



## **What is ethnic discrimination and what can be done? Myths and Background**

We will not begin with a general introduction to the theory of discrimination. Instead, we will examine the context through which people interpret issues of ethnicity and equality. As in the former USSR, Russians' perceptions are heavily mythologised. This mythologisation is particularly evident when ethnic issues are concerned. I will not dwell on the different meanings of the word «myth» and the nuances of its interpretation here. By «myth» I mean a simple (and therefore distorted) judgement or explanation based only on faith rather than on a rational analysis of the evidence. A myth is not just imagination or fantasy. It bears a resemblance to reality but offers a simplified interpretation that ignores all evidence to the contrary. Thus, a myth is a matter of faith that attempts to convince its supporters by means of rational arguments. This is often a meaningless and thankless task.

Below, I set out the central myths about equality and discrimination in Russia. I present these myths simply to complete the picture and clarify the context in which we will examine this topic.

To begin, it is worth naming a few features of public opinion that allow for the creation and distribution of myths about equality and ethnicity. These features are not exclusive to Russia, but they precisely manifest there.

Worth noting first and foremost is the desire to see racial and ethnic groups as an objective reality; a sort of collective body with its own rules and interests. From there arises the acceptance of the term «interethnic relations» as defining the relationship between real «ethnic groups». Then people are ready to discuss incredibly different societal relationships - education, economic participation, migration, civil action and many others - as the «life» and «development» of «ethnic groups». At the same time, ethnicity is not viewed as a social category but as an objective trait or personal characteristic. Strictly speaking, this is the basic worldview of what we usually call racism.

The second important feature is a kind of naive positivism. This is the idea that people's perceptions, including ethnic stereotypes, directly reflect reality and their «objective» life experience.

It is also worth noting the conscious or unconscious desire to see the world through the eyes of the state. This has several consequences; chief among them is an affinity for social engineering and the belief that everything that happens in a society can be managed. It also creates the belief that everything that happens has been intentionally designed or permitted. Therefore, if anything goes wrong, it is the result of the leadership's malice or mistakes. Thus, to fix things the right law must be passed, the right concept adopted or the right command issued. This view is always accompanied by a disregard for specific individuals and their interests. The belief that society can be run like a machine, combined with the belief in the reality of «ethnic groups», creates the belief that an «ethnic policy» meant to manage «interethnic relations» is possible and necessary. No one can really explain what that policy is without

resorting to demagoguery. However, the subtext of such ideas is the assumption that different «ethnic groups» - that is, members of different people groups - should be treated differently. The hierarchy of priorities is also important here. Issues of security and public order come first. These priorities explain the excessive attention paid to incitement of hatred, «extremism» and «conflicts».

**Myth 1. Discrimination is something only done by the government. Private individuals (especially business owners and landlords) may to decide with whom they do business.**

This is incorrect. In fact, any person or organisation can discriminate, including the government and its representatives. The rational basis for this myth comes from the fact that discrimination by the government is much more dangerous. In addition, according to international and national laws, the state is supposed to stop discrimination by individuals. Thus, the government is still responsible for any discrimination. This will be discussed further below.

**Myth 2. Government prohibition of discrimination will solve the problem on its own.**

These views are beyond comprehension. It is often not just a myth but rather a joke on the part of officials, who may ingenuously assert that Russia has «advanced anti-discrimination laws» since some laws include broad declarations establishing equal rights. Even these officials cannot help but realise that in and of itself a formal prohibition, without specific mechanisms, does not provide results — it is simply unclear who may bring which claims to whom in connection with the infringement of equality. This is addressed in more detail below.

**Myth 3. Intolerance towards the «other» causes discrimination.**

Both experts and the wider public, as a rule, perceive discrimination as those actions rooted in animosity towards those of other nationalities or based on ideas of certain groups' supremacy in relation to others. This notion is true only in part and only in a narrow area, but the majority of the actual situations that do not fall into the categories of discrimination, hostility and aggression (indicated by the word «phobia»).

Government structures and individuals may have different motives and reasons for relating differently to people of other nationalities, and more often than not, among them there is no thought of superiority, any recognised ill-will or efforts to specifically bring harm to an «outsider». Generally, these simply are not thought about, or they are considered to be unimportant. Conversely, they may even suppose that they are acting in a way that will benefit the outsider or serve common interests. The desire to avoid conflicts or refrain from «directing a migration» may result in the establishment of limits on the rights of an individual with a particular nationality to choose their place of residence (for example, by using 'residence permits').

