

# MEDIA AND LANGUAGE POLICIES IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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**Some of the problems regarding the use of languages in mass media are common for Central Asia at large while each nation is confronted by its own specific challenges. The general public is concerned about the low standards of native-tongue journalism, seeing it as a barrier preventing people from being well informed. Thus, it seeks to get to the root of the matter.**

That is the focus of this issue's contributions from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. All the authors are unanimous in pointing out one common feature – lower popularity of mother-tongue publications, and this despite the fact that people feel they badly need quality information written in precisely their native languages. For the time being though, such publications appear to be double losers as they find it impossible to compete with the more prompt and professional Russian-language press. Neither can they meet the competition from far more rapid and informative television and radio networks.

## THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

Thus, Asan Kuanov, a reporter from Kazakhstan, in his article "Media Industry Development in Kazakhstan", mentions that his country's position as a Eurasian corridor brings it substantial political and economic benefits. At the same time, he admits that "it is clearly thwarting the spread of the national language which has actually been reduced to being simply a means of household communication." Touching upon Kazakh language use in mass media, he quotes an expert as maintaining

that "the Kazakh-language media totals a scant 5%." Some of the researchers attribute this to the ethnic pattern of Kazakhstan (natives do not exceed or only slightly exceed 50%) and Russification of Kazakh intellectuals. Moreover, studies carried out by the sociologist Sulzhan Ismailova suggest that readers, including the Kazakhs, give preference to Russian-language press: "the style of Russian-language journalists is more accurate, concise and clear, and they choose more important topics. The Kazakh-language media is frequently second to its Russian peers when it comes to delivering a clearly formulated and concrete assessment of the matter in point."

Low-skilled journalism characteristic of native-language print media is what our other authors draw attention to – Charos Abdullayeva and Tajiboy Ikromov ("Uzbek Media Develops According To Its Country Laws"), Tolkunbek Turdubayev ("The Kyrgyzstan Media And Languages: Market Decides All"), Ilkhom Jamolov ("Tajik- And Uzbek-Language Press of Northern Tajikistan"), Sukhail Siddikzoda ("The Tajik Language: Farsi Or Not Farsi?").

"This is particularly notable in

Uzbek translations from Russian and other languages. Sometimes they are unintelligible. The sentence structure is distorted; the basic rules of grammar are not observed... This is becoming a normal state of things... Good material... has become a rarity," write Charos Abdullayeva and Tajiboy Ikromov citing the editor-in-chief of *Mokhiyat* newspaper, Abdukayum Yuldashev.

## THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

The journalists' low welfare standards are one of the factors responsible for this situation. So, they choose to use the official style to save themselves the trouble of taxing their brains for meager salaries. "Newspapers talk official-ese," point out journalists from Uzbekistan.

This idea receives support from Ilkhom Jamolov: "the bulk of the print media in Northern Tajikistan is made up of newspapers and magazines established by the *khukumats* (local authorities). Official articles account for three quarters of these news media publications, which are overwhelmed by reports of offbeat achievements and milestone successes. Readers describe these newspapers as featureless, humdrum and boring. Hence the generally lukewarm attitude to state-owned mass media. In contrast, a popular weekly, "Suga", - once committed to fair reporting - eventually lost OSCE financing and became a monthly publication. Worthy of mention also is the fact that the rural popu-

lation is not in a position to buy periodicals due to low living standards.

### **CHOOSING LANGUAGES:**

The authors also highlight the fact that all Central Asian nations have created legal environments that provide state languages as well as the other tongues with opportunities to survive and to work. This legal environment is being made use of variously by different nations. For example, "Uzbek media develops according to its country's laws," as follows from the headline of a contribution by Charos Abdullayeva and Tajiboy Ikromov, who point out that the Uzbek language alone has been granted the definite legal status of being a state language. However, journalists from other countries mention a number of difficulties. Asan Kuanov from Kazakhstan, for one, indicates an "objective" peculiarity in the way the Kazakh language develops in a multicultural republic. There the Russian language has become a language of inter-ethnic communication while Kazakh is spoken only at home or on informal occasions. "In fact, the Kazakh language dominates the countryside, while Russian prevails in urban areas," comments the author. In spite of the fact that a number of language-related laws have been passed in Kazakhstan, the situation remains basically unchanged. Addressing the first Congress of Journalists called on March 12, 2002, in the city of Astana, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan said that the Government should place state orders specially intended to produce Kazakh-language television and radio programs. In the meantime, Professor L.A. Baideldinov asserts that the language domain is akin to "social spontaneity that

defies speedy and sweeping reformation through legal regulation."

This point of view is apparently shared by Kyrgyzstan, where authorities do not demand that the state (Kyrgyz) or official (Russian) languages be used by mass media publications. "Consequently, there is no direct relationship between a status of the language that news media choose and reporting standards," writes Tolkunbek Turdubayev from Kyrgyzstan. He also points out that Russian-language newspapers have large circulations, are informative and boast skilled personnel. In contrast, newspapers published by the Uzbeks, another minority in Kyrgyzstan, are second in promptness and subject matter. They are marked by the so-called overstretched language – a feature more typical of publications written in the state (Kyrgyz) language. The author concludes by saying that, whatever the language, a newspaper will never win its audience unless it meets the requirements of the day – in other words, the market will put everything in its place.

### **COSTLY SPECIAL TASKS:**

Therefore, things that hold the key to language problems are skills, will and resources. The latter is also of high account with regard to solving special tasks in language policies. This concerns primarily Uzbekistan, which is planning to commute Cyrillic into the Roman alphabet. There are a wide range of approaches dictated by objective reasons. Some believe this to be a lasting process, which would call for huge investment. Others fear that the process would spawn a great host of social problems should the transition to a new alphabet be too rapid, especially in the print media. Even today, the

adult population reads newspapers and magazines only from time to time. Worse, there are a great number of trivial factors – e.g. no universal rules for spelling geographical or personal names, etc. Meanwhile, there are people championing the earliest possible transition to a new alphabet. Be that as it may, the initiative will call for enormous funds.

Other nations are overwhelmed by problems of a different kind. The public in northern Tajikistan, for one, turned to the electronic media having given up on print publications. Still worse, they prefer to watch higher-standard television productions of neighboring Uzbekistan – a matter of great concern in the eyes of local authorities. Considering the media is a vehicle for spreading certain ideology, the affair is taking on the dimensions of a media security issue in northern Tajikistan.

As regards Tajikistan, though, the nation has much more challenging problems to come to grips with, writes Sukhail Siddikzoda. It was the first Central Asian country to pass the Law on the State Tajik (Farsi) Language (October 1989). The adoption of the Arabic alphabet was debated nationwide, but after opposition headed by the Islamic Revival Party left the country, the debates have gradually come to a standstill. In 1999, the parliament of Tajikistan decided to remove the word Farsi from the name of the law. Nonetheless, the Arabic alphabet issue has not lost its appeal for a certain group of society. Many do not wish to reconcile themselves to the fact that the Russian-language press has a strong hold in Tajikistan. The same is true for the electronic media. There are many bilingual publications. The problems relating to the state language are gen-

erally raised during preparations for Language Day, a state holiday celebrated on July 22 after which the author says they sink into oblivion.

Mass media in the other countries of the region have their own

specific problems to deal with. The immediate success in solving these problems hinges on the media itself. Whatever, as before, mass media continues to expose bottlenecks in one sphere or another and

launch debates in publications or broadcasts struggling to have their errors eliminated. In so doing they contribute significantly to the success of their nations' language policies.