

# *Language Policy and Language Situation in Kyrgyzstan*

CHOLPON CHOTAEVA

Introduction

General Description of Kyrgyz

Historical Background: Tsarist and Soviet Language Policies

Language Policy in Kyrgyzstan after 1980s

Ethno-linguistic Situation

Conclusion

Attachments

## **Introduction**

Ethnic problems were of the key factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Originally, the perestroika, initiated by the leadership that came to power in 1985, didn't imply any changes in the nationality policy. However, in the late 1980s an implicit discontent with the former official ideology came out and became apparent in the field of interethnic relations.

In 1987-1989 the policy of russification, carried out by the Soviet authorities, met with resistance of local ethnic elites and resulted in the legislation that made the languages of titular ethnic groups the state languages in each of Central Asian republics. Adopted on September 23, 1989, the law recognized Kyrgyz as the only state language of Kyrgyzstan. The 1989 law aimed to change inequalities, existed in functioning of Russian and Kyrgyz, and provide an exclusive use of Kyrgyz in all social-political spheres of the republic. On the eve of Kyrgyzstani independence the adoption of 1989 law was in fact a demand for sovereignty.

Language plays a significant part in the formation and expression of ethnic identity. Language is a crucial part of culture, which is not isolated from the external environment. During the late 1980s the Kyrgyz language was in the core of the Kyrgyz cultural and ethnic awakening, a symbol of spiritual revival of the Kyrgyz people.

Meanwhile, the implementation of the 1989 language law contradicted a real ethno-linguistic situation in Kyrgyzstan, represented by more than 100 ethnic communities and a few tens of ethnic languages. The 1989 law deprived them of the right to satisfy their linguistic and ethnic identity. Moreover, Kyrgyz itself lacked developed scientific and technical terms and styles to replace Russian. Under existing conditions the adoption of the 1989 law did not resolve the language problem, but marked the beginning of the era of 'language battles', where is still no final solution.

This article will focus on the language policy and ethno-linguistic situation, taking place in the contemporary Kyrgyz Republic, as well as

give a general description of Kyrgyz and historic conditions preceded the present language situation.

### **General description of Kyrgyz**

Kyrgyz is spoken by approximately 2 million people in the Kyrgyz Republic, where it is the state language. There are also 150,000 Kyrgyz speakers in China (Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region) and smaller communities of speakers in western Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, Russia, Ukraine.

Kyrgyz is a member of Central Turkic, which also includes Kazakh and other less-known languages. Central Turkic is a subgroup of Common Turkic group of languages, which also includes Turkish, Azerbaijani, Tatar, Uighur, Uzbek, and others. The Turkic languages and the Mongolian-Tungus languages of Siberia and northeastern China are major divisions of the Altaic language family. Some experts also consider Japanese and Korean as part of this family.

There are a number of Kyrgyz dialects. Nevertheless, the most considerable differences are between Northern and Southern dialects. Standard Kyrgyz is based on the northern variety, which has a large number of word borrowings from Mongolian languages, but the least number of Persian words that are often in Southern Kyrgyz. Presently, Kazakh influences the development of the Northern dialect, while Southern (linguists distinguish Southeastern and Southwestern dialects) is affected by Uzbek.

### **Historical background: Tsarist and Soviet language policies**

The roots of the 1989 cardinal shift in the language policy of Kyrgyzstan are found

in the language policy, carried out in the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. Although the Tsarist language policy did not have an immediate effect on Kyrgyzstani modern language policy, yet it was a reference point for the language policy, carried out after the Bolshevik revolution.

### *Tsarist language policy*

The Russian Empire was a multinational state, which in the south incorporated Turkestan. The Tsarist language policy was colonial in respect of other peoples and implied the dominating role of Russian. Russian was the language of the majority and, consequently, the state language of the empire. It was the language of administration, court, army, and interethnic communication.

