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## Support for Iranian Students in the USSR by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries at the Turn of the 1920s — 1930s

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**Abstract.** In the early 2020s, the close relationship between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran was significantly strengthened. Higher education is one of the most important areas of cooperation between two countries. Russian medical and technical universities are popular with Iranians. The relevance of the study is due to the fact that the state organization responsible for attracting foreign students is currently Rossotrudnichestvo. It is therefore necessary to consider the traditions established by its predecessor, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), when working with Iranian students. The present article is based on solid archival ground, relying on the unpublished documents from the VOKS files of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and published documents from Iranian archives. The aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive description of VOKS' strategy for working with potential and current students from Iran, highlighting the internal and external factors that influence VOKS' performance. It also sheds light on several important case studies related to the problems Iranian students faced in the USSR, including expulsions, internships, and employment. The neo-institutional approach, which emphasizes the actions of individuals within an organization, is employed to demonstrate VOKS's place among Soviet institutions and to show how the work with Iranian students was organized and in what way this influenced their life and the success of Soviet cultural diplomacy in Iran. Studying medicine or technical subjects was as popular with Iranians then as it is today. It is concluded that Iranian students who managed to gain support from both VOKS and diplomatic officials from the USSR and Iran were successful. Attracting international students from Asia and Africa to Russia is relevant in the 21st century because of the “turn to the East” foreign policy strategy and the expansion and cooperation of the BRICS organization.

**Key words:** academic mobility, internationalisation of education, Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iranian students, cultural exchange

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## Поддержка иранских студентов в СССР со стороны Всесоюзного общества культурной связи с заграницей на рубеже 1920–1930-х гг.

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**Аннотация.** Прочные отношения между Российской Федерацией и Исламской Республикой Иран (ИРИ) значительно укрепились в начале 2020-х гг. Одной из важнейших сфер продуктивного взаимодействия является высшее образование. Среди иранских абитуриентов популярны медицинские и технические вузы в России. Актуальность исследования обусловлена тем, что в настоящее время государственной структурой, ответственной за привлечение иностранных студентов, является Россотрудничество, и необходимо обращение к традициям работы с иранскими студентами, сложившимся в результате работы предшественника этой организации — Всесоюзного общества культурной связи с заграницей (ВОКС). В этом контексте деятельность ВОКС по привлечению иностранных студентов изучена недостаточно. Задачи исследования — охарактеризовать стратегию ВОКС по работе с абитуриентами и студентами из Ирана, выделить внутренние и внешние факторы, влиявшие на успешность работы ВОКС, проанализировать конкретные проблемы, с которыми сталкивались иранские студенты в СССР: отчисление, прохождение практики, трудоустройство. Материалы исследования — это документы из фонда ВОКС, хранящиеся в Государственном архиве Российской Федерации (ГАРФ), ранее не введенные в научный оборот, а также опубликованные иранские документы из фондов иранских архивов. Методы исследования включают неоинституциональный подход, который концентрируется на действиях субъектов организаций и раскрывает роль ВОКС в системе советских учреждений. Результатом исследования является анализ организации работы со студентами из Ирана и влияния этой организации на их жизненные траектории и оценка успешности советской культурной дипломатии на иранском направлении. Как и в настоящее время, в исследуемый период иранские абитуриенты стремились получить образование в области медицины и технических специальностей. Сделан вывод, что положительного результата добивались те иранские студенты, которые обращались в ВОКС через посредников — иранское посольство в Москве либо советских дипломатов в Иране. В XXI в. опыт привлечения в Россию иностранных студентов из стран Азии и Африки является актуальным в связи с «поворотом на Восток» в российской внешней политике, расширением БРИКС и взаимодействием в рамках этой структуры.

