

ASE'S RUSSIAN CULTURAL CENTRE – 10 YEARS OF ACTIVITY

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Abstract

Against the background of an increasingly multilingual and multicultural labour market, universities have sought not only to diversify their curricula so as to provide diverse cultural and linguistic content in addition to specialized content, but also to continuously provide students with opportunities for immersion in international academic and professional environments. One such university is the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in Romania (ASE), who offers students multilingual experiences through both language classes and extracurricular activities organized by its American, French, Russian and Japanese Cultural Centres. The current paper aims to explore the ways in which ASE's Russian Cultural Centre – celebrating 10 years of existence in December 2019 – has contributed to the University's internationalisation endeavours.

Keywords: The Russian Cultural Centre in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in Romania (ASE), internationalisation of higher education, multilingualism and multiculturalism on the labour market

1. Introduction

“Internationalisation” is one of the 21st century buzzwords in the realm of higher education. It has been defined as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institutions” (Knight & de Wit, 1997: 8, apud de Wit, 2000: 10). It has been shown to refer to aspects that

range from the mobility of and competition for students, teachers and scholars; export of academic systems and cultures; research cooperation; knowledge transfer and capacity building; student and staff exchange; internationalisation of the curriculum and of learning outcomes; and cross-border delivery of programmes, projects and institutions; to virtual mobility, digital learning and collaborative online international learning. (de Wit & Hunter, 2015: 41)

Internationalisation has been shown to be motivated by more than just a continuous strive for enhanced academic knowledge and experiences. In fact, political and economic factors also

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underpin universities' endeavours to becoming ever more internationalized. From the political point of view, internationalization has been supported by governments "to maintain and to expand their influence", or as a "peacemaking force" in a "world in which international understanding and co-operation in solving problems will be increasingly critical for the quality of life and sustained economic, social, and cultural development" (de Wit, 2000: 13-14). From the economic point of view, internationalization is believed to be motivated by the need to meet "the requirements of the modern, more global labour force" and "to compete internationally in new technology" (de Wit, 2000: 16); in other words, internationalization is believed to be "integral to economic well-being" (Rider-Grant: 2).

Against this background, it seems only natural that a business university such as ASE should aim at increasing its international outlook. In effect, this aim is attained by means of: curricula and syllabi; short- and long-term educational programs delivered in Romanian and foreign languages (English, French, German)⁴; academic and research staff training; student and staff mobility; partnerships and cooperation agreements with universities from abroad; affiliation to international higher education networks; development of the University's cultural studies centres; ASE's staff's contribution to decision-making in key areas, as members of academic, business and governmental for a etc. (Istudor, 2012, Popa et al. 2014). ASE's internationalisation efforts have led to the University's increased visibility on the international education market, as reflected by the institution's presence in leading academic rankings: Top Shanghai, Times Higher Education World University Ranking, QS World University Rankings, U-Multirank (for details, access https://www.ase.ro/?page=ase_top).

Given this institutional context, the current paper epitomizes the many ways in which the Russian Cultural Centre in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania (henceforth ASE) contributed – for the last decade - to the internationalisation of this higher education institution. The paper is structured as follows: we first refer to the need for multilingual professionals on the Romanian labour market and not only, as well as to the need for professionals with a good command of the Russian language and an increased awareness of the cultural specificities of the Russian-speaking world. Next, we provide details on the variety of activities undertaken by ASE's Russian Cultural Centre - language courses and cultural activities, student and teacher exchanges with partner universities from the Russian Federation, student participation in internationally renowned festivals and summers schools for speakers of Russian, scholarly debates on Romanian-Russian trade relations. Since ASE's Russian Cultural Centre works not just with ASE's students, but also with postgraduate professionals from a variety of institutions on the Romanian labour market, a separate section is dedicated to the latter's motivation in learning the Russian language, and their perception of the Centre's usefulness in their careers. Last but not least, we briefly summarize the main reasons for which ASE's Russian Cultural Centre can be seen as a promoter of multilingualism and multiculturalism on the Romanian educational and labour markets.

2. A few remarks on labour market requirements - multilingual and multicultural trends

Researchers have continuously highlighted the fact that the 21st century labour market is characterized by an increased need for multilingual staff, i.e. professionals who master not only the specialised skills and knowledge of their field, but also a wide range of communication skills across languages and cultures. This complex employee profile has been shown to be beneficial for employees and their companies, on the one hand, as well as the

⁴ For details on "the role of foreign language classes in ASE's internationalization efforts", see Dima et al. (2018), as well as Mohanu & Jurconi (2000), Deaconu (2014).

economies of the countries they operate in and world economy at large, on the other hand (*World Economic Forum*, 2018, Pătru et al., 2018, Dima et al., 2019, Mohanu et al. 2019 and references cited therein). Among the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism referred to in the literature, we highlight:

- higher wages (of up to 5-60% higher than monolingual employees, function of language and country);
- higher chances for promotion;
- increased creativity, problem solving and innovation;
- enhanced opportunities for attracting foreign investments;
- larger number of potential contracts gained abroad;
- improved business-to-consumer and business-to-business relations.

