Language and Sovereignty:
A Comparative Analysis of Language Policy in Tatarstan and Kazakhstan, 1991-2010

by Kyle L. Marquardt

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Abstract
A comparative analysis of the policies pursued by the post-Soviet governments of Kazakhstan and Tatarstan provides vital insight into the role of language in state-building. In the period following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the governments of these two territories enjoyed a great deal of sovereignty: Kazakhstan as a newly independent state, Tatarstan as a powerful autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. However, both governments faced linguistically-divided populations: non-titular populations in both Kazakhstan and Tatarstan generally preferred Russian to Kazakh or Tatar as a lingua franca, and politically-important segments of even the titular populations were largely Russophone. As a result, both territories pursued remarkably similar policies during the 1990s, focusing on symbolic measures and incrementally increasing titular language usage among targeted groups. Over the first decade of the new millennium, differences in sovereignty caused Kazakhstani and Tatarstani language policies to diverge: whereas a recentralizing Russian state was able to curtail important aspects of Tatarstani policy, Kazakhstan’s long-term strategy began coming to fruition. These different trajectories provide evidence for both the virtues and failings inherent in pursuing incremental language policies as an element of state-building: while the governments of both Kazakhstan and Tatarstan generally avoided ethnic conflict as a result of their policies, implementation has been a long-term process, subject to potential reversal at different stages.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, a prominent thread in the social-scientific literature argued that newly-independent Kazakhstan was in danger of embarking upon a strongly nationalist course, wherein the titular ethnic group’s control of the state would be enforced at the expense of the territory’s minority populations (see discussion in Schatz 2000). Language policy in particular became the subject of much discussion regarding this supposedly imminent shift: observers feared that a nationalizing Kazakh government would embark upon a dramatic shift toward the eponymous language, excluding those individuals who did not speak Kazakh from the public sphere. Serving as prime evidence for these fears was the fact that Kazakh became the sole “state” language of independent Kazakhstan, with other languages (including Russian, the language of Kazakhstan’s large Russian minority and the main language of interethnic communication in the territory) occupying more ambiguous positions (for a discussion of language status debates, see Fierman 1998). Given that non-

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1 Kyle L. Marquardt is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.
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Kazakhs constituted 60.4% of the new republic’s population as of 1989, and only 1.6% of this non-titular population reported speaking Kazakh,2 pursuing such a policy would have been fraught with danger. Somewhat surprisingly for theory, the Kazakh government apparently concurred with the assessment of risk that would be incurred by pursuing an overly nationalist policy. Indeed, many more recent works written on Kazakhstani language policy have argued that pro-Kazakh language policy ended up being largely symbolic: the government used its language policy to portray itself as a successfully multicultural state, all the while allowing the Russian language to maintain its prominence (Schatz 2000; Dave 2007; Brubaker 2011). However, other observers have noted that while Kazakhstan did not overtly nationalize in the sense of immediately demanding knowledge of the titular language, there has been a slow shift toward linguistic rationalization, i.e., unifying the state under a single language, in this case Kazakh (Laitin 1998; Fierman 2006).

Rhetoric surrounding the language policy of the Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan, an ethnofederal region of the Russian Federation, has been remarkably similar to that in Kazakhstan. Fears of Tatar linguistic nationalism were spurred by acts of the Tatarstani government, such as raising the status of the Tatar language to that of a “state” language on par with Russian (as in Kazakhstan, the main language of interethnic communication and a large Russian minority), as well as the regional government’s unambiguous pronouncements of support for increasing usage of the language in the public sphere. Also as in Kazakhstan, Tatarstan’s demographic situation provided evidence that a linguistically nationalist government could create conflict: as of 1989, 51.5% of Tatarstan’s population was not ethnically Tatar; moreover, only 2.0% of this non-titular population spoke Tatar. Again, these fears proved to be largely unfounded: the Russian language remained hegemonic in the republic, and general downward trends in Tatar use continued (Gorenburg 2005). However, unlike results in Kazakhstan, the post-millennial trajectory of Tatarstan has lent credence to claims that pro-Tatar language policy had minimal impact: a recentralizing Russian center has systematically begun removing the elements of Tatarstani language policy, making it more difficult for the government to pursue its already moderate goals vis-a-vis linguistic revitalization. When the Republic of Tatarstan’s first president stepped down in March 2010 after two decades in power, the position of the Tatar language in the republic remained uncertain, even as the Kazakh language’s position in Kazakhstan became more entrenched.

However, the different trajectories of these languages after the millennium belie their underlying similarities, especially in the 1990s. Indeed, I argue that the policies implemented by Tatarstan and Kazakhstan are emblematic of how regional governments can pursue policies of rationalization in the face of uncertain sovereignty (Kazakhstan’s government faced irredentist claims on its territory by Russian nationalists, while the extent of Tatarstan’s sovereignty has always been the subject of heated debate) and multilingual populations.

The domestic linguistic situation of both regions was indeed strikingly similar. While Soviet nationalities policy was multifaceted and subject to change over time (Slezkine 1994), by the late 1980s in Kazakhstan and Tatarstan it served to promote the Russian language as the default language for interethnic communication; some fluency in Russian became essential for

2 Unless otherwise mentioned, all statistics related to linguistic identification in 1989 are from the 1989 Soviet Census (Gosudarstvenniy komitet SSSR po statistike 1991). Specifically, they reflect the percentage of a given population that reported that they either 1.) considered a given language to be their “native” language (schitaiut rodnym iazykom) or 2.) spoke fluently as a second language, further specified as being a “language of the peoples of the USSR (svobodno vladieut vtorym iazykom narodov SSSR).
citizens who lived in multiethnic urban centers (such as the Tatarstani capital of Kazan and the Soviet-era capital of Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata) or who desired professional advancement in the Soviet bureaucracy (see discussions in Laitin 1998; Giuliano 2000; Dave 2007; Faller 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that, in 1989, much larger percentages of regional populations reported speaking Russian as their native language or fluently as a second language than did so with respect to the regional titular languages: 83.1% vs. 40.2% in Kazakhstan; 89.4% vs. 48.2% in Tatarstan. At the same time, Soviet language policy provided protection for the Kazakh and Tatar languages in certain spheres: education was available in Kazakh and Tatar in areas with large titular populations (especially rural settlements); newspapers and other publications in the titular languages enjoyed state support, as did cultural organizations and centers. The result of these efforts was that the titular populations of both Kazakhstan and Tatarstan maintained high identification with their national languages (98.8% and 97.4%, respectively), and the languages retained their utility in areas largely populated by members of the titular ethnicity. However, the high level of titular identification with national languages was likely conflated with overall ethnic identification (Silver 1974) and thus not necessarily reflective of actual linguistic behavior for many individuals. Indeed, researchers have noted that while significant percentages of the Kazakh and Tatar titular populations identified with their “native” language, such identification did not mean they actually spoke the language with any degree of fluency: many ethnic Kazakhs and Tatars spoke Russian preferentially to their “own” language, especially in urban areas (Giuliano 2000; Dave 2004).

