Identity, Symbolism, and the Politics of Language in Central Asia

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This article is devoted to the symbolic aspects of language and power in the four Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Much of the discussion will analyse what I will refer to as ‘reference points’ of identity represented in language. These include ‘Islam’, ‘Turkicness’, ‘Persian culture’, ‘nationality’, and two ‘international’ reference points—‘world international’ and ‘Soviet international’. In the very first years after the Bolshevik Revolution, ‘international’ referred to parts of the world beyond the former Russian Empire, especially the industrial states of Western Europe. In the 1930s, however, ‘international’ came to mean the USSR, and in particular, Russia. In the post-Soviet world, ‘international’ is once again acquiring a much broader and more global meaning. Following a brief discussion of these reference points, the essay will illustrate some of the ways in which they were embodied in Soviet language policy and language change during the Soviet era, especially the early years. This is critical background to understanding the manipulation of language since the late 1980s, the topic of the remainder of the essay. This essay will examine only a few of the most easily studied domains of language use, primarily education, mass media and government records. The analysis below will be limited to questions of alphabet, orthography, vocabulary and language status.

It is critical to keep in mind that the Central Asian republics were themselves created by Soviet power. None of them existed as distinct entities until the 1920s. Likewise, the Communist Party supervised the creation of the nationalities that were associated with the established republics, as well as the standardised languages assigned to the republics and their titular inhabitants. This was a natural product of the Soviet approach to nationality issues which linked territory, population and language. The widespread popular belief in this link was an important element in Soviet policy, but it is arguably even more important as the underpinning for language policies in all post-Soviet states, including those in Central Asia.

The development of literary norms for Central Asian Turkic languages in the early years was far from smooth. Rather open debates about the languages continued until the end of the 1920s, and in some cases even into the early 1930s. In these years many of the voices that expressed conflicting views about language came from within Central Asia. From the mid-1930s onward, however, it was Moscow, with a very heavy hand, that determined language policy. This has important implications for the analysis
below. Whereas the debates in the 1920s offer us insights into Central Asians’ own conflicting views of language and identity, from about 1935 until near the end of the Soviet era we are left primarily to observe policy shifts that in large measure reflected decisions made in Moscow. Under Gorbachev, thanks to glasnost’, there were more clues about language and identity from Central Asians’ own voices.

During the period that decisions on language policy were nearly monopolised by Moscow, there were relatively minor shifts in language corpus. The Gorbachev era, however, saw the reappearance of debates about the nature of the Central Asian languages; these would continue into the era of independence. A similar pattern applies to language status. The trajectory of Central Asian status development from the late 1930s until the 1980s, though not unilinear, did not reflect the magnitude of policy shifts that was characteristic of the 1920s and early 1930s. From the mid-1980s onward, however, debates on fundamental issues of language status reappeared. Both in the case of language corpus and status, these debates took on particular importance after independence in 1991.

In order to appreciate the differences between language as symbol under the mature Soviet system and after independence, it is worth noting the powerful levers in the hands of the Communist Party to control language during most of the Soviet era. The regime’s ability to control the mass media, the educational system, political and economic mobility, and movement of information and people across borders also endowed it with powerful means to control language and the symbols it represents.

‘Reference points’ of identity

The ‘reference points’ concerning language and identity are, of course, oversimplifications of very complex phenomena. However, this scheme will allow us to trace the broad dynamics of change in language policy and identity both during the Soviet era and beyond.

A key reference point for early Soviet language policy (including in Central Asia) was what I have labelled ‘international’. The early ‘internationalism’ was rooted in Marxist ideology and the Bolshevik vision of an international proletarian revolution. Because Marxist theory suggested that industrialised capitalist societies were the most advanced on the road to socialism and communism, the reference point for ‘international’ culture was situated outside the former Russian Empire, in Western Europe. Over time, in Soviet ideological tracts, ‘international’ would come to mean something quite different. The change would occur as it became clear that a world proletarian revolution was not imminent, and that, therefore, for the foreseeable future, socialism would have to be built in only one country. As the Communist Party leadership recognised this, it eschewed the ‘internationalism’ with its reference points in the West. It would not be until the mid-1930s, though, that ‘international’ in Soviet parlance came to be synonymous with ‘Russian’.

Islam was a second reference point important for Soviet language policy, especially in Central Asia. Among the reasons that Bolsheviks opposed Islam (as well as other religions) was that it directed individuals away from the material world and secular sources of authority. Naturally, Bolsheviks were hostile to the conservative Islamic ulama and their followers, who opposed the Bolshevik attempt to curb activities of
religious institutions. Although Pan-Islam was not a political threat to the Bolsheviks, the Party was eager to seize on opportunities to place distance between peoples in their emerging state and the influence of an ‘obscurantist’ faith. For tactical reasons, Bolshevik policy towards Islam remained relatively moderate until the last years of the 1920s. Nevertheless, it demonstrated early on that the Party rejected any claim that Russia’s Muslims might organise based on their common religion.

Although the overwhelming majority of all Turkic populations in the Russian Empire and beyond were Muslim, ‘Turkicness’ was a separate reference point of identity with critical relevance to Soviet language policy in Central Asia. Jadid Muslim reformers from Central Asia, many of whom had studied in Istanbul, emphasised common roots and bonds with Turkic peoples, links which they sought to embody in language. Despite the importance of this current of thought among Central Asia’s early twentieth-century intellectual elite, there is little evidence that a sense of ‘Turkicness’ was strong among the masses of Central Asian speakers of Turkic dialects. Furthermore, even among the intellectuals who felt a strong attachment to Turkicness, there was far from unanimity that this should be reflected in political forms that would unite those who called themselves ‘Turks’. Some Central Asians, for example, harshly criticised what they perceived as attempts by Tatars to be the arbiters of what constituted ‘Turkicness’. The Tatars’ major role in language reform in Central Asia was linked to their prominent role in education, press and other aspects of culture in Central Asia in the early twentieth century.

Although this article deals only with Central Asian Turkic languages, it is important to mention ‘Persianism’ as another reference point relevant to language policy in the region.1 Despite the presence of speakers of Persian languages in other countries outside the Russian Empire and the Central Asian vassal states of Bukhara and Khorezm (most immediately, of course, in Afghanistan and Iran), the Bolsheviks expressed much less anxiety about a ‘pan-Persian’ than a pan-Turkic threat. Among other reasons, this was likely because the Persian-speaking world was divided between Shi’a and Sunni Islam, and because in the case of Persian culture there was no equivalent of a Tatar ‘pan-Turkic’ intelligentsia in the Russian Empire. Furthermore, links between Iran and Persian-speaking regions of what became Soviet Central Asia had been quite tenuous for centuries, and even in the case of populations in Central Asia, speakers of Persian and other Iranian languages were geographically scattered. The greatest centres of Persian culture—Bukhara and Samarkand—were ‘islands’ largely surrounded by territories inhabited by Turkic speakers who did not know Persian or any other Iranian language. The danger of any pan-Persian sentiment in Central Asia was all the more remote because the largest territory with a dense population of Persian speakers—eventually designated as Tajikistan—contained no major urban cultural centres in the early twentieth century.

