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## “OWN” – “ALIEN”: ON SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION OF THE FOREIGN RUSSIAN COMMUNITY

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### *Abstract*

The paper is devoted to scientific reflection on the specifics of sociocultural adaptation of the foreign Russian community in an alien linguistic and cultural environment, while scientific attention to the problems of sociocultural adaptation of the Russian diaspora seems to be the most important element of consolidation of the Russian society and strengthening of inter-state relations. The primary condition for the adaptation of emigrants to a different cultural environment is the readiness to offset the image of the homeland as an attribute of collective consciousness, the authors trace the importance of the image of the homeland in the memory of those who have left the country, who, despite a large number of years living in a different cultural and linguistic environment, maintain a feeling of strong connection with Russia. Based on the empirical surveys, the desire of emigrants to interact with members of the Russian diaspora, the steady need for communication in their native language and information about their homeland, the presence of a clear or hidden “justification” of their choice based on economic advantages of staying abroad in communication with compatriots are recorded. The study of general trends in the opinions of Russian respondents about the foreign Russian diaspora makes it possible to conclude that Russians have a sense of group ownership towards compatriots, considering those who have left as “own”; the opinion of Russians that the Russian diaspora is a full part of the Russian people is also associated with language and culture.

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**Keywords:** Russian diaspora, sociocultural adaptation, homeland, compatriots.



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## 1. Introduction

The topic of sociocultural adaptation of the foreign Russian community in an alien linguistic and cultural environment, climate change, usual way of life, traditions and customs, peculiarities of life in a foreign region, as well as the communication difficulties arising in this regard, is not well studied in Russian scientific literature. However, the problem of the person leaving the “habitual world” is quite challenging and cross-disciplinary as the emigrant faces not only positive, unusual and new, but is often under pressure of the unknown, alien environment that generates psychological discomfort intensified by a feeling of “rejection”, refusal to accept new cultural and social norms and specific traditions.

The adaptation serves the initial stage of including migrants in a different sociocultural environment, new conditions and lifestyle, then the subject identifies himself with a particular self “I” and is eventually integrated into a new community. Thus, the content of sociocultural processes in a foreign country (both at the group and individual level) includes three conditional “stages”, the hierarchy of which is built according to the following paradigm: adaptation-identification-integration (Marshak, 2018). Adaptation is not so rigid and traumatic when an individual maintains contact with the members of the native diaspora (Greek “dispersion”), which is understood to be part of the ethnic group living outside the country of its origin. The most common form of diaspora is the enclave community, as a social organism combined with its institutions and immigrants (both active and “static” members of the community) as long as they are associated with it by common mentality (Levin, 2015).

However, joining the diaspora is also a “slowdown” factor in socio-cultural adaptation of immigrants, since the community is the carrier of the so-called “collective memory”. An important condition for sociocultural adaptation of immigrants is thus the willingness to offset the image of the homeland as an attribute of collective consciousness, since when the memory of the native culture is weakened, the attributes of ethnic identity are diffused and the ability to self-consciousness is lost.

## 2. Problem Statement

One of the interesting, almost unexplored phenomena is the attempt by Russian immigrants to persistently design their ethnic identity and broadcast native ethnic culture in an alien social and cultural environment, when different institutional models of the homeland are transferred by them to other cultural contexts. There are atypical assimilative sociocultural combinations and hybrid forms of ethnic identity as a discursive possibility of broadcasting cultural heritage and memory, preservation of elements of native culture as the affirmation of their belonging to it. The examples include the following: language constructions practiced by the members of the foreign Russian community, when in one sentence they mix Russian words and words of the language of the country of emigration; persistent practices of demonstrating involvement in Russian celebrations and commemorative dates (Victory Day, New Year, Knowledge Day, Easter, etc.); active response to the invitation of the Russian side to take part in presidential elections, etc. The ethnic identity of the Russian immigrant group thus does not disappear even when the “own” culture of the group is alien to the majority.

### 3. Research Questions

The phenomenon of diaspora was not the subject of close attention by researchers until the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Senior Researcher of the Institute of Scientific Information in Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences Kondratieva T.S. points out that Western researchers such as J. Armstrong, R. Brubaker, M. Dabag, J. Clifford, W. Conner, R. Cohen, W. Safran, H. Sheffer, M. Esman and others greatly contributed to the theoretical reflection of the phenomenon of diaspora (as cited in Kondratieva, 2010). At the same time, Brubaker (2005) believes that the increasing interest to the problem of diaspora can be traced in some English theses.

Complementary publications on the subject of our study include the works of American political scientist Abramson (2017) devoted to the phenomenon of diaspora identity, British political scientists Syrett and Keles (2019) about the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, article of Leber (2016) on spiritual life of Serbian diaspora in the USA.

