

## A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE ECOLOGY AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

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**Abstract.** In the late Soviet era, the domains of use of languages were largely a function of ethnic groups' status in the Soviet administrative hierarchy. Russian was at the top; below it were the eponymous languages of the non-Russian 14 "Union Republics;" all other languages were used in relatively narrow sets of domains. The "Union Republic languages" included five in Central Asia-- Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek. These languages' use in fewer domains than most other Union Republic languages profoundly affected their expansion into new domains after 1991. Two other factors affecting this primarily rooted in the Soviet era were the ethnic composition of the republics upon the USSR's collapse and their populations' language repertoires. In addition to these "Soviet heritage factors," language policy and ecology have also been shaped by each country's nation building project, its international orientation, the nature of its political system, and its economic resources. Russian today remains more widely used in high prestige domains in Central Asia than in all other former Soviet republics except Belarus. However, Russian is less used in a wide variety of domains in Central Asia than it is in "autonomous" units of the former RSFSR.

**Key words:** language, language ecology, Kazakhstan, language policy, Central Asia.

### *Introduction*

In this essay I will try to highlight some of what I see as the most important factors affecting the language ecology of Kazakhstan today. My approach will be to examine the similarities and differences between Kazakhstan and other parts of the former Soviet Union, particularly other parts of Central Asia. I will pay special attention to the balance of use of Russian and the state language of each country. I recognize, of course, that analysis of language policy and language ecology in Central Asia warrants examination outside of what might be termed "Soviet studies" or "Post-Soviet studies." Certainly, for example, the subject warrants consideration in a variety of other contexts, especially those of colonized regions. However, limiting the focus here offers an opportunity to reflect on vastly different outcomes in independent states that

shared a common heritage of governance for decades by the very centralized Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Although I will focus primarily on developments since 1991, I will begin by looking at some of the roots of today's language ecology and policy in the relatively recent past, i.e., the late Soviet era. Although, as noted above, I will primarily be examining developments in Central Asia, at times I will also refer to patterns in other former Soviet republics.

Looking back at language issues in the USSR, we can observe variations in language ecology across republics as well as within each republic. Throughout the country, however, the Russian language had a special status, among other ways in serving as the Union-wide lingua franca. The Russian language's unique position in the late Soviet era was highlighted in its description as the "second native language" of non-Russian Soviet peoples and in its role as an integral part of what Soviet authors often referred to as "patriotic upbringing" [патриотическое воспитание]. Russian was also unique in the USSR because Russians, who overwhelmingly spoke Russian as their primary language and had little knowledge of other "Soviet languages,"<sup>1</sup> were by far the most numerous ethnic group in the USSR.

The importance of Russian was also highlighted in the way Soviet ideologists referred to the "progressive" nature of the "borrowing" of words from Russian into other languages and the maintenance of Russian orthography and pronunciation in other languages. Following rejection of the linguistic theories of Nikolai Marr in the 1950s, Soviet ideologists no longer predicted the merging of languages in the foreseeable future, there was nevertheless a sense that, over time, Russian would displace other Soviet languages. In particular, I recall that when I was conducting research in Tashkent in 1976-1977, my local "research supervisor" [научный руководитель] assigned by Tashkent State University informed me that within one or two five-year plans, only one language would remain in the USSR. It required no elaboration for me to understand that Gulyam Sharipovich was referring to Russian. Although my supervisor was profoundly mistaken in his prediction, the continuing importance of Russian in much of the post-Soviet space is an indication of its critical role throughout the USSR in the Soviet era.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the CPSU conducted a policy that was called "nativization" [коренизация]. As part of this process, the Party made serious efforts to expand the domains of use of non-Russian languages in administration, even demanding that Russian and other Russian-speaking administrative personnel learn the local languages where they worked. These efforts largely ceased in the early 1930s, when language policy underwent a major shift. The change in language policy was a component of the broader revised nationality policy signaled at the CPSU 17<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1934; after this congress "Great Russian chauvinism" was no longer singled out in Party documents as the primary danger on the nationality front [1, pp. 165-210].

### *Status of Languages in the Soviet Era*

It is useful to view Soviet language policy after the early 1930s as a kind of three-level hierarchy. Following Russian in its unquestionably superior position, at the second level were languages of the ethnic groups inhabiting the USSR who were represented in the

Soviet federal political hierarchy by Union Republics (UR's). In addition to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, from 1956 until the end of the Soviet era there were 14 such republics. <sup>2</sup> Below, I will be referring to the languages of UR's simply as "UR languages. (henceforth "URL" for singular and "URLs" for plural). The bottom group in the tripart hierarchy were the eponymous languages of ethnic groups inhabiting the USSR who were represented in the Soviet system by units of a lower status and correspondingly called either "autonomous republic," "autonomous oblast" or "autonomous okrug." Below I will refer to the languages of these peoples as "tier 3 languages" (henceforth "T3Ls").

Although the domains of use of individual languages varied over time and within their "home" territories, as a rule, T3Ls were not utilized in education beyond the early grades of primary school, and their use in mass media was less than in the case of URLs [2]. During perestroika, some elites of ethnic groups speaking T3Ls expressed optimism and worked to expand the domains of use of their languages; however, for a variety of reasons, most of which lie beyond the scope of the present article, these hopes largely remained unfulfilled.

