

LANGUAGE STATUS OF RUSSIAN MINORITY IN TAJIKISTAN

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Abstract:

Russians of present day Tajikistan are living there from Tsar and Soviet times. Despite the anti-religious policies of Soviet government they successfully preserved and maintained their tradition and culture, language, religion, etc. throughout the Soviet period. After the fall of Soviet Union the status of their language was demoted significantly. In the post Soviet they were not able to maintain the official status of the Russian language. Although it is being used in every strategic and key sectors of the state but its Soviet-time kind of mass usage is no more seen in the country.

Key Words:

Language, USSR, Tajikistan, Migration, Independence, Constitution.

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Introduction:

Russian migration to Central Asia started in the beginning of eighteenth century (Tsar Period). In the beginning only soldiers and laborers came in and after the October Revolution of 1917 (Soviet period) people from all other walks of life immigrated to Central Asia. They brought their culture and language with them to and since they were the rulers and as such their language (Russian) replaced the native language of the Central Asian native in all matters government, business and in the bilateral matters. Central Asian states at that point of time were very backward and possessed very limited contacts with the outside world. Naturally when the Russians came, they were far ahead of the Central Asian natives. They brought with them the modern science, technology, new method of learning and an entirely innovative method of governance (Socialism). All this was in Russian language. As a result the Russian language took no time to become the official language, an elite language of cream layer in every sector.

However the situation changed immediately after the disintegration of Soviet Union. In the first years after independence many non-Central Asian peoples emigrated because of the establishment of Tajiki as the official language, dissatisfaction with the standard of living, and fear of political violence.¹ And the Russian language accordingly was demoted from official status to that of language of inter-ethnic communication among the non-Central Asian leftovers. And the case of Tajikistan was not different.

Even though the rights of ethnic minorities in Tajikistan are based on the recognized principles and norms of international law², yet Tajikistan (and Uzbekistan among the five independent Central Asian states) has certain difficult social conditions that seem rather difficult for Russians³ for they encountered some specific problems like, psychological adaptation to new conditions, ignorance or poor knowledge of the state language, limited capabilities of obtaining education in native language and limited access to the native culture and information in native language.⁴

¹ <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Tajikistan.html>

² <http://www.tajik-gateway.org/index.phtml?lang=en&id=874>

³ Sebastien Peyrouse, *Occasional Papers*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 2008, p. 8.

⁴ Stephen A. Bahry, "Language, Literacy And Education In Tajikistan", *The Domestic Environment of Central and Inner Asia*, Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia No.VII, Asian Institute, University of Toronto, 2005, available online at http://individual.utoronto.ca/s_bahry/Literacy_in_Tajikistan.htm, T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 42.

In this paper we will discuss the gradual demotion of Russian language in the post-Soviet Tajikistan from official to that of a mere instrument of interethnic communication vis-a-vis the scope of Russian language in the post-independent Tajikistan.

Language:

Since all business of the government and international matters were handled in the Russian medium during the Soviet period, therefore as a natural consequence the Russians in Central Asia were hardly required to learn native languages. And as after 1990s native languages in Central Asia, including in Tajikistan, were raised to the status of official languages and thus used as medium in the government businesses⁵ Russian language began to lose its hold. It was also because of the large scale out-migration of the Russians that native language in Tajikistan gained momentum and thus communication in Russian language is restricted to a particular limit.

One has to take into account that during Soviet period knowledge of Russian language provided additional possibilities for jobs to the citizens of the Tajik nationality and its ignorance was a hurdle in ones career.⁶ Therefore, soon after Tajik language (Farsi) was raised to the status of the state language, the constitutional legal warranties have but provided for the free functioning of Russian (and other languages of the ethnic minorities) as a language of inter-ethnic communication. According to article 2 of the constitution of Tajikistan, the national minorities of the republic can use their language without any restrictions. And article 5 of the Language Act of the republic, guarantees its citizens the right to choose the language to use in dealing with government bodies and authorities, enterprises, institutions and associations (including voluntary ones), and to receive information and documentation from them in the official language (Tajik), Russian and another acceptable language.⁷ Accordingly Russian is the second important language in use after Tajik in the country, which is regarded native or second

⁵ Sebastian Peyrouse, *Occasional Papers*, p. 6.

