

POLITICS TODAY

SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: RESULTS, PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

National identities, considered a guarantee of successful development, were among the priorities for the five newly independent states that emerged in the territory of what used to be the Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan—the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The process began when the Soviet Union still existed: the Soviet Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan adopted laws on language that allowed the Central Asian elites to pass decisions related to the languages used by titular nations. In the post-Soviet years the language policy moved to the fore as one of the key aspects of the gradually emerging national identities treated with special attention at the state level.

No matter how similar the processes were, no matter how close the cultures and traditions, each of the Central Asian countries chose its own road, fine-tuned to the specifics of their domestic contexts and the interests of the elites in power. The processes unfolded in full compliance with social continuity, traditions, culture and national languages that survived under Soviet rule. The republics, however, had to take into account the national minorities, including the Russian-speaking populations, in all post-Soviet republics.

Inherited from Soviet times, the Russian language was dominant in all of the Central Asian republics, and even preserved much of its influence in the newly independent post-Soviet Central Asian states. This means that they should have opted for a relatively balanced language policy up to and including the continual stage-by-stage contraction of the spheres in which Russian was predominantly used. For obvious reasons they could not push aside their trade and economic relations with Russia and ignore the role of the Soviet cultural and educational heritage. This cushioned the politi-

cal effects of the Soviet Union's disintegration, partially limited the role of nationalist parties in the newly independent states and helped preserve their educational potential.

Shaping national identities in the post-Soviet Central Asian countries was not a smooth, let alone easy, process: societies were far from homogenous, while the regions found it hard to agree to more or less reasonable compromises. This became especially apparent in Kyrgyzstan, which was divided into the southern and northern parts; in Kazakhstan, where the local society was divided into zhuzes; in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, where clans carried a lot of political weight. Thus the elites in power in all of the Central Asian states had no choice but to take into account very different or even clashing interests of informal groups and clans, and tune their policies accordingly. This means that the road towards national identities was far from simple: it meandered between contradictory trends and interests. This also explains the centuries-old mechanism of governance, namely, regional-clan approaches to various problems, which was in place in all of the Central Asian countries, functioning outside the party and state structures. While paying lip service to Communist ideology, leaders of the Central Asian republics invariably took the clan balance of power into account.

From the very first days of independence, the Central Asian leaders remained loyal to the conceptual approach to national identities: they concentrated on historical heritage, culture, traditions and national language, the key element of national identity.

Despite the fairly long history of their independence, the problem of national identity remains prominent in all of the Central Asian countries. It is intertwined with the problem of the emergence of statehood and development of political systems and the radical geopolitical shifts occurring against the background of mounting economic prob-

lems. This cannot but affect the situation in | cess of shaping national identities has not
the Central Asian countries in which the pro- | yet been completed.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, identity, language policies, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Republic of Uzbekistan, Russia, political process.*

Introduction

The events of the late 1980s-end of 1991 have a significant effect on the future of the Central Asian republics. In an effort to acquire more political weight and influence, the elites stepped up their activities. At that time the role of the Russian language was never questioned—it dominated education and culture and remained the language of inter-national communication, even though wider spheres of application of the titular nations' languages were also discussed.

This resulted from and reflected the long-standing relationship first between the Central Asian khanates and the Russian Empire and later, in Soviet times, between the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and the federal center, on the other. Having established control over vast territories, the Russian Empire confirmed its domination through a wider use of Russian, among other things. The Soviet Union moved in the same direction towards a supra-national Soviet identity, while the Russian language bound together all ethnic groups.

In the 1930s-1940s, industrialization of the Central Asian republics attracted Russian-speaking migrants who, in fact, made modernization possible, and widened the sphere of use of the Russian language in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

In the Soviet Union the Russian language dominated the social and public spheres. It played a key role in shaping the Soviet identity in a unified state; the knowledge of Russian was an important element of a successful career in the party and state structures. On the whole, it was within the Soviet Union that the Central Asian republics instituted state structures and achieved an economic breakthrough by creating an industrial economic sector. They perfected their methods of governance and endeavored to establish their national statehoods.

First Steps towards Independence

The political processes in Central Asia were gaining momentum while the Soviet Union was still in existence. In the late 1980s, fairly active national movements emerged in the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan, reflecting the desire of the Central Asian elites to gain greater independence within the Soviet Union. Under the pressure of the political changes happening in the federal center, the republican leaders had no choice but to adjust to the kaleidoscope and learn to meander in order to remain in power. A tactical alliance between the party and bureaucratic elite, on the one hand, and the leaders of nationalist movements, on the other, was used by those in power to put pressure on

Moscow. In the Central Asian republics the slogans of democratization and economic and political change served as a smokescreen behind which the struggle between clans for power and control over republics' property mounted.