During the Soviet era, a much greater variety of literature appeared in URLs than T3Ls. Because URLs were widely used throughout primary and secondary education, many textbooks covering most curricular subjects were published in those languages. Another aspect that distinguished URLs from T3Ls is the broad-range multivolume encyclopedias published in each of the URLs.

All URLs were used extensively for publishing on subjects about the eponymous ethnic group in the humanities—literature, linguistics, folklore, history, and philosophy, as well as in the field of education. However, some URLs were used in a broader range of domains than others. Thus, for example, in the post-World War II era, higher education was available in the titular languages of the Baltic and South Caucasus republics much more than in the Central Asian languages. Even technical higher education specialties were taught in such languages as Estonian or Azerbaijani, and requisite textbooks were distributed in them; by contrast, the titular languages of Central Asia were rarely, if ever, used for this purpose, especially for teaching students beyond their first year of university or institute instruction.

With two arguable exceptions, in the post-Soviet era, all URLs have fared much better than even relatively "healthy" T3Ls. The first exception is Belarusian, which was experiencing shrinking domains in the late Soviet era; more importantly perhaps, the continued dominance of Russian in independent Belarus has been reinforced by policies pursued by Belarus's President, Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The second arguable exception, Moldovan, is vastly different. In a sense, the language has blossomed over the last 30 years, though under a different name. When, near the end of the Soviet era, Moldovan reverted to the Latin alphabet, it became virtually identical with Romanian; and today the state language in Moldova is called "Romanian." "Moldovan" as such survives only in the self-proclaimed republic of Transnistria, where it is still written with Cyrillic letters.

Except for Belarus, today the lion's share of primary and secondary education in each post-Soviet country is in the state language, and (at least on paper) pupils in schools or "streams" with other languages of instruction are obliged to study the state language. By contrast, in Russian Federation political units identified with a particular

ethnic group, Russian is the primary language of instruction, and the local language is not a mandatory subject for pupils of other ethnic groups living there, and in some cases not even for members of the titular ethnic group.

If we take the extent of use in secondary and higher education as an indicator of the vitality of Soviet languages today, we see that overall, T3Ls are much weaker than the URLs. Furthermore, among the URLs, those of Central Asia are in a weaker position vis-à-vis Russian than the state languages of Ukraine, the states of the Baltic, and south Caucasus.

I anticipate a possible objection to this statement based on grounds, say, that in Turkmenistan almost all higher education is in Turkmen, with very little in any other language. I would argue, however, that the overall quality of Turkmen-language education – in part for reasons related to language – is inferior to the quality of education in Ukrainian, not to mention education in the state languages of the Baltic and South Caucasus. Furthermore, I would argue that in the rest of Central Asia (i.e., outside Turkmenistan), students in native-language higher education “streams” nevertheless depend in one form or another on the Russian language in a way that is not the case in the other post-Soviet countries mentioned here. Even in Kazakhstan, which has been able to invest substantial resources in development of Kazakh-language textbooks, many supplementary materials used by students and instructors in “Kazakh language streams” of universities and institutes are not in Kazakh, but, rather, Russian, English, or another language. Beyond this, according to anecdotal information from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, higher education instructors often prepare their lectures by taking material off the internet in Russian or English and making their own summaries or translations into the respective state language.<sup>3</sup>

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss six other factors (beyond their Soviet era status) that relate to the language ecology in post-Soviet Central Asia. In various degrees, these factors are interdependent. Two of these factors (as in the case with status in the Soviet era), are deeply rooted in the period before the Soviet Union’s collapse. One of these two is the language repertoires of the population in the late Soviet era; the other is the ethnic composition of the individual Union Republics. In addition to these factors, I will also discuss states’ nation-building projects, their international orientation, nature of their political systems, and their economic resources.

### *Language Repertoires in the Late Soviet Era*

Unfortunately, in assessing the population’s language repertoires in the late Soviet period, one of the primary sources we must depend on – the published results of the 1989 Soviet census – is itself unreliable.<sup>4</sup> One reason for this is that many individuals claimed that their native language was the eponymous language of their reported nationality; many who made this claim in fact had very little knowledge of that language.<sup>5</sup> The data problem is particularly serious in urban areas with a multi-ethnic population, where Russian was the dominant language of many of the “native speakers” of Central Asian languages, and where therefore many of these individuals did not know much of “their own” language.

The census appears more indicative of the real situation in the case of two other sorts of data. These are 1) the share of non-titular groups in each republic who were

fluent in the republic titular group's language and 2) the share of the titular ethnic group and other non-Russians with a mastery of the Russian language.<sup>6</sup> As for the former, throughout the USSR the share of non-titulars who claimed fluency in the local titular language was low. However, In the case of Central Asia, substantial numbers of Central Asians living outside "their own" titular republic did claim to be fluent in the republic titular group's language.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, among Slavs living in the region, the share claiming fluency in the titular language was uniformly low, nowhere exceeding a few percent; the number of Slavs claiming the republic titular language as their native language was a tiny fraction of 1% everywhere in Central Asia.

