

# RUSSIAN DIASPORAS OF THE CASPIAN REGION COUNTRIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "RUSSIAN WORLD" PROJECT

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## ABSTRACT

A number of state and public organizations take part in pursuing cultural policy and protection of rights of compatriots in the countries of the Caspian region. Russian-speaking communities abroad are regarded as components of "the Russian World" - a civilizational community that unites them around Russia as a historical and cultural centre. The preservation of the Russian language in the post-Soviet states is focused on the studying of the language by the titular peoples of sovereign states as the language of interstate communication with Russia and to ensure favourable conditions for labour migration to Russia. In the Caspian states the status of the Russian-speaking community is constantly declining and decreasing, as well as its cultural role in the life of the independent national states. In a long run, this reduces the base of the functioning of the Russian language in the Caspian countries. The Russian World state project is officially presented as a project on preserving the Russian language in the countries where Russian communities exist. At the same time the analysis of documents and information portals, related to the Russian World program, demonstrates that the policy of the Russian Federation focused on the repatriation of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people to Russia lines up with their migration activity.

**Keywords:** diaspora, compatriots abroad, "the Russian World", the Caspian region.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Russian diaspora is one of the most numerous in the world, so the diaspora can be considered as a special resource of the foreign policy of the Russian state. In the context of multidirectional complex processes of international integration in the Caspian region, Russian culture and language as the basis for the formation and preservation of the diaspora community acquire a special significance as a factor of the "soft power" of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, the potential resource of Russia's "soft power" in the countries of the Caspian region is steadily decreasing because of the reduction of Russian communities in them and the language policy pursued by the local authorities. In these conditions, the state program "Russian World" was created, aimed at preserving Russian culture and the Russian language in countries with Russian communities, the Caspian countries are among them.

## 2. THE FORMATION OF THE RUSSIAN DIASPORA IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE CASPIAN REGION AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR

As a result of the USSR collapse about 25 million ethnic Russians and about 30 million Russian-speaking citizens of the former USSR have found themselves outside the state borders of the Russian Federation since 1991 [1]. Thus, one of the most numerous diasporas in the world was formed.

A diaspora is understood as a part of an ethnic group that lives outside the region of its development or historical origin. In determining the essential content of the concept of diaspora, the approach of R. Brubaker is important, which considers the diaspora as a result of centrifugal tendencies and the transformation of a multi-ethnic state (empire). The collapse of an empire leads to

the formation of sovereign states formed on the basis of a certain titular ethnic group but includes other ethnic groups as well. The formation of nation-states cause formation of "diasporas of cataclysm", which are a consequence of traumatic disintegration as a result of rapid foreign policy changes, arise regardless the wishes and aspirations of the people who make them up, who have found themselves citizens of a new nation-state [2]. Thus, we can consider a part of an ethnic group in a certain state (Russians of Kazakhstan).

Besides, diaspora presupposes the formation of a transnational community, parts of which are located outside the territory of the state where the ethnos was formed. Consequently, diasporas preserve their ethnic or ethno-confessional identity and cohesion through the creation of cross-border social networks [3].

G. Sheffer distinguishes different types of diasporas: with deep historical roots (Armenian, Jewish), "dormant" diasporas (representatives of Scandinavian peoples in the USA), young diasporas (Turks), nascent diasporas at the initial stage of their formation (Filipino), homeless diasporas (Kurds, Gypsies), and "enthnonational diasporas" which are supported by the state, and scattered ones and diasporas living compactly [4].

Diaspora can be considered as the total of all communities of a certain ethnic group in all states outside the territory of the state of origin (Russian sociopolitical discourse uses term "compatriots abroad").

The ethnic nature of the diaspora in the context of global ethno-political changes actualizes the problem of searching for identity as a person's place in the structure of social ties and his relations with the state. Identification of oneself with a diasporal community can be of a complex nonlinear nature.

The phenomenon of diaspora in the modern world includes a combination of ethnic, political and social dimensions. Formation of a diaspora involves structuring the social space of a community through the combination of the demographic potential of an ethnic group, its ethno-cultural resources, public and ethno-cultural institutions and infrastructure.