In what concerns the demand for Russian-speaking professionals, the 2011 European Commission Report on “Languages for Jobs. Providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market” shows that in 2006 “the languages on top of the wish lists of European SME’s apart from English were German, French, Russian and Spanish” (p. 16). The tendency is still in place today. Thus, we have noticed that Russian is demanded on the labour markets of both Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking countries. More specifically, in October 2019, the *Europe Language Jobs* portal listed 37 openings available in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Thailand, in areas such as: customer support and sales representatives, information and content analysis with internet-based companies, IT developers, game developers, HORECA, marketing, finance and accounting, transportation, translation and interpreting etc. Interestingly, the majority of job advertisements on the portal specified the need for business professionals with multilingual skills:

- 11 companies (29,7%) advertised for speakers of Russian and another language, mostly English (10 companies), but also Bulgarian (1 company);
- 11 companies (29,7%) advertised for speakers of Russian and two other languages – either English plus Bulgarian, Estonian, German, Latvian, Spanish, Ukrainian; or French plus German, Greek; or Croatian plus Serbian;
- 10 companies (27%) advertised for speakers of Russian and three other languages: Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish;
- only 5 companies out of 37 (13.5%) advertised for speakers of Russian alone (cf. <https://europelanguagejobs.com/jobs-for-Russian-speakers>).

As for the Romanian labour market, *Wall-street.ro* (2016) cited in Mohanu et al. (2019) pointed to the fact that there is an expectation for an increasing demand for Russian-speaking professionals. For instance, in October 2019, the *Ejobs* recruitment portal listed 14 job vacancies on the Romanian market for speakers of Russian, in areas such as: customer support and sales, engineering, HORECA, real estate, translation and interpreting (cf. <https://www.ejobs.ro/locuri-de-munca/?cauta=limba%20rusa>).

Having briefly examined the need for multilingual professionals in Europe and Romania, we have seen that the Russian language is very much on demand. We now turn to the description of the activities undertaken by ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre to develop economic students’ language and cultural skills that would enhance their employability.

3. ASE's Russian Cultural Centre – celebrating 10 years of existence

The Russian Cultural Centre in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies was inaugurated in December 2009, in partnership with the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Moscow (Russian Federation), due to the long-standing tradition of teaching Russian language, culture and civilization in the University, ever since the latter's establishment in 1913 (Nicolae & Constantinescu-Ștefănel, 2013: 7). Over more than a century, ASE's curricula comprised Russian classes in a variety of forms: compulsory, optional and/ or elective disciplines (Mohanu, 2013, Mohanu et al. 2018, 2019). It was, thus, only natural that the economic students' (and scholar's) interest in developing proficiency of Russian be given a more comprehensive framework. In the decade lapsed since the establishment of the Centre, it has done its best to contribute to:

- the development of economic students' multicultural and multilingual competences;
- the strengthening of the University's ties with higher education institutions abroad;
- the strengthening of the University's ties with the business environment.

To reach these aims, the Centre is well equipped with state-of-the-art infrastructure (computers, smart board, video projector) and facilitates free-of-charge access to more than 1500 print, electronic, audio and video materials from leading Russian information databases and publishing houses. Among the areas covered, we mention: arts, culture and civilization, education, economics, history, law, language, philosophy, psychology, science.

3.1. Russian for ASE's students

In 2019, Russian language classes are among the optional disciplines that students from all 12 of ASE's Faculties can enroll for, starting from an A0 level of proficiency. This is not to say that all students taking Russian are beginners! In fact, as shown in Dima et al. (2018), first year students at ASE may well have a background in Russian, gained in their pre-university studies.

