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## RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA: PERSISTENCE IN PRESTIGE DOMAINS

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In most countries of the former Soviet Union, the domains of use of the Russian language have severely narrowed since 1991. This is to some extent true in Central Asia, in part because of the radical decrease in the share of Slavs in the population. However, in contrast to such regions as the South Caucasus and Baltic countries, in Central Asia, Russian continues to be widely used in “prestige domains.”

**Key words:** Russian language, Central Asia, prestige domains of language use

My remarks today will focus on the continuing important role of the Russian language in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period. In my presentation I will focus in particular on the role of Russian in “prestige domains” of communication in Central Asia (1) and I will contrast the situation in Central Asia with the situation in the countries of the Baltic and the south Caucasus regions.

It is important to see the current situation against the backdrop of the role of the Russian language in the late Soviet period. For this reason I will begin by noting some of the key points related to the Russian language in the last decades of the USSR. Then I will look at the use of Russian language in prestige domains in post-Soviet Central Asia. By “prestige domain” I am referring here primarily to use in higher education and in certain high status urban occupations (2).

Although no official documents of the Soviet government or CPSU identified Russian as the “state language”, in fact it very much functioned in this capacity. Russian was the single language of communication for high level government and Party work, and was the major language of “inter-ethnic communication”. Part of the reason for this was that Russian was the native language for almost all of the ethnic Russian population of the USSR and in fact had become the native language of many members of other ethnic groups; this was true not only in the case of other Slavic ethnicities, but also groups who did not have “their own” Union republic, and even urban populations from other ethnic groups, among them the Central Asians. Furthermore, Russian was widely described as the “second mother tongue” of non-Russians, and some Soviet scholars envisioned an eventual merging of languages of Soviet peoples. Soviet-era writings implicitly also suggested that such a language would most resemble Russian. Given the great role and prestige of the Russian language in the Soviet Union, a knowledge of Russian was required of anyone who sought upward social mobility, especially in a form that involved more than one’s “own” titular republic.

Along with the above, Russian language also served as a core element of the Soviet identity promoted by the CPSU. In addition to its function as the “second mother tongue”, this was evident in the many accounts describing Russian as “enriching” other

languages of Soviet peoples, even in such aspects as phonetics and syntax. The importance of Russian was also reflected in the huge investment by the Soviet government in promoting Russian language study by non-Russians and, consequently, a high level of bilingualism (and often even tri-lingualism) by non-Russians. As a rule, however, and indeed in part due to this high level of bilingualism among non-native Russian speakers, most Russians did not become bilingual in Russian and the language of the traditionally non-Russian territories in which they lived.

Despite the importance of Russian, the other languages spoken in the USSR were also used in a wide range of domains. The breadth of domains, however, was much more limited in the case of peoples whose units did not enjoy the status of Union Republic (UR). Furthermore, the domains of use of even the “UR” republics varied from one to the next and changed over time. Even in the case of languages whose domains were quite restricted in the last Soviet decades, it needs to be recognized that Soviet — often Russian — scholars made great contributions to the corpus development of these language and to their standardization in the USSR’s first decades. Among other groups of population, this was especially true for the peoples living in Central Asia.

Throughout the USSR, the UR titular languages were widely used in primary and secondary education of children of the titular ethnic group. To a lesser extent, and not everywhere, this was true in higher education. The periodical press in these titular languages was very widespread and these languages were widely used for radio and television broadcasting. Naturally, resources available to central broadcasting from Moscow, in Russian, were much greater than what was available in individual republics. To some extent this was reflected in some local media, at least sometimes including those in Russian, that were inferior to Moscow mass media.

Beyond education and media, UR titular languages were the dominant language for most internal communications in areas of those republics with dense and overwhelming demographic superiority of the titular group. This was particularly the case in rural areas, where the Slavs were generally a small minority. (In parts of some UR’s, however, for example the KirSSR and KazSSR, there were large rural Slavic populations.)

