# Social Integration Challenges Faced by Dual Migration Groups: Case Study of Russian Koreans

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### ABSTRACT

Russian Korean immigrants within the United States consist of ethnically Korean people who have lived in Russia or the Soviet Union before immigrating to the United States. Most Russian Koreans came to the United States in search of better economic, health, or social opportunities. Many of them only speak Russian and have a predominantly Russian culture and upbringing despite their Korean ancestry. Because of this variation in ethnicity and culture, it can be very difficult for Russian Koreans to assimilate and find comfort within the United States. In order to determine what Russian Koreans specifically struggle with, a survey was sent out to 21 participants with a variety of questions about their general background as well as their current mental and physical struggles. It was found that because of specific differences in culture and ethnicity, the majority of Russian Koreans reported that they struggled with a sense of belonging and personal identity, on top of typical immigration adversities such as the language barrier, economic struggles, and lack of information. In fact, 42.9% of the participants felt that Russian Koreans face struggles that are unique to other types of immigration due to how specific their ethnic and cultural mix is after dually migrating. The majority of participants felt that it was difficult to connect with those who were not Russian Koreans similar to themselves, making it difficult for the already limited population to find connections.

### Introduction

Dual migration, alternatively referred to as secondary migration, involves the intricate trajectory of relocating from one country to another, followed by subsequent immigration to a third nation. In essence, this phenomenon unfolds when an individual embarks on a journey from their birthplace, which is distinct from their ultimate destination. Moreover, this phenomenon extends to individuals whose birth country differs from their ethnic origin, further deepening the complexities of dual migration. Illustratively, this phenomenon is exemplified by instances such as Jamaican migrants who first ventured to the United Kingdom and subsequently resettled in the United States. Similarly, the process of re-migration is evident in cases such as Iranian refugees seeking refuge in Sweden before eventually settling in the United States (Takenaka). Despite its prevalence across diverse nations, the phenomenon of dual migration has not garnered commensurate research attention. Koreans represent a pertinent example within this paradigm. Historically, the Korean diaspora has been spurred by multifarious factors, including war, famine, and economic exigencies, leading to their settlement in the Soviet Union across generations. However, contemporary times have witnessed a distinctive trend, characterized by the re-migration of numerous Russian Koreans to destinations spanning the global landscape. Foremost among these destinations is the United States, where the pursuit of enhanced opportunities and quality of life has prompted their resettlement. Remarkably, these re-migrations for a promising future.



#### History of Russian Koreans

Immigration is a widespread phenomenon as individuals relocate from one country to another. An illustrative instance of immigration is the influx of Koreans into Russia/the Soviet Union. The motive behind many Koreans immigrating to Russia was to escape famine and other adversities in Korea, seeking a fresh start after the war (Chang). This immigration into the USSR can be classified into three categories (Saveliev 484). "Continental Koreans" are descendants of immigrants from the 19th century, mainly before the revolution. "Sakhalin Koreans" are the progeny of those who migrated to work in mines during the 1930s-40s. Additionally, post-war workers from the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (DPRK) were recruited by the government in the late 1940s. Consequently, the 2002 census reported a total of 148,556 Koreans in Russia. Over time, these Koreans established agricultural and trade communities, fostering a network of Russian Korean communities within the Soviet Union.

However, conditions for Koreans in the Soviet Union were far from ideal. Frequently, deported Koreans were abandoned in desolate regions with minimal resources, often just a few blankets and limited personal belongings, leaving them to fend for themselves (Gelb 401). This harsh circumstance led to the deaths of many elderly individuals and children. Some desperately appealed for relocation to more civilized areas to secure basic necessities like shelter and sustenance. Generally, Korean immigrants encountered societal reluctance, finding it arduous to obtain land grants or citizenship (Chang). The apprehension of potential tensions with Japan led to many Koreans being denied citizenship (Gelb 304). In reality, most Koreans within the USSR were isolated from the broader Russian populace, living in insular communities. Under the rule of Stalin and Molotov, around 175,000 Koreans were forcibly deported and displaced, with about 2,500 others arrested, presumably for resisting these deportations. These deportations involved cramming Koreans into crowded and unsanitary freight carts for transportation across the continent, resulting in numerous deaths due to neglect and maltreatment. In 1938, the mortality rate among deported Koreans was roughly 42 per thousand, with an infant mortality rate of 20% during the same year (Gelb 402). Clearly, Koreans in the Soviet Union endured unjust and harsh conditions.

