

“AS IF I WERE AN ILLEGAL”: Racial Passing in Immigrant Russia

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Minju and I entered a secluded corner of the Far Eastern Federal University’s library in Vladivostok, Russia. Framed by bookshelves, our table overlooked the Sea of Japan. When I first met Minju, I thought she looked ethnic Korean. Petite, pale, and with thick, dark brown hair and blunt bangs, Minju resembled my Korean friends from Kazakhstan, whose families Soviet officials had deported to Central Asia under Stalin’s orders in 1937. Yet her classmates had told me that she was ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan. A week earlier I had given a talk about my research on Russian compatriots to a class at the university. Afterward, a student told me I should connect with her roommate, a member of the Russian-speaking diaspora eligible for expedited citizenship as a “compatriot.” “She’s Uzbek but from Kyrgyzstan,” she told me. Another girl interrupted, “No, she’s a foreigner [*inos-tranka*], not a compatriot [*sootechestvennik*].” The roommate corrected her, “No, she is a Russian citizen [*grazhdanka Rossiiskoi Federatsii*]. Her parents live here.” The student gave me a phone number, and I contacted Minju on WhatsApp.

Now, another person was questioning Minju’s citizenship. I had just asked Minju when she had immigrated to Russia, when a voice interrupted us. “She is a migrant [*migrantka*],” an elderly librarian called out, emerging from behind the shelf. Just moments earlier, when we had arrived at the library, we had registered

with her, Minju handing over her student ID and I, my American passport. The librarian had scrutinized the documents before logging our information in her notebook and returning them. She had followed us to the corner where we now sat.

“No, I am a citizen of the Russian Federation,” Minju answered. I looked at Minju, worried. The librarian’s assertion that Minju was a migrant was an accusation—it suggested Minju was potentially a *nelegal* (illegal), a term often associated with the homogenizing “Central Asian” (*sredneaziatskie*).

“Then you are from Siberia!” the librarian exclaimed.

I looked at Minju, confused. “What does she mean?” I asked in English, switching from Russian, so that the librarian would not understand.

“She thinks I am from some ethnic group from Siberia,” Minju explained, shaking her head. As we continued our conversation in English, the librarian retreated.

As the discussion among the students and then between the librarian and Minju illustrated, it was hard to place Minju. Was she a foreigner or a compatriot? Migrant or indigenous? She was ethnic Uzbek but from Kyrgyzstan, her roommate qualified. Her name, Minju, led to further confusion. Minju was not an Uzbek, Kyrgyz, or Russian name but sounded potentially Korean—was she ethnic Korean from Kyrgyzstan or South Korea?¹

The questions that followed Minju demonstrate the complicated act of locating someone within contemporary Russian society. The labels—foreigner (*inostranets*), compatriot (*sootechestvennik*), citizen (*grazhdanin*), and migrant (*migrant*), as well as ethnic Russian (*russkii*) and Russian citizen (*rossiianin*)—all have different connotations, marking expectations of behavior and degrees of belonging. They sort immigrants along a hierarchy, ranging from compatriot, with the strongest claims to citizenship and often imagined as ethnic Russian or “of Slavic appearance” (*slavianskoi vneshnosti*, associated with “fair features”), to migrant, with the weakest claims and tied to those of “non-Slavic appearance” (*neslavianskoi vneshnosti*) and designated as “blacks” (*chernye*), associated with “darker complexions.” The term *rossiianin* means “Russian citizen” and includes all who live in the Russian Federation, but it, too, can be disparaging, at times deployed as a politically correct sneer in place of a racial slur (Graber 2020, 2).²

The indeterminacy of locating Minju in Russia’s migration hierarchy points to processes of racialization, understood here as “the processes through which any diacritic of social personhood—including class, ethnicity, generation, kinship/affinity, and positions within fields of power—comes to be essentialized, naturalized, and/or biologized” (Silverstein 2005, 364). What is at stake for Minju

is whether she will be recognized as a citizen or illegal. In Russia, the world's fourth-largest migrant-receiving country, illegality functions in ways similar to American and European contexts, in that the terms *illegal* (*nelegal*) and *guest worker* (*gastarbaiter*) become proxies for blackness. Racialized as "black," immigrants from Central Asia, as well as internal migrants from the North Caucasus, experience discrimination in applying for jobs, renting housing, attending schools, and accessing health care (Agadjanian, Menjívar, and Zotova 2017; Reeves 2013; Yusupova 2021; Abashin 2012; Round and Kuznetsova 2016; Malakhov 2019).

What makes Russia unique are Soviet legacies of belonging that continue to inform migration and citizenship projects today. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, internal migration between the republics of one country was transformed into transnational migration between fifteen post-Soviet states, with most immigrants migrating to Russia from Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (Denisenko, Strozza, and Light 2020). Russian officials have sought to restrict labor migration through various initiatives, including by introducing quotas for work permits and requiring that migrants pass a Russian language, history, and culture exam (Schenk 2018). At the same time, officials have sought to attract Russian-speaking compatriots from abroad to offset population decline by offering expedited citizenship in as little as three months after one's arrival, as opposed to the standard five-year process. Whereas scholars have shown how efforts to restrict citizenship in Europe and the United States reinforce the production of illegality "by perpetuating immigrants' marginality" to ensure the continuation of cheap labor (Agadjanian, Menjívar, and Zotova 2017, 560; De Genova 2002), in Russia we see a different dynamic as a result of Soviet legacies. As I found during ethnographic research on Russian citizenship projects, most immigrants, including those classified as labor migrants, qualify for expedited citizenship as Russian compatriots because they speak Russian (Woodard 2019). Yet Minju was not the only immigrant I met whose citizenship status was called into question based on her perceived ethnicity. As her experience demonstrates, in everyday life, the categories of compatriot and Russian citizen remain normatively racialized as white and ethnic Russian.