As suggested above, even among the URs, there was substantial variation among the domains of use of the titular languages. Indeed, some of these were even reflected in the respective republic constitutions adopted in 1978. Thus, for example, only in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia did the constitutions designate a state language, namely the titular language of each republic. And both in these republics as well as in the Baltic republics instruction for the “national” groups in higher education was in the titular language. By contrast, instruction for most specialties in Central Asian higher education in the Soviet era, even in “national” groups, was largely in Russian after the first year; and for many specialties — it appears particularly in the KazSSR and KirSSR — there were no “national” groups whatsoever.

In addition, only partly because of the small share of titular population in the capitals of the KazSSR and KirSSR, there were few opportunities to study in Kazakh- or Kyrgyz-medium schools in Alma-Ata or Bishkek. Especially in these two republics — and perhaps even more in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan — there was thus a kind of self-reinforcing process: few cadres were trained in the titular languages and therefore the language in the capital and often other urban workplaces was overwhelmingly Russian. To judge by

the greater presence of titular-language schools in capitals of the TaSSR, TuSSR and UzSSR and of the greater share of titular group population than in the KiSSR and KaSSR, it seems plausible that Russian was less dominant in the workplace of their capital cities.

With the exception of the TuSSR, following the parade of laws in other republics, all Central Asian republics adopted language laws in 1989; the TuSSR (along with the BSSR) adopted such a law in 1990. For our purposes here it is important to note that, despite the radically different conditions prevailing in the Central Asian republics, the laws adopted there appear to have been modeled after the laws of the Baltic republics. Even in Kazakhstan, where the titular language was arguably in the weakest position — and Russian the strongest — the year after the adoption of the language law, a program to implement that law set out a totally unreasonable timetable for shifting office work; even in the oblasts with the smallest ethnic populations, this shift was to start no later than 1995.

Especially given the fact that most of the Central Asian laws were adopted over two years before the collapse of the USSR, the plans for shifting language were extraordinarily ambitious. Even if such measures might succeed in the Baltic or south Caucasus republics, they were far beyond what was possible in other parts of Central Asia, let alone in Kazakhstan. On the one hand these types of initiatives fostered unrealistic hopes among those who knew the titular Central Asian languages and were eager to raise their status; on the other hand they created doubts and anxiety among those who did not know the languages, including many of the linguistically russified titular ethnic groups. In part due to the widely held belief in the USSR that somehow language is inherent in ethnic identity, many of the “russified titulars” were singled out as shameful individuals who “did not know their own native language”.

Given that the laws were adopted in the Soviet Union, it was implicit that in the foreseeable future Russian would still occupy an important role in the Central Asian republics. Indeed, all of the Central Asian laws on language mentioned the Russian language, some calling it the “language of inter-ethnic communication”. In terms of bilingualism, the assumption was that there would be greater bilingualism, and therefore that some of the monolingual Russian speakers would acquire some knowledge of the titular language.

It has been almost a quarter of a century since the former Soviet republics became independent and over a quarter century since the language laws were adopted. Despite this, and despite the fact that the average level of Russian language skills among the masses in Central Asia appear to have declined — in some places, precipitously — Russian continues to occupy a very important niche in the region. This is especially notable in the “prestige domains” of language use, including administration and education (particularly higher education). This stands in relief when viewed against processes in the countries of the Baltic and south Caucasus, where Russian is not associated in the same way with higher prestige or quality.

It is worth noting that the continued use of Russian in prestige domains in Central Asia has despite the very steep decline of ethnic Russian population in the region. The ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan has declined from about 38 percent to about 23 percent, in Kyrgyzstan from over 20 percent to less than 8 percent, and in each of the other three countries — where the Russians constituted between 7.5 and 9.5 percent of

the population in 1989, today they are well under 3 percent. Space here does not permit a detailed examination of the reasons for this decline, but I note this here to highlight the demographic processes which make the continuing role of Russian all the more remarkable.

A number of factors seem to explain the higher prestige of the Russian language in Central Asia than in the Baltic or south Caucasus. Two of the key factors — in turn related to one another — concern the “starting position” of the various countries upon independence. Most important are the respective domains of use in the last decades of Soviet power for Russian and the titular languages, i.e., for those languages which became “state” languages in 1989-1990 and then state languages of *independent countries* in 1991.

