

Characteristics of the immigration group from the former Soviet Union after 1990 in Washington State¹

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Introduction and model of the integration process of immigrants

The recent findings of geneticists have suggested, in experiments with mice, that memories of life experience can be transmitted to future offspring (ARAI, J. A. – LI, S – HARTLEY, D. M. – FEIG, L. A. 2009). Similar transgenerational response (TGR) has also been investigated in humans, and scientists suggest “a closer degree of integration between environment and biological evolution” than was previously thought (KAATI, G. – BYGREN, L. O. – PEMBREY M. – SJÖSTRÖM, M. 2007:789). This phenomenon seems to indicate that a person’s social life and the quality of that person’s experience are of essential importance in their influence on future generations whose ancestors’ memories will be embedded in their own. The process of immigration presents various issues for researchers who are aware of the complexities and of the significant impact on both the people who participate in the activity of immigration and those who are releasing or receiving them. In the future, we might benefit from the discovery of the ways in which these enormous changes in a person’s life can result in consequences for future generations. But what are the elements that have an impact on the first generation of immigrants? Which groups and which individuals are playing the most important roles in this process? And how do these factors influence the integration process for the immigrants? What compels citizens of some places to leave their homes to establish a new life in a foreign environment, while other citizens do not? Are there any shared characteristics and common reasons for leaving their homelands, and do different groups experience common difficulties? Is immigration beneficial for the places that receive immigrants, and does it benefit the places of origin? These are only some of the important questions to answer. This paper describes the characteristics of an immigrant group from the former Soviet Union in Washington State and focuses on the new arrivals who left one of the former Soviet Union’s countries after *perestroika*. This study aims to reveal this group’s diversity and relate differences in their integration process to differences in experiences and history in their home countries.

In recent years a vast quantity of literature has focused on this topic, and, as Zelinsky states, it is “more, it seems, than any single individual could digest or master” (ZELINSKY, W. 2001:ix). “The study of immigration in the social sciences has focused on two central problems: the determinants of migration out of the countries of origin and the adaptation of immigrants once they arrive in host societies” (PORTES, A., ESCOBAR, C. – ARANA, R. 2008:1056). Sassen organized the migration literature around the question of ‘why migration would occur’ (SASSEN, S. 1988:12). He drew attention to a “neglected variable” that needed to be considered

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along with the usual “push and pull” factors like high unemployment and resources for mobility in the sending countries, perceived opportunity, the presence, or lack of, a preexisting immigrant community, and the need of cheap labor in the receiving country. As he has pointed out, “the specificity of labor migration in the current historical period lies not in these general conditions or individual motivations but in its articulation with the internationalization of production [and]...disruption of traditional work structures” and Sassen has analyzed its impact on migration (SASSEN, S. 1988:17).