Many people in Russia believe that race and racism do not exist in their country because Soviet officials introduced an anti-racism campaign in the 1920s, shortly thereafter declaring the Soviet Union anti-racist (Shnirel'man 2013; Zakharov 2015). As was the case for its purportedly color-blind neighbor Europe, race for the Soviet Union (and now Russia) was located elsewhere: it primarily constituted an *American* problem, associated with binaries of black and white

(Goldberg 2006; Lemon 2019). Russian people instead identify difference through the term *nationality* (*natsional'nost'*). As I explain below, nationality is entangled but not synonymous with ethnicity. I am interested in the relationship between nationality, ethnicity, and race, particularly in the moments in which they overlap and blur (Bilaniuk 2016; Lemon 2000; Rucker-Chang and Ohuiri 2021). Ethnographic attention to casual word choice and behavior—referring to someone as a migrant rather than as a compatriot, characterizing one group as uneducated (*negramotnyi*) and another as highly qualified (*vysokokvalifitsirovannyi*), and using the informal “you” (*ty*) instead of the more respectful “you” (*vy*)—reveals the racialization of citizenship, associated with Russianness and whiteness. As a result, immigrant citizens such as Minju must continually perform their compatriotism to claim Russian belonging.

In this article, I examine the racialization of ethnicity and citizenship in the post-Soviet context and show how immigrants engage in practices of racial passing to assert belonging. In emphasizing *passing*, I employ a term used to describe the practice of mobilizing the very points of difference that marginalize someone to suggest an alternative reading (Ahmed 1999; Tudor 2017; Sion 2014). Although the term originated in the American context to describe blacks who passed as white to escape slavery and later segregation (Hobbs 2014; Ehlers 2012), scholars have also examined how individuals—historically excluded owing to their gender, sexuality, religion, and other aspects of their identity—have navigated social hierarchies through other forms of passing (Butler 1990; Sánchez and Schlossberg 2001; Rogers 2019; Sasson-Levy and Shoshana 2013; Sion 2014). This article joins recent scholarship in demonstrating how passing helps us understand the racialization of migration (Krivonos 2020; García 2019; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Ullman 2015).

In my analysis, I draw on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with immigrants and officials in Moscow and Vladivostok between 2015 and 2017. My research focused on Russia's Resettlement of Compatriots Program, an initiative introduced in 2007 to attract from abroad Russian compatriots—defined as ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, and those with “spiritual, cultural, and legal ties to the Russian Federation.” These compatriots were encouraged to immigrate to strategic parts of the country like Vladivostok in Primorskii krai.³ Located in the Far East, officials consider Primorskii krai strategic because it borders China, North Korea, and the Sea of Japan. As I analyzed how a group of politicians, officials, NGO workers, and academics envisioned the program in Moscow and how officials implemented it in the Russian Far East, I met a variety of immigrants, not just those who obtained citizenship as compatriots. Some im-

migrants I encountered in online forums devoted to helping compatriots return to the homeland, others at universities, grocery stores and markets, in various lines, and in taxis and on public transportation. I conducted thirty-five in-depth interviews with immigrants in Primorskii krai, as well as twenty-one interviews with officials, scholars, and others in Moscow and Primorskii krai. I also analyzed news coverage, policy discussions, and academic discourses about migration in Russia.

I begin by introducing the concept of passing as a useful lens to analyze processes of racialization in Russia. Drawing on [Sara Ahmed \(1999\)](#) and [Frantz Fanon \(2008 \[1952\]\)](#), I historicize the space through which bodies move in Russia by exploring Soviet interventions into race theory and legacies of nation-building. In the remainder of the article, I explore how racialized bodies move through a shared post-Soviet space of unmarked Russianness through two ethnographic examples. The first examines the case of two ethnic Uzbeks who immigrated to Russia through the compatriots program because they identified with Russian language and culture. Although legally recognized as Russian compatriots and citizens, they could not pass as white, ethnic Russians. To negotiate everyday discrimination, they sought to pass by leaning into, or *toward*, multiethnic claims of Russianness by shedding ethnic markers, including their names and clothing, that racialized them as Uzbek, Central Asian, and thus black. The second case analyzes how Ukrainian citizens, prioritized until recently as Russians' "Slavic brothers," seek to pass as ethnic Russians by modifying how they speak Russian. I suggest that such efforts at passing point to the persistent association of Russian citizenship with ethnic Russianness and whiteness, despite Soviet-era disavowals of racism and contemporary claims of Russia's multiethnic diversity. By paying attention to efforts to pass, we see a fundamental tension in Russian society in which belonging is defined as multiethnic and tied to Russian language, a legacy of the Soviet era, while a popular understanding of Russianness remains tied to ethnic Russians and whiteness. Thus, this article contributes to studies of citizenship as racial projects and whiteness as locally nuanced but informed by transnational structures of white supremacy ([Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020](#)).

PASSING IN RUSSIA

The concept of passing helps us understand how racialization works by drawing our attention to how bodies move through space ([Ahmed 1999](#), 94). Drawing on [Alyosxa Tudor \(2017, 21\)](#), I conceptualize passing as "making oneself readable as privileged from a discriminated positioning." To claim such privilege, one must be able to identify the recognized signs and practices that suggest belonging in a par-

ticular racial, ethnic, gendered, or citizenship status position (Ehlers 2012). It presumes that the boundaries of group membership are clear, and it requires communal knowledge of ideal types such that there is general agreement on what “looks” can reliably identify an individual with reference to binaries of black or white, male or female, citizen or migrant. Passing becomes possible when an ambiguous presentation, like Minju’s, cuts off immediate identification and opens multiple possibilities. Strategies for passing include changing one’s name, accent, dress, and behavior (Krivonos 2020; Sion 2014; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Ullman 2015). They can also include utilizing material culture and performing one’s knowledge of place to suggest that one belongs and is thus “legal” (De León, Gokee, and Schubert 2015; Reeves 2013; García 2019).

In what follows, the material I present from Russia illuminates yet another dimension of passing, one that takes into account postcolonial theories that move beyond the American context, but nevertheless remain tied to notions of whiteness. My analysis aligns with the work of Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshanna (2013) and Daria Krivonos (2020) to suggest that passing reveals internal hierarchies and illuminates the ways in which whiteness operates. In pointing to how bodies move through space, Ahmed’s definition of passing emphasizes how historical contexts shape the spaces in which bodies encounter one another, or what Fanon (1952, 91) describes as “the historical-racial schema.” As I detail in the next section, the historical-racial schemas that shape the spaces through which immigrants move in Russia today are deeply informed by Soviet interventions into race theory and global circulations of anti-migrant rhetoric and productions of illegality.

