



NATION-BUILDING IN CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH LANGUAGE LEGISLATION

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Abstract

In the short space of one year, from July 1989 to May 1990, all five Central Asian republics passed legislation making the national languages state languages and Russian the language of inter-ethnic communication. This was preceded in the Soviet period by frequent discussions and complaints in the republican press over the deplorable state of the national languages – one of the few politically acceptable expressions of national self-identity at that time. This paper will examine the significance of language legislation to the nation-building process in Central Asia as an important factor in the moves of these republics towards sovereignty and finally independence from the center and in asserting national awareness among the people.

Keywords: inter-ethnic communication, nation-building, titular languages, minority languages, national self-identity, national awareness.

Introduction

I was employed at RFE/RL during the Cold War. One of my duties was to monitor the native-language press of the five Central Asian states to which we broadcast. A theme that was often repeated in the press was respect for the mother language. Article after article complained that the titular languages were being neglected because of the overwhelming attention given to Russian – the language of the empire. There were complaints about the high infiltration of Russian lexemes and phrases into everyday speech of the non-Russian populations to the extent of becoming a real threat to the integrity of the titular languages. There were also complaints that parents were not teaching the native languages to their children.

However, later this situation changed somewhat. Feeling the need to establish their sovereignty preceding independence, language policy makers in the post-Soviet states pushed for language legislation that would make the titular languages official languages with obligatory language education.

Language Legislation

In general two models of language planning have been followed in post-Soviet space: nation building and language diversity. The nation-building model regards the essential role

of language planning as that of promoting statewide linguistic convergence - that is, giving the titular or national language official status at the expense of the minority languages; whereas the language diversity model supports the minority languages oftentimes at the expense of the titular language. In many cases nation building has been abandoned in place of language diversity.

But the adoption of an official language in which the economy and the state function can lead to the social and political exclusion of those who speak other languages. This has led some policy makers to question the nation-building model as a major source of conflict affecting the stability of numerous political entities around the world. Serious problems arise when the state attempts to eradicate all linguistic differences for the purpose of imposing the language of the majority on the minority. Language then becomes a factor of division rather than unification. In states that promote linguistic homogenization, speakers of minority languages often find themselves excluded from many economic activities, as these are made available only in the language of the majority. Gellner argues that wealth and economic opportunities are more available if one speaks the language of the majority. (Gellner, E, 1997).

In Turkey the nation-building model was followed in the formative years of the republic; many felt then that the language diversity model that was followed in the Ottoman Empire could pose a threat to social cohesion and national unity, having realized that the nineteenth century minority uprisings had contributed to the disintegration of the Empire. Turkish policy makers, heavily influenced by the memory of these nationalist conflicts, reversed the Ottomans' diversity-preserving model by adopting official mono-lingualism or the nation-building model in the name of "national unity and indivisibility." In this period the Turkish language became an essential component in the creation of the new Turkish identity.

One of the challenges that the Turkish nation-building project faced was the diverse number of languages spoken throughout the nation. There was a widespread fear that the linguistic diversity would constitute a threat to the formation of national identity. Several campaigns were initiated to promote the use of Turkish and to encourage greater use of the Turkish language.

This resulted in the language reform movement initiated by the Kamalists. Geoffrey Lewis calls the reform "a catastrophic success." "What gives the success of the language reform its catastrophic aspect is not just the loss of Ottoman Turkish, but also the loss of its natural development, the Turkish of the 1920s and 1930s, the language of Halide Edip Adivar, Sabahattin Ali, Yakup Kadri Karaomanoglu, and Reşat Nuri Güntekin." (Lewis, G., 2002: p. 3). This has

resulted in the loss of thousands of Arabic and Persian borrowings that had long been a part of the language.

The most significant law of this period was the Language Ban Act of 1983, which prescribed the banning of languages other than the mother tongue of Turkish citizens in public places. Then in 1991 President Turgut Ozal enacted a bill which abolished the Language Ban Act, thus re-introducing an era of language diversity. Later under Erdoğan, the AKP government took more positive steps, especially in regards to the status of the Kurdish language. Erdoğan claimed that the twenty-first century had opened “a new democratic era” for the Kurds. Lewis concludes from all this that the steps taken by Ozal and Erdoğan towards the diversity model were taken in the right direction. Adopting a strictly monolingual language policy, Lewis writes, could have been “a recipe for ethnic conflict.”

In Europe there were three factors that contributed to the adoption of the diversity-preserving model: 1. heightened sensitivity to language and increasing concern about language death (Crystal, D, 2002). 2. ethno-linguistic conflicts in Eastern Europe; 3. ethno-linguistic conflicts within the European countries themselves.