It is fully possible that targeted checks of Caucasians or Muslims could be motivated by concern for safety and order. The refusal to hire Caucasians or Central Asians may be based in the business

owner's wish to not lose clients with a xenophobic slant. They may also want to refrain from giving anyone grounds to think that the business is cutting costs on personnel or is somehow connected with the «ethnic mafias».

The compulsory separation of children with different nationalities into other classes may be taken as an attempt to avoid conflicts, ease the education process and even to help the children «preserve their culture<sup>1</sup>». Finally, you can encounter that plain simplicity, which is worse than theft. How, for example, does one explain that in some elite parts and divisions of the Armed Forces they take only young people «with Slavic features»?

The presence of an ideology of supremacy or exceptionalism (however it is phrased) is not mandatory where discriminatory policies are carried out. The government, or people who act on its behalf, may infringe or limit any ethnic group for different reasons - the convenience of its leaders, safety, the desire to obtain bribes, etc. And conversely, even if the government or territorial autonomy holds itself to be fundamentally defined by ethnic groups, this does not mean that all those remaining in this territory will be discriminated against. The republics within Russia serve as an example, albeit with some reservations (more about this below).

#### **Myth 4. Discrimination is the evidence of mass xenophobia, primarily experienced by the ethnic majority.**

Many people, among them activists, analysts and journalists, worry very much about widespread xenophobic attitudes, which are ostensibly reflected, for example, in public opinion polls. It is implied that discrimination is a product ordinary people's biases and actions. In other words, if xenophobia becomes truly popular, then in one ugly moment people will go in unison to assault someone or force the authorities to carry out some discriminatory measures.

Such an unsophisticated democracy (in the sense that all policies are created in accordance with the will of the people) often reveals itself in discussions regarding «conflict». Many things, which may be fully described as discrimination, ethnic violence or hate speech, are construed as a clash of large groups of people - «ethnic groups» or «minorities».

In principle, it is unreasonable to claim that popular attitudes do not influence people's behaviour and government policies, especially in countries with a democratic system. It is equally unreasonable to say that the concept of ethnic conflict is unfounded and has no analytical value. Rather, it is that these approaches and conceptualisations function within a narrow framework that limits their value. Beyond this narrow framework, they no longer function, forming instead misconceptions and becoming a tool for manipulation.

Almost all known instances of systematic discrimination in the modern era, as well as large-scale conflicts, ethnic cleansing and genocide have been reasonably well-studied and documented. In most cases, it is not as if a mass of people suddenly fell into ethnic hatred, got up and went out to fight with «foreigners». The prevailing popular attitude is one of indifference. Indifference gives free reign to and helps criminal leaders (like field commanders or members of varying extremist groups). It also allows the

<sup>1</sup> The last argument sometimes is used by Russian bureaucrats, commenting on the contention that in their own way, such separate classes for minorities establish a ghetto, where the children are simply ignored.

state to persecute, deport or eliminate those whom these leaders consider enemies or undesirable elements. To be sure, mass apathy is not the only factor that makes persecution or elimination of people possible; appropriate incentives and mechanisms and an appropriate external environment are required.

Indifference in this case should not be understood as neutrality; here it implies the absence of strong emotions and aggressive impulses. Few people experience fear and hatred in regard to «foreigners». People can refrain from thinking about their participation in and accountability for events, and they simply go about their business and carry out orders given from above. The question of personal moral accountability simply does not arise. The right to make decisions is given over to the authorities, and it does not even occur to the actor what meaning their small personal function has in the larger system of oppression or extermination.

Experience has shown that indifference according to this definition is brought about by simple propaganda techniques. One must mark out «foreigners» according to a psychological trait and assert (and this is simple) that it is correct to look at the situation as a whole as «normalisation» or «the restoration of order». For example, it could be the deportation of illegal immigrants, agents of a foreign government or harbourers of criminal offenders. This is usually followed by a childish popular reaction in the spirit of «Let the authorities deal with it».

Manipulation using the idea of mass xenophobia permits authorities or politicians to shift accountability for what is happening away from them since they act, allegedly, in accordance with the will of the people. Discussions of mass xenophobia also means ineffective blathering on and discrediting truly serious issues, since most do not feel these particular emotions and do not consider themselves xenophobes.