The critical reference point for Soviet nationality and language policies, especially in the period beginning in 1933, was ‘Soviet International’ or ‘Russian’. As noted above, in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, the reference point for ‘international’ was west of the former Russian Empire. The word ‘international’

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1I use this term, parallel to Turkicness, to indicate the links to ‘Greater Iran’, to Iranian culture, including Iranian languages.
remained in the Soviet lexicon, but its meaning altered. This became clear during the ‘Great Retreat’ from cultural revolution, when Stalin adopted more traditional policies towards non-Russians, granting them far fewer concessions in developing their cultures in ways that distinguished them from Russian culture. Although the meaning of ‘international’ had begun to shift already in the early 1920s (as the Bolsheviks recognised that the world revolution was not imminent), it was during the ‘Great Retreat’ of the 1930s that Soviet, ‘international’ and ‘Russian’ became tightly bound.

Finally, with regard to reference points, we should note the individual nationality labels established by Soviet power. Thus, although the content of nationality and national language may have been empty until its contents were assigned by Soviet-appointed elites, the labels ‘Kazakh’, ‘Kyrgyz’, ‘Turkmen’ and ‘Uzbek’ came to represent orientations in their own right. As we will see below, this was particularly true in the case of language status, where the greatest tension in orientation was between Russian and the titular nationality language.

The list of reference points above is, of course, not comprehensive. For example, early twentieth-century Kazakhs viewed their relations based on blood ties signifying membership in a particular lineage, clan, tribe or horde. In contrast to nomadic groups such as the Kazakhs, local territorial identities were more important to sedentary populations, including in the great cultural centres of Bukhara and Samarkand. Despite the importance of the blood ties and links among the people living in a particular territory, these local territorial designations and blood relations do not appear to have become significant reference points in public debates over language policy in Central Asia to the extent of the categories introduced above.

Symbolic aspects of Soviet language policy in Central Asia

Establishment of standard languages

In accordance with Leninist–Stalinist theory, national delimitation necessitated the creation of distinct literary languages. The Bolshevik regime established norms and designated precisely which dialects belonged to which language. In the case of Kazakh, despite the vast territory in which it was spoken, there were relatively minor dialect differences. Uzbek and Tajik, on the other hand, were established as literary standards for a wide variety of dialects. The choice of dialect base was often contentious and in certain cases it shifted. For example, initially the Uzbek standard was based on dialects considered more ‘pure Turkic’ (not ‘spoiled’ by Persian elements). However, as described below in the section on alphabet and orthography, this changed after just a few years.

Although the establishment of literary norms for each Central Asian language did not mean that people stopped using their local speech varieties with their families, neighbours and co-workers, it did mean that all who attended the schools in the same language would eventually use identical textbooks, and their consumption of mass media would also be according to the same newly developing standards. This was to be true in languages both with relatively little dialect variation (notably Kazakh), as well as those (like Uzbek) which subsumed a wide variety of dialects.
After the national and linguistic delimitation of the region, there does not appear to have been any serious discussion in the Soviet era of a re-division of the Turkic dialects into a different set of ‘languages’. Under the influence of Marxist theories, Soviet linguists claimed that Central Asian (and other) languages were moving towards unification into a single world language, and certain ‘international’ elements were cited as evidence of this process. A discussion of this, however, never went beyond general talk of long term processes.

Alphabet and orthography

The alphabet shifts in Central Asia are the most easily identifiable element based on the shift of Soviet policies reflecting identities. The Arabic alphabet, closely associated with Islam, was replaced by the Latin alphabet for all Central Asian languages at the end of the 1920s. This was the most prominent (though very short-lived) move that represented the selection of a symbol that represented a ‘world international’ identity. Indeed, in 1930 Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky published an article in which he revealed that Lenin himself had recognised that Russian would eventually shift to Latin letters; that same year a plenum of the All-Union Committee of the New Turkic Alphabet declared Latin the ‘alphabet of October’. Just a decade later, however, the Latin alphabet was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet. This latter shift, which brought the writing systems of Central Asian languages very close to that of Russian, also served to separate them from the languages of Western Europe that not long before had been the reference points for ‘international’ identity.

Aside from embodying a shift from ‘international’ in its earlier meaning, the change to Cyrillic letters also signified a shift away from a Turkic identity. One reason is that it separated the Central Asian Turkic languages from Turkish which had shifted from the Arabic to the Latin script in the 1920s. Furthermore, unlike the relatively uniform version of the Latin alphabet that was used for Central Asian Turkic languages, the Cyrillic alphabets they adopted were not coordinated. For this reason, different letters were used for the same sound in different languages. This impeded communication among writers and readers of closely related Turkic languages.

Though not as obvious as the alphabet shifts from Arabic to Latin to Cyrillic, orthographic changes within each of these scripts also demonstrate the ways in which language change reflects realignment in accordance with new reference points. The jadid-supported reforms of the Arabic alphabet in the 1920s represented a distancing from a form of Islam their proponents considered backward and irrelevant. In an attempt to modernise spelling, Uzbek language reformers eliminated a number of letters whose presence in their language had kept Uzbek spelling consistent with Arabic; however, the letters complicated Uzbek writing because the ‘foreign’ letters had no phonetic meaning in Uzbek which differentiated them from other letters.

2It is worth noting that the Central Asian Turkic cases are somewhat different than the case of language in Azerbaijan. In the earlier years after independence, Azerbaijani was referred to as ‘Turkic’ or ‘Turkish’ (türk dili). This same term was used in Azerbaijan to refer to the local language during the rule of the National Front in 1992–1993. A somewhat analogous situation exists in Tajikistan. Although not supported by the political authorities in Dushanbe, some intellectuals in Tajikistan speak about Tajik in a way that creates a very fuzzy line dividing it from Persian.
(The reforms were opposed by those ulama members who maintained that the alphabet and orthography of words used in the holy Koran must not be changed.)

An attempt to emphasise Turkic identity was clearly manifest in Central Asian reformers’ approach to the orthography of words in their languages that were borrowed from non-Turkic languages. This was true both in the case of the Arabic as well as the Latin alphabets, and was closely related to the Turkic linguistic property of ‘vowel harmony’. According to this phonetic principle, all vowels of a single word are of the same type (such as rounded or unrounded, front or back). The resolution of the 1926 Baku Turcological Congress, which formalised the forthcoming shift to Latin letters, affirmed this principle, and it was reiterated at a number of other forums in the years immediately following.

Applying this principle was very complex, above all because it was extremely difficult to determine principles that applied to languages that were just being codified; this was especially true for languages with a large number of dialects. Furthermore, all Central Asian Turkic languages included very common borrowed words that did not follow the rules of vowel harmony. (Many of these had been borrowed from Arabic or Persian.) Were they to be changed so that they could be written and pronounced with new rules? Or would they constitute exceptions to the ‘rules’ of a particular language?