Faced with these realities, the post-Soviet governments of both Kazakhstan and Tatarstan pursued relatively mild, targeted, and symbolic language policies designed to create a social and technical infrastructure for future policies that would further strengthen the position of their respective titular tongues. In Tatarstan, this policy has been partially halted by the recentralizing Russian state; in Kazakhstan, it has continued apace. In other words, while the policies of both states were not immediately “successful” (i.e., they did not cause a widespread shift in linguistic behavior over the course of a decade), such a goal would have been both impractical and politically untenable. Instead, the course actually taken maintained relatively harmonious interethnic relations while providing a foundation for future programs. In Kazakhstan, where the state’s sovereignty increased over the two decades following independence, such policies could be pursued in a relatively continuous fashion; in Tatarstan, where the region’s sovereignty decreased in the second decade, such policies became increasingly difficult.

1. Language and the Nationalizing State

As conceptualized by David Laitin (1988), peripheral elites and central governments (henceforth “center”) have fundamentally different goals vis-à-vis language policy. While the center desires to rationalize (i.e. unite a state under a single language) for reasons of economic efficiency, peripheral elites have a strong incentive to maintain regional linguistic distinctiveness and thereby retain their position as essential interlocutors between citizens of the periphery and the center. Laitin (1998) develops this theory to incorporate the preferences of a state’s citizens, arguing that linguistic shift occurs as the result of a tipping game: once a critical number of individuals in a given group has shifted toward using a language (either that of the center or the periphery), the equilibrium strategy for individuals of that group is to begin using the language. The goal of the center is thus to influence enough of its citizens’ preferences so that use of the language of the center is an equilibrium strategy; peripheral elites have the opposite goal.
While the overarching framework of this argument is convincing, it presents an unrealistically fluid argument regarding the ease of linguistic transition. Specifically, learning languages is a time-intensive and arduous process for all individuals, and developing native-level fluency is essentially impossible for most adults (Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2000). Thus, while intergenerational linguistic shift is certainly possible as per the framework Laitin presents, intragenerational linguistic shift is much more unlikely: parents may decide to invest in educating their children in a language different from that in which they are most fluent, but they are unlikely to adopt that language wholeheartedly themselves. As a corollary to this argument, the situation faced by the governments of multilingual territories is very unstable: while governments desire to incentivize certain linguistic behaviors, they also must deal with the fact that adult speakers of different languages are unlikely to develop full fluency in the desired language unless it is already one of their native languages. If such adults are numerous enough to present a threat to a state’s stability and/or the government’s sovereignty is already somewhat tenuous (i.e., if it is a newly independent state or region of a federal state), the government’s policy will be forced to mediate between its competing impulses to maintain stability and to rationalize.

As a result, the best case scenario for some peripheral governments is to stabilize the position of a peripheral language through both symbolic and targeted measures. For example, Marquardt (2012) examines the case of the Chuvash Republic in the Russian Federation, arguing that the regional government was able to stabilize the situation of a peripheral language (Chuvash) in the face of an indifferent and largely linguistically Russified population. Essentially, the Chuvash government avoided conflict with Russophones (and the Russian center) by making the language omnipresent in the republic, while mainly targeting ethnic Chuvash with educational initiatives. Such steps both demonstrated the government’s commitment to the Chuvash language and meant that those individuals most likely receptive to linguistic initiatives were invested in maintaining linguistic distinctiveness. All the while, the Chuvash government portrayed itself as being an essential interlocutor between the center and the Chuvash people, as predicted by theory.

The Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan and the independent Republic of Kazakhstan were faced with situations somewhat more conducive to linguistic revitalization than the Chuvash Republic: specifically, much higher percentages of the territories’ titular populations identified with the peripheral language. Whereas 87.7% of the Chuvash Republic’s ethnic Chuvash population reported speaking the Chuvash language on the 1989 census, 98.8% of Kazakhstan’s Kazakh population reported speaking Kazakh, and 97.4% of Tatarstan’s Tatar population reported speaking Tatar (the median level of titular identification with a group’s eponymous language was 97.6% across the 53 ethnofederal regions of the Soviet Union). As a result, both Tatarstan and Kazakhstan had a core population that was likely more amenable to the imposition of a more rationalizing linguistic course; the governments of both territories could therefore have potentially pursued more vigorous policies than the Chuvash Republic, as in fact both did.

However, as in the Chuvash Republic, the governments of both Kazakhstan and Tatarstan faced populations that identified strongly with the Russian language: according to the 1989 Soviet census, 83.1% of Kazakhstan’s population spoke Russian, among them 64.2% of the region’s Kazakhs; 89.4% of Tatarstan’s population spoke Russian, among them 80.6% of the region’s Tatars. As a result, overly coercive policies would have likely met with widespread popular disapproval on the part of large percentages of all regional populations, including
individuals of the titular ethnicities.

On the other hand, both Tatarstan and Kazakhstan differed from Chuvashia in that they had achieved greater sovereignty than the Chuvash Republic in the 1990s: Tatarstan, by virtue of achieving great concessions from a weak federal center, and Kazakhstan by virtue of being independent. However, in both regions, the degree of sovereignty was somewhat contested: Tatarstan was involved in frequent confrontations with the center regarding the ambiguous implications of what “sovereignty” meant in principle and in practice (Graney 2010); Kazakhstan faced uncertainty regarding Russia’s relationship with the republic’s largely Russophone and Slavic north (Brubaker 1996).

As a result, both regions had clear and contradictory incentives both to pursue and abstain from rationalizing language policies: pursuing a strategy of rationalization under a titular language would distance the republics from the Russian center. However, such a strategy could provoke both the center and each region's Russophone populations. Given these similarities, it is perhaps unsurprising that the governments of both areas pursued relatively similar policies following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and indeed painted their policies in a similar light. However, the policies of both territories have changed as sovereignty has shifted: while Tatarstan has lost sovereignty in the past twelve years, hindering its ability to pursue its desired policy, Kazakhstan’s language policy has begun coming to fruition.

2. Tatarstan

The literature regarding Tatarstan’s attempts to project sovereignty and pursue a policy of linguistic revitalization has come to contradictory conclusions, often based on the aspect of the policy being assessed. Works of political science often have focused on language policy as emblematic of center-periphery relations in Russia; many of these works have concluded that the case of Tatarstan indicates that the Russian center is willing to make concessions to regions, especially insofar as cultural policy is concerned (Cashaback 2008; Graney 2010). Social-scientific work on the motivation behind Tatarstani language policy often cite its importance for “projecting sovereignty” (Graney 1999) and/or the local government’s desire to appease a variety of actors, including Tatar nationalists and the federal center (Giuliano 2006, 2011; Gorenburg 2001, 2003). However, in an excellent overview of actual implementation of Tatarstani language policy, Gorenburg (2005) notes that the sociolinguistic success of the policy has been relatively limited: while use of Tatar has increased in the public sphere, the general downward trend in Tatar usage has continued apace. This result presents a conundrum: if the Tatarstani government had both incentives and the ability (i.e., a high degree of cultural sovereignty) to implement a policy of linguistic revitalization, why was it not more successful?