Apart from Russian language classes, ASE's students are offered a wide range of opportunities to practice and enhance their knowledge of linguistic and cultural aspects, through participation in various scientific and cultural events organized on campus and off campus. From among the on campus events, we mention: the annual students' conference, where they elaborate and present papers in Romanian, English and Russian on topics related to Russian culture and civilisation (Figure 1); meetings with cultural and diplomatic figures from the Russian Federation; meetings with outstanding Russian personalities - e.g. chess grandmaster Anatoly Karpov, astronaut N.M. Budarin (Figure 2); movie nights etc. From among the off campus opportunities, we mention: participation of students in world-famous festivals and summers schools for speakers of Russian (Figures 3a.,b.): the International Russian Language Summer School in Varna, Bulgaria; the International Festival for Learners of Russian Language; the European Student Festival in Belgrad (Serbia), Kamchia and Kiten (Bulgaria); the World Youth and Student Festival in Sochi, Russia. ASE's Russian Cultural Centre teams participating in these festivals usually comprise Romanian and foreign students from ASE, but not only (e.g., students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages from the Universities of Bucharest, Constanța, Cluj Napoca, Timișoara may also be part of the team, cf. Mohanu 2019).

On an annual basis, ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre selects Romanian students for scholarships and study opportunities in the Russian Federation (Figures 4a., b.), as follows: four students per academic year are offered the chance to study at Saint Petersburg State University of Economics (UNECON), ASE’s strategic partner for almost 15 years; while 30 students per academic year enjoyed for more than 15 years their study abroad experience at the “A.S. Pushkin” State Russian Language Institute in Moscow. ASE has a two-way partnership with these leading Russian universities, in that the latter also send students for study visits or exchange programs in ASE, whom the Centre supports throughout their stay.

Figure 1. Annual students’ conference



Figure 2. Russian personalities visiting ASE



Figure 3a. Festivals and summers schools



Figure 3b. Festivals and summers schools



Figure 4a. Student mobility in Russia



Figure 4b. Student mobility in Russia



3.2. Russian for ASE’s academic and research staff

Among the activities that ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre facilitates for the academic and research staff, we mention: round tables, seminars, conferences and workshops on Romanian-Russian trade relations (Figures 5a., b.) organized with the support and participation of scholars from the University’s and Centre’s Russian partner universities (Saint Petersburg State University of Economics – UNECON; the “A.S. Pushkin” State Russian Language Institute in Moscow; the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public

Administration - RANEPa, Moscow), as well as with specialists from the Chamber of Economic and Cultural Cooperation between Romania and Russia, or from the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Romania. The results of research presented at such scientific events are published in journals and/or conference proceedings (cf. a.o. Piroșcă 2015). Moreover, ASE's Russian Cultural Centre also facilitates scholarly exchange between ASE and its Russian partner universities (Figures 6a., b.).

Figure 5a. Romanian-Russian conferences



Figure 5b. Romanian-Russian conferences



Figure 6a. Academic staff exchange



Figure 6b. Academic staff exchange



3.3. Russian for the Romanian business environment

The Russian Cultural Centre in ASE offers free courses of Russian language for absolute beginners since 2010. The courses are targeted at business professionals from Bucharest who want to learn the language either for business-related or for personal reasons. In what follows, we present some data on the business professionals taking the Russian language courses organized by the Centre.

The data analysed comes from 920 students and most of it was collected using Google Forms. The form contained questions for identification and communication purposes (name, email address, phone number) and for background on the candidate, namely highest education level attained, economic sector, employer and position. The form ends with two questions regarding the reason for learning Russian and a brief, open question for the motivation of the candidate. Applicants were then invited to a face-to-face interview with the Centre Coordinator and the teacher that will conduct the activities. The data of the 920 professionals analysed in the present paper refers only to successful applicants, namely those who were enrolled and completed one of the two courses offered (A1.1 or A1.2).

For the purpose of the present paper we chose to analyse three variables in order to highlight the profile of the beneficiaries, namely their reason for learning Russian, highest education

attained and employer. The answers for the last two dimensions are self-declared and open, thus were recoded and grouped in relevant categories.

The structure of the sample shows that most applicants stated both professional and personal reasons for learning Russian (2 out of every 5 persons), the remaining 6 out of 10 students gave either professional, or personal reasons with similar frequency (Figure 7). The students' highest education level (Figure 8) attained indicates that the courses are of interest to graduates with Master's studies (more than half of the sample), but they are also appealing to graduates from Bachelor's studies, who represent 3-4 out of every 10 persons, together comprising about 90% of the sample. Most of the successful candidates are employed in multinationals (11.56%), higher education (10.88%), ministries (10.2%) and other public administration institutions (8.16%), in total 2 out of every 5 students (Figure 9).