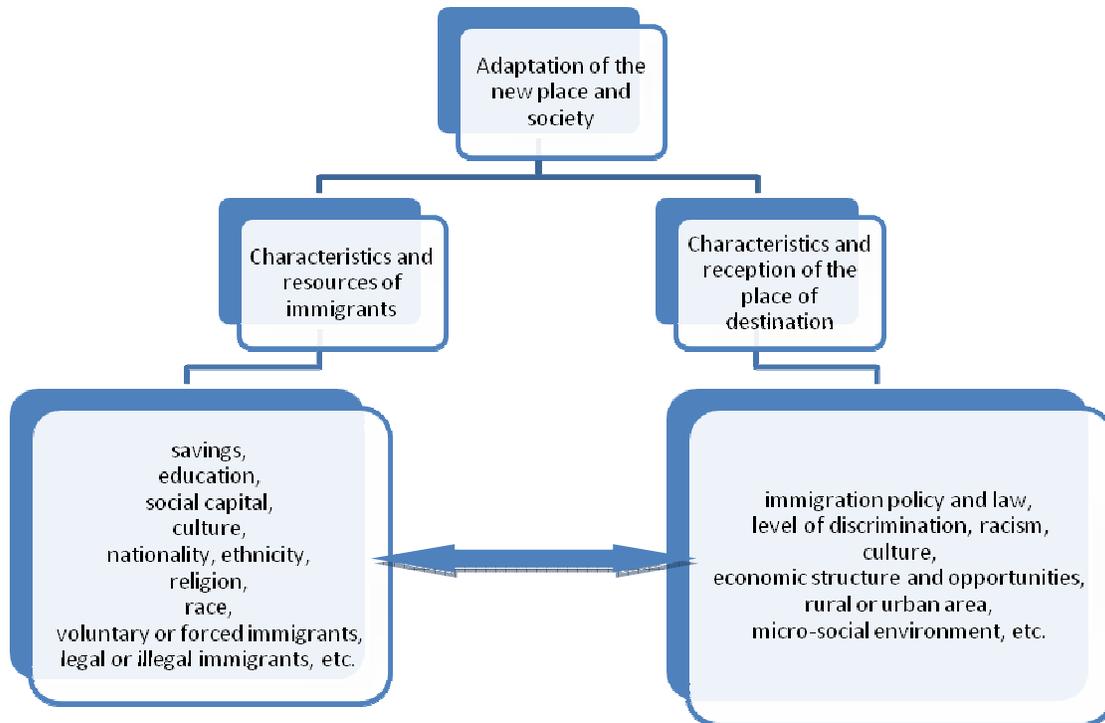
Many of the researchers emphasize and argue for the positive impact of immigration and diversity for the receiving countries (e.g. KRALY, E.P. 2008; PUTNAM, R. D. 2007;); others focus on conflicts in the multiethnic society (AMIN, A. 2002; Anas, A. 2002.). Portes and Böröcz underline three basic dimensions of assimilation: 1) condition of exit; 2) the class origin of immigrants and 3) the contexts of reception (PORTES, A. – BÖRÖCZ, J. 1989). The segmented adaptation theory is based on three factors: 1) the nature of migration to the host country (forced or voluntary); 2) the resources that immigrants bring; and 3) the host country’s reception (PORTES, A. – ZHOU, M. 1993, SKOP, E. H. 2001). Woltman and Newbold consider the segmented assimilation theory (“discrimination and unequal opportunities affect processes of adaptation”) “in the context of how the adaptation of Cuban émigrés differs along lines of race” (WOLTMAN, K. –NEWBOLD, K. B. 2009). Skop argues the same issue in case of the adaptation of Mariel Exiles (SKOP, E. H. 2001). In this paper she also suggests that “the segmented adaptation model should be expanded to include a fourth element: place of incorporation.” However, it may not be necessary to expand the model, since the present model already includes a clear emphasis on the importance of the degree of receptivity of the host culture. It is this receptivity that is primary, and not merely the geographical place (at least in her paper) as she includes: “Yet this study has explored only the broadest aspects of the idea of place in the adaptation of immigrants, using the geography of settlement and migration patterns to reveal the divergent process of adaptation. It offers only a glimpse of the complexity of "place" in the adaptation of immigrants. A more nuanced exploration of the idea of place - particularly in terms of how immigrants attempt to fix meaning to, have experiences within, and contest other ideas of, particular places - will prove fruitful in future investigations of immigrant adaptation.” (SKOP, E. 2001: 467) In my opinion the characteristics of place (and not the place itself) play a significant role in the process of adaptation, which we might conclude are based on two main factors: 1) characteristics and resources of the immigrants (savings, education, social capital, culture, ethnicity, religion, race, immigration status, etc); and 2) characteristics and reception of the place of destination (immigration policy and law, level of discrimination, racism, culture, economic structure and opportunities, micro-social environment, rural or urban area, etc.) (figure 1).

The two main factors’ elements interact with each other, and the result of these relations produces blockage or eases the adaptation. For example, if I am an immigrant and I would move to a place where local people would welcome me and would help me to integrate into their community, I would have a good chance to resettle with success. But if I would move to a settlement where people do not support foreigners and tend to exclude them, the accomplishment of my integration could be greatly delayed.

