

# Integration Examination in the Russian Federation. Three years of experience and research: Success or failure?

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*The 3-module Integration Examination, incorporating Russian Language, History and the Basics of Law tests, is a mandatory integration requirement for immigrants in Russia. Integration tests and educational courses are only a few examples of the new 'civic integration policies' used all over the world to promote common values for newcomers. Through the present study, the authors address the question of whether these requirements facilitate the migrants' integration process. In doing so, they examine the impact of the Integration Exam in Russia as one of its integration policy strategies. The paper draws on surveys to explore the attitude towards the Integration Exam among different categories of migrants. The research is supported by the all-Russia 2015-2017 Integration Exam statistics. The authors reveal causal relationships between language proficiency and integration. The results presented in the paper indicate that most migrants support the idea of the Integration Exam and demonstrate understanding of the importance of civic integration. The level of integration correlates with the purpose of migration, which is reflected in the Integration Exam's level structure. The findings presented in the article help explore the Exam's perspectives, facilitate better-addressed education programmes, and discuss legislative initiatives affecting Russia's State Migration Policy.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Integration Exam, migration policy, civic integration, language assessment, language proficiency*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of integration tests and the role of language in the integration processes are 'hot topics' among researchers dealing with the issue of migration. Studies published since the late 1980s analyse the phenomenon from different angles (see, for example, Joppke, 2017; Resnyansky, 2016; Kostakopoulou, 2010; Ager, 1992). For

Russia, these problems are relatively new, and there are not many local studies devoted to this topic. The present paper examines the practice of the 3-module Integration Exam in the Russian Federation. The exam, incorporating Russian as a Foreign Language, History and Basics of Law tests, is a mandatory integration requirement. In this article, the authors examine the impact of the

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Integration Exam as one of the integration policy strategies. An attempt is made to ascertain whether such requirements can facilitate migrants’ integration process.

Several countries in Europe have already adopted obligatory language and country knowledge requirements for settlement and naturalisation. Given the concerns of some countries regarding levels of integration, naturalisation is a pertinent issue in the field of migration (Peters et al., 2016). Integration tests and educational courses are only a few examples of the new ‘civic integration policies’ used to promote common values for newcomers. Many countries use naturalisation tests, though the form of the examination can be different. The test can be conducted by written examination or interview. Some countries, including Australia, have changed from a written test to a citizenship interview.

There are different approaches to assessing the level of the language skills development for the purposes of migration. Some countries have a

language test as a separate part, some ‘measure’ language proficiency indirectly by means of civic tests. *‘Liberal democratic states adopt widely varying attitudes and policies towards foreign residents who seek to naturalise as citizens. Language proficiency is a widespread requirement for naturalisation in liberal democratic states’* (Hampshire, 2011, p. 963).

Only four countries in the EU – Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Sweden – do not require applicants for naturalisation to demonstrate proficiency in the official language of the state. Australia, Canada and the United States require that applicants be able to speak and understand basic English. In the United States, it is required that they can also write a basic sentence in English.

James Hampshire mentions language proficiency as the most common requirement for naturalisation and sees it as relatively uncontroversial. *‘A basic proficiency in the official language of the state is often seen as essential to effective participation in civil society and the labour market, as well as a prerequisite for informed political participation. While the implementation of the language tests has not always been pursued with alacrity ... the principle is widely accepted’* (Hampshire, 2011, p. 955).

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The main source of information for the study was

an anonymous survey of foreign citizens applying for the Integration Exam at RUDN University Examination Centre. The purpose of the survey was to explore the attitude towards the Integration Exam among different categories of migrants. The survey was conducted from January to March 2017; 150 candidates agreed to act as respondents. 52% of the respondents were women, 48% were men. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 40. For more than half, the period of residence in Russia was from one to five years. There was also a substantial group of respondents, whose period of residence amounted to ten years and more. The research was supported by the all-Russian Integration Exam statistics collected in 2015-2017. The theoretical foundation of this research relied on the principles of language proficiency assessment and its quality (Balykhina, 2009).

