do we, essentially, view it. . . Through the intellect or through the stomach. . . Yes, the biggest groupings of Russians are the ones that happen in Tri-city, the Tri-city Store. . . But then again, they come to the store, they buy what they wanted, they leave. . . they have some sort of nostalgia for past things. . .

Viktor went on to reflect that in fact religious institutions are at least as important as food for drawing people together.

## Religious organizations

Religious practice emerged as important for community engagement in interviews and also in our analysis of print media. While only a few of the people interviewed said they regularly attend church or synagogue, many noted that these faith-based communities were critical upon their arrival in Canada. For instance, a number of Jewish respondents expressed their gratitude for the extensive support provided by the Jewish Community Center as they sought English classes, job training, or even affordable childcare. In addition, a long-established Russian Orthodox Church of the Holy Resurrection and the Russian Orthodox Holy Trinity Church (Okulevich 1952) offer an array of religious services that are particularly attended around significant holidays like Easter; these churches also offer social services, including a food kitchen in which one of our respondents assists on a weekly basis. Several interviewees mentioned friends or relatives who attended Evangelical churches, including the Slavic Evangelical Baptist Church on Windsor Street, and the All Nations Church in Richmond, and two interviewees noted how they had begun to attend the Willingdon Church when they first arrived in Vancouver and sought out a sense of community. The Willingdon Church in Burnaby is especially successful at attracting Russian-speaking congregants. Unlike other churches with smaller Russian-speaking congregations, this Mennonite-inspired one has a savvy website with information about multilingual services, job opportunities, and transportation to the church (<http://www.willingdon.org/node/232>).

### Ethnic sub-groups and connections

Another significant, yet less frequently discussed, type of engagement involves ethnic belonging. Most often, the topic of ethnicity led to comments on ethnic divisions as linked to the Soviet Union's long-standing practice of indicating "*nationality*" (*natsional'nost*) in internal passports. In some cases people explained a desire to avoid issues of ethnicity and being categorized as belonging to an ethnic group. For instance, Valery, a Georgian post-Soviet migrant living in Vancouver recalled his youth in 1960s Moscow, "We didn't look Georgian since my mother is Russian and my father Mingrelian, and Mingrelians are lighter-skinned [...people sometimes thought we were foreigners]. . . if we spoke Georgian, people would see we weren't foreigners and kick us out of the line." Immigrants pointed to such experiences as they reflected on not wanting to join groups in Vancouver that were based on ethnicity.

Despite widespread reluctance to identify in ethnic terms, there were generational tendencies for identification. For instance, interviewees with Jewish heritage who had young children when they arrived in Vancouver spoke of how important the Jewish Community Center (JCC) had been for them. They felt welcomed and included in a community, but the JCC also provided an affordable means for them to send their child to summer camp, and also have access to critical ESL classes and to professional development generally. These same interviewees explained that after the first 4-5 years in Vancouver, however, they no longer made efforts to engage with the JCC. In contrast, several interviewees who arrived in Vancouver in their early 70s recounted their ongoing reliance on the JCC, and one woman who was a Holocaust survivor expressed her appreciation for the small stipend and emotional support she receives from the JCC and their immigrant services. Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants have access to resources that non-Jewish Russian speakers

cannot access, like the subsidized summer camp that one interviewee mentioned; however, in Vancouver it appears that only those with a deep sense of being Jewish turn to the Jewish community and its resources as a space of inclusion and engagement in the long term. This sense of connection is most prevalent among older Jewish immigrants; their migration trajectories brought them via Israel to Vancouver, but they are also less integrated in diverse professional and leisure networks than younger immigrants.

Most interviewees did not voice an interest in seeking out people with similar ethnic backgrounds, from Uzbekistan or from Latvia, for instance. In most cases interviewees emphasized instead cities from which they had departed—Kharkov, or Moscow, or Tashkent—rather than the specific ethnic community with which they might identify. For people of working age, seeking out a professional community (of engineers, or teachers, or artists) or a group with common leisure interests (like Tango) was emphasized.

#### Community Organizations and Cultural Centers

As reflected in the Russian-language newspapers, a wide number of secular organizations and clubs aim to connect Russian-speaking Vancouver, and sometimes people of Russian heritage across Canada. In the summer of 2009 the Federation of Russian Canadians, an organization that has existed since the early 1930s, convened in Vancouver; they met in one of the two Russian cultural centers that exist in the city, the one that was originally bought by the Maxim Gorky Russian Workers' Club and established in 1930 near downtown Vancouver on Hastings Street (Okulevich 1952: 33). Today this hall is widely known as the "Russian Hall", and it often serves as a venue for a wide range of non-Russian-speaking community events and concerts.