In December 1948, after the atrocities committed during World War II, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although the Declaration did not specifically address the issue of minority language rights, Article 2(1) nevertheless stated, “every one is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as...language.”

On March 19–20, 2015, a conference on the Russian language was held in the city of Stavropol. Like almost all conferences on language issues, it was quite politicized. While Russian officials pushed for Russia’s status as the country’s state language, the North Caucasian participants, especially those from Dagestan, emphasized that neglect of the minority languages could be “potentially explosive and needed to be treated with care.” Activists in the North Caucasus are increasingly sounding the alarm that Moscow’s nation-building policies are resulting in the further degradation of their languages, despite declarations of support for native languages of the region.

Several years ago, the United Nations agency for science, education and cultural advancement, UNESCO, warned that Circassian, Karachai-Balkar, Ossetian, Ingush, Chechen and other languages in the North Caucasus are in danger of extinction. Researchers listed 25 languages in Dagestan and pointed out that only 14 are officially taught in republican schools.

The indigenous languages of the North Caucasus are often proclaimed as “state languages” in the republics, but they practically never play such a role in reality. Earlier,

Moscow cut the hours for state TV and radio programs in national languages, calling this a step in the “optimization” of their structures. Now these same proposals are being rolled out in regard to schools, where the number of Russian language hours is increasing at the expense of the minority languages.

The language issue appears increasingly important not only in the North Caucasus but in other minority-populated areas of the Russian Federation. In Tatarstan, Tatar-language instruction has been cut back not only in schools but in university Tatar-language departments as well, as the newly created Federal University of Kazan took shape.

In Central Asia political elites were frequently divided between those who perceived language homogeneity as crucial for nation-building and those who thought it more advantageous to preserve language heterogeneity, whether this included Russian or one or more ethnic minorities’ languages in each of the five states. While they often felt that states had no choice but to single out a language as the lingua franca for its institutions to function properly at the same time they could see that the implications on other languages spoken within the boundaries of the same state could be disastrous. Therefore, they started to see a need to accommodate the needs of the linguistically diverse communities within the boundaries of the state so as to avoid any possibility of ethnic conflict. Such challenges and conflicts gradually contributed to widening support of the diversity-preserving model.

In any case, the declaration of state languages by the Central Asian republics was seen as an important factor in their moves towards sovereignty and finally independence from the center. In the short space of one year, from July 1989 to May 1990, all five Central Asian republics passed legislation making the national languages state languages and Russian the language of inter-ethnic communication. In the case of Turkmenistan, in addition to becoming the state language, Turkmen became the language of inter-ethnic relations along with Turkmen.

Many Russians particularly in Uzbekistan, felt that their former status was being seriously eroded even though in most cases they were speakers of the language of interethnic cooperation. One of their worries was that their language was now occupying a second-rate position, since the titular languages now enjoyed an official preference. As a result many Russians emigrated, chiefly in the 1990s, to the Russian Federation or to other states with large Slav communities, mainly for “economic reasons.”

In passing language legislation, Central Asian officials seem to have selected the nation-building model, arguing that legislation elevating the national language to the status of a state or administrative language is an important element of national cohesion and international relations, no matter how small the number of actual users or how recent the

literary language. For example, the Iranized, unharmonized Tashkent Uzbek dialect, which for political reasons became the official language base and now the state language of Uzbekistan, has been important for the current concept of Uzbekistan, even though the harmonized traditional Kypchak-Uzbek dialects of southern Uzbekistan had contributed more to the historical identity of the Uzbeks.

Issues of the preservation of national languages and their elevation to state languages were and even now closely associated with alphabets and terminology. Recognizing in many instances that their Cyrillic-based alphabets were inadequate for representing all of the phonemes of their languages, a number of Central Asian intellectuals recommended in the early days of independence that their traditional alphabets in Latin, and even Arabic be returned, or at least that the people be given the opportunity to learn these alphabets. In some cases, these recommendations resulted in politically based conflicts. For example, the recommendations that Kazan Tatar change to the Latin script led to political conflicts with Moscow.

On 22 July 1989, Tajikistan became the first of the Central Asian republics to proclaim Tajik as the national language of the republic the official language with Russian as the language of international relations. The law went into effect on 1 January 1990 despite fears among members of the language commission that the adoption of a law making Tajik the state language would result in an outflow of the Russian population from the republic.