**Ключевые слова:** академическая мобильность, интернационализация образования, Реза-шах Пехлеви, иранские студенты, культурный обмен

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### Introduction

Russia's positioning as a country open to the outside world is reflected in the indicators of the "Education Export" national priority project. It requires universities to enhance the attractiveness of the educational programs. Russia is demonstrating its commitment to attracting students from both neighboring and

distant countries. Their admission to Russian universities is coordinated by the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*). During a conversation with K. Jalali, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to Russia,

Y.A. Primakov, the head of the agency, noted that our country is interested in attracting Iranian students.<sup>1</sup> Iran is one of the agency's priority areas of activity. According to L.V. Pankina (Votinova), the First Secretary at the Russian Embassy in Iran and the representative of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, approximately 6,000 Iranian students were enrolled at Russian universities in the 2023/2024 academic year.<sup>2</sup> In 2025, the Russian Prime Minister, M.V. Mishustin, stated that there would be 9,000 Iranians studying at Russian universities.<sup>3</sup> This highlights the relevance of the history of Russian-Iranian relations in higher education, especially since the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, signed on January 17, 2025, outlines areas of educational cooperation in Articles 28, 30, and 34, with the training of medical specialists being specifically mentioned (Article 28).<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is especially important to turn to the experience of interaction with foreign students from Iran of the organization — the predecessor of *Rossotrudnichestvo* — the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), established in 1925.

As an integral part of cultural diplomacy during the interbellum period, educational diplomacy has been examined by historians, through the prism of relations between government agencies and universities (Tronchet, 2013), the role of private foundations in supporting foreign students (Bu, 2012, p. 115), and the classification of types of academic

mobility (Tournès & Scott-Smith, 2018, pp. 13–15). The problem of the internationalization of higher education in Russia has been examined by both Russian (Kuzminov & Yudkevich, 2021, pp. 577–612; Shumilova, 2022) and foreign researchers (Perraton, 2017). However, with regard to the education of students from Eastern countries in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s, researchers have predominantly focused their attention on the activities of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) (Kirasirova, 2024, pp. 64–65). The education of Iranians in the USSR has been analyzed in relation to the activities of the KUTV (Ravandi-Fadai, 2015), in the context of the biographies of Iranian leftist activists (Genis, 2014), and in connection with the development of Soviet Iranian studies (Volkov, 2018). However, the lives of Iranian young men and women who went to the USSR to study outside the Comintern framework are practically ignored by historians. In modern Iranian historiography, the education of Iranians in Soviet universities in the 1920s and 1930s has not been studied, despite the fact that Iranian students' education abroad has attracted the interest of researchers in Iran (Gheidari & Shohani, 2022) and Western countries (Menashri, 1992, pp. 125–141; Matin-Asgari, 2002, pp. 19–25).

Foreign students, including Iranian ones, seeking admission to Soviet universities in the second half of the 1920s, contacted the Soviet mission, the Iranian embassy, and individual educational institutions. They, along with staff

<sup>1</sup> Iranian Students Studying in Russia Was Discussed in the Agency // Rossotrudnichestvo. September 27, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://rs.gov.ru/news/v-agentstve-obsudili-obuchenie-iranskikh-studentov-v-rossii/> (accessed: 04.05.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Votinova L. Mahdudiyati baraye tahsil dar reshteha-ye khass nadarim (mosahebe) [Votinova L. We Don't Have Any Limitations for Studying Certain Subjects (interview) // Farhikhtegan. September 28, 2023. No. 3968. (In Persian). URL: <https://farhikhtegandaily.com/newspaper/3968/8/> (accessed: 09.06.2024)].

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Mishustin's Talk with Mohammad Reza Aref First Vice President of Iran // Government of Russian Federation. August 15, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <http://government.ru/news/55941/> (accessed: 17.08.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran // President of Russia. January 17, 2025. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/6258> (accessed: 19.09.2025).

from these institutions, also contacted VOKS for support or clarification. For this reason, the VOKS archive, which is housed in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), comprises a collection of relevant documents that facilitate an examination of various aspects of students' or applicants' interactions with Soviet reality.

On the one hand, this relationship can be analyzed within the framework of a neo-institutional approach, according to which the behavior patterns of actors (applicants and students) are not only determined by rational considerations, but also by the influence of the institutional environment (Smeplass, 2025, p. 9). On the other hand, this research focus should be adjusted in a temporal-contextual way, taking into account the intersection of international relations, Soviet bureaucratic practices of the 1920s, and cultural diplomacy. The latter is defined as the activities of state and non-state actors to promote their own values and strengthen mutual understanding at the international level (Martin & Piller, 2021, p. 155). At the same time, educational initiatives contribute to achieving the cultural diplomacy goals (Walton, 2015, p. 345).