Nevertheless, many Koreans managed to adapt and integrate into Soviet society. They secured employment, established communities, and forged friendships in Russia. Social identities played a key role in this assimilation process, guiding individuals' affiliations and shaping their cultural norms and objectives (Smaldino). Often, these identities determine an individual's aspirations and behaviors, influenced by their exposure to various social groups (Leaper, 2011). These groups encompass sports teams, religions, nationalities, occupations, sexual orientations, ethnicities, genders, and other affiliations that foster a sense of connection. The strongest impact of these groups on personal identity occurs when emotional attachment is most pronounced. Belonging to a social group heightens selfesteem and confidence. An individual's ethnicity and the surrounding society both contribute to shaping their identity. While ethnic roots influence personal identity, the environment in which individuals grow up also exerts a significant influence. Cultural norms are often imbibed from the surroundings and are subject to adaptation. Emotional, psychological, historical, and cultural ties to physical places contribute to the formation of human bonds (Knez et al., 2020). Attachments to places and countries influence personal identity and interpersonal relationships.

Adapting to a new country can prove challenging for many immigrants due to unfamiliar customs, languages, and educational systems (Rodriguez). Adolescents and teenagers, in particular, tend to experience these challenges. However, with successive generations residing in a new country, families tend to acclimate to the language, culture, and education of their adopted nation. In this process, children often shed their parents' accents and gradually lose their proficiency in the original language (Rathore-Nigsch & Schreier, 2016). The majority of descendants of Korean immigrants in Russia no longer speak Korean, losing touch with their ancestral language. As time progresses, the Korean community in Russia progressively loses aspects of their cultural heritage, traditions, mindset, and language skills. Consequently, connecting with Koreans who are more closely aligned with Korean culture becomes difficult for them.



### Challenges for Russian Korean Immigrants in the United States

Most Russian Koreans, like other residents of the USSR, received education in the Russian language. However, the third and fourth generations of Russian Koreans have gradually lost their ability to speak and understand Korean due to the absence of avenues for learning it (Saveliev 489). Many Koreans in Russia are enrolling their children in prestigious schools across the country, especially in major cities and capitals. The youngest generations of Russian Koreans are actively integrating themselves within the larger Russian community, seeking education and employment opportunities there. This shift has led to a stronger alignment with Russian culture, including language, customs, and folklore. As a result of this deep assimilation into Russian culture, they find it challenging to connect with their Korean heritage, which in turn makes it difficult for them to resonate with other Koreans.

Even when returning to Korea, Russian Koreans continue to uphold and disseminate Russian culture. In Korea, an increasing number of Russian Koreans who have been repatriated are establishing businesses (Saveliev 492). New laws and policies in Korea facilitate the reintegration of returnees. However, Russian Koreans encounter difficulties in readjusting both in Korea and Russia due to their limited shared language with the majority population. This struggle is particularly noticeable in workplaces and society. In Korea, Russian Koreans feel a lack of belonging with native Koreans due to their multi-generational assimilation into a contrasting culture. This phenomenon is similarly observed among Russian Koreans who have emigrated to the United States. Despite the United States' diverse landscape, Russian Koreans face challenges in fitting in due to differences in race and culture. Just like those who return to Korea, those who immigrate to the United States often find it hard to assimilate within the Korean population. Most Russian Koreans feel a stronger cultural and societal connection with Russians, leading to their estrangement from traditional Koreans. Moreover, the language barrier hampers communication between Russian Koreans and other Korean immigrants.

Koreans who have assimilated into Russian culture consider the USSR and Korea as their homelands and ancestral lands, respectively (Chang). However, when it comes to their new homelands in the United States, many Russian Korean immigrants experience uncertainty. Frequently, they find greater comfort and rapport with Russian Americans, mainly due to shared language and culture. Yet, interacting with Russian immigrants brings out a contrast in physical appearance. In the former Soviet Union, Koreans endured exile, disadvantages, and social ostracism, resulting in their exclusion from mainstream society (Park). Despite being part of the nation, they faced discriminatory practices that undermined their well-being, without entirely isolating them. Instead of complete isolation, they were marginalized and looked down upon. This remains a challenge for numerous Russian Koreans in the United States. They encounter marginalization from Russians, Koreans, and other immigrant groups, making it arduous for them to assimilate and find a sense of belonging.