In Russia, research interest to the topic of foreign diaspora only dates back to the second half of the 1990s in response to the consequences of the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of the so-called “New Russian diaspora” or foreign Russian community. Today the problems of sociocultural adaptation of the diaspora, including the Russian one, are mostly reflected in the works of such researchers as Arutyunov (2000), Voronov (2009), Dmitriev (2018), Kondratieva (2010), Levin (2015), Marshak (2018), Militarev (2016), Poloskova (2016) and Semyonov (2015).

To some extent the authors stand in full solidarity with the definition given by Tishkov (2001), who characterized the diaspora as a cultural and distinctive community emerging “on the basis of ideas of common origin and the resulting collective ties, solidarity and demonstrated attitude towards the homeland” (p. 22). Partially supporting this position, the authors believe that the diaspora is a social community with particular sociocultural characteristics.

The process of finding new forms of interaction with the Russian diaspora and recognizing the political relevance of issues related to Russian emigration and the foreign Russian community was reflected in the Federal Law *On State Policy of the Russian Federation towards Compatriots Abroad*, which clearly defines the concept of “compatriots” in Article 1. According to the law, compatriots are recognized as persons “residing outside the territory of the Russian Federation and belonging, as a rule, to peoples who have historically lived in the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as persons whose lineal ancestors have previously lived in the territory of the Russian Federation who have freely opted for spiritual, cultural and legal connection with the Russian Federation”.

Thus, by establishing and maintaining contacts with the members of the Russian diaspora living abroad, the state not only provides them with humanitarian aid, but also ensures the solution of a number of political and economic problems. In this regard, *scientific attention to the problems of sociocultural adaptation of the foreign Russian community* seems an essential element of consolidation of the Russian society and strengthening of inter-state relations.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In this paper, the authors solved the following tasks: to systematize the main directions of theoretical scientific developments on the research topic; to postulate the hypothesis on the specifics of ethnic identity and to translate native ethnoculture in conditions of alien social and cultural environment among the members of the Russian diaspora; to define qualitative socio-cultural features of adaptation of the members of the foreign Russian community on the basis of experimental data; to identify common trends in the views of Russian respondents on the role of the foreign Russian diaspora in the process of formation of the all-Russian civilization and preservation of collective identity.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The author's empirical sociological study "Foreign Diaspora as an Element of Russian Culture" was carried out in three stages, two of which cover the period from June to October 2019, the third stage is additional, was carried out in the period from 2016 to 2018.

The first phase of empirical study was conducted on the basis of the method of individual semi-structured interview; methodological limitation: age of respondents (18 to 85 years); ethnocultural affiliation (according to self-identification of a respondent broadcasting his involvement in the "Russian world"); long-term (more than a year) residence in other cultural environment of near or far abroad, N = 17. The participants of the survey live abroad on average for about ten years or more, these are such countries as Canada, Mexico, USA, Poland, France, Great Britain, Germany. The second stage of empirical sociological study was carried out via online survey (questionnaire), respondents were citizens of Russia from 18 to 85 years old, N = 120. The third stage involved the study and sociological analysis of the opinions of emigrants on the peculiarities of their attitude towards Russia and the specifics of adaptation abroad on the basis of the study of comments on the Internet (Facebook (2018), and Linked-in (2016), N = 33.

#### **6. Findings**

As the first stage of the survey showed, the subjective meaning of socio-cultural adaptation of the majority of respondents who live outside Russia for a long time is not the desire to forget the memory of the homeland. All participants of individual interviews answered "yes" and "rather yes" to the question: "Do you still feel part of Russia and Russian culture?" The respondents show solidarity in that they remember the homeland, such memories are most often related to childhood, home and parents, Russian culture, Russian character and people, Russian landscapes. None of the respondents consider Russia from the negative side, never refer to poverty or injustice. Let us give a few answers as an example. Respondent M., a woman, 29 years in emigration: "I remember childhood, youth, friends, classmates and fellow students, all relatives, culture. Yes, in general, I remember everything and quite often". Respondent E., a woman, lives 14 years in Germany: "Now there is an opportunity to come to Russia at any moment, so Russia is home where you can always come. I remember Russian language, traditions, culture, people, multilingual and multinational Russia". Respondent A., Great Britain: "I remember our home in St. Petersburg, our dear medical university. I had a girl there, I loved her very much, we studied

together. Here it's not like that. I've lived here for a long time". The first stage of the sociological study showed the following results: despite the large number of years lived in a different cultural and linguistic environment, the image of the homeland remains significant in the memory of those who left Russia. Emigrants feel a strong connection with Russia and their native culture, seek to communicate with the Russian diaspora, identify themselves with the ethnocultural group "The Russians" and their homeland.

