

SOVIET-ERA UZBEK ELITES ERASE RUSSIA FROM NATIONAL IDENTITY

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As the Central Asian country with the largest population, Uzbekistan elites' efforts to build national identity since 1992 provide an interesting case study in which the leaders of an old system try carefully to create a new one without losing power themselves.

Like the rest of Central Asia, Uzbekistan lacked an organized dissident or national democratic movement in the Soviet era. So former Soviet elites, including one-time Communist party boss Uzbek President Islam Karimov, ran Uzbekistan without many impediments after the Soviet Union collapsed. With independence foisted on them, the elites understood that they had to forge a new legitimacy for the state by building a national identity that would trump competing claims to Uzbek identity from clans, tribes and regions - and that would create a mechanism for dealing with border disputes. Throughout the 1990s, the elites gained further legitimacy. This reinforced a sense of Uzbekistan's importance in Central Asia and bolstered its regional rivalry with Kazakhstan. It also sapped the country's commitment to the Commonwealth of Independent States. In light of Uzbekistan's new alliance with the US-led antiterrorism coalition, Uzbek elites' program has interesting consequences.

In early 1999 Uzbekistan withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty (CST) and joined GUUAM, a grouping of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (Uzbekistan's membership provides the second "U"). These moves, coinciding with the country's burgeoning collaboration with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Partnership for Peace program, helped smooth the course for an alliance with the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

What components of Uzbekistan's post-Soviet program helped define its national identity? They seem to be a commitment to political stability, an insistence on privatization before political liberalization, a vigorous defense of sovereignty and territorial integrity, a pronounced shift away from dependence on Russia for communications and transportation, and a concerted effort to make Russians less dominant in the military. By the mid-1990s, two-thirds of the military's officers were ethnic Uzbeks. Promoting radically nationalist policies like these is, of course, easier to do in countries such as Uzbekistan where dissent is not allowed and authoritarianism prevails than in countries

like Poland, where a commitment to democracy drove the independence movement.

This strategy has consequences for Uzbek foreign and state policy. The country opposes military integration with the rest of the CIS, refuses to introduce dual citizenship of the sort proposed by Russia and, like Ukraine and other GUUAM states, is only interested in an amorphous CIS. Domestically, Uzbek identity, history and language have become important fibers in national policy. Plans to promote the Uzbek language have coincided with the expansion of instruction in English and German as alternatives to Russian. But teachers and officials promote the state language as a symbol of republican sovereignty whose defense preserves Uzbeks as a unique people.

More importantly, the promotion of the Uzbek language and the development of national culture aim to remove Russian influence from Uzbeks' lives and thereby redistribute political and cultural power away from Russians to Uzbeks. This policy of affirmative action in favor of the titular culture and language will inevitably lead to a growth in the number of Uzbeks in dominant positions within the state and a decline in Russians and Russian speakers. The second law on state languages, adopted in December 1995, promotes Uzbek as compulsory in the state administration, justice system and the mass media. Russian is placed on a par with other national minority languages.

This zeal hints at a broader nationalist agenda. The language law makes Uzbekistan one of the most aggressive countries in the region in terms of stripping Russian language from the public discourse. (In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian enjoys equal status with the indigenous language.) The authorities have also been zealous in eliminating Russian from public view in typography and from school textbooks. In Central Asia, the shift to Uzbek away from Russian is the fastest of any Central Asian country. This has negatively affected relations with Russians in the country, who had always lived separate lives from Uzbeks. Russians in Uzbekistan traditionally looked upon Uzbek culture as regressive and few had wanted to learn the Uzbek language. The promotion of the new language law has therefore solidified an Uzbek-Russian divide that already existed in the Soviet era.

With this emphasis on language, Uzbek elites have taken an aggressive approach to rewriting history. As in other Central Asian states, the Uzbeks seek to revive past glorious moments in history to

legitimize their independent state as one with a long historical past. This project occupies elites' attention in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan as well, because these countries also battle a Soviet myth that characterized Central Asians as backward. Only states that seek to maintain their Soviet-era dependency upon Russia as "younger brothers," such as Belarus and Moldova, continue to use Soviet-era history textbooks.

For Uzbeks, the new "father" of the Uzbek nation is one of the oldest: Timur (known in the West as Tamerlane), who unified Uzbeks in the 14th Century. In the Soviet era, Timur was portrayed as a bloodthirsty tyrant; now the Uzbek state sees him as a great and wise ruler. New statues of Timur are being unveiled in parks and other public places, and a Timur museum in Tashkent now receives soldiers and schoolchildren in much the same solemn climate that used to pervade Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow.

Nation-building in Uzbekistan has gone far in distancing the independent state from its Soviet and Russian-dominated past. Eventually, this trend would have to peter out, since it would logically lead to the debunking of Karimov and other elites who rose to prominence under the Soviet system. Ironically, the new Uzbek-US alliance is likely to foster Karimov's ability to lionize himself to an even greater degree and re-orient Uzbekistan away from Russia and Eurasia.

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