However, the annexation of Turkestan to the Russian Empire in the late 1870s didn't bring any serious changes into the language situation of the region. The communication of the Russian administration and indigenous peoples did not go beyond occasional contacts through Tatar interpreters. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Central Asians, being isolated inside their communities, spoke their native languages and didn't know Russian.

### *Language policy from 1917 to the 1930s*

The Soviet language policy can be divided into two stages. The first one, which took place from the 1917 Bolshevik revolution to the late 1930s, was characterized by the declaration of equal rights and a free choice of languages. The language policy at that stage was also called *language building* as within that period more than seventy Latin alphabets were developed for the peoples of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> At the second stage, lasted from the late 1930s to the late 1980s, a centralized state policy of teaching Russian was pursued.

---

<sup>1</sup> V. M. Alpatov, *150 yazykov I politika: 1917-2000* (KRAFT+IV RAN, 2000), p 74.

After the Bolsheviks came to power, they launched a new language policy, which opposed the introduction of an obligatory state language and aimed to satisfy the need of all ethnic minorities in their mother tongue. The politics of equal rights of all ethnic languages met with a wide support of the Bolshevik revolution among the non-Russian population, whose ethnic self-consciousness had remarkably developed during the years of revolutions and civil war.

Meanwhile, the implementation of the new language policy was hampered by one factor: an inadequate development of many ethnic languages. In the 1920s only 13 languages had standard form and 19 had written language.<sup>2</sup> The situation was even more complicated in Central Asia, where prior to the 1924 national delimitation there were neither precise linguistic borders, nor developed ethnic self-consciousness, except for a small group of russified intellectuals. People affiliated themselves with tribe or place of birth (according to nomadic or settled population) and belonging to the Muslim community.

Following standardization of the language, a modified Arabic script was adopted for Kyrgyz in 1924. A traditional Arabic script was linguistically improper for Turkic languages, as short vowels were not shown while writing. The reform of the Arabic script resolved that problem. Nevertheless, even the modified Arabic script had a number of shortcomings. It contributed to the insularity of Soviet Muslims and thereby contradicted the idea of world revolution and internationalism. In 1928 a decision to switch from the Arabic script into Latin was made. As a result, the Unified Turkic Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic script of the Kyrgyz language. The Latin script was recognized as international and didn't have any unpleasant associations with the Tsarist regime.

### *Language policy from the 1930s to the 1980s*

---

<sup>2</sup> V.M. Alpatov, p 46.

The late 1930s witnessed the restoration of the Tsarist language policy and the introduction of Russian into all language spheres. In 1938 an obligatory study of Russian in all schools of the USSR republics was introduced. In 1940 the modified Cyrillic alphabet was introduced for Kyrgyz. The latter was motivated by mainly political reasons.

The change in the language course was caused by the fact that a real language situation was contrary to the state language policy. Despite the official declarations on the uselessness of an obligatory state language, the language situation in the 1920-1930s was opposite. The need of mutual understanding, along with other objective factors, required a single state language, which could be only Russian. Mass expectations of the world socialist revolution, when all ethnic languages would disappear and a common world language would come instead, gave place to the doctrine of building socialism in one particular country. Internationalism in the language policy was replaced by the policy of nationalism.

Since 1941, when it was officially reported about a successful realization of introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet, up to the late 1980s the language policy didn't have any considerable changes.

### *Consequences of the Soviet language policy for Kyrgyz*

The consequences of the Soviet language policy for the development of Kyrgyz were discrepant. On the one hand, Kyrgyz was not standardized until the Soviet period, when it was used along with Russian for official and governmental purposes. During the Soviet time the functioning of Kyrgyz extended greatly, as well as its status in the society was strengthened. The introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet for the Kyrgyz language facilitated the study of Russian for non-Russian speakers and provided an access to the information and literature, written in Russian.