Another important feature of this model is that it represents an open system, in that the sending country’s political system, its regulations, its customs, etc. all have effects on the people who left their country (and of course on those too who are still living there). Along with the nature of their experience of immigration (whether they received the refugee status in the country of destination, and, if so, what it means, and how it provides for them) the nature of the relationship

between their home country and their country of resettlement affects the process of their adaptation. “The blockage of the return option – for extensive periods or even for life – constitutes a fundamental difference with other forms of immigration, affecting refugees’ attitudes toward the host society and their patterns of adaptation.” (PORTES, A. – BÖRÖCZ, J. 1989: 616).

Figure 1. Model of the integration process of immigrants



We have to think about this model as a system which is continuously changing, because of the perpetual interactions between its elements and outside coefficients as well. There is no place where the adaptation would occur in exactly the same way at different times.

In the case of the immigrants who have come from the former Soviet Union, this paper presents some examples of their integration process and illustrates how these elements have modified the trajectory of integration.

Data

The research employs the five percent sample files of the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 2000 and 2006-08, and statistical analysis of semi-structured interviews (questionnaires). The PUMS data allowed us to extract records about immigrants (43,074 and 1548 people) according to their sending countries, but, unfortunately, some data about immigrants was lost because certain people (e.g., from Estonia) did not appear in the 2000 PUMS data separately, and were included among the category of ‘other Europeans,’ probably

because of their small number, and of course we could not use the data which included other groups from different parts of Europe. The situation was similar in the case of most of the former Soviet Union's Asian countries. The available data refer to some further problems, like its age and the limited information. In spite of these disadvantages we tried to create our own data from recent and more specified information, but as Hardwick mentions in her book about their challenges with the data collection, "two attempts to distribute and collect written questionnaires to community groups and individuals for this study were completely unsuccessful" (HARDWICK, S. W. 1993:12). We also had some difficulties with our survey, but finally were able to distribute and collect 50 questionnaires from Washington State during the period from May 2009 to early 2010, mainly from Vancouver, WA and the Greater Seattle area, where the majority of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union live within the state. Qualitative interviewing was also carried out in order to help with the design of the questionnaire and complement the questionnaires' data.

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Washington State

When we are attempting to follow the progress of an issue, similar kinds of data from different years are required. It is very difficult to gather them with unique variables from a certain period. It was possible to extract PUMS data in terms of the birthday but the PUMS 2000 and 2006-08 3 year data are very different. We used the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files contain records representing 5-percent samples of the people in the occupied units. The 2000 data file contains individual weights for each person, which when applied to the individual records, expand the sample to the relevant total. The 2006-2008 ACS 3-year estimates are based on data collected between January 2006 and December 2008. This data file was not expanded. In this paper we use "rate views" where data is measured in percentages referring to the whole sample in each research period, so we can compare these rates from different eras presenting the changes in case of each variable.

Hardwick defined 4 waves of the Russian immigration to the Pacific area: the first was in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries; the second was during and between the two world wars; the third is dated from after the Second World War until 1987; and the latest wave started with the agreement between President Reagan and President Gorbachev that citizens of the USSR should be free to leave the country (HARDWICK, W. S. 1993). Figure 2 shows that the immigrants who live in Washington State today came to the United States mainly in this last period. As expected, the number of émigrés from these countries has been decreasing since 2000, but the exact data will be known only after the 2010 census. According to the 2000 and 2006-08 PUMS data, the highest proportion from within the former Soviet Union's countries arrived from Ukraine (44.11% and 46.32%) and Russia (37.76% and 31.65%). Their population is young, with more than 60% of them between 16 and 60 year old, and around 50% are married. Very few of them are widowed, divorced or separated, and about 40% are single, mainly because of the high proportion of young people (according to the 2006-08 PUMS data the proportion of the 25 year old or younger people within the whole population of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union is 39%). In 2000, 78 percent of them did not have US citizenship, while according to the 2006-08 data, around 60 percent of them had not received citizenship yet. In 2000 the Latvians, Lithuanians and Armenians had the highest rate of naturalized immigrants, while in 2006-08 it was the highest for Lithuanians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis (figure 3). In 2000 31.15% of the

Russian speaking émigrés had some kind of academic degree, while the 2006-08 data shows that the percentage of the highly educated residents from the former Soviet Union’s countries increased to 44.9% (figure 4). Generally we can say that a high proportion of immigrants from most of the post Soviet countries have degrees (usually more than 30% in 2000, but the 2006-08 PUMS data represents residents from most of the area’s countries with more than 40 percent of them having degrees).