Despite such data problems, we can be fairly confident that in 1989, Kazakhstan was an outlier in terms of the titular group's fluency in Russian.<sup>8</sup> According to the 1989 census, 64.2% of the Kazakh SSR's titular group claimed to be fluent in the USSR's lingual franca; analogous figures for Kyrgyzstan were 37.3%, and only 30.5%, 28.3%, and 22.7 % respectively in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

### *Ethnic Composition*

Not surprisingly, the share of Central Asian titular nationalities fluent in Russian occurred in those republics where the Slavic populations were large and the share of titulars smaller. According to the 1989 census, the share of Russians (37.8%) was almost equal to the share of Kazakhs (39.7%). In addition, populations of other Slavs (primarily Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Poles) comprised almost another 7%. Many of these individuals were linguistically Russified. Elsewhere in Central Asia, the 1989 census shows that Russians comprised over 21% of the population in Kyrgyzstan (and other Slavs almost 3% more), whereas only between 7% and 10% in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were Russians (and other Slavs in each of them accounted for something in the range of 1%).

It is worth noting that although a less dominant share of the titular nationality in individual Central Asian republics correlates with a higher level of Russian fluency, in some cases elsewhere in the former Soviet Union this relation between population composition and Russian language fluency does not hold. That is, the ethnic population ratio is just one factor, albeit an important one. Looking beyond Central Asia, it seems to account for the situations in Latvia and Estonia: in 1989 in the former, where Latvians and Russians respectively comprised 52.0% and 34.0% of the republic population, the census shows that 65.7% of ethnic Latvians were fluent in Russian as a second language and another 2.6% claimed it as their native language. As we might expect, in neighboring Estonia, where the titular ethnic group comprised a larger share of the republic's inhabitants (61.5%) and Russians a smaller share (30.3%), the census results show that fewer of the titular group were fluent in Russian as a second language (33.6%) and merely 1.0% claimed it as their native language.

However, the need to consider other factors beyond ethnic composition is illustrated by Armenia, where the Armenians comprised 93.3% of the population in 1989 and Russians a mere 1.6%; yet in Armenia, 44.3% of the titular nationality—a much larger share than in Estonia—claimed to be fluent in Russian as a second language. (Another 0.3% of Armenia's ethnic Armenians claimed Russian as their native language.)

Although, as this illustrates, demography alone does not allow us to predict language repertoires, it stands to reason that after independence, with leaders of independent countries promoting their titular languages, a growing share of the titular ethnic group would likely favor the state language. This appears to be the case in Kazakhstan. In the 30 years since attaining independence, Kazakhs have grown from less than 39.7% of the total population to about 70% today. Conversely, Russians have slipped from 37.8% to about 20%. The change has been particularly dramatic in urban areas, where in 1989 Russians comprised over half of the population, and Kazakhs just over one quarter. Although the direction of the trend has been the same throughout Central Asia, Kazakhstan still has by far the largest share of ethnic Russians in the region; even in Kyrgyzstan, Russians today account for only about 5% of the population, probably only about 2% to 3% in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and well under 1% in Tajikistan. Conversely, the titular group in the other four republics of Central Asia is larger than in Kazakhstan.<sup>9</sup>

The demographic changes just discussed have taken place as the role of the Russian language in such a privileged domain as higher education has declined and the role of the local state languages has increased everywhere. Here again, the example of Latvia provides an interesting comparison. Despite the continued large share of ethnic Russians living in Latvia, the state language there is in a much stronger position in higher education than it is in Kazakhstan [3].

### *Nature of the Nation-Building Project*

Perhaps the most important reason for this difference in the respective roles of the titular languages and Russian in Kazakhstan and Latvia has been the nature of their respective “nation building projects.” I will differentiate here between two types of “nation-building projects” that I see as opposite ends of a continuum. These two ends are the “civic” and “cultural” models. By “civic” project, I have in mind a project to create a sense of national identity in which all ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc. groups are considered and treated as equal. By the “cultural” model, I mean one in which identity is linked to the attributes of one or more groups within the population and that in some way(s) this group’s identity is privileged.<sup>10</sup>

Every post-Soviet state has articulated and promoted a nation building project somewhere on this continuum. Inasmuch as no post-Soviet state has limited citizenship only to members of a single group defined by religion, language, none is at the absolute “cultural” end of the continuum as I imagine it. Likewise, since at least in some form each post-Soviet country privileges a single ethnic group, none are at the absolute “civic” end, either. Before comparing the Central Asian nation-building projects, let me point out that at least the publicly articulated model of Kazakhstan’s project is further away from the “cultural” pole and closer to the “civic” pole than Latvia’s. Thus, upon the Soviet collapse, Latvia did not grant citizenship to non-ethnic-Latvians who could not trace their roots back to the period prior to Soviet accession. For those without a claim to immediate citizenship in Latvia, residents had to meet certain requirements, including passing a Latvian language test. In contrast, and despite the unambiguous special role for ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan’s project, upon the USSR’s collapse, Ka-

zakhstan granted citizenship to everyone living on the republic's territory, and it has never demanded knowledge of the Kazakh language for citizenship. In line with the relatively civic model, Nursultan Nazarbayev has repeatedly emphasized that Kazakhstan is the common home of all who live there, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or language. Nazarbayev also oversaw the creation of an Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan in which representation is explicitly accorded to non-Kazakhs.

Despite movement in recent years in Kazakhstan in the direction of a cultural model of nation building, Kazakhstan remains closer to the civic model than any other Central Asian country. Throughout the post-Soviet period, in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as in Kyrgyzstan during the last couple decades, the models have been closer to the "cultural" pole than Kazakhstan's. It is worth noting that the rest of the post-Soviet states (outside of Central Asia) have also followed "cultural" projects.

