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Russians and Ukrainians

Profile

A primarily urban minority, most remaining Russians and Ukrainians live in or near the capital, Ashgabat, and other urban centres. While Russians and Ukrainians constituted the largest minority group at the time of independence, their numbers have decreased dramatically in two separate waves: first, immediately after independence, and then more recently in 2003 when Russians lost their dual citizenship rights. Russians and other Slavs with technical expertise in the oil and gas industries have tended to be insulated from many of the states discriminatory practices, though this appears to be changing after 2003. The Russian Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged position, alongside Sunni Islam, it was until recently one of only two officially recognised religions.

It is difficult to know the exact numbers of Russians and Ukrainians in the country: it was thought that more than 100,000 holders of Russian citizenship lived in Turkmenistan at the time of the loss of dual citizenship in 2003, and that many thousands left the country as a consequence. One estimate for 2005 however suggests a much larger population of perhaps around 142,000 (BBC News, 23 November 2005).

Historical context

The presence of Russians and Ukrainians in Turkmenistan began in the early 20th century, though it is for all intent and purposes mainly a legacy of the more recent Soviet rule. Since they did not arrive as settlers in any significant numbers, most members of these Slavic minorities tended to live in the country's cities and towns.

The independence of Turkmenistan and early signs of consecrating Turkmenistan as the 'land of the Turkmen', including the refusal of authorities in 1992 to recognise a Russian community organisation as unconstitutional, soon led to a wave of emigration which began in earnest in the mid-1990s. By 2003, there was thought to be only about 100,000 individuals of Russian ethnicity.

While in the initial years after independence Russian-speakers could be said to enjoy a number of privileges due to the status of their language and the positions in government and industry they traditionally occupied in the country under the Soviet regime, there were to be slowly reduced. Gradually, Russian media outlets have been shut down: Russian newspapers were banned before 2000, except for one Russian-language daily newspaper (produced by the government), and in 2000 Russian-language radio stations were in turn all closed.

A second wave of emigration occurred after President Niyazov decided in April 2003 to terminate the agreement on dual citizenship with the Russian Federation. There are no reliable figures available,

though Russia's deputy foreign minister is reported to have indicated that approximately 1,500 Russians per month left Turkmenistan from April 2003 to February 2004. The number of Russians and Ukrainians remaining in the country may be less than 50,000, though these figures are doubtful.

Current issues

The situation of Russian and Ukrainian minorities has deteriorated in the last few years for the previously relative advantages that they enjoyed as Russian-speakers, with their language still widely – though diminishing – spoken as a ‘language of inter-ethnic communication’ under the 1992 Constitution. The removal of the last Russian troops from Turkmenistan in 2000 seems to suggest that Russian authorities will no longer be able to exercise whatever influence it may have had to temper the effects of President Niyazov's extreme drive of ‘Turkmenisation’ of the country. This seems to be confirmed by the President's ending dual citizenship for Russians in 2003. It was also that year that all foreign Russian newspapers were prevented from entering the country.

There continues to be no specific organization allowed in Turkmenistan to promote Russian concerns, which appear to involve demands for the right to participate in public life and the decision-making process, and to use the Russian language in dealings with the government, to increase the number and access to schools teaching in Russian. There are claims also that Russians should not be excluded from jobs, both in the private and public sectors.

The Turkmenisation campaign has reached far-reaching levels in the last few years that have resulted in the now near exclusion of the Russian-speaking minority from virtually all state employment. This has been done through a number of techniques, such as not recognising Russian university degrees for professional employment, the prohibition on employment within the government institutions for those who still hold Russian citizenship.

Those who have retained – by accident or willingly – Russian citizenship, have no right to own property.

Though privileged in the past, the Russian Orthodox Church is also being increasingly subjected to the control of government authorities: Russian Orthodox are prohibited from bringing religious literature into Turkmenistan and Russian priests are consistently not allowed to enter and serve in the country.

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