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The Russian Language and Workers from Central Asia Migrating to Russia

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Abstract

This paper reviews historical, economic and social reasons for working people to migrate from five Central Asian Republics (CARs) to Russia in the early 21st Century. Relationships between Russia and the five Central Asian States changed dramatically after the USSR collapse and in the ensuing three decades, large numbers of workers from Central Asia migrated to Russia. It became imperative for migrating workers to learn Russian to mingle socially and gain economic benefits. Russian-speaking workers amalgamated well in Russia and their remittances improved the GDPs of their home states. However, with greater numbers of migrating workers, Russia imposed new migration laws that required better competence in Russian, which resulted in new difficulties and challenges for migrants and those who aspired to move to Russia for work.

Keywords: Russia, Russian, Central Asian Republics, remittances, migrant workers, immigration laws, immigration policies

After independence, many Central Asian Republics (CARs) promoted national languages to reduce Russian culture and influence and strengthen nationalism and statehood. This resulted in the reduced use of Russian (lingua franca), especially for generations born after the Soviet era. In addition, weak educational systems in CARs waned Russian-speaking skills. In countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the use of Russian not only decreased, but literacy in general even for local languages, Kyrgyz and Tajik, also declined, leaving a significant number of Central Asians struggling with

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the Russian tongue.¹ *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* reports that 20 per cent of migrants from Central Asia could not speak Russian and 50 per cent could not fill out a simple form in Russian, which left migrants at risk for exploitation.² Migration from CARs to Russia has increased in the last two decades largely due to dreadful economic conditions in home states leading about 800,000 Kyrgyz, 1.5 million Tajiks, and about three million Uzbeks to migrate to Russia.³ Many Central Asian working migrants born in the Soviet era were proficient in Russian,⁴ which gave them the advantage of working in Russia as farmers, labourers and construction workers. In 2007, the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS), reported 40 per cent of migrant workers were employed in the construction sector (of which 13 per cent were legal), 14 per cent in agriculture, and 19 per cent in trade while the rest in the processing industry in Russia.⁵ The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) puts Russia ranks fourth in the world in hosting international migrants (11.6 million) of which 2.5 million come from five Central Asian states. Russia is one of the 'world's largest migration corridors' that relies on imported labour and is dependent on Central Asian states.⁶ The following (adapted) figure shows a steady increase in remittances (billions of US dollars) from Russia based on money transfer operators and postal services for the period 2008-2011 (see Figure 1). These transfers amounted to almost 49 per cent of Tajik, nearly 29 per cent of Kyrgyz and about 13 per cent of Uzbek GDPs,⁷ making CARs and Russian economies interdependent.

¹ Rachel Van Horne. "Russia: Central Asian Labor Migrants Face Language Barrier," *Eurasianet*, 21 Oct 2011, available at <https://eurasianet.org/russia-central-asian-labor-migrants-face-language-barrier>. Accessed 27 December 2022.

² Ibid.

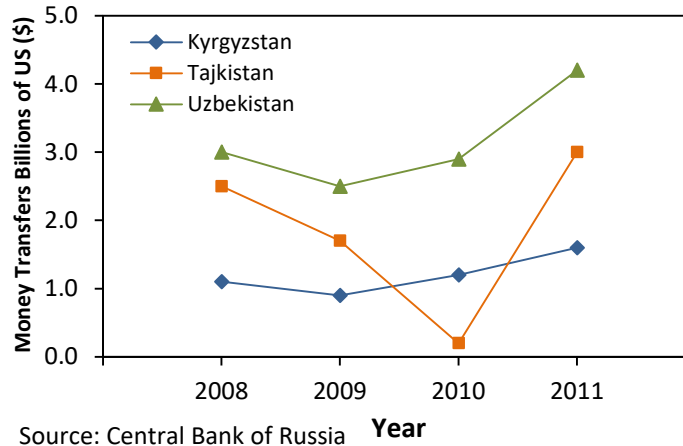
³ Daria Anichkova. *Central Asia's Migrant Headache*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 June 2012). available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/21/central-asia-s-migrant-headache-pub-48574>. Accessed 27 December 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Human Rights Watch. "Are you Happy to Cheat Us? Exploitation of Migrants Construction Workers in Russia", *Report* (10 February 2009), at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/10/are-you-happy-cheat-us/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-russia>.