### 3. STUDY AND RESULTS

#### 3.1 Integration tests and the path to citizenship in the Russian Federation

The 3-module Integration Exam was introduced in the Russian Federation in January 2015 following the provision of Russia's Migration Policy Concept. It was initiated as a prerequisite for migrants to enjoy a comfortable stay in the country. It aimed at adapting foreign citizens in the host society; ensuring migrants' legal literacy and their ability to protect their rights; preventing the establishment of ethnic enclaves to ensure the security of the host

society. The Integration Exam requires a command of Russian (the official language of the Russian Federation), knowledge of the nation's history, law and some level of acculturation. From the beginning, the Exam was meant as an educational tool rather than a barrier to entry. Its developers are aware that the Exam has to be affordable and that the bar is set at a level which accommodates migrants with a low education level. The test does not contain questions about the applicant's personal beliefs, but foreign citizens are expected to demonstrate an adequate knowledge of life in Russia. The Integration Exam was pre-tested after a robust debate in professional circles and among the public at large.

The goal of all these procedures was to introduce a test that would not discriminate against less educated migrants.

Test developers relied on the opinions of people involved in immigration testing procedures and immigrants themselves and acknowledged that the decision to use language tests as an instrument of policy was not taken lightly, as the outcomes of language tests have important consequences both for the candidates and society at large.

The Exam is universal and is aimed at the following categories of foreigners coming to Russia: (i) those who are planning to work and who will apply for a work permit; (ii) those who

*‘From the beginning the purpose of this exam has been an educational tool rather than a barrier to entry’*

are planning to continue living in Russia and start a naturalisation process. The latter apply for a temporary residence permit followed by a permanent residency status before the acquisition of full citizenship.

The Integration Exam serves the purpose of the first two categories and has three examination levels, namely (i) work permit application; (ii) temporary residence permit application; (iii) permanent residency status application.

The final stage – citizenship acquisition, or naturalisation – requires only a certain level of proficiency in the Russian language (a minimum of A2).

The Integration Exam is a one-stage, complex non-computerised test taken mostly in written form with only the language proficiency part including a speaking assessment (dealing with different communicative tasks that require dialogue or a short monologue). The Integration Exam consists of three parts/modules.

1. Russian as a Foreign Language test that assesses

listening, writing, reading and speaking skills; it also includes a special section assessing knowledge of Russian grammar and vocabulary. This module meets the basic communicative needs of foreigners in their communication with Russian native speakers.

2. The Basics of Russian Federation Law test consisting of 20 multiple choice questions on society, government, and the responsibilities and rights of a foreign citizen in the Russian Federation.

3. Russian History test consisting of 20 multiple choice questions covering the history of Russia, which are of importance to the forming of the national identity. This module also includes questions on Russian culture and prominent personalities, people who are considered significant in the development of the nation’s history and culture.

The Integration Exam was developed first of all as an exam corresponding to the real language needs of migrants in Russia. The Russian language module of the exam is based on the structure and language requirements of CEFR (Council of Europe Common Framework of Reference for Languages) A1 Russian as a Foreign Language proficiency level test (Elementary level in Russian as a Foreign Language), with a vocabulary of 900-1000 lexical units. These lexical units include, inter alia, 240

internationalisms (loanwords existing in several languages with similar meanings or etymology) and approximately 30 items of speech etiquette, as well as the vocabulary required in situations typically used in migrants' social interaction in Russia. The article focuses on the educational advantages of the Integration Exam for all categories of immigrants coming to live and work in Russia.

When the Integration Exam was introduced, it was an innovation in Russian as a Foreign Language testing practice. Its development was timely – a practical realisation of the migrants' adaptation model, which can be done through learning Russian as a Foreign Language and the Basics of Law and History. Special attention is paid to the challenges of overcoming the language barrier, aspects of socio-cultural adaptation, the language learning environment and its role in facilitating adaptation.