Race and Space in Russia

Soviet officials disavowed racism because of its ties to capitalism and colonialism while also engaging in their own racial projects that aligned with Marxist-Leninist historical materialism. In the nineteenth century, Russian scholars engaged in debates about race with their European counterparts. They emphasized the role of environmental factors and historical inequities in producing the appearance of races and racial traits (Zakharov 2015, 30; Tolz 2014). After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Soviet officials adopted social scientists’ view that race was socially produced rather than biologically inherited. Communist Party leaders sought to stoke proletariat revolutionary consciousness worldwide and saw racial equity as part of this project. Internationally, they identified people of color as the “toiling masses of the East,” with whom they should ally to spread the revolution (Matusevich 2008, 59–60). Domestically, officials sought to incorporate the di-

versity of peoples of the former Russian Empire into the new Soviet Union and to counteract Russian imperialism through what the historian [Terry Martin \(2001\)](#) describes as “affirmative action” policies. Early Soviet leaders, including Lenin and Stalin, believed that nationalism was a period and product of capitalism. Thus, to accelerate history, officials collaborated with ethnographers to categorize people into ethnic groups, rank them on a hierarchy by levels of national consciousness, and develop ethnic identities. Influenced by Herderian notions of ethnolinguistic belonging, Stalin (quoted in [Hirsch 2005](#), 43) viewed a nation as united by “a common language, territory, and economic life”; its members shared a “common mentality.” Officials designated the term *nationality* (*natsional’nost’*) for the most “developed” cultures, such as Russians, Ukrainians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Germans, and others. Soviet officials allocated nationalities their own territories with some degree of autonomy and state resources to develop and promote their cultures, primarily through standardizing their languages and organizing ethnographic exhibits and concerts to educate their own people and others about their ethnic identities ([Hirsch 2005](#); [Martin 2001](#); [Slezkine 1994](#)).

Soviet nation-building produced tensions between promoting a universal Soviet identity and simultaneously producing ethnic pluralism that included implicit hierarchies of value and belonging. While Soviet officials may have promoted the languages, cultures, and rights of all Soviet nationalities, this did not mean that officials did so peacefully or that they took into account how people self-identified. Similar to other Soviet projects, nation-building occurred from the top down. It also proved ambitious, resource intensive, and linked to a specific rendition of decolonization intended to incorporate the former peoples of the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union, with the ultimate goal of erasing group identities altogether to make way for international socialist culture. Ethnic groups did not disappear, and some historians have argued that Soviet nationality policies even reinforced group boundaries, fueling independence movements in the late 1980s ([Suny 1993](#); [Slezkine 1994](#)). Furthermore, as [Nikolay Zakharov \(2015, 57–58\)](#) points out, even the alternative modernities that Marxists advanced were still rooted in Western European traditions of Enlightenment that Soviet officials sought to counter. Officials categorized many of the people who lived in the Soviet Union as oppressed and backward and thus subject to socialist projects of civilization.

Soviet diversity policies left three legacies important for understanding migration, processes of racialization, and belonging in Russia today. First, since the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Russia’s migration policies have sought to respond to the question of what obligations the Russian government should have to former

Soviet citizens, specifically ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers who live outside of Russia in other post-Soviet republics. While they proved rather fluid in the 1990s, Russia's citizenship and migration policies have become more restrictive in the 2000s. However, it has become easier to obtain citizenship as a Russian *compatriot*—an intentionally ambiguous term that includes ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, and those who identify with Russian culture (Shevel 2011). As a result, most immigrants from other post-Soviet countries can apply for expedited pathways to citizenship if they move to areas outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Although nearly any immigrant from a former Soviet country can claim Russian compatriotism, passing as a Russian citizen requires a particular performance that remains tied to phenotypical and linguistic features associated with ethnic Russians.

This leads to the second legacy of Soviet nationality policies—namely, the effect of Russification on Soviet space and how Russianness operates as unmarked whiteness. Although initially Soviet nationality policies sought to promote the development of non-Russian nationalities over (white) ethnic Russians as a response to Lenin's concern of "Great Russian chauvinism," from the 1930s onward, Soviet identity became more tied to Russian language, culture, and identity (Slezkine 1994, 443). Ethnic Russians became "the first among equals" as Soviet officials positioned Russian language and culture as something that unified the Soviet Union's diversity of peoples (Martin 2001, 454–55; Sahadeo 2019). As privileged traits, Russian language and culture became a way of marking class as urbanites across the Soviet Union adopted Russian as their primary language (Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski 2019). At the same time, Sovietness functioned increasingly as unmarked Russianness, so that by the late Soviet period, the ideal image of the Soviet citizen, regardless of discourses that celebrated the diversity of the Soviet people, was that of the white, ethnic Russian, male Soviet patriot (Zakharov 2015, 188–89). Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Russian nationalists have mobilized popular support by arguing that Soviet nation-building and diversity policies destroyed authentic Russian culture (Oushakine 2009). Thus, while Russian became the common language of the Soviet Union, ethnic Russianness became a form of whiteness, a privilege made invisible and seen as victimized (Twine and Gallagher 2008, 6).