Under the Soviet rule a system of elementary, secondary and higher education with the instruction in Kyrgyz was established. Prior to the revolution less than 1% of the

Kyrgyz population was literate. In 1926 the literacy rate of the Kyrgyz was about 5%; in 1959 it reached nearly 100%.<sup>3</sup>

No Kyrgyz language press existed before the Bolshevik revolution. In 1987, 62 newspapers, 17 journals and 400 books were published in Kyrgyz.<sup>4</sup> In 1926 first radio station was established, in 1959 Kyrgyz television started broadcasting.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, a wide use of Russian in social, political and cultural life of the republic led to narrowing of functions of Kyrgyz and diminishing of its sociopolitical role. The first stage of the reforming caused the disconnection of Muslim tradition in the region that fed religion, language and culture, based on the Arabic script. The second stage of the language reforming pushed the peoples of Central Asia aside from growing ethnopolitical and sociocultural influence of Turkey and furthered the cultural unification and assimilation within the Soviet Union.

From 1959 to 1989 the Kyrgyz language was not taught in schools, where the language of instruction was not Kyrgyz. The functioning of Kyrgyz did not go beyond secondary and higher humanitarian education. In the late 1980s only 26-27% of research papers in the field of humanitarian and social science was published in Kyrgyz. Since the 1970s historical, economical and natural sciences' works have been done exclusively in Russian.<sup>6</sup>

## **Language policy in Kyrgyzstan after 1980s**

### *1989 law on state language*

During the 1980s public demands for granting a higher status to the

---

<sup>3</sup> *Istoriya kyrgyzov I Kyrgyzstana* (Bishkek: Ilim, 1998), pp 303-304.

<sup>4</sup> A. Orusbaev, *Yazykovaya jizn Kirgizii* (Frunze: Ilim, 1990), pp 140-141.

<sup>5</sup> *Istoriya kyrgyzov*, pp 314-315.

<sup>6</sup> A. Orusbaev, *Yazykovaya jizn Kirgizii*, pp 145, 147.

Kyrgyz language brought to the 1989 law, making Kyrgyz the state language of the republic. The resolution of the Supreme Council of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, which put in force the 1989 law, specified a term of ten years (1989-1999), during which Russian along with Kyrgyz could be used in the official correspondence at state agencies, enterprises, establishments and organizations. Beginning from January 1, 1999, Russian-Kyrgyz bilingualism was to be replaced by Kyrgyz monolanguage. As to Russian, it was formally described as the language of interethnic communication; other languages guaranteed not to be discriminated against (See Attachments 1,2).

During the Soviet era Russian dominated in most spheres of public life. It was the language of administration, a large-scale industry, natural science, and other fields, where non-indigenous population prevailed in their number. Russian also had a high social prestige over other languages. The knowledge of Russian was the key to social promotion and carrier. As to Kyrgyz, it was applied in agriculture, secondary and philological higher education, humanitarian science, fiction and mass media. Whereas Kyrgyzs mainly lived in the rural area, non-Kyrgyzs inhabited cities and villages of the Chui valley.

Under those circumstances, the 1989 law aimed to eliminate a great disparity in the use of Russian and Kyrgyz and to promote the status of Kyrgyz. It implied to extend functions of Kyrgyz at the expense of Russian, thus creating serious problems for the citizens not speaking Kyrgyz. On the other hand, the 1989 law was seen by many Kyrgyzs as an opportunity to reverse one of the past injustices and restore a sense of dignity to the Kyrgyz people.

Ten years later it became obvious that the objects were not achieved. Kyrgyz was



not ready to implement functions of state language on account of “weak development of the language of official correspondence, the scientific language and the conceptual-terminological apparatus” (See Attachment 8). At the same time, the introduction of Kyrgyz as the only state language met with resistance of Russian-speaking population. The lawmakers did not take into account a socio-demographic situation in Kyrgyzstan, where more than 100 ethnic communities resided. The introduction of monolanguage violated their right to speak their native language and satisfy their linguistic identity. In practice it led to the escalation of interethnic tension and caused mass migration of Russian-speaking population from Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, the adoption of the 1989 law on the eve of independence had a broader symbolic meaning. It signified decentralization of power from Moscow and supremacy of the Kyrgyz sovereignty over Kyrgyz territories.