In turn, again except for Belarus, throughout the former Soviet states outside of Central Asia, the nation building projects have been embodied in the promotion of the titular group's language as a major symbol of the nation. The situation in Belarus, where Russian has equal status with Belarusian, but in fact dominates in most domains, appears to be part of President Lukashenko's larger but intricate unique political game with Russia.

The relatively broad civic model pursued in Kazakhstan has been reflected in its language policy, which assigns Kazakh a unique superior position, but which also allows a very large role for Russian. Yes, Kazakh is the only state language in Kazakhstan and (despite the popular belief in Kazakhstan to the contrary), Russian is *not* identified in the still valid 1995 constitution as the language of "cross-ethnic communication" [4]. Yet the leadership's deference to the Russian language in Kazakhstan has been much greater than in the rest of Central Asia with the partial exception of Kyrgyzstan. The relatively high status for Russian in Kazakhstan diminishes the unique position of the state language, a situation which such Kazakh linguistic nationalists such as Qazybek Isa have sought to change [5].

The nature of the balance between Kazakh and Russian in Kazakhstan at times seems to have been intentionally obfuscated. For example, even before Kazakhstan's independence but after Nazarbayev took the reins of power, Kazakhstan (as other Soviet republics) adopted a language law. Curiously, though, the Kazakh name of this law referred to a single language" (Тіл туралы заң [Law on Language]), while the Russian title referred to languages in the plural (Закон о языках [Law on Languages]) [6, p. 178]. Almost certainly this law was written initially in Russian, and many articles were simply copied with slight modifications from Russian versions of laws adopted in other Soviet republics.

Another example of uncomfortable compromise and confusion concerning the balance between Kazakh and Russian in Kazakhstan is the article in the 1995 Constitution (repeated in the language law adopted in 1997) which reads "In state institutions and local self-administrative bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazakh language." Due to its vagueness, even today opposing sides argue about the meaning of this formulation. The more nationalistically inclined seek to have this article removed entirely.

The “fuzziness” of Kazakhstan’s language policy and its telltale signs of being part of a civic model are evident in the fact that although Nursultan Nazarbayev at times has seemed to speak out strongly in support of Kazakh replacing Russian in high prestige domains, this support from the (now former) president and his closest political allies has not been consistent: thus, at the end of February 2018 President Nazarbayev explicitly announced that government ministers and parliamentary deputies would be obliged to speak only in Kazakh in their official work; he also said that those who did not know Kazakh would need to use simultaneous translation. However, just a few days later, Dariga Nazarbayeva, the president’s daughter and member of Kazakhstan’s senate, gave a Russian-language interview which greatly weakened what her father had said: She claimed that the president’s words had been misunderstood, and that “no one has abolished the Russian language” [7]. Subsequent to this, Kazakhstan’s lawmakers and government officials have continued often to speak in Russian publicly in their official capacities; former President Nursultan Nazarbayev himself and his successor as president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, do the same.

With the arguable exception of Kyrgyzstan, the language policies of the other Central Asian states have reflected nation building models closer to the “cultural” model than Kazakhstan’s. The legal status of Russian in Kyrgyzstan has varied over time, though today the constitution refers to it as “official.” Yet if one looks at the status of Uzbek in Kyrgyzstan, the nature of Kyrgyzstan’s nation building appears much narrower and more culturally Kyrgyz. The country’s political leaders have consistently refused to consider any special status for the Uzbek language in Kyrgyzstan’s south, where Uzbek speakers are concentrated. Moreover, the special attention to the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan can also be viewed as a kind of “defense” against Kazakh and Uzbek, languages related to Kyrgyz that could claim to play greater regional roles in Central Asia. As Kyrgyz interlocutors have at times commented to me, it is easier for Kyrgyz to view Russia as less of a threat than Kazakhs do because Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Russia, and even Russian nationalists cannot have the kind of territorial claims on Kyrgyzstan that they do on Kazakhstan.

Tajikistan’s constitution designates Russian as the “language of cross-ethnic communication,” but here, too, the foundation of national project is most clearly evident in relation to Uzbek: although few of Tajikistan’s Uzbeks have emigrated, the share of Tajikistan’s pupils in Uzbek-medium classes and schools has rapidly declined; this is very much in harmony with Tajikistan’s official historical narrative that stresses achievements of speakers of Iranian languages and denigrates those of Turkic speakers. Russian lost its status as “language of inter-ethnic communication” in Tajikistan in 2009, but this was restored in 2011 [8]. In any case, given the tiny share of Tajikistan’s population that is neither Tajik nor Uzbek, and the strong campaign to “Tajikify” the country’s Uzbeks, the reference to Russian as “cross-ethnic” should not be understood as a sign of a broad nation-building project.

Russian has never been mentioned in Uzbekistan’s constitution, though there were public proposals by some prominent Uzbeks officially to make Russian the “language of cross-ethnic communication” in 2019 [9]. The proposal, however, received a cold reception and appears to have been rejected. In any case, Uzbekistan’s nation building model is a narrowly based one, emphasizing the central place of ethnic Uzbeks and



their culture over others. In important ways, Uzbekistan's historical narrative today is the mirror image of Tajikistan's, downplaying the role of speakers of Iranian languages over the centuries. At the heart of the Uzbek project is Timur (Tamerlane), who is portrayed as an Uzbek. With Tashkent's encouragement, the Tajik language has been in sharp decline in Uzbekistan, most markedly in Bukhara and Samarkand; there has also been pressure on the Kazakh language in Uzbekistan, which has stimulated emigration of many of the country's Kazakhs to Kazakhstan.