Part of the answer is that Tatarstan’s project has been successful, at least in comparison to other Volga republics: while identification among titular populations with their eponymous languages decreased in Mordvinia, Mari-El, and Udmurtia between the 1989 and 2002 censuses, identification has only slightly decreased in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Chuvashia (Marquardt 2012, 133). This finding indicates that, given Tatarstan’s institutional environment, its policy

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3 Assessments of change in identification between 1989 and 2002 (Federal’naia služba gosudarstvennoi statistiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2004) based on census data are crude, given that the wording of the questions changed between the censuses. Moreover, the extent of change among groups with various subethnic groups (the Tatars, Mari and Mordvin) was less drastic than originally reported in Marquardt (2012), which erroneously double-counted subethnic groups in the 2002 census. However, the extent of decrease in identification in Tatarstan (3%), Bashkortostan (1%) and Chuvashia (2%) remains much smaller than that which occurred in Mari-El (14%), Mordvinia (6%) and Udmurtia (8%).
performed as well as was possible.

I therefore argue that Tatarstan’s environment was more constraining than is generally believed, limiting the scope of the policy that could be pursued. While Tatarstan did have a high degree of sovereignty during the 1990s, the high degree to which its population had experienced linguistic Russification placed a policy of rationalization out of bounds; when sovereignty decreased after the turn of the millennium, such a policy became even more untenable.

2.1 1991-1999

In the time period immediately preceding the disintegration of the Soviet Union and continuing until Vladimir Putin’s assumption of the post of president of the Russian Federation (1991-1999), the weakness of the Russian central government meant that it granted the Tatarstani government of President Mintimer Shaimiev significant economic, political and cultural sovereignty (for a thorough analysis of Tatarstani sovereignty during this time, see Graney 2010). Tatar language policy assumed a very important role in this project; indeed, Shaimiev frequently argued that preserving and revitalizing the Tatar language and culture were the main reasons Tatarstani sovereignty was necessary (for example, see statements in Vinogradov 2001).

Legislatively, Tatar quickly became a state language of equal status with Russian, and indeed all legislation related to sovereignty made note of Tatarstan’s commitment to its titular language (for a collection of these documents and prominent articles related to language debates, see Khaïrullin, Minnullin and Valev 1999; Cashback 2008). The purpose of these documents, according to Shaimiev, was to spread the language’s “functional sphere” by legislating republic-wide changes in linguistic behavior (Vinogradov 2001; Shaimiev 1997, 2002a). Indeed, even if such efforts by the government had no immediate effect on language practices, they symbolically demonstrated the government’s commitment to ensuring that the language had a future. Furthermore, the legislation was matched by an earnest attempt to make the Tatar language omnipresent throughout Tatarstan, making exposure to it a fact of everyday life even in traditionally Russified cities (most importantly the capital city, Kazan): street signs and government documents became bilingual, and Tatar-language mass media increased in prominence. The omnipresence of the language gradually had the effect of making it more accepted everywhere in Tatarstan; it was no longer just a language to be heard in Tatar villages (Faller 2011). Moreover, the form of the Tatar language that became visible emphasized Tatarstan’s cultural distance from the Russian Federation: the Tatarstani government began a program of changing of the Tatar script from Cyrillic to Latin in 1997. The change not only emphasized Tatar’s linguistic distinctiveness from Cyrillic-based Russian, but also the Tatar

4 By naming Russian and Tatar equal state languages, the government was able to frame itself as being an acceptable alternative to Tatar nationalist organizations active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which called for greater emphasis on Tatarstan’s Tatar identity (Gorenburg 2003; Giuliano 2006, 2011). For example, in its founding congress, the relatively moderate Tatar nationalist organization, Tatar Public Center, called for giving only the Tatar language the status of state language, and downgrading Russian to the status of “language of interethnic communication” (Tatarskii Obozrevatel 1989). Perhaps the most radical of the Tatar nationalist groups, the party Ittifaq, called for the foundation of an explicitly independent Tatar state that had only Tatar as an official language (Ittifaq 1993). While a strategy of cooptation and general public disapproval for radical nationalism meant that Tatar nationalists were generally of little political threat to the Tatarstani government following the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Evangelista 2002; Gorenburg 2003; Iskhakov, Sagitova and Ismailov 2005; Walker 1996), the Tatarstani government generally deemphasized its nationalist programs when addressing non-Tatar audiences and the general Tatarstani public (Gorenburg 1999).
culture’s closeness to other Latin-script-using Turkic states and the largely Latin-script-using west (Sebba 2006; Faller 2011). While the importance of a script change for linguistic revitalization is questionable, the change did mean that the form of Tatar becoming omnipresent signaled the region’s orientation away from Russia.

Tatarstani language policy during the 1990s also had a less-symbolic side: promises that knowledge of the Tatar language would be mandatory for at least some state employees in the future were matched with increasing requirements for (and availability of) Tatar-language education. President Shaimiev was at the forefront of those who indicated that the Tatarstani language would at some point be mandatory for Tatarstani civil servants, noting often that the status of the Tatar language as one of the republic’s state languages constituted a requirement that government usage of the Tatar language should grow (Shaimiev 2002c). A corollary to the increasing usage would be increased knowledge of Tatar by government officials: Shaimiev claimed that knowledge of Tatar by the Tatarstani president as an essential first step in this project, to be followed by an eventual shift toward greater knowledge among government servants of Tatar, as such language knowledge would allow them to serve all Tatarstani citizens (Kalashnikova 2000; Garipov and Faller 2003). Such a development was to occur in the long-term by necessity, as an immediate shift would have excluded almost all Tatarstani Russians from politics, given that virtually no Russians spoke Tatar.5

Indeed, there was a general lack of Tatar knowledge among the bureaucracy, regardless of ethnicity. To remedy this problem, the government began offering an array of opportunities for Russophones to learn Tatar, with the goal of removing lack of opportunity as a justification for not knowing the language (however, non-Tatars generally expressed little interest in the program; Gorenburg 1999, 262). Furthermore, this situation would be drastically altered in the future given that all students in Tatarstan now learn Tatar as a required subject in school, meaning that all Tatarstani citizens raised in Tatarstan should have knowledge of Tatar, regardless of ethnicity.

The policies do seem to have had an effect on linguistic behavior: though Tatar use among Tatars has remained largely constant, as Gorenburg (2005) notes, the most striking aspect of Tatar language policies has been that the number of Russians claiming knowledge of Tatar has increased. While claims of knowledge are not necessarily reflective of actual knowledge, this shift at least indicates that claiming to not know any Tatar has become increasingly unacceptable in Tatarstan, regardless of ethnicity.

