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LANGUAGE POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS-CENTRAL ASIAN EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

In the field of international relations language policies are rarely studied. On the other hand studies on language policies have not systematically taken into account the international dimension, but have merely focused on either language behaviours of individuals or on the political structure effecting language behaviours in one country. In this paper my purpose is to discuss the relation between language policy and international relations in the light of my doctoral thesis in which I analysed the language policies in Central Asia.

The relation between language and politics can be analysed in two broad ways depending on how politics is defined. If politics is defined in broad terms as an influence on another one's action and if it is related to power, authority and legitimacy, then the relation between language and politics is intrinsic. From this perspective, language and politics are inseparable from each other. On the other hand, if the politics is defined as decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, then that relation is subject to change according to the characteristics of the political structure. Thus, we can talk about both changing and constant elements in the relations between language and politics. My argument is that the characteristics of world politics and changes therein also affect that relation.

One example of the constant elements is widely agreed correlation between the power of the linguistic groups and spread and prestige of their languages, which appears independent of the characteristics of political structure. On the other hand, the deliberate attempt of rulers to control and affect language behaviors of the ruled is not embedded in the nature of that relation, but derives from the characteristics of the political structure, which in turn is affected by world politics.

What is new about the relation between language and world politics is linked to the recent structural changes in the later. One of the most important features of the new world order is the parallel development of globalisation, which has frequently been referred during the Congress and regionalisation. The ever-growing tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces that are deriving from those concurrent developments are reflected on language policy issues. National languages are subject to the pressures coming from above and below. It can be argued that the reactions of nation-states to these pressures will shape the linguistic panorama of future.

The second change in world politics is the wider definition of international security. Migration, environment, population increase, poverty and ethnic conflicts are considered among major challenges to security according to this definition. Accordingly, ethnic conflicts with their huge impacts like

migration, environmental disasters and armament, are no longer accepted as merely domestic issues of one country, but are taken into international agenda.

Despite these fundamental changes, it is difficult to claim that the new conceptualisations of security and peace have totally changed the international relations. Unlike the field of sociolinguistics, the field of International Relations is still dominated by the scholars who refer themselves as realists or neorealists. The foreign policies of states are shaped by those who have been taught International Relations according to the realist principles. Neither International Organisations, nor International Law, has replaced the role of the nation-state, that, according to realist principles, pursues its own interests.

The examples, which prove the realist principle that morality is irrelevant to international relations, are plenty. Humanity considerations have been secondary to the material concerns, especially when they are outside the country. Policy of Big Powers towards independence movements during the 18th century and British foreign policy before and during the First World War are examples in the history. Recent examples are the foreign policies towards Iraq and Bosnia, which shows that the interest of the international community to ethnic conflicts is selective and depends on the perceptions of interests.

When thousands of Kurds from Iraq escaped from chemical weapons and the Turkish president of the time, Ozal (who is said to be of Kurdish origin), opened the borders to them, the international community was largely inactive. The international community acted when Iraq attacked the oil-rich Kuwait. If the difference between the two cases was the stability of legitimate borders, the question arises why the same criteria didn't apply to ex-Yugoslavia. The Western countries, which are interested in human rights violations even in geographically distant countries, remained inactive towards a genocide amidst Europe. One can also ask whether it is the case that tolerance to diversity applies only when it comes to languages but not to religions, which are also carriers of culture and ways of living and being.

Given this framework, I find Professor Bastardas' argument about "the importance of changing the perceptions of interests" crucial. I believe that this can be done only by understanding the dynamics of each language situation within its own political culture and political setting including political history. International relations is one of the important components of that political setting, as I am going to elaborate with the case of Central Asia.

What makes Central Asia a fascinating case for the study of the language policy is the ongoing and simultaneous processes of nation-building and democratization in those five countries. Facing the power vacuum that emerged in the region as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, these countries are in urgent need of pursuing new foreign policy alternatives, most of which entail or can be related to a different language policy option. Therefore, the case of Central Asia provides a rich example of the relation between language policies and international relations.

Historical and political context: Continuity and change

Central Asian countries are frequently analysed as an entity, for they have common political, social, cultural and historical roots. Created by the Soviet national delineation process, they were subjects to Soviet nationalities policy that presented one of the most striking example of language policy, given the size of the territory in which it was applied and its relation to a particular ideology.

While heading to its aim of creating a communist state, Soviet politicians allowed, as an intermediate stage, the establishment and flourishing of nations around national languages. Accordingly the beginning of the 20th century witnessed a fierce campaign for codification and standardisation of new languages in the ex-Soviet Union. There are controversial opinions about Soviet language policy. According to one argument it is the most successful language policy of history for it saved tens of languages from disappearing, whereas according to another claim it is nothing else than means of dividing otherwise the same people based on small differences between dialects.