Korean immigrants were already a minority in the USSR (Huttenbach). Their minority status is even more pronounced in the United States, as they do not fully align with either the Russian or Korean groups. Besides social challenges, Russian Koreans also grapple with stress arising from immigration laws, including unstable housing, economic concerns, and deportation regulations, which all contribute to their mental health strains (Vesely).

### Methodology

The study involved a cohort of 21 participants aged between 27 and 66 years old, selected through purposive sampling. The objective of the study was to gather insights and personal accounts from Korean Russians residing in the United States. The generational composition of the participants in Russia primarily consisted of the second generation and beyond, making up 90.5% of the sample, while a smaller subset migrated before turning 18 (9.5%). Similarly, within the United States, a comparable percentage (90.5%) immigrated after reaching adulthood, while 9.5% were minors when they migrated. On average, participants had spent 29.67 years in Russia and 17.52 years in the United States. These individuals are part of Russian Korean communities across the United States, with many residing in the same

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community, mainly the Russian Korean community in Brooklyn, NY. The survey was open for responses from July 31 to August 20, 2023. Respondents were reached through communities and churches in Brooklyn, NY, and were also encouraged to share the survey with other Russian Koreans throughout the United States.

The survey encompassed multiple-choice, short-answer, and Likert scale questions. Initially, participants provided background information to establish the demographic profile of the cohort. Questions covered their age, generation of immigration to the USSR/Russia, generation of immigration to the United States, duration of residence in the USSR/Russia, years spent in the United States, and details about who they immigrated with. Subsequently, participants were prompted to select struggles they encountered as Russian-Korean immigrants and to elaborate on any distinct personal challenges they believed were prevalent among Russian-Korean immigrants. Moreover, participants were asked to share suggestions for improving the Russian Korean immigration process and to rate their change in mental state on a scale of 1-5 (with 3 indicating neutrality). The survey then inquired whether participants felt comfortable within any particular group post-immigration, and if so, to specify the group. They were further asked whether they felt more at ease with Russians, and Koreans, both equally, or neither. Lastly, before the Likert scale questions, participants were asked about their motivations, regrets, and expectations following immigration.

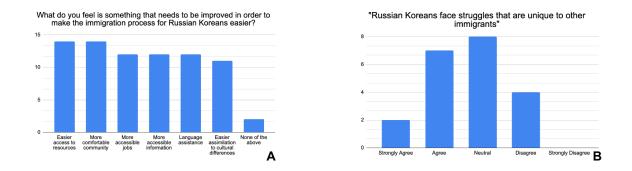
The subsequent section of the survey involved participants rating their level of agreement with statements using a Likert scale. The statements covered a range of topics including whether their mental health improved after immigrating, if Russian Korean immigrants face unique struggles compared to other immigrants, if the Russian Korean immigration experience is similar to generic immigration, whether they formed strong friendships and relationships after immigrating if they assimilated into the culture and society of the United States, whether they felt more connected to their USSR/Russian roots or Korean roots if they felt excluded by Koreans in the United States or by Russians in the United States, and if they felt more integrated into the community after immigrating.

## Results

In relation to the circumstances of migration, the majority of participants (71.4%) undertook the journey individually, while a notable proportion arrived with their families (28.6%). A smaller fraction embarked on their immigration journey accompanied by friends (4.8%). The motivations underpinning participants' decision to relocate to the United States were multifaceted, with a substantial 76.2% emphasizing the pursuit of economic opportunities. In tandem, 42.9% sought to escape oppressive circumstances, while 38.1% anticipated an amelioration of resources. A smaller subset (19.2%) underscored family and children's considerations as influential factors in their migration.