The fact that immigrants, eligible for citizenship as Russian compatriots, seek to pass *toward* Russianness points to a third legacy of Soviet diversity policies—that racial hierarchies have endured despite Soviet campaigns of anti-racism. Although Soviet officials sought to reject race, as the Cold War intensified after World War II, their efforts to compete with the United States often meant that

they called out racism elsewhere but ignored it within the Soviet Union (Lemon 2000, 2019). As a result, although ethnic profiling, racial slurs, discrimination, and racially motivated violence continue in Russia today, many Russians perceive race and racism as problems that exist only elsewhere (Rucker-Chang and Ohueri 2021). This perception obscures the work that discourses of nationality perform. Socialist discourses and policies that promoted ethnic diversity also reproduced notions of ethnic groups as bounded (Verdery 1993). The Soviet Union's rhetoric of anti-colonialism and anti-racism may have been progressive for the time, but scholars and officials still positioned ethnic groups on a hierarchy that corresponded to Marxism's stages of development, essentializing ethnic groups' positions in the hierarchy based on ideas of "ethnic mentality" (*mentalitet*) and locating ethnic Russians and other Europeans at the top. Mentality was seen as heritable; even if one's ethnicity was initially ambiguous or unknown, it could be revealed because it was "in the blood" (*v krovi*).⁴

As Soviet authority weakened and Marxism-Leninism lost credibility in the 1980s, an ideological void opened, with the opportunity for new narratives about national identity in Russia to emerge (Shnirel'man 2013; Djagalov 2021). In the past thirty years, these debates have been shaped by narratives of ethnic Russian genocide, the reemergence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the rise of Russian conservatism (Oushakine 2009; Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle 2015; Suslov and Uzlaner 2019). Many conservatives share the stance that Russia constitutes the last bastion of white, Christian values as postcolonial Europe becomes more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse. American and European discourses of race and migration, including migration as a crisis and migrants as aliens, have also played a role in transforming Russian conceptions of race (Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Laruelle 2010). Against this backdrop, assumptions about ethnicity and its links to mentality persist, including the supposed ability to guess someone's ethnicity, and thus, one's character. I join a growing number of scholars who argue for the need to analyze the racialization of ethnicity in Russia and other post-socialist countries (Zakharov 2015; Weitz et al. 2002; Lemon 2000; Shnirel'man 2011; Baker 2018; Rainbow 2019; Carew and Kiaer 2021; Rucker-Chang and Ohueri 2021; Yusupova 2021; Sahadeo 2019). When ethnicity means unmasking one's mentality and identifying someone by a percentage of one's blood, then discourses concern not only ethnicity but also race as people biologize difference (Zakharov 2015, 76; Shnirel'man 2011, 2:243; Lemon 2000).

It is especially this final legacy—how one recognizes another—that I focus on here as I explore how racialized bodies move through a shared post-Soviet

space of unmarked Russianness. As [Cristina Grasseni \(2017, 1\)](#) writes, racial recognition is “a culturally situated capacity that is learnt, embodied, and socialized in specific ways in thickly layered material and socio-historical contexts.” Often, though, those complex histories are reduced to a series of stereotypes—what [Grasseni \(2017, 2\)](#) conceptualizes as “mugshot aesthetics”—that rely on the idea that people belong to distinctive, internally homogenous categories, recognizable by sight alone. What happens when it is not immediately clear where someone fits into the hierarchy of belonging, when someone with an ambiguous appearance passes through a post-Soviet, Russian space? As I demonstrate below, many immigrants in Russia cannot pass as white, ethnic Russians; rather, they thwart accusations of illegality by choosing ethnic Russian names, adapting their accent, and changing their clothing to claim Russian citizenship through the multiethnic but still marked category of *rossiianin* (Russian citizen). I argue that, for immigrants from cities in Central Asia who move to Russia because they identify with Russian language and culture, passing can be a form of subject-making deployed to distance oneself from the specter of illegality. But for others, it can also mark a rejection of an ascribed identity, including the demand to inhabit only one ethnicity or one language, as I next explore in the case of Ukrainian citizens who also seek to pass in Russia.

“AS IF I WERE AN ILLEGAL”

When I met Maxim on an online forum for Russian compatriots in January 2017, his profile picture was of a gray cat with big green eyes, drinking tea and eating cookies. After seeing several posts by Maxim about immigrating to Vladivostok, I sent him a message, explaining my research project. We exchanged messages on WhatsApp and agreed to meet for lunch.

When I arrived at noon, the restaurant was empty, and I chose a table in the center to wait for Maxim. Soon the waiter returned with a tall, tan man with brown eyes and dark brown hair, cut fashionably with the top longer and the sides buzzed shorter. “Maxim?” I asked, and he smiled. He was not what I expected. From his name, I had assumed he was ethnic Russian. In our text message exchanges, he had told me about his family. They left Tashkent because they saw no future for themselves as Russian-speakers. His mother was a sculptor and his sister a ballerina working for a company in Greece—class markers that I read as indicators that they formed part of the Tashkent intelligentsia. The other background information I had gleaned—his name, affection for cats, Russian language, and nostalgia for Tashkent, rather than Uzbekistan as a whole—all informed my as-

sumption that he was ethnic Russian. Now, though, at the restaurant, when I saw his darker complexion, I wondered whether he was ethnic Uzbek.

As we drank tea and ate *plov*, an Uzbek rice dish, we chatted about why Maxim and his family had decided to leave Tashkent. Russian was Maxim's native language. Many of his Russian-speaking neighbors had immigrated, ethnic Russians to Russia and ethnic Jews to the United States. Maxim was a high school teacher at a Russian school, but many of the Russian schools were closing as the government replaced them with schools taught in Uzbek. When his school shuttered its doors, Maxim and his parents decided to immigrate to Russia through the compatriots program. "I always had problems because I could not speak my native language. And all our neighbors and all the Russians moved away. Although here I speak Russian, they see me as a foreigner [*inostranets*]," Maxim told me.

"Are you ethnic Uzbek?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm a foreigner," he replied. "But they aren't prejudiced [*net predubezhdenii*]. They can't be prejudiced because it's not their land either. Historically—if I'm not mistaken—Chinese people lived here. And the Russians came here two centuries ago, or something like that. That's why they're more hospitable here than in the central or western part of Russia. In the western part, they're a bit dangerous."

"Is that why you chose Primorskii krai? Because it's dangerous in other parts of Russia?" I asked.

"Yes, but also Primorskii krai borders some Asian countries. And I think the economic situation will improve here."