Uzbek provides perhaps the best example of the complexity in determining a new language’s rules. One of the major dividing lines among the dialects that Soviet linguists labelled ‘Uzbek’ was between dialects that maintained vowel harmony and those, primarily urban, that did not. Proponents of observing Turkic principles in orthography insisted on representation of vowel harmony in orthography; they considered the ‘Persianised’ urban dialects that had lost vowel harmony to be ‘corrupt’. The Uzbek Latin alphabet adopted at the end of the 1920s maintained letters which had made it possible to represent vowel harmony; however, in 1933, the All-Union Committee of the New Alphabet announced in Moscow that several letters that had allowed representation of vowel harmony in Uzbek were to be eliminated. This change and certain other spelling modifications were implemented the following year (Fierman 1991, p. 130).

Although the problem of establishing a norm was especially problematic in a language with so many dialects as Uzbek, spelling problems due to unclear ‘principles’ plagued other languages as well. Thus, for example, despite the creation of detailed rules, one account states that in Kazakh the word ‘communist’ was rendered with 16 different spellings (Zhubanov 1935). Such problems were no doubt one of the reasons that a special congress of Kazakh cultural workers in 1935 adopted a resolution mandating that the Russian spelling be maintained for ‘international’ terms in Kazakh (Printsipy 1935). In 1936, a Turkmen linguistic congress adopted an analogous decision, mandating that Turkmen orthography of ‘international’ also preserve the original Russian form, even if this violated Turkmen vowel harmony (Edgar 2004, p. 163).3

3According to Grenoble (2003, p. 53), a ‘common rule’ was eventually adopted in the 1940s mandating that the spelling of loan words in non-Russian languages throughout the USSR be subordinated to the Russian version.
In addition to ignoring vowel harmony, the unification with Russian spelling during the 1930s meant that, contrary to Turkic phonetic rules, borrowed words with initial consonant clusters were to be written with the cluster intact. Thus, this meant, for example, that Uzbek spelling of *Stalin, traktor* and *stol* would be identical with Russian (rather than, for example, *Istalin, istol* or *tiraktor*). Additional letters were added to the Latin alphabets of some Central Asian languages to allow them to render spellings closer to Russian. This was the reason for adding the three letters f, x and v to the Kazakh Latin alphabet. 4

Despite the overwhelming trend to bring orthography of borrowed words into line with Russian spelling, a few exceptions were allowed. In particular, spelling continued to reflect the local pronunciation for a small class of words that Central Asian languages borrowed from Russian before the Bolshevik Revolution. Thus, for example, even after the shift to Cyrillic writing, the Russian words *samovar* (самовар) and *krovat* (кровать) (bed) continued to be written *samauyr* and *kereuet* in Kazakh. 5

**Vocabulary and terminology**

In the case of alphabet and orthography it is relatively easy to point to specific turning points that represent changes in policy towards representation of identity. The situation is more complex in the case of lexical items. One reason is that two ways of expressing a concept continued to exist, sometimes with only a slight difference in meaning or tone. Nevertheless, it is clear that the same general pattern described above concerning alphabet and orthography also applied to vocabulary. The main difference appears to be that vocabulary never reflected a ‘world international’ orientation in such an unambiguous way as alphabet did (through the adoption of Latin letters). The most discernible pattern in the case of vocabulary in the 1920s was the replacement of Arabic and Persian words with ‘world international’ and Turkic ones. However, as in the case of alphabet and orthography, in the middle of the 1930s many of the Turkic words (as well as some of those representing Arabic, Persian and ‘world international’ orientations) were expelled, and replaced with ‘Soviet international’ (Russian) ones.

It is possible to illustrate these trends with examples of words to represent political and social concepts that were adopted in Central Asian Turkic-language public discourse in the early post-revolutionary years. Initially, many were taken from Arabic and Persian sources. Thus, authors who wrote in what we can call ‘Uzbek’ frequently used words from Arabic to represent such concepts as revolution (*inqilob*), party (*firqa*), and communist (*ishtirokiyun*); likewise, they used words taken from Persian to mean capital (*sarmoya*), and soviet or council (*sho’ra*). Although Kazakh (and Kyrgyz) authors appear to have adopted fewer Arabic and Persian terms, vocabulary for concepts in education and political life in the early years (which were later ‘expelled’) were also drawn from these languages. Among these were *daris* (Arabic) for

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4The sounds ‘f’ and ‘v’ occurred only in borrowed words (Razvitie 1980, p. 127).

5In the early 1950s, however, there were discussions about unifying the spelling of these words with the Russian orthography (see Sauranbaev et al. 1952). For whatever reason, it appears that far fewer Uzbek than Kazakh words maintained a distinct spelling that reflected the local pronunciation.
lesson and basuazir (the first element from Turkic and the second from Persian) for prime minister (Isaev 1965, p. 104).

Many of the prominent Turkic-minded language planners sought to cleanse their languages of such ‘alien’ terms and replace them with words from Turkic roots. Thus, for example, in 1923 the Uzbek newspaper Turkiston carried a series of articles with lists of words borrowed from Arabic and Persian that it suggested should be removed from Uzbek. They included mehnat (labour), tashkilot (organisation), nashriyot (publisher) and fikr (thought); the proposed respective equivalents were the Turkic ish, uyushma, tarqatish and uy.6

The question of sources for vocabulary figured prominently at the 1926 Baku Turcological Conference. The resolution of that gathering still strongly favoured Turkic words, but it was far from absolute. It suggested that a language which lacked certain terms created from Turkic roots might borrow them from other Turkic languages. However, it conceded that in cases where no Turkic equivalent existed and where Arabic or Persian terms had already been assimilated, the foreign terms need not be purged. This represented a relatively relaxed stance towards Arabic and Persian terms (Fierman 1991, p. 155).

Some of these Arabic and Persian words, and even Turkic ones, were to remain in the Central Asian Turkic languages only until the Russification of the mid-1930s. For example, in Turkmen ‘soviet’ replaced ‘shura’ to mean council; ‘ministr’ replaced ‘vezir’ to mean ‘minister’; and ‘republika’ replaced ‘jemkhuriyet’ (Zakonomernosti 1969, p. 31). A Russian–Uzbek dictionary published in 1934 still gave the translation of the Russian words ‘soviet’ and ‘republika’ as ‘shora’ and ‘zhumhuriyet’. The dictionary, however, provides insights into the beginning of a shift: ‘revolyutsiya’ is given ‘in Uzbek’ first as ‘revolutsija’, but is still followed by inqilab (derived from Arabic) and ozgerish (derived from Turkic).7 Soon after the dictionary’s appearance, however, such words as ozgerish and inqilab, as well as shora and zhumkhuriyat, would totally disappear from the Uzbek publications.

