

Research visit to Dushanbe, Tajikistan (4-11 June 2018) – REPORT

In June 2018 Dr Polina Kliuchnikova spent 7 days in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on a research visit. The aim of this introductory trip was to explore the variety of social and educational spheres in Dushanbe's environment which provide Russian language tuition, especially as part of the preparation of prospective Tajikistani labour migrants for their move to the Russian Federation or other FSU Russian-speaking countries.¹ The programme included meeting with teachers of Russian at different levels of schooling, visiting the Russian World Centres run in the city with the support of the Russian World Foundation, interviewing local experts in migration analysis and language provision, and attending events dedicated to the Russian language and culture in Dushanbe. Potential for further collaboration with experts in sociolinguistics, migration studies, and RFL/RSL teaching methodology was also explored during the trip.

This assignment started with a visit to one of Dushanbe's top-ranking Russian-language schools, which included conversations with a teacher of Russian language and literature. The discussion focused on the prescribed and provided materials for teaching, children's progress in different areas of language learning and cultural studies as well as potential trajectories for this school's graduates. One of the main concerns expressed by the teaching professional was the absence of a Russian-speaking environment outside the classroom which effectively restrained the children's language progress to the level of the school programme and the number of contact hours provided in the class itself.



A notice board entitled 'Russian language – language of friendship', with two subtitles ('In the world of literature' and 'The world of Russian language' respectively) at a Russian-speaking school in Dushanbe.

¹ This research visit was conducted as part of the 'Language Borders: Russian in FSU Migration' project (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/owri/subprojects/langaugeborder/>), of the transnational strand of OWRI's 'Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community' project (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/owri/transnational/>); it was principally sponsored through HEFCE's Global Challenges Research Fund (<https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/>).

Two other school-level Russian-language teachers who agreed to provide their comments on their professional experience in Dushanbe's schools come from slightly different environments – one of them teaches Russian at a mixed school with both Tajik- and Russian-language instruction available, but mostly to the non-Russian-instructed classes; the other is a teacher of Russian as a second (compulsory) language in a Tajik-language school (both are also involved in teaching Russian at the HE level in one of key universities in the city). Their reflections also centred around the gap between the high requirements for school graduates in Russian language as well as other subjects (for which in Russian-speaking schools there is the most striking crisis of teaching professionals), poorly developed teaching guidance for RFL/RSL classes and a lack of opportunities to practice 'correct' Russian outside classrooms. Another key problem mentioned by the two (in contrast to a teacher from the Russian-language instruction school) is the undefined balance between language and literature classes: with higher requirements set for language performance, Russian language classes tend to be prioritized both in the number of hours assigned and in the accuracy of nationwide programmes whereas Russian literature is given the supplementary role of a 'language-in-context' subject. This becomes particularly obvious, in their own experience, once students enrol to Russian Philology programmes at university level, yet lack both the necessary background knowledge of Russian-language literature traditionally introduced in schools and essential skills to work with longer classical literary texts in Russian.

One of the key HE institutions in the city, Tajik National University (<http://www.tnu.tj/>), is home to the Department of Russian Philology as well as to the Russian World Centre (run as a local site for attracting young learners of Russian from city's schools). On the day of the visit, 6th June, the centre held an event dedicated to Alexander Pushkin's birthday date which is now the Day of Russian Language Arts. The first part was carried out by high-school students who read Pushkin's poetry, sang a couple Russian-language popular songs and performed a dance to a Russian folk tune. The second half was presented by current students of Russian philology studying at the University. The Centre's current Director, Prof Mekhriniso Nagzibekova, who is also one of key methodologists of teaching Russian to Tajik-language audiences at different educational levels, gave a short tour around the Centre, talked about its main activities and resources, introduced staff members of the Russian Philology Department and commented on the state of Russian-language provision in Dushanbe over the course of the past three decades.



The Day of Russian Language Arts, Pushkin's birthday, at the Russian World Centre at Tajik National University.

Another key university in the country, Russian-Tajik Slavic University (<http://www.rtsu.tj/en/>), founded in 1996 as a joint establishment between the Russian Federation and Tajikistan, provides tuition in Russian and hosts another Russian World Centre (open mostly as an information and library space) as well as its own Centre for Russian Language and Culture (facilitated by its Philology Department). During the research visit to the university, meetings with the Chancellor, International Office Director, Research & Innovation Office Director, Migration Research Centre's Director and the Head of the Russian Philology Department provided a nuanced picture of this University's policies and practices around Russian language provision and tuition, the composition of students in terms of their linguistic backgrounds, and the kinds of topics that research-active staff develop in their projects.

The event organised by the Centre for Russian Language and Culture around the Russian Language Arts Day (held on 8th June) was similar to the one performed at the Russian World Centre in TNU; it consisted of poetry declamations and a short staging of *The Captain's Daughter*, a novel by Alexander Pushkin, delivered to the audience of the Department's staff, PG and UG students.



Performance based on Pushkin's The Captain's Daughter at the event dedicated to the Day of Russian Language Arts at RTSU.

RTSU's Institute of Professional Training has pioneered one of the very few courses in Russian language tuition for adult learners, specifically designed to answer the needs of soon-to-be migrants to Russia and to meet the requirements of the language certification they have to pass when entering the country. The Institute's members, Prof Tatiana Gusseinova and Dr Aziz Saloev, provided their own expert comments on the administration, running and outcomes of the course which opened only that academic year – in September 2017. With over 180 attendees enrolled during its first academic year, the programme is currently seeking additional funding in order to continue running in 2018-2019.



A poster board with information on the language courses for adult learners (potential migrants) entitled 'To master Russian is to open the window to the world' at RTSU.

The scheduled visit to the office of a local branch of The Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation (<https://www.osiaf.tj/en/>) was very insightful in terms of the current projects that the OSIAF conducts locally or in partnership with other Central Asian countries. It was also useful for expanding contacts in analytical and decision-making spheres dealing with Russian language provision in Dushanbe. Two of these suggested contacts were available for a meeting during the period of this visit – Prof Irina Karimova, Vice President of the Education Academy of Tajikistan (<http://www.aot.tj/ru>), kindly provided a number of recent reports on Russian-language provision and the development of language policies in general; Jamshed Kuddusov, Director of the 'SocServis' Research Institute, commented on the state of labour migration in Tajikistan, language skills of entrants to Russia and services for language provision available to them.

Another important part of the visit focused on getting to know the language landscape of contemporary Dushanbe. The presence of both Tajik and Russian in informal communication in public spaces is mirrored in a mix of both languages in signs, advertisements, public announcements, etc., which fill the streets. Based on the shared Cyrillic alphabet, the blend of the two languages is normalised in this sphere of communication and is prone to developing cross-linguistic creativity of urban environments. Whereas more formalised signs provided by official institutions (e.g. government buildings, museums or theatres) are more divided in terms of using Russian and Tajik (a message in one is likely to be doubled by an identical message in the other), commercial ads or posters on the streets are more diverse in their attempts to mix the languages. At potentially tourist sites, the presence of English as a second or third medium of communication is also quite common.



Dushanbe speaking: announcement board for the (Russian) Opera Theatre (with larger posters to advertise single events mostly in Tajik); an ad for tutoring services in languages, IT skills and school subjects in Tajik and Russian; a street sign with arrows to 'tourist locations' (bars, pubs, cafés) in a mixture of Tajik, Russian and English.