

Russians and Ukrainians

Profile

Slavs – mainly Russians and some Ukrainians – constituted until recently the largest minority in Kyrgyzstan. Unlike in other Central Asian states, a significant proportion of Slavs were rural dwellers, though this has steadily been decreasing. Most Russians in Kyrgyzstan, estimated at around 500,000 (BBC News, 23 November 2005) now live in the capital Bishkek and the fertile Chui valley which surrounds it. They are mainly Orthodox Christians or Jews.

Historical context

Russian and Ukrainian migrants started to arrive in the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan towards the end of the 19th Century, as workers to construct roads and buildings as Tsarist Russia began to establish its presence and control, but also as farmers in the Chui valley which surrounds the capital Frunze (now Bishkek).

Given the limited amount of fertile land available in Kyrgyzstan, the discriminatory policies of Tsarist authorities which took away the best land for the use of Slavic settlers was to contribute to a rebellion in 1916 which led to the killing of some 2,000 Russians and Ukrainians by ethnic Kazaks, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz.

Despite the creation of the Kyrgyz SSR in 1924, effective control of the republic remained largely in the hands of Slavs and a Russian-speaking Kyrgyz elite. The beginning of the end of this era of dominance for Russian-speakers was to emerge with Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991. As the Kyrgyz 'titular nation' asserted their dominance and imposed their language as the main language of government (its 'state language'), Russians and other Slavic minorities began emigrating towards Russia, the Ukraine and in the case of Jews towards Israel. Half of the approximate million Slavs were to leave the country by 2005.

While the Russian language is still used in most levels of government – at least in the northern parts of the country – and formally became an official language in February 2004, the increasing legislative and other regulations requiring fluency in Kyrgyz in various positions has gradually diminished or even eliminated opportunities for Slavs in areas where they were previously dominant, such as the higher levels of administration and government. Since 1991 and especially 2004, most of these positions are occupied by ethnic Kyrgyz. The use of Russian still remains widespread in public life, especially in the capital, but the decreasing numbers of native speakers and the growing pre-eminence of the Kyrgyz language have not alleviated the fears of this minority. Partially as a response to these and other concerns, especially in the area of educational opportunities as state universities were to move in the 2000s towards education in Kyrgyz, a Russian–Kyrgyz (Slavonic) University was established in 1993 where teaching in Russian would be firmly entrenched.

Current issues

The diminishing importance of the Russian language, its replacement by Kyrgyz, the growing dominance of ethnic Kyrgyz in government administration and the perceived limited employment and economic opportunities for members of the Russian (and Ukrainian) minority have all encouraged large numbers to emigrate. The emigration trend appears to have seen a relative jump in numbers in 2005 and 2006 with the recent political upheavals and instability, as Mother Russia appears more stable and economically attractive for some of the half-million or so Russians left in the country.

The rights of the Russian-speaking minority are in theory much better recognised than those of other minorities in the Constitution and in the state administrative structures, as the Russian language is still frequently used in government departments as a language of work and communication. But legislation after 2004 has made it clear that unless they are fluent in Kyrgyz, Russians will eventually be shut out from political representation and other areas of public life. Though this law remains 'pending', it remains a threat.

These developments have led to recent demands from representatives of the Slavic minorities for guaranteed representation and a quota system in state employment, but these demands have as of yet remained unanswered.