Unlike the language laws of other Central Asian republics, Tajikistan enacted essentially all the articles of its language law immediately following its passage. But this haste in enacting the Tajik language law was met with indignation by the non-Tajik language speakers in the republic who demanded that the obligatory use of Tajik be introduced gradually. The outflow of skilled workers that been happening raised fears over an unfavorable shift in the labor force of the republic.

Again realizing that a strictly nation-building model could foment ethnic tensions, articles enacted on the same date in 1990, in an effort towards language diversity, were set for the “free” development, use and preservation of the Pamir languages in the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast. This oblast had the freedom in deciding its own language issues; and for the enactment of articles defining the legal status of the use of Tajik, Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and other languages of the republic and guaranteeing citizens the right to choose their own language in communicating with organs of state power and administration, enterprises, and institutions.

Soon after the passage of the Tajik language law, a commission was formed to investigate terminology being used and to recommend Tajik equivalents for Russian and other “international”

terms. Members of the commission were of the view that Iranian Persian could serve as a source of terms needed in Soviet Tajik for Russian and other foreign scientific, political, and economic terms for which Tajik had no equivalents. Others thought this might lead to an Iranian Persian contamination of Soviet Tajik.

Other Central Asian republics had similar issues with respect to their state language laws. In Kazakhstan their language law making Kazakh the state language was passed on 22 September 1989. The Kazakh law emphasized the role of the Russian language in the republic, perhaps in an attempt to make concessions to the large Russian population of the republic and to prevent as much negative reaction from them as possible. Nevertheless, it may have been the enactment of the law that precipitated the subsequent large out-migration of Russians from the republic.

The Kazakh language law and the project that accompanied it calling for the development of Kazakh and other languages of the republic were not only enacted to support state sovereignty, but in response to alarm raised over the state of the Kazakh language in the republic. A member of the Kazakh SSR Presidential Council, Mirzatay Joldasbekov, observed that many members of the Kazakh elite were not using Kazakh as a mother tongue. It was claimed that around 40% of the population of Kazakhstan is unable to speak their mother tongue. This was a trend that was regarded as potentially resulting in the extinction of the Kazakh language. Joldasbekov also stressed that people cannot be blamed for their lack of expertise in Kazakh because he said that many fell prey to the idea that Russian was essential in order to pursue a career in the Soviet Union. Subsequent discussions resulted in mandatory Kazakh language acquisition in the republic.

In October 1989, just after the Kazakh Supreme Soviet adopted the language law, the Kazakh Language Association was founded. The purpose of the Association was to help facilitate the enactment of the language law, particularly in respect to the Kazakh language by “preserving and refining” its use, increasing the teaching of Kazakh in the republic’s schools, and broadening the use of Kazakh in books and in the media. The officially recognized Kazakh Language Association was at that time one of the most popular societies in Kazakhstan with a membership of nearly one million, with its own weekly called *Anatili*.

On May 6, 1991 a further step was taken in Kazakhstan to consolidate the language law requiring citizens to uphold the sovereignty of the republic, accept its present borders, and actively participate in the use of its state language in public life.

On 23 September 1989, the Kyrgyz SSR passed a law proclaiming Kyrgyz the state language of Kyrgyzstan and a “symbol of independence of the Kyrgyz SSR” and Russian the

language of interethnic communication. The law was implemented as a result of the “harm the Kyrgyz language suffered from the Leninist policies throughout the years” and the necessity of both preserving the language and increasing its role in public life. It was emphasized in the preamble to the law that the situation of the Russian language in the republic would not be harmed through the implementation of the law, “nor would it harm neither the Kyrgyz nor those who do not speak Kyrgyz.”

In addition to increasing the role of Kyrgyz, the law emphasized that the situation of the other languages of other nations living in Kyrgyzstan would “be improved.” Schools that earlier taught only in Russian would henceforward be required to teach in Kyrgyz as well. In areas where other nationalities lived (Uzbeks, Tajiks, Germans, Dungans, Uighurs) more schools that taught in these languages would be established. Scientists working in the republic could choose either Kyrgyz or Russian in carrying out their research.

Unlike the Kazakh language law, the Kyrgyz law included a paragraph calling on schools and other educational institutions to provide instruction in the earlier Kyrgyz alphabets that were based on the Latin and Arabic scripts, in an obvious effort to help students learn more about Kyrgyz history and traditions by being able to read earlier documents.

Unlike the Kazakh law which placed Kazakh and Russian almost on the same level with no reference to a schedule for Russian, the Kyrgyz language law stipulated that the use of Russian in official transactions would be phased out by 1999 in favor of the state language. Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, which also had a large Slav population of 30% at that time, did not consider it necessary to make concessions to the Russians.