The Caspian region consists of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan

The smallest Russian community in the Caspian region – currently about 2 thousand people - has been formed in the Islamic Republic of Iran [5]. It started to form during migration after the Revolution of 1917, when several thousand families of representatives of the White Movement settled in the territory of Guilan, Mazandaran and Iranian Azerbaijan. Members of the Russian community have made a great contribution to the development of architecture, industry, and trade in Iran. The peculiarity of the current situation of the Russian community is that Russians base their relations on the code of laws of the Russian Empire. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the religious authorities granted national communities the opportunity to be guided in

their daily life by their own family and property rights. At the same time, Orthodox priests were expelled from the country for several decades. On the whole Russians permanently residing in Iran are marginally included in the orbit of the Russian World due to the general smallness of the community and the historical features of its formation.

The beginning of the formation of Russian community in Azerbaijan dates back to the middle of the 19th century. The first wave of Russian migration from several provinces of Central Russia was caused by the policy of the tsarist authorities, who were pushing representatives of religious sects (Dukhobors, Molokans, etc.) to the outskirts. They received plots of free state lands in Transcaucasia.

The second wave was caused by the industrial development of the region, rapid urbanization, largely in connection with the Baku oil refineries. The number of Russians in Baku for the period between the population censuses of 1897-1913 doubled from 38.98 to 76.2 thousand people [6]. Russians made up a significant part (up to a third) of workers in the oil fields and dominated in administrative structures.

During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920) Russians retained their positions in the administrative apparatus and sectors of the economy, and the Russian language received the status of the state language. However, the revolutionary events and the consequences of the First World War led to economic dislocation, supply problems and an agrarian crisis, which contributed to the reverse migration of a significant part of Russians from rural areas to Russia.

In the Soviet period, according to the 1939 census, there were 528,318 Russians, they made up 37% of the urban population. [8] Russians' share in the rural population was rapidly declining in the post-war period, and due to the faster processes of urbanization, the Russian population was concentrated in cities.

After 1991, the migration of the Russian population from Azerbaijan was influenced by economic problems, political instability, and local conflicts (Sumgait, Baku, Nagorno-Karabakh), the reduction of the scope of the Russian language due to the formation of a national state. According to the census of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1999, there were 134.7 thousand Russians, in 2009 - 115 thousand people. 96.1% of Russians live in the Baku agglomeration [9]. The character of settling and the level of urbanization determine the education level which is higher than the average one in the country. The birth rate and population growth play an important role in the ethnodemographic processes, which have a significant impact on the change in the age structure of the population among ethnic groups. There is a pronounced gender disproportion in Azerbaijan - women account for 62.6% of Russians and 50.4% of Azerbaijani, which is due to the higher rate of aging of the Russian community. There is a slight transition of part of the diaspora to the

Azerbaijani language and consolidation with Azerbaijanians, including through mixed marriages [10].

The Russian community in Turkmenistan is one of the smallest in the former USSR. According to the Soviet population censuses, the Russian community has insignificant changes in the share of the population of the republic (from 17.3% in 1959 to 19.6% in 1979) [11]. On the cusp of the USSR collapse, the Russian community begins to shrink due to migration (up to 9.5% in 1989) and continues to diminish during the period of the sovereign state formation (6.7% in 1995, maximum 3.2% in 2010) [12]. Russians live almost exclusively in Ashgabat, the capital of the republic. The migration of the Russian population has led to a change in the social and demographic characteristics of the Russian-speaking community. The Russian community continues to age. In the context of the traditional society, in which the reliance on family ties and mutual assistance of related households remains, this leads to a further deterioration of their living conditions. Besides, the extremely closed and authoritarian nature of the Turkmen state, which has taken a course towards Turkmanization, also negatively affects the situation of the Russian diaspora.

In Kazakhstan, Russians historically settle in the north and east of the country. The Russian population was historically formed from the Ural, Siberian, Semirechensk Cossacks. In Soviet times, the migration of the population to the territory of modern Kazakhstan was associated with urbanization, evacuation of people during the Great Patriotic War, the development of industry, reclamation of virgin and fallow lands. The Russian-speaking community of Kazakhstan was formed as a predominantly urban one, which led to a lower birth rate and lower rates of natural growth compared to the Kazakh population. By the time of the USSR collapse, about 6 million Russians lived in Kazakhstan. According to the census data, the share of the Russian population is decreasing irreversibly (1959 - 42,7%, 1970 - 42,4%, 1979 - 40,8%, 1989 - 37,8%, 1999 - 29,96%, 2009 - 23,7%) [13]. Russian (Russian-speaking) communities of the Caspian countries were historically formed as communities with an improved social structure – Russians had a high percentage of urbanization, a higher level of education, were engaged in industry, science, education, health care, and management. After the sovereign states were formed, the situation of Russian-speaking communities everywhere, except for Azerbaijan, began to worsen.

