



## **Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of South Africa**

### **PRESS-RELEASE**

#### **Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's article "Russia: the Ethnicity Issue" for Nezavisimaya Gazeta**

23-01-2012

For Russia – with its rich diversity of languages, traditions, ethnicities and cultures – the ethnicity issue is without any exaggeration a fundamental one. Any responsible policymaker or public leader must realise that public and inter-ethnic harmony is one of our country's key requisites.

We see what is happening in the world, and what serious risks are accumulating. The growth of inter-ethnic and inter-faith tensions is one of today's realities. Nationalism and religious intolerance are coming to provide an ideological base for most radical groupings and tendencies. This undermines and destroys the state and divides society.

Colossal migration flows – and there is every ground for believing they will only increase – are already called a new "great migration" able to transform the patterns of life and even appearance of whole continents. Millions of people in search of a better life are leaving regions hit by starvation, chronic conflict, poverty and social dislocation.

The most developed and affluent countries, which used to be proud of their tolerance, have come face-to-face with an "exacerbated ethnic issue". Today, one after another, they announce that they have failed to integrate different cultures into society, that they have failed to ensure the conflict-free and harmonious interaction between different cultures, religions and ethnic groups.

The melting pot of assimilation is highly volatile – pushed to its limits by the ever-increasing migration flow. In politics this has found reflection in a "multiculturalism" which denies integration through assimilation. Although it makes the "minorities right to be distinct" absolute, it does little to balance this with public, behavioural or cultural commitments to the population and society as a whole. Closed ethnic-religious communities that form in many countries refuse not only to assimilate but even to adapt. There are neighbourhoods and whole towns where generations of new arrivals live on benefits and do not speak the language of the country in which they live. The growth of xenophobia among the population and harsh attempts to protect their interests, jobs and social benefits from "immigrant rivals" is the response seen in this behavioural model. People, shocked by what they perceive as aggressive pressure on their traditions or way of life, feel a genuine fear of losing their national identity.

Thoroughly respectable European politicians have started to talk openly about the failure of the "multicultural project". They exploit the "ethnic card" to stay in office, adding their voices to the chorus of those they used to consider marginal or and radicals. Extreme forces, in turn, are rapidly gaining in number, laying serious claims to power. In fact, there is talk of forced assimilation – against the backdrop of "shutting down" and sharply tightening migration rules.

People from different cultures are faced with a choice: either “blend in with the majority” or remain an ethnic minority that is isolated, despite being provided with all kinds of rights and safeguards. But in effect they find themselves divorced from promising career opportunities. I will say frankly – an individual who finds themselves in this environment is unlikely to be loyal to his or her country.

Behind the “failure of the multicultural project” stands the crisis of the model of the “ethnic state” – a state historically been built exclusively on the basis of ethnic identity. This is a serious challenge that Europe and many other regions in the world will have to face.

### **Russia as an “historic state”**

The situation in our case, for all the apparent similarities, is entirely different. Our ethnic and migration problems are directly related to the collapse of the USSR, and beyond that, historically, to the destruction of Greater Russia, which emerged in its original form in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was followed by the inevitable degradation of state, social and economic institutions. And a huge development gap throughout the entire post-Soviet space.

When RSFSR deputies declared sovereignty 20 years ago, they, in the heat of fighting the “Union centre”, started up the process of building “ethnic states” within the Russian Federation itself. The “Union centre”, in turn, trying to bring pressure to bear on its opponents, began a behind-the-scenes struggle with Russian autonomous areas, promising them a higher “ethnic-state status”. Now all those involved are simply passing the buck. But one thing is apparent – their actions led equally and inevitably to both downfall and separatism. They lacked both courage and responsibility as well as the political will to uphold the Motherland’s territorial integrity steadfastly and consistently.

What the originators of this “sovereignty scheme” perhaps failed to envisage, was quickly and easily understood by others, including those beyond our state borders. The effects were not slow to follow.

The country’s collapse pushed us to the brink and certain regions even to the brink of civil war fuelled by ethnic strife. With great effort and major sacrifices these flames were extinguished. But that does not mean, of course, that the problem has been resolved.

However, Russia did not vanish, even when the state as an institution was critically weakened. What happened can be described in the words of historian Vasily Klyuchevsky, who wrote about the first Russian revolt: “When the political pillars of public order gave way, the country was saved by the moral will of the people.”