Figure 2. Distribution of the recent immigrants according to their years of enter
 source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008 ACS 3-year PUMS files and 2000 PUMS files

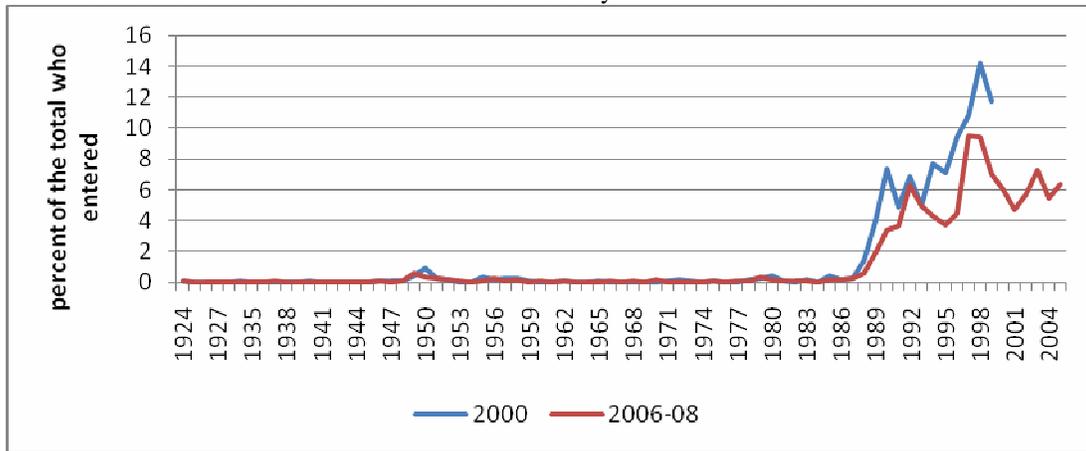
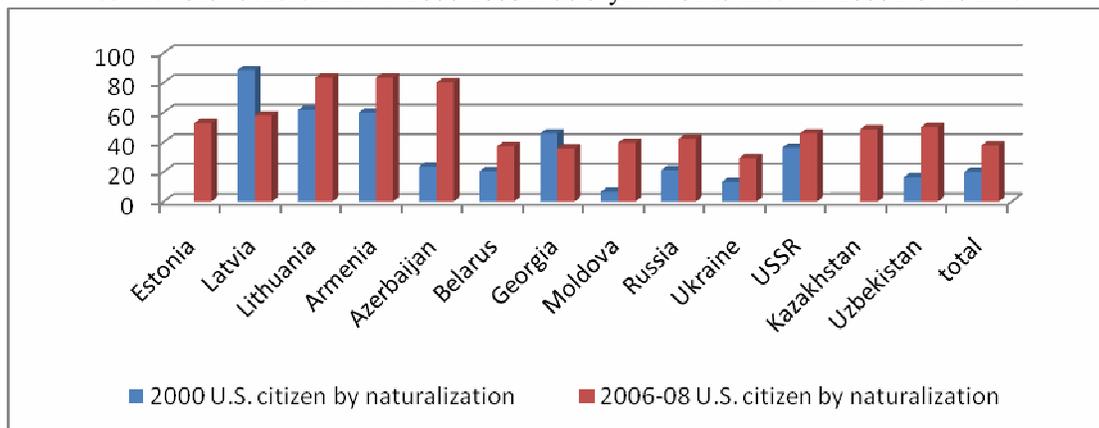


Figure 3. Proportion of the immigrants who have US citizenship
 source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008 ACS 3-year PUMS files and 2000 PUMS files



The employment rate is relatively high among these people; in 2000 it was 46.78%, while during the 2006-08 this rate increased to 58.47%. The unemployment rate was always below 5% among the Russian speaking immigrants in Washington State during the period of this study.