After the codification of new languages, Soviet policy continued to support the communicative function of the national languages. For example, the schools where the medium of education was nationality



languages were allowed and supported. Among the aims of this policy were increasing the literacy, spreading Soviet ideology and securing the flourishing of cultures of the Soviet people, which was believed to be followed by their merging and establishment of a communist state.

During that period, the symbolic function of the national languages was paradoxically curbed as supporting it was found to be incoherent with the Soviet ideology and Russian was imposed to ensure the merging of the Soviet nations. However, nowhere else in ex-Soviet Union, the superiority of Russian language and culture was so obviously imposed as it was in Central Asia. On the other hand, in line with the changes in nationalities policies, which were based on the new interpretation of dialectical relationship between flourishing and merging of nations, Soviet language policy changed in time as well. First, Russian was declared obligatory in all schools and afterwards teaching of national languages ceased to be obligatory and became optional, despite the Leninist principle favoring national languages.

According to my view, Soviet language policy, which increasingly required wider usage of Russian as an interethnic language and emphasizing the symbolic value of Russian, despite the fact that big proportions of populations were not fluent in that language, resulted in an imbalance between symbolic and communicative functions of languages in Central Asia. Language policy remained a highly sensitive issue on the top of the political agenda, throughout the Soviet period, but became more and more explosive towards the end of that era.

After becoming independent, almost involuntarily, language policies became one of the most important aspects of the nation-building processes in Central Asian countries. Although opposing Soviet language policy and striving to reverse the language shift caused by it, in fact the language policies of Central Asian countries inherited some basic characteristics of the Soviet language policy. Among these was the tradition to use the language policies to distribute the elite positions in the society. Tolerance to the use of other languages, which had been peculiar to these societies for centuries, continued, as well. However, although they adopted relatively liberal language laws, there has been a growing gap between de facto and de jure language situations in these countries.

Having severe economic and security problems, the politicians of the newly established countries gave priority maintaining order and creating a sense of unity around a common language over maintaining equality between ethnic groups. First and one of the most important outcomes of the new language policies in those countries is the overemphasis on national languages that can distort equality between local languages, which was kept in balance by the existence of Russian as an interethnic language during the Soviet era. The emergence of a hierarchy between languages in this highly heterogeneous region can cause serious problems, given the fact that the dissolution of the Union has already caused many border disputes and a risk of ethnic conflicts among the Central Asian peoples.

Another aspect of these developments is the likelihood of internationalisation of the possible conflicts. One of the major characteristic features of the new international order emerged in the post-Soviet era, is the wider definition of the security. According to this new approach, ethnic conflicts are no longer accepted as merely domestic issues, but with their huge impacts like migration, armament, environmental damages etc., are taken into international agenda. Moreover, because of its strategic importance and rich energy and mineral resources, the region has become a focus of competition among big powers. Maintaining security of the region is one of the requirements of benefiting from these resources that were found to be even greater than estimated before. New American policy towards the region which is against the increase of influence of any country unilaterally has large implications for the language policies that can be pursued by Central Asian countries.

International dimension

There have been clear links between language policies and international relations in Central Asia, since the early years of the Soviet Union. The efforts for standardization of languages were heavily affected by considerations of international relations. It is claimed that among the main aims of standardization of languages in Central Asia were the principle of divide and rule and the prevention of the development of supranational movements, such as pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. For example, the shift to Cyrillic Alphabet did not only make the national languages more open to Russian influences, but also created a



barrier against the other international influences, especially Turkish, coming from outside the region.

After gaining their independence, Central Asian countries have faced a number of foreign policy alternatives that correspond, in turn, to different language policy options to be taken into consideration. Among these foreign policy alternatives are sustaining close relations with Russia, seeking new partnerships in the region especially with regional powers such as Turkey or Iran, participating in a wider organisation composed of Islamic countries and building a regional integration.

Early attempts to reduce the usage of Russian by language laws have slowed down, not only because it was realized that replacing the Russian speakers holding the political posts by local elites was impossible in a short run, but also because of the relations with Russia, which are still fundamental for economic and security reasons. For Russia, large Russian speaking group in the region ensures continuing influence and a say in the political life of these countries. On the other hand, migration which has frequently been accounted with the tightening language policies poses great challenges for Russia because of its demographic and economic effects.

In accordance with the changes in its foreign policy, since 1995 Russia has started to get more involved in the questions relating to Russian minorities in the ex-Soviet republics. Some studies have pointed out that language policy has been an issue that can be bargained in the bilateral relations between Russia and Central Asian countries. For example according to a claim, Russia ceased to support the demands for double citizenship of the Russians in Kazakhstan, after managing to persuade Kazakhstan to give up the idea to launch an international consortium for its spaceport. Despite all other considerations, Russian is likely to remain as the common language of the political elites and masses for a longer time.