#### *Languages in the Kyrgyz Constitution*

During the constitutional debates a second major issue raised after the question of political power was the issue of language. With the creation of a new constitution many, and not only Russian speakers, felt able to raise the question again. The resolution of the issue would have major implications for both substantial minorities within Kyrgyzstan and the relationship of Kyrgyzstan with Moscow.

Some of those raising the issue proposed to add some form of definition of Russian as an ‘official language’ or ‘means of interethnic communication’ to the constitution. Others demanded to make Russian a second state language, arguing that only that status of Russian could prevent mass outflow of Russian speakers from Kyrgyzstan. However, the first phrasing was completely rejected on the grounds that it was simply meaningless in

legal terms and that constitution could only speak of state languages.<sup>7</sup>

Finally adopted on May 5, 1993, the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic maintained the status of Kyrgyz as a state language, but didn't grant any special status to Russian. Nevertheless, it stressed equal functioning of Russian and all other languages, spoken by the republican population (See Attachment 3).

#### *1994 and 2000 president decrees on regulation of migration*

In response to growing emigration and outflow of skilled citizens from Kyrgyzstan, two Decrees of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic: 'About measures on regulation of migration processes in the Kyrgyz Republic' dated 1994 and 'About extra measures on regulation of migration processes in the Kyrgyz Republic' dated 2000, were issued. The first decree of 1994 allowed using Russian in those areas and work groups, where Russian-speaking citizens were majority (See Attachment 4). In the same decree the government was charged to revise and prolong the term of implementation of the 1989 law regarding the introduction of Kyrgyz at state enterprises and other institutions. As for the parliament, *Jogorku Kenesh*, the decree prescribed it to develop a draft on amendments to the 1989 Law 'On state language'. As a result, by the 1994 resolution of the Kyrgyz Government the date of final introduction of Kyrgyz was postponed to January 1, 2005.

Issued in 2000 the second Degree 'About extra measures' in addition to the actions, directed at stabilization of migration, demanded some measures on setting up favorable conditions for study and development of Russian and its historiography in Kyrgyzstan (See Attachment 5).

---

<sup>7</sup> John Anderson, 'Constitutional development in Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 16, No 3, 1997, pp 307-310.

### *2000 law on official language*

On May 29, 2000, Jogorku Kenesh passed the law, recognizing Russian as an official language of the Kyrgyz Republic (See Attachment 6). The passage of the 2000 law was recognition of the failure of the 1989 law to achieve its goals and an affirmation of the status quo. During the time since the 1989 law just a few non-Kyrgyzs tried to learn the Kyrgyz language. Moreover, many Kyrgyzs themselves remained comfortable with the Russian language in their workplace. Although presented as a measure to stem the mass outflow of the republican Slavic population, it has two political goals: gathering support from the non-Kyrgyz and urban Kyrgyz population in the presidential election that fall, and winning Moscow's support for Bishkek.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the adoption of the law generated a strong reaction from Kyrgyz nationalists, who worried about the fate of their language.<sup>9</sup>

### *2001 amendment to the Constitution on status of Russian*

On December 24, 2001, after Jogorku Kenesh approved the bill's second reading, President A. Akaev signed the Law 'On introduction of amendments to Article 5 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic', according to which the new status of Russian as an official language was introduced into the constitution (See Attachment 7). The law in fact equalized both the Kyrgyz and Russian languages in their rights.

It is worthy to note that the 2001 legislation on introduction of amendments to the constitution was not the first attempt to grant an official status to Russian. The first attempt took place in 1996. At that time an initiative of deputies concerning the Russian language failed to succeed. In 2001 the initiative was taken by President A. Akaev and manifested in the 2000 law.

---

<sup>8</sup> Nick Megoran, *Language and ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan*, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> *Kyrgyz rukhu*, 9 November 2001.

