

TAJIK LANGUAGE: FARSI OR NOT FARSI?

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Being one of the first nations in Central Asia to pass the Law on the State (Farsi) Language, Tajikistan initiated the transition to the Arabic alphabet. Today, however, the promotion of Farsi and the imposition of the Arabic alphabet have slowed to give way to the Russian language.

Observing the way the law on the state (Tajik) language works and the current development of Tajik mass media, wakes memories of the 1990s when the situation was more propitious for the promotion of the state language and its implantation in society. Since 1994/1995 the Tajik language has been giving way to Russian. State language issues are referred to in Tajikistan annually on Language Day, marked July 22. Tajikistan is the only CIS country celebrating Language Day as a state holiday. Prior to annual celebrations, language matters figure prominently in press publications. And what next? Next, the wide use of the state language and related problems sink into oblivion.

RUSSIAN CONCURRENCE

The President of Tajikistan speaks mostly Tajik and demands that ministries prepare reports in the state language. In general, though, the Tajik language is gradually returning to the household level and increasingly becomes a tongue of home use. Within the recent seven or eight years, the development of the Russian language has predominated. Such weeklies as *Digest Press*, *Vecherny Dushanbe*, *Avicenna*, *Aladdin*, *Reklamnaya Gazeta*, *Varorud*, *Pro...*, *Biznes I Politika*, *Biznesmen*, *Narodnaya*

Gazeta, *Tojikiston* (since the autumn of 2001 published in Tajik), and others re-emerged one by one after a break caused by the Civil War.

Besides, there are a lot of bilingual publications – *Chashmandoz* (Perspective), *Minbari Halq* (Tribune of the People), *Rohi Umed* (Road of Hope), etc. It frequently happens, though, that Tajik-language newspapers carry Russian-language advertisements. Even *Jumkhuriat* (Republic), the number one newspaper, an official organ of the President and government, sometimes places Russian-language advertisements.

Perhaps this indicates that Tajik-language advertising doesn't sound attractive enough to appeal to the public. Sometimes, things come to absurdities though. For example, the above mentioned *Jumkhuriat*, a Tajik-language newspaper, once published the Foreign Ministry's condolences over the death of an official - in the Russian language. By so doing, the Ministry, intentionally or unintentionally, made it clear that the family of the deceased did not understand Tajik. The Ministry though, might well have had the condolences carried in *Narodnaya Gazeta*, a Russian-language government organ.

Why does Russian prevail in Tajikistan's print and electronic

mass media? The question is quite reasonable, and the answer is supply follows demand. And besides, publishing Russian-language newspapers doesn't involve too much trouble as Russia's press is available to Tajik journalists on the Web. From here they can draw publications, ideas and topics. Again, many newspapers are private, commercial outlets whose owners build their relations with the authorities on the principle "you don't touch me and I will not touch you". Therefore, Tajik-language newspapers do not often carry highly critical articles. Besides, few journalists would venture upon criticism, although there is no state censorship in this country. Reporters here have developed strong self-censorship – far stronger compared to their peers in the other Central Asian countries.

Electronic news media are contributing greatly to the growth of Russian-language broadcasting. The total amount of Russian-language productions in state-owned television and radio networks has risen substantially compared with the situation in 1990s, despite the significant decrease in the number of Russian-speakers in the republic. Today their number stands at about three percent, against more than 10 percent in the 1990s. This three percent includes pensioners, sick and poor citizens as well as mixed marriages.

In 1992, there were only two Russian-language television programs – "News" and "Every Monday Evening", a youth show. At the time, the Ministry of Television and

Radio was headed by Mirbobol Mirrakhimov, an opposition member, politician and scholar. When accused of having cut the number of Russian-language programs, he would riposte that the programs' air time limit was fixed at ten percent, thus being proportionate to the percentage of Russian-speakers. No doubt, contributing to such a state of affairs was the Law on the State (Farsi) language – Central Asia's first law of its kind enforced in October 1989. There were a lot of factors urging society to get the Tajik language revived.