It goes without saying that terminology in all Central Asian languages grew exponentially with the expansion of education, political mobilisation and economic development. The overwhelming share of new terms created from the mid-1930s until the end of Soviet power, especially in technical fields, were Russian borrowings. According to one account, on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Turkic languages which were spoken on the territory later to become the USSR each had between 25 and 50 Russian loanwords;8 by 1940, a number of the languages had 500 such words; by the late 1960s, the figure is said to have reached into the thousands, with over half of those words consisting of commonly used vocabulary (Zakonomernosti 1969, p. 32). This calculation is in line with a study of the Kyrgyz literary language, which asserts that in the early 1980s, 80% of terminology in the ‘Kyrgyz literary language’ consisted of loans either from Russian or from West European languages through Russian (Akhmatov 1984, p. 146).

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6Turkiston various issues between 5 September 1923 and 21 November 1923.
7The entry for ‘revolyutsionnyi’, however, gives only the Arabic-derived equivalent inqilabiy.
8In a strict sense, of course, this predates the creation of these ‘languages’, since by and large standards had not been established.
It should be emphasised that despite the changes in vocabulary discussed here, all Central Asian Turkic languages contain (and still contain) a large number of common assimilated words that came from Arabic and Persian, but which most speakers of the languages do not recognise as alien. The share of such words, however, varies among the languages and across time. (Uzbek probably has the largest share.) For all of the languages, however, it is clear that terminology became highly politicised in the Soviet era, and that the sources that provided much of the terminology in the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution—Arabic, Persian and Turkic—lost substantial ground from the 1930s onward, with the vast majority of the new words coming from Russian.

Language status

Although language corpus issues lend themselves to the kind of analysis of a larger number of symbols of identity and power as presented above, language status—despite its extraordinary importance as a symbol of power and an instrument for exercising it—does not offer the same opportunities to examine the same set of reference points. The focus in this section will therefore be on the changing dynamics between the newly established nationalities’ titular languages and Russian. However, considering status more broadly, we should keep in mind the radical diminution in the status of Arabic language and those who knew it at a time when the Bolshevik regime closed mosques, Islamic schools and other religious institutions. We should also recognise that in each of the republics the tension was not merely between Russian and the titular nationality language, but rather also included other minority languages.

In the early years of Soviet power, the Bolshevik regime’s ‘world internationalism’ obliged it to attempt to demonstrate that it would not continue the Russian chauvinist policies of its tsarist predecessors. In line with this, it carried out a programme of ‘korenizatsiya’ (‘nativisation’). Under this initiative, which began in the early 1920s, the Bolshevik regime encouraged the preparation and promotion of local cadre to work in administration in all non-Russian areas of the emerging USSR. As part of korenizatsiya, administrative institutions were required to work in the local languages (Martin 2001, pp. 75–77). Among other things, this meant that non-locals were supposed to learn these languages.

Korenizatsiya was especially difficult to implement in Central Asia. Among the main reasons were the low levels of education and literacy, the lack of standard writing systems, and the constant changes outlined above. Furthermore, and related to this, many Russians and other members of non-local ethnic groups resisted learning the local languages, which they considered backward. The Soviet regime never publicly rejected korenizatsiya. Furthermore, some of the activities related to this effort—such as the development of primary and secondary education and a mass press in the local languages—survived throughout the Soviet regime. Indeed, even higher education (especially teacher training) was to develop in Central Asian languages; however (depending on the republic and the era) a much broader range of subjects and a higher quality of teaching was usually available in Russian than in the local languages.

From the mid-1930s onward, Soviet policy generally encouraged asymmetrical bilingualism, with non-Russians obliged to learn Russian, but Russians and other
minorities having little need to learn the local languages. Russian was officially introduced as a mandatory subject in all schools of the USSR in 1938. In the 1950s Russian began to be called the ‘second mother tongue’ of all non-Russians of the USSR. Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev adopted this characterisation in his speech at the 22nd CPSU congress in 1961. Russian language was closely linked with what was called ‘international upbringing’, a kind of ‘internationalism’ clearly rooted in Russian culture and language. At various times in Soviet history, pupils in Russian-medium schools of Central Asia were offered opportunities or even obliged to study the local language; however, anecdotal evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the teaching of Central Asian languages to non-native speakers was poor and frequently viewed with disdain.

Demographic patterns in urban areas were an important factor supporting the dominance of Russian in Central Asia. The policies that produced these patterns, though adopted for a wide variety of reasons, nevertheless constituted part of the Soviet policy to create a single ‘Soviet people’. Soviet ideological literature praised migration, which made Soviet cities more ethnically diverse, as ‘international’. In the case of Central Asian urban areas, the Slavic dominance was largely a matter of Slavic in-migration. True, in rural areas and even provincial towns the Central Asian ethnic groups were often dominant; there, for local purposes, Russian might occupy a secondary position. However, the Soviet Union was ruled by a hierarchically organised party that radiated power from Moscow, and transmitted it through republic capitals. In no Central Asian capital city did the titular nationality during the Soviet era achieve a majority share of the population and, indeed, as of 1970, Russians alone outnumbered the titular population in every case; combined with other Slavs, they continued to outnumber the titular nationality in every capital in 1979 (Guboglo 1990/91). In capital cities and other urban areas with a large non-titular population, Russian was overwhelmingly the language of communication between or among members of different nationalities. This was usually the case even in settings where Russians were a small minority and members of the local nationality an overwhelming majority. The dominant language in urban factories and other enterprises, not to mention the Communist Party, was Russian. By the 1970s and 1980s, even in informal situations in Slavic-dominated large urban areas, Central Asians were often obliged to communicate in Russian, even if they did not have a good mastery of it. Although the most important Central Asian language in each republic during the Soviet era was the titular language of that republic, the Soviet system in some ways supported the status of non-titular Central Asian languages in neighbouring republics. Uzbek primary and secondary schools operated, for example, in all Central Asian republics, and some graduates of those schools entered higher education in Uzbekistan. Local Uzbek-language media (such as raion newspapers) were also published in the other republics of Central Asia. Likewise, Uzbekistan’s schools for its minorities received some textbooks from neighbouring republics.

Simon (1991, p. 246) notes a 1958 reference by Bobojon Gafurov in a Kommunist article as one of the earliest demands to declare Russian the ‘second mother tongue’ (Gafurov 1958). Until he left to direct the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow in 1956, Gafurov had served for a decade as head of the Tajik Communist Party.
Symbolic aspects of language policy in Central Asia since Gorbachev

Since the late Soviet era the overall shift in language as a symbol of power throughout Central Asia has been away from Russian (representing ‘Soviet internationalism’) and towards symbols representing the titular ‘nationality’ promoted by the elites of the newly independent states. The shifts, however, especially in the case of corpus, are quite complex; furthermore, they vary from country to country. Unlike in the Soviet era, since 1991 there has been no central party apparatus in Moscow dictating uniform principles. Instead, individual leaders, attempting to foster a basis for national development, have opted for diverse policies. One extreme is represented by Turkmenistan, where the late President Niyazov conducted a bold policy of Turkmenisation and de-Russification. Uzbekistan’s president has also pursued ‘nationalisation’, glorifying Uzbeks above other nationalities in his country. On the other hand, due above all to demographic and geographic factors, the nation-building projects in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been less exclusive, and they have allowed more prominent representation of non-titular groups and their languages.