As we will see in the analysis of the questionnaire survey, the new residents were found to have the most difficulties coping with the language. We designed an English ability index, where a score of 100 would mean that everyone from the group could speak English fluently, while 0 would mean that nobody did. Between 0 and 100 the index expresses their level of English-

speaking ability, which was only 49.5 in 2000 and grew to 65.22 by 2006-08 among the Russian speaking émigrés. Those who were born in the Baltic states have the best English ability, while immigrants from Ukraine and Georgia struggle more because of their lack of ability in English (figure 5).

Figure 4. Proportion of the émigrés who have a degree
 source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008 ACS 3-year PUMS files and 2000 PUMS files

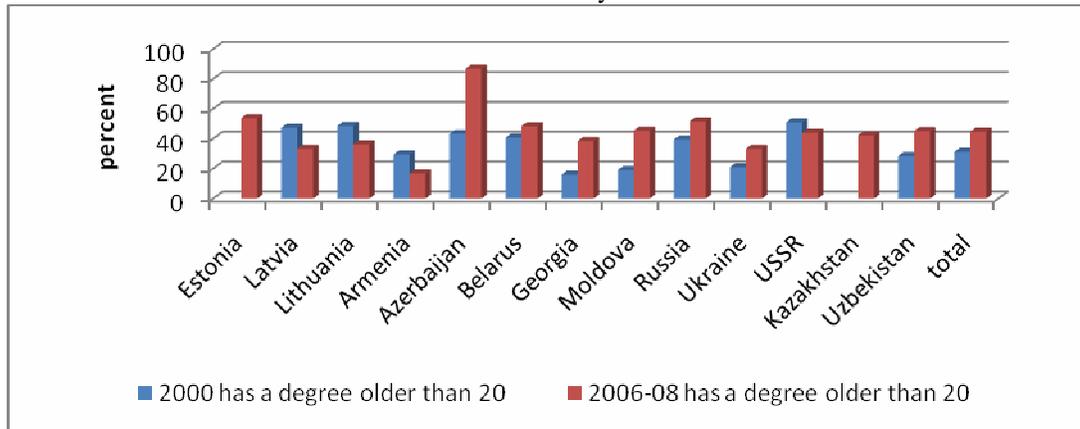
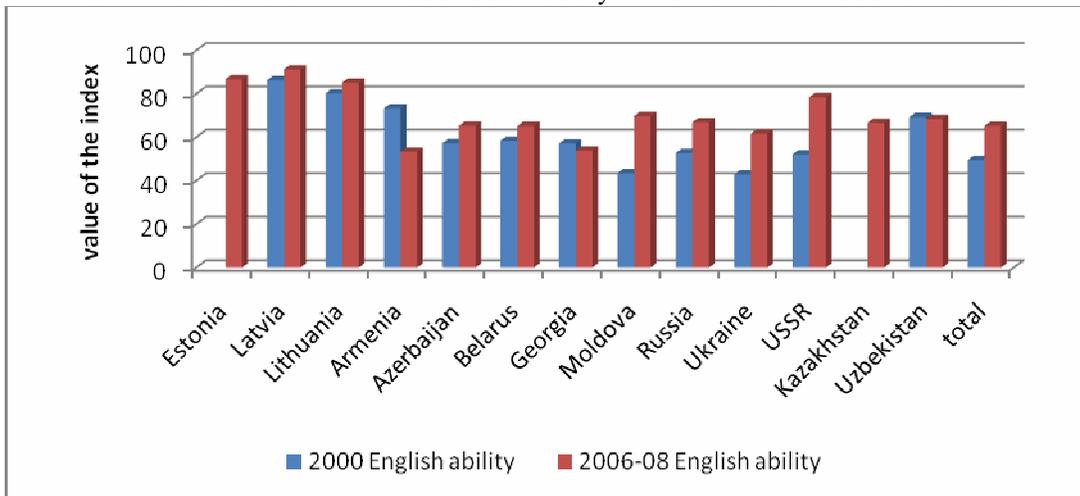


Figure 5 English ability indexes of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union
 source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2006-2008 ACS 3-year PUMS files and 2000 PUMS files



Summarizing the PUMS data results we can see that immigrants' movements from the former Soviet Union's countries to Washington State were selective, and that their age range is younger than that of their home countries', and a high proportion of them have academic degrees, with the unemployment rate very low. The PUMS data suggests that after 2000, immigrants have been younger and better educated than previously, and their English language ability is better too. However, less of them have entered the country than during the '90s.

