

# Speaking in a Forked Tongue: Russian Help for Autocracy in Kazakhstan

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Syria, Hong Kong, Belarus, and now Kazakhstan. During the past decade the autocrats' international have perfected rigging elections and suppressing democratic dissent. Resurgent Russia has excelled in this field. Few observers, however, notice that the Kremlin's neoimperial package is underpinned with ethnolinguistic nationalism, or the ideology of the *Russkii mir* (Russian world). Alongside oil blackmail, the Kremlin imposes Cyrillic and the Russian language on the post-Soviet states with an eye to constructing a Russian sphere of influence. This neoimperial sphere is designed to coincide with the area of the former Soviet Union or even the Russian Empire. Moscow's offensive use of language and script politics is part and parcel of hybrid warfare strategy that reduces the need for the deployment of troops and outright annexations. Are the Russian intervention forces going to leave Kazakhstan anytime soon?

## Fraternal Help<sup>1</sup>

In Kazakhstan, on 1 January 2022, the state-imposed cap on the price of liquid gas was removed. Not surprisingly, this price immediately shot up by 100%, hitting hard the country's impoverished population mid-winter. Distances in Kazakhstan are vast. From one end of the country to the other is as far as from Paris to Moscow. Affordable car transport is essential. As a result of this drastic price rise, on 5 January, protests erupted in the main cities, and quickly turned violent. In reply to the Kazakhstan president's plea for help, the following day, the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, an alliance of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) sent stabilizing forces to the country.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the Kazakhstan president talked to the Belarusian dictator on the latter's experience of suppressing the widespread protests in 2019 that had erupted in the wake of the rigged election.<sup>3</sup> Russian MP Leonid Kalashnikov also explained that the 'peace-keeping forces' would stay in Kazakhstan as long as deemed necessary by the Kazakhstan president.<sup>4</sup>

However, what international observers largely fail to pay attention to is the list of four demands to Kazakhstan that Margarita Simonyan tweeted.<sup>5</sup> First of all, Kazakhstan must recognize Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Fine, only to be expected, given the Kremlin's drive to make the post-Soviet space into its own sphere of influence. Yet, the three further demands refer exclusively to language politics. Kazakhstan must reinstate Cyrillic as the official script of the Kazakh language. This demand entails an immediate stop to the country's transition to the Latin alphabet that was to be completed by 2031.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://24tv.ua/ru/bratskaja-pomoshh-ot-rossii-budet-samoubijstvennoj-novosti-rossija\\_n1835858](https://24tv.ua/ru/bratskaja-pomoshh-ot-rossii-budet-samoubijstvennoj-novosti-rossija_n1835858)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/05/kazakhstan-protests-president-threatens-ruthless-crackdown>

<sup>3</sup> [https://24tv.ua/ru/tokaev-pogovoril-o-protestah-lukashenko-novosti-belarus\\_n1835948](https://24tv.ua/ru/tokaev-pogovoril-o-protestah-lukashenko-novosti-belarus_n1835948)

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.ru/cis/deputat-kalashnikov-nazval-sroki-nahozhdeniya-sil-odkb-v-kazahstane/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://twitter.com/M\\_Simonyan/status/1478813205933789186](https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/1478813205933789186)

<sup>6</sup> <https://emerging-europe.com/news/kazakhstans-alphabet-switch-reflects-wider-societal-changes/>

Thirdly, Russian should become Kazakhstan's second state language, like in Belarus or Kyrgyzstan. And last but not least, Kazakhstan must 'leave the Russian-medium schools alone,' meaning the discontinuation of Kazakh language lessons in such schools and of any plans to make these schools bilingual.<sup>7</sup> As an afterthought, Simonyan tweeted two more demands: the expulsion of anti-Russian NGOs from Kazakhstan, and copying Russia's ban on nazis in the country's public space.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, in the Kremlin's political vocabulary, the term 'nazis' (or at times, 'fascists') refers to opposition, pro-democracy and human rights figures.<sup>9</sup> They are officially designated and denigrated as 'foreign agents,' which legalizes their state-led persecuted across Russia and its allies.<sup>10</sup>