Language policy issues are also closely linked to the relations with regional powers that have been presented as models for Central Asian countries. Having historical, cultural and linguistic ties with these countries, Turkey has been backed as a model by the West against Iran. Having the opportunity of rebuilding ties after a long period of separation, Turkey was the first country that recognised the independence of Central Asian countries and the first diplomatic visits of Central Asian countries were to Turkey, in turn. Besides other steps for economic and military cooperation, Turkey's greatest assistance has come in the fields of media and education. Turkey has a satellite broadcasting to the region. 20 000 students are reported to be attending to Turkish schools in Central Asia and over 15 000 have come to Turkey to attend universities between 1992-1998.

However, despite the positive developments the cooperation between Turkey and Central Asia has so far lagged behind the former expectations. Among the reasons for this are the geographic distance, foreign policy preferences of Central Asian countries seeking as many partners as possible, the attitude of Western countries towards this relation marked with suspicions that it can lead to a pan-Turkist movement and the sensitivity of the parties towards this attitude. After a period of euphoria, the relation between Turkey and Central Asian countries turned to be a mild one which is defined "enthusiastic among peoples and cautious and neat among politicians".

Linguistic affinity has a very big role in relations between Turkey and Central Asia. Although the mutual intelligibility among the languages vary to a great degree and developments of these languages in the last century contributed to further differentiation, one of the most crucial discussion has been creating a common Turkic language. After the independence two important conferences have been held in 1993 in Turkey. However, the outcome of these efforts pointed out once again the approach of politicians that renders linguistic issues secondary to high politics. Despite the agreement of the scholars on one common alphabet, the Turkmen president issued a decree declaring another alphabet as official. Lacking the strong will for the fulfilment of greater steps, linguistic affinity between parties could not win over political and economic concerns.

For Iran, the independence of ex-Soviet Turkic republics brought risks as well as opportunities. Improving the relations with Persian speaking Tajiks and Shii Azeris could be means of ending the isolation of the country in the region. However, the possibility that new developments can cause irredentist claims by Azeris that amounted 20% of the whole population of Iran prevented Iran to pursue ambitious foreign policies and to seek a greater influence on the language policies of Central Asian



countries.

Not alone Turkey and Iran failed to address the economic and security needs of Central Asian countries, but criss-crossing interests and relations of different regional actors have curbed their influence on language policies in the region. The existence of many languages that can play a role of a tie to outside powers has complicated the situation, given the power vacuum in the region. It can be considered that, language policies which will increase the influence of one of these competing countries, can disturb the others and cause reactions.

The idea to build a regional cooperation between Central Asian countries, which has been gaining more and more supporters inside and outside of the region, includes a policy to bring the Turkic languages closer to each other. Yet, considerations of balance of power within the region is also affecting language policy preferences of these countries. The attempt to create a common Turkic language, an idea which has long roots and has been brought forth by Uzbekistan most frequently, is regarded suspicious by other Central Asian countries, having the fear that it can be used for expansionist purposes by Uzbekistan. Furthermore, instability of borders and irredentist claims are causing more restrictive language policies in the area, as it was seen in the destruction of Tajiki books and in the cut of Tajiki courses in Uzbekistan, following a dispute between the countries.

Here, too, "high politics" and its components are prevailing over linguistic and cultural issues, in the eyes of politicians. The differences in size and population of the countries are hindering cooperation. Having differentiated interests and problems, shaped by those factors, these countries share a common policy of giving priority to sovereignty and unity.

In this framework, the politicians are facing the dilemma of creating a national identity and avoiding isolation in regional and world politics at the same time. This dilemma is reflected to language policies which have many controversies, especially about the role of Russian. One example is declaring national languages as only official languages, while giving Russian an official status, which is not clearly been defined by law.

Despite the rhetorics, the developments in the region since the independence have few considerations to bring the languages closer, if they don't aim to enlargen the gap. Although none of these countries are powerful enough to overcome their problems alone, competition rather than cooperation among these countries has prevailed and the concurrent competition of the outside powers over the region has further complicated the political situation. The linguistic resources of the region which can bring the countries closer and make them stronger have neither been fully recognised as a resource nor have they been utilised.

These examples show that international relations can affect language policies. At the same time language policies can be used as tools for foreign policy. However, not everywhere that relation is as strong as it is in Central Asia. The developments in the region have proven so far that the Real Politik concerns have priority over linguistic ones. It also seems that they will be prevailing, as long as policy makers and their supporters continue to believe so and the policies are constructed accordingly.

Like many other participants, I would like to conclude emphasizing the importance of increasing knowledge and awareness about language issues and providing education to all underlying the primacy of human life and dignity over all other concerns. I believe that cooperation among us is fundamental to this end, especially for those who have more complicated language situations and less means to solve the problems deriving from them.