Concerns about danger, even direct references to skinheads in western Russia, and appreciation for the Far East's perceived hospitality appeared throughout my interviews and conversations with immigrants from Central Asia. Mindful of what they described as their Asian appearance (*aziatskaia vneshnost'*)—their darker skin color and eye shape—these immigrants chose to move to cities that they perceived as more "hospitable," in Maxim's words. Like Maxim, many interpreted eastern Russia's proximity to China, Korea, and Japan—as well as its history, interchanging between Chinese, Russian, and Japanese imperial powers—as more open toward other ethnicities than central or western Russia. Indeed, many locals in Vladivostok prided themselves on their city's diversity. I often observed instances, though, that challenged this assumed openness. As elsewhere in Russia, everyday forms of prejudice were evident, from cleaning services that promised only "Russian personnel and guaranteed quality" to one Russian friend telling me

that he had bought an apartment in a nice area with “just children and grannies, no Central Asians.”

Later during our lunch, Maxim’s friend and coworker, Oksana, joined us. We continued our conversation, and I asked Maxim why he had joined the forum where we had met.

“I had questions and I searched for them there. . . . And there I registered and made a nickname [he says “nickname” in English], because if I had written Samir then people wouldn’t answer me, as if I were illegal [*nelegal*],” Maxim explained.

“Wait, is your name Samir or Maxim?” I asked.

“Please meet Samir,” Maxim—or Samir—replied in English, opening his arms and smiling.

“Really! Why Maxim?” I exclaimed in Russian.

Oksana joined in, laughing, “Why Maxim? Maybe you want to give this name to your son?”

Again, in English, Samir paused, more serious, “Well, nickname and people are more friendly if you are native Russian. I think so.”

Maxim’s transformation (back) to Samir in our interview was reflective of the discrimination many from the Caucasus and Central Asia face when immigrating to Russia. Just as Minju and I switched from Russian to English in the presence of the librarian, in the restaurant, Samir, too, switched to English to tell me his Uzbek name and why he had chosen a Russian one. Minju’s and Samir’s use of English, rather than Russian, to speak about discrimination with me made our conversation more private. It also proffered another strategy of distancing oneself from perceived illegality by indicating to those around us that they spoke English, signaling that they were urban, cosmopolitan, and of a higher class.

Like other immigrants I interviewed who had selected the Far East for its relative openness, Samir intentionally selected a Russian name on the compatriot forum to mask his ethnicity and, therefore, race. He feared that people would assume from his Muslim name that he was “illegal” or a migrant worker. As Madeleine Reeves (2013, 512) writes, the terms *nelegal* (illegal) and *gastarbaiter* (guest worker) evoke those who are *nerusskie* (non-Russian), *neslavianskoi vneshnosti* (not of Slavic appearance), *chernye* (black), or *sredneaziatskie* (Central Asian). Assumptions about a lack of Russian fluency merge with physical markers of ethnicity to racialize someone as black and illegal. When Russians think that *nelegaly* (the plural of *nelegal*) are “pervasive” and “visibly recognizable” as “non-Slavic,” ethnic profiling through frequent document checks becomes socially acceptable (Reeves 2013, 512). However, as Alaina Lemon (2000) reminds us, racial signs are “slippery.” In

post-Soviet countries, many non-Russians, such as Tatars, Roma, and Uzbeks like Samir, are not any darker than ethnic Russians. As a result, people look to other signs beyond skin tone to index ethnicity and belonging. Often these other characteristics indicative of one's true ethnicity are seen as "innate" or, in Russian, "in the blood" (*v krovi*); they have to be "detected, unmasked" (Lemon 2000, 69). With living memories of Stalin's purges and World War II, when many non-Russians perished in camps, and the threat of skinheads today, racial passing also constitutes a tool for survival.

Although Samir could not control how people interpreted him in person, he sought to conceal his Uzbek name online, seeking to pass as Russian with the name Maxim. When I asked him whether people in Vladivostok recognized him as Uzbek and if he ever experienced discrimination because of his ethnicity and race, he replied (again in English), "I never tell my nationality to others. Sometimes guys ask me, where do you come from? And I tell them I'm local [he laughs]. I lie."

Passing could also take the form of asserting one's identification with Russian culture. When I asked Minju whether she felt that people often discriminated against her as a migrant, as the librarian had, she responded no:

I really know Russian language, Russian mentality. Usually, people think that I'm already Russian [*russkaia*]. I've lived with a Russian girl for three years already. It's now easier for me to socialize with other Russians than my own compatriots [*sootechestvennikami*]. Many of my girlfriends in Kyrgyzstan, we already don't understand one another. We speak in the same language, but about different things. . . . There are of course many from Central Asia here [at the university], but I'm already far away [*daleko*] from them. . . . Although we speak the same language, they don't understand me. I look like I'm Korean or Chinese—they even approach me and think that I'm one of them! But I'm more comfortable with my Russian friends.

Minju and Samir, both ethnic Uzbeks, moved to Russia from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan because they identified with Russian language and culture. As ethnic minorities within Kyrgyzstan, Minju's parents chose for their children to attend Russian-language schools because they saw the language as providing greater future mobility. As Minju approached her high school graduation, she joined her father in Vladivostok, where he had been working for the past decade, so that she could more easily attend a Russian university. Minju told me that she liked Russian language and culture. Similarly, as fewer of his neighbors spoke Russian and more

Russian schools closed in Uzbekistan, Samir decided to immigrate too. While Minju thought that she was already Russian because she had more in common with her Russian friends than with those from Central Asia and because most people thought she was Russian, Samir said that he still felt like a foreigner to locals.

To pass as Russian, Samir and Minju adopted multiple strategies to lean into their ambiguity—the pause that occurred when they passed through a space and those around could read them in multiple ways. Samir’s darker skin suggested he was from Central Asia and more suspect as “illegal,” whereas Minju’s appearance was more ambiguous. As I had observed, people could not immediately place her. She could simultaneously be seen as a Korean or a Chinese student or as someone indigenous to Siberia and, thus, a Russian citizen. Furthermore, she did not associate with other students from Central Asia. As she said, although they were from the same country and region and spoke the same languages, she felt “far away from them.” Additional details about Samir’s and Minju’s interests—Russian language, culture, and art—paired with their adopted names, Maxim and Minju, did not align with what people expected from Central Asian “illegals.” As [Liora Sion \(2014\)](#) argued in the case of Palestinian teachers who taught in Jewish schools in Israel, Samir and Minju could not pass as ethnic Russians, but they could construct alternative identities that would suggest they were not illegals. By making the features by which people would normally identify them more ambiguous, shedding markers of the illegal other, Minju and Samir asserted that they *were* Russian, not ethnic Russian but potentially members of another ethnic group from within Russia. Passing proved a strategy of protection, distancing oneself from accusations of illegality, and asserted belonging as a Russian-speaker and compatriot.