Some readers may wonder who Simonyan may be. She heads RT (Russia Today), or the Kremlin's main propaganda tube.<sup>11</sup> Her statements set the tone of what the Russian public opinion's view on a given matter should be, as required by the Russian president.<sup>12</sup> Somehow the position of the Russian language in Kazakhstan is of vital importance to Moscow. (No attention, however, is given to the Kazakh language in Russia, despite the Kazakh diaspora of almost 1 million.<sup>13</sup>) For instance, in 2019 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) criticized Kazakhstan for removing Russian inscriptions from the new edition of the country's Tenge banknotes.<sup>14</sup> But to add insult to injury, later the same year, Latin letters fully replaced Cyrillic on the new Kazakhstan coins.<sup>15</sup> Hence, in early 2021, when the decade-long plan for the transition to the Latin alphabet was finally adopted, the Russian MFA referred to it as the 'suppression of the Russian language.'<sup>16</sup> Then, in late 2021, the same Russian ministry opined that the observed intensification of the policy of Kazakhization was none other but the outright discrimination of the country's ethnic Russians.<sup>17</sup>

## Russian World

After Russia's 2008 war on Georgia, and especially in the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, no one has any doubts about the resurgence of Russian imperialism. Yet, what has been little noticed is the marriage of this imperialism with ethnolinguistic nationalism, more characteristic of Central Europe. During the first decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation styled itself as the sole successor of this communist polity. This meant the preservation of Russia's autonomous republics with about their 30 official languages. At that time, after the bloody clampdown on Chechnya that had dared to proclaim independence, Tatarstan remained Russia's most

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<sup>7</sup> <https://365info.kz/2021/07/612106>

<sup>8</sup> <https://t.me/margaritasimonyan/9827>

<sup>9</sup> Cf <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2021/12/28/903038-kak-prohodila-likvidatsiya-memoriala>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/01/russia-extends-foreign-agents-law-to-critics-of-military-and-security>

<sup>11</sup> <https://xn--c1acbl2abdlkab1og.xn--p1ai/management/>

<sup>12</sup> Cf <https://expert.ru/2022/01/6/kazakhstan-kakim-budet-rezultat-pervogo-v-istorii-primeneniya-mirotvortsev-odkb/>

<sup>13</sup>

[https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.gks.ru%2Ffree\\_doc%2Fnew\\_site%2Fpopulation%2Fdemo%2Fper-itog%2Ftab5.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.gks.ru%2Ffree_doc%2Fnew_site%2Fpopulation%2Fdemo%2Fper-itog%2Ftab5.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

<sup>14</sup> <https://tass.ru/politika/6149215>

<sup>15</sup> <https://nationalbank.kz/ru/catalog/coins?page=1>

<sup>16</sup> <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/mid-rossii-zayavil-o-pritestnennii-russkogo-yazyka-v-kazahstane>

<sup>17</sup> [https://lenta.ru/news/2021/11/03/zaharova\\_mid/](https://lenta.ru/news/2021/11/03/zaharova_mid/)

independently-minded ethnically non-Russian autonomous republic. In 1999 this republic's Assembly (Dəvlət Sovety) decided to adopt an act on the replacement of Cyrillic with Latin letters for the Tatar language. This act entered into force in 2001, and the planned script replacement was to be completed by 2011.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, in 2002 the Duma (Russian Parliament) made Cyrillic into the sole official script for all of Russia's state and republican languages.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Tatarstan's decision on the adoption of the Latin alphabet was nullified. Two years later, in 2004, Russia's Constitutional Court confirmed that it would be illegal to use Latin letters for writing and publishing in Tatar.<sup>20</sup>

In this fashion, the foundations for the Kremlin's neoimperial policy of the 'Russian World' (*Russkii Mir*) were laid. Officially, the Russian Federation remains multilingual, but in practice Russian is the sole language of public life, administration, mass media and education.<sup>21</sup> Ethnic non-Russians who are citizens of Russia need to acquire Russian,<sup>22</sup> while no encouragement is given to ethnic Russians to learn republican languages, even if they reside in an ethnically-non Russian autonomous republic of this kind.<sup>23</sup> In the past, such a policy used to be known under the name of 'Russification',<sup>24</sup> and criticized as 'Great Russian chauvinism.'<sup>25</sup>

Ideally, from the Kremlin's perspective, all the post-Soviet space should remain monoscriptal in Cyrillic. Russia accepts that Tajik is the official language of Tajikistan, Turkmen of Turkmenistan or Moldovan of Moldova. However, in light of the ideology of the Russian world, exclusively Cyrillic – or in other words, the 'Russian alphabet'<sup>26</sup> – should be retained for writing and publishing in these post-Soviet languages. That is why, Moscow is so pleased that Mongolia, which formally never was a member of the Soviet bloc, retains Cyrillic for writing and publishing in Mongolian.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, following the annexation of Crimea, Cyrillic was imposed on Crimean Tatar, in line with the Duma's 2002 decision.<sup>28</sup> Ukraine continues supporting the use of Latin letters for this language.<sup>29</sup> And, for instance, in the de-facto breakaway polity of Transnistria, under Russia's control, Cyrillic is used for writing and publishing in Moldovan,<sup>30</sup> though Latin letters have been used for this purpose in Moldova since 1989.<sup>31</sup>

