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Language Policy in Kyrgyzstan

Fourteen years after sociologist David Laitin wrote *Identity in Formation: The Russian-speaking populations in the Near Abroad*, inquiring into the role of the Russian language in national life in the former Soviet republics, language policy continues to vex intercommunal relations in many of these countries. Most recently, on February 18, 2012, Latvians voted in a national referendum to overwhelmingly reject proposed constitutional amendments that would have accorded the Russian language co-national language status alongside Latvia's own distinctive vernacular. Yet far from finally euthanizing the long-standing issue of the linguistic rights of Latvia's sizeable Russian minority though, the referendum invited an unnecessary and unpopular debate that implicated a host of foreign actors – from Russia's legislature and air force to the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner.

Now that same debate threatens to consume Kyrgyzstan, or so suggests the Russian independent newspaper *Vzglyad* (Russian for 'View'). Since the unveiling in 2010 of a new constitution by Kyrgyzstan's previous caretaker government, Kyrgyz nationalist groups have demanded a greater role for the much-maligned Kyrgyz language, preferably at the expense of the hegemony enjoyed by the Russian language in Kyrgyz social life. Yet, despite these bourgeoning calls and in contrast to their Latvian cousins-in-tongue, it is not expected that Kyrgyzstan's primary Russophones (numbering some 25-30% of the country's population and concentrated around the capital Bishkek) would be encumbered by a significant shift in policy, thanks in large part to the relative security that Russian enjoys in the Kyrgyz public space. The Russian language's status as an official language was preserved by a 2010 law enacted by the caretaker government of Rosa Otunbayeva (2010-2011), and while the current coalition government of Almazbek Atambayev has adopted its predecessor's *Concept of Ethnic Development and Consolidation in the Kyrgyz Republic* (which aims to replace Russian, and Uzbek in the country's southwest region, with Kyrgyz as the medium of instruction in educational institutions), support within the Kyrgyz legislature for the preservation for Russian's parity of status with the Kyrgyz language remains strong.

This looks likely to remain the *status quo*, at least until Kyrgyzstan's next presidential elections in 2015. In the October 2011 election cycle, the nationalist *Ata Zhurt* ('Fatherland') party, which espouses pro-Kyrgyz linguistic policies, failed to capitalize on momentum it had built during the 2010 parliamentary election - its lead candidate Kamchybek Tashiyev losing convincingly to the more moderate Atambayev of the Social Democratic Party. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan's strategic location on the metaphorical Eurasian chessboard has in previous years flushed it with Russian military investment and enhanced Bishkek's prominence in Russo-aligned regional fora such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), creating a nuanced cautiousness about alienating Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Russians and primary Russophones to Moscow's displeasure. For now then, it appears that an officially advanced Kyrgyz linguistic renaissance remains nascent at best, and geopolitically impractical at worst.

To be sure, the durability of the Russian language's privileged status in Kyrgyz society is something of an anomaly in Central Asia, whose constituent states have embarked on ambitious, if lackadaisically implemented, derussification policies. In October 2009, neighboring Tajikistan enacted a new language law which made Tajik the sole acceptable language for official use, abrogating (at least in theory) the Russian language's 'official language' status accorded to it by Tajikistan's liberal 1989 *Qunani Zuboni* (Language Law). In Kazakhstan, the government's *2001-2010 National Program for the Functioning and Development of Languages* mirrored a restrictive package of language policies that had been adopted by Latvia in 1992; strikingly similar features in the Kazakh variant include a requirement that all official communications be in Kazakh, as well as provision for free Kazakh language instruction with the view to eventually promulgating a linguistic proficiency test that will regulate participation in government and business life. And in Turkmenistan, disconnect between language policy and actual language corpus reform (Turkmenistan adopted a latin alphabet in 1994 to replace the Cyrillic script, although poor implementation resulted in the continued use of Cyrillic through the 1990s) was only remedied in 2000 when a language law requiring the use of Turkmen in strategic and official communications was enacted (and purportedly enforced: according to the UNHCR, the 2000 law was followed by the termination of Russian-language public television channels and a reduction in the number of Russian-language radio broadcasts).