## **VOKS and Its Interaction with Iranian Students**

In both Russian and foreign historiography, the activities of VOKS are viewed through the prism of strengthening cultural ties, organizing friendship societies with the USSR, hosting foreign guests, creating a positive image of the USSR abroad, and developing academic mobility (Fayet, 2014; David-Fox, 2015; Golubev & Nevezhin, 2016; Gruzdinskaya & Demyanov, 2024). However, there was a more

prosaic aspect to VOKS's work, related to its intermediary functions between foreigners and Soviet authorities. VOKS performed these intermediary functions in accordance with the society's charter, which stated that VOKS "promotes the exchange of scientific personnel (... students) between the USSR and abroad."<sup>5</sup>

This was a laborious process of communication involving both the foreign national and their diplomatic mission — in this case, the Iranian embassy. Within VOKS's central office, the Eastern Sector was responsible for interacting with Iranian students, while in Iran, VOKS representatives — embassy or consulate employees, as well as other Soviet diplomats — contacted them. The Eastern Sector of VOKS (later renamed a department) bore the primary burden of liaising with Iranian students. In the second half of the 1920s, this department employed people fluent in Persian (for example, A.N. Urvantseva-Levitskaya, a graduate of the Oriental Studies Department of the Military Academy of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army), which allowed for effective communication with both students and the Iranian diplomatic corps (Surkov, 2023, pp. 64–65).

## **Iran's Government Policy on Sending Students Abroad**

Reza Shah Pahlavi, while allocating resources towards educating his subjects abroad, did not view the USSR as a priority destination for knowledge and technology transfer. The military sphere was an exception, and even then on a limited scale, for training aircraft pilots.<sup>6</sup> Iranian ruling circles were concerned about the susceptibility of Iranians living in the

<sup>5</sup> All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries Charter. Moscow, 1926. P. 2. (In Russian)

<sup>6</sup> Moshfeghifar E. Tarikhche-ye ta'limat va tahsilat-e nezami dar Iran: dowre-e Pahlavi-ye Iran [History of Military Education in Iran during Pahlavi Dynasty Reign] // Moassese-ye motale'at va pazhuheshha-ye siyasi [Institute of Political Studies and Research]. 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://psri.ir/?id=mle1c0y2> (accessed: 30.06.2024).

USSR to communist ideology, and sometimes even took measures to prevent those returning from the Soviet Union from entering the civil service (Poormohamadi Amlashi, Rahmani & Khazani, 2023, pp. 67–68). European countries were viewed as a source of effective models for organizing educational systems and technical knowledge that could be used during the large-scale modernization reforms of the late 1920s (Marashi, 2008, pp. 92–93).

In 1928, Iran passed the Law on Sending Students Abroad, requiring 100 students to be sent abroad annually for the next six years. Between 1928 and 1934, the Ministry of Education sent 640 students to Europe and the United States (Moradinezhad & Pezham-Shariati, 1974, p. 101). In total, between 1922 and 1938, approximately 1,500 people received an education abroad, both through state scholarships and private funding (Arabadzhyan, 2022, p. 195). For example, France was particularly popular destination for medical studies (Azizi & Azizi, 2010, p. 358). Despite the normalization of relations between Moscow and Tehran following the signing of the Neutrality Treaty of 1927, mutual mistrust persisted in bilateral relations. Moreover, in the USSR, industrialization and other reforms were just beginning to be implemented in the late 1920s, unlike in Western European countries, which also influenced Iran's choice of destination countries for its students. It is also noteworthy that, among the 100 students selected for study abroad, a quota of 35 university teacher training students was always allocated (Gheidari & Shohani, 2022, p. 92; Arasteh, 1962, p. 87). Many of the returning students began teaching at Tehran University (Amanat, 2017, p. 470).

Given the ideologically charged nature of Soviet education, it is not surprising that the Iranian government sent its future teachers and professors to European countries.

Even those Iranians who had graduated from Iranian schools in the USSR, such as, the Ittihad School in Baku (Taher Ahmadi, 2005, p. 188), were supposed to be sent to Tehran to participate in selection for study in Europe, rather than be sponsored for their education at Soviet universities. However, their poor command of European languages posed a significant challenge. Not a single Iranian graduate of the Baku school was able to travel to Europe in 1929.<sup>7</sup> Those wishing to study in the USSR had to rely on support from their families, Soviet institutions, and the Iranian embassy. For example, M. Parvin, an employee of the Soviet-Iranian company *Iranryba*, received an education in the USSR at the company's expense. However, according to A. Soheili, the chairman of the board of directors, this student was also sent to study in Europe after his stay in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

### Iranian Students in the USSR: Problems and Solutions

The Iranian Embassy in Moscow interceded on behalf of Iranian nationals. Correspondence between the Embassy and VOKS outlines the issues that Iranians have encountered, including problems with university admissions, expulsions, internships and employment.