Next step is the demand of keeping or reintroducing Russian as the co-official language in a post-Soviet state. If a state in question demurs and presses on with the policy of ethnolinguistic monolingualism in its own national language, Moscow resorts to issuing

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.tataroved.ru/publication/npop/5/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/12/2002/5703b5239a7947783a5a4233>

<sup>20</sup> <https://unpo.org/article/1239>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theworldmind.org/home/2019/12/4/uho1knk6cazj0lomsp9ibbhen0no>

<sup>22</sup> <https://theconversation.com/russia-is-cracking-down-on-minority-languages-but-a-resistance-movement-is-growing-101493>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.idelreal.org/a/28937644.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z6rjy9q/revision/7>

<sup>25</sup> <https://themilitant.com/2018/12/19/lenin-i-declare-war-to-death-on-great-russian-chauvinism/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/its-the-cyrillic-alphabet-not-the-russian-alphabet/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.interpretemag.com/will-mongolia-have-the-courage-to-scrap-the-russian-alphabet/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://crimea.gov.ru/textdoc/ru/7/act/1562prz.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3320261-cabinet-approves-crimean-tatar-alphabet-based-on-latin-letters.html>

<sup>30</sup> <http://president.gospmr.org/pravovye-akty/konstitutsiya-pmr/konstitutsiya-rmn/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/13047/literary-musical-clubs-sparking-moldova-national-liberation-movement>

threats. That is what happened after the Latvians dared to reject the 2012 referendum proposal of making Russian the country's second official language.<sup>32</sup> In 2019, remarking on the successes of the policy of Latvianizing education and public space across Latvia, Sergey Zheleznyak, a member of Russia's State Duma Committee on International Affairs, accused the EU member state of 'linguistic genocide.'<sup>33</sup>

The Russian world's ideal is autocratic Belarus. In 1995 Russian was made into the country's co-official language,<sup>34</sup> to the de facto exclusion of the Belarusian language from public life.<sup>35</sup> In 2017, the Belarusian dictator lauded Russian as Belarus's 'national language.'<sup>36</sup> Acknowledging the Kremlin's help with the suppression of the 2020 democratic protests in Belarus, the following year, this dictator announced Russian to be another 'mother tongue' of the Belarusians.<sup>37</sup> Then, in 2022, the dictator prided himself at championing the burgeoning position of Russian in Belarus so much that even he could not help but admit that this policy had considerably hurt the prestige and use of the country's national language of Belarusian.<sup>38</sup>

The Kremlin pressed Ukraine hard to follow the Belarusian path, among others, for sidelining Ukrainian in favor of the Russian language.<sup>39</sup> The 2014 Revolution of Dignity reverted this anti-Ukrainian policy, much to Moscow's chagrin. Among others, this setback served as yet another 'justification' for Moscow's annexation of Crimea and starting the Russian war on (eastern) Ukraine that rages to this day.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, this war is *not* about language or script. The goal is seizing effective control of politics and economy in Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> The Russian language and Cyrillic is the sign of allegiance, a symbol of Russian dominance, a visible homage to the autocrat on the Kremlin's throne.<sup>42</sup> Yet, in the age of the internet and (a)social media, this language and alphabet also create a broad freeway for Russian propaganda across the post-Soviet states.<sup>43</sup>

## **Kazakhstan's Russian Future?**

Hence, deciding on whether Kazakhstan should be known as **Qazaqstan** or **Қазақстан** in the Kazakh language is not an idle issue. Russia's current intervention in Kazakhstan<sup>44</sup> – pardon, the CSTO's fraternal help – will probably turn out to be successful. Autocracy will prevail. The Kazakhstan president will most probably remain in office. Then the space of language politics must be closely watched. Is the Kazakhstan president going to

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17083397>

<sup>33</sup> <http://nrt24.ru/en/news/language-genocide-latvia>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.svaboda.org/a/27734568.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42261095>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-russkij-jazyk-dlja-belarusi-ne-chuzhoj-eto-i-nashe-natsionalnoe-dostojanie-256890-2017>