The concept of conflict opens up even more possibilities. It distributes responsibility, as the word «conflict» implies at least two equally active and comparable sides that are thus equally guilty. With such an approach, it is convenient to blame the victims themselves for what happened to them. This is especially easy in post-Soviet society, where people have become accustomed to living «by the rules». For authorities or politicians, it is easier to deny their own responsibility if conflict can be presented as a natural and inevitable process. Thus it is easier to justify discriminatory practices, which are supposedly intended to prevent conflict. Here we put the matter to rest, although there are also other such possibilities.

More often than not, it can be said that it is not mass xenophobia that leads to discrimination but rather repressive policies (not necessarily explicitly discriminatory ones) that give rise to xenophobia. Many actions by the government nudge actors or observers into devising or choosing racist explanations and justifications of events. It is impossible to know whether discriminatory considerations are responsible for routine measures against illegal immigration in every specific case, but, in general, many civil servants and laymen understand such actions as a battle with «Blacks», «Asians» or «Caucasians».

And it is not very difficult to see and to understand that a general atmosphere of searching for enemies, establishing unity of opinion and suspicion, propaganda of imperialistic values and militarism effectively cultivates suspicion and animosity towards those who differ from the average majority, including in ethnic origin.

**Myth 5. Discrimination does not constitute a problem in and of itself; it is people's natural and justified reaction to what frustrates them and what they perceive as injustice. The solution must be sought by eliminating the root of these frustrations.**

Discrimination toward people of different nationalities (or those who appear to be of a different «nationality») is the result, with some simplification, of stereotypes. That is, stereotypical notions that link a person's physical characteristics or qualities to his or her ethnic background. Ethnicity serves as a marker for a variety of different assumed characteristics. Importantly, most often stereotypes are not related to hostility or fear, which is the literal meaning of the word «xenophobia». More often than not they are not personally perceived as xenophobia by those who have them or by the authorities. Therefore, all the grand rhetoric and provocations about national intolerance and xenophobes fall on deaf ears.

The relationship between stereotypes and reality can be very complex. Stereotypes may be rooted in overactive imaginations, as much as in actual patterns of human interaction<sup>2</sup>. A stereotype is rather an expectation, which may be formed over a long time under the influence of a variety of factors. The overwhelming majority of people who believe in some kind of stereotype regarding one ethnic group or another have never actually met anyone from that group themselves. So-called common sense and its by-product, prejudice, are learned things. It is a particular cultural system, developed and reproduced by all the mechanisms of socialisation and communication— family upbringing, rumours, anecdotes, the press, cinema, literature<sup>3</sup> and more. Even if someone has personal experience (especially clashes and conflict) with another nationality, then this experience falls on top of already existing expectations and beliefs. Something that would not have attracted attention in a different setting with different people can take on significance and provoke an emotional response.

Adherence to stereotypes is its own kind of rational behaviour. Everyone must make choices when dealing with others. Typically, this choice is made on the basis of incomplete information about a person, or even without any information at all. Stereotypes linking particular expectations to certain attributes then serve as a means of navigation. The problem is that the system of stereotypes forms a persistent routine of relations and a behavioural pattern that simply does not allow many people, who fall into «minority» or «migrant» groups to have a normal, equitable life in society.

Herein lies the difficulty. Stereotypes, especially those supported and ennobled by literature and the media, are perceived as a reflection of objective reality and become an excuse for discrimination and even a guideline for political decision-making. Since common sense stands behind them, it is very difficult, if at all possible, to overcome them. Stereotypes reflect expectations and, to a very contentious degree, empirical reality. It is therefore naïve to expect that, even if the minority changed in such a way as those surrounding them would like, it would automatically end the prejudice.

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<sup>2</sup> An illustrative example of such concocted stereotypes is given through the history of the Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai - for all the accusations of criminality and aggression aroused by the authorities and the press, they did not find even a minimal number of likely cases.

<sup>3</sup> A striking example of the way that clichés take root and begin to shape popular conceptions of ethnic minorities in general is provided by the popular detective novel by Anna and Sergey Litvinov, «Ladies Kill Cavaliers», which deals with the crimes of an invented ethnic community in Moscow.

**Myth 6. The problem itself is created in the discussion about inequality and discrimination because the discussion spreads misconceptions and encourages people to see ethnic discrimination where it does not exist.**

Such opinions originate from two sources. The first is officials, who in principle do not want any criticism, and therefore hide behind arguments about «inflaming passions». The second is specialists, who have a somewhat simplistic understanding of the idea that social reality is formed by language. In other words, how people describe reality and formulate problems in their own speech.