⁶ International Migration 2020, Report Highlights, available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2020_international_migration_highlights.pdf.

⁷ Daria Anichkova, *Central Asia's Migrant Headache*.

Figure 1: Remittances from Russia to three CARs (2008-2011)⁸

According to a recent update (World Bank, 2022), 30 percent of Kyrgyz work abroad, mainly in Russia and their remittances make up almost 30 percent of their country's GDP.⁹ For remittance-dependent countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, labour migration is encouraged by the state to support their foreign currency reserves and strengthen economies by creating a migration corridor dependent on each other.¹⁰

Importance of Russian Language

International migration can be taken as a special case of social mobility where "a society permits or encourages change in social class, social or economic status, or social roles."¹¹ Migrants from Central Asian States not only gain economic uplift, but those who speak Russian effectively have added advantages to move vertically in social status and social roles. Working strength and money alone cannot lead to higher social standing in Russia, and without knowing the Russian, the laws of the country and rights and duties of migrant workers in Russia, social mobility slows.¹² This

⁸ Figure 1 cited in Ibid.

⁹ World Bank Group. Kyrgyz Republic: Country Economy Memorandum (2022), at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/679681585289928309/pdf/Main-Report.pdf>.

¹⁰ Visit <https://www.adb.org/publications/support-for-labor-migration-tajikistan>.

¹¹ 'Social Mobility' in *American Psychological Association*, at <https://dictionary.apa.org/social-mobility>.

¹² Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Online Russian-Language Hate and Discrimination against Central Asian Migrants: Challenges and Ways Forward (London: ISD, 2022), 6. Available at

qualitative paper uses hermeneutic methods to explore, what challenges are faced by migrants if they have a poor understanding of Russian. And how would they be affected by new Russian migration rules?

Russian is among the top most spoken languages in the world. It is one of 6 official languages used in the UN.¹³ Also, officially it is used in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan which border Russia, and is spoken in the Baltic States, Israel, China, Armenia, and even the United States, where hundreds of people speak Russian.¹⁴ In the Russian Federation, Russian is spoken by 260 million people around the world.¹⁵ Since Russian is a Slavonic language, it has similarities to Polish, Belarusian, Czech, and even English.

Russia repositioned itself as a major global economic power in the new millennium and is a member of G20, the United Nations, UNESCO, the European Council, and the World Trade Organization. After becoming an economic power, a large number of Russian companies have started searching for qualified employees who are capable of speaking and writing in Russian, which is why it is commonly heard in diplomatic exchanges that Russian has regained its importance and use.¹⁶ Fluency in Russian was a ticket for job opportunities in the former Soviet Union, and, today, it continues as an incentive in the job markets of Russia. Knowing Russian increases the probability of getting employment in Central Asia and in Russia for migrants.¹⁷ Many migrants not fluent in Russian and working illegally in Russia often face difficulties financially and socially. This makes younger generations of Central Asia cautious as they understand the practical use (like building their resumes etc.) of Russia to access economic benefits and improve their financial standing. For Russian employers, applicants with

<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Central-Asia-Online-Extremism-Report.pdf>, accessed 17 November 2022.

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/guide/languages.shtml>

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20130614060228/http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/ACS-12.pdf>.