The language assessment system of Russian as a Foreign Language comprises six levels. The system was officially recognised by the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) as being equivalent to the European system of levels of foreign language proficiency. The multi-level system of testing Russian as a Foreign Language was developed by the universities who are participants in the Russian Testing Consortium. It allows assessment of the level of Russian

communication competence of foreigners and unifies the requirements for the contents of teaching Russian as a Foreign Language.

The developers relied on the vast theoretical, academic and methodological understandings established through the theory and practice of teaching Russian as a Foreign Language over the last 60 years. They took into account existing testing methods, developed in Russia and abroad, and analysed them to verify their effect and usability in testing for integration purposes.

The fact is that migrants in Russia have special language objectives and language needs. These objectives reflect the peculiarities of their communication in the host country. The migrants require more vocabulary units than are provided by A1 (Elementary Level) Standard. A1 Level of competence in Russian as a Foreign Language is considered to be a breakthrough level. According to the CEFR, A1 language proficiency means that candidates can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases, can introduce themselves and others and can ask and answer questions about personal information such as where they live, people they know and things they have. This level allows interaction in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is ready to help. The vocabulary and the grammar of this level let the migrant establish and maintain social contacts in standard everyday

situations. The language skills are usually enough to get acquainted with somebody; to give typical holiday greetings and to reply to them; to offer an invitation, to accept or refuse an invitation, and explain the reason for refusal. The communicative competence at A1 level also includes the ability to find out and give your address and phone number and information about where you live. A migrant should know how to use a transport schedule, understand street signs and directions at stations and airports, manage the conversation with a waiter at a restaurant or a café, order food and drinks and pay for the meal.

Besides language proficiency, the Integration Exam checks whether people know their rights. The test determines whether the migrants are aware of their rights and that their rights cannot be denied (for example, migrants should know that they are free to practise their religion). The test contains many questions that stress basic knowledge, such as *What is the currency of Russia?* and *What is the main identification document in Russia?* The test also establishes whether a person has some familiarity with Russian history. It asks questions about the Great Russian Revolution and the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. The test also checks social knowledge, such as the dates of the main public holidays and other socially important events. It also tests applicants on some aspects of their rights, for example, *Who has the right to vote and at what age?* and *Do men and women have*

*equal rights for medical help?* The test also determines the candidate's knowledge of the people who contributed to the development of the Russian history, science and culture and what exactly their contribution was (for example, Alexander Pushkin and Yuri Gagarin).

The number of questions and their difficulty correlates with the reason for migration and varies from one exam level to another. Depending on the exam level, the two modules (Basics of Law and History) consist of one or two parts. The highest level of the Exam (for those who apply for permanent residency status) includes 20 multiple choice questions and five write-in (open) questions where the applicant must give an answer to at least two questions of the five set. The pass rate also depends on the Exam level and varies from 50% to 85%.

If the applicant fails to pass one of the Exam modules, they have the right to take it one more time. Where two out of three modules are failed, then the entire Exam can be taken one more time. Strictly speaking, there is no limit on how many times a migrant can take the Exam. The test can be repeated as many times as necessary. The candidates are provided with extensive pre-exam preparation. The lists of all the questions for the *History of Russia* and *The Basics of Law of the Russian Federation* modules are published in advance and can be obtained from the Russian

Testing Consortium website, as well as the sites of any examination centre offering the exam (either online or face-to-face). There, a migrant can also take a mock exam (online or face-to-face as part of pre-exam preparation). Dictionaries explaining and translating the main legal and history terms are available in eight languages of the main migration flows in Russia (Moldovan, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Vietnamese, Chinese, Turkish, Korean, and Tajik). These dictionaries are considered a useful educational tool as they give socio-cultural commentaries in the native language of an immigrant.

Immigrants are often unaware of their rights and what is to be done when these rights are violated, so extensive preparation is required. The migrants are both rights-bearing individuals and people who must assume responsibilities toward the host-country and its society. One of the purposes of the pre-exam preparation is to explain to migrants that they also have to be ready to assume responsibilities in relation to the host country community.