<sup>37</sup> <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10677469>

<sup>38</sup> <https://udf.name/news/politic/237820-russkij-mir-v-belarusi-ne-spasajut-dazhe-teplicnye-uslovija.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.ibidem.eu/en/language-policy-and-discourse-on-languages-in-ukraine-under-president-viktor-yanukovych-9783838204970.html>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15387216.2015.1038574>

<sup>41</sup> Cf <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-key-ukraine-ally-charged-with-treason/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/09/08/hybrid-war-the-real-casualties-in-ukraine/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://euobserver.com/foreign/138825>

<sup>44</sup> <https://theconversation.com/in-kazakhstan-russia-follows-a-playbook-it-developed-in-ukraine-174505>

fulfill Simonyan's demands, as dictated by the Kremlin? Why wouldn't he? It is a small price to pay for getting a hefty cut of the country's riches. After all, in 1989, among all the SU's union republics, the Kazakhs were the most Russified nation. A mere 40 percent of them stuck to their native Kazakh language in everyday life.<sup>45</sup> In the late Soviet period, even more Belarusians (46 percent) preferred their mother tongue to Russian.<sup>46</sup>

Should the prediction on subjecting Kazakhstan to the Kremlin's will come true, usual neoimperial consequences will also follow. Behind the curtain of the Cyrillic-based Kazakh language and the quickly broadening use of Russian in the country's public life and education, Moscow will gain control over 3 percent of the global oil reserves<sup>47</sup> and 12 percent of the world's uranium deposits<sup>48</sup> that are located in Kazakhstan. On top of that, at present, Kazakhstan is responsible for almost half of the global production of uranium.<sup>49</sup>

Autocrats of the world, unite! China's dictatorial leader enthusiastically supports the Kazakhstan president's heavy-handed reaction to the protests and his unabashed use of lethal force.<sup>50</sup> While the West is queasy about splitting Central and Eastern with Russia into spheres of influence,<sup>51</sup> Beijing sees no problem with such a geopolitical 'reordering' of Central Asia. So, Kazakhstan is Russia's, but Moscow needs to be supportive<sup>52</sup> of the Uighur genocide in Xinjiang<sup>53</sup> that China whitewashes as 'counterterrorism.'<sup>54</sup>

With Russia's geostrategic success looming in Kazakhstan, a veil of silence is also bound to permanently descend on the subdued discussion of the Soviet genocide in the early 1930s.<sup>55</sup> This tragedy, caused by the collectivization of agriculture, wiped out almost half of all the ethnic Kazakhs.<sup>56</sup> By comparison, in today's Ukraine, out of the Kremlin's neoimperial control, the parallel Soviet genocide of Holodomor has been made into a cornerstone of the post-Soviet country's identity.<sup>57</sup> Yet, Russia, as the Soviet Union's legal successor, prefers to deny that any genocide happened.<sup>58</sup> The Kremlin maintains that the Ukrainians and the Russians are a single nation historically united, among others, through the shared language of Russian.<sup>59</sup> In the case of the Kazakhs, Moscow may not replicate the claim about them being part of a single Russian nation. Yet, the

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<sup>45</sup> [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_lan\\_89\\_1\\_1.php](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_lan_89_1_1.php)

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_lan\\_89\\_1\\_1.php](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_lan_89_1_1.php)

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-59900037>

<sup>48</sup> <https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Uranium-sector-monitors-evolving-Kazakh-situation>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/mining-of-uranium/world-uranium-mining-production.aspx>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/chinas-xi-extends-support-lauds-kazakhstan-s-president-for-decisive-action-101641567826447.html>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/04/nato-to-hold-special-foreign-ministers-meeting-over-ukraine-tensions>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Moscow-to-Beijing%E2%80%99s-rescue:-No-Uyghur-genocide-in-Xinjiang-53065.html>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/9/china-guilty-of-uighur-genocide-beyond-reasonable-doubt-report>

<sup>54</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/time-to-confront-chinas-counterterrorism-claims-in-xinjiang/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/book/the-hungry-steppe-famine-violence-and-the-making-soviet-kazakhstan>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-kazakh-famine-1930-33-and-the-politics-history-the-post-soviet-space>

<sup>57</sup> Cf <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3370442-verkhovna-rada-calls-on-bundestag-to-recognize-holodomor-as-genocide.html>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2017/11/27/russia-still-denies-holodomor-was-genocide>

<sup>59</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

presumed Soviet-inflected oneness of Kazakhstan and Russia under the Kremlin's watchful control is already pushed through the shared Cyrillic script and the use of Russian as the Russian world's true language of 'interethnic communication' and 'higher culture.'

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