However, there was also a strong ethnic element to the Tatarstani program, indicating that the government focused its program to some degree on those most apt to learn the language. The Tatarstani government has made it clear that Tatars should speak “their” language, whereas for Russians the necessity remained somewhat more ambiguous. Such attitudes are reflective of the beliefs that have come to be held by many Tatars in Tatarstan (for more thorough discussions of the role of the Tatar language in Tatar identity, see Wertheim 2003; Faller 2011). In 2002, only 2.1% of Tatars questioned in a survey believed that a command of Russian was sufficient for an ethnic Tatar; 82.5% claiming that command of both Russian and Tatar was necessary. That over 90% of Tatars saw knowledge of the Tatar language as being essential to Tatars indicates that a Tatar identity linked to the Tatar language is highly salient in Tatarstan (Iskhakova, Minnnullin and Musina 2002, 38). However, that Russian was likewise considered

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5 Employees of the state were expected to be able to speak Russian as well, since it was a state language on par with Tatar. However, given that there were few bureaucrats who lacked competence in the Russian language, similar measures to ensure knowledge of Russian would have been of little importance.
vital by a large portion of the population surveyed indicates the Tatarstani government’s dilemma *vis-a-vis* sovereignty: being a part of the Russian Federation, Tatarstan could not diminish the perception of Russian’s importance.

Nevertheless, the result of the competition between Russian and Tatar in terms of relative importance can be seen to some degree in school enrollment statistics, where increasing belief in the importance of Tatar has translated to increased enrollment in Tatar-language schools. Enrollment in such schools as a percentage of total enrollment in Tatarstan approximately doubled between the 1990-1991 to 1998-1999 academic years, from 12.9% to 24.8%, while enrollment in Russian-medium schools decreased from 86.2% to 74.6% (Garipov 2007). These statistics mean that the percentage of children who were learning largely in Tatar doubled over the decade as a percentage of the total school-age population, meaning that a larger number of parents saw Tatar as being important enough to their children’s future to entrust their children’s future life opportunities to Tatar-language education, as per the formulation of Laitin (1998). Given both the resources provided to these schools and the fact that their pupils appear to be invested in Tatar identity, it appears that the government has used this opportunity to invest at least some members of a new generation in the Tatar language (Alvarez Veinguer and Davis 2007).

The Tatarstani government thus increased identification with the Tatarstani state through education mixed with symbolism, while laying the basis for potential future steps toward increased rationalization of the bureaucracy under Tatar in addition to Russian. Given Tatarstan’s degree of linguistic Russification, these changes would require time to take effect; had several generations of Tatarstanis engaged in bilingual education and been continually exposed to a visually distinct Tatar language, knowledge of the Tatar language may have further increased. However, the success of this project was contingent upon the Russian Federation’s weakness, and its lack of ability to force a more rationalizing course on its republics to prevent future mobilization. During the presidencies of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008, 2012-present) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), this contingency ceased to exist.

2.2 2000-2010

While prior work has noted correctly that much of Tatarstan’s cultural autonomy remained intact even as Moscow systematically removed many aspects of political and economic sovereignty (Cashaback 2008; Graney 2010) during the period 2000-2010, theory indicates that this state may not be indicative of a stable equilibrium. The Russian government was subject to some of the same constraints as local governments: abruptly attacking Tatar linguistic institutions would be dangerous for the same reasons that doing so with Russian institutions would have been dangerous for the Tatarstani government. If the Russian federal government is instead conceptualized as a gradually rationalizing state, its project takes on a different light. The center focused initially on Tatarstani political and economic sovereignty, as well as the most provocative aspects of Tatarstani language policy. In doing so, it reasserted political control over Tatarstan while also signaling that it ultimately decides even cultural policy. Having removed much of the Tatarstani president’s room to politically maneuver, the Russian government became more willing to target more fundamental aspects of Tatarstani legislation, albeit only tentatively.

2.2.1 Recentralization, Initially without Rationalization

As the Russian government has systematically undercut regional political and economic
sovereignty, it has maintained a discourse of respect for regional programs of linguistic revitalization (Marquardt 2012). Indeed, the center avoided conflict during this process by describing the changes to Tatarstani legislation as solely political and economic, and not threatening to the Tatar language. As a result, the Tatarstani government could claim that its ability to preserve the importance of Tatar in Tatarstan remained unhindered; the federal government waited until later to encroach upon this aspect of Tatarstani sovereignty.

For example, after the federal government introduced multiple changes to the Tatarstani constitution in 2002, Shaimiev portrayed the changes as a victory for Tatarstan. The Tatar language’s status as one of two state languages remained, and an article was added to the constitution committing the Tatarstani government to assisting the development of the national culture, language and distinctiveness of Tatars living outside of the republic (Shaimiev 2002b). Shaimiev thereby made it clear that while Tatarstan had been forced to make changes to its constitution that could indicate a loss of its sovereignty, it had nevertheless been able to maintain its charge to protect Tatar culture.

Comments by representatives of the federal government gave credence to this interpretation: the federal plenipotentiary to the Volga Region, of which Tatarstan is a unit, noted that the existence of ethnic republics ensures that their languages and cultures will be protected; that which was being changed in republican constitutions was just that which is unfair to its citizens (Kirienko 2001).

Another prime example of this phenomenon is the Moscow-ordered revision of the Federation Treaty between Tatarstan and the Russian Federation (the treaty that established the legal relationship between the two entities). During the process of the writing of the new treaty, Shaimiev noted that while economic issues played a large role, the “principal question” in the discussions was the “stability of traditions and language of the people” (Ostrovskii 2006). In the end, Moscow again avoided language as it diminished Tatarstan’s political and economic sovereignty: the new treaty included a provision stating that Tatarstan has two state languages (both of which the president of Tatarstan must know) and that both the federal and republican governments are charged with protecting the national culture and language.7

6 For example, in marking the 450th anniversary of Bashkortostan’s alliance with Russia, Putin spoke of the Russian language as having “created the ‘unique alloy’ that unites the rossiiskii nation” (the word “rossiiskii” translates as “Russian” in a sense of being a citizen of the Russian Federation, as opposed to “russkii” which translates as “Russian” in a more ethnic sense); he then added that Russia supports the “respectful cooperation of all ethnic cultures and languages” (Putin 2007). This juxtaposition of both stating the importance of Russian as a unifying factor in Russia and declaring respect for other languages is Putin’s standard rhetoric in this regard, which his plenipotentiaries in the Volga Region have largely mimicked. Putin’s rhetoric regarding Tatarstan and the Tatar language is typical of this more general stance. For example, Putin himself spoke Tatar briefly in a speech he made while visiting Tatarstan for its capital city’s millennium celebration, an unprecedented sign of respect by a Russian president (Putin 2002; Graney 2007). However, Putin has also evinced a less wholehearted pro-Tatar stance. For example, when a child confronted him regarding the difficulties she and other non-Tatars encountered in Tatarstan regarding the Tatar language, Putin responded by first citing Russian as an instrument of unity within the Russian Federation and commented that not speaking a local language should not be an obstacle to success in life (Stenogramma Vstrechi s Det’mi—Stipendiatami Prezidentskoi Programmy ‘Odarennye DetiRossii’ 2002). Characteristically, Putin also nevertheless concluded that the president of Tatarstan understands these issues and noted that the Russian government supports local language programs. Unsurprisingly, the Tatarstani government’s opinion of Russian support for cultural diversity differs from that of Putin, succinctly summarized in President Shaimiev’s statement that although the US Congress-financed Radio Liberty deems the Tatar people worthy of a Tatar-language radio broadcast, the Russian government does not (Vinogradov 2001; Amelina 2006).

