

## Russians and Ukrainians

### Profile

Unofficial figures from 2005 suggest that about two-thirds of all the country's Slavic minorities have emigrated. According to the census held in 1989, 1,653,475 Russians and 153,197 Ukrainians lived in Uzbekistan: by 2005, it was estimated that only 620,000 remained (BBC News, 23 November 2005).

The Slavic minorities are almost exclusively urban, 45 per cent of them residing in the Tashkent Oblast, with much of the rest in other industrial centres.

Russians and Uzbeks have remained largely separate communities. Recognising the need for Russian specialists, the government had offered them after independence various incentives to retain their services. But the growing 'Uzbekisation' of the country led most Russians and other Slavs to leave the country.

### Historical context

Some Russian military were posted in Uzbekistan during the Tsarist period after Uzbekistan was absorbed into the Russian empire after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, but for the most part the existence of a large minority of Russians and other Slavs dates back to their settlement during the time of various five-year plans for the development of industry and agriculture during the time of the Soviet Union. There were also other waves of Slavic immigration, such as during the Second World War when the evacuation of plants and research institutions from European Russia brought a scientific and technical intelligentsia to the republic.

The dominant position of Russians and other Russian-speakers - exemplified and effected through the Russian language - started to weaken with the adoption of Uzbek as the state language in October 1989. The initial law stipulated an eight-year transition period, but this was superseded after independence with its replacement with another language law in 1995 which put the Russian language in the same group as other national minority languages. It is also from this period that Uzbekistan has started to set itself apart from most of its Central Asian neighbours in the visible face of the Russian legacy and on its treatment of the Russian language. Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian country which did not include a provision for the Russian language in its post-Soviet constitution. While others also replaced Cyrillic with a Latin alphabet, Uzbekistan quickly went one step further and also replaced Russian (and Soviet) signs, topographical and street names with Uzbek names. Even burning of Russian-language books occurred on a number of occasions in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Uzbekistan has since independence been one of the Central Asian states most vehemently opposed to dual citizenship - a perhaps not so subtle invitation for Russians and other Slavs to think seriously about leaving the country.

The switch to a national currency in Uzbekistan in November 1993 and recurring incidents of violence directed against Russian-speakers contributed as accelerators to the wave of emigration by 2005.

## **Current issues**

Though not initially apparent, Uzbekistan has through various means adopted an 'Uzbekisation' of the state and its institutions, which has resulted in Russians and other Russian-speaking minorities feeling more and more out of place, and in practice excluded or disadvantaged in a number of public spheres - often through language requirements.

Since Russians, Ukrainians and other Slavic minorities are by and large not fluent in the Uzbek language, the country's only official language, the immediate and - in the context of Uzbekistan - discriminatory result is their limited access to civil service and to high political office.

By some estimates, the number of Russian-language or mixed Russian-Uzbek-language, schools dropped from 1,147 in 1992 to 813 in 2000. Ironically, Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia has improved since the 2005 Andijan massacre, leading to an increased emphasis on Russian in education as Russia seemed to greet the former autonomous republic of the Soviet Union with open arms at the same time as many in the international community condemned the country for the atrocities committed against a civilian population. Since the 1995 language law actually protects a right for minorities to schools teaching in their own language, the Russian-speaking minority would appear to be currently in a more secure environment, at least for education up to the university level.

But the drive to make Uzbek the language of instruction at state universities and for most positions in government remains one of the main obstacles to the educational and employment opportunities of many Russians. Some of the cultural claims of members of the Russian minority include greater use of the Russian language on state media (almost all of the content of the four state television stations are in Uzbek, with for example only a half hour per day to news in the Russian language).