Moscow slackened the reins, which meant that the power within the Soviet system had to be redistributed. The institute of presidency was introduced in the Central Asian republics in order to consolidate their positions in the relationship with the federal center and the power of local elites. In some of the republics (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may serve as pertinent examples) presidents were elected by the Supreme Soviets as evidence of informal agreements between the main political forces. Other republics (i.e., Turkmenistan) elected their presidents by popular vote while still a part of the Soviet Union. In both cases, however, the presidents were concerned, first and foremost, about the opposition, which had to be kept in check. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan the opposition parties were removed from the political scene. Having accomplished this, the Central Asian republics could move towards cardinal decisions related to national identity.

The crisis mounting in the U.S.S.R. allowed the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan to exploit the situation with the aim of raising the status of titular languages through republican laws. In 1989-1990, new laws on language were passed: in 1989—in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; in 1990—in Turkmenistan. The titular nations' languages acquired the status of state languages, while the status of Russian was lowered—in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan it was defined as the language of inter-ethnic communication—but its role was still great.

In April 1990, the federal center responded with the Law on Languages of the Peoples of the U.S.S.R. in which Russian was defined as the official language of the Soviet Union.¹ This occurred too late—the law could not and did not affect the desire of all republics to raise the status of their titular languages.

Language Policy: First Results

The first phase of new language policies in the Central Asian countries began in 1991 when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were moving towards higher statuses of their national tongues much faster than their neighbors. In the 1992 Constitution of Turkmenistan, Turkmen was defined as the state language. In 1993, the republican leaders decided to readjust the already complex language policy with a decree on trilingual education (in Turkmen, English and Russian). In real life, however, the power elites remained determined to promote the Turkmen tongue and to squeeze Russian out of the republic. The volume of teaching conducted in Russian and national minorities' languages was gradually contracting; street signs were replaced, and all the officials were expected to master Turkmen.

Uzbekistan was also active in the language sphere: it relied on historical heritage, the period of Central Asian khanates and paid particular attention to the ancient origins of Uzbek civilization. This justified the policy that aimed for the accelerated introduction of Uzbek as the state language to be used in all power structures. Uzbek language classes were organized, the secondary schools curricu-

¹ See: M.A. Arutiunova, "Yazykovaia politika i status russkogo iazyka v SSSR i gosudarstvakh postsovetovskogo prostranstva," *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta, Series Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia i mirovaia politika*, No. 1, 2012, pp. 155-178.

lum was radically changed, traditional festivals and other cultural events became much more frequent. For obvious reasons, the Russian language issue was absent from the 1992 Constitution and the preceding Law on Language. The road, however, was a bumpy one: making Uzbek the state language obligatory for all officials was an unattainable goal.

These problems did not discourage the Central Asian elites: inspired by the idea of national states they never abandoned or revised their approaches to nation-building. National identities seemed like a sufficient explanation and justification of new foreign policy vectors and new value systems that replaced the communist ideology. It was expected that language, education, culture and history would add appeal to the new ideas that the elites tried to plant in the minds of common people in the form of new axiological landmarks, revised history and reinterpreted historical facts. Each of the post-Soviet states was consistently creating its “true” pre-Soviet history by raising folklore to the status of official history and adopting national flags and symbols.² National resurrection was treated as an all-important goal; new national histories were constructed to suit the political tasks of the new post-Soviet elites that relied on pre-Soviet history. A consistent language policy was an inevitable companion of active manipulations with historical facts designed to awaken national self-awareness and confirm national specifics.

No matter how persistent, the efforts to accelerate the process of building national states, and to shape what was considered adequate national elites ran against the problems created by the region’s economic ties with post-Soviet countries, kinship ties and the absence of nationalist forces that relied on considerable financial support and a sustainable electorate. Central Asian societies were disunited, meanwhile, as could well be expected, the clan system and ethnic and religious disagreements survived. National integrity was destabilized by national and religious conflicts, separatism and even wars between states.³ Central Asian elites persisted in their efforts to plant new ideas and values and to transform their polyethnic and multi-confessional populations into nations.⁴ This policy can be aptly described as one aimed at “ethnic revival” designed to bring members of the titular nation to the fore in all spheres of life.⁵