Incidentally, National Unity Day on November 4, which some superficially describe as “the day we overcame the Poles,” should more accurately be described as the day we achieved victory over ourselves, over our internal strife and feuds, the day when the classes and ethnic groups saw themselves as a single entity, as one people. We can rightly consider this holiday the birthday of Russia as a civil nation.

Historically, Russia has been neither a mono-ethnic state nor a US-style “melting pot,” where most people are, in some way, migrants. Russia developed over centuries as a multinational state, in which different ethnic groups have had to mingle, interact and connect with each other – in domestic and professional environments, and in society as friends. Hundreds of ethnic groups live in their native lands alongside Russians. The development of vast land areas throughout Russia’s history has been a joint affair between many different peoples. Suffice it to say that ethnic Ukrainians live in an area stretching from the Carpathian Mountains to Kamchatka, and the same is true of ethnic Tartars, Jews and Byelorussians.

One of the earliest Slavonic philosophical and religious texts, *The Sermon on Law and Grace*, rejects the theory of the “chosen people” and advocates the idea of equality before God. And here is how *The Primary Chronicle* described the multi-national character of the Old Russian state: “The Slavic-speaking ethnic groups are Polans, Drevlians, Novgorod Slavs, Polochans, Dregoviches, Severians, Buzhans... And there are other ethnic groups – Chud, Merya, Ves, Muroma, Cheremis, Mordva, Perm, Pechera, Yam, Litva, Korsh, Neroma and Lib – who speak their own languages...”

It is about this specific feature of the Russian state that Ivan Ilyin wrote: “Do not eradicate, suppress or enslave the blood of others, do not strangle the life of other non-Orthodox tribes, but give everyone the freedom to breathe and their own great homeland... honour everyone and reconcile them with each other, allow everyone to pray and work as they choose, and *pick the best from each for the political and cultural development of the state.*”

The Russian people and Russian culture are the linchpin, the glue that binds together this unique civilisation. But all kinds of provocateurs and our enemies will do their best to snatch this linchpin from Russia, through phoney talk about the Russian right to self-determination, “racial purity” and the need to “complete what was started in 1991 – the elimination of the empire that is feeding off the Russian people.” What they really want in the end is to make people destroy their homeland with their own hands.

I am convinced that the attempts to preach the idea of a “national” or monoethnic Russian state contradict our thousand-year history. Moreover, this is a shortcut to destroying the Russian people and Russian statehood, and for that matter any viable, sovereign statehood on the planet.

When they start shouting, “Stop feeding the Caucasus,” tomorrow their rallying cry will be: “Stop feeding Siberia, the Far East, the Urals, the Volga region or the Moscow Region.” This was the formula used by those who paved the way to the collapse of the Soviet Union. As for the notorious concept of self-determination, a slogan used by all kinds of politicians who have fought for power and geopolitical dividends, from Vladimir Lenin to Woodrow Wilson, the Russian people made their choice long ago. The self-determination of the Russian people is to be a multiethnic civilisation with Russian culture at its core. The Russian people have confirmed their choice time and again during their thousand-year history – with their blood, not through plebiscites or referendums.

### **A common cultural code**

The Russian experience of state development is unique. Ours is a multiethnic society; we are a united people. This makes our country complicated and multidimensional and gives us unique opportunities for development in many spheres. But when a multiethnic society is infected with the virus of nationalism, it loses its strength and stability. We must understand the far-reaching consequences of indulging those who are trying to incite ethnic strife and hatred towards people of other cultures and faiths.

Civil peace and ethnic accord are not a completed painting that remains unchanged for centuries. On the contrary, it entails constant movement and dialogue, hard work by the state and society, very delicate decisions and balanced and wise policies capable of ensuring “unity in diversity.” We must not only honour mutual obligations, but also try to find common values. You cannot force someone to be with you, not even in a mercenary marriage based on a cost-benefit analysis. Such a relationship only works until a crisis hits, at which point it starts working against itself.

Confidence in our ability to achieve the harmonious development of a multicultural society is based on our culture, history and our type of identity.

You may recall that many Soviet citizens who were based abroad identified themselves as Russians and considered themselves as such, irrespective of their ethnicity. It is also interesting to note that ethnic Russians have never formed stable ethnic diasporas anywhere, even though their representation – both in numbers and quality – has been significant. The reason is that our identity is based on a different cultural code.