¹⁵ Tom Guest, *7 Reasons to Learn the Russian Language (Besides Being Able to Order Vodka)*, (Mosa Lingua blog, 23, September 2020), available at <https://www.mosalingua.com/en/russian-language/>, accessed 15 December 2022

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Alan Duncan and Astghik Mavisakalyan, "Russian Language Skills and Employment in the Former Soviet Union," *Economics of Transition* 23, No. 3 (2015): 625–656. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecot.12075>, accessed 22 December 2022.

good Russian skills mean serious intent, resourcefulness, and hardiness in learning a tough language like Russian.¹⁸

Foreign Investors

The economy of Russia stands at 11th place in the world, stable and secure for many national and international businesses. It is ranked 28th (190 world economies) for business climate. Large resources of oil, gas, and metals exported by Russia attract foreign investors and the workforce of Russia is appreciated by them because of favourable costs. The largest foreign investors include the US, Turkey, France, UK, and Cyprus. Total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the year 2020, was 446 billion (US\$) where most FDI was in the mining and drilling sector (24%) followed by manufacturing industry (21%); and eight billion (US\$) in green field investments.¹⁹ Even after Russia is facing international sanctions and a huge number of foreign businesses ended their contracts, many Western companies from Germany, France, Italy, the USA, and Britain have continued their operations in Central Asia to date.²⁰ Russian is considerably important for business communication. It may be reduced but not curtailed.

Immigration Laws

Several immigration laws (2022) stem from the Russian Constitution, the Federal Law on Refugees, the Federal Law on Citizenship (amended 2004), the Law of Forced Migrants, and the Federal Law on Legal Foreign Citizens in Russia.²¹ President Vladimir Putin signed a revised State Migration Policy on June 13, 2012. Foreign workers need to pass a compulsory test in Russian language and history to get work permit visas, and for those who work illegally, criminal penalties were enforced for them and their employers.²² But the number of illegal migrants does not decrease because they fill vacancies, which Russian citizens avoid, especially, jobs with low salaries,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Residence Permit in Russia - 2022 Guide*, (Lawerrussia.Com, 2022), available at <https://www.lawyersrussia.com/residence-permit-in-russia#:~:text=Under%20the%20new%20Immigration%20Law,documents%20issued%20by%20Russian%20authorities>, accessed 21 February, 2023.

²⁰ <https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/over-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain>.

²¹ *Residence Permit in Russia - 2022 Guide*.

²² Anichkova, *Central Asia's Migrant Headache*. See also "Russia: Moscow Tightens Rules for Labor Migrants," 18 June 2012. <https://eurasianet.org/russia-moscow-tightens-rules-for-labor-migrants>.

little or no respect, and hard work. The other reason is immigration quotas are not enough to recompense labour shortages.²³

Central Asian migrant flow is becoming so huge that it has started to affect religious and ethnic demographics in Russia. Two million Uzbeks, one million Tajiks, and over half a million Kyrgyz make up one-third of total migrants, which does not include those who hold Russian passports. The number of Muslims from CARs in Moscow now exceeds two million. Muslims are expected to account for 20% of Russia's total population by 2030.²⁴ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 13 February 2012,) ironically announced a program to enlist members for the anti-migrant network called *Volunteer Brigade* to catch illegal immigrants and help FMS officers conduct raids on tenants who did not have legal permits or were suspected lawbreakers.²⁵ The Russian authorities have similar regulations for foreign citizens who have temporary or permanent residence permits. To obtain the Russian residency according to the new immigration laws, foreigners need to know Russian history, language, and legislation. This knowledge is to be verified by documents issued by Russian authorities, however, some individuals are exempt, like those below 18 or above 60 years of age, have family members from the former Soviet Union, foreign students at accredited universities or schools, and specialists in fields required by Russian companies.²⁶ Russia has remained among the top countries for migrating individuals for decades.²⁷

In 2012-15, Russia despite difficult immigration laws, hosted 12 million foreigners. China constituted the largest diaspora (20 per cent) and Vietnam (13 per cent). Other foreign nationals who were granted patents and work permits during 2011-15 mainly came from Uzbekistan (45 per cent),

²³ Marlène Laruelle, "Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia: The "Diasporization" of the Central Asian States?" *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5, No. 3 (2007): 106, available at https://isdpeu/content/uploads/images/stories/isdpeu-main-pdf/2007_laurelle_central-asian-labor-migrants-in-russia.pdf. Accessed 15, January 2023.