Titular nations and national languages (perceived as one of the symbols of state independency and national identity) remained in the center of attention. It turned out, however, that in the complicated political situations that prevailed in all countries, it was difficult to find alternatives to Communist ideology and the Russian language. The elites were locked in a power struggle, while the convoluted social and economic problems were pushed aside. The newly-independent Central Asian countries were confronted with the impossibly low level of command of national languages. The majority of the republics’ populations (in which members of titular nations prevailed) preferred Russian as the language of everyday communication. Central Asian elites took shape in the Soviet Union, where the Russian language was a consolidating factor, the role of which was never doubted. This explains why the elaboration of language policies in the Central Asian states proved to be a daunting task and why it turned out to be next to impossible to use national languages in everyday communication as readily as expected. The language reform stalled because Russian was widely used in all countries. Their elites limited themselves to replacing geographic names and the names of territorial-administrative units inherited from the Soviet Union, while family names regained their historical originals.

² See: M. Laruelle, “Vneshniaia politika i identichnost v Tsentralnoy Azii,” *Pro et Contra*, No. 1, 2013, pp. 16-20.

³ See: E.T. Seylekhanov, *Politicheskaia sistema Respubliki Kazakhstan: opyt razvitiia i perspektivy*, KISI at the President of the RK, Almaty, 2009, p. 62.

⁴ See: R.K. Kadyrzhanov, *Etnokulturny simvolizm i natsionalnaia identichnost Kazakhstana*, ed. by Z.K. Shaukenova, Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies KN MON RK, Almaty, 2014, 168 pp.

⁵ See: M.V. Starchak, “Obrazovanie na russkom iazyke v gosudarstvakh Tsentralnoy Azii-chlenakh SNG: problemy i puti reshenia,” *Problemy natsionalnoy strategii*, No. 3, 2010, pp. 52-65.

The Russian language, a part of the Soviet heritage, widely used in all spheres of social life in the post-Soviet states, was one of the stumbling blocks on the road towards national identity. Central Asian elites wanted to rely on traditions and mechanisms of power inherited from the pre-Soviet past, the most important of them being informal agreements, an indispensable element in the countries divided into regions and societies divided into clans. Deeply rooted in the region's past, these elements survived the Soviet Union. Under Soviet power, however, clan disagreements remained suppressed: the federal center spared no effort to maintain a balance between rivaling clans and severely suppressed all attempts at independence. The newly-independent Central Asian states were all too eager to demonstrate that they had detached themselves from the Soviet past, and that their regimes differed from the Soviet regime. Greater attention to national identities up to and including the efforts to develop the titular national language were intended as a departure from everything Soviet.

The language policy in these states was the central element of shaping national identities, its tasks and paces determined by the political elites in power; their attitude to the national and minorities' languages.

The language policy in all Central Asian countries was highly politicized; passions flew high, a sure sign of a highly complicated situation. This means that the political elites had no choice but to take the views and opinions of the highly heterogeneous societies into account. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan the outflow of the Russian-speaking population, frightened by the widely popularized ideas of national distinctions, strongly affected the pace of the introduction of language policies.⁶ Their elites had no choice but to adjust their policy to a degree to support the Russian language in these republics.

New Identity: Reliance on Titular Nations

Confronted with or even challenged by these problems, Central Asian elites did not change their approach: they remained convinced that statehood and identity could and should be built on titular nations as the foundation. These ideas were further developed in the constitutions and laws related to language policies.

The post-Soviet Central Asian countries selected one of the two roads leading to the target aim: Uzbekistan pushed aside the interests of national minorities and opted for Latinization via the law of September 1993 (the process was expected to be completed by 2000). Later on the implementation period was extended to 2005, but the process has yet to be completed. In December 1995, Uzbekistan adopted a new version of the same law, which confirmed the status of Uzbek as the state language. Three years later, in 1998, the law was annulled. The Russian language reappeared in official documents, which was quite logical: the political elite knew Russian better than their native languages.

Turkmenistan followed a more or less similar course. In April 1993, the president signed the decree on Latinization, which defined 1996 as the deadline; subsequently the cutoff date was pushed to 2000. The process was not completed by either the earlier or later date. The intensified Turkmenization limited the role of the Russian language: having gained independence, "Turkmenistan ac-

⁶ See: *Natsionalnye istorii na postsovetском prostranstve-II*, ed by F. Bomsdorf, G. Bordiugov, The Friedrich Naumann Foundation AIRO-XXI, Moscow, 2009, 372 c.

corded a de facto higher status to its titular population, ethnic Turkmen, and adopted policies and practices that promoted its specific interests.”⁷

In both countries it was expected that the Latin script would limit the cultural and educational impact of their Soviet past and legitimize the positions of the new elite. In plain words, it meant that Latinization would tighten the elite’s grip on power.

Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with their multinational populations exerted more caution. They preferred to implement their language policies step by step. In August 1995, the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted its Constitution, wherein Art 7 stated that Kazakh was the state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan and that “in the state organizations and local government bodies Russian is officially used on an equal basis with Kazakh.”

In Kazakhstan, all definitions of national identity clearly point to the Kazakh ethnicity as the core of the state and to its special responsibility for the processes unfolding in the country and language policy in particular. Republican leaders never abandoned their efforts to find the mechanisms by which the role of the Russian language could be taken into account. In 1995, the republic established the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, which convened to address numerous issues, including language.

The Concept of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted in 1996 claimed the Kazakh idea to be the cornerstone of Kazakhstan’s identity.⁸ This document specified the aims of state policy in the language sphere and created conditions for the further development of Kazakh as the state language.⁹ Later, in July 1997 the country adopted the Law on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which dealt with the function of different languages in the country and endowed Russian with a special status. This means that the country’s leaders tried to preserve the role of the Russian language, while moving the national tongue to the fore.

The 1994 Constitution of Tajikistan defined Tajik as the state language and pushed Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication aside. In 1997, the language situation in the republic was further elaborated in the Program of the Government of Tajikistan for the Development of the State and Other Languages in the State Territory of the Republic of Tajikistan.

All in all, despite the deliberately demonstrative trend to take into account the multinational composition and avoid any discriminatory measures against the Russian language, it was pushed to the margins. The reforms in the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan reflected the desire of the elites to assert and confirm their national identities.

Language Policy: No Compromises

In the early 21st century, the Central Asian countries arrived at a clear and unambiguous decision: a commitment solely to the interests of the titular nation. The pace of language reforms and the methods used varied from country to country, while the interests of social and political stability dictated caution in the language sphere.

⁷ A. Bohr, *Turkmenistan: Power, Politics and Petro-Authoritarianism*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatam House, 2016, p. 33.

⁸ See: E.E. Omelchenko, “Protsessy natsiestroitelstva i formirovaniia identichnosti na postsovetkom prostranstve (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus),” *Kazakhstan-Spektir*, No. 1, 2010, pp. 30-43.

⁹ See: *Rasporyazhenie Prezidenta RK ot 4.11.1996 No. 3186 “O kontseptsii iazykovoy politiki Respubliki Kazakhstan,”* available at [http://kazakhstan.news-city.info/docs/sistemsl/dok_pegfto.htm], 5 December, 2017.

In 2000, speaking at the 7th Session of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev had pointed out that Kazakh cultural affinity should be based on Kazakh culture; subsequently he emphasized the consolidating role of Kazakh ethnicity. In 2001, Kazakhstan adopted the State Program of Functioning and Development of Languages for 2001-2010 to gradually expand the sphere of Kazakh language usage and narrow down the public sphere of the Russian language. The republican leaders staked on the Kazakh language, something that those who wanted to consolidate Kazakh identity insisted on. The president of Kazakhstan, in particular, repeated that the knowledge of the titular tongue was critically important for the nation's cohesion.

The interests of the Russian-speaking population could not be ignored, either. The authorities tried to reduce tension through all sorts of initiatives. In October 2006, speaking at the 12th session of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, the president formulated the idea of trilingualism, which he developed in his 2007 address "New Kazakhstan in a New World": "I propose to begin a step-by-step implementation of the 'The Unity of Three Languages' cultural project. Kazakhstan must be perceived by the world as a country with a highly educated population, which can use three languages." In 2012, he returned to the idea and pointed out: "We should treat the Russian language and Cyrillic writing in the same caring way as we do Kazakh."¹⁰ On the whole, the lack of tension in the language sphere helped preserve stability and keep inter-national tensions in check.

Kyrgyzstan followed a more or less similar road. In 2000, it adopted the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Official Language of the Kyrgyz Republic, where Russian was defined as official. In 2001, this status was confirmed in the newly adopted Constitution. Later on in the same year the president issued a decree in regard to the Program of the Development of the State Language of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2000-2010, which was designed to develop the Kyrgyz language and ensure its more active use in all social spheres. In 2004, the republic adopted a new Law on the Official Language of the Kyrgyz Republic, which reconfirmed the status of Kyrgyz as the state language and of Russian as an official one. The 2007 Constitution confirmed both statuses.

