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Education Language Policies and Practices in Post-Soviet Central Asia. An Historical Analysis of Ethnic Minorities in the Ferghana Valley

Olivier Ferrando *

Institute of Political Studies, Sciences Po Paris

Abstract

In Soviet times, nationality policy used language, among other cultural criteria, to differentiate ethnic groups and reinforce their collective consciousness. Most citizens were consequently granted schooling in their own native language. Since 1989, Central Asian governments have endeavoured to promote their state language in all areas of the public sphere. In the education sector, new policies have encouraged the use of the state language as the sole language of instruction. As a result, the share of schools providing education in Russian or any other minority language appreciably declined during the first decade of independence. This article examines the issue of language of instruction — the primary language in which education is provided — in post-Soviet Central Asia from a double comparative perspective. First, it looks at three neighbouring countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, focusing particularly on the Ferghana valley, a small but densely populated region that spans all three countries and is often considered a microcosm of Central Asian complexity. Second, the article looks at indigenous minorities who were present prior to Russian colonization, namely those known today as Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks, and who were suddenly cut off from their kin states in the early 1990s, after the establishment of international borders within Central Asia.

Keywords: Language of instruction, education policy, ethnic mobilization, Ferghana valley

* Contact: olivierferrando@gmail.com

Introduction

The education sector in post-Soviet Central Asia is of particular interest, in the sense that governments have to cope with the legacy of both a multi-ethnic population and a multilingual education system. In Soviet times, language was considered a key criterion in differentiating ethnic groups and reinforcing their collective consciousness. Most citizens were consequently granted an education in their own native language. Yet Russian played the role of unofficial *lingua franca* in the multilingual Soviet society: in Central Asia it became the language of instruction for most non-native peoples.¹ The collapse of the USSR had a strong impact on education. Each independent state focused on the legitimization of its newly gained sovereignty by promoting its titular nation — the one for which the state was named — to the exclusion of other ethnic groups, which were reduced to the status of minorities. In the education sector, new policies encouraged the development and use of the state language. As a result, during the first decade of independence, the share of schools where education was provided in Russian or any other non-state language appreciably declined. In recent years though, Russian schools have recovered the attractiveness they had in Soviet times. Notwithstanding the mass departure of Russians from Central Asia and the resulting lack of Russian teachers, many parents have requested the (re)opening of Russian schools.

This article explores the issue of the language of instruction — the primary language in which education is provided — in post-Soviet Central Asia from a double comparative perspective. First it looks at three neighbouring countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, focusing particularly on the Ferghana valley, a small but densely populated region that spans all three countries and is often considered a microcosm of Central Asian complexity. My first assumption here is that ethnic minorities, which had equal legal status under the Soviet regime, are now subject to differentiated treatment in the education sector, which varies from one state to the other. The article focuses on indigenous minorities who were present prior to Russian colonization, namely those known today as Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks, and who were suddenly cut off from their eponymous republics after the establishment of international borders between Central Asian states in the early 1990s. My second assumption is that parents belonging to these indigenous minorities have developed alternative education strategies since the collapse of the USSR. In Soviet times, parents decided either to foster a civic consciousness within their children by educating them in the mainstream language, thereby facilitating their integration in society, or they promoted their own ethnic identity by educating them in their native tongue. I assume that this binary frame, which coincides with the well-known civic vs

ethnic identity dichotomy, fails to account for the true complexity of the situation, where other options play an increasing role in parents' schooling strategies. I propose to test these two assumptions at three different levels: First, from a state policy perspective, the article investigates the treatment of ethnic minorities in terms of the choice of their language of instruction, the production and supply of textbooks, and the initial training and continuing education of school teachers. Second, from an ethnic community approach, it examines the discourse that activists and minority leaders use to frame the education sector as a means of community mobilization. The article focuses on non-Russian ethnic groups insofar as Russian represents neither their native language, nor their state language. Finally, from a grass-roots individual perspective, it seeks to understand whether parents comply with the state policy, with their community leaders' discourse, or whether they develop their own assessment of the education issue and adopt alternative decisions. I argue here that Russian, as a third and unexpected choice, embodies a new pattern of schooling strategies among parents who seek to provide their children with a quality education and to ensure they have future job opportunities in Russia.

This article is based on published materials on education and language policies, including statistics and data from the three Ministries of Education (MoEs), and on field research in the three target countries,² where I conducted interviews with state officials, local authorities, community leaders, school directors, teachers and parents.

1. Historical and legal background

As elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, Central Asian states have largely inherited the education system from their communist past. Between 1924 and 1936, the division of Central Asia into five national republics was backed up with a 'fabrication of nations' (Roy, 2000: 8–10). In the well-established dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism,³ the USSR promoted nations based on their own history, culture and language (Kohn, 1933: 86–91). In the long term, however, the Soviet ideology aimed at building a socialist union of denationalized peoples. The Soviet Union was the first state to systematically base its political units on ethnicity (Suny, 1992: 28). The Soviet nationalities policy aimed at regrouping and fixing local identities into national categories based on homogenous criteria (language, religion and cultural practices). This policy consisted of a 'double assimilation': on the one hand, it assimilated peoples into official nationality categories through the census, maps and other classificatory devices; and on the other hand, it assimilated them into the Soviet state and society through a range of

administrative, economic, cultural and political institutions.⁴ As a result, the pre-colonial multicultural political entities of Central Asia were replaced by five national republics, whose borders essentially matched the five newly created nationalities. Even though the rationale of the delimitation was the coincidence of ethnic and political territorial boundaries, there were many cases in which populations from one titular nationality remained outside the republic to which their group gave name. This was particularly the case of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz who resided outside the borders of their respective national republics.

Under the Soviet regime, constitutions and legal documents granted cultural rights to all nationalities. In the education sector, everyone had the right to ‘a schooling in the mother tongue’ (article 45 of the USSR Constitution of 1977). In multi-ethnic Central Asian rural societies,⁵ a network of native language schools was created on the basis of the population’s ethnic composition. The education system was managed through a double chain of command, which placed each school under the supervision of a district department of education (*raiono*), which in turn was under the control of the provincial department of education (*oblono*), and the whole system was managed by the MoE of each republic. However, teaching programmes were implemented on the basis of language; for instance, all Uzbek language schools in Central Asia followed the same programme regardless of their location. Curricula, textbooks and teachers’ materials were designed in Tashkent, at the MoE of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in line with Soviet ideology, and distributed all around the region. Consequently, an Uzbek language school located in the Tajik SSR was managed by the MoE of its host republic (Tajikistan) but received operational support from the MoE of its kin republic⁶ (Uzbekistan).