The Russian people are state-builders, as evidenced by the existence of Russia. Their great mission is to unite and bind together a civilisation. Language, culture and something Fyodor Dostoyevsky defined as “universal responsiveness” is what unites Russian Armenians, Russian Azeris, Russian Germans, Russian Tatars and others, in a type of state civilisation where there are no ethnicities, but where “belonging” is determined by a common culture and shared values.

This kind of civilisational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture, although this culture is represented not only by ethnic Russians, but by all the holders of this identity, regardless of their ethnicity. It is a kind of cultural code which has been attacked ever more often over the past few years; hostile forces have been trying to break it, and yet, it has survived. It needs to be supported, strengthened and protected.

Education plays a huge role in this. The available choice of educational programmes, the variety of curricula, is, without doubt, a major achievement. At the same time, this variety should be based on sacrosanct values, as well as a basic knowledge and understanding of the world. The civic goal of the education system is to provide each citizen with the necessary amount of cultural knowledge, upon which the foundations of national self-identity is based. First and foremost, education programmes should emphasise important subjects such as the Russian language, Russian literature and Russian history – taught, of course, within the context of the global wealth of all ethnic traditions and cultures.

In the 1920s, some leading universities in the United States advocated something referred to as the Western Canon, a canon of books regarded as the most important and influential in shaping Western culture. Each self-respecting student was required to read 100 books from a specially compiled list of the greatest books of the Western world. Some universities still hold on to this tradition. Russians have always been described as a “reading nation.” Let us take a survey of our most influential cultural figures and compile a 100-book canon that every Russian school leaver will be required to read – that is, to read at home rather than study in class or memorise. And then they would be asked to write an essay on one of them in their final exams. Or at least let us give young Russians a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and world outlook in various student competitions.

State policy with regard to culture must provide appropriate guidelines. I am referring to media such as television, cinema, the Internet and mass culture in general, which shape public consciousness and set rules and patterns of behaviour.

Let us recall how Hollywood helped shape the consciousness of several generations of Americans. It promoted values and priorities that were rather positive in terms of national interests and public morals. Russia could learn from that experience.

Let me emphasise that this policy has nothing to do with restricting creativity, with censorship or some rigid “official ideology.” What I am saying is that the government has a right, and a duty, to focus its efforts and resources toward resolving the social and public challenges it has identified. Shaping a mindset that binds the nation together is one of these challenges.

So subtle cultural therapy is what is recommended for Russia, a country where, for many, the civil war never really ended and where the past is highly politicised and seen as a collection of ideological quotes (often interpreted by different people in opposite ways). We need a cultural

policy – pursued at every level from school teaching to historical documentation – to shape an understanding of history in which representatives from each ethnic group, as well as the descendants of the “Red Commissars” and “White Officers”, can be seen to have a place. They must see where they belong in that process and see themselves as heirs to the great Russian history – tragic and controversial as it is, but still “one for all.”

We need a national policy strategy based on civic patriotism. There is no need for anyone living in Russia to forget their religion or ethnicity. But they should identify themselves primarily as citizens of Russia and take pride in that. No one has the right to put their ethnic or religious interests above the laws of the land. At the same time, national laws must take into account the specific characteristics of different ethnic and religious groups.

I believe that the federal government should set up a special agency responsible for ethnic development, inter-ethnic accord and interaction. These problems are currently the responsibility of the Ministry of Regional Development. Unfortunately, with the overwhelming volume of current issues the ministry has to deal with, these matters are often pushed to the back burner. This needs to change.

This should not be another stereotypical government agency. Rather it should be a collegial body with certain powers to work directly with the president and top government officials. National policies cannot be drafted and implemented exclusively in official offices. National and public associations should be directly involved in the consultation and drafting process.

We also expect the traditional religions to be actively involved in these policy consultations. Although very different, each of them – the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism – has the same basic and universal underlying moral and spiritual values: compassion, cooperation, truth, justice, respect for elders, the ideals of family and work. These moral targets cannot be replaced, and must be strengthened.

I am confident that the government and society should welcome and support the efforts of the different faiths in education, social welfare and in the Armed Forces. At the same time, Russia should remain a secular state.