Turkmenistan has unquestionably adhered to the nation building project in the region that is closest to the "cultural" pole, and this is evident in its language policy. Unlike all other Central Asian countries, which maintain some schools in state languages of their Central Asian neighbors, no such schools or classes exist in Turkmenistan. Furthermore, the number of middle schools and classes with Russian-medium instruction has been sharply curtailed.

### *International Orientation*

Both in Central Asia and other post-Soviet countries, each country's nation building projects have gone hand in hand with the respective country's international alignments, particularly the nature of relations with Russia. Thus, overall, the decline of the Russian language has been most precipitous in those post-Soviet countries that have distanced themselves most from Russia-- the Baltic states, Georgia, and (since 1994) Ukraine. In line with this, these countries account for five of the nine states included in the list of nine "unfriendly" states recently identified in Russia's mass media. (The other four were the USA, United Kingdom, Poland, and the Czech Republic [10]. Although international political alignment is only a secondary factor, it is logical that Belarus, the only post-Soviet state where Russian has equal status with the titular language, also has had the closest political relations with Russia,

Despite the large number of native Russian speakers in Ukraine (including among ethnic Ukrainians), the status of the Russian language in Ukraine (especially the efforts of Ukraine's leadership to promote Russian's decline) has been a major irritant in Russian-Ukrainian relations. Indeed, as Russia's incorporation of Crimea and support for rebels in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have aggravated bilateral ties, Ukraine has intensified linguistic Ukrainization.

While looking for links between language policies and international alignments, of the Central Asian states, it is worth keeping in mind that Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country that has land borders with Russia; this reinforces the various political, economic, and cultural ties between Kazakhstan and Russia and has to some extent constrained Kazakhstan's international orientation. Despite some recent policy differences (e.g., Kazakhstan's refusal to recognize Russia's incorporation of Crimea), Kazakhstan is arguably Russia's closest ally. Russia's other very close ally in the region is Kyrgyzstan. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although Tajikistan is a member of the CSTO, it is not in the EAEU. Despite the exodus of Tajikistan's Russians and other native Russian speakers, the Russian language continues to play an important role there. One of the reasons for this is the lack of employment

opportunities in Tajikistan: the remittances from these labor migrants constitutes a large share of Tajikistan's GDP. The funds earned by labor migrants also appear to be a major reason for support of the Russian language in Uzbekistan which, however, as Central Asia's most populous country has been careful not to ally itself with Russia as closely as Tajikistan has: Uzbekistan only recently accepted observer status in the EAEU, and, although it was once a member of the CSTO, it withdrew.

Although Uzbekistan has been far less politically aligned with Russia than Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, within the Central Asian region, it is Turkmenistan that has kept the greatest political distance from Russia. Turkmenistan, which proudly touts its "neutrality," has never joined the EAEU or CSTO and, in fact, is not formally even a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States. It is not surprising, then, that Turkmenistan has done less to support the Russian language in Central Asia than any other state in the region. At one point during the presidency of Sapamurat Niyazov, the Russian language ceased even to be taught as a mandatory subject in secondary schools and most books relating to the teaching of Russian were destroyed [11,12]. Beginning in 2008 the Russian State Institute of Oil and Gas named after I. M. Gubkin offered Russian-medium instruction in its Ashgabat branch, but Turkmenistan unilaterally closed this institution in 2012; its instructors from Russia returned home, and the institution's students and local instructors were transferred to the newly created Turkmen State Oil and Gas Institute [19]<sup>11</sup> To the best of my knowledge, there are currently no higher educational institutions in Turkmenistan offering higher education in Russian.

### *Nature of Political System*

In principle, governments can allow language processes to develop on their own with relatively little state intervention. However, as described above, outside of Belarus, the governments of all post-Soviet states have devoted considerable attention to promotion of their own respective countries' titular languages as part of their nation building projects. That said, the nature of the political systems that engaged in language planning has varied greatly across the former Soviet states. Some of the countries have moved much further in the direction of democratic governance than others. If we take the 2021 Freedom House 7-point rating scale of "national democratic governance" as a shorthand indicator of democratization, we see, for example, that the Baltic countries received ratings ranging between 5.5 and 6.0, whereas Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had ratings of 1.0, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had ratings of 1.25 [13]. Thus, by this indicator Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are a bit more democratic than the other three Central Asian countries but have not moved as far as the Baltic states from the authoritarian Soviet legacy.

Influential commentators in Russia have been particularly critical of what they claim are violations of ethnic Russians' linguistic rights in the Baltic. However, despite such censure, the ratings cited above suggest that policy decisions in the Baltic states (including those on language), have been reached through a much more open political process than in Central Asia. Furthermore, the states in the Baltic have responded to pressures from international organizations to respect language rights of minorities [14, pp. 217-218].

Despite the very modest progress towards democratization in Central Asia, the level of popular input into language policy decisions reflects the operation of the political systems in the region. In particular, the public debates on language status issues have been much more open and robust in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan than in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; such debate in Turkmenistan appears to be absent entirely.