In contrast to the situation of the language law in Kazakhstan, where articles complaining about and in support of the language law were only sporadic, the Kyrgyz press abounded with articles discussing their language law, both before and after its passage.

Seven months after the enactment of the language law, prominent specialists on the Kyrgyz language complained about the extent Kyrgyz in the villages had become contaminated with Russian vocabulary. Even Kyrgyz in the villages, they observed, use “five words in Kyrgyz and five words in Russian as they speak.” However, a later commission reported in May 1990 that several districts in Bishkek had opened Kyrgyz-language schools and special classes for Kyrgyz-language instruction had been introduced in other schools. The one problem remaining was the lack of qualified teachers; teachers with qualifications could not live in Bishkek because of a shortage of housing.

In Uzbekistan the passage of the language law was preceded by controversy and intense discussions on a scale exceeding debates surrounding language law in other Central

Asian republics. In April 1989 the Birlik popular front organized a demonstration in Tashkent calling for official recognition of the Uzbek language. On 21 October of that year the Supreme Soviet of the republic passed the law making Uzbek the state language and “ensuring free and equal use of the Russian language as a language of interethnic communication. The final version of the law did not place Russian on the same level as that of the state language. This may have been due to pressure from the Uzbek Writers’ Union which met on 12 July in Tashkent and rejected the “bilingualism” of the bill as being incompatible with their insistence that the dominant language must be Russian. Concessions were made in the Uzbek language law to the development of other languages of the republic, in addition to Uzbek, Russian and Karakalpak, (Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen) in offices and schools.

As with the other Central Asian language laws, the Uzbek Supreme Soviet set a schedule for enacting the various articles of the Uzbek language law, namely, to go into force eight years following the passage of the law. Then on 24 October 1989, the same day it published the final version of the Uzbek law on language, the Presidium of the Uzbek Supreme Soviet passed a decree which amended the Constitution of the Uzbek SSR with a paragraph proclaiming Uzbek to be the state language of the republic (with no mention of the Karakalpak ASSR), Russian to be the language of inter-ethnic communication, and the freedom to choose either of the above two or any other language spoken in Uzbekistan.

The 1995 revised version of that law further entrenched the hegemony of the Uzbek language within the state yet postponed the deadline for the full use of the state language in state functions until September 2005, when full conversion to a Latin-based script was scheduled. Uzbekistan's Russian and Tajik minorities failed to react in cohesive ways to this and other legislation, although a considerable number of ethnic Russians permanently migrated to Russia from 1989 to 1996. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians, Tatars, Belarusians, Germans and Jews also emigrated, but the bulk of the Tajik minority in Uzbekistan has responded to the new laws with relative equanimity.

As with so many laws promulgated in the post-Soviet States, language legislation in Uzbekistan proclaimed to fulfill two competing objectives: it sought to entrench the hegemony of the language of the titular nation on the one hand, while claiming to safeguard the rights of non-titular minorities on the other. In other words, both the nation-building model and language diversity model were attempted with a more recent trend towards the language-diversity model. One can say that language policy in Uzbekistan has reconstituted ethnic relations between titular group and non-titular minorities.

In an obvious move towards language diversification, according to official data of the Ministry of People's Education, education in Uzbekistan is now conducted in several languages: Uzbek, Russian, and five minority languages – Karakalpak, Tajik, Kazakh, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz. English, together with some French and Arabic, has meanwhile been added. In fact, last year President Karimov declared the year to be the “Year of English” with some idea that it might eventually replace Russian. In any case, one could say that the rise in Uzbek as language of instruction at the expense of Russian has been remarkable, resulting in a significant increase in the number or teaching hours in Uzbek.

Conclusion

Irrespective of which model of language planning was followed – either the nation building model or the language diversity model - in general, language legislation in Central Asia has provided for the free use and development of languages spoken by other nationalities of the republics, and in the case of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has given specific regions such as Karakalpakistan jurisdiction over matters concerning language. With the exception of the Tajik law, the Central Asian language laws were all accompanied with a timetable giving specific dates between 1990 and 1999 by which time the various articles of the laws should be implemented. Uzbekistan, however, was the only republic at that time with constitutional provisions enforcing the language law.

However, there was a fear that even though the language laws ensured the right of minority groups to develop their own languages freely, there was fear that since speakers of these languages may come to feel themselves second-class citizens, such legislation may not be enforced and the situation of their languages would deteriorate even further.

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