7 This outcome was not necessarily preordained. Of Russia’s ethnofederal units, only Chechnya and Tatarstan have new federal treaties with the Russian Federation government, and Tatarstan’s treaty was subject to great
However, two issues of language policy-related contention have belied Shaimiev’s claims of his ability to maintain Tatarstan’s cultural sovereignty against Moscow’s centralizing tendencies, revealing intrinsic tension between Moscow and Kazan regarding language policy and cultural sovereignty: the Tatar script change and mandatory Tatar-language education in Tatarstani schools. As the former issue was a highly charged symbol of Tatarstan’s non-Russian nature, the center attacked it first; Shaimiev reacted to the loss of the alphabet by claiming to have protected more important aspects of Tatar cultural revitalization—e.g., mandatory language instruction.

2.2.2 Points of Contention: Latinization and Education

The Tatar Latin script was the first aspect of Tatarstani language policy which the center attacked. Legislation in 2001 was passed, banning the use of non-Cyrillic alphabets. After appeal by the Tatarstani government, the constitutionality of the legislation was upheld in a 2004 Constitutional Court case. Importantly, while the Latin alphabet was an everyday symbol of Tatar disunity with the Russian Federation, its removal had little impact on the Tatarstani government’s overall policy of increasing Tatar language use: omnipresent Cyrillic-script Tatar signals the government’s commitment to the language as well as omnipresent Latin-script Tatar. As a result, the Tatarstani government could portray the illegalization of government promotion of the Latin script as a minor defeat, especially since it occurred simultaneously with a Russian Constitutional Court decision that declared mandatory Tatar-language education to be constitutional. However, recent laws of the federal government make its intentions toward Tatar-language education unclear, greatly concerning the Tatarstani government, which perceive these gestures as evidence of the federal government’s rationalizing course.

The fact that the Latin script was symbolically intolerable to the Russian government is reflected in the rhetoric surrounding the 2001 legislation, “On the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation,” which stipulated, alongside declarations of the importance of the Russian language, that all languages of subject-states of the Russian Federation must be written in Cyrillic. The rationale for this stipulation bespoke Russian fears of Tatar separatism, but was also couched in the language of aiding of Tatar ethnic rebirth. For example, Kaadyr-oool Bicheldei, one of the main proponents of the legislation, noted that both the Russian language and “alphabet unity” are necessary for unifying the Russian Federation (Bicheldei n.d.). However, Bicheldei also noted the possible negative effects that the script change would have on the Tatar people itself by distancing the Tatars of Tatarstan from those outside of Tatarstan, as well as from other Turkic peoples who use the Cyrillic script. Similar rhetoric is found in the 2004 Constitutional Court decision against the script change, wherein the court declared that a unified graphic system in Russia “enables the harmonization and balanced functioning of the federal language and languages of republics toward the goals of protection of state unity,” while not hampering the “realization by citizens of Russian of rights and freedoms in the sphere of language.” In contrast, the unilateral decision of Tatarstan to change its script could lead to the “weakening of federal unity” and hurt the rights of ethnic Tatars living outside of Tatarstan, who
purportedly would be unable to read Tatar literature written in the Latin script (Chernega and Vdovin 2004). The representative of the Duma to the court made the same point in a somewhat sharper manner, commenting that “there are particularities in the status of the republic according to the constitution, they have that right, but when Tatarstan began to carry itself like a sovereign government, the Constitutional Court corrected it” (Zakatnova 2004b).

Importantly, as with other cases wherein aspects of Tatarstani sovereignty were removed by the federal government, the Tatarstani government was able to argue that the decision against the Latin alphabet was overshadowed by another “success” in the area of linguistic revitalization: namely, a same-day court decision allowing mandatory Tatar-language teaching in Tatarstan (Postnova 2004; Mintimer Shaimiev: My Mozhem 2005). In this case, a parent of a Russophonic child brought suit against the Tatarstani government in the Russian Constitutional Court to have universal Tatar-language education declared unconstitutional. The Tatarstani government argued that since Tatarstan has two official languages, both should be taught; furthermore, the Tatar language has a greater need for government assistance because Russian remains privileged even in the republic (Zakatnova 2004a; Demina 2008; Ivanova 2008; Shaimiev 2008). Importantly, the Russian presidential representative to the court concurred, saying that he saw no reason for the complaint against the teaching of the Tatar language, demonstrating that the presidential administration did not then intend to challenge Tatarstan’s Tatar revitalization program (Aptekar’ 2004). That the case was paired with the Latin case is indicative of a quid pro quo: the Tatarstani government was to acquiesce to a decision against a divisive symbol, while Moscow would allow it to continue teaching the Tatar language.

However, comments of the Duma representative to the court presaged future steps of the Russian government to curtail Tatarstan’s language policy: she commented that the status of the Tatar language as a state language allows for the “right of citizens to teach it, but not to force [its] study.” Indeed, the court’s decision laid the basis for future moves toward linguistic rationalization: though mandatory Tatar-language teaching remained in effect, the court reiterated Tatarstan’s need to serve the Russian state, requesting that the government of Tatarstan take into account “different life situations,” e.g., the concerns of Russophone families (Zakatnova 2004b).

This insistence that programs of Tatar-language education are subordinate to federal programs became even more apparent recently in the controversy regarding the Russian law, “On Education,” which is intended to standardize the Russian education system; a byproduct of the standardization appeared to be the likely removal of the regional component of education. Since the regional component includes education in the titular language of republics in non-titular medium schools, many individuals active in the sphere of language policy in the Republic of Tatarstan see it as an attempt to reassert the primacy of the Russian language throughout the country to the detriment of local languages like Tatar. However, ambiguity about the effect of the law allowed the Tatarstani government to prevent the implementation of aspects of the law

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8 While the Tatarstani government’s initial response to the 2001 Duma legislation was harsh (Vse razgovory o ikoby izaykovom separatizme v sviazi s perekhodom v Respublike na latinitsu s kirillitsy iavliaiutsia nesostoiatel’nymi i nosiat spekuliativnyi kharakter 2002; Postnova 2004), by the time of the court case the Tatarstani representative to the court also noted it was not necessary to “obsess about the Cyrillic and Latin and reduce everything to the transliteration of the Tatar language to the Latin graphics,” indicating that he (and by extension, the Tatarstani government) did not see the script to be as fundamental as other linguistic issues (Aptekar’ 2004; Predstaviteli prezidenta, Soveta Federatsii i Gosudarstvennoi Dumy v Konstitutsionnom Sude vozrazhauit protiv predostavleniia Tatarstanu prava ustanavlivat’ graficheskuiu osnovu national’nogo izaya 2004).
that it found most objectionable (i.e., those related to language education).

When the Russian Minister of Education traveled to Tatarstan in 2008 to assuage local fears about the law, his assurances of the continued possibilities for education in local languages and the Russian Federation’s belief in the importance of said possibilities was met with great skepticism. Indeed, his comment that the Tatar language could still be taught outside of the standard curriculum (for example, in Sunday schools) confirmed for many that Tatar would no longer be taught to all students. Shaimiev regarded such a recommendation for language revitalization as an insult (Agranovich 2008; Ivanova 2008).