Russian language schools were attended mostly by Russians, but also by various non-indigenous groups who had arrived in the region more or less voluntarily (Slavs, Uralian Tatars) or as the result of forced settlement (Koreans, Germans, Caucasians, Crimean Tatars, Greeks, Poles, etc.). Such groups generally lived in mixed areas and could not enjoy separate schooling in their respective native languages. Parents could choose between Russian or a local language for the education of their children. As they mainly selected Russian, these ethnic groups were assimilated to the Russian-speaking population. Regarding higher education, state universities offered separate courses to separate language groups. Students were able to take the entry exam in their native language and enter their own native language university group, in continuity with their primary and secondary education. It should be mentioned that these teaching languages were used by the Soviet regime as instruments for communicating a common content — the communist ideology — that was shared across all the Soviet languages.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian states had to manage a complex and costly education system by themselves. Figure 1 presents the language structure of the education sector in the three target countries in 1991. Uzbekistan inherited an education system with seven tuition languages, Tajikistan six and Kyrgyzstan five. The distribution of schoolchildren per tuition language corresponded roughly to the ethnic composition of the population, as most ethnic groups were educated in their mother tongue. Among the indigenous languages, Uzbek had a significant position not only in Uzbekistan but also in bordering Tajikistan, where one in four pupils were educated in Uzbek (one in three in the province of Sughd located in the Ferghana valley), and in Kyrgyzstan where the rate was one in eight pupils (one in four in the provinces of Osh and Jalalabad located in the Ferghana valley) (see map in Annex 4). In Uzbekistan though, the distribution of tuition languages did not respect the country's ethnic structure: only half of registered Tajiks and Turkmens were educated in their mother tongue. The rate fell a quarter for Kyrgyz. The share of Russian language schools exceeded the mere proportion of Russians within the population (e.g. 13.1% vs 8.3% in Uzbekistan) because Russian schools were attended by Russians as well as many other Slavic (Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Polish) and non-Slavic (Uralian Tatar, German, Korean, etc.) nationalities.

Figure 1: Ethnic distribution of the population (1989*) and schoolchildren and university students (1990/91**) per tuition language in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

	Uzbekistan			Kyrgyzstan			Tajikistan		
	National ethnic groups	School tuition languages	University tuition languages	National ethnic groups	School tuition languages	University tuition languages	National ethnic groups	School tuition languages	University tuition languages
Uzbek	71.4%	78.1%	65.1%	12.9%	12.1%	0.3%	23.5%	23.8%	7.7%
Kyrgyz	0.9%	0.2%	–	52.4%	55.7%	23.4%	1.3%	1.1%	–
Tajik	4.7%	2.7%	0.4%	0.8%	0.2%	–	62.3%	67.2%	48.2%
Russian	8.3%	13.1%	32.3%	21.5%	32.0%	76.3%	7.6%	7.6%	44.1%
Turkmen	0.6%	0.4%	–	–	–	–	0.4%	0.3%	–
Kazakh	4.1%	3.0%	0.3%	0.9%	–	–	0.2%	0.01%	–
Karakalpak	2.1%	2.5%	1.9%	–	–	–	–	–	–

Sources: (*) USSR, 1991-1993 / (**) USSR, 1991

2. State education policies: an instrument to mould new national identities

2.1. The Soviet legacy: a status quo with different developments in each state

The *Law on the state language*, adopted by each Central Asian Soviet republic in 1989⁷ remained in force after the collapse of the USSR. Each law introduced a legal hierarchy between the state language (of the republic's titular nation), Russian as the language of 'interethnic communication', and other languages spoken in 'ethnically compact areas'. In terms of education, the laws provide all citizens with a 'free choice of their tuition language' (Article 6 of the Uzbek law) or 'an education in their mother tongue [...] for the ethnic groups living in compact areas' (Article 25 of the Kyrgyz law, Article 21 of the Tajik law).⁸

The school system remained mostly unchanged in the early 1990s, but after the first few years of transition Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan started to develop their own education policies, as education was considered a key sector for building an independent nation. New curricula were drafted, textbooks and pedagogical materials were revised, and teachers' training modules were adapted. The effectiveness of the reform depended, however, on the funds made available to the MoEs. Lack of finances compelled the states to set priorities among the different subjects and languages of instruction. For subjects such as history, geography and national literature, considered to be the most sensitive, the old-fashioned Soviet ideology was quickly replaced by national contents. As for the languages, the MoEs focused primarily on state-language schools attended by most of the titular ethnic group. Consequently, teaching conditions in minority language schools faced quick deterioration, since Soviet programmes, still in use, were not compatible with the new national curricula and textbooks were outdated and in bad condition.

Significant changes also affected higher education in the aftermath of independence. In Soviet times, students could attend most courses in their native language. But after 1991, authorities encouraged the use of the state language in universities. Most courses were made available only in the state language, while minority languages were limited to Pedagogical Faculty courses. Russian language remained an exception for subjects in the fields of science and technology, since their literature and documentation existed only in Russian. University entrance exams have been reduced to two alternatives: either the state language or Russian. This limitation has severely reduced opportunities for graduates of minority language schools to enter state universities and get grants.

Still, this general picture does not represent the specific features of each state. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as the authorities could not cope with minority language education either in financial⁹ or logistical terms, school directors were authorized to adopt alternative solutions in the most liberal way. Russian schools could enjoy direct support either from the

Russian embassy or through twinning programmes between Central Asia and the Russian federation. This successful sponsorship contributed to the preservation of a quality Russian education. For other minority language schools, the MoEs agreed to delegate directly to schools the management of the so-called school fund (*shkol'nyi fond*), a legacy of the Soviet period, consisting of a monthly cash contribution from parents to cover education expenses. The Uzbeks in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan provide a telling case study. As the regional provision of textbooks collapsed, school directors, parents and community leaders agreed to use the school fund to purchase and import textbooks in the Uzbek language from Uzbekistan. By doing so, minorities were just replicating — albeit in a private form — the Soviet model, where kin republics had provided education materials to their kin-language schools.¹⁰ As a result, education quality differed significantly between schools. Kyrgyz and Tajik state-language schools continued to get sizeable MoE support and enjoyed the first reform outputs, while minority language schools were managed in a less centralized but rather more liberal way. This privatization of book supplies through school funds enabled the maintenance of a minimal education service and addressed parents' grievances.