One of the clearest examples of public opinion affecting language decisions in Kazakhstan involves the policy of “trilingualism” as rolled out under the direction of Yerlan Sagadiyev, Minister of Education and Science between February 2016 and February 2019. Although the policy was associated with this particular minister, President Nazarbayev also enthusiastically endorsed it [15].

“Trilingualism” as a policy to ensure that all of Kazakhstan’s school pupils study Kazakh, Russian, and English remains official policy in Kazakhstan today, but a key feature of the policy on Sagadiyev’s watch, namely the teaching of four subjects in English in the last two years of secondary school, was abandoned soon after Sagadiyev left office. According to the Trilingualism policy in the “Sagadiyev era,” biology, chemistry, physics, and computer science were to be taught in English in all Kazakhstan secondary schools, regardless of a school’s primary language of instruction. Despite endorsement by President Nazarbayev, this policy received a hostile reception from a large number of parents, teachers, educational administrators, and prominent public figures. Although initially piloted in a limited number of schools in Astana, it was envisioned to expand this initiative to *all schools* in the country within a few years. Proponents of the policy claimed that teaching content subjects in English had proven successful in a limited number of schools, and that all that had to be done was to expand it to the rest of the country. Among other things, however, the supporters failed to consider that the conditions in the elite schools which already had experience teaching in three languages were vastly different from most schools in the country: unlike the “average schools” or very weak rural schools, the pupils in elite schools were more motivated and came from families that provided better living conditions; furthermore, the elite schools’ facilities were better, and their teachers better trained and paid. The plan to begin teaching the hard sciences and computer science in English was particularly unrealistic because subject teachers—even those with no previous English language skills—were supposed to learn enough English in relatively short intensive language courses to be comfortable teaching their specialty subject in English.

Objectively, the country was nowhere near being prepared for this. Among the fundamental problems discussed in the press were the inadequate level of English skills of both teachers and students, parents’ dissatisfaction because of their inability to help their children who would be taking classes in English, and the lack of textbooks. Although this program was to include teaching certain subjects even in Russian-medium schools and Russian groups in “mixed schools” in the Kazakh language (e.g., History of Kazakhstan, Kazakh Literature), the strongest opposition to Sagadiyev’s program was framed in the context of undermining the next generation’s Kazakh-language skills through displacement by English [16].

There is, of course, no way to prove that the policy was eventually rejected due to articulated negative popular sentiment. However, following Sagadiyev’s removal in February 2019, the trilingual policy in the form he promoted was abandoned. Perhaps

a grass roots campaign leading to a rejection of an unpopular language policy in one of the Baltic states or most other EU countries would not be so unusual. However, by Central Asian standards it is quite rare; furthermore, this kind of process would have been unimaginable in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, let alone Turkmenistan.

### *Economic Resources*

Language policy implementation often requires substantial financial resources, especially when it involves change. Funds may be needed, for example, to support language instruction, retrain personnel in such fields as mass media and education, to reprint texts, change signage, etc. Beyond this, in some cases policy implementation may first require corpus development such as development of a standardized terminology. Because during the Soviet era Central Asian languages were used in fewer domains than most URLs, this is complex and expensive; and the opportunities for unanticipated financial and other costs to arise are many, e.g., when precision is lost because multiple terms are used for the same concept, and when it is necessary to republish materials that contain mistakes because editors have not followed rapidly changing rules.

The economic resources required for implementing language change vary greatly across the Central Asian states. This is evident, for example, in the range of per capita purchasing power (PCPP) in the individual countries.<sup>12</sup> In 2017, the latest year for which World Bank data are currently available, Kazakhstan's PCPP approached \$27,000. This was far higher than for any other country in the region: even in gas-rich Turkmenistan the analogous figure was around \$16,000; the figures for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were much lower still—over \$7,000 for Uzbekistan, just under \$5,000 for Kyrgyzstan, and under \$4,000 for Tajikistan [17].

Of course, having greater financial resources and even spending them does not mean that they are spent effectively, let alone efficiently; furthermore, results in real life do not necessarily conform to what is intended. For example, although Kazakhstan has funded teaching of Kazakh language in all schools and groups with Russian and “other” (i.e., non-Kazakh) languages of instruction, the results have generally been quite poor.

Kazakhstan has devoted large sums to the development of terminology and publication of specialized dictionaries to promote officially approved terminology and other lexical items. The government has also funded publication of many Kazakh-language textbooks, including for higher education in a wide array of disciplines. Yet the Kazakh press is replete with criticism of the choice of officially adopted terms and textbook authors' failure to use them, as well as other issues concerning textbooks published in Kazakh. Despite these problems, Kazakhstan's relative wealth has allowed it to support state language development more amply than has been possible in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan. It is especially hard to imagine the governments of poorer and less populous Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan investing the scale of resources that Kazakhstan has been able to afford. For that matter, the relatively slow development and standardization of terminology in Uzbekistan and the extremely extended process of Uzbek's Latinization appear to be at least partly a function of the regime's failure to direct scarce financial resources to resolution of language issues.