### **Nationalities policy and the role of strong institutions**

Society's systemic problems frequently surface in the form of interethnic tensions. It should always be kept in mind that there is a direct relation between unresolved socioeconomic problems, an inequitable law enforcement system, bureaucratically entangled officials and corruption, when considering ethnic conflict. If we look at the history of recent interethnic excesses – Kondapoga, Manezhnaya Square, Sagra – we can find these "triggers" practically everywhere. In each case we can see a sharp response to injustice, irresponsibility and inaction on the part of government officials. We see a lack of faith in equality before the law and in the inevitability of punishment for criminals. We see the conviction that everything is corrupt and that there is no truth.

When people start complaining that the rights of Russians are being infringed upon in Russia and particularly in historical Russian territories, this means that government agencies are failing in their direct duties: they do not defend the lives, the rights or the security of the people. Since the majority of this people are Russian, it becomes possible to capitalise on the subject of "national oppression of Russians" and to make this justified public reaction assume the most primitive and vulgar form of interethnic unrest. At the same time they will cry about "Russian fascism" at every opportunity.

We must be aware of the risks and threats inherent in situations likely to reach the point of ethnic conflict. And we should estimate the activity or inactivity of law enforcement or of the

authorities, which have led to interethnic tensions, with the most critical approach manner, and with no regard for rank or position.

There are just a few recipes for situations of this kind. Do not jump to hasty conclusions. Every aspect of the problem should be considered. Each case involving the "ethnic issue" should be considered on its own merit, with the facts clarified and the mutual grievances settled. Where there are no hard facts, the process should be made public because the lack of information can breed rumours that can only make things worse. Of exceptional importance at this point is the media's professionalism and sense of responsibility.

No dialogue can take place amid rioting and violence. No one should be tempted to push the authorities into making a decision using a riot as a tool. Our law enforcement agencies have proved that they can cut short these attempts quickly and efficiently.

One more point of principle is that we must promote a democratic, multi-party system. Decrees are to be issued soon, which will simplify and liberalise the registration and functionality of political parties; proposals on reestablishing the popular election of regional governors are being put into practice. All these steps are necessary and to the point. But the organisation of regional parties, including in the national republics, is one thing we should think twice about. This is a direct path to separatism. Restrictions, with possible separatism in mind, should also be applied to the election of the regional governors. Those who attempt to lean towards nationalist, separatist, or other similar forces or influences should be restricted from the electoral process through democratic and court procedures.

### **The migration problem and our integration project**

Today many people are worried or even, let's face it, irritated by the costs linked with mass migration, both immigration and domestic migration. Some are concerned that the creation of the Eurasian Union will lead to a surge in migration and consequently to the amplification of existing problems. I believe we must clearly outline our position.

First, it is obvious that we should dramatically improve the quality of the government's migration policy. We will address this issue.

Illegal immigration can never be stopped completely; but it must and can be minimised. In this sense, intelligible police actions and the authority of the migration services should be strengthened.

But a simple mechanical toughening of the migration policy alone will not be effective. In many countries this toughening has only led to a rise in illegal migration. A migration policy's criterion should be its efficiency, not its rigidity.

In this connection, our policy with respect to legal migration, both permanent and temporary, should be clearly differentiated. This, in turn, implies obvious migration policy priorities, a policy that favours skills, competence, competitiveness, and cultural and behavioural compatibility. This "positive selection" of and rivalry for quality migrants exists all over the world. It goes without saying that these migrants integrate into their host societies much better and easier.

Second. Domestic migration has been growing in this country; people travel to other constituent territories of the Federation or to big cities to study, to live or to work. They are full citizens of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, those who arrive in regions with different cultural and historical traditions should treat local customs with respect. I mean the customs of the Russian people and those of all

the other peoples of Russia. A different kind of behaviour – inadequate, aggressive, provocative, disrespectful, and the like – should meet with a legitimate, if severe, response on the part of the authorities first, authorities that often are simply indifferent today. We must see whether the Administrative Code, the Criminal Code and the regulations of the Interior Ministry's agencies contain all the necessary provisions for controlling this kind of behaviour. A case in point is tightening the law and introducing criminal liability for breaches of migration and registration rules. Occasionally it is enough to issue a warning. But if a warning is based on a concrete legislative rule, it will be more effective. It will be understood correctly – not as the opinion of a police officer or an official but precisely as an injunction of the law that should be obeyed equally by everyone.