Unlike its neighbours, Uzbekistan adopted a tougher line and strictly banned the illegal importation of books, with the aim of avoiding any external influence on its ongoing nation-building process. Infringement of this law could result in Uzbek officials seizing and destroying any unauthorized literature.¹¹ It would be relevant to assume that the negligence of Tashkent towards its minority language schools, along with an authoritarian control over imported publications, were part of a deliberate policy to promote the state language among minorities and facilitate the 'Uzbekisation' of education. Indeed, the number of minority language schools has decreased by 414 schools — from 2,335 in 1998 (UNESCO, 2000) to 1,921 in 2013 (UNESCO, 2015) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Schools and children by language of education in Uzbekistan (2013)

Language of instruction	Number of schools	Distribution of children	Population's ethnic distribution
Uzbek	8,886	86.7%	82.9%
Russian	788	8.3%	2.7%
Kazakh	427	1.2%	2.7%
Karakalpak	373	2.0%	2.2%
Tajik	235	1.5%	4.8%
Kyrgyz	55	0.2%	0.9%
Turkmen	43	0.2%	0.6%

Source: UNESCO, 2015

Another peculiarity in Uzbekistan was the decision adopted in 1995 to shift the Uzbek language from Cyrillic to Latin script. For political and financial reasons, however, other countries hosting Uzbek populations would not approve this change. This change had two major consequences in the education sector. First, at the state-wide level, the Uzbek MoE had to manage two scripts — Latin for the Uzbek schools and Cyrillic for Russian and other minority language schools. Second, at the regional level, a linguistic frontier arose between the Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and Uzbek minorities in other post-Soviet republics, who had no option but to continue using the Cyrillic script.

2.2. Instilling civic values through a harmonized multilingual education

In the early 2000s, the Uzbek government addressed the issue of education in minority languages to avoid an outbreak of resentment and grievances among parents. Perpetuating the Soviet approach, the Uzbek authorities viewed the language of instruction as an instrument for providing a common content — what used to be Soviet ideology was now the unity of the nation. However, this ideology did not take the form of an exclusive ethnic nationalism but rather an inclusive discourse about concepts of territoriality and statehood, where ‘Uzbekness’ (*O‘zbekchilik*) would constitute civic values for all citizens regardless of their ethnic origin (Fumagalli, 2007a: 105–122). Education was considered a key sector for moulding a common civic consciousness among ethnic minorities. Presidential decree n°3431 on ‘the State national school education development programme for 2004–2009’ emphasized the need to harmonize and upgrade national education standards, and to develop new textbooks and teaching materials for all schools, with special attention to minority language schools.¹² As a result, hundreds of new textbook titles were published in 2006, and 90% of them were in the minority languages — 92 titles in Turkmen, 72 in Kyrgyz, 70 in Tajik and 70 in Kazakh. The availability of textbooks conforming to the new national curricula sharply increased in all schools, reaching an impressive average of 92% of needs coverage (UNHCHR, 2006: 11–12). To foster common civic values, the MoE did not develop specific teaching materials for the minority language schools, but rather kept a common content by translating the original Uzbek textbooks into the country’s six minority tuition languages. Through this harmonized content, the Uzbek government ensured that minorities would ultimately embrace the country’s customs and traditions and develop a civic national consciousness regardless of their ethnic belonging.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan developed the same approach, but with a significant delay. First, they produced new textbooks on history, geography and national literature and outlawed

the importation of textbooks in these sensitive subjects. Second, they started to translate materials into their respective minority languages. But the achievement remained limited until international donors intensified their support for the education sector.¹³ In 1999–2003, the Asian Development Bank gave a first grant to the Kyrgyz MoE to print 46 textbook titles (1,247,250 copies), including seven in Russian and one in Uzbek. A second grant was scheduled for the period 2006–2011 to produce and print complete sets of textbooks along the lines of Uzbekistan’s model — original textbooks drafted in the state language and translated into Russian, Uzbek and Tajik.¹⁴ Other international actors such as the World Bank,¹⁵ Unicef, the Open Society Institute and various embassies have also provided meaningful support, albeit at a smaller scale.

Nevertheless, international funding was a mixed blessing. Taking this impending supply of textbooks for granted, Kyrgyz president Bakiev abolished the school fund in 2006. The Uzbek minority expressed scepticism about the removal of the only funds to purchase textbooks from Uzbekistan before effective production of Uzbek language materials could begin in Kyrgyzstan (Mamaraimov, 2007), but to no avail. In Tajikistan, there were different problems. International organizations were also committed to supporting the education sector, but the insufficiency of local skills to develop new teaching material compelled the donors to focus first on capacity-building and training. This delayed the production of new textbooks for minority language schools.

It is meaningful that the state authorities and the international donors both continued to address the issue of minority education in ethnic terms. The former kept designing education in the Soviet mould, and the latter used the discourse on minority rights to justify their grants. Surprisingly, both approaches converged on the same solution — ethnic minorities should continue to be educated in their mother tongue, regardless of the changes in society.

3. Education in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: a frame to mobilize ethnic minorities

Besides the development of state education policies and the support of international donors, ethnic activists and minority leaders endeavoured to mobilize their communities in a collective request for education rights. In Uzbekistan, the state did not leave much space for such mobilization.¹⁶ But in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, ethnic claims became a significant phenomenon. One can see here the effect of what Snow et al. (1986: 464–481) has called a ‘frame alignment process’, working to ‘organize experience and guide action’ with regard to expressing the grievances of the population. As Gorenburg (2003: 12) argues, ‘seventy years

of Soviet ethnic policy [have] decisively moulded the perceptions, beliefs, and identities of minority ethnic group members'. In independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the legacy of Soviet nationality policy continued to influence the speech of ethnic minorities, at least in their analysis of education needs, as they argued that all minority members should have access to a quality education *in their mother tongue*. In the mid-1990s, the deterioration of education conditions in minority language schools constituted a breeding ground for activists to mobilize their communities.

In Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek cultural organizations played an increasing role in framing the issue of education to mobilize their community. Although this type of association was initially intended to promote cultural events rather than to support schools, two Uzbek organizations openly addressed the education sector in their agenda. The Uzbek National Cultural Centre (UNCC) branch in Jalalabad province set up a Social Fund on Support of Education in 1996, which started to finance the publication of textbooks and literature in the Uzbek language (Khamidova, 2005, 40). But the impact was limited as textbooks were printed in insufficient numbers, and the initiative had to stop in 2000 due to a lack of funds. In a second attempt, the UNCC branch along with the Osh-based Society of Uzbeks asked the Kyrgyz government to adopt a Latin script for the education of its Uzbek minority. Although this claim sought to erase the script difference with Uzbekistan and maintain therefore the benefit of imported textbooks, most Uzbeks were opposed to such a measure (Fumagalli, 2007b: 577–586). When Tashkent stopped producing textbooks in Cyrillic Uzbek, the UNCC set up a Centre for the publication of Uzbek language textbooks. Since 1998, the Centre has edited dozens of textbooks in various subjects, yet with a limited print run. Due to a lack of state subsidies, all production expenses had to be covered by the selling price. Consequently, Uzbek language textbooks edited in Kyrgyzstan cost twice as much as their Kyrgyz language equivalents, and most Uzbek parents could not afford them.¹⁷

Let us focus briefly here on the development of mutual requests from the Kyrgyz population in Tajikistan and Tajik population in Kyrgyzstan. In 1992, the Tajiks of Kyrgyzstan, numbering 42,636 people in total, founded the Association of Tajiks in the southern province of Batken, where most of them reside. Similarly, in 1995, the Kyrgyz minority of Tajikistan, a reported 65,515 people, established the Society of Kyrgyz with the objective of promoting the rights of the Kyrgyz minority, most particularly in the education and cultural sectors. In both cases, minority leaders addressed the issue of education as a framework for mobilizing their respective communities.¹⁸ These claims contributed to the signing of a bilateral agreement

between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the education sector in early 2000, which provided for the mutual supply of textbooks and teacher training, as well as facilitating access for minority students to the universities of their respective kin states.¹⁹ The discrepancies between state curricula and imported textbooks were considered to be ‘marginal in comparison with the overall benefits of such an agreement’.²⁰ All interviewed parents and teachers acknowledged that the cooperation greatly improved the quality of education in their schools. In fact, minority language schools often enjoyed a better supply of textbooks than their state-language counterparts.²¹

In Kyrgyzstan, the Association of Tajiks also addressed the issue of higher education because the Tajik community of Uch-Korgon, located more than a hundred kilometres from the closest Tajik border, experienced relative isolation. As parents were no longer willing to send their children to a distant university, Tajik leaders saw this as an opportunity to frame their claims towards the Kyrgyz government and succeeded in opening a Tajik language section in the Pedagogical Faculty in the neighbouring Kyrgyz city of Kyzyl-Kiya in 1999, which started working with four groups of Tajik language students.²²

4. Parents’ education strategies in the post-Soviet era

Meanwhile, parents developed a new understanding of their children’s rights to education and began to abandon the frames predefined by both the Soviet legacy, as used by the states in their nation-building process, and by the western human rights approach, as used by activists and international donors to promote the education rights of ethnic minorities.

4.1. Tajikistan’s Uzbek minority interest in state-language education

These individual strategies were developed among Tajikistan’s Uzbek minority, particularly in Spitamen, known as Tajikistan’s most Uzbek district, whose population is comprised of 84.7% Uzbeks. In 1994, out of the 31 schools of the district, 25 were in the Uzbek language, two were in Tajik and four had mixed language groups, including two with Russian. As Figure 3 shows, between 1994 and 2006,²³ the number of monolingual Uzbek schools decreased, while new Tajik groups opened in eight (formerly monolingual) schools.

Figure 3: Spitamen district schools and children, per language of instruction (1994–2006)

Number of schools	1994		2002		2006	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Uzbek	25	80.5%	20	64.5%	16	51.5%

Tajik	2	6.5%	2	6.5%	2	6.5%
Uzbek/Tajik	2	6.5%	7	22.5%	10	32.3%
Uzbek/Tajik/Russian	2	6.5%	2	6.5%	3	9.7%
Total	31	100.0%	31	100.0%	31	100.0%
Number of children						
Uzbek language	n/a	n/a	22,155	89.5%	19,996	84.3%
Tajik language	n/a	n/a	2,322	9.4%	3,014	12.7%
Russian language	n/a	n/a	279	1.1%	698	2.9%
Total	n/a	n/a	24,756	100.0%	23,708	100.0%

Source: Sughd Province Education Department

This evolution reflects the demands of many Uzbek families that their children be educated in Tajik.²⁴ This can be easily explained by the fact that state authorities had not yet implemented the education reform within minority language schools, and Uzbek parents wanted their children to be educated in schools actively supported by the state. Here are some reasons that parents formulated to explain their choice:

Being an Uzbek, I never had the chance to learn the Tajik language properly. I want my children to be more fluent than I am.

In Soviet times we were motivated to learn Russian. Now we are living in Tajikistan, so it's better for our children to learn Tajik to have the chance of getting a job in the administration.

Since independence, universities have been closing down all their Uzbek language groups. If my son wants to study, he first needs to master Tajik. It makes no sense to send him to an Uzbek language school.²⁵

The Uzbek parents' decision reflects a well-thought-out strategy, but clearly goes against the ethnic model of education. Their choice differs from the framing in many respects: First, it appears to be an individual decision, rather than the collective response motivated by community leaders. Second, the framing is a tool that seeks to mobilize minorities in a way of thinking that is familiar to them. Indeed, both the state education policy and the nationalistic discourse of minority's activists draw on the same Soviet essence, chiefly on the policy of nationalities. The choice of language of instruction is therefore predetermined by this common doctrine. But the parents' strategy appears to be a deliberate choice that takes an alternative view. Here the decision is not the result of a prevailing collective instilment but is rather driven by the individual common sense. It embodies the parents' opportunistic or strategic view, their aim to give the best chances to their children in their future social and professional life.