⁶ www.unc.edu/~lajanda/slav167langpolussrch6.ppt; T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 29; Soviet language policy in Central Asia encompassed three broad aims via the completion and enrichment of existing languages (including transformation of tribal and community languages into developed national languages), the removal of the large Arabic and Persian loan vocabulary inherited from the Muslim conquests and the establishment of Russian as a second native language (for the purpose of governing the state effectively and to embark on the path of Russification especially during the Stalin); <http://www.oxuscom.com/lang-policy.htm#policy>

⁷ International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, reports submitted by states parties under article 9 of the convention, Addendum, Tajikistan, United Nations, 2004, p. 3; T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 9; <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav082609a.shtml>

by 20.1% of the total population of the country and 99.7% of Russians.⁸ Russian language therefore still plays a very important role in the areas like inter-ethnic dialogue, education, communication, media, etc.

Education is provided in Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Citizens enjoy freedom in choosing the language of education; however the study of the Russian language is compulsory starting from elementary school.⁹ in case of secondary education in general the state language is used as a medium of instruction but in places of compact residing of the citizens of other nationality the medium remains their native language.¹⁰ To this end freedom of choice of language of education is provided through creation of necessary number of the applicable educational institutions, classes, groups and necessary conditions for their functioning.¹¹ Higher education is offered only in Tajik and in Russian languages.¹² However more than 80% of students are receiving education in Tajik medium.¹³

Before 2009 language law government used to publish all decrees, laws, etc. in both Russian and Tajik. But now all document are being documented in Tajik. However Russian is still being used extensively by the government agencies including Presidents Office for communication with external parties such as development partners and media. In case of public services, Russian continues to used and Tajik is used for some senior governmental positions. Likewise Russian is still widespread in army and police. In the largest companies in the public sector (like TALCO-aluminium, Barki Tojik-electricity monopolist, and TojikTelecom-telecommunications) as well

⁸ In 1989 census Russian language was called second by 36.4% of the population. In 2004 share of persons considering language of the nationality to be native language for some nationalities exceeds 97%: Tajiks (99,8%), Russians (99,7%), Uzbeks (99%), Kirghiz (98,3%) and Turkmen (97,4%); T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, pp. 31-32.

⁹ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.usefoundation.org/view/857>; T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 9; *Constitution of The Republic of Tajikistan*, available at internet.

¹¹ Stephen A. Bahry, "Language, Literacy And Education In Tajikistan", *The Domestic Environment of Central and Inner Asia*, Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia No.VII, Asian Institute, University of Toronto, 2005, available online at http://individual.utoronto.ca/s_bahry/Literacy_in_Tajikistan.htm.

¹² The only exceptions are the Tajik-Russian Slavic University and the Tajikistan branch of the Moscow State University, which teach in Russian only; K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

¹³ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

as in the largest private companies (like Babylon – mobile/internet operator, Orient group – banking, manufacturing, investment and Obi Zulol – beverages) official working language is Tajik, but Russian continues to dominate in informal communication and work communication. Internet advertisement, employment news, etc. are still being communicated in Russian (and English).¹⁴

The promotion of Tajik language to the status of state language gave important political and socio-psychological supremacy to the Tajiks in the country and consequently national minorities started to feel deprived in political and socio-economic sectors.