As discussed above, the languages of all titular languages in the south Caucasus and Baltic were used to a much greater extent in prestige domains than those in Central Asia. Consequently, in Central Asia, the role of Russian in such fields was much greater. Although this is perhaps most easily illustrated in the case of higher education, this seems likely to have been the case more broadly. As noted, much of the training of the higher education of “titular specialists” was in Russian in Central Asia; indeed, especially in the capital and certain other cities of the KiSSR and KaSSR — to a lesser but still significant extent — the entire formal education of many titulars was in Russian. Many Kyrgyz and Kazakhs were able to discuss household matters with parents or, more often, grandparents in their ethnic group’s language, but they were unequipped to handle technical matters in it. Among their work colleagues were many (and sometimes a large majority) of Russians and members of other ethnic groups, often people with very limited or even no knowledge of the new “state” language; it goes without saying that with the rarest of exceptions, these non-Kazakhs and non-Kyrgyz (especially those from Slavic and other non-Turkic groups) did not know how to use the new state language for official business.

Although Russian language has preserved a strong position in Central Asia despite the sharp fall in the share of ethnic Russians in each republic’s population, demography is nevertheless an important factor determining domains of Russian language use and bilingualism. Although this has affected elite domains of use less than the everyday language environment for the masses it is an important factor that Kazakhstans’ Slavic population declined from almost half in 1989 to approximately one quarter today (3). This is a radically different situation for the country as a whole than, say, in Tajikistan, where the combined total of non-Tajiks and non-Uzbeks is under 2 percent. On the other hand, the case of Latvia, where today the ethnic Russian population is proportionally larger even than in Kazakhstan, demonstrates that demography is not always decisive in determining language use in prestige domains.

One of the key factors underlying very different roles for the Russian language in Central Asia as compared to the Baltic and south Caucasus republics/states relates to the histories of corpus development of the respective state languages, their standardization, and domains of use both before the Bolshevik Revolution and in the immediately ensuing decades. With the possible exception of Azerbaijani, at the beginning of the twentieth century, all of the titular languages of the south Caucasus and Baltic countries had a longer history of literacy and were much further on the road to standardization than those of Central Asia. Due to space limitations it is impossible here to examine in detail the reasons for the possible partial exception of Azerbaijani. It should be mentioned, though,

that even in the early twentieth century there was much more industrialization and even urbanization among the indigenous population in Azerbaijan than in Central Asia. However, the Soviet decision to develop an “Azerbaijani” language independent of Turkish seems to have been a later (and maybe even reluctant?) decision than the decision to develop standards for Central Asian languages. In any case, during the Soviet era, Azerbaijani came to be used in many prestige domains that were dominated or monopolized by Russian in Central Asia. Thus, for example, even in the Brezhnev era, technical specialties were widely taught in higher educational institutions in Azerbaijani, and the textbooks even beyond those for the first year of studies were in the titular language. This was very different even than in Uzbekistan, the Central Asian republic where higher education was most developed in the titular language in the Soviet era.

Statistics related to level of knowledge of Russian in the Soviet censuses in Central Asia are notoriously unreliable. Nevertheless, they suggest, if not prove, that substantial segments of the titular ethnic population in the every republic knew Russian. According to the Soviet census of 1989, even in the UzSSR — Central Asia’s republic with the lowest reported level of Russian proficiency — 22.7 percent of Uzbeks claimed to be fluent in Russian; the analogous figures for titulars in their “home republics” was 28.3 percent in the TuSSR, 30.5 percent in the TaSSR, 37.3 percent in the KiSSR, and an astounding 77.8 percent in the KaSSR. Indeed, I estimate that at the time that the KaSSR adopted a law making Kazakh the single state language, approximately 30 percent of the republic’s entire population was literate in Kazakh, while 90 about percent — including ethnic Kazakhs — was literate in Russian!

