

## **Kyrgyz Language Controversy**

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Kyrgyzstan's attempts to make Kyrgyz its official language have alienated Russian-speakers

There was little surprise in Kyrgyzstan when a deadline to conduct all state business in the native language was delayed for another five years.

As in most Soviet republics, Kyrgyz played second fiddle to Russian for much of last century, only becoming the official language on independence in 1991.

The change partly prompted much of the Slavic, Russian-speaking population to leave the country. Those who stayed behind did so believing that Russian would not lose its dominant position quickly. They were right. Russian is to all intents and purposes the working language in Kyrgyzstan.

The transition from Russian to Kyrgyz was supposed to be complete by 2000, but the switch has been beset with problems - the biggest being the huge reduction in the budget allocated for the process.

The deputy chairman of the president's National Commission on the State Language, Kazat Akmatov, is highly critical of government efforts so far, "Resources have been wasted. The money was allocated by business and private firms, where it was used for anything but the Kyrgyz language."

In the capital, Kyrgyz is studied from the age of seven to seventeen. But the quality of the teaching is inadequate, textbooks are lacking - at some schools, there are five pupils for every book. The situation is worse in the provinces.

It's not only native Russians who need to learn Kyrgyz. Many middle-aged, native Kyrgyz who have grown up in the capital cannot speak their state language. Graduates of Russian schools - and of prestigious universities such as Leningrad, Novosibirsk and Tomsk - together with many of Kyrgyzstan's 80 minority groups, including Germans, Jews and Tartars, also have problems with the native language.

All have been waiting for President Aksar Akaev to complete the transition to Kyrgyz by this year. Yet even the new deadline of 2005 seems over-ambitious.

Firstly, expenditure for the translation of all existing laws, decrees and acts of government will be enormous. Secondly, the country is sorely lacking in skilled translators to complete the task. And finally, going on past experience, financial resources allocated to the job stand a real chance of being siphoned off to other departments

Also, the idea of a monolingual Kyrgyzstan provokes widespread controversy. Critics say the country will isolate itself from Russia and Russian-speaking countries in the CIS, possibly resulting in serious economic losses. Abandoning Russian could also inflict cultural damage, as much of the population would be deprived of access to a vast volume of world literature in Russian.

Kyrgyz nationalists frustrated at the slow pace of the language transition have put pressure on Akaev prompting this year's controversial decree requiring higher state officials to speak Kyrgyz - a blatant contravention of anti-discrimination laws laid down in the Constitution.

The decree further alarmed Russian-speakers, prompting some to leave the country. In an effort to stem the flow, the president recently proposed giving Russian language official status. Addressing parliamentarians at the beginning of May, he said, "maximum efforts be made in order to prove that the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan is a Home for All of Us' is not made up of empty words."

He also gave the government the task of creating equal conditions for Russian-language and Kyrgyz-language citizens who are seeking employment in the state sector.

Going on past behaviour, the president will undoubtedly soon blame his unpopular decree on unscrupulous bureaucrats, thus absolving himself, restoring rights to aggrieved citizens and gaining political capital for the December presidential elections.

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**Location:** Stavropol  
Russia  
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**Focus:** Central Asia

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