In reaction to the new law, two important developments occurred. First, the Tatarstani government formed an alliance with the governments of other ethnic republics in opposition to the law (Mushkina 2009). Second, Tatar nationalist activity spiked in Tatarstan, with nationalist organizations claiming that the new law proved that the Russian government was an inherently untrustworthy partner (Demin 2009d). Indeed, some Tatar nationalist groups seem to have developed ties with the Tatarstani government, especially the youth organization Uzebez, which was at the forefront of linguistic activism (Demin 2009a).

In reaction to these two developments, the Russian federal government backed down, at least initially. While the final outcome of the most recent clash between Moscow and Tatarstan regarding language remains uncertain, the government of Tatarstan claimed victory in having a language component added to national education standards. However, the exact wording of the law remains unclear and seems to reemphasize the importance of Russian alongside local languages; local languages should only be taught if demand for doing so exists among students and their parents (Demin 2009b, 2009f). On the ground, the amount of time dedicated to Tatar in Tatarstani schools seems to have remained constant, if it has not actually increased. In the final year of his presidency, Shaimiev also launched an initiative to strengthen early language learning programs (e.g., in preschools) (Demin 2009f; V Kazani proshlo avgustovskoe soveschanie rabotnikov obrazovaniia i nauki RT 2009; Shaimiev 2009).

However, the victory was somewhat tenuous. A backlash against the Tatarstani victory began both externally and internally to Tatarstan. Externally, the Russian federal government took steps to reemphasize the role of Russian in Tatarstan: the Russian Supreme Court has ordered that all public announcements in Tatarstan (in addition to official documentation) be printed in Russian as well as Tatar (Russian Supreme Court Orders Tatarstan to Change Language Law 2009). Furthermore, the standard examination for Russian university admittance ceased to be available in Tatar (it is now only available in Russian), greatly diminishing the value of the Tatar-language education for those Tatarstanis who desire higher education.

Internally, Russophones continued to argue that Tatar is prioritized over Russian in education, putting Tatarstani children at a disadvantage compared to children from elsewhere in Russia (Demin 2009f). Indeed, a local Russophone organization even organized a “Russian March” in protest of this alleged prioritization (alongside other concerns of “Islamicization” and “Tatarification”), with support from United Russia (the ruling party in Russia) (Demin 2009e, 2009c). Such maneuvering was reminiscent of how the Latin script came to be banned: the Russian Federation created a law that was then enforced; now, having stipulated that education in local languages should only occur in the face of demand, the government then attempted to show that no such demand exists (at least universally).

2.2.3 Language and Sovereignty at the End of the Shaimiev Era

Though the first Putin and Medvedev administrations were largely supportive in their
rhetoric regarding Tatarstani language policy, they fastidiously likewise maintained that Russia’s sovereignty trumped that of Tatarstan (by rhetorically emphasizing the importance of the Russian language, and denying the Tatarstani government’s right to switch its alphabet). Since the continued dominance of Russian in Tatarstan is linked to its greater usefulness in the Russian Federation, knowledge of the Tatar language is mainly useful insofar as it is valued in Tatarstan. At the end of Shaimiev’s presidency in 2010, the Tatarstani government had successfully defended the most important aspects of the Tatarstani language policy and thus its relevance in the republic; however, continuing encroachment by the Russian center meant that it was unclear how long it could continue to do so.

That said, the language policy of the Tatarstani government between 1991 and 2010 reinforced a Tatar-national base with an investment in the Tatar language: several generations have grown up in an atmosphere where the Tatarstani language was actively supported by the government, and where increasing numbers of parents chose to have their children educated in Tatar medium schools. These Tatars have grown up with the expectation that their language will be valued; should this not prove to be the case, resentment will rise. Indeed, the Tatarstani government’s generally outspoken response to perceived threats to its programs of linguistic and cultural revitalization play on these fears, reminding the center of the possibility for ethnic unrest should its demands become unreasonable. For example, after the Latin script was banned by the Duma, Shaimiev made multiple provocative statements and Tatar cultural activists formed a group with government backing (the Latin Front) dedicated to protecting the restrictions on the alphabet change (Vse razgovory o iakozy iazykovom separatizme v sviazi s perekhodom v Respublike na latinitus s kirillitys iavliautsia nesostoiatel’nymi i nosiat spekuliativnyi kharakter 2002; Postnova 2004). When faced with threats to Tatar-language education, prominent Tatarstani official Farid Mukhametshin’s pleas had an ominous tone: he called on the complainants to not “offend the Tatar people” and, when asked by journalists about the possibility of solving the question with a referendum, he responded by saying, “Don’t push us.” (Zakatnova 2004b).

Moreover, with the government’s policy of mandatory Tatar language education came an increase in the number of individuals whose careers are directly dependent on the future of the Tatar language, and thus the continuance of Tatarstani’s language policy. As Mukhametshin noted in his criticism of the new law on education, “over seven thousand teachers of the Tatar language are now working. Today the question has arisen: what to do with them?” (Demina 2008). Indeed, in protests of the law on education that occurred in Kazan, teachers of Tatar were at the forefront (Nur 2008). It is therefore clear that the Tatarstani government had preserved constituencies in Tatarstan invested in the language to the point of mobilization; if Russian cultural recentralization continues apace, more such constituencies may appear.

3. Kazakhstan

Initial language policies in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Tatarstan shared great resemblance. However, while Tatarstani’s policy has become increasingly subject to the designs of the Russian federal government, Kazakhstan’s language policy has continued along the trajectory on which it began. The legal, psychological and educational basis laid by the Kazakhstani state over almost two decades of independence has led to increasing Kazakh language usage, as well as the language’s increased visibility. As a result, as Kazakhstan’s wealth and state capacity to enforce its will increased after the turn of the century, its policy has been able to become increasingly one of rationalization. My analysis therefore differs from that
of earlier works on Kazakhstani language policy and language change by Dave (2007) and Laitin (1998), both of whom offered more pessimistic appraisals of the Kazakh government’s attachment to the Kazakh language. While Laitin’s assessment that learning the Kazakh language held meager benefit was accurate in the 1990s, this was because the government had yet to develop the capacity to pursue a course of greater rationalization. Dave’s conclusion that the government’s promotion of Kazakh was largely symbolic was likewise accurate; however, I argue that symbols matter a great deal in the long-term because they provide the psychological preconditioning and proof of government commitment necessary for future rationalization, as seen by the comparison with Tatarstan.

As in Tatarstan, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union nationalist leaders described an increased role for the Kazakh language as being essential to the survival of the Kazakh ethnicity; the government has wholly adopted this rhetoric, albeit with a stronger emphasis on Kazakhstan’s multiethnic nature than more nationalist leaders would have desired (Fierman 2006; Nazarbaev 2008b). Indeed, in the years leading to Kazakhstani independence, the government passed a series of laws that raised the status of the Kazakh language and made knowledge thereof mandatory for certain government officials; however, most of these pronouncements had the result of “at once privileging the status of Kazakhs while not lowering the status of other nationalities” (Hale 2009; Fierman 1998). This trend would continue into the post-Soviet era: even though Kazakhstan gained largely uncontested sovereignty over its territory, it still had a large Slavic minority, especially in northern territories near Russia; its bureaucracy and urban areas also remained Russophone to a large degree.