Still another factor affecting the continuing function of Russian in prestige domains in Central Asia relates to educational policies and their implementation in the countries of the region. Implementation of policy is closely related to available resources for this purpose. Both in the case of policy and resources it is useful to differentiate among the individual states, even though everywhere in the region there appears to have been a general degradation of education since 1991. In the case of Turkmenistan this, and in particular the policy which once even eliminated Russian entirely from the curriculum of Turkmen-medium classes, demonstrates that political considerations have been a critical determinant there. Russian has consistently remained a mandatory school subject in titular-language curricula in every other country of the region. Educational policy emphasis on the importance of Russian in titular-language schools in Uzbekistan appears to have waxed and waned with fluctuations of the country’s relations with Russia, but, overall, Russian classes for Uzbek pupils in Uzbek-medium classes has suffered from a lack of resources; the resource problem appears to have been most severe in Kyrgyzstan and especially Tajikistan. Relatively wealthy Kazakhstan, which also has the largest proportion of ethnic Russians as well as the traditionally much higher level of Russian proficiency among the titulars, has been the most successful in supporting the language in schools.

In any case, it is worth contrasting for a moment the policies of Central Asia as a whole with those of the Baltic countries and south Caucasus countries with the exception of Armenia. Russian language in these five non-Central Asian countries is no longer an obligatory subject. No doubt the political orientation of the governments in all of these countries is reflected in their policies toward languages in the schools and the choices of

their students. The orientations of the Baltic states, among other things members of NATO and the EU, are clearly away from Russia and towards the west; the same is true of Georgia, which has even been at war with Russia; the Azerbaijani case is again more complex, as that country has maintained closer ties with Russian than the other four. The case of Armenia, where Russian is a mandatory subject in Armenian-medium schools, demonstrates the importance of overall political orientation and on language policy: Armenia, unlike any of the other five non-Central Asian countries discussed here, is a close political ally of Russia.

Despite the undulations characteristic of Russian-Uzbekistan political relations, Uzbekistan as well as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have maintained consistently closer relations with Russia than Turkmenistan, not to mention the Baltic countries or south Caucasus countries excepting Armenia. And this has been reflected in their respective educational policies.

The factors described above explain the continued widespread use of the Russian language in prestige domains and many other settings. Before concluding I would like to focus a bit on the issues related to corpus language issues and the many prestige workplaces in Central Asia. One of the factors impeding the more widespread use of the Central Asian languages (and resulting in the continued greater use of Russian) is the lack of standardized and widely known terminology in technical fields. Instructions for goods and equipment essential in the workplace are still not always available in local languages, and even those that *are* “translated” (most often from Russian) are often so poor that it is necessary to refer to the Russian original. This is aggravated by the fact that in certain fields there are still employees without a mastery of the registers of the state language necessary to operate comfortably and efficiently in their workplace; some of them, educated in Russian-medium Soviet institutions are in senior positions. For now, this still likely has a serious impact in the workplace. It would seem that this is particularly the case in Kazakhstan where there were so few urban schools in the Soviet era with titular-language instruction; it is likely also the case in Kyrgyzstan where in the capital there were almost no Kyrgyz-medium schools. Proportionally though, (due to large Kyrgyz urban populations in a variety of the republic’s cities) there were likely proportionally more titular-medium urban pupils in Kyrgyzstan in the late Soviet era than in Kazakhstan. At the same time, though, relatively poor Kyrgyzstan has had far fewer resources than Kazakhstan to spend on the expensive corpus activities of language development, standardization, and policy implementation.

The other three Central Asian countries have historically had far fewer ethnic Russians, but even in the Soviet era the capital cities appear to have had ample titular-medium schools. Despite the small share of Russians in these countries and even their capital cities today, Russian-medium primary education is popular and broadly viewed as prestigious. In some cases the Russian-medium schools serve primarily titular ethnic children.

The state language in each of these countries is unique in terms of corpus development, which, as noted above, is important for use in many prestige workplace domains. Uzbek arguably had the best developed terminology in the Soviet era, but the government of Uzbekistan has not devoted great resources or even attention to language development since independence. Furthermore, the very extended and still incomplete shift from

Cyrillic to Latin alphabet makes Uzbek less convenient for many purposes requiring uniformity. Since independence, Tajik appears to have witnessed quite active development of terminology, often with adoption of words from Farsi. It is an open question to what extent this has facilitated greater use of Tajik in that country which has few Slavs and also so few resources.

Under independent Turkmenistan's first president there was wholesale development of new terminology and other vocabulary, but since his demise there has been some shift back to Soviet-era (often Russian-based) words. The instability there, too, may negatively affect the introduction of Turkmen (and its displacement of Russian) in many prestige work environments. Financial resources, however, have obviously been a much less serious impediment to language policy in hydrocarbon-rich Turkmenistan than in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan.