If people are prepared to see relationships and conflicts between “ethnic groups” in everything around them, then they will adjust their thinking and behaviour accordingly and encourage others to do the same. This adjustment will lead to tangible, practical results. In fact, those who fight discrimination often think and reason based on the same exact assumptions and representations as those who are guilty of it. However, it does not necessarily follow that conscious public figures and private citizens imposing a taboo on ethnic designations will change anything or even bring any benefit. For one thing, discrimination - that is, treating people differently based on their ethnic background - exists, and such incidents must be revealed and documented. Of course, you can only change widely-held societal beliefs and ways of speaking and writing by participating in discussions. In this, you can explain what this or that stereotype is and means and how you can overcome them.

**Myth 7. Accusations of discrimination are an instrument of propaganda and political manipulation.**

Western governments and global organisations seeking to discredit Russia and put psychological pressure on its leadership accuse Russia of this more often than anything else. Another target of these accusations (with its foundations on the nationalist side) is the liberal publicists and human rights activists, who allegedly accuse the government and Russian public of xenophobia and racism. In this way, they encourage nationalism and xenophobia toward minorities and those seeking to destabilise society and governmental institutions.

In the first place it should be noted that the existence of racism itself does not characterise any government in global societal opinion as either good or bad; governments are subject to harsh criticism both for support of discrimination on the governmental level or a demonstrated denial of the problem. Most often, public debate and investigation into the problems of racism affect only Western countries. The press in Europe and especially in America are interested almost exclusively in their own problems, and so, in contrast to in Russia, these topics are discussed often and actively. The world press will include only a very few, especially resonant cases occurring in Russia. The inquiries into the question of discrimination initiated by the former Soviet authorities can generally be counted on one hand. If you look over the conclusions and resolutions of global organisations (like the UN Committee on Racial Discrimination, for example), then you can see that they describe all countries as the same. On the contrary, these organisations, attempting to be diplomatic, do not give Russia nor similar countries the credit they deserve.

The myth of what role the subject of discrimination plays in international relations comes into contact with reality: foreign academic circles and human rights organisations actively promote and propagandise to the rest of the world Western (basically American) ideas of what racism and discrimination mean and entail. But the fact is that other working models simply do not exist. Arguments about «double standards» are valid only regarding a few «young democracies» that emerged from the dissolution of the USSR and Yugoslavia where undeserved advances are given, but some politicians and researchers appear ready to close their eyes to the local ‘tricks’ played with the rights of minorities. But there are no serious experts in this area; information about the problems spreads and is openly discussed.

As for a conspiracy theory (where would Russia be without it?), though it is present in conversations on the subject of discrimination, it is not a noticeable trend. For this reason, and because conspiracy theories are overtly clinical in nature, we will not discuss it in any further detail<sup>4</sup>. Actual occasions for this type of exposure do not exist. In Russia, the people and organisations concerned with the questions of equality and discrimination is negligible and nearly non-existent.

It is valuable to note three things. First, exposing foreign intrigues are based on preferred journalistic trends, namely, the denial of the imagined arguments from fictional opponents. For example, no one in their right mind would accuse the people or the government of «Russian fascism» and such things. Second, attempts to reinterpret people’s concerns about xenophobia and discrimination as racist accusations against the majority groups or all Russians as a whole echoes a common variation of Myth 4. This is the desire/tendency to see the source of discrimination only in the sentiment of the masses. Third, it is necessary to comment on the often-repeated idea of ‘standards’ in relation to various groups, the majorities and minorities. There is a kernel of rationality in this: the difference in attitudes toward xenophobia and nationalism between majority and minority groups, if there is any, is not dictated by malicious intents, but only the consideration that xenophobia on the part of minorities usually can be ignored as a political factor.