Tajikistan adopted the Law on the State Language of the Republic of Tajikistan in 2009, according to which the Tajik language was to be used in official documents. This predetermined the key role of the titular ethnicity, while Russian was deprived of its status of the inter-ethnic communication language. Subsequently, in 2011, the amended law restored its status.

The Central Asian countries faced the challenging task of gradually promoting the titular nations' languages, while limiting the sphere where the Russian language, the greatest barrier on the road towards a stronger statehood, was used. Titular languages were perceived as unifying factors.

The process was a slow one, even though the states were doing their best to support their state languages. Other, non-titular, ethnic groups demonstrated no enthusiasm when it came to learning the languages of the titular Central Asian nations. This meant that the corresponding languages could not be regarded as the cornerstone of national identities. City dwellers who habitually used Russian in everyday communications showed no strong desire to learn the national languages.

It is even harder to impose shared values: members of other ethnic groups rejected them as alien to their identities. For obvious reasons, non-titular populations could not be integrated in the tribal-clan system, while the titular nations were, in fact, divided by all sorts of traditions into tribes, zhuzes and clans stamped with regional specifics.

¹⁰ [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-nnazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state].

Political Process and Identity

The political processes unfolding in Central Asia were highly contradictory since the institutes of power, the party system and the attempts to identify the roles and places of the opposition parties were developing under pressure from tribes and regional clans. This is explained by the powerful structures on which local societies represented by regional, tribal, clan and other traditional units relied for self-regulation, and which inevitably affected domestic and foreign policies.¹¹

In an effort to resemble democratic states, the post-Soviet Central Asian countries elected their parliaments and presidents and followed the separation of powers principle only to discover that they were not yet ready to construct political systems according to Western patterns.¹² The local political elites used traditional methods of governance that relied on compromises between informal groups of influence. This was partly rooted in the Soviet system of state governance in Central Asia, which combined party and state with regional-clan approaches. Predictably, independence added a spark to the struggle between clans and groups of influence that unfolded behind the screen of negotiations regarding democratic changes. It was hardly a surprise that Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan between 1991 and 2016, took special and very active measures to neutralize the most powerful regional and ethnic clans.¹³

In practically all of the Central Asian countries the clans consented to no compromises; they were determined to redistribute power not among branches of government but between the key elite groups, which the republics inherited from the Soviet past, when they had been formed according to local traditions and historical specifics.¹⁴ Central Asian clans are rooted in the region's past and culture. The tribal-clan and territorial division is essential to the region's countries and plays a key role in their political life. Not infrequently, candidates for political and economic posts are recommended by territorial units.¹⁵

Personified power and the reliance on one's own ethnic group, clan or region explain why local regimes became authoritarian after a while. The Supreme Soviets elected in Soviet times, when a different model and very different interests dominated the region, were replaced with the institute of presidency. From that time on, the president was seen as the key figure responsible for foreign policy, who also plays a great role in internal developments. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan worked hard to introduce and consolidate democratic institutions, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been infringing on the rights of their parliaments from the outset. For instance, in 1991 the Uzbekistan Supreme Soviet amended the law on the status of deputy under which any deputy could be deprived of his mandate for anti-constitutional actions and destabilization of social and political situation. Under the Constitution, Turkmenistan was a presidential republic in which the president was the head of the state and the executive branch. In 1992, when the Constitution and the reforms were drafted, Sapar-

¹¹ See: A.D. Bogaturov, A.S. Dundich, V.G. Korgun, *et al.*, *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v Tsentralnoy Azii: sobytia i dokumenty*, Aspekt-Press, Moscow, 2011, p. 19.

¹² See: S. Zhiltsov, "Political Processes in Central Asia: Peculiarities, Problems, Prospects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1, Vol. 17, 2016, pp. 21-29.

¹³ See: *Tsentralnaia Azia: 1991-2009*, Monograph, ed. by B.K. Sultanov, KISI at the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2010, p. 199.

¹⁴ See: R.Yu. Khadyrov, "Osobennosti politicheskoy sistemy Tadzhikistana," *Problemy postsovetского prostranstva (Post-Soviet Issues)*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 104-111.