Throughout Central Asia governments generally have less control over important domains of citizen’s language behaviour than did Soviet leaders prior to Gorbachev, in particular Stalin. Part of the reason for this is that, even though they may have crossed republic borders with ease, most Soviet Central Asians as a rule did not travel beyond local towns or perhaps their own republic’s capital city. Only in the rarest of circumstances did they cross a Soviet border. Today, most often due to economic necessity, many live for extended periods outside their home country. The situation is quite different for those who live at home, too. Under Stalin, Central Asians, even urban residents, had no access to mass media except programmes broadcast by local stations (perhaps rebroadcast from other Soviet cities) or newspapers sold at local kiosks. Today, even in Turkmenistan, many have access to electronic media from beyond their country’s borders. The language of the mass media within Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, is not subject to the kind of control that it was in the Soviet era. Furthermore, in some parts of Central Asia, new sorts of norms may be developing for ‘the same language’. Uzbek textbooks in Kyrgyzstan, for example, are being published in the Cyrillic script while those in Uzbekistan have long ago shifted to Latin.

Language status

Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost’ and perestroika permitted and even encouraged citizens to express their views in a more open fashion. ‘National fronts’ formed throughout the USSR during the Gorbachev era; their memberships were comprised mostly of the titular nationality in each republic. One of their primary goals almost everywhere was to raise the status of the titular languages of the republic. Over the course of 1989–1990, all Soviet non-Russian republics whose constitutions did not already identify a state language adopted new laws which raised the status of their titular languages in such areas as education, media, public services and administration. Importantly, the laws adopted in Central Asia in this period still referred to Russian as the language of ‘interethnic communication’.
Since 1989, the main thrust of laws and other regulations concerning language throughout Central Asia has been to expand the domains for the titular language and reduce the domains for Russian. This has been pursued most harshly in Turkmenistan. Niyazov’s regime marginalised all non-Turkmen languages in public spaces, including Russian. Almost all non-Turkmen schools were closed or turned into mixed schools (with some classes using Turkmen, and others Russian or Uzbek as the language of instruction), and there was a shift in higher education to the exclusive use of Turkmen. Russian language was removed as an obligatory subject in the school curriculum. Although many Turkmens accessed foreign television through satellite broadcasts, subscriptions to print media published outside Turkmenistan were severely limited. This, in combination with the end of most Russian-language broadcasts within Turkmenistan, also contributed to the country’s linguistic nationalisation.

Kazakhstan also raised the status of the titular language, but to a much lesser extent than in Turkmenistan and through much less severe measures. Besides the nature of the political leadership, another reason for this is that Kazakhstan became independent not only with a minority titular population (especially in urban areas), but even among ethnic Kazakhs, only a minority in urban areas were literate in Kazakh. Overall, as of 1991, probably only about one third of the country’s total adult population was literate in Kazakh, whereas 90% were literate in Russian (Fierman 2006, p. 101). Although legislation in Kazakhstan has promised a shift of all government office work to the state language, a number of deadlines for this have passed with limited results. The country’s electronic mass media have proven adept at finding ways around laws which require that at least 50% of broadcasts be in Kazakh. A new language law adopted in 1997 stripped Russian of its role of ‘language of cross-national communication’, but introduced an equally ambiguous status for it as the language ‘used officially on a par with Kazakh in state organisations and organs of local self-government’ (Fierman 1998, p. 179). Despite these and many other problems, Kazakh has begun to occupy a more prominent place in the country’s cities. This has been supported in part by the growing proportion of Kazakhs among urban residents, many of whom are former rural residents with strong Kazakh language skills. (Many of them have replaced Slavs who have emigrated to Russia.)

The extent of linguistic nationalisation in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been somewhere between the pole of Turkmenistan on the one hand and Kazakhstan on the other. Although the role of Russian in Uzbekistan has sharply declined since 1991, the regime has pursued linguistic ‘Uzbekisation’ much less vigorously at those times it has sought improved relations with Russia. The greatest pressure inside Uzbekistan, it appears, has been on the Tajik language, particularly in its traditional areas of strength, Bukhara and Samarkand. Kyrgyzstan’s government, due to demographic factors and less abundant resources, has promoted change in language status in ways that are more like those employed in Kazakhstan than Turkmenistan. Thus, it has continued to permit extensive use of Uzbek through all levels of education in the country’s south. However, it has refused to yield to demands to raise Uzbek to a regional official language. By contrast, and despite the sharp decline of the ethnic Russian population, Kyrgyzstan has made Russian an ‘official’ (but not state) language.
Alphabet and orthography

At least to some extent, the Latin alphabet has replaced Cyrillic for writing Turkmen and Uzbek. In both cases, the shift to the Latin alphabet has been a powerful symbol of rejection of the ‘Soviet international’ (Russian) identity. Prior to the 1993 announcement of the impending shift in Uzbekistan, the country’s press had carried extensive discussions of alphabet, including a possible shift from Cyrillic to the Arabic script. This choice, which was quickly rejected, would have represented a stronger tie to Islam and to the literature written before the adoption of Latin letters in the 1920s. Because the script is also used for such languages as Persian, Dari and Pashto, not to mention for Uzbek in Afghanistan, Uzbek’s adoption of Arabic letters would also have reinforced cultural links with neighbours to Uzbekistan’s south.

Turkmenistan, the only Central Asian state that has completed the transition to Latin letters, announced plans to shift from Cyrillic in a 1993 presidential decree. Although for several years the shift proceeded slowly, on 29 December 1999, Turkmenistan’s parliament adopted a resolution mandating that beginning in the new millennium, Turkmen would be written in Latin letters. Within days, all central newspapers began to appear only in Latin. Aside from this delayed but eventually rapid shift, the Turkmen case is particularly interesting because of the choice of symbols. The initial version of the Turkmen Latin alphabet included Ññ, Şë, ¥û and ££.10 In January 2000, however, three of these symbols—Ññ, ¥û, and ££—were replaced with Ññ, ¥û and Žž (Postanovlenie Khalk Maslakhaty 1999).11 Anecdotal reports indicate that authorities originally selected symbols representing international currency (dollar, yen and pound) because they were often on standard typewriter keyboards. If true, the choice of such ‘international’ symbols might best be interpreted as a symbolic turning away from Russia.

Although poor coordination and various economic factors also played important roles, the slower pace of shift from Cyrillic to Latin for Uzbek is also probably linked to the frequent shifts in relations between Uzbekistan and foreign countries, most importantly Russia and Turkey, and perhaps the ‘West’ represented by Western Europe and the USA. Uzbek’s projected shift to Latin that was originally announced in 1993 was supposed to be completed by 2000. The deadline was later pushed forward to 2005, but in 2002 it was moved back another five years, to 2010. Elementary school textbooks began to be changed, one year at a time, beginning with 1996. This process was completed on schedule in 2005. However, in late 2008, the final instalment of a five-volume Uzbek language Cyrillic-based dictionary appeared, and as of spring 2009, most Uzbek newspapers continued to be published in Cyrillic; according to a report from 2007, 80–85% of Uzbek book production was still in Cyrillic (Sharifov 2007).