**Myth 8. The Western models of multiculturalism, political correctness and anti-discrimination, which they want to implement in Russia, have failed.**

This idea is one of the most mythologised and embellished to the point that one can only throw up one’s hands in dismay. There are many reasons for this mythologisation, and to inquire into all of them is next to impossible. I will discuss only one. Even fully-qualified people often conflate government policies and real measures with discussions concerning the state of affairs in this area or the potential risks. If real policy would be restrained and cautious, as it is in Western countries, then those who discuss it often do not limit themselves in their evaluations, criticisms and predictions. It is easy for people to read into a large amount of statements, widely varying in terms of their direction and argumentation, anything they like. Dishonest or semi-literate commentators choose what fits into their worldview, and

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the former governor of the Krasnodar region occasionally said that protests against discrimination toward Meskhetian Turks were organised by Zionists in an attempt to destroy the world in the Kuban. See: N.I. Kodratenko’s radio broadcast «The Kuban», 5 and 19 March 1998 (off-air transcript cited in: Alexander Osipov. «Russian experience of ethnic discrimination. Meskhetians in the Krasnodar Region». Links, 1999). In its turn, the local FSB press service stated that the Meskhetian Turkish diaspora controlled the special services. See: Turkish march/Krasnodar news. 2001. 14 April. It’s true that after 2003 the power of the US opened up the opportunity for Turks to move to America with refugee status and the Meskhetian opinions on whether or not to go were split even among single families, this somewhat tainted the impression of alleged cohesion and handling of the «community».

distort what does not. In addition, life is rich and diverse, and indeed, on the basis of multiculturalism and political correctness, sometimes absurd and ridiculous situations emerge. It then becomes possible to use one of the most effective methods of demagoguery - to treat specific, special cases as a general rule<sup>5</sup>. This is what allows false stories, such as those of man who was imprisoned for saying the word «Negro» or how Christians in Europe are forbidden to wear their own crosses, to spread.

In Western countries, there is no one model of «multiculturalism», and «multiculturalism» in various places is interpreted so differently that it is unclear how to even combine these interpretations into a single approach. Virtually nowhere is there a well-thought-out concept or strategy for «multiculturalism». Even at the best of times there are few cases in which authorities have referred to their policies in this way. In addition, people have grown accustomed to mixing a variety of things: anti-discrimination policies, integration of immigrants, anti-racism campaigns, business policies to «develop diversity» and so on. Moreover, it is also difficult to pinpoint any kind of prevailing internally consistent national model. Individual approaches in various areas are constantly changing and sometimes form bizarre combinations. It is therefore difficult to understand the success or failure of the matter in question.

For some reason, people who lived through the Soviet era subconsciously believe that everything important in life happens on the orders of the authorities. Accordingly, many are convinced that Western governments have developed and begun to implement some type of multiculturalism doctrine, thereby drastically changing the life of Western societies.

Rather, it is the exact opposite. Western Europe and North America are composed of free countries where civil rights really are secured. Immigrants and minorities, like everyone else, had privacy, business opportunities, the right to association, the right to freedom of expression, religious freedom and the right to disseminate information, including through the media. When ethnic and linguistic diversity developed and became noticeable, new realities required some explanation and adaptation. In response, there were discussions, plans and individual arrangements, sometimes under the label of «multiculturalism».

No matter how individual countries varied in their approaches toward ethnic diversity, they all had a common agenda at their core. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the governments in North America and Europe began to search for and try different ways of integrating various ethnic and racial minorities (especially immigrant communities) into a single society. This was to give everyone the opportunity to earn money and feel comfortable, while preventing the formation of poor, marginalised and socially-disadvantaged enclaves. Among these attempts was the desire of some governments (e.g. the Netherlands and Sweden) to not rely solely on the bureaucracy out of habit, but also on NGOs run by immigrants and ethnic minorities themselves. Furthermore, many governments make symbolic gestures designed to show their positive attitude toward the new cultural diversity. All this taken together has created the impression that these governments cultivate and support «community».

It might be difficult for post-Soviet people to imagine, but not everything in the world depends on the state, and the reach of any government is extremely limited. The state, it turns out, cannot fundamentally

<sup>5</sup> For example, in one of his articles, Vladimir Malakhov criticized one absurd statement from an odd loner in the Netherlands, which in the European and Russian press was discussed as a demarche of the Muslim community as a whole. See: V. Malakhov Muslims and Dogs, or How Every Day Problems Turn Political // Russian Journal. 22 February 2012. (<http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Musul-mane-i-sobaki-ili-kakbytovye-problemy-prevrashchayut-v-politicheskie>; Date accessed 15.09.2012).

alter the habits of people, the preferences of businesses or the actions of employers - anything that has an impact on social dynamics and social divisions. Not all immigrants and members of racial minorities have achieved success in their education and career. Many of them are still among the poorest and least fortunate members of society. Many live off state benefits, and many more are simply isolated from the rest of society, either because of settlement patterns or because of an imperfect knowledge of the local language. However, the fact that some problems remain and others have arisen does not mean that nothing else has changed. People can now defend themselves from overt discrimination. Minorities and immigrants have, in general, more rather than less opportunities to develop a career and increase their status, and attitudes within society as a whole have become more open and tolerant.

