



## THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN UZBEKISTAN IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY ON ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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**Abstract.** This article analyzes how the language policy implemented in Uzbekistan in the first half of the 20th century influenced ethnic and national identity. The study examines changes in the formation of national culture and identity through language policy.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, language policy, ethnic identity, national identity, 20th century.

The first half of the 20th century was a very complex and contradictory period in the history of Uzbekistan. The establishment of Soviet power, the formation of a new political system, national-territorial delimitation, writing reforms, changes in the field of education and culture were directly related to language policy. In the Soviet period, language policy was considered not only as a linguistic process, but also as a means of implementing political and ideological goals. Also, in the first half of the 20th century, language policy in Uzbekistan was closely related to the socio-political life of the country, the processes of national revival and Russification.

The study of this topic is still important today, because the language policy implemented in the first half of the 20th century not only determined the socio-cultural processes of its time, but also left a deep mark on the formation of the Uzbek language and national identity in subsequent periods. Therefore, the scientific analysis of this topic allows for a deep understanding of the historical development of the national language, its role in political and cultural processes, and its influence on ethno-national identity.

This period is divided into two main stages: the language policy pursued in Uzbekistan in the 1920s-1930s acquired a dual character. On the one hand, the official status of the Uzbek language was strengthened, and the process of forming Uzbek national consciousness through the formation of a national republic and a new education system intensified. As a result of the adoption of the Latin script, the Uzbek people began to recognize the world in the new alphabet. On the other hand, as a result of writing reforms, the increasing dominance of the Russian language, and the repression of the national intelligentsia, the historical and cultural continuity of the Uzbek people was interrupted, and national identity was subordinated to the influence of Soviet ideology.

First of all, let's answer the question of what ethnic identity is. In Y.Odilov's "Explanatory Dictionary of Sociolinguistic Terms," the term "ethnic identity" is interpreted as follows: "People consider themselves to belong to a certain ethnic group or nation, the connection of a person with the cultural, historical, linguistic, and social characteristics of their people, independent of themselves. For example, Uzbek ethnic identity is linked to the Uzbek language, Uzbek traditions, Uzbek cuisine, and other values. It is a means of identifying and promoting oneself through the customs, traditions, values, language, religion, and other characteristics of one's ethnic group or nationality. Ethnic identity helps people preserve their cultural heritage

in multinational societies or in the context of migration."<sup>1</sup> As an example of the last opinion of this term, one can point to the fact that Uzbeks living in Russia or Kazakhstan give their children Uzbek names, cook Uzbek national dishes, and celebrate national holidays. These processes, although taking place abroad, serve the preservation of the ethnic identity of Uzbeks.

In dictionaries devoted to linguistics, the term "national identity" is interpreted as follows: "The language, customs, values, lifestyle, and other ethnic characteristic features of a particular nation, as well as the ability to distinguish itself from other nations by such features. National identity is preserved to a certain extent even when individual peoples completely merge."<sup>2</sup> For example, citizens of Uzbek nationality living in the territories of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan have preserved national elements characteristic of Uzbeks, such as skullcaps, atlas, adras, and chapan, in their clothing culture.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the national identity of the Uzbek language manifested itself, first of all, in close connection with the language, customs, values, and way of life of the people. The Uzbek language, as the main carrier of national culture, has expressed the historical thinking, worldview, and spiritual values of the Uzbek people. Therefore, the language reforms carried out by the Jadids were also carried out in order to preserve national identity and adapt it to the requirements of modern development. National identity has maintained a certain degree of stability in the cultural life of the people, in written and oral speech, and even in the process of rapprochement with other nations.

The language policy implemented in Uzbekistan in the first half of the 20th century had a complex and multifaceted impact on the process of formation of national and ethnic identity. In the 1920s-1930s, the Uzbek language underwent a transition from the Arabic script to the Latin script, which served to modernize national identity and increase literacy. At the same time, the complexity of reading ancient manuscripts limited access to religious and cultural heritage, leading to the temporary isolation of some elements of Uzbek cultural heritage. Moreover, the establishment of the Russian language as a priority language in schools, science, and administration during the Soviet period, although it created opportunities for Uzbeks to communicate with other nationalities, reduced the social status of the Uzbek language and limited the linguistic aspects of national identity. At the same time, although the activities of the Uzbek intelligentsia and the Soviet government in creating literary language norms served to strengthen the national language by combining folk dialects and ethnic features, as a result of the non-introduction of features of some regional dialects into the literary language, some ethnic features faced the threat of disappearance. Language policy in the first half of the 20th century played a complex and contradictory role in the formation of national and ethnic identity, not only as a developmental, but also as a limiting factor.

In the first years, the Soviet government focused on the development of national languages and their use in education and administration.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the Uzbek language began to be actively used in state, educational, and cultural life, which strengthened the process of national self-awareness of the Uzbek people.

<sup>1</sup> Odilov Y. Sotsiolingvistika atamalarining izohli lug'ati. – T.: «Innovatsion rivojlanish nashriyot-matbaa uyi», 2025. – B. 66 – 67.