¹⁵ See: R.Yu. Khadyrov, "Rol klanov vo vnutrenney politike Tadzhikistana. Aktualnye problemy razvitiia postsovetского prostranstva," *Materialy Mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii (Moskva, 2 apreliia 2015 g.)*, MGOU, Moscow, 2015, p. 124.

murat Niyazov, who headed the country between 1991 and 2006, pointed out that his country should not copy the state systems of other countries but should rely on the Turkmen history, traditions and experience.¹⁶

The relationships between authorities and the opposition were strongly affected by the fact that in the Central Asian countries the power was concentrated in the hands of the president. The so-called official opposition was impotent—it could not affect domestic or foreign policies. The democratic norms produced little or no effect on the political elites' actions on the domestic political scene: the democratic institutions and procedures existed side by side with the methods directly related to the mentality and history of the Central Asian countries.¹⁷ This made the political struggle in Central Asia highly distinctive: it retreated from the public sphere to behind-the-scene arrangements. Cabinets were removed and snap parliamentary elections organized to strengthen the position of the president. On the whole, the Central Asian countries have not yet achieved continuity of supreme power.¹⁸

Consolidation of power in the hands of the president and the trend towards limiting the leeway of the opposition changed the relationships between authorities and nationalist movements, which by inertia from the 1980s demanded political and economic reforms.

The Central Asian countries that moved away from the Soviet experience encouraged clan and hierarchical approaches to state governance. Having outlived the Soviet Union, they became pronounced enough to determine the approach to the shaping of political systems for many decades to come. This process fully reflected the Central Asian peculiarities and relied on the region's long history. Indeed, Western democratic standards—the president, elections and the party system—have nothing in common with traditional Asian societies.¹⁹ In addition, “the ideals, principles, and standards of developed societies, as well as anything resembling an authentic national doctrine, were replaced with imitations, a façade of democracy; promises of national plans to develop government language policy, history, and the culture of the people became merely decorative.”²⁰

In clan societies political and economic elites are intertwined, therefore, regional elites compete for political power that, as they are well aware, equals control over the economy.

The region's historical and cultural heritage strongly affected the ways, in which the political systems developed in each of the countries: the post-Soviet ideological vacuum was filled with mythologized history and historical heroes.²¹ Having pushed the Communist ideology aside, local leaders armed themselves with the idea of a national state. The new political elites needed legitimate arguments to justify their pivot to a national state; they used history to push the origins of statehood deeper into antiquity in order to inflate national grandeur.²²

¹⁶ See: K.P. Dudarev, “Postkommunisticheskiy avtoritarny rezhim,” in: *Postsovetskaya Tsentralnaia Azia. Poteri i obreteniia*, Vostochnaya literatura RAN, Moscow, 1998, p. 167.

¹⁷ See: Kh.Kh. Khurramov, “Vzaimootnosheniia oppositsii i vlastey v Tadzhikistane: istoria i sovremennost,” *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva (Post-Soviet Issues)*, No. 2, 2016, pp. 112-116.

¹⁸ See: *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v Tsentralnoy Azii*, ed. by A.A. Dynkin, V.G. Baranovskiy, IMEMO, Moscow, 2013, 150 pp.

¹⁹ See: E. Luzanova, “Mezhdunarodny seminar ‘Politicheskoe razvitie Tsentralnoy Azii i Tsentralnoy Evropy: skhodstvo, razlichii, puti sotrudnichestva,’” *Tsentralnaia Azia*, No. 10, 1997.

²⁰ V. Tuleshov, “On the Question of the Formation and Development of Identity in Kazakhstan and the Central Asia Region,” in: *Central Asia at 25: Looking Back, Moving Forward. A Collection of Essays from Central Asia*, Central Asia Program, Washington, D.C., 2017, pp. 32-35.

²¹ See: M.A. Neymark, “Kultura kak resurs natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossii,” in: *Sovremennyy mir i geopolitika*, Kanon +, Moscow, 2015, pp. 158-175.

²² See: R. Agaev, “TsAR: problemy evoliutsii politicheskikh system,” in: *Tsentralnaia Azia: geopolitika i ekonomika regiona*, Krasnaia zvezda, Moscow, 2010, p. 15.

The Constitutions that all Central Asian countries adopted in the early 1990s redistributed power in favor of the president and de facto deprived parliaments of independence. The region's most typical feature is indicative of the specifics of its political system: a state should be governed from the center, while political rivalry between government branches should be limited. Having pushed the parliaments to the back burner, the Central Asian countries adopted new constitutions that allotted wider or practically unlimited power to the presidents and limited powers of other government branches to the greatest extent.²³

Convinced that the opposition posed a threat to their power, Central Asian presidents persistently pushed it out of the political sphere. In Kazakhstan, "peaceful coexistence" of authorities and the opposition survived till the mid-1990s; in Uzbekistan, authorities did not hesitate to push the opposition into an impossibly narrow framework to downplay its influence. Predictably, authoritarian trends in the Central Asian countries grew even stronger.