4.2. The case of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek minority

The Uzbek minority of Kyrgyzstan experienced a different situation. The Kyrgyz MoE launched a large-scale programme to provide minority language schools with translated textbooks, and Uzbek leaders succeeded in mobilizing members of their ethnic community around the frame of education. Depending on the ethnic environment, different patterns can be observed. In mixed Kyrgyz-Uzbek areas, education was generally given in the two languages in different classrooms. Occasionally though, both groups were educated in the same language. Take the example of Oogon-Talaa, a village of the Bazar-Korgon district in the province of Jalalabad. Its 2,500 inhabitants, consisting of Kyrgyz (60%), Uzbeks (30%) and Russians (10%), had long attended a single school where education was organized into separate Kyrgyz and Russian language groups, and Uzbek children would join either of these two groups. In 1990, following a landslide, about a hundred Uzbek families were resettled from the neighbouring mountain hamlet of Buokol to Oogon-Talaa. Since Uzbek had been the sole language of instruction in their former school, they soon asked for an Uzbek language group to be added within the Oogon-Talaa school. The group was launched in the following year and is still active today. Following the departure of Russians and the eventual closure of the Russian language group in the mid-1990s, the share of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks was 50/50. In 2006 however, the distribution of tuition languages remained largely in favour of the Kyrgyz language (77%), with a limited extension of Uzbek (23%).²⁶ The Uzbek groups consisted mainly of children from Buokol, while those originating from Oogon-Talaa continued to send their children to Kyrgyz groups. It appears clear that Buokol Uzbeks, who had previously lived in a mono-ethnic environment, did not adapt to their new multi-ethnic society. An Uzbek native of Oogon-Talaa asserts:

I completed school in the Kyrgyz language as did all my relatives. We speak Uzbek at home but when we go to the town, we speak Kyrgyz. Nobody there can tell whether we are Uzbek or Kyrgyz [laughter]. Those from Buokol are just backward (*bezkul'turnyi*). They don't even think about the future of their children. They want everything to be done for them as in Soviet times. Are they aware that we are now living in Kyrgyzstan?²⁷

As this case study shows,²⁸ villagers living in a multi-ethnic environment generally develop a civic understanding of their identity. Being bilingual in their mother tongue and the state language, and with a fair knowledge of Russian, they are tolerant of each other. Their schooling strategy appears, therefore, to be an expression of their civic consciousness.²⁹ On the other hand, villagers living in an isolated, ethnically homogenous community continue to think in terms of ethnicity. They are usually not as fluent in non-native languages as the former group and, above all, they have limited opportunities to mix with other ethnic groups and therefore to

get to know their cultures and habits. Tension and disrespect often develop across this virtual, but powerful, border of social environment.

4.3. The case of Kyrgyzstan's Tajik minority

The influence of the geographical and social environment on education strategies is even more acute for the Tajiks of Kyrgyzstan. Although they constitute a small ethnic group at the national level (0.9% in 2000), the Tajiks live in compact settlements, where interethnic relations are of paramount importance. In the Andarak municipality, in the mountains of the extreme southwestern part of Kyrgyzstan, Tajiks and Kyrgyz share a small remote valley, but live in distinct neighbourhoods. Schooling, social life and even religious practices are organized separately. Figure 4 shows that the ethnic cleavage is reflected in the breakdown of tuition languages: Tajiks amount to 44.4% of the population and 48.2% of Andarak pupils are educated in Tajik, while for Kyrgyz the figures are respectively 54.8% and 50.2%. The minor discrepancy could be explained by a higher fertility rate among Tajiks. In recent years, interethnic tensions broke out over access to the land, the sharing of water resources and the building of common infrastructure. The potential for clashes was considered critical enough to attract the attention of conflict mediators such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (FTI, 2000).

Figure 4: Population ethnic distribution* and school languages of the municipalities** in Andarak (Leylek district) and Uch-Korgon (Kadamzhai district)

	Andarak municipality		Uch-Korgon municipality	
	Number	%	Number	%
Ethnic distribution (1999)				
Kyrgyz	5,944	54.8%	5,352	21.3%
Tajiks	4,816	44.4%	14,523	57.8%
Uzbeks	86	0.8%	4,271	17.0%
Others	0	0.0%	980	3.9%
Total	10,846	100.0%	25,126	100.0%
Pupils per tuition language (2006)				
Kyrgyz language	1,559	50.2%	1,166	18.6%
Tajik language	1,497	48.2%	598	9.5%
Uzbek language	51	1.6%	3,464	55.2%
Russian language	0	0.0%	1,046	16.7%
Total	3,107	100.0%	6,274	100.0%

Source: (*) Kyrgyzstan, 2000 (**) Leylek and Kadamzhai district education departments

In the Uch-Korgon municipality, located in a more populated plain, a majority of Tajiks (58%) live alongside Kyrgyz (21%) and Uzbeks (17%). Despite this ethnic distribution, Tajik is the language of instruction for less than 10% of Uch-Korgon children, while 55% are educated in Uzbek, 19% in Kyrgyz and 17% in Russian. Among the municipality's 11 schools, there are three exclusively Uzbek language schools, two Kyrgyz, two Uzbek-Kyrgyz, two Uzbek-Tajik, one Uzbek-Russian and one Uzbek-Russian-Tajik, but no monolingual Tajik schools (Figure 4). Despite the efforts of the Association of Tajiks to orient parents toward Tajik language education, Uzbek schools continue to attract most Tajik families.³⁰ This disinterest in the Tajik language is also obvious in higher education. Although the launching of Tajik language groups in Kyzyl-Kiya Pedagogical Faculty were positively received at first, the community's mobilization was short-lived. Over the years, candidates became scarce and the Kyzyl-Kiya Tajik section was compelled to close in 2004. This local interest in the Uzbek language, despite the small share of Uzbeks, can be explained by the proximity of Uzbekistan. Located just two kilometres from the border, Uch-Korgon has long developed close cultural and economic ties with neighbouring Uzbek cities.