A study based on 2000 census shows that only 30.3% of the minority nationalities freely knew Tajik language and among them 13.2% of ethnic Russians living in urban areas and 25.1% in the rural areas freely knew the Tajik language.¹⁵ It is because that soon after independence the conditions were not created that could offer a free plank for the Russians living in the country to learn Tajik. Most of them were at a stage of their lives that offered little chance for them to learn Tajik. The schools even though had the provision for young children to be able to acquire the learning in Tajik but because of psychological reasons many Russians preferred to send their children in schools that had majority of Russians. Accordingly Russian marginalization started to show its signs. Many Russians believe that they had hardly any opportunity to learn the national language as is evident from a study carried out in 2004.¹⁶

We are blamed with ignorance of the state language. But I consider that very little was made, in order to minorities knew and possessed the state language. We do not know it not because we did not want, but because we have lived in other conditions, there were other requirements, and in general practically nothing was done for effective learning of the Tajik language. (Elena... belongs to a Russian speaking minority in Tajikistan.)

I do not know the grammar, but I can freely communicate. Extension of knowledge of the Tajik language goes due to the environment and communication with Tajiks, but not because of the

¹⁴ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, “Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia”, available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

¹⁵ T. N. Bozrikova, “Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan”, a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 29.

¹⁶ T. N. Bozrikova, “Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan”, a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 31; Poor economic conditions in Central Asian in general and Tajikistan in particular offers little money to spare for training people in different languages; “In Post-Soviet Central Asia, Russian Takes A Backseat”, Radio Free Europe: Radio Library, available online at http://www.rferl.org/content/in_post_soviet_central_asia_russian_takes_a_back_seat/24342710.html

study of Tajik language in educational process at school, at university. (Yuryi...belongs to a Russian speaking minority in Tajikistan.)

Life will force to learn the language. If we want to communicate and to live in this country we should study the state language. (Igor...belongs to a Russian speaking minority in Tajikistan.)

The statements of Russians living in the country reflect their concerns that what they perceive is going to effect their lives in the days to come. This is a fact that Tajik language has official dominance in the official transactions, speeches, radio / TV programmes and in education, etc. Accordingly Russians need opportunities to learn it but because of their minority character, better teachers available in Russian medium or that standard of teaching in Russian schools is better than Tajik schools or else because Russians get opportunities to work in Russia on the basis of their education they therefore do not prefer to study in Tajik schools.¹⁷ Nevertheless in practice Russian still continues to be used, mainly in urban areas where 30% of the total population live have a very good hold on the Russian language.¹⁸ Besides being used in inter-ethnic communications it is also used in certain cases in the international affairs, government and business.¹⁹ In fact the most lucrative jobs in the private sector are open only to those who are fluent speakers of Russian language.²⁰ At present 25% of the total population in the country speak fluent Russian and 60% speak intermediate-level Russian and only 15% have a weak or no command on Russian language.²¹ According to John Schoeberlein, co-director of the Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus at Harvard University's Davis Center, "...in the university context, Russian almost doesn't figure in Tajikistan and many young scholars simply don't know

¹⁷ Today the school curriculum in Tajikistan has compulsory Russian classes starting from elementary school; K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

¹⁸ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

¹⁹ Ghafur Khodjamurodov and Bernd Rechel, "Tajikistan Health System Review", Bernd Rechel (Ed.) and Martin McKee (Series Ed.), *Health Systems in Transition*, Vol. XII, No. II., European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, Denmark, 2010, p. 3; Library of congress – federal research division, country profile Tajikistan, 2007, p. 5; <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Tajikistan.html>

²⁰ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

²¹ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia", available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

Russian...". They really only know Tajik and maybe Uzbek.”²² There are occasions when one cannot secure a job in administration (civil service) or in the field of science and technology without having good command over the Russian language.²³

Not only this, by the year 2004 there were 42 newspapers and 24 magazines published in ethnic minority languages - Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Shugni and Farsi.²⁴ Six news agencies disseminate information in Russian.²⁵ National State Television (TVT) channels and the public television company “Poitakht” telecast news bulletins, films and other programmes in Russian (and Uzbek), and the bulk of the programming of the private television company “Somonien” is telecasting in Russian. ORT and Vesti, two Russian state channels, are broadcasted. In total less than 20% of programmes broadcast in Russian.²⁶ The main Russian television channels are routinely retransmitted in Tajikistan.²⁷ Cultural institutions use both Tajik and Russian. There are mixed institutions that use both languages and specialized institutions like the Mayakovski Theatre in Russian and the Lohuti theatre in Tajik.²⁸ The following table according to a 2004 study demonstrates other roles played by the Russian language in present day Tajikistan.²⁹

Table.

