

Kazaks Hold Their Tongues

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Russian-speaking Kazaks are unimpressed with attempts to revive their own language

Walk down any street in Kazakhstan and the chances are you'll hear people speaking Russian.

When the country was still a member of the Soviet Union, use of the Kazak tongue was rather looked down on. This has left its mark as only about a third of Kazaks speak their language fluently, a fifth not at all with the rest having just a shaky grasp.

Zauresh Ismailova, a Kazak language teacher at an Almaty school, recalls that in Soviet times people did their best to educate children in Russian because this was seen as advancing their career prospects. Few schools in the cities conducted lessons in Kazak.

Back in the Nineties a number of decrees elevated Kazak to the status of official language for state institutions, but this turned out to be something of a token gesture, as Russian continues to predominate in the corridors of power.

Efforts are now being made to encourage people back to using the Kazak language, but with limited success. Leading the campaign for a restoration of the Turkic-based Kazak tongue is senator Mukhtar Kul-Mukhamed, newly appointed minister for culture and information. At a seminar in late May, he promised that state support for Kazak would be increased, but not, he insisted, at the expense of Russian.

But attempts to introduce Kazak as the administrative language are proceeding at a snail's pace. Rather than being used as a tool for day-to-day business, the language seems just to be keeping state translating offices busy.

The academic bodies tasked with restoring Kazak have done little more than encourage people to adopt the language, so it seems the government might well take over the role. Even so, no one believes the transition will be a swift one.

Bolat Khasanov, a member of the work group that drafted legislation on language use in 1989, thinks it will take several generations before Kazak becomes the lingua franca.

Many believe the process ought to be a gradual one to avoid any risk of alienating the Russian population.

Valentina Kurganskaia, director of the Centre for Humanitarian Research, thought the population in general supported a shift towards Kazak but sometimes resented official efforts to push their campaign too fast.

Pro-government media has given mild support to the adoption of Kazak, while independent periodicals have denounced the process as too nationalistic. The conflict of views has tended to confuse public opinion.

Not least of the problems is a lack of qualified language specialists and teachers capable of developing

Kazak courses at schools and colleges. Saken Ibrashev, an Almaty State University student, admits he has a poor grasp of his own language.

"We have lectures on the Kazak language," he said. "But teachers deliver them without enthusiasm. If you want good marks, you don't always need to learn it. Very often a bribe is enough to get you through."

The root of the problem is that ethnic Russians are unwilling to embrace Kazak, although this appears to be changing. In Soviet days, only a handful were prepared to do so. But a recent poll of young people showed that since 1994 there has been around 6 per cent growth in the number of who've acquired a command of the language.

At the same time, Russian-speakers say that if Kazaks themselves show no keenness for their language why should they bother to learn it.

Evgeny Petrov, a locksmith, said he would not study Kazak because he has no trouble in simply sticking to Russian.

Teacher Kuralai Kalieva said she sent her children to a Russian school because education standards there were better, a matter she considered more important than knowledge of her native language.

But the main dispute seems to centre not on the revival of Kazak itself but on the pace at which this can be achieved without alienating ethnic Russians. The latter, for instance, are opposed to any attempt to make knowledge of Kazak a condition of employment.

In a quite separate development, some state and private institutions insist their members must have knowledge of English. Strangely, nobody seems to mind this.

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