ETHNIC RUSSIAN BUT NOT RUSSIAN

While immigrants from Central Asia sought to pass as *not* illegals, thereby ascending Russia’s racial hierarchy, they were not the only immigrants who adopted practices of passing to suggest an alternative identity. Ukrainian and even ethnic Russian immigrants from other post-Soviet countries, invited back to the Russian homeland as compatriots, also sought to pass as Russians once in Russia.⁵ Since the Russian war in Ukraine began in 2014, more than a million immigrants from Ukraine, displaced from the conflict as refugees or economic migrants, have obtained Russian citizenship.⁶ Initially, in 2014 and 2015, officials welcomed immigrants from Ukraine, describing them as the “most desired immigrants” and “our dearest relatives” who shared a “common language and common culture” with Russians ([Woodard 2019](#); [Mukomel 2017](#); [Kuznetsova 2020](#)). However, as the

conflict has continued, refugees and other immigrants from Ukraine have experienced greater difficulties adapting to life in Russia, and I found that even those "most desired" felt alienated.

One afternoon in early April in 2017, I walked with our cat's vet, Seryozha. It fleetingly felt like spring, sunny and warm.

"Are you from Moscow?" I asked.

"No, from Ukraine. I moved here two, three years ago. There isn't any future there [*tam net perspektiv*]," he said, repeating a phrase I had heard before. In Russian, the phrase is literally, "there isn't any perspective." As in English, "perspective" can also refer to the art of depicting a three-dimensional space on a plane. I heard this phrase often during fieldwork. Immigrants from across the former Soviet Union used the term to describe their decisions to move to Russia, referring often to unemployment, discrimination in their countries of origin as Russian-speakers, and low salaries.

"There aren't laws," Seryozha said. "Corruption is everywhere. It's not like that just in the east, where I'm from, but in Kyiv too. You have to be careful, though, as Ukrainians. When I moved here, I quickly Russified [*rusifitsiroval*]."

"Why?" I asked.

"When I arrived, I had a strong accent," he said, providing examples in which the "g" in Russian became the "kh" in a Ukrainian accent. "I spoke [*khovoril*] with an accent, and many [*mnokhie*] didn't like it. Locals, Muscovites, don't like Ukrainians. When I looked at apartments . . .," his voice trailed off. "Nobody liked it."

"Why not?"

"Because we're not needed [*my ne nuzhny*]. Why are there so many [this time he said *mnogo* with the Russian "g" that sounds like a "k"] Ukrainians in Russia now?"

Seryozha's assertion that "we're not needed" echoed an earlier conversation I had had with Minju. "It's enough already. Immigrants aren't needed!" she had said, crossing her forearms to emphasize her point. "Look for yourself, all the factories, plants—all of the economy is here in Russia. In Kyrgyzstan, there is nowhere to work. But in Russia, there is good pay—maybe not for Russians—but you can do a lot with that money there [in Kyrgyzstan]. . . . They don't need to attract anyone to come here. All the same, people, themselves, arrive! From the [post-Soviet] republics there is already enough! Have you been to Sportivnaya?" she asked me, referring to a popular market in Vladivostok. "It's hard to find ethnic Russians [*ruskikh*]! They mean to attract ethnic Russians, Slavs," she said, referring to the compatriots program.

Seryozha was Slavic, privileged in Russian media as the most desired of immigrants, but he also thought that Russians resented him and others from Ukraine because there were too many Ukrainian citizens in Russia, especially after the war had begun in 2014. He and other Ukrainians, as well as ethnic Russians from other post-Soviet republics I met, experienced the disconnect between the promise of Russian life and its reality as a feeling of otherness. Sveta, a refugee from a village near Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, fled to Russia in 2014. “I’ve always felt at home everywhere, but here I feel different [*chuzhaia*]. I don’t feel at home,” she told me. Sveta’s word choice of *chuzhoi*, or alien, was one I heard frequently throughout my interviews with ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers from other post-Soviet countries. While in their home countries, they felt alien because they spoke Russian and were ethnic Russian, in Russia, they remained different. As one ethnic Russian woman from Kazakhstan explained to me, “We were different in Kazakhstan because we were ethnic Russians [*russkie*]. But here [in Russia] I understood that we’re ethnic Russians but not Russians [*rossiane*].”

Like Samir, most immigrants who were ethnic Russian or of European origin simply denied that they were immigrants, choosing not to disclose that they hailed from elsewhere. Those with an accent like Seryozha sought to Russify by changing their speech. This approach suggested that Russianness not only concerned phenotype (Slavic or European features) but also how one spoke Russian. Their self-recognition that they may be ethnic Russian or Ukrainian, with languages and cultures imagined as similar, but not *Russian*, as in from Russia, highlights the instability of their privileged positions as Slavic compatriots. Although, as Krivonos (2020) points out, much of the scholarship on passing and the racialization of migration focuses on how those who are racialized as black seek to pass as white (García 2019; Gómez Cervantes 2021; Ullman 2015), Seryozha, Sveta, and other compatriots were white and even ethnic Russian. They were exactly the immigrants the compatriots program and other initiatives directed at the Russian diaspora sought to attract, but they, too, felt isolated, unneeded, and—in the case of the Ukrainians—discriminated against. Their precarious position revealed how even those at the top of the immigrant hierarchy, Slavic compatriots, found themselves in an unstable position. Though privileged and more able to pass than someone of “non-Slavic appearance” like Minju or Samir, they, too, had to Russify to assert their belonging.