Many were struck by the statements on the failure of multiculturalism made by Western heads of state in 2010-11, but these statements perplexed people aware of the real state of affairs. After all, the kind of measures and programmes which might fall under the heading of «multicultural policy», in the sense of attempts to encourage and support immigrants in public life, were developed only in certain countries (Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Switzerland) in the 80s, and by the 90s they were already starting to be rolled back. Criticisms and vitriol directed against multiculturalism appeared later, particularly after the events of 2001. Thus, the appearance of proclamations by Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron on the failure of multiculturalism many years later in 2010 and 2011 were by then rather behind the times. The question of what provoked these statements is a whole other issue, and answers are likely to be found in politicians' courting of the electorate and plans to overhaul policies on society and immigration.

**Myth 9. Because of multiculturalism and so-called positive discrimination, minorities in the Western world are now at an advantage and have started to oppress the majority.**

«In fact, the statements made by Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron about the failure of multiculturalism are a recognition of the failure of the European model, which basically obliged citizens to adapt to the new arrivals, not the other way around<sup>6</sup>.»

«Benefits, 'privilege politics' and quotas inevitably lead to discrimination against the most powerful members of society, a group which tends to include many of a state's indigenous population. For this reason, theories of multiculturalism lay the ground for discrimination against the base cultures at the root of developed societies<sup>7</sup>.»

These kinds of opinions have little basis in reality, to put it mildly, and could safely be ignored if they had not suddenly become so popular on so many levels. Indeed, one of the fundamental official conceptual documents drawn up in 2010, the State Council of the Russian Federation's report on national relations, included a phrase about the situation outside of Russia: «the search, in a democratic society, for a just resolution to the situation whereby enshrining the rights of minorities has proved detrimental to the rights of majorities<sup>8</sup>». No satisfactory explanation of what

6 Arina Kholina. 'Enemies all around' [Кругом враги], New Times [Новое Время], no. 18, 2012. <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/52579> [accessed 15 September 2012]

7 Olga Smirnova and Darya Zolina. «The Cultural Security of Contemporary Russian Society» [Культурная безопасность российского общества на современном этапе], Ethnopanorama [Этнопанорама], No. 3-4, 2011, p. 83.

8 See the State Council of the Russian Federation's Report on Measures for Strengthening Cross-National Accord in Russian Society [Доклад Государственного совета Российской Федерации о мерах по укреплению межнационального согласия в российском обществе], 11 February 2011, p. 3, published by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian

majorities are being forced to adapt to, what advantages minorities have received and which of their own rules they are forcing on the majority was forthcoming.

«Reverse discrimination», real, formally recognised advantages and privileges used by minorities, actually does exist. It is essentially the policies favouring aboriginal populations in the USA and Canada. However, these groups are of interest to only a few of those anxious about the «persecution of the white man», and they are rarely discussed. In all other cases, «positive discrimination» is an exception, not a rule. The wider concept of «positive measures», or, in the American phrase, «affirmative action», involves the creation of stimuli for the advancement of vulnerable and formerly discriminated-against groups in business, in the job market and in education. Usually these measures are limited to competing for open jobs or for admittance into universities, when being part of a minority can be considered an additional advantage in otherwise equal circumstances. Actions that go further and approach, to an extent, «reverse discrimination», are rare and are practically always challenged in court, often fairly successfully. All the long-term risks associated with «positive measures», all the discussions around them and wide-ranging polemical excesses lie in a completely different plane that does not intersect with real world politics.

The subtext of all the laments about the «oppression of white people» or about the «political correctness scare» can be summed up with a single word: «pamper». This implies, or says directly, that Western governments, through stupidity and naivety, are too permissive with minorities, and those who perceive this as weakness take advantage of them. It is clear that to people whose recent past was within the Soviet era, simple «crackdown» solutions – bans, restrictions, policing, and so on— are more familiar. The best way to be a fool is to consider others to be more foolish than oneself.