The collapse of the unified socio-political, economic, and socio-cultural space of the USSR gave rise to a complex of problems. For the Russian diaspora, this made it more complicated to meet information, cultural, and linguistic needs, as well as worsened problems of preserving and reproducing personal and kinship relations. These problems were especially acute in the first years after the USSR collapse, since the mono-ethnic model of the state began to be implemented to various degrees in the course the construction of national states.

At the beginning of the national states formation political elites began to oust their Russian citizens from authority and administrative bodies, which led to a decrease in the status of representatives of the Russian-speaking community and their cultural role in the life of independent national states. These trends were manifested in different ways in the republics of the former USSR - from restrictions on civil rights in the Baltic states to real security threats in the context of local conflicts and political tension in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The degree of this discomfort depended on three main factors - on the characteristics of Russian communities in the sovereign states, the chosen model of nation-building of sovereign states, and on Russia's policies to support compatriots abroad.

Conceptually, foreign Russian-speaking communities are regarded as components of the "Russian World" - a civilizational community that unites them around Russia as a historical and cultural centre.

### **3. THE RUSSIAN WORLD PROJECT - ESSENTIAL CONTENT AND GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY**

The concept of "the Russian World" was introduced into use both in the sphere of professional politics and in the field of modern scientific discourse by the head of the School of Cultural Policy P. Shchedrovitsky while preparing the concept of Russia's policy in the CIS. In his article "The Russian world. Possible goals of self-determination", published in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" of February 11, 2000, P. Shchedrovitsky writes that the impact of revolutions, world wars, historical and tectonic shifts that occurred during the twentieth century, formed the Russian World as a "network structure of large and small communities, thinking and speaking in the Russian language" [14], i.e. the concept of "the Russian World" is much wider than the borders of Russia and the concept of "Russian-ness".

The Russian World is the Russian capital, which can be actualized in future political, economic, and educational onto-practices to become a full-fledged participant in the process of developing innovative economies.

Thus, P. Shchedrovitsky did not set out to formulate a definition of the Russian World: the main task was to develop a geo-economic strategy of the core of the Russian World of Russia. The foundation of this concept is the idea that Russian-speaking diasporas are meant to strengthen Russia's position in the global economy and world politics.

Russian Diaspora is one of the most numerous and widespread, therefore, the activities of diaspora groups are an important resource in the foreign policy of the state [15], since diasporas have the potential to contribute to the implementation of the donor state's national interests.

At the First World Congress of Foreign Compatriots in 2001, the idea of integration and consolidation of the Russian World was proclaimed by the Russian political elite as an important component of the Russian Federation state policy. However, today the concept of the Russian World lacks a clear formulation and a single system justification. Scientific definitions of the Russian World can be presented as socio-cultural, applied political, religious and diasporal approaches.

The socio-cultural approach is associated with understanding the Russian World as a kind of community of people with a common cultural code or cultural values: traditions, customs, language, historical memory, etc. (works by V.N. Ivanov and V.K. Sergeev [16], V.N. Ksenofontova [17], V.D. Kovalenko [18], and others). Emotionally coloured and metaphorical definitions can be attributed to this typology.

There are many definitions of the Russian World, the main integration quality of which is the Orthodox religion (E.V. Astakhov [19], E.V. Bilchenko [20], O.A. Zhukova [21] and others). We believe that this approach is quite inaccurate and one-dimensional, since the concept of Russianness cannot be reduced only to the Russian ethnicity professing Orthodoxy. The Russian World is polyethnic, multicultural and multi-confessional, which complicates the formulation of a universal definition and concept of this phenomenon.

Understanding of the Russian World as a comprehensive program for the use of the cultural code of the Russian "matrix", "tool", "project" can be attributed to the applied (action-oriented) political typology.

Russian World, in accordance with the diasporal approach, includes the post-Soviet space and Russian diasporas of foreign countries, regardless of the time of and reasons for residing abroad, occupation, ethnicity, religious affiliation or citizenship (Yu.A. Tikhomirov [22], V.A. Tishkov [23] and others).

Russian language, traditions, values and historical memory are the main features of the Russian World, contributing to the preservation of the national identity of Russian diasporas located in different countries of the world, especially in the neighbouring countries - CIS ones, as well as the creation of a single cultural space that can be used not only ideologically, but also economically and politically.