THE OLDEST LANGUAGE

The Tajik (Persian) language, by far the oldest in Central Asia, has been a state language ever since the times of the Samanid dynasty which ruled more than a thousand years ago. It escaped extinction and remained a state language in the Bukhara Emirate. It was not until after the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia that it finally gave way to the Russian language.

Following the collapse of the Central Asian emirates in the wake of the revolution, the Arabic alphabet was initially replaced by the Roman alphabet, which, in turn, was displaced by the Cyrillic alphabet during World War II. It happened so that Persian-speaking nations – Tajiks, on the one hand, and Iranians and Afghans, on the other – still had to use different alphabets albeit sharing the same language. Sharing a common cultural and historical background and having an opportunity to read vast Persian-language literature, Tajik intellectuals during the post-independence years felt the potential of Tajik as a language of statesmanship, science and culture was still strong, and decided to

correct the historical error committed in the 1920s and 1930.

In addition, Tajikistan has been and remains a predominantly rural Central Asian nation – a circumstance that has a direct bearing on the Tajik languages being preserved. Unlike Soviet-era Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with Russian-speakers accounting for about half their populations and with more than 50% of the natives speaking Russian – a fact they took pride in – Tajikistan was a country with about 70% rural population. Naturally enough, they poke Russian worse than the neighboring nations but, luckily, retained their mother tongue. The other Central Asian nations did not have such facilitating conditions as Tajikistan for the preservation of their mother tongues.

The significance of the Russian language in this country was promoted using artificial methods. For example, students of the same university received different scholarships at different departments. Departments of Russian language and literature paid scholarships 25 percent larger than did departments of Tajik philology, for example. The same practice continued in secondary schools where university graduates went to teach. The salaries of Russian language teachers would be 25 percent higher than their Tajik language peers. Furthermore, young Russian-language specialists sent to Tajikistan from Russia's provinces would be provided with housing sooner than Tajik graduates. One-sided language policies, whereby Russian received priority, resulted in a gradual dislike of it.

NO LANGUAGE REVIVAL

Many optimists in the 1990s believed that the Arabic alphabet

would make a comeback to Tajikistan in some ten or fifteen years. Debates were in progress focusing on the great time and resources it would take. Champions of the Arabic alphabet laid special emphasis on the fact that once Tajik scientific, historical and religious literature was wholly written in Arabic the transition to the Arabic alphabet would be vital, otherwise part of the culture would be irretrievably lost. Also, there were quite a lot of skeptics and pessimists maintaining that the Arabic alphabet was too difficult to learn. Even now there appear from time to time articles by prominent figures flatly opposing the adoption of the Arabic alphabet. For example, Bozor Sobir, a notable Tajik poet who has stayed in the USA for the past eight years, has recently written that it would be a great mistake of the Tajiks to adopt the Arabic alphabet as it is very difficult and not everyone can master it. In the early 1990s, though, such protests were disregarded, and the Arabic alphabet was being gradually introduced into schools along with Persian that was taught as a special discipline. Books by Tajik and Iranian authors using the Tajik Arabic alphabet came to be printed.

All previous billboards, announcements and street name plates were removed and replaced with those written in the Arabic alphabet. Newspapers and television began to give lessons in the Persian language and Arabic writing. But, still, there was one important aspect the reformers neglected. In 1992 and in the years that followed, when opposition led by the Islamic Party of Revival was forced to emigrate from Tajikistan, the introduction of the Arabic alphabet slowed down. People didn't risk keeping books

based on the Arabic alphabet at home because of rumors that such literature would be confiscated and the owners arrested. So, books based on the Arabic alphabet were being destroyed again – just as they were after the October Revolu-

tion. The Arabic alphabet, too, began to disappear from billboards, announcements, street signs and magazines. In 1999, a parliament session, on the initiative of the deputies, removed the word “Farsi” from the name of the law on the

state language. However, only time will show whether a parliament resolution can suppress an alphabet that came to us, without the permission of the reigning Shah, about one thousand, four hundred years ago.