



## Russian Language Teaching in Scottish Schools

### John Boyle in collaboration with the Scotland-Russia Forum

Despite Russia's rise in the past decade as an energy superpower the teaching of Russian in Scottish schools seems to be approaching an end. Recent developments indicate a collapse of the language with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) recommending its removal as a standalone subject from 2015 as a result of insufficient uptake. The training of new Russian teachers has ceased and no formal classes existing in state schooling with any teaching being done in private schools or through extra-curricular classes. Today there is a clash between a thriving interest in learning the culture and adult language learning through independent Russian cultural organizations and the collapse of Russian language teaching in Scottish schools.

The Scotland Russia Forum has seen membership increase steadily since its formation eight years ago and has seen a high response to its various events championing Russian culture as well as publishing the Scotland-Russia Forum Review. Russian language degrees remain available at the University of Glasgow, the University of Edinburgh and the University of St Andrews. Other western nations show a healthy rate of Russian learners with 126 schools in 28 states in the USA teaching Russian and France showing a thriving rate of teaching with 197 secondary schools offering the language. Russian is an international language yet it is restricted to being timetabled at just two schools in Scotland, and examinations being gradually removed from the curriculum. This is despite there being teachers willing to teach and a small but persistent student base. My dissertation aimed to

find the reasons behind this clash between the usefulness of the language and the problems it faces in Scotland.

#### The dissertation

After meeting with my partner organisation the plan was to interview a range of people I deemed to be involved in Russian language teaching including teachers, university students who are studying Russian and school pupils learning Russian. The interviews conducted highlighted the issues faced by teachers and students and gave an insight into their views of the teaching of the subject. Along with this, an extensive literature review encompassing media sources and journal articles was conducted.

#### Findings of my research

1. Russian language is particularly useful in a career given Russia's place in the world economy and yet students did not appear to know the benefits learning a modern language in Scotland. It was also not clear whether this information was properly communicated to students. However this issue is not just restricted to Russian language teaching provision.
2. There is an inherent lack of support for Russian language teaching. The teaching of Mandarin shows how a language can grow in the curriculum if suitable support is given. As it stands no support exists from Scottish Government, Russian state or the SQA.
3. Questions exist over the degree to which the SQA tried to assist the Russian uptake issue which

is the rationale for ending the course. No teachers interviewed were consulted or even told of the courses cessation, limited documentation exists on the review of the subject and the SQA did not respond to attempts at contact from the paper. There also appears to be little transparency over what uptake would be deemed acceptable for a course to run.

4. Earlier teaching of languages is needed as well as more information for students on the usefulness of learning a language. A core cultural issue remains, languages are deemed too difficult and of little use.
5. Government support of Gaelic and Mandarin highlighting willingness for support of languages with certain political benefits. Reluctance of the government to address Russian language provision appears to suggest a double standard since any benefit of learning Mandarin can be applied to Russian.
6. It is recommended that the SQA review their decision making process. Any attempts to keep Russian the curriculum requires reinstating examinations, teacher training and a willingness to timetable the subject. The current situation may lead to the marginalising of the subject to evening classes and courses which are not assessed.