In any case, it seems clear that over all, Russian is still in greater use in prestige domains throughout Central Asia than in the countries of the Baltic and the south Caucasus. Beyond this, however, within Central Asia the balance of use of Russian and the state language in these domains is linked to the financial resources and demography specific to each country.

Opportunities for temporary or permanent labor migration to Russia are undoubtedly a continued stimulus for developing Russian skills in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; this is also likely true to some extent throughout the countries of the south Caucasus. However, this may not sustain high prestige for Russian in these countries. Regardless of their country of origin, most labor migrants in Russia probably acquire at least somewhat greater Russian competence when they work there; however, many among them — especially those working illegally — are confined to menial labor and perhaps even hiding much of the time when they are not working. Therefore, few of them seem likely to be employed in prestigious occupations back home where they will use markedly improved Russian skills. Indeed, as illustrated in numerous reports from Russia, many arrive in Russia with very weak Russian language skills and do not even make much progress while there.

Mass media broadcast from Russia with large audiences in Central Asia also support the Russian language there (4). They may play a significant role in developing at least passive listening skills among the masses. This applies not only to Central Asia, but is true to some extent even in the Baltic and south Caucasus. It is an open question, however, how much this might contribute to use of Russian in prestige domains.

As for the future, the state languages throughout Central Asia seem likely to be increasingly used in prestige and other domains as their corpus development continues, and as the share of graduates of Russian-medium institutions who are not also fluent in the state language declines. Furthermore English, which is being taught to the overwhelming majority of students throughout the region, may well displace Russian in certain prestige domains. In this context it is of note that even President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has suggested that English be used as the language of instruction for math and science subjects in *all* secondary schools throughout his country. Of course in Kazakhstan everyone recognizes that Russian will remain in a strong position, and Nazarbayev's statement must be read keeping in mind that the President assumes that Russian will remain a mandatory subject in the curriculum of Kazakh-medium schools.

President Nazarbayev's proposal seems quite unrealistic, at least for many years to come. In any case, for historical, political, geographic, economic, and other factors, the use of the Russian language in certain prestige domains in Central Asia seems likely to persist for the foreseeable future, perhaps decades. What happens beyond that will depend on political and economic developments in Central Asia and beyond which are impossible to predict in today's rapidly changing world. Although growing competence in the state language and a decline in Russian skills are undoubtedly related, Russian competence may not be the key factor. Rather, the critical point may be the improved competence in the state language which the elites — even those educated primarily in Russian — are increasingly likely to have. And this language will be one that likely will have a more developed and perhaps more standardized corpus.

### NOTES

- (1) Although in the USSR it was practice to speak of «Казakhstan и Средняя Азия», I will be using the English term “Central Asia” to refer to the entire region, i.e., «Центральная Азия» as “Central Asia”.
- (2) Of course there are and have always been urban occupations associated with high prestige in Central Asia where the titular language has been dominant. These have included and today include, for example, such professions as academic institutions related to study of the local language, Islamic religious institutions, and some others. Such occupations, for example, might also be related to distribution of scarce goods or opportunities.
- (3) By the end of the Soviet era, for most of Central Asia's Ukrainians, Belarussians, and Poles, Russian was the dominant language except possibly in the home. Certainly almost none of them received their education in Ukrainian, Belarussian, or Polish, since it does not appear that there were any schools in these languages in the region.
- (4) Much of the domestic radio and television broadcasting in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is also in Russian.

## **РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫК В ПОСТСОВЕТСКОЙ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ПОСТОЯНСТВО РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА В ВЫСОКОСТАТУСНЫХ СФЕРАХ**

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В большинстве стран бывшего Советского Союза после 1991 г. использование русского языка в престижных сферах радикально пошло на убыль. До некоторой степени это имело место и в Центральной Азии — частично из-за того, что доля населения славянских национальностей резко сократилась. Однако по сравнению с такими регионами, как страны Южного Кавказа и Балтии в Центральной Азии русский язык все еще широко используется в высокостатусных сферах.

**Ключевые слова:** русский язык, Центральная Азия, язык в высокостатусных сферах