Migration scholars have demonstrated how officials have denied Ukrainian citizens refugee status in Russia and instead recognized them as Russian citizens, using citizenship as part of a larger political strategy to maintain influence in the

region (Kuznetsova 2020; Myhre 2018; see also Dunn and Bobick 2014). The shifting geopolitical mood influences everyday interactions in terms of who is and is not recognized as a Russian compatriot. It also builds on other legacies of Soviet nation-building, including ideas of nations and cultures as recognizable and distinct, with no room for multiplicity, lending itself well to mugshot aesthetics (Grasseni 2017). Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Russian state-sponsored discourses have produced ethnic Russians and Ukrainians as separate, incompatible identities, denied Ukrainian history and statehood, and erased multiple identities within the region (Teper 2016; Wanner 2014; Kuznetsova 2020, 513). Shifting geopolitics and Soviet legacies of nation-building come together in such a way that ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, though legally recognized as Russian compatriots, find that they, too, must pass to assert belonging.

CONCLUSION: THE STAKES OF PASSING

My interlocutors in this article represent Russia's more privileged immigrants, Russian compatriots with the agency and status to mobilize their ambiguity to pass as Russian. Ultimately, even if interlocutors questioned their belonging, they *were* Russian citizens. For those with semilegal status, the stakes of passing prove higher. In the summer of 2015 in Moscow, I sat with my host family—a middle-aged woman and her two elementary school-aged children—around the kitchen table, drinking tea, eating cookies, and watching the popular TV show *Kukhnia* (*Kitchen*). Broadcast on STS, *Kukhnia* ran weekly for six seasons from 2012 to 2016 and featured the lives of the kitchen staff of the fancy French restaurant called Claude Monet in Moscow. The episode we watched that night illuminated many of the themes around race and passing that were already emerging in the early phases of my fieldwork on Russian immigration.

In episode 16 of the first season, migration police raid the restaurant, searching for *nelegaly*. At the sudden appearance of the red-vested Federal Migration Service officers outside the restaurant, management try to rush their immigrant employees out the back. The catch of the episode is that while we, the audience, already expect some immigrants to be working at the restaurant illegally—for example, Ainura, the Kyrgyz cleaning lady—it turns out that Fedya, one of the chefs, has been passing as ethnic Russian and a Russian citizen. Fedya, we learn, is Moldovan and working in Russia without a work permit. Unable to leave the restaurant in time, he and Ainura must pass as guests, dining in the restaurant while the police search for *nelegaly* in the kitchen.

The show parodies Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglorious Basterds* about an American soldiers' operation to kill Nazi leaders in France. The episode likens the migration police chief to Tarantino's Colonel Hans Landa, known as the "Jew hunter." Like Landa, the migration police chief tells Ainura over an apple strudel, in a direct parallel to the film, that he is the "hunter of guest workers," and that he always finds them. Ainura chokes on her wine, widening her mouth as she gasps, then immediately closes it as she realizes she may reveal her gold tooth, a stereotypical marker of Central Asian immigrants. While the parody deepens the critique of the Russian migration police by likening them to the Nazis, it is not necessary for understanding the episode, and the first time I watched it, my host family and I missed the allusion.

Presentations of language, ethnicity, and race specific to the post-Soviet context appear throughout *Kukhnia*, arising in unexpected ways that challenge common assumptions linking race and legality. In this episode, the joke is on us, the audience, and how we read race. Ultimately, Ainura passes, but the chief catches Fedya and deports him to Moldova. The "hunter of guest workers" knows how to read the signs of the *nelegal*, and he identifies Fedya by his pickiness and discomfort, eating in the restaurant as a patron rather than in the kitchen. We, however, are not as good at assessing the situation. We learn at the same time as Fedya's colleagues of his Moldovan origins. Until this episode, my host family and I had assumed that Fedya's white skin, blond hair, blue eyes, and Russian fluency designated him as ethnic Russian and, thus, a Russian citizen. Meanwhile, we presumed that Ainura was the *nelegal* and that the chief would deport her. Her clothing and physical appearance—her skin color, eye shape, gold tooth, and lined eyebrows—as well as her Kyrgyz-accented Russian indexed a migrant worker from Central Asia. In a twist—and a departure from Tarantino's Nazi Landa—the migration police chief lets Ainura go.

The show's depiction of the migration police raid and Fedya's deportation at the end of the episode illustrate the stakes of passing. Unlike the immigrants featured in this article who were Russian citizens, Ainura and Fedya experienced the everyday precarity of working in Russia as guest workers, subject to ever changing migration policies that depend on the racialization and scarcity of labor (Schenk 2018; Reeves 2013; Round and Kuznetsova 2016). As Ahmed (1999) and Tudor (2017) have written, every identity is ultimately a performance, an act of passing and an approximation to an image of what we imagine someone to be, but the stakes of passing are not the same for everyone. As Ahmed (1999, 93) asks, "Would one worry, would one fear being caught out, if one did not *already* perceive oneself

to be passing for white? Would there be danger, would there be death?" Although white Fedya from Moldova is the one ultimately deported, it takes an expert like the chief to identify him. A hunter of guest workers, he boasts about his skills to evoke the violence of the job, a title made more chilling by the show's allusion to the Nazis. While Russian compatriots in this article described similar feelings of alienation and adopted various practices to pass as Russian citizens, the stakes for them were not equal. Minju and Samir, despite seeking to make their identities more ambiguous to distance themselves from specific racial assumptions, could ultimately fall back on their Russian citizenship with the cultural capital to pass. Yet for immigrants who appeared Central Asian like Samir, fears of racially motivated violence, invoked in interviews with references to skinheads in western Russia, influenced families' decisions to immigrate to the more hospitable Russian Far East, where immigrants assumed the region's proximity to China and Korea would allow them to pass unnoticed more easily.