Therefore, while the government theoretically could have demanded the use of Kazakh among all government functionaries throughout the country after independence (or an even more onerous policy of rationalization), such legislation would have been costly to enforce: it would have resulted in widespread noncompliance and/or resignations in the best case scenario and Russophone revolt in the worst. In other words, pursuing a policy of linguistic rationalization before developing a basis for such a policy throughout Kazakhstan would have been foolhardy. As a result, the initial state policy was one of symbolism.

3.1 Initial State Language Promotion

As in Tatarstan, the Kazakh language swiftly became omnipresent in the Kazakhstani public sphere, with the government funding Kazakh language media outlets and demanding that public documents and signs be bilingual; universal Kazakh education also became mandatory. However, in Kazakhstan the legal foundations for the state to rationalize under Kazakh—and thereby also the important psychological preconditioning for eventual rationalization—were created in the initial demotion of Russian to “official language” status as Kazakh became the sole state language of Kazakhstan in 1997. This codification of Kazakh as the state language symbolized Kazakh primacy in the state after a long period of Soviet domination (Dave 2007; Nazarbaev 2008b). Such a step was impossible in Tatarstan, an entity of the Russian Federation, where all founding documents stressed the equality of Tatar and Russian.

That said, Kazakh language policy has been marked by ambiguity and accommodation (see also Schatz 2000), allowing the government to assuage fears on the part of the Russophone population even as it proceeded with evolutionary rationalization. Even the name of Kazakhstan’s 1997 “Law on Languages”—the legislation that demoted the Russian language—is indicative of this policy. As William Fierman notes, the Kazakh language version is unclear as to whether the name of the law regards “language” (singular) or “languages” (plural), whereas
the Russian version is unambiguously “languages,” implying the state’s commitment to more than one language (Fierman 1998; Dave 2007). Indeed, as per the Law on Languages, Russian remains an official language alongside Kazakh, a fact which Nazarbaev consistently notes with pride, as it allows the two languages to “peacefully function in both the official and everyday-life [bytovoi] medium in equal measure.”9

3.2 Move toward Rationalization

Despite rhetoric of multiculturalism, Nazarbaev’s view of implementing Kazakh became more unambiguous as time progressed, an evolution he summarized in a speech from 2007. Nazarbaev notes that Kazakh should be spoken by all Kazakhstanis: the “state language...is as much a symbol as a flag, emblem, hymn, from whence the homeland begins.” Furthermore, after years of universal Kazakh education, the youth have had the opportunity to develop a facility in the Kazakh language; claims that it is unfair to require knowledge of the language are therefore unfounded. As a result, the state can reasonably demand knowledge of Kazakh: “Without knowledge of the state language it will be impossible to work in government organs, the service sphere, law-enforcement organs or the legal sphere. Questions in the state language should be answered in the same language” (Nazarbaev 2007).

While Kazakhstan initially had a moderate language policy, it pursued such a course because there had been little basis for rationalization. After almost two decades of independence, a stronger basis now exists: the Kazakh language is noticeable across the country, linguistic competency has generally increased, and the population increasingly perceives knowledge of Kazakh to be important to the future (Smagulova 2008). As a result, the government is in a position to place increased demands for language knowledge not just on ethnic Kazakhs, but other ethnicities as well.

3.2.1 General Language Promotion

While controversy still exists in Tatarstan whether or not even the president should be required to speak Tatar, the policy in Kazakhstan has shown clear progression over time, and now seems oriented toward actual rationalization. Ambiguous legislation written in the immediate post-Soviet era thus laid the basis for demands of knowledge after the turn of the century.

Immediately after independence, the only positions for which Kazakh language proficiency was clearly mandated were the presidency and chairmanship of the houses of parliament (Fierman 1998). As regards the requirements for other official positions, similar ambiguity again played a role in preventing Russophones from being overly concerned with the trajectory of Kazakhstani language policy while providing a foundation for future rationalization. The law stated that Kazakh was to be used on par with Russian, a formulation that begs a variety of interpretations, though Dave argues that the net result is that all official government documents are available in both Russian and Kazakh (Dave 2007; Fierman 1998). Even if this was the only result, such a step would still have been psychologically significant as

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9 Ambiguity extends to script choice as well. Unlike Tatarstan, Kazakhstan has less of a need to differentiate the Kazakh language from Russian given the fact that it is an independent state. Indeed, a script change could provoke Russophones by emphasizing the distance between the two dominant languages in the country. As a result, even as Nazarbaev has spoken in favor of the Latin script, he likewise has argued that the Kazakh Cyrillic script is unique and well-suited to Kazakh (Nazarbaev 2008a). In any event, the Minister of Culture and Information says that a switch would take a minimum of 15 years, showing that there is clearly no rush to change the script (Rakhmetova 2007).
it forced individuals in the government to acknowledge the importance of the Kazakh language on a daily basis.

Furthermore, the law did in fact have a more significant effect in that it called for bureaucrats to be able to interact with their constituents in the constituents’ own languages. In practice, this requirement allowed largely Russophone regions to have largely Russophone bureaucrats. However, as the Turkophone population of an area increased, so did the number of jobs necessitating Kazakh for communication with the population. As rural-to-urban immigration has increased and more Turkophones have moved to areas that were previously Russophone strongholds, it is becoming increasing difficult for Russophone monolingual bureaucrats to adequately interact with their population, providing a rationale for requiring more knowledge of Kazakh by government officials throughout Kazakhstan (Fierman 2006, 112).

For that reason, rhetoric concerning the necessity of Kazakh abilities among government officials has become more prevalent. Nazarbaev has noted with pride that in the Atyrau, Zhambyl, Kyzylorda and South Kazakhstan regions the work of the government is conducted in Kazakh, given the high level of Kazakh knowledge among members of all nationalities there (Nazarbaev 2003). In other regions, the chairman of the Committee for Languages of the Ministry of Culture and Information has noted increased opportunities for government workers to learn Kazakh to help them adapt to new standards for Kazakh knowledge. Nevertheless, there remained “more questions than answers” in terms of whom among government workers must know Kazakh, and to what level (Enaleev 2007).

However, it is clear that at least ethnic Kazakh officials should speak “their” language (i.e., Kazakh). Nazarbaev now supports requiring ethnic Kazakhs working in the government to speak “their” language, as well as creating incentives for non-Kazakh government employees to learn Kazakh (Nazarbaev 2007). Indeed, the increasing demands for Kazakh knowledge among Kazakh bureaucrats is now reflected in a general shift in Kazakhstani society: “The environment is filled with signals that it is the ‘right thing to do’ for Kazakhs to educate their children in ‘their own’ language,” linking it to independence (Fierman 2006; Smagulova 2008). Furthermore, the increased prestige of Kazakh means that it is vital to “establishing a personal bond and in informal negotiations”; lack of Kazakh knowledge now is something for which Kazakhs can be punished in terms of job placement (Dave 2007). As a result, large numbers of Kazakhs are in fact developing Kazakh skills: 88% of Kazakhs claimed fluency in Kazakh 2006, and 6.9% claimed to speak with difficulty (Suleimenova, Shaimerdenova and Akanova 2007). As the shift toward Kazakh continues, momentum for a program of rationalization under Kazakh will increase; a tipping point for a cascade toward Kazakh has thus been reached (see also Smagulova 2008).