The expulsion have reflected widespread Soviet-era practices of suppressing dissent, with no obvious nationality connotations. It has been reported by the Iranian Embassy that,

<sup>7</sup> Asnadi az madares-e irani dar kharej va madares-e khareji dar Iran (1301–1317). Be kushesh-e I. Abadi [Iranian Schools Abroad and Foreign Schools in Iran: Documents (1922–1938) / ed. by I. Abadi]. Tehran : Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 2002. P. 84. (In Persian).

<sup>8</sup> Daneshjuyan-e irani dar Orupa. Asnad (az sal-e 1307 ta 1313). Be kushesh-e A. Navaii, E. Malekzadeh [Iranian Students in Europe. Documents (from 1928 to 1934) / ed. by A. Navaii, E. Malekzadeh]. Tehran : National Library & Archives of the I.R. of Iran, 2003. P. 137–138. (In Persian).

N. Ananyeva, an Iranian national, was expelled from a Construction Technical College in Penza due to her father's social background. The Eastern Sector of VOKS submitted a request to the college's director. The response indicated that the student had been expelled not because of her social background, but because she had been accused of "contaminating of the student body." This assertion was supported by a citation of an excerpt from a college trade union meeting organized jointly with the Komsomol branch. The extract specifies the nature of the "contamination": it was carried out "through evenings spent in the apartment and Christmas tree celebrations."<sup>9</sup> It was communicated to the embassy that the reason for N. Ananyeva's expulsion was the exertion of pressure from the Technical College's student organizations.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the tightening of control over everyday rituals by the party structures at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s also played a role (Lebina, 1999, p. 139).

However, students were expelled for the most prosaic of reasons, such as poor attendance. Z. Grigoryan, a student at the Moscow Pharmaceutical Technical College, rarely attended classes in her first year and was expelled in 1930. Through the embassy, Z. Grigoryan cited illness as the reason for her absences in her petition, specifically swelling of the extremities due to the cold. VOKS, interceding on behalf of the Iranian student, advanced the argument: "She came from far away to study, and it is in our interests to bring young Persian students into the

orbit of Soviet culture."<sup>11</sup> However, the college rejected this argument, noting that Z. Grigoryan had been accepted as a first-year student in the 1928/29 academic year, had performed poorly, and had been held back a year by exception. In the first half of the 1929/1930 academic year, the student received several failing grades and missed more than 20 % of her classes, which led to her expulsion.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kinship as a Positive Factor**

When petitioning for Iranian nationals, their family ties were taken into account. For example, the Iranian embassy requested that VOKS support S. Rafat, a 1930 graduate of the First Moscow State Medical Institute, in obtaining a position at a hospital in Makhachkala, given that her husband was the head of the Iranian vice-consulate.<sup>13</sup> This request was granted after consultation with the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID), with VOKS justifying its support by the fact that Rafat was the daughter of M.A. Gafarov, a renowned orientalist and employee of the USSR Institute of Oriental Studies, who had personally petitioned VOKS on her behalf.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the recommendations from VOKS and NKID were effective, and S. Rafat was able to find work at the hospital. However, just a year later, the consulate was closed, and the diplomat's family moved to Tehran, where S. Rafat was able to open her own medical practice.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 71. L. 97. Application of Iranian Subject Student Akhmedov Surur Jabar Zade and Correspondence with NKID. 04 January 1931–03 May 1931. (In Russian).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. L. 95. (In Russian).

<sup>11</sup> GARF. Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 59. L. 35-35verso. Correspondence with NKID. 20 January 1930–11 June 1930. (In Russian).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. L. 28. (In Russian).

<sup>13</sup> Iranian Vice-Consulate was opened in Petrovsk (Makhachkala) in the early 1870s. See: (Plieva et al., 2022, p. 86).

<sup>14</sup> GARF. Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 71. L. 146. Application of Iranian Subject Student Akhmedov Surur Jabar Zadeh and Correspondence with NKID. 04 January 1931–03 May 1931. (In Russian).