Aside from its rejection of symbols associated with Russian, initially Uzbek’s adoption of the Latin alphabet could be interpreted as both a move bringing them

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11 The symbols (upper case) $ and (lower case) € were apparently replaced at some earlier date with Ş and ş, respectively.
closer to a more ‘world international’ orientation as well as one that emphasised Turkic bonds. But later developments downplayed the link with Turkic, particularly as represented by Turkish. The first version of the Uzbek Latin alphabet, promulgated in 1993, adopted the Turkish convention of representing the sound ‘sh’ with the letter ‘ş’. Two years later, however, along with some other changes, ‘ş’ was replaced with ‘sh’. This change meant that, except for the reverse apostrophe, Uzbek writing did not require any special letters beyond those used for the world’s most ‘international’ language, English.12

Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbaev has spoken on several occasions about a possible shift to Latin letters, and in 2006, a commission was established to study the question. No firm decision has been announced, and the president has emphasised that if Cyrillic is abandoned for the Kazakh language, this will be a very gradual process. Such a shift is a particularly sensitive issue in Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russians still constitute at least a quarter of the population, and about 20% of ethnic Kazakhs still receive their education in Russian-medium classes. In spring 2008 Nazarbaev seemingly backtracked on a course leading towards adoption of Latin. In an interview with Kazakh-language media, he took pains to note that Kazakh in fact did not use the Cyrillic alphabet as such, but a ‘Kazakh alphabet’ developed on the basis of Cyrillic. He further pointed out that the Cyrillic used for Russian ‘is not a Slavic form of writing, but represents a modified form of Latin’ (Velikii put’ 2008). Although the possibility of a change of alphabet has been discussed in Kyrgyzstan, to date there have not yet been any official moves to indicate a shift is likely in the near future.

Orthographic changes in the region have been relatively modest, but some are clearly tied to questions of identity. For example, even before Uzbek began to shift to Latin from Cyrillic, it dropped the й (soft sign) from the end of the names of the nine months written with that letter in Russian. Personal and place names have also brought changes in orthography. Indeed, in some cases the authorities in Central Asian countries have insisted that the Russian language spelling of place names conform not to standards established in Russia, but to those of the language of origin. Consequently, whereas Russian-language newspapers in Russia use ‘Kirgizstan’ or ‘Kirgiziya’ to denote the now independent country of Kyrgyzstan, the official Russian language norm that is widely (but not universally) followed inside the Central Asian country itself is ‘Kyrgyzstan’. (This violates the usual phonetic and spelling rules for Russian.) Likewise, Russian-language publications issued in Moscow consistently spell the name of Kazakhstan’s largest city and former capital ‘Alma-Ata’. This is the name that was used throughout the Soviet era in Russian-language publications. Today, however, Kazakhstan’s Russian-language publications generally write it as ‘Almaty’, in conformance with the Kazakh orthography.

This differentiation according to country of publication underlines the changed meaning of borders in the post-Soviet era, both the very porous borders that once separated Soviet republics, and the much more formidable ones that once separated Soviet citizens from those abroad. In the Soviet era, with political power concentrated in Moscow, it would have been inconceivable for separate alphabets or orthographies

12According to Sharifov (2007), the adoption of the Latin alphabet itself was not so much a step reflecting a desire to Westernise as a rejection of Russia and a ‘gift presented to Turkey’.
to be used for what was recognised as the same language in different republics. Thus, Uzbek in formal communications of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan (such as mass media or education) used the Uzbek standard promulgated in Tashkent; the same applied in other languages in more than one republic, such as Tajik in Uzbekistan’s cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, and in Tajikistan. Due to poor relations between the USSR and China, however, Kazakhs in Xinjiang generally used a script that did not coincide with the norm set in Kazakhstan, just as Soviet Uyghurs, who began to use Cyrillic in the 1940s, generally used a different alphabet than Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

The barriers among the Central Asian countries that are represented by the new borders have created situations where, as noted above, distinct norms may be starting to develop within the former Soviet space. This seems to apply in particular to Uzbek: all Uzbek language schools in Uzbekistan are supposed to be using Latin-alphabet textbooks, whereas those in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan continue to use Cyrillic. Part of the reason for continued use of Cyrillic books, especially in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, may relate to the financial burden of shifting to a new form of writing. However, the reluctance to shift to Latin also seems to represent a continued greater orientation in those countries towards Russia than in the case of Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan has made prominent overtures to ethnic Kazakhs living beyond the borders of Kazakhstan, including outside the former USSR. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan has announced no decision about whether Kazakh will shift to Latin, beginning in April 2004, the Kazakhstan National Information Agency (Kazinform) began disseminating news in Kazakh for Kazakhs living abroad in the Latin alphabet along with that in Cyrillic-version Kazakh (as well as Russian and English) (Akanbai 2004).

Vocabulary

Since the late 1980s the Soviet ‘internationalisation’ (‘Russianisation’) of vocabulary in Central Asian languages has been somewhat reversed. Indeed, in the last 20 years all Central Asian Turkic languages have been ‘internationalised’ primarily through the incorporation of words from English. Although many of these same words are probably also being adopted in Russian, today they represent a link to a broader world than the ‘international’ world once defined in Moscow in the 1930s. Not surprisingly, many of these new ‘international’ words relate to such fields as economics and business.

The pace of replacement of ‘Soviet international’ words (borrowed from or through Russian) accelerated during the Gorbachev era and probably reached its height in the last months of Soviet power or the early years of independence. At least initially, the ‘new’ replacement words were not primarily English, but rather lexical items based on Arabic, Persian and Turkic roots. Often these were the same words that had been purged from the standard literary languages in the 1930s. Some of these words had begun to reappear in limited domains in the 1960s and 1970s in particular genres, especially historical fiction.

Before looking at the broad trends, it should be noted that the picture of the shift in lexical items since 1991 is very complex, varying from country to country, and across time, genre, author and publication. In some countries, such as Kazakhstan, due to
less political control of the media, authors have had more discretion to choose either ‘Russian’ vocabulary or ‘new’ equivalents drawn from other sources. In other countries, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, because the government regulates public domains of communication more tightly, it also has greater power to influence the language they use. With this caveat in mind, we can say that in the last 20 years the general trend has been de-Russianisation. Thus, for example, Kazakh has rejected the Russian names of months and adopted new ones based on Turkic and Persian roots. In Turkmen the Russian word for system (sistema) has been replaced by ulgam; the Russian klas, which had been used to mean ‘class’ both in terms of a ‘social class’ or a ‘school class’, has entirely been displaced in the latter sense by synp.