This comparison between Andarak and Uch-Korgon shows that, despite a comparable ethnic composition, the practices of Tajiks in the education sector can differ radically. In the former case, the harsh geographical environment and the competition for scarce resources have moulded the population into a plural mono-ethnic society rather than an inclusive multi-ethnic one,³¹ as both groups live in separate circles. In such conditions, the ethnic frame continues to resonate successfully among both communities, including in the education sector, where no Tajik would enter a Kyrgyz language group and vice versa. In the latter case, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks live in a more hospitable environment and have developed historical ties with the multi-ethnic society of the Ferghana valley. If the Soviet policy of nationalities succeeded in framing an ethnic education among Uch-Korgon's inhabitants, the collapse of USSR and the emergence of liberal economic practices led to a growing interest in Uzbekistan and the Uzbek language. The parents dissociated from the established education system, embodied in the reciprocal agreement between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to support their respective kin minorities. Parents also opposed the Association's active ethnic framing. As a result, most Tajik parents choose to educate their children in what they consider to be the region's most widely spoken, and therefore profitable, language: primarily Uzbek, and to a lesser extent, Russian. From this individual perspective, the Tajiks of Kyrgyzstan have developed a deliberate education strategy in the sense that they clearly distinguish between the private sphere, where

the Tajik identity prevails in language and cultural practices, and the public sphere, where other language proficiencies, mainly Uzbek but also Russian and Kyrgyz, are fostered to actively contribute to the multi-ethnic and multilingual society in which they live. This language strategy has neither an ethnic motivation nor a grounding in civic consciousness. Rather, it addresses the issue of education in a broader regional framework where the opportunistic choice of Uzbek or Russian prevails over the Tajik ethnic origin and the assumed civic acceptance of the Kyrgyz state language.

5. The emergence of new trends in languages of instruction

After two decades of transition, Central Asia's education systems faced new challenges. In the mid-2000s, the oil-led economic boom in Russia and Kazakhstan brought millions of migrant workers from Central Asia's poorest republics. The flow of migrants reached unprecedented levels, with an estimated 0.8 million Kyrgyz, 1.5 million Tajiks and 2.5 million Uzbeks in the period 2004–2008. This labour force came to play an important role in their home countries. By 2008, remittances were providing the equivalent of half Tajikistan's GDP (a world record), a quarter of Kyrgyzstan's, and an eighth of Uzbekistan's (ICG, 2010).

In this context, Russian language education regained its former appeal among Central Asian parents since it would help children develop the necessary language skills to work abroad and gain a higher position in the *Gastarbeiter's* competitive hierarchy. After a sharp decline, the share of pupils educated in Russian started to increase again in the late 2000s. In Uzbekistan, this share dropped from 12.3% in 1991 to 4.6% in 2003, alongside the departure of nearly 600,000 Russians. But in 2013, it reached 8.3%, a remarkable figure considering Uzbekistan then only had 2.7% Russians (see Annex 1). The same trend can be observed in Tajikistan, where 7.6% of the pupils attended a Russian education in 1991, only 2% in 2003 and 3.2% in 2013, with a proportion of Russians decreasing dramatically from 7.6% in 1991 to 0.4% in 2013 (see Annex 2).

In Kyrgyzstan, the context is different. Unlike Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan upgraded Russian to the status of co-official language with Kyrgyz. Therefore, a fluent command of Russian would not only be an asset within Russia; it would also facilitate the integration of language minorities into Kyrgyzstan's mainstream society, where Russian has maintained a chief position in administration and public life. Indeed, in 1991, a third of Kyrgyz pupils were educated in Russian, but this figure dropped to 14.5% in 2003, before increasing significantly to 21.3% in 2018 (see Annex 3). Russian language schools are also attracting an

increasing proportion of Kyrgyz in the capital. This can be explained by the high rates of internal labour migration to Bishkek where, when settling in town, rural dwellers discover the large use of Russian and consider its knowledge as a requirement to secure a better future to their children (Aminov, Jensen, Juraev et al., 2010).

In Kyrgyzstan, a second differentiating factor is the outbreak of ethnic violence that took place in 2010 between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the Ferghana valley region. It resulted in 470 deaths, thousands of injuries and 80,000 displaced Uzbeks (KIC, 2011). Though Kyrgyz and Uzbeks had long lived in separate niches in southern Kyrgyzstan, after independence they developed a symbiotic relationship, with Kyrgyz occupying local government positions and Uzbeks involved in entrepreneurial activities (trade, food, transport) (Liu, 2012). In the aftermath of the ethnic conflict, nationalism intensified in the country, with official discourses promoting a land owned by the Kyrgyz, and the erection of monuments dedicated exclusively to Kyrgyz national heroes, including in areas of compact Uzbek settlement (Wachtel, 2013). The government has not yet undertaken a serious reconciliation process. Discussing ethnic issues is considered taboo and remains a sensitive topic in the public sphere. A turning point came in the education sector in 2014, when the Kyrgyz MoE abandoned Uzbek as one of the languages of the secondary school graduation test. Until then, all school graduates had been given a choice between Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek, bestowing an equal value on all schools regardless of their tuition language. It is no surprise that the share of Uzbek language pupils, which had remained stable at 12% between 1991 and 2009, shrank by half to 6% in 2018 (see Annex 3). After 2014, most parents considered Uzbek language schools to be a dead end for their children, since they would hardly be able to pass the graduation test in Kyrgyz or Russian (Ataeva, 2018). Parents' strategy moved toward Kyrgyz and, above all, Russian language schools. The share of children educated in Russian increased from 17.5% in 2009 to 21.3%, while simultaneously the proportion of Russians in Kyrgyzstan continued to decline from 7.8% to 5.6%. However, most of the new Russian schools are private institutions on a fee-paying basis. Due to limited funds and a lack of Russian-speaking teachers, the MoE had no capacity to meet Uzbek parents' demands and could not switch public schools from Uzbek to Russian. Opening private Russian language kindergartens and schools has become a profitable business for many Uzbek entrepreneurs who had had to give up their economic activities after the 2010 conflict (Ismailbekova, 2018).

Conclusion

The article shows that the issue of education of ethnic minorities is complex and can be examined from different perspectives. At the state level, the education policies of the three target countries appear to be similar, albeit at different stages of implementation due to funding and/or capacity constraints. At the ethnic community level, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, activists play a major role in framing the issue of education to mobilize their respective minority groups. These frames resonate diversely among the population and are challenged by parents' alternative strategies. This individual level of analysis proves to be the most enlightening, in the sense that parents' choices appear to be very flexible, shifting from ethnic identity to civic consciousness or a mere survival strategy.