<sup>15</sup> Mojavvez-e tababat-e doktor Safiyeh Ra'fatjah [Safiyah Rafatjah's Medical Practice License] // Donya-ye zanan dar asr-e Qajar [Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran]. (In Persian). URL: <http://www.qajarwomen.org/fa/items/14134A29.html> (accessed: 09.10.2024).

High-ranking relatives sought to ensure better educational conditions for Iranian students. For example, the Iranian Consul General in Tashkent, M. Kerim Khan, approached the NKID Commissioner for the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, V.I. Solovyov, with a request to initiate a petition to transfer his nephew, M.-K. Aliyev, a law student at Baku State University, to Moscow University due to a family relocation. Moreover, it is clear that, unlike his Moscow colleagues, the Iranian diplomats, he had not yet grasped the role of VOKS. The embassy usually wrote directly to VOKS, bypassing the NKID structures, while the Iranian Consul approached the NKID Commissioner, who, in turn, forwarded M. Kerim Khan's request to S.K. Pastukhov in the Eastern Department of the NKID. S.K. Pastukhov then forwarded the letter to VOKS, who sent it to the Main Directorate of Vocational Education (*Glavprofobr*), which issued a positive decision.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the Soviet republics, it was poorly understood that VOKS wielded a certain weight in the Soviet hierarchy and could, by coordinating its position with the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, advocate for the interests of foreign nationals.

In 1928, the embassy interceded on behalf of A. Moed, an Iranian graduate of the Aachen Technical University (Germany), for an internship in the Baku oil fields. The Iranian planned to visit his parents in Baku for the holidays, seeking both to be with them and to earn some extra money. He approached the embassy, which forwarded his request to VOKS. A.N. Urvantseva, an employee of the Eastern Affairs Sector, was tasked with arranging this student's internship. She obtained the consent of M.V. Barinov, the Chairman of the

Board of *Azneft*, and notified the Iranian embassy.<sup>17</sup> VOKS was gradually drawn into bureaucratic red tape, which the society lacked the strength or resources to cope with. However, the presence of relatives in Baku apparently played a role, as the embassy's application for another Iranian student, A. Afshar, a graduate of the Berlin Federal Institute of Technology, was denied due to a lack of vacancies.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1920s, students indeed faced a shortage of internship opportunities, which led to problems in the educational process for all categories of students.<sup>19</sup>

### Success Was Not Guaranteed

The embassy, as well as Iranian students, viewed VOKS as an institution that typically acted as a 'patron' for foreigners within the Soviet system, and they used its resources to push through various issues. In September 1928, an Iranian citizen, P. Naseri, arrived in Moscow to enroll in a technical school, having received a recommendation from the Soviet consul in Mashhad. Although VOKS's applications encountered resistance from *Glavprofobr*, which pointed out that the deadline had passed, the NKID's support was effective, and the student was accepted onto a state scholarship to the Kalinin Workers' Faculty (*rabfak*). However, due to his parents' illness, he was forced to return to Iran and work in various Soviet institutions, including the Sharq office and Byuopers. This demonstrates that, even in the case of a successful petition by VOKS (meaning the expenditure of resources on correspondence, discussion, and debate with the relevant agencies), the outcome could be very ambiguous.

<sup>16</sup> ГАРФ. Фонд Р-5283. Инв. 4. С. 29. Л. 17. Иран. Correspondence with VOKS's Representative in Iran. January 1928–19 September 1928. (In Russian).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. L. 156. (In Russian).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. L. 175. (In Russian).

<sup>19</sup> Pushkin I. Some Results of the Summer Internships // Red Students. 1928. No 5. P. 4. (In Russian).

However, positive recommendations from Soviet diplomats did not always determine the outcome. The main problem for many Iranian applicants was late submission of documents, and the arguments of VOKS and NKID officials had no influence on decision-making within the People's Commissariat of Education (*Narkompros*). This should certainly be viewed as an oversight on the part of applicants who submitted their documents late. For example, in August 1928, G. Moghadas, a graduate of the Russian-Persian School in Tehran, submitted an application through the plenipotentiary mission for admission to a university in the capital. As the head of the Consulate General in Tehran emphasized, the applicant's application and autobiography had been written independently — in perfect calligraphic handwriting, in flawless Russian. This demonstrates that the Soviet school in Tehran had successfully fulfilled its cultural diplomacy mission: it had prepared an applicant with excellent Russian, determined to study in the USSR. Moreover, in his autobiography, understanding the 'rules of the game' in the Soviet administrative system, G. Moghadas cited recommendations from the former Consul General in Tehran, N.P. Itvi (Podgorny), and the military attaché of the Plenipotentiary Mission, A.A. Bobrishchev.<sup>20</sup> However, the People's Commissariat of Education did not bother to select a university and denied Moghadas admission on the formal grounds of the expiration of the application deadline, thereby nullifying the efforts of the Soviet school teachers in Iran and Soviet cultural diplomacy.<sup>21</sup> Although there were also examples of the successful careers of graduates of the Tehran Soviet School (Ravandi-Fadai & McNeer, 2023).