<sup>2</sup> Odilov Y. Sotsiolingvistika atamalarining izohli lug'ati. – T.: «Innovatsion rivojlanish nashriyot-matbaa uyi», 2025. – B. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Тогаев Т. Шўролар тузумининг илк даврларида Ўзбекистонда тил сиёсати // International scientific journal of Biruni, 2023. Vol. 2, issue 2. – B. 179.



In the 1920s, an initiative was put forward to transition from Arabic script to Latin script in order to increase literacy, reduce religious influence, and modernize society. Starting from 1929, as a result of the introduction of the Latin script in Uzbek schools and the press, the level of literacy increased sharply, and the process of reading and writing became simpler for the younger generation<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, Uzbek folklore, literature, theater, and the press developed rapidly, and educational and publishing activities were established in the languages of representatives of different nationalities, in particular, in the Tajik and Karakalpak languages.<sup>5</sup> All this was an important step towards promoting the idea of interethnic equality, laying the foundation for cultural development, and strengthening ethnic identity.

However, this policy also had its downsides. As a result of the alphabet reform, the organic connection with the rich cultural and religious heritage of the Arabic script was broken, and the values inherent in Islamic civilization were gradually pushed aside. The historical and cultural unity of the Turkic peoples weakened, and the influence of the Russian language and culture increased. As a result, ties connected with the traditional values, religious beliefs, and national memory of the people weakened. Textbooks, works, and archival documents previously written in Latin script ceased to be read, which led to a cultural disconnect between generations. Due to the inability of a certain part of the population to adapt to the new writing system, cases of illiteracy were observed.

At the same time, the Uzbek language became even more influenced by the Russian language. Especially in the spheres of politics, production, technology, and culture, Russian terms – *partkom*, *sovhoz*, *kolhoz*, *zavod*, *rayon* entered into circulation and caused significant changes in the lexical system. At the same time, some Arabic and Persian words fell out of use, and the lexical layer of the Uzbek literary language was renewed<sup>6</sup>.

After 1940, the situation worsened. With the transition to Cyrillic, the return to or study of the Arabic script was completely restricted. Old writing was assessed as having a "religious" and "reactionary" character. Knowing or using the Arabic script has become politically dangerous. In general, the language policy of that time influenced in two directions: on the one hand, it served the development of national identity and literacy, and on the other hand, it weakened some aspects of ethnic identity by distancing them from historical and cultural heritage.

From the 1930s, the Russian language began to dominate as the language of state administration and higher education. Uzbek intellectuals and teachers were often required to know Russian, which led to the widespread bilingualism. This process, on the one hand, led to the Russification of Uzbek society, and on the other hand, hindered the independent development of national identity. In the 1920s and 1930s, Uzbek intellectuals sought to awaken national identity and promoted the development of the Uzbek language and culture. However, as a result of the Stalinist repressions of 1937-38, supporters of the national revival were repressed. This stopped the development of Uzbek national identity in an independent direction, and language policy remained within the framework of central Soviet ideology. The language policy of the 1920s-1930s initially seemed to create an opportunity for the formation

<sup>4</sup> Usman M. "Romanisation in Uzbekistan Past and Present // Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2010. Vol. 20. – P. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Togayev T. Language Policy of the Soviet State and its Implementation in Uzbekistan (1918-1930s) // International Journal on Integrated Education, 2023. Vol. 6. №12. – P. 58.

<sup>6</sup> Mirzayev T. O'zbek tili va rus tili aloqalari masalalari. – Toshkent: Fan, 1972. – B. 43.

of Uzbek national identity, the development of the national republic and the language. However, due to the reform of writing, Soviet ideology, and the invasion of the Russian language, the historical and cultural continuity was interrupted, national differences within the multi-ethnic group intensified, and the formation of independent identity was hindered<sup>7</sup>.

In 1929-1940, the transition from the Arabic script to the Latin script was carried out by the Soviet government under the banner of enlightenment and modernization. However, the hidden goal of this reform was to separate the Turkic peoples from their Islamic-cultural roots and form a new socialist nation. As a result of the transition to the Latin alphabet, it became difficult to read religious literature, and there was a disconnect from the ancient cultural heritage. This stage weakened religious identity and initiated the process of forming a secular national identity.

The transition of the Uzbek script to the Cyrillic basis in 1940 was carried out within the framework of the Soviet Union's centralization policy, with the aim of strengthening the dominance of the Russian language and culture. The Cyrillic script became a means of rapprochement with Russian culture, strengthening the concept of "Soviet people." As a result of this process, the Uzbek people were disconnected from their written heritage in Arabic and Latin script and faced a second stage of cultural memory disconnection. The widespread adoption of Cyrillic along with Russian limited the independent development of the Uzbek language and created a bilingual environment. As a result, the "Soviet" identity strengthened in Uzbek society, and national identity was pushed to the background.