All the above measures are designed to help candidates succeed in the Integration Exam. They are not there to hinder those who do not speak Russian well or who do not have a high enough level of education. Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language and pre-test preparation are provided by universities and institutes, as well as ethnic,

### *‘The process of teaching the Russian language to migrants as the form of pre-exam training is taken seriously as it is a great responsibility for the host country’*

religious and immigration groups. The scope, amount and quality of preparation depends on a candidate’s initial level of Russian language proficiency. Classes are usually delivered by experienced teachers of Russian as a Foreign Language with expertise in specialised intensive teaching methodology.

The process of teaching the Russian language to migrants as a form of pre-exam training is taken seriously as it is a great responsibility for the host country. The development of communicative competence is the focus of this language support so that the migrant can deal with the main communicative tasks and challenges, which are not limited to their workplace, but include different situations for social interaction.

In planning the language courses, migrants’ knowledge of Russian and intended period of residence are taken into account. For the migrants, the fact that their language repertoire varies greatly depending on the purpose of their coming to Russia and the planned period of residence is



always taken into consideration. Professors of RUDN University and Moscow State University are currently developing a Minimum Vocabulary List for the Integration Exam. The fact is that migrants usually exceed the A1 vocabulary level as they communicate in a wider range of situations than many people applying for the Elementary Level Exam in Russian as a Foreign Language. These applicants are mostly students. Their communicative needs include such topics as police and migration services, work, health and safety, etc. Other factors, such as age and psychological issues, which may also influence language needs, must be taken into account, as

they may affect the speed of language acquisition. Migrants' native language can be used in the classroom as the language of instruction, thus making the educational process more effective.

**3.2 Is it necessary for migrants to know Russian history and the basics of Russian law?**

Analysing survey results, an interesting statistic emerged. In the group of female respondents, 38% stated they knew two languages and 45% stated they knew three or more languages. In the male cohort, 38% stated they knew two languages, while only 24% of respondents stated they knew three or more languages.

