

# OFFICIAL LANGUAGE DEBATES IN UZBEKISTAN AND THE RUSSIAN FACTOR

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The Central Asian Turkish republics, which gained their independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, also made new attempts on the alphabet. While Azerbaijan switched to the Latin alphabet in February 1992, the Turkmen parliament decided to gradually switch to the Latin alphabet from April 1993 until 2000, which marked the full implementation of the new state alphabet. Uzbekistan decided to switch to the Latin alphabet in September 1993.

The transition from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet limited Russian influence in these young republics, hence Moscow described the change as a disturbing step. Since Kyrgyzstan is dependent on Russia in many issues, especially regarding the economy, it could not take a step in this direction. Kazakhstan also waited many years, but needed to eye out for the balance of powers within the region. The alphabet transition, which was initiated in 2017 with the instructions

of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the founding leader of Kazakhstan, is still in progress.

## Opposing Views and Reform Steps

Despite all developments, discussions on the status of the Russian language and its alphabet continue in Central Asia. While in Uzbekistan in particular, these discussions, which have become more pronounced in recent years, have become remarkable. The "state language law" enacted in 1995, which recognized Uzbek as the only state language and obliged government works to only be written in Uzbek, was never fully implemented. The Cyrillic and Russian alphabets are still widely used in Uzbekistan, and the vast majority of government documents continue to be written in Russian.

President of Uzbekistan Shevket Mirziyoyev encouraged the utilization of the internet more and more; increasing online discussions about



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language among the Uzbek people. Discussions prioritizing Uzbek rather than Russian were held on telegram, facebook and other social media platforms rather than national television or print media. The civil society, which started to develop among the Uzbekistan youth, made an important voice for the spread of the national language.

While these discussions were taking place, a limited minority of the old generation with Soviet nostalgia called on the Uzbekistan government to make Russian an official language along with Uzbek. These discourses increased even more, especially in the period that coincided with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Tashkent in 2019. Some prominent names and artists, who advocate the Russian language more than their native language and stated that the official status of Russian is a sign of gratitude to the Russian nation, also demonstrated the colonial mentality with these attitudes.

Despite the calls made by the old generation elites for the regulation of the Russian language, a new process has been initiated in the country to strengthen the Uzbek language. The Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan drew attention to the violation of the state language law in state organizations and prepared a draft law that would impose fines on government officials and civil servants who refrain from using Uzbek as their primary working language. Russian officials reacted to this decision.

While the government officials criticized the Russian officials by stating that the issue is

Uzbekistan's internal affairs, the Uzbek people showed a serious reaction against Russia regarding the matter, especially on social media. For the first time, a Russian official's involvement in the internal affairs of Uzbekistan in such a domestic issue has also raised an important question mark. It is also remarkable that this statement took place in a process in which the Tashkent government was considering to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union as an observer.

Despite all these events, President Mirziyoyev issued a new decree to accelerate the transition of the Uzbek language from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. The decree announced on October 21 includes a language policy for the period of 2020-2030 to reform the Uzbek language and expand the use of it. The decree calls for the establishment of a working group within three months to develop a roadmap for a full transition to the Uzbek alphabet based on the Latin alphabet and submit it to the presidency. In addition, it is stated that Uzbek should be spoken in 80% of kindergartens by 2030. More over, it aims to increase the hours of Uzbek language teaching in education.

Besides this determined stance of the Uzbek government, the young generation and the advocates of national sovereignty show that they are aware of the importance of their mother tongue. For this reason, new reforms are of great importance in order to increase the prestige of the Uzbek language.