### *Program on development of state language for 2000-2010*

Meanwhile, by the president degree dated September 20, 2000, *the Program on development of the state language of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2000-2010* was approved (See Attachment 9). The Program laid the foundation for a stepwise switch into the Kyrgyz language in state administration. The Program was developed by the *National Commission on the state language under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic* on the basis of *the Conception of development of the state language*, approved by the president Decree ‘About further development of the state language of the Kyrgyz Republic’ of 1998 (See Attachment 8). The Commission has become the main body, coordinating the activities of all state agencies and establishments on development and use of the Kyrgyz language.

The adoption of the Program, as well as the measures, prepared for realization of the Program, came into conflict with earlier 2000 law on the official language and the new redaction of Article 5 of the Kyrgyz Constitution. It has to be mentioned that in general the post-soviet national-language policy of the Kyrgyz Republic is quite contradictory. On the one hand, it is manifested in the policy of promotion of interests of the titular ethnic community, the Kyrgyz. On the other, it is reflected in the attempts of creating a civic society for all, regardless of ethnicity, which is enriched in President A. Akaev’s slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’.

### *Orthography*

In 1993 it was reported to switch from the Cyrillic orthography to the Turkic Latin alphabet. The matter was justified by political reasons. The Cyrillic script was associated with the Soviet rule, while Latin symbolized an independence from Russia and an exit to the international scene. In this respect Turkey exerted a strong influence over Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian states. However, in the course of time Turkey’s influence over the region noticeably weakened.

The intention hasn’t been realized in view of economic and psychical difficulties.

Whereas an economic aspect of the problem lies in the expenses to cover the reintroduction of a new alphabet, a psychological aspect signifies the unwillingness of the literate adult population to have their written language changed, as in that case they have to learn a new orthography again. Despite that fact, in the measures on realization of the Program on development of the Kyrgyz language for 2000-2010 a development of special programs to teach the Latin script with reference to the Kyrgyz language is planned in schools, secondary and higher establishments.

## **Ethno-linguistic situation**

### *Ethnic situation*

The policy of a stepwise switch into Kyrgyz, followed by the Kyrgyz authorities, collides with a real ethno-linguistic situation in the republic, a homeland of more than 100 ethnic communities. In fact, twelve out of 100 ethnic groups have the population of more than 20,000 people (See Table 1).

As a result of the population natural increase and emigration, the ethnic composition of Kyrgyzstan underwent remarkable changes during the period between the 1989 and the 1999 census. In this respect three groups can be distinguished.

The first group consists of peoples, whose number increased during the ten years. The population of Kyrgyzs rose by 900,000 (or 40%), so that their proportion among the republican population increased from 52.4% in 1989 to 64.9% in 1999. Dungans increased by 15,000 (40%), Uigurs – by 10,000 (27%), Turks – by 12,000 (57%). The number of Uzbeks rose by 115,000 (21%), so that the percentage of Uzbeks increased from 12.9% in 1989 to 13.8% in 1999. In 1999 they became the second numerous ethnic group after Kyrgyzs, leaving behind Russians, the second largest group in 1989. The population growth in all mentioned ethnic groups was mainly due to the

population natural increase. The Tajik population increased by 27% mostly at the expense of the mass arrival of Tajik refugees.

The second group includes peoples, whose number noticeably dropped by 1999. For 1989-1999 the Russian population decreased by 300,000, from 21.5% to 12.5%, as a result of emigration. Because of emigration the proportion of Ukrainians dropped from 2.5% in 1989 to 1% in 1999 (57,000), and the percentage of Germans - from 2.4% to 0.4% (80,000).