By contrasting state policies and the mobilizing speeches of activists with the actual strategies developed by parents, this article shows that stakeholders compete in the way they address the education issue and work out solutions. Government officials made no effort to consider the schooling practices of ethnic minorities or include them in their policies. On the other hand, minority leaders do not pay attention to alternative strategies developed by their community members. Both the MoEs and the community leaders stick to their Soviet-rooted understanding of the right to an education in the mother tongue. If such a right is guaranteed, the key issue in education then becomes how to instil a civic consciousness in ethnic groups that are being educated in separate education systems. Uzbekistan's solution, which inspires its neighbours, is to translate textbooks and teaching material into the various tuition languages of the country's education system. As was the case in Soviet times, language is considered to be the vehicle of a common ideology. The limits of this approach are obvious, but no alternative policy has yet been developed.

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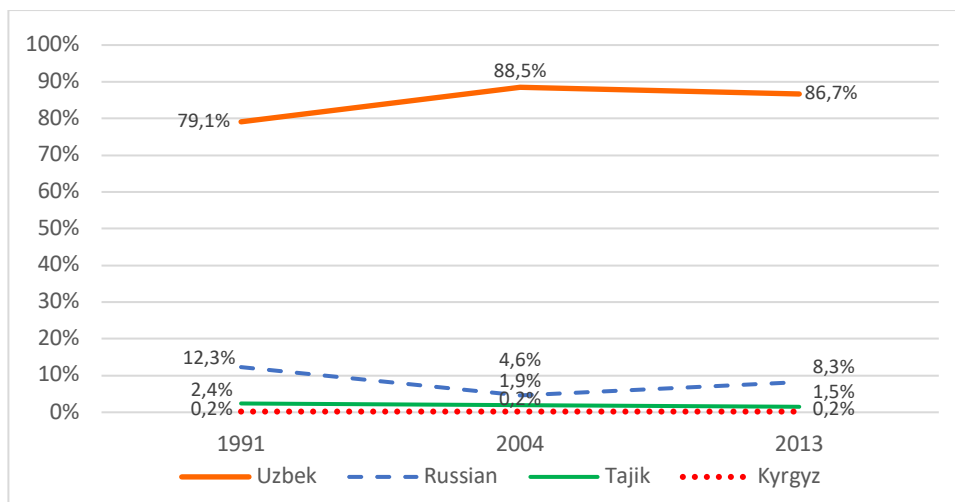
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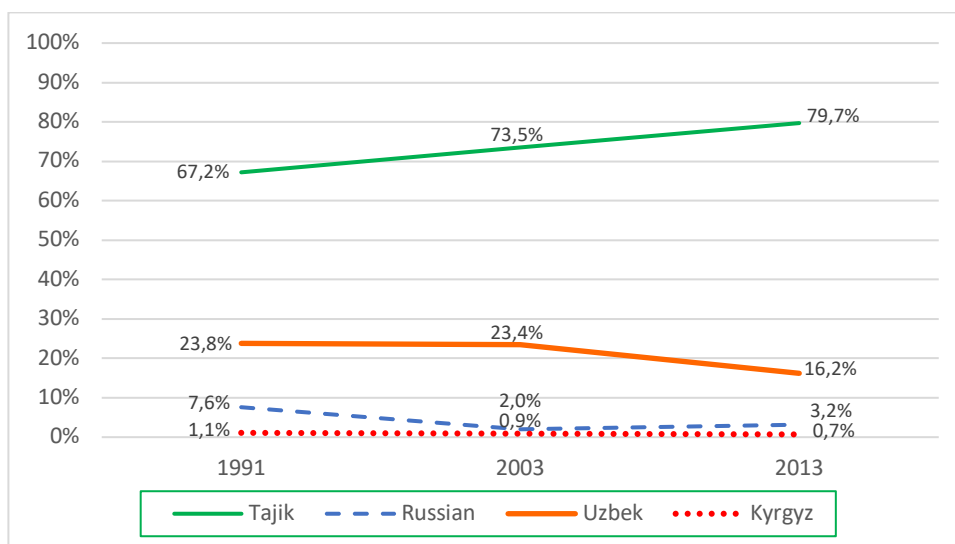
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Annex 1: Schoolchildren by language of instruction in Uzbekistan (1991–2013)



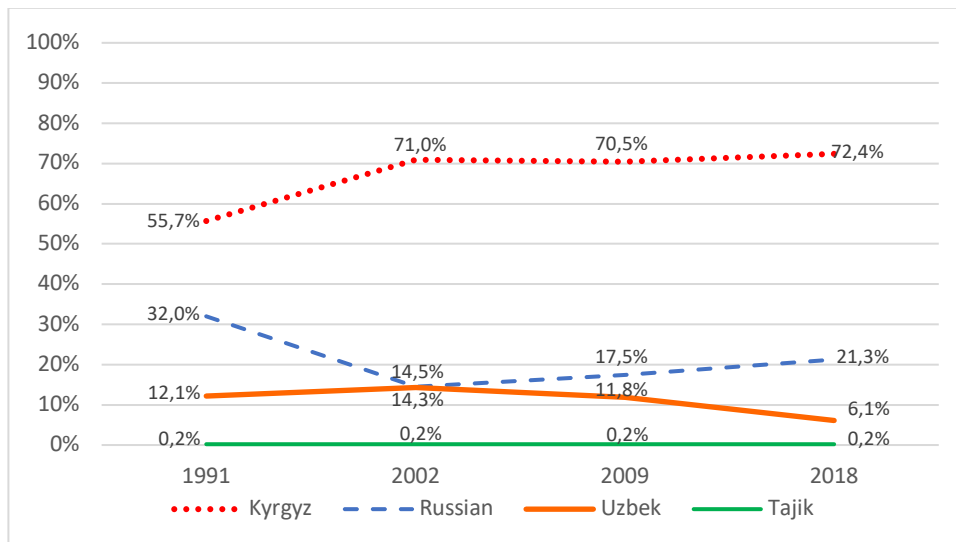
Sources: USSR, 1991; UNESCO, 2000; UNESCO, 2015

Annex 2: Schoolchildren by language of instruction in Tajikistan (1991–2013)



Sources: USSR, 1991; data for 2003 & 2013 were collected at the MoE

Annex 3: Schoolchildren by language of instruction in Kyrgyzstan (1991–2018)



Sources: USSR, 1991; Kyrgyzstan, 2018

Annex 4: Map of the Ferghana Valley with locations mentioned in the article



¹ ‘Non-native’ refers to those ethnic groups who moved to the region during the colonial and Soviet period either voluntarily or forcibly, in contrast with native peoples who originate from the region.