Questionnaire survey result

Characteristics of the immigrant respondents

A significant percentage of the respondents did not tell us exactly where they came from (26%). Among those who answered this question most of them arrived from the Russian Federation (54.1%), 16.2% from Ukraine, 10.8% from Moldova, and the rest left Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Belorussia, Azerbaijan and Estonia. Both the push and pull factors played a role in their decision to leave, since it was because of the unfavourable economic circumstances in their home countries and the promising economic situation in the USA that they were encouraged to move to the USA (table 1). The male respondents are most likely to think about returning to Russia at some point in the future, but most of them would like to stay in the States permanently (table 1). The majority were in their 30s when they entered, and their educational level was high (more than 50% of them had college or university degree), but they did not speak English well (table 2). Around 75% of them had studied in the US, and their English skills improved significantly (table 2). Of the male respondents, 66% came before 2000, while according to this index, 51.6% of the women arrived before that time. The men found jobs about 9 months after they entered, and women were employed in their new country in less than eight months (table 3). This is very similar result what Hardwick stated using the social service agencies' records, which "indicate that 70-90 percent are unemployed within four-eight months" (HARDVICK, S. W. 2008:33). Our respondents reported that they liked living in the U.S. initially better than in their home countries, and now they enjoy it even more. They kept their national identity, so they still feel that they are Russians, Moldavian, Ukrainian, etc. apart from a small percentage of the women émigrés (6.45%) who became Russian Americans and interestingly there are some immigrants who have said that they do not have any national identities (4 of the 49 respondent, table 4). Among who have no national identity one of them came from Russia, one of them from Moldavia and two of them would not divulge their origins. This raises the question whether there is any connection between the attitudes towards their national identity and any issues of ethnicity in the post-Soviet states, such as one that was described by one of our Russian interviewees who left Estonia with his family: "In Estonia we were Russians, in Russia we were Estonians" (KOTELNIKOV, V. 2001:12). For those Russians who lived outside the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union the situation became more difficult, as we can see in the case of the Baltic states (SMITH, D. – BURCH, S. 2007). Only 25% of the immigrants who lived in some of the other post-Soviet countries regarded their national identity as their home countries' nationalities; otherwise they are Russians, or have a multicultural or no national identity at all. Most of them are proud of their nationalities (however, not very much) but this feeling does not usually result in a strong desire to return to their places of origin (table 4).

		men	women
Why did they leave their home countries?	Unfavorable economic circumstances	33.33	16.13
	Religious discrimination	11.11	32.26
	Ethnic discrimination	44.44	25.81
	Better economic situation in the USA	38.89	25.81
	Better future for their children	33.33	38.71
Would they like to return there?	No	50.0	70.97
	Yes	16.7	3.22
	Maybe	33.33	22.58

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents: making decision about leaving their country

	men	women	Spouses / F	Spouses / M
Age /mean	45.18	42.83		
Age when they entered / mean	35.17	33.52	38.85	42.86
No good English when they entered	61.1%	77.4%	53.3%	82.4%
Good English now (scale 0-3)	2.22	2.03	2.07	1.94
Education: college or university degree (%)	66.7	51.6	80	58.8
They did study in the USA	66.67	77.4%	78.6%	63.2%
They studied at the university / college	33.33	38.71	78.6%	63.2%
They studied in the language school	27.7778	29.0323	27.3%	44.4%

Table 2 Characteristics and resources of respondents: age, education and English skill

	men	women	spouse/F	spouse/M
Year when they entered / mean	1999.44	2000.74		
came directly to this area %	61.1%	77.4%		
months after they entered the US they found a job	9.25	7.40	14.00	5.33

Table 3 Characteristics of respondents: year of their entry and find a job

		men	women	spouse/F	spouse/M
How happy they were/are	when they entered (scale 1-5)	3.71	3.63	3.60	3.84
	and now (scale 1-5)	4.28	4.16	4.07	4.53
	to live Russia (scale 1-5)	3.50	3.43		
Their national identity	Russian %	61.1	64.5161		
	Russian American %	0	6.45161		
	No %	11.1	6.451613		
Proud of their nationalities (scale 1-5)		3.56	3.38		