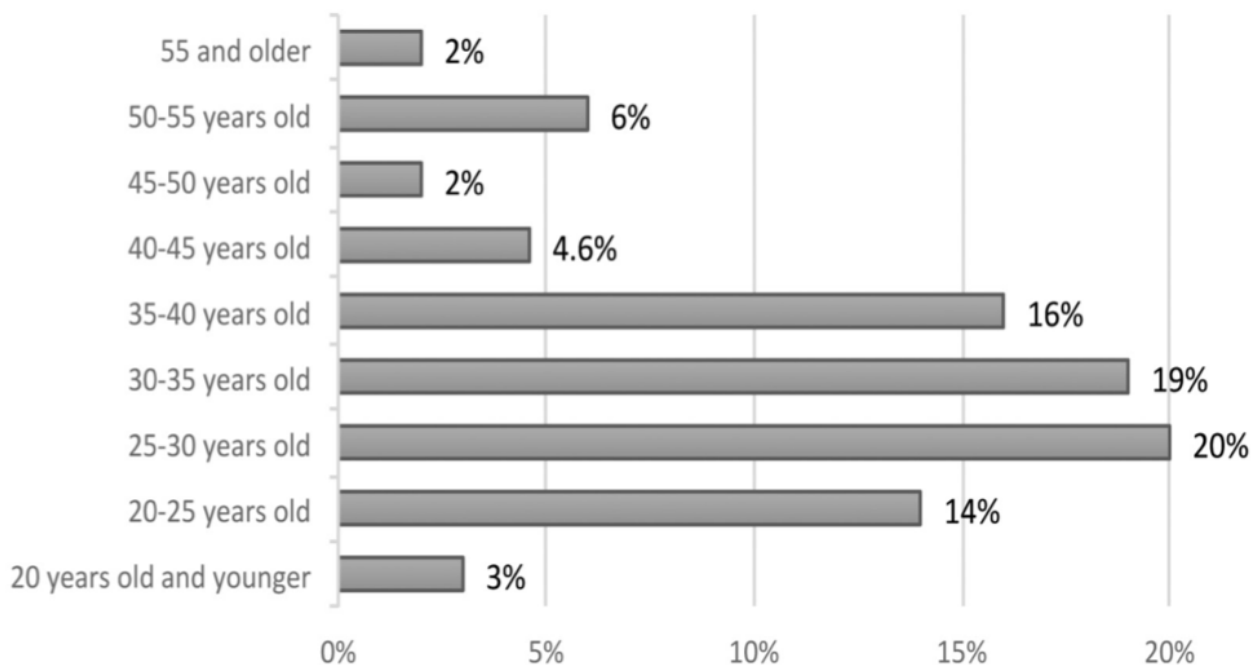


Figure 1. Age distribution of the respondents



The majority of the respondents came from Eastern Ukraine (40.7%), the rest came mostly from former USSR republics, though there were candidates from other countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Latvia, the USA and Australia.

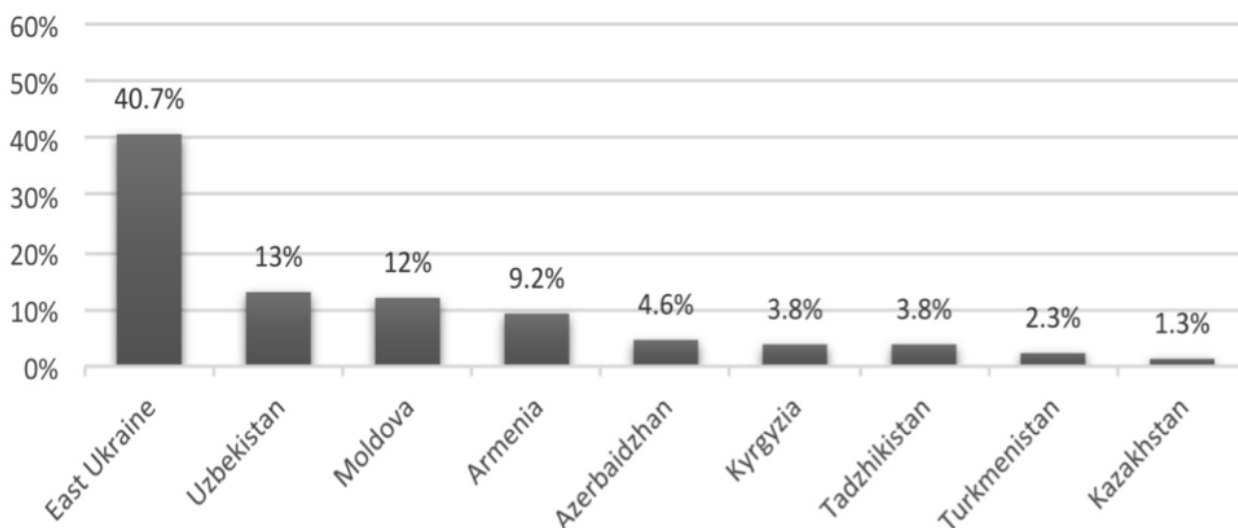


Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents by countries

Although more than 50% of the respondents mentioned Russian as their native language, the Integration Exam presented substantial difficulties even for them. They considered it necessary to study online for the Exam (learning from books, using the Internet and printed books (less popular). One respondent claimed to have passed the special preparatory course with no special study. 80.8% of female respondents and 75.4% of male respondents considered it necessary to study for the Exam, though there is no correlation between the age of the respondents and their readiness to 'study' for the test. People aged 35 and older

normally demonstrate better results. The largest re-examination number is among the 25 to 30-year-old cohort.

The authors conclude that migrants realise the importance of the examining procedure as a component of their naturalisation journey and take preparation seriously. Even though half of these people speak Russian as their native language (mostly those who come from Eastern Ukraine), they still need to prepare for the Exam in order to complete the law and history modules successfully. When asked whether it was necessary

for a migrant to know Russian history and the basics of Russian law, 94% of male and 89% of female respondents replied in the affirmative (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Responses to questions on the need to know the basics of Russian law*

WOMEN		MEN
29%	necessary to know as I am going to live in this country	28%
16%	not to break the law	15%
5.8%	for general knowledge	14%
4%	to communicate in a comfortable way	10%
3%	to acquire citizenship in the future	–