Figure 7. Structure of the sample by motivation for learning Russian

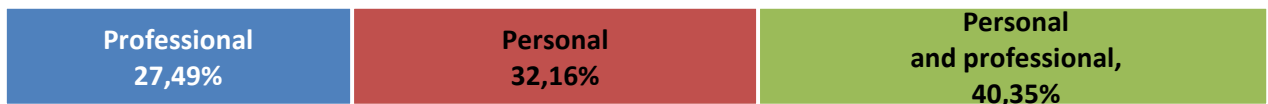


Figure 8. Structure of the sample by highest education level attained

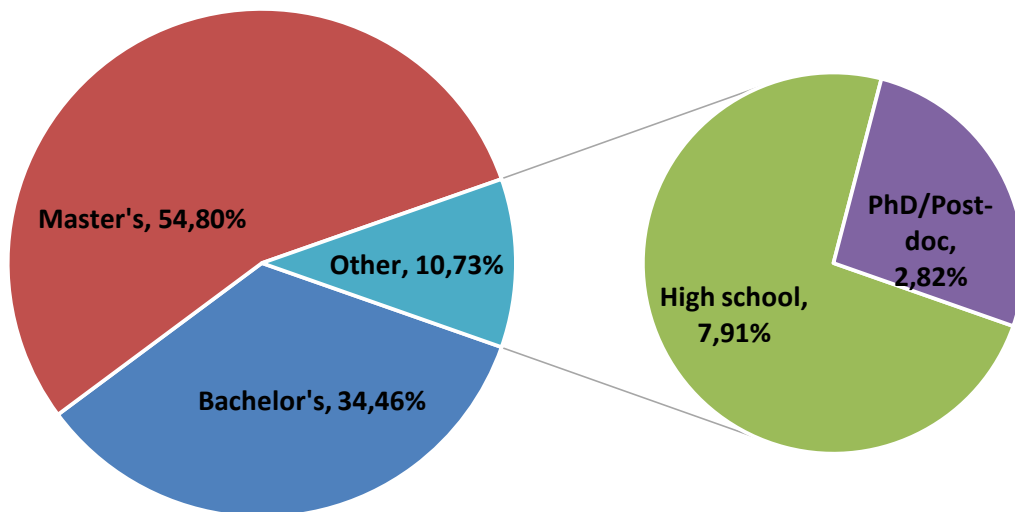
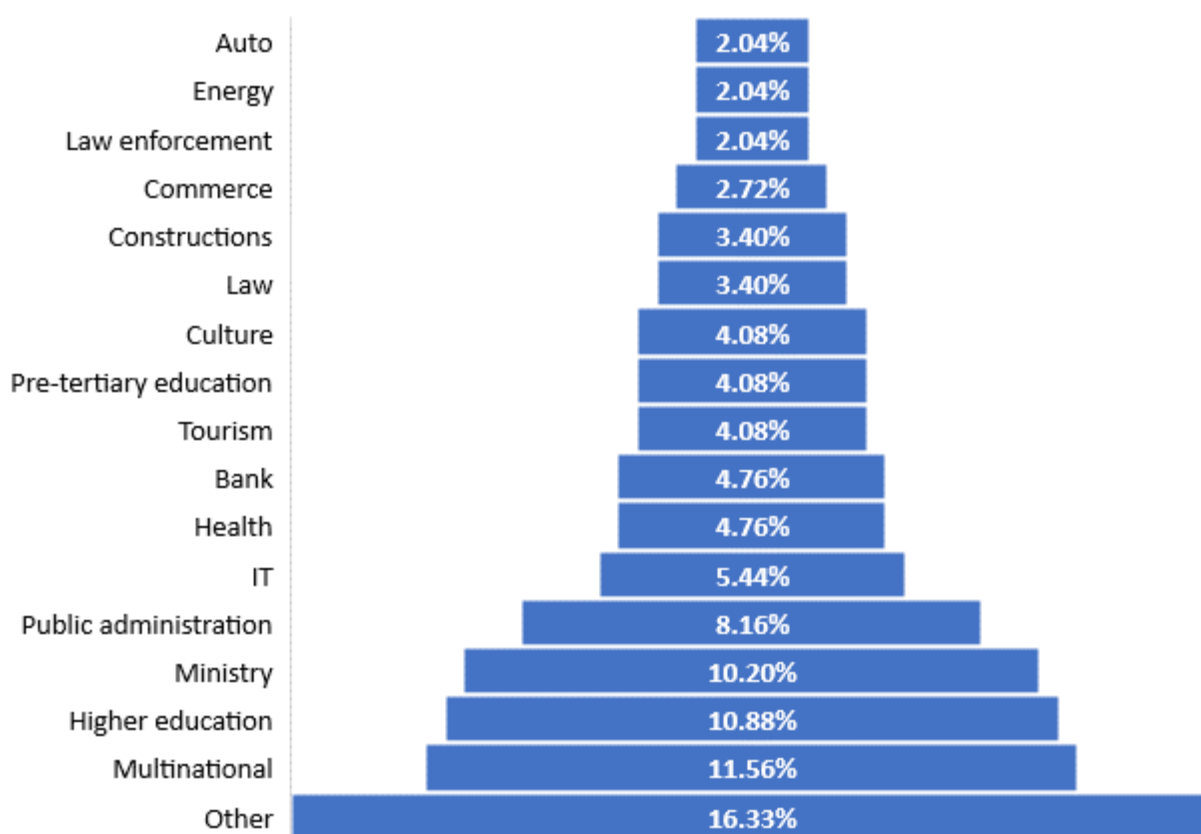