### *Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?*

Against the background of other languages of peoples of the USSR, we can view the situation of Kazakh today either as a glass that is half empty, or one that is half full. As illustrated above, the roots of this “half full/ half empty” characterization extend back to the Soviet era. Of course, Kazakh never attained the status of Russian in the USSR, and as described above, Kazakh and other Central Asian languages were used in a more limited range of domains than most other URLs. In addition, Kazakh was displaced by Russian more than the titular languages in the other Central Asian republics, in part because of the Kazakh SSR’s very large Slavic population; this in turn contributed to Kazakhs in the republic learning Russian, and the displacement of the Kazakh language by Russian, especially in urban areas.

On the other hand, because Kazakh was a URL its status in the Soviet era was higher and its development greater than the T3Ls. Even more important, however, because Kazakh was a URL, upon the Soviet Union’s collapse, Kazakh became the state language of an independent country. Thanks to this and to demographic change, Kazakh today is in a vastly stronger position than T3Ls such as Tatar, Bashkir, Chuvash, or Chechen, not to mention others that are critically endangered.

If Kazakhstan’s leaders had wanted to and been successful in establishing the kind of authoritarian system that prevailed in Turkmenistan, and if the regime made a determined effort to alter the country’s language ecology, it might have been able at some point to afford large investments in areas related to language and achieved greater changes. However, Kazakhstan’s greater prosperity was largely thanks to increased oil production and high prices; yet oil production did not “take off” until the very end of the 1990s [18]. Thus, during the early period of independence it would have been very difficult to place such a high priority on expensive language reform and development.

Nationalistically minded Kazakhs have consistently supported increasing Kazakhization of the country’s language landscape. Even after the turn of the century, when Kazakhstan was in a more favorable economic position, President Nazarbayev did not support unambiguous policies promoting displacement of Russian by Kazakh. Rather, his language policy, with its continued support for Russian, has generally remained rooted in the civic model of nation building pursued under his leadership. The sustained support for Russian has also been in harmony with Nazarbayev’s close international alliance with Russia. Social, demographic, and other developments inside Kazakhstan have resulted in changes over time, but for the most part even today the policies articulated by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev regarding the model of nation building and foreign policy orientation have not deviated from those developed during the early years of Nazarbayev’s presidency.

Today the governments of all post-Soviet states, even the most authoritarian, claim to protect the rights of all ethnic and linguistic groups living within their borders. Putting aside the degree to which such claims conform to reality, it must be recognized that the nature of the national project is very different in a country like Kazakhstan or Latvia than it is in a state like Azerbaijan or Armenia. Demography is undoubtedly part of the explanation for the differences. In Kazakhstan and Latvia, minorities comprise in the range of 30% to 40% of the population; equally important, there is a single very large

ethnic minority in both (Russians), accounting for roughly 20 % of the population in Kazakhstan and 25% in Latvia. Furthermore, Russian is the state language in Russia, the powerful neighbor that borders both Latvia and Kazakhstan. In contrast, minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan and Armenia comprise under 8% and under 3%, respectively of their populations. Furthermore, there is no single ethnic group in Azerbaijan accounting for more than about 2% of the population, and in Armenia no single ethnic minority comprises even 1%. Beyond these differences is the fact that a sizeable share of the titulars in Latvia and Kazakhstan speak both the state language and Russian, the language of the largest minority. This is certainly not the case in Armenia or Azerbaijan, where we can presume that only a very small number of the titulars know any language of a local ethnic minority. Consequently, it is understandable that whereas language nationalists in a country like Latvia or Kazakhstan might perceive Russian as a threat to the state language; it is hard even to imagine Azerbaijanis or Armenians in their “home” republics perceiving a threat from the language of a minority in their country.

As described above, following the USSR’s collapse, Latvia was much more prepared than Kazakhstan to shift to the state language in a wide variety of domains. The shift to Kazakh has been much slower, and the long-term role of Russian in Kazakhstan is still hard to predict. Kazakh has become a part of the repertoire of most of the country’s population. As a result, today, a substantial share of the country’s young specialists with higher or specialized secondary education are prepared to conduct much of their professional life in Kazakh, and this share is increasing every year. Furthermore, another major change in the country’s language ecology is that much of the population is able to use other languages (especially English), and that these languages have begun to be used in elite domain roles that in the Soviet era were the exclusive domain of Russian. At least for the next few decades Russian will undoubtedly continue to play an important role in Kazakhstan. However, the uncertainty of political, economic, social, and cultural processes further in the future make it difficult to predict the balance of Kazakh, Russian, and English in Kazakhstan’s linguistic ecology.

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### *Notes*

1 Although the term “Soviet languages” is clumsy and inexact, I cannot find a better concise term to refer to the eponymous languages of all ethnic groups inhabiting the USSR.

2 This reflected the incorporation of new territories during World War II and the corresponding administrative changes. The last change in this regard was the 1956 “demotion” of the Karelo-Finnish SSR (created in 1940 after the Soviet-Finnish War) and its absorption into the Russian SFSR.

3 Beyond this, the lectures in the state languages may contain many Russian terms and other words, or else still unstandardized “Kyrgyz,” “Tajik,” or “Uzbek” equivalents, frequently calques from Russian.

4 Except where otherwise indicated, all census data used below are drawn from Переписи населения...

5 The census results provide virtually no other useful data allowing us to determine the share of “X” ethnic group whose linguistic repertoires included “X” language. The only marginally useful data about this are those related to the small number of titular group respondents who claimed that their native language was not the eponymous language, but knew it as a second language.