A second community center revolving around Russian speakers has operated since the 1950s. The Russian Community Center, located in the heart of the neighbourhood of Kitsilano, was established by immigrants who identified more with aristocratic Russia than with the labour struggles that drew Russians to the Workers' Club in the 1930s. In an interesting twist, today it serves as an important site for cultural events and Russian language classes for a wide range of Russian-speaking immigrants. Most interviewees mentioned the Russian Community Center on Fourth Avenue as a place they seek out for their children to be exposed to Russian language and literature, and the language programs typically have a waiting list.

A range of people take part in events at the Russian Community Center, but for the most part participants are first- or second-generation immigrants. Soviet ritual culture is actively celebrated, and as one of the organizers explained, "We try to celebrate Soviet holidays - International Women's day (March 8<sup>th</sup>), Red Army Day (May 9<sup>th</sup>) , New Year's (January 1) . . . these are important to people, and they seek a place to mark holidays as they did at home." In addition to running a Saturday language school, the Center also hosts a Balalaika group and a Russian language theatre troupe under the auspices of the Palme Theater. Most interviewees expressed little interest in maintaining ties to this community center or attending the seasonal events organized there, unless they had young children, but most who raised or are raising children in Vancouver (19 people)—and even one interviewee who married a man whose family has lived on Vancouver Island for generations—at least considered having their young children attend language classes there.

In addition to formal spaces of interaction, interviewees and media sources pointed to more informal types of community interaction. For instance, there are beauty salons that Russian-speaking women from across the

Lower Mainland seek out. These provide both services sought out by Russian women and the medium for a loose network of information sharing. In these settings women exchange tips and information on everything from domestic life to careers to fashion to children, but also on the issues more related to citizenship and mobility in the form of the latest updates on Canadian immigration policy, and the best flights to and from Russia and other former Soviet countries.

Another key informal space of engagement is that of childcare and children's education. In perusing the Russian language media one can see that this goes well beyond the Russian language school run by the Russian Community Center. There are at least four Russian language preschools in the Lower Mainland. There is one private Russian language high school, as well as a wide number of programs focused on physics, math, and Russian literature. Furthermore, a wide array of clubs, including dance, gymnastics, and chess, as well as music schools advertise for participants in the Russian language newspapers. What might normally be regarded as "extracurricular" activities, are taken very seriously by Russian-speaking parents.

Interviewees pointed to the legacy of the Soviet Union where a person could not be considered well rounded and generally well educated without taking education in the arts as seriously as more academic pursuits. As Rita, a professional music teacher, recalls of the fall of the Soviet Union:

It was terrible. All this ended in a moment. Musical programmes created for children. . . We had the most elaborate programs . . . Every class was specially developed . . . there were even painting classes [created to accompany the music classes], so that children would look at pictures and hear music. All the programs were ready to teach the children. Everything was done to enhance the child's development from every side and then. . . It all ended.

Rita currently teaches music in one of the Russian afternoon music schools, but she dreams to revive the Soviet tradition where children were taught to appreciate classical music as part of a government-approved curriculum. In many ways Rita's dream is shared by others who have a certain sense of nostalgia for a form of Russian "high" culture that was promoted in schools throughout the Soviet Union. These reflections are not just nostalgic, however. They also point to the expectations many immigrants have of a state-citizen relationship where the state enables the holistic development of human beings and takes an investment in children's education seriously. Rita's reflections on how "it all ended" could also be seen as a lamentation about the relative retraction of state support for the arts in contemporary Uzbekistan, but also as an implicit critique of Canada's relatively weak support for public education, including in the arts.

#### *Webs of Connection and Memories of Mandatory Engagement*

"I have a dream," shares Viktor, a prominent entrepreneur and founder of two major Russian-language organizations in Vancouver, "I want to build a Russian House, something that will make people proud of their heritage, proud of being Russian. [...] Here, the Chinese, the Koreans, the Vietnamese, they all have their identity, but not Russians. I would like to create something so people feel proud of who they are."

