

Background Note

ROUNDTABLE OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND MONGOLIA

Fostering Regional Co-operation through Multilingual Education in Central Asia and Mongolia

Ashgabat, 22 October 2026

1. Context

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (hereafter Central Asia and Mongolia) have reached significant momentum in regional co-operation in recent years, including through landmark border agreements and significantly growing practical collaboration across the political, economic and human dimensions. This environment of constructive engagement creates opportunities to deepen co-operation in other areas of shared interest.

Education, and in particular language-in-education policy, is one such area. The region's rich linguistic diversity is exemplified by the fact that, oftentimes, the State language of one country is the mother tongue of communities living in other countries within the region, and vice versa. Furthermore, the six countries are home to numerous unique smaller languages that are spoken only across the region. This means that how States in the region organize language instruction can have positive implications well beyond their own borders. In relations between the States of the region, having societies and communities that speak regional languages creates conditions for increased social exchanges, economic co-operation, and good neighbourly contacts, thereby enhancing regional cohesion and stability.

All the States have, to varying degrees, maintained education systems that support instruction in several languages alongside the State language. This shared legacy and an interconnectedness of the region's multilingual space offer a strong foundation for co-operation on language-related issues in education. Most importantly, over the past two decades, significant practical experience with various multilingual education models¹ (hereafter MLE) has been developed in all countries, generating insights on good practices that are available for regional exchange, including by way of the three phases of the Central Asian Education Programme, which was implemented across all countries of Central Asia and Mongolia with the support of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (hereafter HCNM) and UNICEF.

International evidence indicates that children learning in well-designed, balanced MLE programmes achieve higher proficiency in the State language than their peers receiving monolingual instruction. Many MLE programmes positively contribute to education quality, and well-designed multilingual provision is compatible with high system performance. For example, among the highest-performing systems in mathematics in PISA 2025 were Singapore, Macao (China), Hong Kong (China) and Switzerland, all of which formally recognize more than one language as a medium of or a compulsory language of instruction. MLE also contributes to the integration of diverse societies by creating shared educational spaces where learners of different backgrounds study together, and to workforce competitiveness by equipping youth with the language skills required in increasingly interconnected regional and international economies.

Some of these benefits are already evident in the region. At the same time, countries developing and implementing MLE can face similar challenges. This includes issues such as strengthening State language proficiency, supporting the efficient learning of, and in, other languages while ensuring education quality for all children, training and retaining qualified teachers, and developing appropriate curricula and materials. Given the similarities of these issues across the region, there may be ample opportunity to tackle them most effectively by pooling regional resources and fostering regional co-operation.

Building on this foundation, and with a view to further advancing regional co-operation in this field, the HCNM would like to facilitate an inter-State dialogue on multilingual education and, for that purpose, wishes to convene a ministerial roundtable.

¹ We define multilingual education broadly as the use of two or more languages in education, which may or may not include the mother tongue. When the mother tongue is the primary language of instruction, it is called mother tongue-based multilingual education. Multilingual education can include bilingual education. (following *Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education*. UNESCO, 2025)

2. Objectives

This roundtable has three specific objectives:

- 1) To facilitate a structured exchange among participating States on good practices, common questions, and opportunities in language-in-education policy, in particular on MLE;
- 2) To document positive examples from the region and related recommendations that can be shared with other OSCE participating States;
- 3) To identify concrete areas for regional co-operation on language-in-education policies, and in particular on MLE, among participating States.

3. Expected outputs

The expected outputs of this event are subject to discussion with all of the participating stakeholders but may include, among others:

- A summary document (in joint communiqué format) on regional good practices in multilingual education and regional collaboration, to be developed in consultation with the participating States attending the round table, with a view to potentially being reflected at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Lugano, Switzerland (3 - 4 December 2026);
- Concrete guidance provided to the HCNM for follow-up during bilateral and regional engagement on specific aspects of multilingual education policy and practice.

4. Expected participants:

- Ministers responsible for education, plus senior public education officials, per participating State.
- OSCE HCNM delegation.
- Interested MLE stakeholders among the international community (in particular, and to be confirmed: UNICEF, UNESCO, Global Partnership for Education, World Bank, ADB and others).
- OSCE field presences in Central Asia.
- Members of the MLE expert community.
- Representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, at the discretion of each participating State.