Simple solutions such as forced assimilation and intense police surveillance have been used in developed countries (and, unfortunately, this use is beginning to occur again), but they have proven to be counterproductive. Forced assimilation leads not to integration but to segregation. In short, when the government segregates a group that is subject to reform and reeducation and begins to oppress it, this leads only to the segregated group falling into social isolation. Intense police surveillance of disadvantaged minorities also leads to this, as well as to mutual estrangement and to animosity between the minority and the police. The police consider the members of the minority group to be potential criminals and act accordingly; the minority repays this in kind. One of the most well-known results is the low-level war between the police and youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods inhabited by minorities and immigrants. This from time to time leads to outbreaks of mass violence and urban riots (such as those that took place in France in Autumn 2005). A lesser-known consequence is the creation of a criminal image for minorities and actual criminalisation. Increased attention paid to a minority means that a relatively large number of immigrants from there come to the attention of law enforcement. Police officers are specifically trained and are not inclined to be too soft. Thus, a large number of people acquire experience dealing with the police and prison systems. Corresponding criminal statistics emerge and before long the majority wants nothing to do with those coming from allegedly criminal surroundings amidst immigrants or «coloured» people. They then willingly vote for those who offer further “crackdowns,” and this spiral can uncoil endlessly.

## **Myth 10. Diasporas are all around.**

This is already a myth about Russia, boiling down to the fact that numerous organised and aggressive «diasporas», in spite of all their complaints, were not badly settled, have taken hold of many economic spheres and even impose their own traditions and practises on the majority. Conversations about discrimination, then, are ordered and paid for by the self-same diasporas, and anti-discrimination measures signify the creation of privileged conditions for them.

There is nothing to be said about protection from discrimination and about discussions on these topics, due to the absence of said protection and discussions (i.e. meaningful discussion, not empty talk). Regarding the other topics noted, they should certainly be interesting. Indeed, there are many important and complex questions: how people use familial and community connections in order to conduct business or simply adjust to life in a foreign, unknown and often unfriendly environment; how groups of young people, with or without criminal inclinations, are formed and how they occupy themselves; how different people explain and describe the clashes that occur in the course of communication with ethnic «others» and so on.

However, given the realities of the Russian case, there are two difficulties in having this type of discussion.

First, topics that are concretely and impartially studied are not proposed for discussions, but rather those that are considered well-known, or more accurately, rumours and gossip. No one has bothered to explain what kind of «traditions and customs» from the «diaspora» are «imposed» on Russians. Typically, there are extremely generalised claims concerning the aggressiveness of the «newcomers», their criminal inclinations and their general incivility toward Russians. Conversations about economic expansion has, for over twenty years, mainly revolved around such key sectors of the national economy as wholesale and retail markets, which were previously called «collective farms».

Second, there is a universal general willingness to see their ethnic background first and foremost in social processes and phenomena. If ethnic differences are left aside, then it is easy to see that the problems understood as related to the diaspora are in fact one way or another common to Russia as a whole. There is monopolism and corruption, which are inherent in the whole Russian economy without exception. There is lack of economic freedom and social mobility and, therefore, the inability to conduct business or make a career without patrons or clientism. There are a large number of unsettled young people with no prospects in life, who then replenish the criminal environment. There is, what is referred to as social anomie, which is the disintegration of norms and a lack of a common understanding of what is considered normal and acceptable and what is not. There are numerous methods and strategies for surviving and earning money. There is a feeling of universal injustice, which turns into envy and aggression. The idea that the diasporas bring something new into these issues is not factual. However, it is important that when all of these issues have a national component and when social cleavages and conflicts intersect with ethnicity, then all of these problems are immediately noticed and resonate.

The economy is skewed, with a large proportion of industries that do not need high tech but are willing to exploit the free labour force, drawing it, like a vacuum, from neighbouring countries. There is the state apparatus, which makes this import and exploitation possible. There is clientism in law enforcement and administration, who are key players in small and medium trade-related businesses (and the big question is who adapts to whom - them to the «diaspora» or the «diaspora» to them). There are economically depressed areas in the periphery (whether in Siberia or the Caucasus), from

where people migrate with all of their skills and habits to large central cities, which are unfamiliar and unfriendly environments. All of these real causes for the current situation would seem to reveal the truth, but attention continues to be easily diverted to a discussion on «migrants» and their supposedly «alien» culture and «community cohesion».