The third group includes peoples, whose population did not change greatly or remained stable for the period of 1989-1999. Among them are Armenians, Moldavians, Georgians, Turkmens, Lithuanians, Estonians.<sup>10</sup>

### *Linguistic situation*

Among a few tens of Kyrgyzstani languages only 10 languages have a considerable number of speakers and practical functions implemented. Aside from Kyrgyz and Russian, they are Uzbek, Dungan, German, Ukrainian, Tatar, Uighur, Kazakh and Tajik. The languages of the rest, as well as Uighur, Tatar, Kazakh and Ukrainian, are mostly operated in the domestic and intra-ethnic communication. Many Ukrainians, Germans, Belarus, Jewish, Koreans, Kazakhs, Kalmyks, Tatars, Turks, Uighurs, mention Russian or Kyrgyz as their mother tongue.

Below we will focus on the Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek languages as the most popular among the population of Kyrgyzstan.

### *Kyrgyz and Russian*

According to the 1999 census, the number of people freely speaking Kyrgyz constituted 70% of the republic population.<sup>11</sup> Kyrgyz speakers are mostly ethnic

---

<sup>10</sup> *First National Population Census 1999: Osnovnye itogi pervoi natsional'noi perepisi naseleniia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki 1999 goda*, Bishkek, 2000, p 27.

<sup>11</sup> *First National Population Census 1999*, p 32.

Kyrgyzs. Almost all population of Naryn and Talas provinces, Batken district of Batken province, are of Kyrgyz origin. Historically, Russians and Ukrainians have inhabited the north of the country: Bishkek city, Chui and Issyk-Kul provinces (See Map).

Kyrgyz is widely applied in all provinces with the exception of Chui province and Bishkek city, where Russian is more frequent. Kyrgyz villagers speak Kyrgyz much more often than urban Kyrgyzs. In the cities of the Chui valley many Kyrgyzs use Russian not only in interethnic, but also in intra-ethnic communication. The generations of urban Kyrgyzs of the 1950-1980s, speaking Russian at schools, universities and workplace, kept on using Kyrgyz at home with family members.

The situation, when urban Kyrgyzs of Chui province speak Russian inside and outside their families, stems from a particular ethno-demographic situation in cities, which have been taking place since the Soviet time. Originally, Kyrgyzs led a nomadic way of life until almost 1930s, when they settled under compulsion. They hardly mastered agricultural and industrial professions and mainly populated rural areas. As for cities, they, emerging as industrial and educational centers, were developed on the basis of hundreds of industrial workers and engineers, dispatched to Kyrgyzstan from Russia and Ukraine. They settled in Bishkek capital (formerly Frunze city), industrial cities of the Chui valley and mining towns of Osh province. They, along with the first migrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Russian and Ukrainian peasants, who settled in the Chui valley, at the Issyk-Kul lake and the Fergana valley - laid the foundation for subsequent migrations of Russians, Ukrainians and people of different ethnic origin to the republic. In their majority they spoke Russian, which served as the language of interethnic communication for non-Russians.

Those migrations, as well as mass deportation of Germans from Volga region, Koreans from the Far East, Transcaucasians, the genocide of the Kyrgyz people in 1916 and the tragic events of the 1930s in Kazakhstan, contributed to the decrease in the proportion of Kyrgyzs among the republican population. In 1979 the Kyrgyz

constituted 47.9% of the republican population, in 1989 - 52.4%, in 1999 - 64.9% (See Table 1). That proportion was even smaller in Bishkek city, where Kyrgyz residents formed 22.9% in 1979 and 52.2% in 1999.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, Kyrgyz speakers in Bishkek and other cities of the Chui valley found themselves out of the Kyrgyz language environment. Many Kyrgyzs aged 25-50 years cannot freely speak Kyrgyz. During the 1999 census 5,657 Kyrgyzs (0.3%) mentioned Russian as their mother tongue (See Table 2).

### *Uzbek*

Uzbek is the third language in Kyrgyzstan according to the number of speakers. The overwhelming majority of the Uzbek population resides in three southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan that are located in the Fergana valley. Uzbeks mainly populate southern Osh city, neighboring Kara-Sui and Aravan districts of Osh province, Djalal-Abad city and neighboring Suzak district of Djalal-Abad province (See Map). In Osh, the largest southern city, the number of Uzbeks is about the same as the number of Kyrgyzs.