²⁴ Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, *Discrimination, often Violent, Impacts Thousands of Central Asian Migrants in Russia*. (IPI Global Observatory, 20 February 2013), available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2013/02/discrimination-often-violent-impacts-thousands-of-central-asian-migrants-in-russia/>. Accessed 13 January 2023.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Residence Permit in Russia - 2022 Guide*.

²⁷ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/183131468024337798/pdf/384260Migratio101OFFICIAL0USE0ONLY1.pdf>.

Tajikistan (nearly 20 per cent) and Ukraine (9 per cent). Workers inflow from former Soviet States made up 90 per cent of the total flow of authorized migrants.²⁸

Russian and Central Asian States

Aziz Berdiqulov (2022) writes that many Russians who lived in CARs moved to Russia after the collapse of the USSR largely because they had ties with their motherland and could not subscribe to new national identities that were emerging in the Central Asian States; however, many Central Asians also left for Russia because of poverty and unemployment in their home countries. Nevertheless, sizeable Russian minorities continued to live in CARs. For example, 18 per cent of the total population of Kazakhstan is Russian,²⁹ more than five per cent in Kyrgyzstan, two per cent each in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and half a per cent in Tajikistan. Most Russians remained in Central Asia owned farmlands and maintained their cultural ties with the locals.³⁰

Remittances by Central Asian migrants have contributed to the national economies of CARs. For example, 52 per cent of GDP for Tajikistan and 31 per cent in Kyrgyzstan in 2013 with some decline in 2016, contributing more than a third of GDP for Tajikistan and a fourth for Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia are sharing benefits for being members of the Eurasian Economic Union. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan maintain their distance from Russia but sustain their economic and political relations. Russia remains the top destination for migrant workers from CARs and over 4.2 million have moved to Russia to work,³¹ Some 800,000 have become Russian nationals, and their presence in the multi-ethnic nation of 143 million has contributed to the cultural diversity and economic growth of

²⁸ Russia: A Migration System with Soviet Roots. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/russia-migration-system-soviet-roots>

²⁹ Aziz Berdiqulov, "ECMI minorities blog. Russian migrants in Central Asia – An ambiguous reception". (The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), 25 July 2022. Available at <https://doi.org/10.53779/ABPL3118>, accessed on 15 November 2022

³⁰ Central Asia: Population Geography – Post-Soviet Russian Populations. Visit at <https://cod.pressbooks.pub/easternworlddailyreadingsgeography/chapter/central-asia-population-geography-ii/#:~:text=With%20it%20longer%20historical%20connection,number%20of%20Russians%20remaining%20there.>

³¹ Berdiqulov, "ECMI minorities blog".

Russia. These migrants are beneficial to Russia for they can be used as tools to coerce decision-makers in CARs to follow Russian policies.³²

The majority of Uzbek migrants come from Fergana Valley, which is fertile and irrigated but overpopulated, and young people are mostly unemployed.³³ Some migrants also come from the poor provinces of Surkhandaria and Kashkhadaria, which makes Uzbekistan number one (1.5 million workers in 2018) in supplying workers to the labour market in Russia with high (3.9 billion USD) remittances in 2017,³⁴ and even more in 2020 (World Bank, 2020).³⁵ In his meeting with Uzbek President Shavkat Miziyojev in November 2021, Putin emphasized the need for Uzbek migrants to be proficient in the Russian language and its laws, a proposal readily accepted by Miziyojev and the Government of Uzbekistan³⁶ requiring prospective workers to learn the Russian language, laws, regulations, and their rights before they travel to Russia.³⁷ This led to an increase (over 3 million) in migrant workers to Russia in the first two quarters of 2021.³⁸

Much like Uzbeks, Tajiks prefer to work in Russia and about 200,000 Tajiks have settled in Russia permanently, while others go there for seasonal work. About 1.6 million Tajik migrated to Russia for work in 2020, and their remittance made huge contributions to the Tajik economy.³⁹ After the collapse of the USSR, older Tajik generations that moved to Russia with greater proficiency in Russian and overall education found better-skilled jobs; younger generations that lacked linguistic skills and were less skilled found low-paying jobs. A small number of Tajik students from migrant families have completed higher education. Ninety per cent of Tajik migrants are young men, most of them married with secondary education only.⁴⁰

³² Ibid.