The felt need for immigrants in Russia to pass, even after having obtained Russian citizenship, demonstrates how racialized hierarchies in Russia persist despite Soviet legacies of anti-colonialism and anti-racism and contemporary promises of Russian compatriotism. It also points to the indeterminacy of Russianness itself. Analyzing passing directs us to performances of the negative, the *not* Central Asian, the *not* Ukrainian, to inhabit Russianness. What is Russianness in the absence of these "nots," or as Marina Yusupova (2021, 232) asks, "Could it be the case that [the] whiteness that ethnic Russians [ascribe] to themselves only exists in the presence of racialized migrants?" Yusupova's suggestion about the dependency of Russianness on a racialized other recalls Zora Neale Hurston's (1925, 828) reflection that she felt "most colored" when "thrown against a sharp white background" in universities in New York. It also evokes Nicholas De Genova's (2018) argument that the heterogeneity of Europeanness can only be constructed through the juxtaposition of what it is not—not migrant, not black, not asylum-seeker, and not Muslim.

As concerns about migration borrow European discourses of new racism and fears of cultural difference (Balibar 1991; Laruelle 2010), it becomes easier to define what it means to be Russian—and to perform Russianness—as what it is not than what it is. Analyzing racial passing in Russia points us to connections between Russia and Europe and to how global conceptions of migration and race, including ideas of migration as a crisis (Tolz 2017; Holmes and Castañeda 2016), circulate and transform local and regional conceptions of ethnicity and race (Goldberg 2006). Although the Soviet Union may have disavowed race and sought to

reject colonial legacies of racism, binaries of white and black, legal and illegal, have entered migration discourses in Russia. Ethnographic attention to racial passing offers insight into how immigrants navigate hierarchies and assert belonging, even when that belonging is always shifting. It also points us to the need to examine Russianness as a political project, one locally situated but also informed by transnational and global circulations of whiteness.

ABSTRACT

This article examines how immigrants from post-Soviet countries engage in practices of racial passing to challenge ethnic stereotypes in Russia, the world's fourth-largest migration destination. Ethnographic research reveals that immigrants shed signs of illegality to pass not necessarily as white, ethnic Russians (russkie) but instead as ethnically heterogeneous Russian citizens (rossiiane). The need to pass points to fundamental tensions within Russian society about belonging, tensions arising from a particular configuration of race, ethnicity, and language that emerged during the Soviet era. I show how ethnic Russianness operates akin to whiteness, the invisible ideal against which racialized bodies are marked, despite Soviet-era anti-racism campaigns and contemporary claims of Russia's multiethnic diversity. This article contributes to scholarship analyzing migration and citizenship as racial projects by demonstrating how locally nuanced inflections of whiteness interact with global and transnational movements of white supremacy. [passing; whiteness; race; migration; citizenship; Russia; Europe]

РЕЗЮМЕ

В этой статье исследуется то, как иммигранты из постсоветских стран вовлечены в практики расового пассива, усложняющие этнические стереотипы в России (занимающей четвертое место в мире по величине миграционного притока). Этнографическое исследование показывает, что иммигранты скрывают маркеры нелегальности, чтобы выдать себя не обязательно за белых этнических русских, а вместо этого за этнически неоднородных российских граждан (россияне). Необходимость такого пассива указывает на фундаментальную напряженность в российском обществе относительно самоидентификации, которая возникает из-за особой конфигурации расы, этничности и языка, возникшей в советское время. Я показываю, как этническая 'русскость' действует подобно белизне, невидимому идеалу, рядом с которым существуют расиализированные тела, на фоне антирасистских кампаний советской эпохи и современных заявлений о многонациональности России. Эта статья вносит вклад в исследования, которые анализируют миграцию и гражданство

как расовые проекты, демонстрируя, как локальные нюансы белизны взаимодействуют с глобальными и транснациональными движениями за превосходство белых. [пассинг, белизна, раса, миграция, гражданство, Россия, Европа]

NOTES

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1. I later learned that Minju was a nickname she had selected in her Korean language classes. She preferred it to her own name, which I never learned, and everyone at university referred to her as Minju. For Minju and the other immigrants I feature, I use pseudonyms.
2. Western foreigners do not fit easily along the hierarchy. In large cities like Vladivostok and Moscow, I, as a white American woman, often passed unnoticed as ethnic Russian. In smaller cities and villages, though, I was more difficult to place. Although in my interviews and interactions with officials and immigrants I made it clear that I was an American, when simply walking down the street, I, too, like my interlocutors in this article, tried to pass. Along Russia's border with China, being an American could mean being a spy, and thus I paid attention to my accent and clothing to avoid scrutiny.
3. "On the State Policy of the Russian Federation Concerning Compatriots Abroad" ("Federal'nyi zakon o gosudarstvennoi politike Rossiiskoi Federatsii v otnoshenii sootechestvennikov prozhivayushchikh za rubezhom") passed in 1999 and revised in 2010.
4. Soviet films, plays, and literature reproduced the idea of "unmasking" one's innate ethnic identity. [Alaina Lemon \(2000, 69\)](#) gives the example of the play *Gypsy*, in which a Tatar boy realizes he is really a "Gypsy" (*tsygan*) when he learns to dance with ease. During my fieldwork, the idea of discovering one's true ethnicity played out in one instance when a young man discovered from a DNA test that he had "Jewish blood." To his parents' bewilderment, their son converted to Judaism and became active in Vladivostok's Jewish community. Thus, while determining one's true identity could be dangerous—a kind of racialized unmasking—it could also become a way of claiming repressed family histories.
5. During the Soviet era, Russian people had migrated due to resettlement orders and deportations under Stalin, various economic development initiatives, military service, and study, but they had moved between the republics of one country ([Siegelbaum and Moch 2014](#)). Before 1991, they had been internal migrants and Soviet citizens, but with the Soviet Union's dissolution, they suddenly became transnational migrants with multiple ties. It was estimated that 25 million ethnic Russians lived outside of Russia in other former Soviet republics in the early 1990s ([Brubaker 1992](#)). The 1990s were a period of mass migration and resettlement (see [Pilkington 1998](#)).
6. This number refers to Ukrainian citizens who immigrated to Russia between 2014 and 2020. On February 24, 2022, Putin initiated a full invasion of Ukraine, leading to a

second and larger wave of refugees fleeing conflict. Unlike in 2014, most have fled to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and other countries in Europe.

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