Figure 9. Structure of the sample by economic sector



We proceeded to a deeper analysis of the profile of the 920 participants to the Russian language courses by looking at the interactions between the three dimensions taken into consideration. Based on this, we epitomized the information in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Most frequent student profiles

	Domain of activity	Highest education attained	Reason for studying Russian
1	Multinational	Bachelor's or Master's	Personal
2	Higher education	Master's or PhD	Professional
3	Ministries and public administration	Master's	Either personal, or professional

Because people most frequently declared that they want to study Russian for both professional and personal reasons in all four main profiles identified, the respective column contains the second most frequent reason given. We may, thus, conclude that employees from multinational companies tend to have more personal-oriented goals, while those in higher education rather professional ones. This may be related to the specificities of the activity in the two types of employers. Multinational employees who require Russian language courses for work have a high chance of getting such courses at work, during working hours. For this reason, their motivations to learn outside the company are more likely to be personal. Conversely, employees in higher education institutions might have less well-defined boundaries between their personal and professional activities, as well as non-standard working hours, thus they are more likely to manifest preference for professional reasons, despite investing their personal time into development.

The quality of the Russian language courses organized by ASE’s Cultural Centre has not only attracted more and more trainees from the academic and professional environments, but has also received international recognition. More specifically, in March 2018, ASE became the first university in Romania to organize Russian language testing sessions in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) with issuance of certificates by the Russian Federation. The testing sessions are jointly organized by ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre, the Saint Petersburg State University of Economics (UNECON), and the “Lingua Franca” Foreign Language Training and Testing Centre. Figures 10a., b. depict a Russian language certification session and a selection of successful test-takers receiving their certificates from UNECON representatives in 2018:

Figure 10a. International Russian language certification



Figure 10b. International Russian language certification



3.4. Testimonials on ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre

Since ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre continuously strives to improve its offer, it is only natural that it invites its beneficiaries to express their opinion on the usefulness of the activities undertaken. Table 2 below contains a selection of testimonials.

Table 2. A selection of testimonials on ASE’s Russian Cultural Centre

For me, the opportunity to study one semester with an Erasmus+ grant and mobility frame at Saint Petersburg State University of Economics (UNECON), in The Russian Federation was the best chance for improving my Russian Language and learning more about the economic field, but also about the Russian Culture and traditions. And I have done all of those while living under the lighting sky of the White Nights above the city established on the rivers and canals, passed by the Nevsky Prospekt. (ASE student)

I recommend this course to anyone wishing to start learning of deepen their knowledge of Russian. One of the strong points of the course ... is the interactive manner of teaching, It facilitates the development of listening and speaking skills, apart from reading and writing skills, more than other conventional language classes I have attended. (Male respondent, Romanian Air Force Staff member)

During the job interview for the company I now work for, apart from my advanced

knowledge of Portuguese, the fact that I was attending a Russian language course was a supplementary aspect that attracted the employer's interest in my application. I am certain that this has helped my obtain the job I applied for, and I am equally certain that developing my knowledge of Russian will help me advance in my career. (Female respondent, analyst with Oracle)

For me, the occasion to take the Russian language test in Romania at the university I am a Bachelor's student of has been a very practical way of obtaining international certification in this language. The test was organized relatively soon after my return from Russian language scholarship at the "A.S. Pushkin" State Russian Language Institute in Moscow, the Russian Federation... I believe this opportunity was a unique event ... for which I am grateful to ASE's Russian Cultural Centre, as well as to Saint Petersburg State University of Economics. (ASE student)

4. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the variety of activities undertaken by the Russian Cultural Centre in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, during a decade of existence (December 2009 - December 2019). We have shown that the Centre's beneficiaries come from both the academic and the business environments, and that the Centre's partners from the academic, business and diplomatic realms actively contribute to the satisfaction of the beneficiaries due to the development of the latter's linguistic and cultural competences. We have placed the Centre's activity against the background of the University's internationalisation mission, as it has been shown to contribute, among other things, to students' and graduates' increased chances for employability on a domestic, regional and global labour market.

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