One US citizen living in Russia for 21 years, gave the following answer: *‘A foreign citizen should know the history of Russia and the basics of law to be able to participate in the life of the country.’*

Notably, the questionnaire did not offer any variations for the responses; the questions were open, and the candidates provided their own answers. Analysing the survey data, one might say that migrants generally realise the importance of the history and legal system of the country they are going to live in. Men pay more attention to understanding the law and history for easier social communication. The results of the survey in relation to the respondents’ age are presented in Tables 2 and 3 below, illustrating, among other

*‘Although more than 50% of the respondents mentioned Russian as their native language, the Integration Exam presented substantial difficulties even for them. They considered it necessary to study online for the Exam using the Internet and printed books’*

things, that the answer *‘the knowledge of basic law / it is important not to break the law of the host country’*, was given mostly by respondents aged 40 or older. For a potential citizen, it is an important integration factor.

Table 2

*Opinions concerning the need to know Russian history and the basics of Russian law per age groups*

AGE GROUP	IS IT NECESSARY FOR A MIGRANT TO KNOW...		WHAT FOR? (THE MOST FREQUENT ANSWERS)
	RUSSIAN HISTORY?	THE BASICS OF LAW?	
<20	No – 10% Yes – 90%	Yes	Not to break the law / For easier communication / It is useful
20-25	No – 10% Yes – 90%	Yes	Not to break the law / For general knowledge / To live in Russia / For easier communication
25-30	Yes	Yes	Not to break the law / To live in Russia / For easier communication / For general knowledge
30-35	Yes	Yes	Not to break the law / To live in Russia / It helps to study / For general knowledge / To acquire Russian citizenship
35-40	No – 8% Yes – 92%	Yes	Not to break the law / To live in Russia / For easier communication
40-50	Yes	Yes	Not to break the law/ For normal life / For easier communication
50>	Yes	Yes	Not to break the law / To live and work in Russia / To participate in the life of the country / To acquire Russian citizenship

Table 3

*Survey respondent age groups*

%	20	33	16	7	28	50	30
AGE GROUP	20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-45	45-55

The analysis of statistics shows that migrants have a sensible and practical approach to the Integration Exam. At the beginning of 2015, when the Exam was being introduced into the structure of migration procedures, the dominant attitude was the opposite – often sceptical and even negative. The candidates answered the questions in a deliberately inaccurate way and directly expressed their rejection of the Integration Exam. There was stiff resistance to the preparation process. The motivation to study for the Exam was extremely low, with results confirming this resistance. The situation has been changing slowly yet surely, thanks to the introduction of different pre-exam training mechanisms and popularisation of the test. Exam requirements and questions are available in open access online and there are various preparation courses for those who need help. An important factor in acceptance is that the Integration Exam is administered only by the leading Russian universities. Today, it enjoys undeniable authority and status in the educational process.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

##### 4.1 One nation – one language? Russian as a *lingua franca*

Russian society is not following the path that Jeff Millar calls *'the European ideology, one nation – one language'* where a society is essentially monolingual (Millar, 2013). Language proficiency requirements imply standardisation or impose

rules on its usage. On the other hand, there is no implied wish to minimise the importance of migrants' mother tongues. There is a strong tradition of co-existence of different languages in Russia. The country does not require a 'full assimilation' where migrants are expected to renounce their ethnic or cultural identity. What is expected is integration, which means learning the language of the host society and appreciating its history, constitutional evolution and ways of life. As some researchers claim, these are the preconditions for full political participation in civil society and democratic processes (Kostakopoulou, 2010).

The Integration Exam is the sum of three tests: Russian as a Foreign Language, the Basics of Law, and Russian History. The Russian language in this case functions as a facilitator and as a means of getting the necessary knowledge and not only as a means of communication. Thus, we can emphasise the educational component of Russian language learning by migrants: they acquire new information through the language they learn. Competence in the language of the host society means a migrant has more opportunities to participate in the social and public life of the host country. At the same time, lack of fluency in this language doesn't exclude social or even political participation.