The checks and balances system, commonly implemented in the West, was not popular with the authoritarian Central Asian regimes that nevertheless carried out parliamentary elections and maintained a sham party system to create an illusion of democracy. Central Asia, however, remained as it really was: a region of politically passive population that close ranks with people in power and the elites, obviously unwilling to structure the political space. The archaic political system allowed tribal, clan and regional systems to move to the fore to defend their local interests through agreements reached behind the scenes and amid outbursts of clan rivalry. Political parties set up to demonstrate devotion to the principles of democracy, democratic reforms and changes in the political sphere were nothing more than a façade behind which the real mechanism of decision-making was functioning. Political parties were founded on the basis of regional or clan interests rather than ideological principles; this explains why the semblance of political struggle in these countries was not inspired by ideological disagreements, but by the clashing interests of different clans.

The president's extensive powers relied on historical traditions: the head of state was perceived as the national leader with unlimited powers. The extent of presidential powers differed from country to country, yet the trend remained the same. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan parliaments remained formally independent, while in the neighboring Central Asian countries they could not compete with the president's de facto unlimited powers.

Under the 1993 Constitution Kyrgyzstan became a parliamentary republic with the separation of powers that distinguished it from the rest of the Central Asian countries. In the first years of independence, the president was elected by popular vote, and acquired the widest possible powers as the guarantor of the country's unity. The Supreme Soviet was thus deprived of at least part of its power and political influence. Obviously determined to follow the path of Western democracies, Bishkek tried to prove that the parliamentary form of governance fully corresponded to the country's traditions.

However, the viability of the country divided into clans, tribes and regional groups was heavily tested by the parliamentary system, the fact amply confirmed by two coups d'état organized by regional leaders who wanted to acquire political and economic power at one blow. In 2010, the next coup created a faltering parliamentary-presidential form of government that pushed the state towards disintegration.²⁴

²³ See: D.E. Furman, "Evolutsia politicheskikh system stran SNG," in: *Sredizemnomor'e-Chernomor'e-Kaspiy: mezhdubolshoy Evropoy i Bolshim Blizhnim Vostokom*, ed. by N.P. Shmelev, V.A. Guseynov, A.D. Yazkova, Grantisa, Moscow, 2006, p. 136.

²⁴ See: D.A. Aleksandrov, I.V. Ippolitov, S.D. Popov, "Miagkaya sila kak instrument amerikanskoy politiki v Tsentralnoy Azii," in: *Tsentralnaya Azia: problemy i perspektivy (vzgliad iz Rossii i Kitaia)*, RISI, Moscow, 2013, p. 28.

In the absence of adequate legal mechanisms of cooperation between the governmental branches, the political systems where informal agreements and clan (rather than state) interests predominate become unsteady and therefore unable to oppose external and internal challenges. This deprives the state power structure of self-sufficiency: it becomes nothing more than the forums where sub-state groups of influence are struggling for their own security and monopoly over the state.²⁵

Political processes unfolding in the Central Asian countries are strongly affected by the economic situation, in which the elites, unable to cope with urgent regional problems, are locked in fierce and gradually mounting rivalry for the very limited resources; the social situation burdened with unemployment is meanwhile deteriorating from bad to worse. This naturally affects the approaches that Central Asian elites undertake when trying to secure their power and ensure stability. Turkmenistan, in which rivaling groups are fairly active despite the apparently authoritarian regime, is the best example. The clan structure of Turkmen society has been preserved; today a new generation of clan leaders has joined or will soon join the fracas.²⁶

The presidents of all the Central Asian states have no choice but to balance out the groups and clans to keep them in check and avoid encroachments on the ruling elite's positions. In the last twenty years, the political elites have lost some of their impact on domestic policy. So far, institutionalized relationships and the more developed formal mechanisms of power still share the spheres of politics and economics with informal relationships. Kyrgyzstan is one of the best examples: despite its parliamentary-presidential form of governance the president determines domestic and foreign policies. This was fully confirmed by the 2017 presidential elections.