3.2.2 Ethnic Minorities and Language Policy

The Kazakhstani government’s policy toward its Russian minority has been cautious, much as the Russian federal government’s approach to Tatarstan. However, while the Tatar people have a government actively working to revitalize “their” language, the Russophones of Kazakhstan have no such institutions. As a result, Russophones have been met with increasing demands that they learn Kazakhstan’s titular tongue.

As mentioned earlier, the formalistic implementation of Kazakh language laws meant that the day-to-day life of Russians was not largely affected by the Kazakhstani government’s language policy in the 1990s, decreasing the probability of ethnic unrest (which is not to say that language-based mobilization did not occur in the 1990s; see, for example, Landau and Kellner-
Heinkele 2001, 45-46). However, Dave notes that “leaders and spokespersons of Russian-speaking groups interpreted it [Kazakhstani language policy] primarily as a threat to their very existence” (Dave 2007, 105), indicating that they considered the long-term implications of the moderate policies to be eventual rationalization. Accordingly, those Russians who “defected” by speaking Kazakh were censored by their group (Laitin 1998). Unfortunately, the resulting lack of Kazakh-learning on the part of Russians led to a situation of increasing Russian marginalization in the public sphere and their occasional portrayal as unrepentant colonialists (Dave 2007, 137).

This situation appears to be changing slowly as Kazakhstani Russians have become increasingly aware of the permanence of a Kazakh-oriented Kazakhstan. While several organizations representing Slavic populations in Kazakhstan continue to argue that both Kazakh and Russian should enjoy the status of “state,” the largest Slavic organization has begun working with the government to teach Russophones Kazakh (Kramarenko 2009; Kazakhstanskoe dvizhenie vystupaet za predanie russkomu jazyku statusa Gosudarstvennogo 2006; Rakhmetova 2007; Enaleev 2007). This initiative is indicative of the government’s overall more proactive approach to making the state language more accepted by Russians. In addition to the aforementioned public statements that all Kazakhstani are expected to speak Kazakh, the government has attempted to show the benefit of speaking Kazakh by raising the prominence of non-ethnic Kazakh speakers of Kazakh. For example, one of the most visible anchorpersons on Kazakh-state TV is an ethnic Russian who grew up speaking Kazakh in a village (Rakhmetova 2007).

The policy of the government has shown an effect on the Russian perception of Kazakh: while only 3.6% of Russian respondents in a 2006 survey claimed to speak Kazakh fluently, only 38.7% claimed to speak no Kazakh at all (compared to almost all Russian respondents during the Soviet era—see Suleimenova, Shaimerdenova and Akanova 2007). That so many Russians claimed some knowledge of Kazakh is strong evidence that it has become increasingly unacceptable to not speak Kazakh; that so few speak Kazakh fluently reflects the evolutionary nature of the Kazakhstani policy.

3.2.3 Schooling and the Future

Prior to the new law on education in the Russian Federation, educational trends in Kazakhstan were remarkably similar to those in Tatarstan, showing that while the evolutionary strategies of both states led to reluctance to entrust a child’s education solely to the titular language, they did cause parents to hedge their bets by investing in mixed-language education.

In the most comprehensive English-language review of Kazakh-language education, Fierman convincingly argues that many urban Kazakh families still prefer Russian-language or mixed Kazakh-Russian schools (with only a third or less urban Kazakh families choosing pure Kazakh instruction), while the Kazakh language education has cemented itself in rural areas and among rural Kazakh immigrants to urban areas (Fierman 2006). Fierman links the persistence of Russian-language education to 1.) the lower prestige of Kazakh language schools (related to a lack of teachers and low-quality textbooks); 2.) Russian’s continued importance for most private-sector jobs in urban areas; and 3.) continued Russian-only higher education in some subjects because of a lack of Kazakh-language materials (Fierman 2006).

However, despite these deficiencies, “the current momentum in Kazakhstan toward greater ‘nationalization’ may also encourage movement toward Kazakh schools” (Fierman 2006). While the initial evolutionary policy of the Kazakhstani government did not necessitate

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knowledge of Kazakh in the 1990s, as requirements for knowledge grow with its policy of rationalization, so will the demand for better education. Equally importantly, the demand for Russian will decrease: Kazakhstan’s current policy is of a “trinity of languages,” with Kazakh as the focus and English and Russian as the secondary languages.

Whereas Russian and Tatar would always compete in Tatarstan as a result of Tatarstan’s position in the Russian Federation, in Kazakhstan such is not the case. Indeed, while in Tatarstan knowledge of Russian among the youth has remained largely constant, a generational shift away from Russian is visible in Kazakhstan: only 46% of young Kazakhstanis (ages 16-25) claimed fluency in Russian in 2006, compared to 76% of the general Kazakh population in 1989 (Suleimenova, Shaimerdenova and Akanova 2007).

4. Conclusion

Although Kazakhstan became an independent state after the disintegration of the Soviet Union while Tatarstan remained an ethnofederal unit of Russia, the governments of both territories were faced with similar linguistic dilemmas: an uncertain degree of sovereignty and multilingual populations. As a result, the governments of both territories pursued strategies that were broadly designed to increase usage of their titular tongues in a slow, evolutionary manner; neither government embarked on an overly nationalizing course during the 1990s due to the high political costs such policies would have incurred.

However, differences in sovereignty began having a clearer impact on policy outcomes in the first decade of the new millennium: while a recentralizing Russian state hindered Tatarstan’s project, that of Kazakhstan continued apace. While the government of Tatarstan was able to increase the prominence of the Tatar language during the 1990s, a consistent program of recentralization that began in the Russian Federation under the leadership of Vladimir Putin has chipped away much of Tatarstan’s sovereignty, even in the cultural sphere. Though initial changes to language policy demanded by the center were of tertiary importance to the republic’s overarching goals, toward the end of the decade it became increasingly unclear if the Tatarstani government would have the ability to maintain universal mandatory Tatar-language education over the long term. On the other hand, a large percentage of the region’s population remained invested in the Tatar language, meaning that programs of linguistic recentralization on the part of the Russian government remained cautious.

The language policy of Kazakhstan, on the other hand, followed a more continuous trajectory. The Kazakhstani government pursued an evolutionary policy of rationalization, focusing initially on developing a symbolic basis for rationalization before beginning to pursue such a policy on a level that affected the day-to-day life of its citizens. Specifically, it increased Kazakh-language education and the presence of the language throughout the country, while also developing a legislative infrastructure for rationalization under Kazakh (e.g., downgrading the official status of the Russian language). These efforts are now coming to fruition, though the continued presence of a large Russophone community has demanded continued moderation in the implementation of the country’s language policy.
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'Obrazovanie v Respublike Tatarstan: Sostoianie, problemy, i perspektivy razvitiia’.”

*Offitsial’nyi server Prezidenta Respubliki Tatarstan.*