Migrants live in an environment where everybody

speaks Russian. They are not always mentored by other migrants who are better experienced in the Russian language. Most migrants realise that the better they know the language, the easier for them it will be to socialise and function in the host society. In addition, essential things, like safety in the workplace, depend on the knowledge of the language. One of the reasons why the Integration Exam model in the Russian Federation has proved to be successful seems to be the fact that most migrants come from the former USSR republics. In all these territories, Russian was a second state language. The older generation learned it as a foreign language and some even studied at Russian schools and were bilingual. After the break-up of the USSR, Russian became the lingua franca in all 15 post-Soviet republics.

#### 4.2 Integration tests – pros and cons

There is currently a lot of debate about naturalisation tests. Recent reforms of naturalisation policies, especially in Europe, have been criticised by academicians like Kostakopoulou (2010), who argues that naturalisation reforms, which include language or citizenship tests, are essentially ‘matters of control’, driven by nationalistic and even xenophobic sentiment.

From a liberal perspective, there is not much support in Europe for language and citizenship tests. They are often justified in nationalistic terms.

*‘Making the effort to learn the Russian language, has a positive impact associated with autonomy, sense of achievement and ability to cope with everyday communicative challenges’*

*‘In any case, it is unclear whether naturalisation tests reveal the depth of a migrant’s knowledge of the country and its history and norms, rather than his/her ability to memorise facts about the country in order to pass an exam. And even if one conceded the civic educative role of integration tests in the short term, in the long term, learning about a country and the cultivation of an ethos of engagement can only be self-directed and socially embedded, that is, obtained as a result of one’s involvement in as many networks of cooperation and spheres of social and economic life as possible’ (Kostakopoulou, 2010, p. 841).*

Hampshire (2011), referring to Joseph Carens, claims that naturalisation exams testing civic knowledge do not work well, regardless of the questions they ask. At best, the test will assess the applicant’s ability to memorise a number of discrete facts, but it will reveal little about his/her acculturation at any fundamental level. Moreover, formal tests are likely to be biased against less-educated applicants, which suggests that education rather than acculturation will be a surer

route to success (Hampshire, 2011).

Lack of proficiency in the language of the host country causes stress among the migrant community. Many of the migrants living in Russia speak less than functional Russian. Making the effort to learn the Russian language has a positive impact associated with autonomy, sense of achievement and ability to cope with everyday communicative challenges.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The findings presented in the paper indicate that most migrants, especially those for whom Russian is one of the native languages (those who come from the former USSR republics), support the idea of the Integration Exam as the way to learn about the national features of Russia and its legal framework. They demonstrate a better understanding of the importance of civic integration.

There are causal relationships between language proficiency and integration. The level of integration correlates with the purpose of migration, which is reflected in the Integration Exam level structure. The level of difficulty of the exam depends on the purpose of migration. The findings presented in the article help explore the Integration Exam perspectives. Socio-cultural integration is measured by host country identification, proficiency, use of the host country

language and interethnic social contacts (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2010). As a final step, there is a link between socio-cultural integration and naturalisation.

The migration flows are diverse, with different migration purposes and countries of origin. The migrants coming to Russia have different levels of education and different native languages. The three-module Integration exam is universal, targeting all the categories of migrants before they apply for citizenship.

The original purpose of the Integration Exam was to promote the social integration of migrants, to avoid their isolation from the host community and consequent increase in negative attitudes towards them, to harmonise inter-ethnic relations and to assist with migrants' successful adaptation and integration. This Exam doesn't make Russia less attractive for immigration as all Exam procedures and relevant information and sources are transparent and accessible.

The authors believe that the Integration Exam will positively influence the adaptation and integration of all the categories of migrants coming to Russia irrespective of the purpose of their arrival.

Nevertheless, the study is not without its limitations. The findings present only a small part of a much larger picture of the

Integration Exam perspectives. The authors are planning to continue their research and investigate the correlation of the exam results with the mother tongue of the migrants. Another limitation is that

the study does not capture the difference in the test scores of migrants with different educational backgrounds, which is why further studies are in order.

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