The beginning of the widespread teaching of the Russian language in Uzbekistan dates back to the late 19th - early 20th centuries. Initially, it was introduced as a language of administrative management, and later it occupied a leading position in the spheres of education, science, and culture. In the 1930s-1950s, the Russian language became the main means of communication not only in the education system, but also in everyday life. As a result of this process, the penetration of Russian culture and worldview among the Uzbek intelligentsia, the formation of new styles of expression through language, was observed. The lexicon of the Uzbek language, especially in the fields of science, technology, and politics, has been enriched with Russian terms. However, this situation led to the suppression of natural means of expression in the national language. As a result, Uzbek national identity, especially in urban culture, was formed to a certain extent under the influence of the Russian language and Soviet ideology.

Nevertheless, even during the period of widespread introduction of the Russian language, the national identity of the Uzbek people did not completely disappear. On the contrary, this pressure further strengthened the idea of preserving national culture. Uzbek intellectuals, writers, and artists strived in their works to protect national values, language, and traditions, and to preserve the historical memory of the people. Thus, Uzbek culture, absorbing external influences, did not lose its national foundations, but reinterpreted them in a modern form.

From the beginning of the 20th century, especially between the 1920s and 1950s, a large-scale toponymic Russification policy was implemented in Uzbekistan based on Soviet ideology. Within the framework of this process, Russian or Soviet names with ideological content were given instead of historical place names. For example, *Leninobod* (now Khujand), *Frunze*

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<sup>7</sup> Togayev T. Language Policy of the Soviet State and its Implementation in Uzbekistan (1918-1930s) // International Journal on Integrated Education, 2023. Vol. 6. №12. – P. 58.

(Bishkek), *Kirov, Molotov, Krasnogorsk, Oktyabr, Kommunar* etc.<sup>8</sup> In our view, the main goal of this policy was the replacement of the historical and cultural memory of the indigenous peoples with Soviet ideology, weakening their connection with their historical roots.

Due to the language policy of that time, even the streets and neighborhoods of Tashkent began to be given Russian names, as well as the names of Russian intellectuals. However, changing the name ingrained in the consciousness of the people could not change the national identity of the Uzbek people. In the book "Language and Culture" by M. Mirtojiev and N. Makhmudov, the following notes are found: "... even the name Khadra was changed to the name Komsomol. However, after several years, everything returned to its original name. And now the Tashkent residents hardly know that the square is also named after the Komsomol. The name of Eskijo'va Square is also a centuries-old name, ingrained in the consciousness of the people. It is absolutely impossible to tear it from the consciousness, heart, and tongue of the people. Nevertheless, this square has been officially designated as Kalinin Square for almost half a century. There is also a statue of Kalin here. There is a reason for this name, since it was here that M. I. Kalinin delivered a fiery speech. Kalinin Square is also marked on the front of all the vehicles that travel there. But still, this square is known as Eskijo'va".<sup>9</sup>

According to the research, the "semantic field of national historical identification" was changed through the change of place names, that is, through Soviet toponyms, a memory associated with socialist heroism and party culture was formed in the consciousness of the people. As a result, the geographical memory of the Uzbek people, the cultural and historical identity expressed through place names, was disrupted. Local names like "Qoratepa," "Ko'kcha," and "Qiziltepa" were pushed to the background. This situation served to replace the symbolic signs of national identity with political and ideological signs<sup>10</sup>.

Also, during the 1900s-1950s, knowledge of the Russian language became a political and social necessity. Knowledge of the Russian language was established as a mandatory condition for work in the Soviet administrative system, science, military, and technical spheres. Therefore, the Russian language has become a symbol of social prestige among Uzbek intellectuals and civil servants. According to research, this process led to "social stratification through language." Those who knew Russian had a high social status, while those who didn't had limited opportunities<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time, this situation reduced the social status of the Uzbek language and culture. The Uzbek language was viewed as a "local language" and was pushed aside in the scientific, technical, and political spheres. Among the Uzbek intelligentsia, Russian-speaking and Russian-thinking expanded, resulting in a cultural synthesis between national identity and Soviet identity. That is, the Uzbek language was preserved in our country by the center, but Russian terminology and phrases entered the speech, and the lexical layer of the language was enriched by words imbued with Soviet ideology.

<sup>8</sup> Yusupov O. The russification legacy of historical monuments of Uzbekistan // *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 2021. – P. 1032.

<sup>9</sup> Миртожиев М., ва бошқалар. Тил ва маданият. – Тошкент: Ўзбекистон, 1992. – Б. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Yusupov O. The russification legacy of historical monuments of Uzbekistan // *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 2021. – P. 1033.

<sup>11</sup> Togayev T. Language Policy of the Soviet State and its Implementation in Uzbekistan (1918-1930s) // *International Journal on Integrated Education*, 2023. Vol. 6. №12. – P. 55.

Thus, at the initial stage, the development of the local language, the creation of a national press and school system supported ethnic identity. After the 1930s, the centralized policy of Russification, the repeated change of writing, and the repression of the intelligentsia caused great damage to the continuous development of the national language. Therefore, although the ethno-national identity of the Uzbek people and other local groups has been preserved, their ability to express themselves through language has been limited under the influence of political decisions.

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