Table 4 Characteristics of respondents: attitude: happiness and national identity

A high percentage had known someone in this area before they came to the Washington State (75%) and 67% of the immigrants chose this area because they had friends or relatives here. 71.4% of these émigrés live in the neighbourhood where other Russian-speaking people live. Table 5 shows the existence of an émigrés' network in the division of men and women respondents. It seems to be a very strong pull factor, as Portes and Rumbaut argue in their book about the immigrants targeting of a place for their resettlement: "Most common, however, is the arrival of immigrants into a place where an ethnic community already exists" (PORTES, A. – RUMBAUT, R. G. 2006:95). Most of them have friendships with Americans and with other nationalities, but their closest friends are mainly Russians, especially in case of men (table 5).

		men	women
know people (relatives/friends) in the area before they came here %		66.6667	80.6452
have friends now in the area where they live (scale 0:no – 4: a lot)		3.06	3.23
live in the area where other Russians live %		77.8%	67.7%
Their friends' nationalities %	Only Russians	11.1111	12.9032
	Mainly Russians, few Americans	27.7778	19.3548
	Russians and Americans mixed	11.1111	12.9032
	Russians, Americans, other Europeans and other nationalities mixed	5.55556	25.8065
Their closest friends' nationalities %	Russians and/or Russian Americans	66.6667	48.3871

Table 5 Resources of respondents: social network

The majority have a very high opinion of the USA, and an appreciation for the economic and educational opportunities. Also, they enjoy the freedom and the positive mentality of the Americans (table 6). They found that their life in the new country is beneficial because of the good career prospects and high standard of living, the great opportunity to learn English, to study at good universities, and the freedom of thought, while the greatest challenges are learning English, acquiring the best positions at work, and getting used to unfamiliar customs (table 7).

		men	women
General opinion about the USA	The best	83.3333	77.4194
What they like the best in the USA	Lots of opportunity (economic, edu.)	27.7778	25.8065
	Mentality of people	27.7778	25.8065
	Freedom	22.2222	19.3548
	High living standard	11.1111	19.3548
	Tranquility	11.1111	9.67742

Table 6 Characteristics of respondents: attitude toward the host country

		men	women
Why it is beneficial living in the USA %	Good career and living standard	38.8889	51.6129
	Learn English	22.2222	19.3548
	Religious freedom	11.11	12.91
	Independence	11.1111	16.13
	Education system	16.6667	12.9032
The greatest challenges living in the USA %	Language	50	67.7419
	Different custom	11.1111	19.3548
	Hard to get the best position	22.2222	16.129

Table 7 Characteristics of respondents: attitude toward the host country

More than 50% of the immigrants received financial support from the government or from their relatives, or from friends who have already moved to the States. They also have been helped by the acquisition of information (table 8).

The Russian immigrants did not really experience discrimination, as Hardwick describes: “their ethnic and racial identity and cultural background, in general, fit comfortably into the majority American belief system” (HARDWICK, S. W. 1993:4). However, as we have seen, almost 20 percent of the women respondents found it hard to adapt to the new customs, and many of them had difficulties because of their lack of English, which could make them feel excluded. Usually women are more sensitive toward any unfavourable reception from the local society (table 9). More than 50% of these immigrants have been naturalized, but only 10 percent of the respondents who have dual citizenship (table 10). Our interviewees did not really complain about being discriminated against or being excluded because of their nationality. However, in many cases they said that they could not find a job according to their qualifications and education, but they just accepted not being able to continue their work in their old professions. Lawyers went to work as cleaners in hotels, doctors became nurses. They came to terms with their fate, or at least they did not complain about it to us.