Sometimes things reached the point of absurdity. In 1927, V. Korablyov, the Soviet vice-consul for the Deregez and Kelat district, petitioned VOKS on behalf of the Iranian citizen A. Ismail-zadeh, requesting that a place be allocated to him at one of the workers' faculties in Moscow. A.N. Urvantseva, VOKS's Eastern affairs officer, managed to secure the People's Commissariat of Education to allocate a place designated for political émigrés for this Iranian. However, since A. Ismail-zadeh was a civil servant, he would have to resign to obtain a foreign passport, which he was not permitted to do. The desperate Iranian then told the Soviet diplomat that he would quit his job and try to reach Moscow illegally. V. Korablyov did not support such adventurism and did not approve of this decision.<sup>22</sup> However, this case shows that the resources and time of VOKS employees and Soviet diplomats were often wasted.

## VOKS as a Representative of the Interests of Foreign Students

The positive influence of VOKS on the progress of any given case led to Iranian students repeatedly seeking assistance, becoming regular 'clients.' This was especially true for students who had already been accepted to various Soviet universities, for example, in national republics or regional centers, but who were aiming for Moscow or Leningrad, as well as those who were entering an educational institution with a different profile than they had hoped for. For example, in 1928, S. Ishkhani, a student in the agricultural department of the State University of Armenia, applied to VOKS through the embassy with

<sup>20</sup> GARG. Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 29. L. 44verso. Iran. Correspondence with VOKS's Representative in Iran. January 1928–19 September 1928. (In Russian).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. L. 63. (In Russian).

<sup>22</sup> GARG. Fund R-5283. Inv. 1a. C. 78. L. 227. Minutes of the VOKS's Meeting on Cultural Work in Persia. October 1926 — December 1927. (In Russian).

a request to transfer him to the K.A. Timiryazev Agricultural Academy.<sup>23</sup> M.Z. Grigorian, a student in the economics department of the Plekhanov Institute of National Economy, applied to the embassy for support in transferring to the industrial department at the Industrial and Economic Institute named after A.I. Rykov. VOKS managed to secure his admission to the Institute's third year of studies from its management.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously, foreign nationals approached VOKS not only based on the perception of this society as a 'patron' of foreigners, especially those from Eastern countries, that is, to secure the support of one Soviet institution in its interactions with another. They acted out of inertia: instead of using 'internal' Soviet resources for advocating for their interests, such as trade unions, they relied on the resources they were accustomed to as foreigners.

A. Naghizadeh, a Persian national and an employee of the Moscow-Kursk Railway, and a member of the Railway Workers' Union, attempted to enroll in courses via VOKS rather than through the union. However, his petition was ineffective, as the school's management redirected him to the union.<sup>25</sup> This move by VOKS seems illogical, since VOKS's goals were primarily to work with those categories of foreigners associated with students and intellectual circles, rather than with every foreigner by definition. VOKS's decision to support this Iranian was likely influenced by the recommendation from the Iranian embassy.

It appears that the problem lay in the way VOKS formulated its arguments when

submitting applications to admissions committees. While these arguments were valid in terms of advancing Soviet interests abroad, they could also be interpreted as an attempt to waste state funds. In some cases, the Iranian embassy informed VOKS that a prospective student had committed to leaving for Iran and finding work after completing the studies. Examples include I. Yuzbasheva, an applicant to the Chemical Technology Institute in Leningrad, and N.G. Lazareva, who was applying to the Moscow Construction College.<sup>26</sup> This was entirely logical from the perspective of Iranian state institutions in the context of Reza Shah's modernization. For VOKS and Soviet diplomats from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, the costs of educating Iranian youth in the USSR were justified by the goals of cultural diplomacy, i.e. creating a class of educated young professionals oriented towards the USSR. However, this rationale ran counter to the need to train specialists for the Soviet modernization project, meaning university staff had no motivation to support such requests.