The second stage of the study covered 120 respondents. Thus, 65.8 % feel positive about Russian emigration, 25.9 % have a negative attitude, 8.3 % were unable to answer the question about the attitude towards the Russian diaspora. In the analysis of opinions, it shall be noted that 38.3 % of respondents form their attitude to the Russian diaspora through information from the Internet, more often these are articles about the "shady past" of those who left the country: fraud, financial fraud in Russia, etc. So, 25 % of respondents formed their opinion based on personal observations, 23.3 % of respondents trust television. Besides, 2.5 % of respondents get information about emigrants from newspapers and magazines, 1.7 % admitted that their opinion about the Russian diaspora is influenced by documentaries and books.

To the question "Do you agree that the Russian foreign diaspora is a special sociocultural phenomenon of the modern world?" 51.7 % answered positively, 25.8 % of respondents answered negatively, 22.5 % found it difficult to answer. Most survey participants (74.2 %) replied that the protection of compatriots living abroad is relevant for Russia, 16.7 % of respondents believe that there are other priority problems in the country, 9.2 % found it difficult to answer the question. Most survey participants are positive about the initiatives of the state to popularize Russian language and culture. The distribution of answers is shown in Table 1.

**Table 01.** Distribution of opinions on the question "Do you share the initiatives of the state to popularize the Russian language and Russian culture in the world?"

Yes	No	Not sure	Total
83.4 %	10 %	6.6 %	100 %

Apparently, it is the *language and culture that is associated with the opinion of Russians in general that the Russian diaspora is a full part of the Russian people*. A total of 66.7 % of respondents agreed with this, which is reflected in Table 2.

**Table 02.** Distribution of opinions on the question "Do you agree that the Russian diaspora is a full part of the Russian people?"

Yes, agree	Rather yes	No	Rather no	Not sure	Total
45.5 %	21.2 %	13 %	7 %	13.3 %	100 %

One of the questions was aimed at clarifying the basic feelings of respondents towards those who left the homeland. Thus, 37.5 % respondents admitted of feeling sad; 34.2 % feel solidarity with the members of the Russian diaspora; 24.2 % feel happy, the same number of respondents were not sure. Besides, 11.7 % of respondents have negative feelings, including 5 % of respondents admitted that they feel envy, 4.2 % – anger, 2.5 % – hatred. Thus, the respondents experience a sense of group ownership towards those who have left in general, considering them "their own".

The third phase of the study was devoted to the analysis of text comments on the Internet. Comments from social media Facebook and Linked-in, N = 33, were analyzed. The analysis showed that part of the Russian diaspora regularly communicates on social networks with compatriots left in the ethnic homeland. Traditionally, those who left boast of their changed standard of living (52 %), good climate (78 %), high level of wages of the local (!) population (67 %), level of general culture (34 %), cheap food (56 %). On the part of Russians such online conversations do not cause a positive response, rather the opposite, more often two Russian-speaking emigrants from different countries enter into prolonged communication. That is, there is still silent condemnation or suspicion of those who have left their homeland for good on the part of the conservative Russian community.

When assessing the comments, there is a clear or hidden longing of respondents for open expression of thoughts, sincerity, truth. The general background of the comments allows making the following conclusions:

- Russian-speaking participants from abroad seek long-term communication, provoke interlocutors to continue the conversation, Russian participants distance themselves;
- foreign participants of the conversation seek news, broadcast interest in social, cultural and political life in Russia;
- more often foreign compatriots justify their choice emphasizing economic advantages of being abroad, Russian communicants follow spiritual priorities and direct connection with the homeland, at the same time, realizing that they do not talk to a foreigner, and therefore speak to compatriots “in one language” using humor understood by both, known winged phrases and proverbs;
- there is a clear “lag” of foreign communicants from social and cultural life in modern Russia: they broadcast outdated information, prefer out-of-fashion musical compositions, do not know about renaming the names of cities, streets, metro stations, do not have other current information about life in the country.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the scientific research and the obtained experimental data, it is possible to make the following conclusions:

1. Scientific attention to the problems of sociocultural adaptation of the foreign Russian community seems to be the most important element in consolidating the Russian society and strengthening the inter-state relations.

2. It is legitimate to speak about the specifics of socio-cultural adaptation of representatives of the foreign Russian community, which at least includes the following peculiarities:

- ethnic identity is designed and native ethnic culture is broadcast in alien social and cultural environment;
- significance of the image of the homeland in the memory of those who left Russia is observed, there remains a feeling of strong connection with Russia and native culture;
- there is a desire to communicate with the members of the Russian diaspora;

- there is a steady need to communicate with compatriots in their native language about the homeland;
- there is a clear or hidden “justification” of their choice in communication with compatriots based on economic advantages of staying abroad.

3. The general trends in the opinions of Russian respondents about the foreign Russian diaspora make it possible to conclude that Russians have a sense of group ownership towards compatriots, considering those who have left “their own”, and the language and culture are associated with the general opinion of Russians that the Russian diaspora is a full part of the Russian people.

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