

Two Tongues, One Nation

The Dichotomy of Popular Language in Modern Kazakhstan

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Kazakhstan and Russia, two of the ten largest countries in the world, have been in close geographical, cultural, and linguistic contact for the majority of the past millennium. In the twentieth century, this association was taken to an entirely new level. Prior to this point in history, the people of Kazakhstan were still largely nomadic and were not effectively unified as a single nation in the contemporary sense of the term; Russia, on the other hand, was a colonial European power who had been accruing territory under the centralized leadership of the tsars. After a number of small-scale invasions and forays into the steppes of modern-day Kazakhstan, the Russians had solidified control of the territory by the middle of nineteenth century (“Kazakh”). When the Bolsheviks replaced the tsars as the rulers of the vast territory that had been the Russian Empire and initiated the creation of the Soviet Union, one of the first policies that they implemented was the adoption of Russian as a universal language for the various Soviet blocs to use, to ensure that no trouble would arise from communication barriers. Ever since, Russian and Kazakh have been the most common languages in Kazakhstan; however, their roles have constantly been changing, and recent years have seen dramatic shifts in their usage.

The involvement of the Russian people in the affairs of their Kazakh neighbors has had a number of important consequences for the latter’s original language. As a language, Kazakh is a relatively recent independent branch of the Turkic language family, with roots similar to those of other nearby languages such as Turkmen and Uzbek. In fact, during the period of tsarist rule, “Kazakh was considered but one of many dialects of the ‘Tatar language’; only in the Soviet period did it acquire the status of an independent language” (“Kazakh Language”). Though the language has a rich oral tradition that far predates its status as a distinct language, it was not widely written for a large portion of its history, which is most likely due in part to the relative lack of permanent settlements of its speakers. A number of scripts were used when writing was

warranted, including modified forms of Arabic and Latin alphabets, until 1940, when the government adopted “the present-day Cyrillic alphabet” (Johanson). In addition to providing a relatively permanent writing system, Russian has influenced Kazakh due to the technological and industrial growth that Kazakhstan experienced while under the control of the government in Moscow. Many of the words introduced to Kazakh for innovations in these areas, such “... *kiylö* ‘kilogram’, [and] *telgiræp* ‘telegraph’ ...” (Johanson) were loanwords from Russian. Russian has influenced the development of the Kazakh language and writing system more than any other language over the past two centuries.

A number of languages are used in modern Kazakhstan, but the two with largest number of speakers by far are Kazakh and Russian. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the new government of Kazakhstan led by Nursultan Nazarbayev has promoted the use of Kazakh within the country, and has instituted programs meant to promote the use of the language. Two such programs are increasing the number of schools which use Kazakh as the primary language of instruction and creating the requirement that candidates for the presidency of the country must prove their proficiency with the language by passing “... a three-part test that includes writing an essay, reading a text in Kazakh aloud, and delivering a 15-minute speech” (Najibullah). However, Russian is still used extensively within the country, and “official statistics estimate that 94.4 percent of the population speaks Russian and that nearly 85 percent of people older than 15 can speak, read, and write Russian” (Najibullah). Part of the continued popularity of Russian is due to the fact that it was used as a common language during the Soviet era, and many of the expatriates currently living in Kazakhstan due to either forced deportation or emigration of their own free will consider it a native language. Kazakh, on the other hand, “was mainly a language of communication among the Kazakhs, not having gained any significant headway

beyond the Kazakh ethnic community” (“Kazakh Language”) at the time of Kazakhstan’s reception of independence, and literacy rates of non-Kazakhs are still not as high in Kazakh as they are in Russian. Overall, Kazakh has become the language of choice for government and the Kazakh ethnic majority, while Russian still enjoys a place of prominence in business and among the minority groups of the country.

The constitution of modern Kazakhstan describes Kazakh as the “state language” and Russian as an “official language” (“Kazakh Nationalists”), and the important roles that both languages play in the daily lives of the people of the country are a reflection of their special designations. The close economic and social ties that Kazakhstan still has with Russia ensure that, as a language of business and of interethnic communication, Russian will continue to be used in Kazakhstan for quite some time. However, the promotion of Kazakh in matters of state and education by the government and the growth of national pride in the years following the achievement of independence from foreign rule have increased the profile of the language, especially with the country’s youth, and its role in the country will only continue to grow. The cultural traditions that Kazakh represents, such as “Traditional Kazakh poetry singing contests” (“Kazakh”), further ensure that the language of the Kazakh people will continue to represent a special place in a country which has retained a unique identity throughout a tumultuous history.

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