6 Although these data are the best indicators we have, they are also problematic. Perhaps the best illustration of this are the responses for fluency in Russian as a second language by members of the titular group in Uzbekistan over the three censuses of 1970, 1979, and 1989: Although the 1970 census results purported that only 13.1% of Uzbekistan’s Uzbeks were fluent in Russian as a second language, the analogous results from the census nine years later were an astounding 52.9%, and then in 1989, the reported result was only 22.3%.

7 Thus, for example, approximately 30% of respondents in Uzbekistan who claimed Turkmen nationality claimed to be either native Uzbek speakers (7%) or fluent in Uzbek as a second language (23%).

8 The data used here for Russian fluency include both the very small number of Central Asians who claimed Russian as a native language or fluency in Russian as a second language.

9 No reliable comparable data exist for recent ethnic composition of Central Asian states. For lack of a better alternative, I present the data in the CIA World Fact Book. According to this source, the estimates for titular share of the total population are 73.5% in Kyrgyzstan (2019 est.), 84.3% in Tajikistan (2014 est.), 85 % in Turkmenistan (2003 est.), and 83.8 % in Uzbekistan (2017 est.). The 2019 estimate provided by World Fact Book for Kazakhstan is 68 %.

10 The basis for privilege in a particular society may change over time, and proclaimed policy may not in fact coincide with practice. I do not intend to single out the Central Asian countries for criticism on this account. I am well aware that in the United States, which prides itself in providing equal rights for all, the debates continue on questions of privilege based on identity of specific groups defined by language, religion, race, and other factors.

11 This information was confirmed by a personal communication from an individual in Turkmenistan who wishes to remain anonymous.

12 There are, of course, problems with using a single indicator of wealth like PCPP to compare costs of language policy implementation across countries. Thus, for example, many of those employed in implementing policy in poorer countries earn lower salaries than in the richer countries; and consequently, the same amount of money for a given objective might stretch considerably further in a poorer country. Regardless of problems of this nature, the scale of difference between Kazakhstan's PCPP and those of the three poorest countries is very large.

### **Уильям Фиерман**

#### **Посткеңестік Орталық Азиядағы тіл экологиясы мен тіл саясатын салыстырмалы талдау**

*Аңдатпа.* Кейінгі кеңестік дәуірде тілдерді қолдану салалары кеңестік әкімшілік құрылымдағы этникалық топтардың мәртебесіне байланысты болды. Орыс тілі жоғарғы үстемдікке ие болса, құрылымы бойынша қалған орыс емес 14 "Одақтас Республикалардың" бір атаулы тілдері кейінгі орында тұрды және осы тілдер салыстырмалы түрде тар шеңберде қолданылды. "Одақтас Республиканың Тілдері" бес тілді - қазақ, қырғыз, тәжік, түрікмен және өзбек тілдерін қамтыды. Бұл тілдерді одақтас республикалардың басқа тілдеріне қарағанда аз алаларда қолданылуы, 1991 жылдан кейін пайда болған жаңа салаларда таралуына қатты әсер етті. Осы мәселеге қатысты тағы екі фактор, ең алдымен, Кеңес дәуірінде пайда болған, КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін республикалардың этникалық құрамы мен жергілікті тұрғындарының тілдік репертуары. Осыған қоса, "кеңестік мұраның факторлары" бар, тіл саясаты мен экологиясы әр елдің ұлттық құрылыс жобасымен, оның халықаралық бағдарымен, саяси жүйесінің сипатымен және экономикалық қорларымен қалыптасты. Бүгінгі таңда орыс тілі Беларусьты қоспағанда, бұрынғы кеңестік республикаларға қарағанда Орталық Азияның беделді аймақтарында кеңінен қолданылады. Алайда, орыс тілі бұрынғы РКФСР құрамында болған "автономды" бірліктеріне қарағанда, Орталық Азияның әртүрлі аймақтарында аз қолданылады.

*Түйін сөздер:* тіл, тіл экологиясы, Қазақстан, тіл саясаты, Орталық Азия.

### **Уильям Фиерман**

#### **Сравнительный анализ языковой экологии и языковой политики в постсоветской Центральной Азии**

*Аннотация.* В позднесоветскую эпоху сферы использования языков в значительной степени зависели от статуса этнических групп в советской административной иерархии. Русский язык был наверху; под ним были одноименные языки нерусских 14 "Союзных Республик"; все остальные языки использовались в относительно узком наборе областей. "Языки Союзных Республик" включали пять языков в Центральной Азии - казахский, кыргызский, таджикский, туркменский и узбекский. Использование этих языков в меньшем количестве областей, чем большинство других языков Союзных Республик, глубоко повлияло на их распространение в новых областях после 1991 года. Двумя другими факторами, влияющими на это, в первую очередь, коренящимися в советской эпохе, были этнический состав республик после распада СССР и языковой репертуар их населения. В дополнение к этим "факторам советского наследия" языковая политика и экология также были сформированы проектом национального строительства каждой страны, ее международной ориентацией, характером ее политической системы и ее экономическими ресурсами. Сегодня русский язык по-прежнему более широко используется в престижных доменах в Центральной Азии, чем во всех других бывших советских республиках, за исключением Беларуси. Однако русский язык в меньшей степени используется в самых разных областях Центральной Азии, чем в "автономных" единицах бывшей РСФСР.

*Ключевые слова:* язык, языковая экология, Казахстан, языковая политика, Центральная Азия.