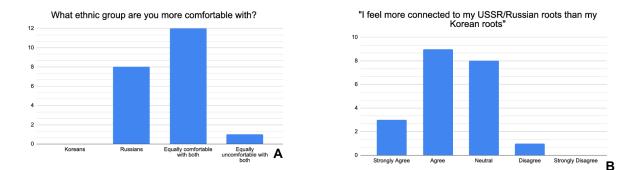
Evidencing the complexities of adaptation, respondents highlighted a spectrum of struggles, most prominently language barriers (85.7%). Additionally, a substantial percentage grappled with challenges pertaining to cultural assimilation (57.1%), fostering a sense of community (52.4%), and cultivating interpersonal relationships and connections (47.6%). A segment of participants further identified challenges in securing employment opportunities (42.9%), whereas a limited subset encountered no discernible challenges (4.8%). Of the struggles previously listed, the majority of participants stated that they felt that Russian Koreans do face unique struggles that other immigrants do not. This majority included 47.6% of participants as opposed to the 14.3% that disagreed with the statement.





**Figure 1.** Bar graphs of the struggles Russian Koreans faced after immigrating to the United States. Figure 1A shows examples of different struggles that participants felt needed to be improved in the immigration process for Russian Koreans. Figure 1B displays information about whether or not the participants felt that Russian Koreans face struggles that are unique to other immigrants.

Delving into participants' levels of comfort within different ethnic groups, a noteworthy 57.1% expressed an equitable sense of comfort with both Russians and Korean Russians. In contrast, 38.1% reported heightened comfort with Russians, while a marginal fraction conveyed discomfort with either group (4.8%). Those who did not feel equally comfortable with both largely felt most comfortable with Russians in contrast to the 0% of people who felt more comfortable with Koreans. Furthermore, 14.3% of the participants strongly agreed, followed by 42.9% of participants who agreed, that they felt more connected to their Russian/USSR roots than Korean roots. This combines into 57.2% of people who connect more with their Slavic culture than Korean, compared to the 4.8% of people who disagreed with this statement.



**Figure 2.** Bar graphs of how Russian Korean immigrants within the United States connect with Russian vs Korean cultures. As shown in Figure 2A, there is a striking difference in the number of people who feel more comfortable with Russians compared to Koreans. Figure 2B shows the number of participants who feel that they better connect with their Russian roots than their Korean roots.

Constructive feedback on enhancing the immigrant experience was forthcoming, with a shared desire for improved resource accessibility (66.7%), a more receptive and inclusive community environment (66.7%), augmented availability of employment prospects (57.1%), increased accessibility to essential information (57.1%), language support (57.1%), and streamlined assimilation into cultural variations (52.4%). Conversely, a minor percentage of respondents felt that no aspects required modification (9.5%). It was found that the majority of participants believed that there were multiple aspects of their immigration that needed to be improved.



What do you feel is something that needs to be improved in order to make the immigration process for Russian Koreans easier?

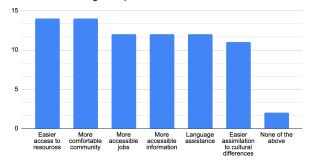


Figure 3. Bar graph of areas that Russian Koreans felt should be improved to enhance their immigration process.

#### Quotes from Participants

Insightful participant quotes offered deeper insights into their lived experiences. Many participants underscored language barriers as a preeminent struggle, compounded by apprehensions related to pronunciation and communication. Cultural assimilation emerged as another major challenge, with individuals expressing the difficulties in adapting to new norms while navigating personal identity: "For the most part it was difficult in the beginning due to my shy character, and being afraid that I could not say and pronounce things right. Therefore, I also had to contend with assimilating and making friends." Participants also lamented the absence of their familiar culture and cuisine, a sentiment poignantly captured by one respondent: "Missing culture, food that I used to eat."

A sense of uncertainty, characteristic of the immigration process, was coupled with an enduring optimism toward the realization of personal aspirations: "It was difficult to face the uncertainty while remaining optimistic that my goals will be realized." Practical challenges extended beyond cultural assimilation, encompassing multifaceted aspects of life, such as education, credit building, and general navigation: "language and assimilation to the culture including understanding and navigating various aspects of life such as education, building credit, education, etc."

The Russian Korean cohort disclosed a distinctive set of challenges arising from their hybrid identity, often straddling between two worlds: "It's often hard for Russian Koreans to find their place and identity in a non-Russian speaking community." Respondents highlighted the complex task of belonging to neither the Russian nor Korean community in a complete sense due to linguistic and cultural complexities: "not fitting into any niche or group since we are Asian but culturally we are more Slavic."