A civilized framework is also of importance in internal migration. Among other things, it is necessary to develop a harmonious social infrastructure: healthcare, education, and the labour market. These systems are already at the edge in many "migration-attractive" regions and major cities. This makes the situation somewhat difficult for both the long time residents and for the "newcomers."

It is my view that we have to toughen registration rules and the penalties for breaching these rules. As is only natural, this should be done without prejudice to the constitutional right to a free choice of a place of residence.

Third comes the strengthening of the judicial system and establishing effective law enforcement agencies. This is essential for both immigration and, in our case, for internal migration – from the North Caucasus, in particular. Without this there can be no objectivity in resolving inter-community disputes (the accepting majority and migrants), nor can there be any perception of migration as both safe and fair.

Moreover, incompetent, corrupt courts and police will always cause a backlash and antagonise the host-society's views of migrants. This also leads to the flourishing of gang culture and the shadow economy among the migrants themselves.

We must not allow isolated ethnic communities to emerge in which criminal codes prevail over the law. This would be a violation of the rights of the migrants themselves – both by the crime bosses and by the corrupt authorities.

Ethnicity-related crimes flourish amid widespread corruption. Under the law, criminal groups tied to ethnicities or clans are no different from any other criminal groups. But in the particular circumstances we face here, ethnicity-related crime is not just a rule-of-law matter; crucially, it has a national security aspect. The problem must thus be tackled in an appropriate way.

The fourth point is the need to adequately integrate and socialise migrants. This is where we have to return to the issue of education. There must be more focus on the quality of education in Russia rather than on the particular relationship between the education system and migration policy (as this latter is, in any case, certainly not schools' main objective).

The value and attractiveness of education could offer migrants a strong motivation to integrate into society while low educational standards will always prompt further isolation and seclusion of migrant communities that will last much longer, even for generations.

It is important that migrants have an opportunity to adapt to society. The basic requirement placed on people who want to live and work in Russia must be their willingness to familiarise themselves with our culture and language. From next year, migrants must be required to pass a Russian language test, Russian history and literature tests and a test in the Russian system of state and Russian law in order to get permission to reside. Like other developed countries, Russia is able

to provide migrants with the relevant classes. Compulsory professional training might be required in a number of cases, at the employer's expense.

Finally, the fifth point is close integration across the post-Soviet space as a real alternative to uncontrolled migration.

Objectively, mass migration is rooted, as I said, in a huge gap in development and living conditions. We understand that the logical way to reduce migration – if not to eliminate it completely – is to curtail this inequality. This is what so many liberal activists and left-wingers in the West advocate. But unfortunately, this beautiful, and ethically impeccable, view is clearly utopian if one takes the global perspective.

There are no objective obstacles, however, for us not to implement this approach given our particular socio-historical landscape. One of Eurasian integration's key tasks is opening up the opportunity for decent living standards and development to millions of people.

We understand that people do not leave their homes and travel miles away to work because they're fleeing "the good life" – sometimes in conditions that are far from acceptable – to earn a basic living wage for themselves and their families.

From this perspective, the tasks we set ourselves regarding these internal issues (creating a new economy and effective employment, rebuilding professional associations, developing production capacity and social infrastructure across the country), and regarding Eurasian integration, become key instruments in bringing migration flows back to a manageable level. This means, on the one hand, that we must direct migrants to areas where they would be less likely to trigger social tension. On the other hand, this means that we must give them the opportunities to lead normal lives, to live and work in their home regions, opportunities of which they largely feel deprived today. There are no easy decisions in ethnic policy. Elements of this policy are firmly embedded in various aspects of the state and society – in its economy, social issues, education, political system and foreign policy. We must build a model of state and a civilised society that would be equally attractive and balanced for everyone who views Russia as their motherland.

We can see where the work needs to be done. We understand we have a truly unique history. And we draw strong support from that mentality, culture, and identity that are ours and ours alone.

We will strengthen the historical state that we inherited from our ancestors, the civilisation that is blessed with an inherent ability to integrate various ethnicities and faiths.

We have lived together for many centuries. Together, we were victorious in the most terrible of wars. And we will continue to exist side by side. To those who want and try to divide us, I say – in your dreams.