### **Myth 11. Ethnocracy**

Ethnocracy refers to the common notion that the Russian republics, which were formed on a quasi-ethnic basis, discriminated against the «non-titular» population, and as such «ethnic federalism» means privileges for «titular» nationalities. It is undeniable that the government, acting on behalf of one ethnic group, can create benefits for that group and thereby undermine the others. However, there is a wide chasm between possibility and reality. Therefore, to speak about ethnocracy in the republics is a myth because thus far the main arguments given are, on the whole, unsubstantiated.

Let's begin with the fact that Russian republics differ from one another in their ethnic makeups, ethno-cultural politics, and the status of their «non-titular» population. Quite often these very significant differences are ignored. Published data in the literature suggests that in some (but not all) republics, «titular» nationalities are disproportionately represented in local administrative elite and in business. But there may always be various causes for the difference in social representation of various groups, and the main cause is not always discrimination. In our particular case, we still do not have serious evidence of discriminatory policies in the republics that would affect a large part of the population. In the legal sense, Russian republics are not «ethnic» governments. Such an impression exists due to the free interpretation of several ambiguous declarative provisions in their constitutions. More importantly, closed systems in government and in business have developed in the republics, as they have in all other regions, so that these options are not open to outsiders. These systems and their filters against «the other» can acquire ethnic overtones, but outward appearance is still no basis for judging how the internal mechanisms are constructed and function.

Moreover, it is worthwhile to examine cases of profound crisis, or even the dissolution of a government, separately. The «Chechen revolution» began in the 1990s and the wave of criminal violence which first targeted the non-Chechen population was directly linked to racism and discrimination. However, it is hardly accurate to call the result an «ethnic statehood». Something similar could be said about the expansion of power and low-level civil war in Dagestan, and the resulting exodus of ethnic Russians. Similar reasons likely are and were in play in other regions as well (like in Tuva at the start of the 1990s), but there is still little reliable information on the subject. In any case, there is no direct relationship between a societal crisis and the powers directly related to ethnocracy and nationalistic ideals.

### **Myth 12. Russians are generally prejudiced and discriminate.**

This is a kind of synthesized myth that takes myths 10 and 11, adds the ideas of the «anti-Russian government» in Russia, the division of the Russian people and very nearly a global conspiracy against Russians.

In general, the reasons for this perception are understandable, though hardly justifiable. Social

projection onto ethnicity, the belief that social phenomena reflect the lives of ethnic groups or «interethnic relations» is, to use a common metaphor, a mill: what you put in is what you get out.

On the one hand, there is a tangle of serious issues in economics, demographics, the composition of the government, social security, education and other matters. On the other hand, there is a general frustration and emotional strain fueled by the media and political journalism, and a strongly-cultivated victim complex in many people. Then again, there is a deeply rooted tendency to pigeonhole social phenomena into ethnic divisions and think that one's own country is exceptional, that there is not a single other country with a similar economy and every group, be it Russians, Chuvash, Dargins etc., has its own separate problems.

Detailed analysis of this belief is not useful. First, because it's impossible to oppose faith with rational argument, and second, because the absence of the object of the dispute. There are no statistical data showing that Russians in Russia are worse off than other nationalities; there is no basis, apart from a purely demagogic one, for the argument that someone is plotting something against the Russian people. There are no rational arguments, because a country and people's issues would have to be examined through an ethnic lens, and not simply viewed in their true forms as social problems.

It is important to note three further things. First: such an ethnically-oriented approach is nothing new. Discrimination toward minorities is almost always justified as a defensive measure and as a «restoration of justice», and the previous state of affairs seen as an infringement on their «own». In the end, lynch mobs in America were explained by the need to «put blacks in their place», and anti-Semitic measures in tsarist Russia were carried out to protect the Russian people from exploitation.

Second, mass conformity makes these ways of thinking very contagious; the most varied sober-minded people decide it is acceptable to act in these ways and agree with this approach. Third: it is clearly evident that the weaknesses of antidiscrimination logic can take you anywhere you like. The «oppression of Russians» is this same idea of «structural discrimination» or «systemic racism», but is used in the opposite direction. (More on this below.)

*This text is an extract of a publication. Original document in Russian available [here](#).*

**Source:** Ossipov (A.), *Что такое jetnicheskaja diskriminacija i chto s nej možno sdelat'*, SOVA for information and analysis, Moskva, 2012

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