Uzbeks are not newcomers to Kyrgyzstan like Russians or Ukrainians. They, as well as Tajiks, are native to the land, where they appeared to be following the 1924 national delimitation. As a result of proclaimed by the Bolsheviks 'the right of self-determination' the Fergana valley was divided between three Soviet republics: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Each part of the Fergana valley includes a considerable community of non-titular representatives, belonging to neighboring republic.

99.4% of Uzbeks mentioned Uzbek as their mother tongue (See Table 2). There are secondary schools with the instruction in Uzbek, Uzbek dramatic theatre of Hamza in Osh city, Uzbek cultural-educational centers.<sup>13</sup> An Uzbek newspaper is issued, as well as Uzbek radio and television broadcast. Though the Kyrgyz authorities was very

---

<sup>12</sup> *First National Population Census 1999*, p 85.



sensitive to the Russian language issue, they refused to secure the functioning and use of Uzbek in the Kyrgyz legislation. The relations between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks, traumatized by the tragic events of 1990, have been further deteriorated by different socio-economic conditions. Uzbeks are mostly the residents of urban areas, where possibilities of economic activities are greater, than in rural areas, where Kyrgyzs are dominating.

### *Bilingualism*

Bilingualism, an ability to speak two languages, is a quite widespread phenomenon among the citizens of Kyrgyzstan. In this case, the second language serves as a means of interethnic communication. In 1999 the residents speaking two languages formed 48% of the republican adult population (See Table 3). It has to be mentioned that the speakers are significantly differed in age, social position, ethnic origin and place of residence.

Historically, Russian was the state language of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Still today Russian has a high prestige in many social spheres and interethnic communication. Russian is the most popular as the second language, spoken by Kyrgyzstani people. One third of Kyrgyzs and of Uzbeks, 81% of Kazakhs, 98% of Ukrainians, speak Russian easily. They are mainly the inhabitants of cities and villages in Northern Kyrgyzstan, young and middle-aged.

As for Kyrgyz, it is freely used by almost half Kazakhs, one fourth of Uzbeks and only 3% of Russians. The percentage of Russians using Kyrgyz greatly depends on their geographical distribution. Thus, the proportion of Russians speaking Kyrgyz is very small in Bishkek city (5%) and Chui province (5%), where Russians are numerous. In Naryn province, where Russians are few (0.3%) and Kyrgyzs are prevalent (99%), Russians, speaking Kyrgyz in daily life, form 28% of the provincial

---

<sup>13</sup> A. Orusbaev, *Yazykovaya jizn Kirgizii*, pp 35-36.

population.

Uzbek is the second widespread language in three southern provinces, bordering on Uzbekistan: Osh province - 5%, Djalal-Abad province - 5% and Batken province - 11.2%. Tajiks show high ability to speak Uzbek. In the south the number of Kyrgyzs speaking Uzbek is equal to the number of Russians speaking Uzbek.

The transformation of Kyrgyzstan into an independent state, accompanied by broadening political, economic and cultural contacts with foreign countries, has provided Kyrgyzstani citizens with a possibility to travel abroad for purposes of tourism, study and work. That fact has become the main reason of public interest in learning English. In 1999, 1% of young people living in Bishkek city mentioned English as their second language (See Table 3).<sup>14</sup>

#### *Education and mass media*

The language of education in the Kyrgyz Republic is prescribed by the 1992 Law 'On education', which in the redaction of 2002 reads that 'the basic languages of instruction are the state and the official languages, as well as instruction can be provided in any other language'. 'In all educational institutions the study of Kyrgyz, Russian and one of foreign languages is obligatory and is regulated by educational standards' (Article 5). It is also stressed in *the State doctrine of education in the Kyrgyz Republic*, approved by the President's degree of 27 August 2000, that the state is responsible to provide the citizens of Kyrgyzstan with a free choice of language of instruction and to realize their rights to study Kyrgyz, Russian and other international languages.