While Kyrgyzstan's own experience does not stray too far from this regional narrative, the subtleness of official efforts to raise Kyrgyz's profile misleadingly masks concerted efforts by Kyrgyz authorities to reclaim the country's perceived linguistic integrity. In September 1989, two years before seceding from the USSR, the Kyrgyz SSR followed a string of Soviet republics in enacting its maiden indigenous language law, the *Law on the State Language of the Kyrgyz SSR*. Already at this formative stage, the 1989 Law sought to balance the pragmatism of statebuilding with nascent nationalist aspirations: Kyrgyz was made the sole "state language" and the Russian language's Soviet-era role of "language of interethnic communication" (which accorded it generous privileges) was retained through 1 January 1999, from when Kyrgyz was envisaged to become the sole operative language in Kyrgyz public life. The mass emigrations of ethnic Russians in Central Asia to Russia in the 1990s however, driven by perceived linguistic discrimination and limited economic opportunities, had a particularly acute effect on Kyrgyzstan as it approached the 1999 deadline. In May 2000, in a placative policy turnaround, the Kyrgyz Supreme Council enacted the *Law on the Official Language of the Kyrgyz Republic*, which made Russian an "official language" with official status in all spheres of public activity. However, it is plausible that the 2000 Law in fact resembled an urgent, even kneejerk, policy response aimed at stemming the flight of Kyrgyz Russians, and thus offered few substantive commitments to guaranteeing the position of Russian. Detractors complained that the Law clearly distinguished Russian's lesser "official language" status from the undeclared primacy of Kyrgyz's "state language" position, despite the 2000 Law omitting any references to a phased, comprehensive linguistic transition to Kyrgyz.

The removal of Kyrgyzstan's inherited Soviet-era *ancien regime* during the 2005 Tulip Revolution and the subsequent ousting of the Bakiyev administration in 2010 have arguably augmented the capacities of Kyrgyzstan's infant civil society, though at the price of opening the country's political forum to competing ideologies and antagonistic social forces. What implications has this new reality had on Kyrgyz language policy? On the one hand, it has given social outlets novel influence over government policy, including sensitive domains such as language policy. There is no disputing that nationalism and the promotion of a distinctive Kyrgyz identity have finally gained traction as salient themes in Kyrgyz politics. In April 2006, the country's National Committee on the State Language (established in 1996) announced that it was reviving the phased transition to Kyrgyz language exclusivity and rolling the target date forward to January 2007, reigniting fears among Kyrgyzstan's primary Russophones that they were once again being offered as slaughter lambs on Kyrgyzstan's nationalist altar. While this revised deadline was ultimately not met, in July 2010, the Otunbayeva administration established a Presidential National Commission on the Development of the State Language to "develop and strengthen the legal basis for and improve the constitutional status of the Kyrgyz language", a move that has been criticized as an attempt to appease Kyrgyz nationalist groups opposed to greater Uzbek influence in the country's southwest. Both *Ata Zhurt*'s Tashiyev and Topchubek Turgunaliev, who leads the nationalist *Erkindiyk Kyrgyzstan* ('Free Kyrgyzstan') party, have been outspoken in their desire to divest other languages of their currency in modern Kyrgyzstan's ethnolinguistic reality.

Yet, despite these trends, Kyrgyz linguistic sentiment appears lukewarm. Russian-language newspapers, namely the *Kirgizstanskoye Slovo*, *Vecherny Bishkek*, *Respublika*, *Obschestvenny Reyting* and *Moya Stolitsa*, remain the largest titles by readership as well as the media of choice of Kyrgyzstan's intelligentsia, while, according to Charles Buxton of the International NGO Training and Research Center, Kyrgyz-language counterparts (such as *Kirgiz Tuusu*, *Kabar, Alibi* and *Kutbilim*) are more popular in the Kyrgyz rural heartlands and among the growing number of religiously-conscious Kyrgyz (Islam-themed newspapers in Kyrgyz have proliferated in the post-Akayev era's more hospitable political and human rights environment; examples include *Islam Nuru, Islam Madaniiyati* and *Islam Azhari*). There has also been no appreciable move to latinize Kyrgyz's script, as has been done in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Central Asia has collectively undergone two comprehensive script reforms: the first in 1922 which latinized the region's Arabic script, and the second in 1940 which replaced latin with Cyrillic). For now at least, given that Kyrgyz society and political structure are having to confront novel and complex questions implicating interethnic coexistence and the direction of the country's democracy, Kyrgyz language policy is unlikely to negotiate as clean and linear a trajectory as its Central Asian, or even ex-Soviet (Latvia comes to mind), counterparts.

-- 2012, Aiman Zarul

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