Accounts by self-appointed community leaders like Viktor to unite all of Russian Vancouver around an idea of cultural pride and heritage have been largely unsuccessful in recent decades. However, in the past, large numbers of Russians in Vancouver, and British Columbia more widely, *were* united, specifically around common efforts to improve labour conditions. For instance, from the 1930s, the earliest years of large-scale Russian immigration to

Canada, Russian labour halls thrived across the country. By 1934 there were 47 branches of the Maxim Gorky Russian Workers and Farmers' Clubs, and Vancouver had a thriving club as well (Okulevich 1952:120). Stan Levkovich, the current president of the Federation of Russian Canadians (FRC), notes that historically when Russian immigrants arrived in Canada they were frequently illiterate. As he explains, "Many learned literacy and culture within the FRC and its prior organization, the Maxim Gorky Russian Workers and Farmers Clubs. They also faced a life in Canada that was very different from the lives faced by immigrants today and were very politically active (Personal communication, August 31, 2009)." In many ways today there is less common ground among immigrant Russian speakers than there was in the past, or rather there are multiple ways in which this community is divided.

Many of the post-Soviet immigrants interviewed said they were reluctant to take part in any type of structured political or social organisation or event. This reaction could be linked to the shared memory of a Soviet childhood where participation in organised social clubs and factions such as the *Octoberists*, the *Pioneers*, and the *Komsomol* was strongly encouraged. As Petr, a self-employed technology consultant who left Moscow in the early 1990s explained:

When you grow up in an environment where, from the youngest age, you are told you must conform... Wear the same uniform, sing the same songs, read the same books, go to the same summer camps where every morning you wake up at the sound of the trumpet and march all day at the sound of a drum, the last thing you want to do when arriving in a new country is join another faction where someone will tell you and others what to do.

Others, however, emphasized a more apolitical stance. As one young woman from Novosibirsk noted, "I came here to become part of Canada; for now I want to learn everything about this place so I don't really need any interaction in Russian beyond my family. Maybe once I'm settled down here I

will look for this." A middle-aged woman from Odessa who recently obtained her Canadian citizenship stated, "I don't make friends by nationality . . . if I find someone interesting, someone I want to talk to, I will. I don't care what nationality or ethnicity they are. Maybe that's why [...] I don't participate in any specifically Russian activities, I don't want to limit myself."

## CONCLUSION

These accounts turn our attention away from state perspectives on migration and toward the wide range of meanings immigrants may attach to their migration experiences, including antipathy toward former government structures and desire for incorporation within a new set of social contracts. While this is a preliminary work on Russian-speaking immigrant experiences of migration, it points to the widespread negotiation in transnational communities and of new understandings of citizen-state relationships. It just may be that Russian-speaking Vancouver is in fact a quintessentially "multicultural" group, or it may be that the specific reaction of Russian speakers to "multiculturalism" points to some of the issues around an ideal that seems to require people to embrace ethnic identity when this may be only one of many ways, or even a relatively unimportant way, in which they define themselves. For many Russian speakers the ideal of multiculturalism appears to harken back to a long-standing reality in the former Soviet Union; while one's ethnic identity was just part of the story of anyone's identity, in official interactions, like when obtaining a passport or seeking access to education, it became reified and given priority in troubling ways where other aspects of identity—regional, historical, religious, class, or even generation—automatically became second order. While Russian-speaking Vancouver could be seen as a "community in spite of itself", to borrow from Markowitz (2003), it is a community with mas-

sive areas of divergence due to waves of migration and generational, religious, political, and economic differences, among others. Perhaps having a “homeland” (the Soviet Union) that no longer exists is one of the biggest challenges for this group to mobilize as a distinct group (Laitin 1995). However, Russian language and a deep skepticism about bureaucracy, including in regard to policies that would have immigrants celebrate diversity, are common points of intersection for this community.

