

Language Controversy in Kazakhstan

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Authorities say sensitive topic being stirred up for political ends.

A fierce debate is raging over language issues in Kazakhstan, sparked by an open letter expressing concern that Kazak is not used enough in official life.

The letter, addressed to Kazakhstan's president, prime minister and the heads of both houses of parliament, called for removal of article 7 of the constitution, guaranteeing that Russian can be used as well as Kazak in official communications.

The 138 signatories, who included intellectuals, artists, the editors of Kazak-language newspapers, and the heads of opposition parties Azat and Ak Jol and the green Ruhaniyat party, complained that the government was falling down on its obligations to promote Kazak as the state language.

The open letter, written in Kazak, was released to the media in late August. But somewhat tellingly, it was publication of a Russian translation that attracted public attention and sparked a heated debate, with media reports and public debates on the controversial issue.

Russian remains in wide use in Kazakhstan, not only among the substantial population of Slavs and as a lingua franca for the many other minorities, but also because it is commonly spoken by many urban Kazaks.

The letter was prompted by a language policy bill designed to promote the use of Kazak, and more specifically by a newspaper interview in which deputy culture minister Gaziz Telebaev suggested that parts of the law that had proved unpopular would be cut out.

On October 2, the group behind the letter held a public meeting in Kazakhstan's second city Almaty, which reportedly attracted around 500 people. Participants agreed a statement calling for the bill to go through unchanged, with no delay to plans to make Kazak mandatory for official use. It also said nationhood should be based on Kazak identity, not on more general notions of citizenship.

The overall public reaction suggests people in Kazakhstan, from a range of ethnic communities, are in favour of greater use of Kazak – and programmes to encourage competence in the language. But by and large, they do not believe this has to be an exclusive process that necessitates Russian being shut out from public life.

Many believe that Kazak will become more prevalent in the natural course of things over the next decade or two, but that trying to impose it will simply create problems while doing little practical to encourage use of the language.

The official view was expressed by Yermukhambet Yertysbaev, political advisor to President Nursultan Nazarbaev, who said he “categorically opposes, and absolutely does not share” the views set out in the letter.

Yertysbaev accused those behind the letter of seeking to create ethnic tensions, and suggested that the opposition parties that signed up to it were trying to win voters in next year's parliamentary election by aligning themselves with Kazak nationalists. He singled out the Azat party, in particular, for exploiting the language question for political gain.

Azat has now distanced itself from the letter, issuing a statement that it never signed up to the final text, and instead approved an earlier draft that “did not envisage restrictions on the use of the languages of other ethnic groups”.

Several other high-profile signatories, including well-known singer Bibigul Tulegenova, and Ak Jol leader Azat Peruashev, have also dissociated themselves from the proposal to cut out Russian from official use.

Some 60 per cent of the country's population now speak Kazak as their main language, while some unofficial estimates put the figure ten per cent higher. This is a result of demographic shifts over the last 20 years – outward migration of Russians and other groups like ethnic Germans who speak the language, and immigration of Kazak speakers from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia, China and even Turkey.

This trend is mirrored in the schools and higher education, where Kazak is replacing Russian as the principal teaching medium. Figures released at a round-table debate held by the Alternativa Centre for Political Research in Almaty in September 12 show that this year, 56 per cent of schoolchildren are

studying in Kazak, compared with just 33 per cent in Russian, and the rest in minority languages like Uighur, Tajik and Ukrainian.

In higher education, the disparity is not so great – 52 per cent of students are learning through Kazak compared with 47 per cent using Russian. The number of students enrolled in university courses taught via Kazak has quadrupled since the early 1990s.

Despite these changes, Russian remains the main language for administration and other official business. One of the complaints made in the open letter was that most meetings of the national government and of local authority bodies take place in Russian; it accused senior civil servants and government officials of blocking progress.

The response from the Russian community has been measured rather than alarmist. Interviewed by the Tengrinews.kz site on September 23, leading community member Vladimir Primin said the letter was not a cause of great concern. He noted comments by members of parliament that the constitution did not have to be amended in order to achieve the aims of promoting Kazak and encouraging its use.

Primin said he recognised the need for non-Kazaks to acquire a good knowledge of the language and commented that he and others like him were learning it as “our moral obligation and duty”.

(See also **[What’s Behind Kazak Language Campaign?](#)**)

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