More often, the shift is one of degree, meaning that there has been a shift in the relative roles of two or more lexical items that co-existed in the Soviet era. Very often, in the Soviet era the Russian loan word was dominant, with the other form restricted to a narrow set of genres, such as historical fiction, or to very specific and limited meanings. Both variants may exist today, though with a shift in the balance and a broadening of the meaning of the word that had been more limited in the Soviet era. In Uzbek, for example, during the Soviet era both avtor and muallif were used to mean ‘author’. The word from Arabic, muallif, which was bookish in the Soviet era, today is used more broadly than avtor; the latter has almost disappeared from formal discourse. Likewise, the common Uzbek words for ‘secretary’ and ‘reform’ in the Soviet era were the same as in Russian (sekreter’ and reforma), whereas the words kotib and islokhot with much the same meaning were classified as archaic. The balance has now changed: kotib and islokhot have largely displaced sekretar’ and reforma in the mass media.¹³ In some cases, the ‘new’ word was almost or totally absent during the Soviet era. To the best of my knowledge, only the borrowed Russian word samolet was used to signify aeroplane in Kazakh. Today this word coexists with the Turkic-derived term ushaq. It is too early to tell whether both of these terms will remain, whether samolet will again become the only word used, or if ushaq will displace it.

What does this tell us about the importance of the ‘Turkic’, ‘Iranian’ or ‘Islamic’ points of reference discussed at the beginning of this article? There seem to be no consistent ideological guidelines which require the selection of new words only from particular sources, such as only Turkic or only Persian. For example, although the ‘new’ Uzbek word for ‘ticket’ (chipta) is Turkic, the new words cited above for secretary and reform are Arabic. Uzbek also has many ‘new’ old words from Persian, such as hiyobon (‘park’ or ‘lane’). Although many Russian borrowings in Kazakh have partially or entirely been displaced by words of Turkic origin, such as kalendar’ (calendar) with kuntizbe, privatizatsiya (privatisation) with zhekeshehendiruv, and suvernitet (sovereignty) with egemenlik, other ‘new’ words are based on Arabic and Persian roots such as quqyk (law) for pravo, matn (text) for tekst; and ziyapat (banquet) for banket. These examples suggest that although Central Asian speakers of Turkic languages may be aware in some vague sense of linguistic bonds that they share due to their Turkic roots, language planning in post-Soviet Central Asia has not been guided by the kind of ideological orientation to Turkey that many language planners of the 1920s sought to observe, and there is no sign that selection of vocabulary has

¹³Umida Khikmatillaeva kindly provided help on these changes in Uzbek.
been guided by a desire to underline links with Persian culture or bonds with other Islamic peoples. Rather, the main trend has been ‘de-Russianisation’.

Despite this, all of the Central Asian languages continue to use many lexical items borrowed from Russian, both for everyday concepts and (especially) for terminology. Furthermore, it should also be noted that many ‘new’ words that were revived or invented to replace those that had been borrowed from or through Russian have failed to take root. Some have disappeared, or else are used rarely. Thus, in the early 1990s some authors used such ‘Uzbek’ words as dorilfunun (from Arabic) and tayeragoh (with Arabic and Persian elements) in place of the Russian words for university and airport (universitet and aeroport), but the Russian words have remained, and ‘new words’ have now practically disappeared. In Turkmen, there also appears to be a return to lexical items borrowed from or through Russian. In this regard the newly invented Turkmen names of the months (created under President Niyazov) have been abandoned, and the Russian-based names are again being used.

Conclusion. Regional variation of language and power across time

The deliberate attempts of the Soviet regime and the post-Soviet leaders in Central Asia to manipulate language behaviour clearly demonstrate their recognition of language as a powerful symbol. Of course it is impossible entirely to separate the regimes’ symbolic concerns from more practical ones. Thus, for example, Soviet leaders certainly viewed the adoption of the Latin alphabet in the 1920s as a measure that would facilitate literacy; this was a very practical objective. On the other hand, the shift away from Arabic letters no doubt appealed to Stalin as a symbolic blow to Islam. Analogous points about a balance of symbolic and instrumental concerns apply to the changes in vocabulary of the 1930s described above. Thus, Stalin no doubt favoured the unification of vocabulary through the Russification of the terminology of Central Asian languages for instrumental reasons: it facilitated translations from Russian. However, the symbolism which this unification represented was also certainly a reason for the policy. It is natural, then, that when Central Asian Turkic authors in the last decades of Soviet power began to use words or terminology that were barely acceptable, they were engaged in a symbolic demonstration of power that challenged representations promoted by Moscow. The adoption of language laws in the waning years of the Soviet era had many practical ramifications. However, at the time of their adoption their greatest significance was as a symbol of the changing dynamics of power between Moscow and the individual republics, and changing balance among competing world views.

We must see the language and language policy changes of the post-Soviet era in this context: the regimes in post-Soviet Central Asia make decisions about script, orthography and status with an acute sense of the symbolic significance of their decisions. However, it is also clear that they take account of instrumental goals and non-symbolic political realities in devising language policies. Both in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, political control over language has varied both over time and across domains. As for the Soviet period, Moscow’s influence over language policy and language behaviour consolidated during Stalin’s terror in the 1930s. Later, urbanisation probably facilitated Moscow’s control over the language used by a
larger cohort of individuals; however, the changed atmosphere during Khrushchev’s thaw and Brezhnev’s ‘stagnation’ allowed members of the intelligentsia to use language in ways that were difficult for Moscow to control. Space does not permit an exploration of the fluctuations in level of control in each of the countries in the post-Soviet era; however, it is critical to note that, unlike in the Soviet era when the CPSU dominated decisions about language policy, in the post-Soviet era each of the countries of Central Asia has moved on its own trajectory.

Among the domains most controlled by the CPSU were mass media and public signs in the capital cities, and documentation in the republic party records. Certainly the regime’s power over the language used in the classroom by remote village school teachers was far less, not to mention communications between grandparents and grandchildren or between spouses in the privacy of their own homes. True, especially over time, Party policy affected even some of these exchanges, so that, for example, parents (even if they spoke seriously flawed Russian) used only Russian with their offspring. Parallels no doubt exist throughout post-Soviet Central Asia. Thus, for example, even in Turkmenistan, where the government has sharply curtailed the number of pupils receiving primary education in languages other than Turkmen, we can assume that Uzbek and Russian (not to mention local dialects of Turkmen that differ from the official standard) are widely used among certain populations.