With the transnational mobility of Russian speakers, a core idea of Canadian society, namely multiculturalism, comes under scrutiny. Despite claims to the contrary, shared origins, a common language, and common cultural practices, may be insufficient to lead to mobilization as a new immigrant group, especially when a “homeland” no longer exists. Furthermore, for some the “cultural” or “ethnic” points of connection may hinder people in their quest for a place where they can fulfill their dreams for citizenship and inclusion in a new society. Understandings of citizenship practices are viewed through frameworks that travel along with newly mobile communities, and policies seeking to promote civic engagement among new immigrants need to take into account the variable meanings associated with citizenship and forms of belonging other than ethnic identity which are emerging in transnational communities.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 All terms in Russian are in italics.
- 2 According to the last census (2006), those of Chinese origin and those of Indian origin numbered, respectively, nearly 402,000 and 182,000 people (Canada Census 2006).
- 3 Only 12,030 respondents to the 2001 Census identified Russian as their mother tongue; respondents identified as “Russian” but did not necessarily speak Russian as a native language. Some may speak English (2<sup>nd</sup> generation), or other languages of the former Soviet Union as their primary, “native” language (Census Canada 2001: <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/growth/keyfacts/bymoth.htm> ; Census Canada 2006: <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/growth/keyfacts/ethnic3.htm> ; accessed 13-06-08). One settlement services officer estimated that by 2009 there were closer to 70,000 Russian-speaking immigrants in the GVRD.
- 4 There is also a large body of work dedicated to Ukrainians in Canada, and one could argue that it is related. However, there is very little interaction between these two diverse communities. Also, most immigrants who identify as Russian-speaking, even if they speak Ukrainian as well, do not seek out community among the Ukrainian groups. These are more typically organized by and attended by second, third, and fourth generation Ukrainian-Canadians. In a related way, these organizations are less familiar with the systems of meaning that recent immigrants from the former Soviet countries tend to recognize.
- 5 I am indebted to Stan Linkovich, President of the Federation of Russian Canadians, for pointing me to these sources. The two magazines are *Kanadsky Gudok* (Canadian Yearbook), published in the 1930s, and *Vestnik*, published from the 1940s until the early 1990s. Prior to the early 1970s, these were the only long-established, nationally distributed Russian language publications in Canada. Stan Linkovich has translated Grigorii Okulevich’s book *Russkie v kanade* into English; it exists as a digital manuscript. Okulevich’s book (1952) treats immigration from Russia into Canada up until the early 1950s and provides extensive background on the Federation of Russian Canadians, as well as on the Doukhobors and Russian Orthodox Church in Canada.

6            Only two sources exist dedicated to the topic of Russian speakers in Vancouver: K. J. Tarasoff's 1963 UBC Masters' Thesis on Russian organizations in the Greater Vancouver area, and H. M. Botnik's 1991 UBC Masters' Thesis on acculturation and family values in the context of first, second and third generation Russian immigrants.

7            In the case of British Columbia and the Pacific Rim at large, this first wave is preceded by a flow of religious dissidents fleeing Imperial Russia, with the Doukhobors, a sectarian group derived from the Orthodox Church, as the "first Russian religious group to migrate to North America en masse" (Hardwick 1993: 80).

8            This was over twelve years (1971-1982). In 1972, at the height of this migration, over 67,000 people left (Matthews 1993: 39).

9            Gold identifies this mass exodus as the direct result of "enormous efforts expended by the American Jewish community over the last 25 years and, accordingly, represent[ing] the successful culmination of a campaign to save Soviet Jewry" (Gold, 1996b: 279-280).

10           One M.A. thesis based on extensive qualitative interviews with Russian speakers in Portland, Oregon revolves around the idea of stability sought by Russian-speaking immigrants (Uthmann 2005).

11           All names used in this text are pseudonyms. This quote is from an interview conducted by Marina Beliaeva, one of the research assistants on the project, and translated by her; all other quotes are from interviews conducted by the author and translated by the author.

12           This is consistent with the findings of one study indicating that 25 percent of those who arrived in Toronto from the former Soviet Union prior to 1992 had at least university level education, as compared to just 6% of overall immigrants to Canada (Anisef et al. 2005).

13           This passage in Russian would read as: "Коллективы есть разные, и есть такая черта. . . у русских, у украинцев, топить своего человека, если он лучше тебя, то его утопить."

14           The Russian original follows: ". . .знаете здесь чисто менталитет

русско-говорящих ....знаете есть такой анекдот, ”когда американцу говорят что у его соседа дом стоит 1 миллион, он решает я буду еще лучше работать и чтоб у меня было 1,5 миллиона. А русский говорит я его подожду этот дом”. Это конечно анекдот, но в этом есть маленькая доля правды, мы ведь сталкиваемся с очень многими людьми из разных иммиграций сюда. . . .”

15           The Russian, ““мы не умеем себя продавать , нас тоже этому не учили .... вот сейчас приезжают русские которые, . . . верней не русские, а русско-говорящие, приезжают, они зубастее, они уже другие чем мы. Они причем намного быстрее начинают устраиваться в этой жизни ...они уже не советские, у них всех английский.”

16           In Russian, “. . . те которые здесь прожили дольше они более такие расслабленные они не спешат. . . те люди, которые вот-вот только приехали они любым способом пытаются заработать и они идут на все. Они идут даже по головам, скажем так. . . , не уважительно как бы они могут переступить через тебя, даже зная, что тебе это будет не приятно.”

17           In Russian, “. . . немножко нас уже подрезали под местные условия, человек же все таки существо общественное . . . я не могу жить в обществе и . . . быть вне его.. я помню еще Ленин сказал “нельзя жить в обществе и быть вне его.”