Presently, there are 2014 schools in the republic, where 1,114,000 students are studying. To compare with 1990, the number of schools increased by 286 and the

---

<sup>14</sup> *First National Population Census 1999*, pp 32-33.

number of students – by 179,400.<sup>15</sup> In 1989 the Kyrgyz language as a school subject was introduced in all schools of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The majority of schools (more than 80%) are located in the countryside, where the language of instruction is Kyrgyz. Russian schools are predominantly concentrated in cities. Besides, there are more than 200 Uzbek schools and 8 Tajik schools. In places of residence of ethnic minorities, schools with parallel Kyrgyz, Russian and other ethnic languages as the language of instruction are established.

All Kyrgyzstani secondary schools are facing serious problems: a shortage and a low quality of textbooks, especially in schools with the instruction in Kyrgyz and other ethnic languages, a lack of qualified teachers and a delay in payment of their salaries. Moreover, the quality of education in comparison with 1990 notably deteriorated. In order to improve the quality of education and maintain its accessibility to all people, *the National educational program 'Bilim'* was adopted in 1996 and the year of 1996 was announced the Year of education.

As of beginning of 2000 the number of state higher educational establishments reached 26, as well as other 13, financed by non-state organizations. There are also 51 state secondary special establishments and 2 are non-state.<sup>16</sup> Both Kyrgyz and Russian are applied as the language of instruction.

Among them there is a number of higher educational establishments, operating on the basis of intergovernmental financing: Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Kyrgyz-American University, Kyrgyz-European Faculty at the Kyrgyz National University, Kyrgyz-Turkish University, Bishkek International School of Business and Management, financed by the UNDP. Presently, many branches of non-state Russian higher institutions have been opened, where the language of teaching is Russian: Moscow International University of Business and Informational Technologies,

---

<sup>15</sup> *National plan of activities on education for all*, 30 July 2002.

<sup>16</sup> *First National Population Census 1999*, p 43.

International Slavic University of Derjavin, Russian Academy of Education and others.<sup>17</sup>

All mass media sources in Kyrgyzstan can be divided into three groups: those in Kyrgyz, in Russian and other languages. The latter are just a few. Since Kyrgyzstan achieved independence the number and the structure of mass media sources sharply increased. In 1996, 142 newspapers and 50 journals were issued. Among them 68 newspapers and 17 magazines were published in Kyrgyz.

There are many private radio and television stations established recently. Most of them broadcast in Russian. The only Kyrgyz language TV channel is the state channel. In the south there are Uzbek TV programs, transmitted from Uzbekistan.

## **Conclusion**

The post-Soviet language policy of Kyrgyzstan is contradictory. On the one hand, the policy of the state support of Kyrgyz has created favourable conditions for the development of Kyrgyz. On the other, the intention to switch from Russian into Kyrgyz in intellectual and political life of the republic was contrary to the real linguistic situation in Kyrgyzstan, where Russian preserved its position as the language of state administration, higher education, science and interethnic communication.

The modern language policy and language situation in Kyrgyzstan is the product of interaction of two discrepant trends: the need of identity and the need of communication. The need of identity is as important as it reflects a wish of an individual to speak his mother tongue. However, the situation changes in a multiethnic state, where the need of mutual understanding starts prevailing. In Kyrgyzstan, the homeland of more than 100 ethnic communities, Russian is the means of interethnic

---

<sup>17</sup> N. Portnova, 'Yazykovaya politika v Kyrgyzstane', *Tsentral'naya Aziya I Kavkaz*,

communication. Although the Soviet Union collapsed and the newly independent state of Kyrgyzstan determined on diminishing the role of Russian, the orientation of many people to Russian remains. The matter is not only in the prestige of Russian. Today, when Russian is not only the language of ethnic Russians, it is one of the channels to integrate into the international informational space and a means of international communication. A similar situation took place at the appropriate stage of economic and political development in many other countries, where the state language were replaced by more prestige languages of ethnic minorities.