Although since 1991 the status of Russian has declined greatly throughout Central Asia, with the possible exception of Turkmenistan, Russian has continued to maintain a high symbolic niche everywhere. This is indicated, for example, by the fact that many of the most prized slots in primary, secondary and higher education are still in Russian-language tracks or institutions. Unlike Russian, languages of Central Asian nationalities outside their ‘titular home’ lack such a high symbolic niche. Therefore, for example, no high prestige is attached to Uzbek-language tracks or institutions in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan, let alone to Tajik, Kyrgyz or Kazakh tracks or institutions in Uzbekistan. This is certainly the case, for example, of Uzbek in Turkmenistan, Kazakh and Tajik in Uzbekistan, or even Uzbek in Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan continues to support primary and secondary education in Uzbek, Uyghur and Tajik, but pupils attending these schools account for only a few per cent of enrolments. Unlike in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, their share is dwarfed by that of Russians and other Slavs. The reluctance to grant concessions or decentralise power over language in Kazakhstan thus is largely not about the languages of other Central Asian nationalities; it is, rather, about symbolic and real power in the hands of a very large share of Russians and other russkoyazychnye, including many Kazakhs whose dominant language is Russian. The tight central control over language policy is no doubt related to a worry that decentralisation of language policy could be exploited for other forms of political autonomy, which to Kazakh nationalists is the first step on a slippery slope that might lead to secession of ‘Russian-speaking’ areas of the country. Analogous comments may be made about Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, but the potential major claimants of power in those cases are members of co-ethnic groups of neighbouring Central Asian countries, not representatives of the former colonial power. The largest geographically concentrated non-Russian minorities in Uzbekistan are the Tajiks and Kazakhs; both in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan the largest minority is Uzbeks.
Contacts with the ‘outside world’ are a key factor affecting the Central Asian governments’ control of language as a symbol as well as the salience of the symbol in power relations within the country. Today, communications and movement across certain former Soviet internal borders are problematic; yet communications and movement across former Soviet external borders are generally much easier than in the Soviet days. Uzbek speakers of Tajikistan are quite isolated from those in Uzbekistan. Moreover, the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have demonstrated their ‘power’ over their ethnic Uzbek citizens by refusing to follow Uzbekistan’s lead in adopting Latin letters to write Uzbek.

The nature and intensity of interaction with the outside world appear to be one reason that in every Central Asian country many non-titular citizens lack enthusiasm for the state language. Thus, for example, despite government policies to promote Uzbek, many non-Uzbeks in Uzbekistan prefer to invest their time in learning English (not to mention Russian) rather than the state language. The reasons for this include the perceived and real advantages in employment conferred by knowledge of English or Russian. Such phenomena suggest that (with the possible exception of Turkmenistan) not only do the Central Asian regimes generally have fewer effective levers than Moscow once did to control language policy and behaviour, but also that many citizens of Central Asia may be far less affected than their parents were by the symbolic value of the state language that the government promotes.

Variation across Central Asia demonstrates a great variety in regimes’ political styles, willingness or ability to manipulate linguistic symbols, and the way in which they balance symbolic aspects of language with economic and social realities. This is apparent, for example, in the respective patterns of shift to the Latin alphabet in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Given the nature of Uzbekistan’s political system, it would seem that the reason for the lack of progress on Latinisation is not the leadership’s inability to implement change, but the fact that it is carefully balancing the economic and social costs and benefits.

In this regard, the decision-making process concerning language in Kazakhstan reflects power relations that are quite different from those in Uzbekistan. As long as he leads Kazakhstan, President Nazarbaev will undoubtedly play a crucial role in the decision of whether Kazakh will adopt Latin letters. Nevertheless, with the president’s blessing, Kazakhstan’s mass media launched a very public debate on the desirability and feasibility of a shift to Latin. It is hard to imagine a public debate about any linguistic issue with such great symbolic meaning in Uzbekistan, let alone Turkmenistan.

Given the relevance of language to power, it is particularly significant that in some cases language as a symbol of power appears to have been manipulated particularly against members of the titular nationality who do not know ‘their own’ language. Such individuals are almost always the products of Russian-language schools, whose student body contained a disproportionately large share of children of the elite. This has made many of the Central Asian nationalities’ most highly educated individuals, who lack a firm grounding in ‘their own’ language, vulnerable to attacks from their more ‘truly national’ co-ethnics.

The environment for such attacks is particularly favourable in the light of the fact that Soviet ideology, despite its promotion of Russian as a ‘progressive’ phenomenon,
produced a widespread belief that an individual’s ‘native language’ should match his or her ‘passport nationality’. This belief was reflected in the 2005 legislation proposed to the Kazakhstan parliament that would have required candidates to demonstrate a knowledge of Kazakh. However, this was to apply only to Kazakhs, and not to Russians or any other minorities (Absalyamova 2005).

In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (but not Turkmenistan), the constitution gives a high symbolic status to the titular language in another way—through requirements that the president be fluent in the state language. Indeed, during the run-up to presidential elections in 2000 in Kyrgyzstan, a number of candidates were eliminated from the race because they could not pass the language test.

For the future, one of the most salient domains for power is language in higher education. Barring political change that would result in a reconfiguration of the political geography of Central Asia, it is virtually certain that the future leaders of Central Asian countries will pass through their respective higher educational institutions. In Turkmenistan today, virtually all higher education is in the Turkmen language. Even though the value and quality of higher education have seriously deteriorated in Turkmenistan since independence, a university diploma is a highly prized document. In that country, it is almost inconceivable that a student could complete the courses of a higher educational institution without knowing Turkmen.

The situation with regard to language and access to higher education in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is very different. True, as part of the secondary school curriculum, a graduate of a Russian-language secondary school in either of these countries is required to complete courses in the state language. However, in these countries, lack of knowledge of the state language is not a barrier to higher education: graduates of Russian-medium schools need not take an exam of the state language if they intend to enter Russian-medium groups in higher education.

The situation in Kazakhstan is unique, and reveals an attempt to promote Kazakh as a symbol, along with a realisation that its promotion may involve consequences with (at least for the time being) an unacceptably high cost. Until 2008, similar to the situation in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, those taking the ‘Unified National Testing’ (UNT) higher educational entrance exam were not required to take a test of their Kazakh language skills if they intended to study in the Russian medium. In 2007, however, it was announced that in 2008 a test of Kazakh language would be made a major UNT component for those seeking to enter Russian language sections in higher education (Nachinaya 2007). This created anxiety among families of many pupils in Russian primary and secondary schools. As a result, the original plans were abandoned. Although the exam remained mandatory, a decision was made not to take it into account as a part of the total entrance exam grade.

These four cases illustrate quite distinct styles of promoting the state language in the respective countries. In Turkmenistan, where virtually all higher education is in Turkmen, the state has obviously made knowledge of Turkmen a condition for higher education. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the state has not required that students

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14Among the exceptions are certain classes in Turkish or English at the International Turkmen Turkish University and certain non-Turkmen instructors who deliver lectures at other institutions in Russian to students whose education is mostly in Turkmen.
entering higher education know the state language. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this would have contradicted the policy which made Russian that country’s ‘official’ (but not ‘state’) language. Such a policy would also have contradicted the interests of many members of the political elite and would have been very costly. These latter reasons also likely apply in Uzbekistan, but in that country there seems to be a greater sense that over time the Uzbek language will in any case become dominant.

As for Kazakhstan, the initiative to introduce the Kazakh language exam was a step of potentially enormous importance. As it turned out, however, as a concession to ‘linguistic nationalisers’ an exam which did not seriously penalise anyone was left as a symbol. The retreat on this policy suggests that the regime was not yet ready to accept the consequences of obliging all students entering the university to know the state language. Whether this might happen in the future is an open question. The answer will shed light on the extent to which Kazakhstan’s leadership intends to link the Kazakh state to the Kazakh language, as well as the extent to which this policy is tolerable to broad segments of the country’s population.

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