Role of Russian language in Tajikistan (in %).

Nationality	Facilitate to interethnic interaction	Allows to increase its professional	Helps to the labor migrants in Russia and other	Hinders knowledge of the

²² “In Post-Soviet Central Asia, Russian Takes A Backseat”, Radio Free Europe: Radio Library, available online at http://www.rferl.org/content/in_post_soviet_central_asia_russian_takes_a_back_seat/24342710.html

²³ Iraj Bashiri, *Tajikistan: An Overview*.

²⁴ International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, reports submitted by states parties under article 9 of the convention, Addendum, Tajikistan, United Nations, 2004, p. 21.

²⁵ International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, reports submitted by states parties under article 9 of the convention, Addendum, Tajikistan, United Nations, 2004, p. 21; The most popular newspapers and magazines and most of the books are in Russian; K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, “*Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia*”, available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

²⁶ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, “*Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia*”, available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

²⁷ International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, reports submitted by states parties under article 9 of the convention, Addendum, Tajikistan, United Nations, 2004, p. 21.

²⁸ K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, “*Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia*”, available online at http://www.osceacademy.net/uploads/docs/language_use_and_language_policy_in_central_asia.pdf

²⁹ T. N. Bozrikova, “Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan”, a Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 32.

		and cultural level	countries of the world	native language
Tajiks	67.7	40.0	57.6	2.0
Uzbeks	97.7	68.2	25.0	
Russians	89.1	58.4	45.5	
Kirghiz	95.5	54.5	27.3	
Turkmen	95.0	35.0	10.0	
Tartars	94.6	56.8	48.6	
Others	91.1	55.4	44.6	

Source: T. N. Bozrikova, "Problems of Ethnic Minorities in Tajikistan", in Sub-regional Seminar on *Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia*, p. 33.

To sum up, we can say that, many Russians, both in rural and urban areas, are able to communicate in Tajik but since most of the natives are also able to speak in Russian therefore language as such is not a barrier for communication. Nevertheless one has to agree with the fact that since the role of Tajik language is growing with the passage of time since independence all natives of Tajikistan including the Russian minorities are required to learn it through proper schooling for which necessary infrastructural facilities have now been created in the country.³⁰ Even though Russian minority is willing to learn the official language yet pre-1991 born among them are not in a position to adopt fully to the requirements of the time. They feel to have got secluded in a new scenario and accordingly are proactive and protective to stick to Russian. This obviously is because that they have lived a life of guarantees and protection during the 70 years of Soviet regimes. Wide spread use of Tajik language has as such caused fear among most of them which unlike the past guarantee jobs in public life and is used as a medium of political and cultural revivalism by the people and the governments in Tajikistan.³¹ Add to it the decree issued by the government in 2009 that has asked people not to use Russian as a language in inter-ethnic communications³² so that all ethnic groups living there are required to learn *Farsi* for its wide

³⁰ Library of congress – federal research division, country profile Tajikistan, 2007, p. 6.

³¹ Sebastien Peyrouse, *Occasional Papers*, p. 17.

³² Spencer Ennis, Sophie-Marie Lamothe and Sean Winchester, "Tajikistan : A Conflict Diagnostic, 2011", Country Indicators For Foreign Policy (CIFP), Carleton University, Canada, 2011. Also available online at <http://www4.carleton.ca/cifp/app/serve.php/1364.pdf>

spread use. This ultimately will force people to use native language everywhere except in intra-ethnic dialogues. Accordingly Russian language has remained the language of Russians only and thus is required to lead them to learn Tajik for gaining jobs in government and non-government sectors where however they have to compete with the majority.