In modern political discourse, the concept of "Russian diaspora" is used extremely rarely, the term "compatriots" has received legal consolidation, the semantic content of which for the first time in the post-Soviet period was spelled out in the Declaration "On the support of the Russian diaspora and on the patronage of Russian compatriots", approved by the resolution of the State Duma of December 8, 1995, No. 1476 [24]. The "compatriots" are those who were citizens of the USSR before its collapse, as well as their descendants who are not citizens of the Russian Federation and who declared

cultural, ethnic or spiritual ties with the Russian Federation, but there were presented no clear criteria for the self-identification of an individual as a "compatriot".

A more precise formulation of the term "compatriots", although somewhat vague, appeared in the Federal Law "On the state policy of the Russian Federation in relation to compatriots abroad" of 1999: "these are citizens of the Russian Federation living abroad; persons who were citizens of the USSR; migrants from the country (emigrants); descendants of compatriots" [25]. The purpose of the state policy on compatriots is proclaimed as "providing them with comprehensive state assistance and support, including free choice of place of residence or the right to return to Russia" (article 5, paragraph 2).

It is noted that the edited version of the law of 2010 [26] also vaguely defines the criteria for belonging to "compatriots", based on the free choice of "spiritual and cultural ties with the Russian Federation" [27].

The concept of the Russian World is widely used in Russian political discourse as a "blurred concept" without relying on a strict conceptual framework.

#### 4. STATE POLICY ON COMPATRIOTS ABROAD

Programs on the state cultural policy on compatriots permanently residing abroad are of a general nature. The main areas of work on cultural policy (according to the annual reviews of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation) are:

- preservation and dissemination of the Russian language in the world, increasing its popularity for study in different countries of the world (including in the countries of the post-Soviet space);
- foundation of new and development of existing Russian scientific and cultural centres abroad;
- countering Russophobic discriminatory practices against the Russian-speaking minority in the post-Soviet space;
- identification of cases of unjustified and unfair actions of foreign states in relation to Russian information resources;
- countering the falsification of history;
- celebration of the Day of Victory in the Great Patriotic War (including such actions as "Immortal Regiment", "St. George Ribbon", etc.);
- identification and coverage of the activities of political movements whose ideological basis is racism, resurgent Nazism and xenophobia;
- organization of interaction between CCORCs (coordinating councils of organizations of Russian compatriots) at the regional and global levels;

- assistance in the voluntary resettlement to the Russian Federation of compatriots who are abroad on a permanent basis (the last item of the list is closely related to state activities in the field of cultural policy, as will be proved below).

Forms of work in the sphere of cultural policy:

- state support to Russian-speaking schools (through *Rossotrudnichestvo*) and organization of language courses;
- holding of round table talks, forums, conferences, including those in online format, festivals;
- holding meetings of the World Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots (WCCRC);
- organization of public actions "St. George Ribbon", "Immortal Regiment", etc.
- familiarization of compatriots with the "State program to assist the voluntary resettlement of Compatriots living abroad to the Russian Federation";
- visits and sightseeing tours to cultural monuments and historical sites of Russia for cultural and educational purposes.

The reporting documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation in the field of cultural policy often lack differentiation by countries, including for the countries of the Caspian region

It is noteworthy that in the annual reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, there are almost no clear statistical data on the work performed with compatriots [28].

The events are reflected in the news reports; however, such information is limited and does not give a holistic view of the dynamics and effectiveness of the state cultural policy. State plans aimed at working with compatriots permanently residing abroad ("the Russian World") also lack detailed information [29].

Digital data on the ongoing cultural policy are presented in the annual reports of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, but they often do not specify the country where certain events were held, objects restored, etc. [30].

Russian cultural policy abroad, in particular, in protecting the status of the Russian language and the rights of compatriots in the countries of the Caspian region is implemented by a number of organizations (the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, the Foundation for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad, the Institute of CIS Countries (Institute of Diaspora and Integration), etc.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and public organizations pursue the idea to return the compatriots to Russia as the priority. Data portals always

contain information on how to participate in the program of the compatriots return to their homeland. Moreover, against the background of vague reports on the results of cultural policy for the reporting year, which are often devoid of specifics, figures on repatriates are clearly recorded [31] (even by quarters in recent years: figures are present in the annual reviews of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and since 2018, a special data portal focused on working with compatriots has been created on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - "Russian Century", which contains detailed information in the form of monitoring reports on the effectiveness of the "State program to assist voluntary resettlement to the Russian Federation of compatriots living abroad") [32]. According to these reports, the largest percentage of migrants accounts for the Central Asian countries of the post-Soviet space - Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. This allows us to conclude that in their policy regarding compatriots permanently residing abroad, the Russian leadership and public organizations see their priority goal not so much to provide conditions for comfortable living (at the level of cultural interaction) of compatriots as diasporas, as for their return.