In the realm of social interaction, participants noted both challenges and improvements over time. Adjusting to social norms in the United States presented initial hurdles, potentially attributable to cultural disparities. However, respondents indicated improved comfort as they became accustomed to their local communities, particularly in regions characterized by multicultural diversity. While many expressed satisfaction with social interactions within the United States, a distinct thread connected them to their heritage: "Mostly my circle of friends consists of Russian-speaking people. So, it's hard to compare. I don't believe I assimilated with the local community." This comprehensive investigation illuminated the intricate dynamics of dual migration for Russian Koreans, unraveling their distinctive challenges while highlighting their resilience and multifaceted affiliations.

### Conclusion

Immigration to a foreign country invariably introduces a plethora of challenges, spanning multiple facets of individuals' lives. This paper delves into the distinctive hardships experienced by dual migrants, with a particular emphasis on the journey of Russian Koreans in adapting to life in the United States. Dual migrants, whose experiences are shaped

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by the amalgamation of two distinct cultures, often confront difficulties that diverge from those typically encountered by single-cultural immigrants.

For Russian Koreans, who are proficient in the Russian language and earnestly embrace its cultural nuances, the process of integration is further complicated by their overly apparent Asian heritage. This ethnically divergent attribute poses obstacles to their seamless integration within certain societal circles in the United States. The investigation reveals that while a substantial 85.7% of the respondents grappled with language barriers—a prevalent challenge for immigrants overall—57.1% encountered difficulties in cultural assimilation, with an additional 52.4% expressing challenges in experiencing a sense of community belonging. Numerous participants articulated the perception that their distinct Asian physical characteristics hindered their capacity to assimilate fluidly into their chosen communities, as encapsulated by a participant's observation: "Russian Koreans often encounter difficulty in establishing their identity within non-Russian speaking communities."

In the traditional immigrant trajectory, communities formed around shared national origins facilitate resource sharing, knowledge dissemination, and skills acquisition. However, the paucity of Russian Koreans residing in the United States poses an impediment to the establishment of such cohesive networks. Despite their shared linguistic proficiency, the Korean ethnicity inherent to Russian Koreans segregates them from conventional Russian immigrants, exacerbating their struggle to intertwine within existing immigrant frameworks. This ambivalence frequently leaves Russian Koreans feeling culturally adrift, with many encountering challenges in aligning with any specific niche or group due to their Asian physical attributes and Slavic cultural heritage. Empirical evidence underscores that 57.2% of the participants attest to a stronger affinity for their USSR/Russian heritage compared to their Korean lineage. This shift in allegiance can be attributed to their upbringing and immersive exposure to Russian culture. Additionally, 38.1% of respondents reported heightened ease in their interactions with traditional Russians, while none indicated a heightened affinity for traditional Korean culture. Despite these inclinations, Russian Koreans continue to grapple with hurdles in integrating into Russian communities due to their discernibly different physical appearances.

The absence of dedicated organizations catering to dual migrants, such as Russian Koreans, exacerbates their challenges. Unlike other immigrant groups that benefit from specialized support networks, Russian Koreans encounter difficulties accessing resources related to employment, healthcare, and mental well-being. As a result, this dearth of targeted support hampers their capacity to secure employment, access essential resources, receive medical assistance, and avail themselves of psychological support. Notably, several resources tailored for general immigrants inade-quately address the specific requirements of Russian Koreans, leading to distinct challenges in navigating their new lives within the United States.

In light of the unique challenges that dual migrants like Russian Koreans grapple with, this paper underscores the pivotal role of community and resource provision in alleviating their difficulties. Advocating for heightened awareness, robust support networks, and the dissemination of pertinent information can significantly ameliorate the integration process for dual migrants. Within a nation characterized by its cultural diversity and a tapestry of ethnicities, it is paramount to empower individuals to embrace their heritage while forging connections within their adopted society. The establishment of resource platforms, diverse organizations, and the promotion of information-sharing can collectively facilitate a more seamless integration process for dual migrants, enabling them to cultivate a sense of kinship within a culturally diverse landscape. Further studies can be conducted with an expansion of participants all over the United States to see whether or not there is a similar trend within a larger population across different demographics. Additionally, it would be beneficial to test other dual migration groups to see how certain factors vary or stay constant throughout other dual migration groups.

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