Conclusion

Since the very first days of independence, the Central Asian states have been trying to limit the sphere of influence of the Russian language: the trend towards establishing national states began in the Soviet Union where it was restricted by the situation in the republics and their continued and complete dependence on Russia. This means that identity potential was and remains a resource of social development.²⁷

The decisions passed by the legislative structures and a wider sphere of use of the titular languages did not manage to squeeze the Russian out of the educational sphere entirely. In fact, its continued use helped preserve the educational potential. The same fully applies to the social sphere in which Russian is used for communication. Concerted efforts to introduce the national languages of the CIS countries as state languages challenged the positions which the Russian language held in official record-keeping, education, culture and the media. Despite its objective role as the language of inter-national communication, Russian was lowered to the status of just one of the national minorities' languages with very limited spheres of use.²⁸

The role of the Russian language was restored in 2016-2017, when Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan revived their trade, economic and political contacts with Russia, while Kyrgyzstan and Kazakh-

²⁵ See: *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kaspiyskiy region: riski, vyzovy, ugrozy: kollektivnaia monografiia*, ed. by B.K. Sultanov, KISI, Almaty, 2012, p. 79.

²⁶ See: Yu. Fedorov, "Turkmenia: vremia peremen?" *Indeks bezopasnosti*, No. 3-4, 2009, pp. 91-114.

²⁷ See: *Identichnost: lichnost, obshchestvo, politika. Entsiklopedicheskoe izdanie*, ed. by I.S. Semenenko, IMEMO RAN, Ves mir Publishers, Moscow, 2017, 992 pp.

²⁸ See: L. Khoperskaya, *Netitulnaia sudba: rossiiskie sootchestvenniki v Tsentralnoy Azii*, Moscow Human Rights Bureau, Moscow, Akademia, 2013, p. 58.

stan joined the Eurasian Economic Union. It remains essential in education and public life across the post-Soviet space.

The political situation in the Central Asian countries and their identities will be strongly affected by their decision to adopt the Latin script. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been making great efforts to move in this direction, however, achieving no impressive results so far.

In 2017, Kazakhstan chose the same path. However, this long and expensive process does not guarantee a higher status for the titular language and may negatively affect the state's future. If the trend continues, the Kazakh language will be confronted with problems in state and educational organizations.²⁹

In 2006, a special commission concluded that "Latinization could be carried out over a 15 to 20-year period... Supporters argued that Latinization would break down language barriers, diminish Russian influence and strengthen Kazakh identity."³⁰

This means that the switch to the Latin script was designed for the country to remove itself as far away from Russia as possible. The Central Asian countries encountered two challenges in the transition period: to establish a state with structures adequate to the current tasks and challenges and to create a national identity.

A weak economy and transformation strategies imposed by the West create an even bigger challenge.³¹

It turned out that staking solely on the language of the titular nation was insufficient. This is amply confirmed by the recent surge of interest in the studies of Russian. People in power in the Central Asian countries have tried to balance out Russian with the titular nations' languages. In fact, the political landscapes in all of them are dominated by clan rivalries that are much stronger than class inequality.

The clan nature was and remains a fairly serious obstacle on the road towards modern national states.³² Thus all Central Asian countries today are facing the need to maintain formally equal statuses of all languages in order to avoid tension in this sphere and to improve the mechanisms of reinforcing the positions of the titular nations' languages. This is a big challenge and an absolute priority for all countries in Central Asia.

Different countries rely on different methods and choose different roads, meanwhile, exclusive reliance on the titular nations may cost them stability. Intra-state conflicts and ethnic clashes may become feasible. No wonder that the authorities focus on language policy as one of the instruments of constructing national identities.

²⁹ See: *Regulirovanie etnopoliticheskoy konfliktnosti i podderzhka grazhdanskogo soglasia v usloviakh kulturnogo raznoobrazia: modeli, podkhody, praktiki*, ed. by I.S. Semenenko, IMEMO RAN, Moscow, 2017, p. 82.

³⁰ B. Kellner-Heinkele, J.M. Landau, *Language Politics in Contemporary Central Asia: National and Ethnic Identity and the Soviet Legacy*, I.B.Tauris, 2011, p. 103.

³¹ See: P. Linke, V. Naumkin, *Politicheskiy protsess v Tsentralnoy Azii: rezultaty, problemy, perspektivy*, IV RAN, Moscow, 2011, p. 368.

³² See: D.B. Malysheva, "Paradoksy natsionalnoy idei i problemy stanovleniya gosudarstvennosti v postsovetском prostranstve," *MEiMO*, No. 11, 1998, pp. 151-155.