However, the instructions are focused more on the far abroad countries. Thus, in the report of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation for 2019 in the section "International cooperation", the effectiveness of the "Russian Seasons" project is emphasized by the number of events held in Japan, Italy, and Germany, while the participants of the project "Days of Spiritual Culture of Russia in the CIS, Europe, Asia" do not indicate any countries of the Caspian region, although the number of events reaches 33 [33].

From what has been said, it can be concluded that the Russian leadership considers working with the Russian-speaking community of the far abroad for a long term. Russian-speaking residents of the near abroad, apparently, are mainly seen as potential repatriates. However, this does not mean that cultural policy is not relevant here. On the contrary, in these countries the issue of preserving the status of the Russian language has become more acute, especially against the background of anti-Russian sentiments which arise from time to time in one country or another. Thus, in 2020, Turkmenistan abandoned the Russian language in the field of education, in this regard in September 2021 the Russian Foreign Ministry made a corresponding comment [34]. In 2017-2025 Kazakhstan starts the transition to the Latin alphabet graphics, and in August 2021, sanctions were applied against the use of the Russian language in everyday communication ("language patrols") [35].

In accordance with the official programs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the preservation of the status of the Russian language is one of the priority tasks in the post-Soviet space. So, since 2007, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation has been implementing programs "Russian World Assemblies", "Russian Centres and Offices of the Russian World",

"Pedagogical Forum of the Russian World", "Professor of the Russian World", "Student of the Russian World".

In order to spread the Russian language abroad (an international cultural project to study the Russian language abroad) the Russkiy Mir Foundation has arranged work of Russian centers in the following countries: Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Iran.

In addition, the Russkiy Mir Foundation founded the online magazine "ruskiymir.ru", which tells about Russian culture, the history of Russia and its outstanding figures. The Russkiy Mir Foundation also has its own portals, such as the Russkiy Mir TV Channel and Radio Russkiy Mir.

The national elites of the post-Soviet states preserve and protect Russian language not so much for the socio-cultural comfort of the Russian diaspora, but for the convenience of their own youth in order to get an opportunity to earn money in Russia.

The preservation of the Russian language is perceived by Russia as the lingua franca of the post-Soviet space and is focused on non-Russian peoples of the CIS countries studying the language. The need to know the Russian language is considered as a factor contributing to the influx of labor migrants to Russia.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### THE EFFECTIVENESS OF "THE RUSSIAN WORLD" PROJECT IN THE CASPIAN REGION

The post-Soviet states in the Caspian region have different speed and vectors of integration. Azerbaijan has set a course for economic and political integration with Turkey. Kazakhstan is included in the orbit of the Eurasian project, but at the same time it is open to various forms of economic cooperation with Western, Chinese and other consortia. Turkmenistan continues to move towards the formation of the most closed and self-contained regime in the post-Soviet space, with a focus on the Turkish integration project.

In this context, the possibilities of the Russian language as an instrument of humanitarian, cultural, economic, and military and political cooperation will be reduced. The pool of native speakers is narrowing due to unfavourable demographic processes in the Russian community and the repatriation of the Russian-speaking population from the countries of the Caspian region. Some expansion of the scope of the use of the Russian language may be due to the desire of representatives of national elites to include their children in the Russian educational space, and migrant workers to find work in Russia.

The state diaspora policies, as a rule, are implemented with the aim to hinder assimilation processes. Meanwhile

the Russian World project implementation has rather not strategic aim to expand the influence of Russian culture and language but is a concomitant element of Russia's migration policy in the Caspian region in order to compensate for demographic losses within the country.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

A.I. Bedaev - substantiation of the concept, definition of the goal and objectives of the study; collection of documentary materials and their analysis; generalization of research results; formulation of conclusions and interpretation of the research results.

E.A. Mikhailova - substantiation of the research concept; interpretation of statistical data; generalization of the research results; formulation of conclusions and interpretation of the research results; paper layout.

V.L. Tikhonova - substantiation and structuring of the research concept; analysis of the history of the problem under study; collection of literature data and their analysis; formulation of conclusions and interpretation of the research results.

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