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[Language as a Soft Power Tool in Central Asia](#)



Joseph Nye, a political scientist at Harvard University, has discussed at length the role of language as a tool of soft power. According to Nye, any user of a language will be influenced by that language's essence, its implied values welded deeply into its grammatical framework.

It can be argued how much any language can ever just be a neutral *lingua franca* – a means of communication, a protocol – or whether it does, as Nye argues, indeed influence deeper political attitudes in a way that is significant and, at times, decisive.

Governments in Central Asia do recognise the ability of language to define the region's relations with the rest of the world, both culturally and geopolitically. As with many other regions, the promotion of language learning in the region has become a vital tool of public diplomacy and soft power for surrounding nations eager for political influence. [The Power Language Index](#) measures languages according to what it perceives as their soft power value. It includes five categories: geography, economics, communication, knowledge and media, and diplomacy. According to this index, the top language is predictably English with Mandarin and Russian placed firmly in the top ten.

In Central Asia, all three of these languages compete. There is also a strong fourth language vying for influence: Turkish.

The Russian Language: Gradual Decline

The Russian Federation acknowledges a need for soft power in its Foreign Policy Concept of 2016. Russia's strategic goals include enlarging the sphere of the Russian language and culture in the 'Russian World'. There is a specific state programme – 'The Russian language' for 2016-2020 – which deals most directly with language policy. This document explicitly says that the Russian language is a global language and is important for civilization. The programme's financing is more than seven billion roubles – around 122 million US dollars – and suggests, among other things, an "active offensive strategy".

The Russian language is still widespread in Central Asia. It is also prestigious to speak Russian, which is a different state of affairs to the Baltic republics, for example. For the time being, in Kazakhstan, 84% of people speak Russian, while in Kyrgyzstan, it is 49 percent. In Uzbekistan, that number is 41 percent, and it is 33% for Tajikistan, and 18% for Turkmenistan.

At the same time, the number of people receiving their education in Russian has declined. In light of this decline, Russia's initiatives in language learning are an obvious attempt to turn the tide of losing ground to other languages; among them, Mandarin Chinese.

China's Language Policy in the Region

The policy imperatives for the Chinese government regarding the country's languages include both domestic and outreach aspects. The outreach means promoting Chinese as an international language. In terms of policy initiatives, the Chinese government has invested heavily in the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms

through the Office of Chinese Language Council International, also known as Hanban. China is spending more than 10 billion US dollars a year on these initiatives. Programmes include academic exchanges and promotion of language and culture.

China opened its first Confucius Institute in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, but before that, the pilot project took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. As of April 2017, there were five hundred institutes scattered across every region of the world. In Tajikistan, in 2015, the Day of Confucius Institute was celebrated in Dushanbe, the most prominent event in this framework was the festive concert 'Beautiful China'. In August 2015, the Confucius Institute was also opened in the Tajik town of Chkalovsk (Buston since 2016).

Learning Chinese is becoming popular in Tajikistan, as many Chinese companies, especially in mining area, are active in the country. Many small towns in Tajikistan are completely dependent on the Chinese enterprises, such as Tajik-Chinese industrial zone in Sogdi oblast.

The interest towards Chinese is growing across the region. For the time being, there are five Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, and two in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The number of students is also growing, for example, in 2006 there were 400 students of Chinese in Bishkek Humanitarian University, in 2017, this number has grown to 700. In Bishkek, the high school specialised in Chinese opened in September 2017, with the funding of the Chinese government. In Uzbekistan, the number of students in the Confucius Institute in Tashkent was estimated 350 (www.confucius.ucoz.com).

It is also popular for the young people from Central Asia to go for studies to Chinese universities. If only single students used to study in China some fifteen years ago, now, for example, about twelve thousand students from Kazakhstan study in China, according to the China Scholarship Council.

The Chinese economic initiative of One Belt One Road is important in this respect as well, as Central Asia plays a crucial role in its success.

How about English?

According to the Power Language Index, the category of Knowledge and Media includes the number of the top universities, the number of feature films, Internet content, and the number of the academic peer-reviewed journals, and here English is globally in the lead.

In 1992, the academic Robert Phillipson published his book, 'Linguistic Imperialism'. This post-colonial view on the English language sees the teaching of English as an instrument of power. But in the case of Central Asia, it is the Russian language that can be considered post-colonial, and English has more neutral connotations. We can definitely see that in Central Asia, language policies include English as an important language. The leaders would like to promote English as a major bridge to the outside world. In Uzbekistan, a 2013 decree by President Islam Karimov mandated the teaching of English from the first grade. In Kazakhstan, the English language education comprises the part of the so-called 'three-language education', and the state nation programme '100 Concrete Steps'. In this framework, more than 500 classes would like to transfer to the English-language instruction.

At the same time, the proficiency in English is still very low in Central Asia, with only Kazakhstan measured in English Proficiency Index, but it is prestigious to learn English. It remains to be seen how the new opening policy of President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan will impact developments, but for now it seems that the language policies of the regional authorities tend to prefer English over other languages.

Quo Vadis, Lingua Franca?

In 2013, EUCAM (European Union Central Asia Monitoring) issued a [Policy Brief](#) claiming, among other things, that the region will become less integrated than now by 2030. The role of Russian as a lingua franca will decline, but the new languages of English and Chinese will be spoken mostly by the elites.

As we could see, both Russia and China have invested considerable efforts into the promotion of their languages.

At the same time, English will dominate the media and entertainment fields, and as many young people prefer social media over traditional news forms, English will spread. English also has an advantage, as it is actively promoted by the authorities. The Russian language will probably continue losing ground, and Mandarin will become more important. As the power of China increases both globally and in the region, it remains a question whether Mandarin Chinese can become truly global with it; its difficult phonetic structure and complicated character system might be a serious obstacle.

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