³³ Laruelle, "Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia: The "Diasporization" of the Central Asian States?", 106.

³⁴ Umida Hashimova. "2021: Another Year of the Russian Language in Central Asia," *The Diplomats*, (3 January 2022), available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/2021-another-year-of-the-russian-language-in-central-asia/>, accessed on 2 August 2022

³⁵ *Uzbekistan - Remittance Inflows to GDP*, available at [Tradingeconomics.Com/Uzbekistan/Remittance-Inflows-to-Gdp-Percent-Wb-Data.Html](https://tradingeconomics.com/uzbekistan/remittance-inflows-to-gdp-percent-wb-data.html), accessed 10 March 2023

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hashimova. "2021: Another Year of the Russian Language in Central Asia

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Laruelle. "Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia: The "Diasporization" of the Central Asian States?", 106

Compared to all CARs, the use of Russian in Tajikistan is somewhere in the middle, even though Tajiks are warm-hearted towards the language. This is partly because of financial and linguistic (still using Cyrillic script) difficulties in using or converting Russian into Latin script, and a period of bad relations with Russia between 2007-2011 when the country experienced *de-russification*.⁴¹ In Tajik media and educational institutions, Russian remained highly used. 80 per cent of Tajiks use Russian when visiting websites and 91 per cent when watching television. On December 28, 2021, Putin reiterated much the same to the Tajik President what he had said to Miziyoyev a month before, i.e., to ensure stable work and safe and good living conditions in Russia migrant workers need to learn the Russian language.⁴²

Kyrgyz workers from poorer southern regions migrate to Russia. According to a report of the Kyrgyz Parliamentary Committee on Labor Migration (May 2006), the southern regional economies of Djalal-Abad, Osh, and Batken were so poor that 70 per cent of the population had to leave the country for Russia. Some headed to Kazakhstan.⁴³ The Kyrgyz government recognizes 300,000 Kyrgyz migrants. 90 per cent are from the southern regions while 10 per cent were from northern regions such as Issyk-Kul, Bishkek, and Kant.⁴⁴ The Russian universities offer free education to hundreds of Kyrgyz students annually, and 900,000 Kyrgyz students remitted between \$300-500 million in 2008 equivalent to the annual budget of Kyrgyzstan then.⁴⁵ In 2010, 18 per cent of remittances to Kyrgyzstan accounted for 27 per cent of the country's GDP.⁴⁶ The Russian language penetrates public space in a much friendlier

⁴¹ Farangis Najibullah. *No Shortage of Students As Tajikistan Builds New Russian Schools*, (Washington DC: Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty, 20 January 2020), available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-new-russian-schools/30384557.html#:~:text=There%20are%20already%2032%20Russian,and%20Russian%20classes%2C%20taught%20separately>, accessed 20 December 2022.

⁴² Hashimova. "2021: Another Year of the Russian Language in Central Asia"

⁴³ Laruelle. "Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia: The "Diasporization" of the Central Asian States?", 106.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Abdykadyr Orusbaev, Arto Mustajoki & Ekaterina Protassova. "Multilingualism, Russian Language and Education in Kyrgyzstan," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, No. 3-4 (2008): 492, available at DOI: 10.1080/13670050802148806. Accessed 19 February 2023.

⁴⁶ Irina Sinitsina. *Economic Cooperation Between Russia and Central Asian Countries: Trends and Outlook*, *IPPA Working Paper No. 5*, (University of Central Asia – Institute of Public Policy and Administration, 2012): 68, available at <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3023190>, accessed 22 February 2023

way in Kyrgyzstan. In the year 2000, Russian became the official language of Kyrgyzstan. The number of schools teaching in Russian has increased in Kyrgyzstan. The university education is already mostly in Russian.⁴⁷ The majority (78%) of people watch television in Russian, and Russian newspapers and magazines are higher in circulation than those in Kyrgyz. Since Kyrgyz migrants have a better understanding of Russian, they can find jobs easily compared to Uzbeks and Tajiks. About 10 per cent of Kyrgyz work in Russia and their remittances contribute 30 per cent to Kyrgyz's GDP.