In 1928, the Iranian embassy lobbied VOKS to ease the university entrance examination requirements for Iranian nationals. As a result, the People's Commissariat of Education ordered that Iranian applicants have the right to defer the Russian language and social studies examinations, provided they demonstrated satisfactory knowledge in specialized subjects — mathematics and

<sup>23</sup> ГАРФ. Фонд Р-5283. Инв. 4. С. 29. Л. 145. Иран. Correspondence with VOKS's Representative in Iran. January 1928–19 September 1928. (In Russian).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. L. 75. (In Russian).

<sup>25</sup> ГАРФ. Фонд Р-5283. Инв. 4. С. 59. Л. 56, 56verso. Correspondence with NKID. 20 January 1930–11 June 1930. (In Russian).

<sup>26</sup> ГАРФ. Фонд Р-5283. Инв. 4. С. 71. Л. 104. Application of Iranian Subject Student Akhmedov Surur Jabar Zadeh and Correspondence with NKID. 04 January 1931–03 May 1931. (In Russian).

physics.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, in the early 1930s, VOKS noted that recent applications for admission of Persian nationals to Soviet educational institutions remained unfulfilled, as there were no available places.<sup>28</sup>

The support from Soviet diplomats on the ground also proved ineffective. The USSR Consul General in Tabriz, S.I. Sychev, recommended graduates of the Russian-Persian School for admission to various universities in the Soviet Union. However, none of them were accepted, as foreign citizens were admitted on the same basis as other universities, and no special NKID decree had been issued to support this petition before the university admissions committees.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, admission difficulties were also related to the fact that studies could sometimes serve merely as a pretext for remaining in the USSR. This observation was documented in the correspondence exchanged between the NKID and VOKS. S.K. Pastukhov, the head of the First Eastern Department of the NKID, noted that some Iranian nationals, seeking to enroll in courses or universities, “actually engage in illegal activities to justify their stay in Moscow.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, VOKS’s activities included interacting with the future intelligentsia and educated youth — working with applicants and students from Iran at Soviet universities. In theory, this aspect of VOKS’s work was attractive, as it enabled for the channeling of Soviet-oriented

Iranians through several educational stages — first to a Russian-Persian school in Iran, and then to a Soviet university to finally develop a worldview friendly to the country of the victorious revolution. However, implementing this theory encountered a number of difficulties, ultimately resulting in VOKS being forced to work ‘on an *ad hoc* basis’ due to insufficient resources and a lack of a clearly defined strategy.

First, the Iranian government did not regard the USSR as a primary destination for students, due to a combination of mistrust of communist ideology and the underdevelopment of the country’s higher education system in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The system was still in its infancy and, compared to the higher education systems of European countries, appeared less attractive. Consequently, Iranian applicants to the USSR could not rely on state scholarships or guaranteed employment.

Second, VOKS did not make the final decision regarding applicants’ admission. The success of applications depended on various factors, such as the student’s family ties, support from the Iranian embassy or the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, and the timing of the application. Formally, the society was a public organization whose recommendations could be accepted or rejected. Its actual influence in the Soviet departmental hierarchy was limited, and it was not always successful in resolving issues. This negatively impacted the systemic nature of VOKS’s work.

Third, attracting foreign students during the period of industrialization was not a top-priority

<sup>27</sup> GASF. Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 29. L. 132. Iran. Correspondence with VOKS’s Representative in Iran. January 1928–19 September 1928. (In Russian).

<sup>28</sup> GASF. Fund R-5283. Inv. 4. C. 71. L. 126. Application of Iranian Subject Student Akhmedov Surur Jabar Zadeh and Correspondence with NKID. 04 January 1931–03 May 1931. (In Russian).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. L. 101.

<sup>30</sup> GASF. Fund R-5283. Inv. 1a. C. 180. L. 16. Correspondence with the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. January 1930–19 December 1931. (In Russian).

state objective in the USSR, as the main priority was ensuring the training of domestic personnel. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of the VOKS experience, such as the attentive attitude towards

each potential student and the support provided during the adaptation period in a foreign cultural environment, may be in demand in the practice of specialists at today's *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

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