When they arrived, usually they were ready to work hard as Vladimir described it in his book about an immigrant family’s experiences in Seattle: “We were not afraid to try a new life...As far as our homesickness is concerned, the beginning of our life here was the hardest...One should not emigrate without a very serious reason, because the lack of a serious reason will overtake you later and destroy your life” (KOTELNIKOV, D. 2001:50). They were determined to leave their places of origin, because they had had a very difficult time back home, and when they compare the situation here to the circumstances they had in their home country, their conclusion is that things are better here. Within a year they had found a job, they quickly learned at least a basic level of English, and after 5 to 10 years of working hard in the US they usually could afford to get loans for new homes. “The majority of immigrants, those who had switched jobs already and had been getting up at four or five in the morning, began to find jobs that suited their education. Suddenly everyone around us started to talk about buying his own house... Do you remember that night, five years ago in Rome, when I told you, I dream of buying my own house someday in America, on the edge of the woods, and when I do, I will invite you to it? Well, we’ve bought the house”. (KOTELNIKOV, D. 2001: 176 and 181). Many of them mention individuals who helped them when they arrived. In some cases this help came from an American neighbour, or someone from the Russian community whose family moved to the area a long time ago. “We have lots of help. Lots of people, American people around offering help like once a week, twice a week you could come they could help with the language, it was amazing. And one person who we used to live with in an apartment building, her name is Miss C, at the time when we met she was an international counselor at the Seattle Pacific University. She offered us help, right away when we came after a week, she helped us with language, and she helped Michael, my husband, and he started a couple of courses at the Seattle Pacific University. This lady was amazing to us.” (Lena, November 2009) These circumstances could accelerate the speed of their adaptation process. We named this component the “micro environmental element” which could play a significant role in their integration. The most important thing is that the two sides of the interaction in the model have to be positive and supportive in this process. However, these immigrants experience difficulties at the beginning, and they have to work very hard. They might not be able to work in the same profession, but they are able to provide significant opportunities for their children without any considerable disadvantage in comparison with the host society’s families. And, in

their new country, they receive help, with very little or no discrimination or exclusion. When the elements in the two factors of this model work in this way, the adaptation occurs as a success in the long term.

	men	women
Received help to settle down, financial support %	55.5556	54.8387
Received help to settle down, information %	50	29.03

Table 8 Reception of the place of destination: supporting émigrés

scale 1:never – 4:very often	men	women
discrimination because of their nationalities	1.35	1.42
uncomfortable feeling because they are foreign	1.94	1.93
feeling that they are not welcome because of their nationalities	1.50	1.87
disadvantages because of their English	2.22	2.79

Table 9 Reception of the place of destination: discrimination

		men	women
Their citizenship	Russian	50.0%	29.0323
	American	33.3%	48.3871
	Russian and American	11.1%	9.67742

Table 10 Reception of the place of destination: naturalization

Summary

The immigrants from the former Soviet Union are over-represented in the west coast area of the USA (PORTES, A. – RUMBAUT, R. G. 2006). “Unlike other European immigrant groups in the United States and Canada, Russians first settled on the West Coast rather than on the East Coast” (HARDWICK, S. W. 1993:5). However, although “public opinion polls had long shown majority hostility to immigration” (DANIELS, R. 2004:232), recent émigrés from the former Soviet Union do not suffer because of discrimination in Washington State. Our sample did not provide reasonable data about this immigrant group because of its size, but with the PUMS data it suggests that the structures of the arrivals from the former Soviet Union’s countries have changed since the 1990s. More recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union’s countries left their home mainly because of the unfavourable economic circumstances rather than religious discrimination. The majority of them have university or college degree, the unemployment rate is quite low among them, and they are happy and satisfied to be living in the USA. They feel that they can provide their children with more opportunities for a better future by moving to the States.

When both coefficients of the model have positive and supportive characters, the output will be favourable as well, and the adaptation occurs relatively fast. The process can be modulated by different elements from the immigrants’ and from the destinations’ sides as well, and not only by the main issues like immigration policy or resources or characteristics of the émigrés as a race or

ethnicity, but also with unpredictable elements like a helpful and unselfish neighbour or a positive attitude of the immigrants toward their new situation. The émigrés' attitude is also an important issue; if it is not positive or strong enough in regard to the move to a new country, they can feel lost and alienated. These circumstances can have significant effects on the individuals' lives, by relieving or exacerbating the difficulties of the period of integration.

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