A considerable number of ethnic Russians live in Kazakhstan and its territories. Such demographic composition provides a convenient excuse for Moscow to play its language card. Putin in his annual marathon press conference (December 23, 2021) emphasized that Russia is a significant factor in Kazakh-Russia relations,⁴⁸ and added, "I am very grateful to the leadership of Kazakhstan for their attentive attitude to the maintenance and development of the Russian language, many people in Kazakhstan are studying Russian, and this is a Russian-speaking country in the full sense of the word".⁴⁹ The Russian language is the most widespread alternative to the Kazakh language. Kazakh constitution grants official status to Russian, and in the government's official paperwork, Russian is widely used. The government is planning to promote three mediums of study i.e., Russian, Kazakh, and English in high schools. To accommodate Russia further, Nazarbayev signed an order in February 2018 to switch to Latin script for Russian – to be completed by 2025. However, it is hard to predict which language shall be prioritized in future as the Russian language is extensively used in political as well as social life in Kazakhstan.⁵⁰

Turkmenistan remained at bay from Russia after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian language suffered an extensive decline because Russian speakers in Turkmenistan decreased threefold by 2010 as most of them migrated to Russia, disrupting the learning of the Russian language.⁵¹ Shift

⁴⁷ Nurbek Bekmurzaev. *Russian language status in Central Asian countries*, (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 18 November 2020), available at <https://cabar.asia/en/russian-language-status-in-central-asian-countries#images-1>. Accessed 19 November 2022.

⁴⁸ Hashimova. "2021: Another Year of the Russian Language in Central Asia."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ CABAR.Asia. *Turkmen Paradox: De Jure - There Is No Russian Language, De Facto - It Is Necessary*. CABAR.Asia (2020). <https://cabar.asia/en/turkmen-paradox-de-jure-there-is-necessary>.

from Cyrillic to Latin script was another difficulty for learning Russian because new and mature generations failed to adapt to a new style of reading and writing. Despite Turkmenization and the decline in the number of Russian speakers, it is believed, that the Russian language will arise in Turkmenistan in the future. Russian is not only a mode of communication among various ethnicities but also in non-religious groups and academic disciplines. Russian is used by Turkmen for many Russian products and access to the Internet. Around \$88.3 million were remitted in 2017 to Turkmenistan.⁴⁵ Though Russia is not a priority in Turkmenistan today due to weak trade relations with Russia, the country depends on Russia for jobs and remittances making Russia important for the future.

Conclusion

Foreign exchange and remittances from Russia make CARs dependent on Russia and Russia depends on CARs' working labour to run its infrastructure. In this context learning Russian is important for those who migrate to Russia, and those who are left behind learn the language speedily so that they can migrate one day to Russia for work. Russian can be used to do cutting-edge science, achieve high levels of art and culture. It is strong enough to bring about international economic dividends. People in CARs are aware of that. The Russians require migrants to be proficient in Russian, know their laws and their regulations, or else it is difficult for the migrating population to get suitable jobs. Central Asian countries need to send migrants to Russia for work because their remittances contribute to the GDPs of these countries. The governments of CARs promote local languages, but they need to promote Russian if they want their new generations to go to Russia for work, higher studies, or permanent residence. Disuse of Russians in CARs will have the worst economic consequences for these republics.

The economic boom in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the great shift of Russian businesses from Ukraine after the war (2022) is manifesting a ray of hope that the Russian language remains a learning essentiality for this region.⁵²

no-russian-language-de-facto-it-is-necessary#:~:text=Russian%20has%20ceased%20to%20be,become%20more%20common%20to%20mention.

⁵² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Economic boom in the Caucasus and Central Asia at a time of Russian immigration. Report.