² This research was funded by the French Ministry of Education and Research, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Institute of Central Asian Studies (IFEAC) in Tashkent.

³ This dichotomy can be traced back to Meinecke’s typology of nationalisms, distinguishing the *Staatsnation* from the *Kulturnation*. According to Meinecke, there is a difference between nations that are based primarily on some joint experience of cultural heritage, and nations that are based primarily on the unifying force of a common political history and constitution. Thus, the *Staatsnation* is based on a form of social contract, while the *Kulturnation* is described as an ethnic community in which inclusion is based on descent (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010: 581).

⁴ This process of ethnic homogenization was intended by Moscow to ‘modernize backward peoples’ (Hirsch, 2000: 225).

⁵ The picture is different in urban areas, particularly in the capital cities, where the Russian-speaking communities [are/were] concentrated and the Russian language exerts a larger influence.

⁶ For a citizen belonging to an ethnic minority, ‘kin state’ means the neighbouring state where fellow ethnics compose the titular nation and for which the state is therefore named, while the ‘host state’ is the country where the citizen actually resides.

⁷ Language reforms date back to the Perestroika period, when each Soviet republic adopted a law on the state language, which established a hierarchy between languages: each titular nation’s language became the state language of the republic and Russian was given the status of interethnic language. In addition the laws often recognized the importance of third languages in the areas of homogenous ethnic settlement (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2001: 109–123).

⁸ This right to an education in the mother tongue was never called into question. The 1997 Uzbek *Law on education* (Article 4), 2004 Tajik *Law on education* (Article 7), 2003 Kyrgyz *Law on education* (Article 6), 2004 new Kyrgyz *Law on the state language* (Article 1) as well as the project of new Kyrgyz *Constitution* (Article 5) all confirmed this guarantee.

⁹ In Kyrgyzstan, public expenditures for education decreased from 7.4% of GDP in 1990 to 4.2% in 1993 and 3.7% in 2000. Tajikistan allocated a limited 2.2% of its GDP to education in 1997 (Mertaugh, 2004: 153–180).

¹⁰ As confirmed by directors and parents from various Uzbek language schools in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek government did not facilitate the provision of teaching material to its kin minorities abroad, neither by entering into formal agreement with the Kyrgyz or Tajik authorities nor by providing them on a free or subsidized basis, despite the historical link between Tashkent and Uzbek language schools and the fact that Uzbekistan was substituting all Cyrillic textbooks with new Latin script and therefore had millions of surplus books. The purchase was arranged through the intermediaries of Uzbek businessmen or by parents or teachers who crossed the border at their own risk to buy books in the bazaars.

¹¹ In July 2001, some 16,000 books given by the Tajik government to Tajik language schools in Uzbekistan were burnt on order of the Uzbek government. In Bukhara, another 10,000 brochures, books and other literature in Tajik were pulped and given to a local poultry factory for packing eggs (ICG, 2001).

¹² From material published at the International Conference ‘Tasks of the education reform in the context of multinational Central Asia’, organized by the OSCE and the Uzbek MoE in Tashkent, November 28, 2006.

¹³ The turning point in world politics precipitated by the events of 9/11 has shed new light on Central Asia, as western countries were seeking local support for military operations in Afghanistan.

¹⁴ Interview with Timur Oruskulov, education project manager, Asian Development Bank office, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 4, 2007.

¹⁵ The grant ‘Rural education’ plans to produce and print eight textbooks (760,000 copies), including six in minority languages (information from the World Bank education department, Bishkek).

¹⁶ In Uzbekistan there was restricted space for ethnic claims. The Constitution expressly banned the establishment of ‘ethnically based political parties’ (Article 57) and the government strictly controlled the activities of ethnic cultural organizations.

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- ¹⁷ Interview with Tursunboy Kamilov, deputy director of the *Centre for the Publication of Uzbek Textbooks*, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, December 12, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Interviews with Abdukhalim Raimzhanov, president of the Association of Tajiks, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, May 4, 2007 and with Zourakan Davlatlieva, head of the Society of Kyrgyz, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, November 15, 2006.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Muhammad Melikov, head of the MoE department of international relations, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, November 13, 2006, and field visits to Kyrgyz language schools in Dzhabbor-Rasulov and Isfara districts (Tajikistan) and Tajik language schools in Isfana and Kadamzhai districts (Kyrgyzstan) in 2006.
- ²⁰ Interview with Merinsa Aydzhigutova, head of Batken province education department, Batken, Kyrgyzstan, October 25, 2006.
- ²¹ This was observed in the Tajik language schools of Andarak and Uch-Korgon (Kyrgyzstan) and the Kyrgyz language school of Matpari (Tajikistan) in 2006.
- ²² Interview with Saidaziz Pulatov, initiator of the project, Uch-Korgon, Kyrgyzstan, December 16, 2006.
- ²³ More recent data were not made available at district level by the Tajik MoE.
- ²⁴ Interview with the head of the education department (*raiono*) of Spitamen district, Nov, Tajikistan, November 6, 2006.
- ²⁵ Interviews with Uzbek parents in the villages of Taghoyak, Saidqurghon and Kushtegirmon (Spitamen district, Tajikistan), in 2006.
- ²⁶ Interview with Raya Abdurakhimova, school director, Oogon-Talaa, Kyrgyzstan, December 11, 2006.
- ²⁷ Interview conducted in Oogon-Talaa, Kyrgyzstan, December 11, 2006.
- ²⁸ The conclusions that we drew from Spitamen district and Oogon-Talaa village case studies were confirmed by field research in Dzhabbor-Rasulov and Kanibadam districts (Tajikistan) and Aravan, Kara-Suu, Bazar-Korgon and Nooken districts (Kyrgyzstan) during several trips between 1999 and 2007.
- ²⁹ It should be noted that the flexibility between Uzbek and Kyrgyz languages is driven by their proximity, with both languages belonging to the Turkic family. In contrast, Tajik is a variety of Persian, which makes it impossible for a Tajik child to simply understand Uzbek or Kyrgyz.
- ³⁰ Indeed, existing Tajik-Uzbek schools have failed to collect enough applications to justify opening Tajik first grade classes for the last six years. When older pupils (from grade 7 to 11) complete their Tajik language education, Uzbek will become the sole tuition language in both schools.
- ³¹ I borrow this expression from A. Sen, 2006.