

The Significance of Granting the Uzbek Language the Status of The State Language On 21 October 1989

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical significance of granting the Uzbek language the status of the state language on 21 October 1989 and evaluates its impact on the socio-political development of Uzbekistan. Particular attention is devoted to the linguistic, cultural, and legal problems that emerged both before and after the adoption of the law, as well as the measures taken to address them. The study argues that the recognition of Uzbek as the state language was not merely a symbolic legal act, but an important milestone in the restoration of national identity, the strengthening of cultural continuity, and the enhancement of the social prestige of the mother tongue. The article also demonstrates that language policy in Uzbekistan developed within a broader historical context, beginning with early twentieth-century debates on linguistic rights and extending to post-independence reforms in education, administration, terminology, and script policy [1], [5].

Keywords: - State language, language policy, Uzbek language, Uzbek script, Latin alphabet, national identity, terminology, linguistic reform.

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most essential foundations of national existence. A nation that neglects its language, fails to preserve it, or does not recognize its cultural value risks weakening its own historical continuity and collective identity. Language is not merely a formal marker of national belonging; it is a profound bearer of meaning, memory, worldview, and thought. Since language and thought are inseparably linked, the decline of language inevitably leads to the erosion of national consciousness itself [4], [8].

During the Soviet period, especially under the dominance of ideological centralism, the national dimension of language was frequently

acknowledged in form, yet the national character of thought was systematically marginalized. The concept of “internationalism” was privileged, whereas the notion of “national” was often treated with suspicion, since the awakening of national self-awareness was understood as a potential path toward political independence. In this sense, the struggle for the recognition of the Uzbek language cannot be separated from the broader history of national awakening and the recovery of historical selfhood [1], [5]. The granting of state language status to Uzbek on 21 October 1989 therefore represented a decisive turning point in the socio-political and cultural life of Uzbekistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The issue has been discussed in the works of several scholars and public intellectuals, including Hoji Satimxon Munavvar, B. Nazarov, H. Bektemirov, A. Haqberdiyev, and N. Maxmudov [4-8]. Their studies address the status of Uzbek in public life, the legal and educational dimensions of language policy, the development of terminology, and the cultural consequences of distancing modern generations from earlier forms of Uzbek writing.

The present article is based on scholarly materials and publicly available historical sources related to the significance of granting state language status to Uzbek in 1989 and the problems that accompanied this process. The study employs historical-chronological, continuity-based, comparative-historical, and objective analytical methods. These approaches make it possible to situate the 1989 language law within the broader context of national revival, legal reform, and cultural policy.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

1. Language, National Thought, and the Question of Identity. Every nation possesses its own distinctive mode of thought, and that mode of thought finds its clearest expression through language. In this sense, language is not only a means of communication but also a form of perceiving and interpreting reality. The diversity of languages reflects not merely phonetic variation, but different ways of seeing the world. From this perspective, the status of the mother tongue has direct implications for national consciousness, spiritual development, and intellectual independence [4].

For the Uzbek people, the mother tongue has served as the embodiment of historical memory, cultural refinement, and collective identity. Uzbek is not only a medium of daily communication but also the linguistic foundation of a great literary civilization. It is the language in which centuries of history, poetic imagination, and philosophical reflection have taken form. As has been emphasized in political thought as well, the great importance of the mother tongue lies in its ability to unite people as a sign of shared spirituality and national cohesion [1]. Thus, the question of language status was inseparable from the question of national dignity.

2. Historical Roots of Language Policy Before

1989. Although the problem of linguistic inequality became particularly acute during the Soviet period, it did not emerge in a historical vacuum. As early as 1917–1918, Muslim political organizations in Turkestan had already raised language as a central legal and political issue. In the draft of the “Basic Law of Autonomous Turkestan,” discussed at the Second Congress of Muslim Organizations of Fergana Province in June 1917, language was given a separate section [2]. These debates show that the demand for recognition of local languages had deep roots in the political consciousness of the region.

Reformist intellectuals and Jadid leaders argued that while foreign languages should be learned in order to study the history, literature, and institutions of other peoples, native language development remained indispensable. The representatives of “Sho’roi Islomiya” likewise insisted that official documents within local institutions should be conducted in Uzbek, except in those cases where relations with all-Russian state structures required Russian [3]. Similarly, the programmatic documents of the “Turk Adamiy Markaziyati” party stated that the official language of each autonomous unit should be the language of its majority population and that education at various levels should be grounded in the native language, alongside broader Turkic and Russian instruction where appropriate [4]. These early documents demonstrate that the demand for linguistic rights in Uzbekistan long preceded the 1989 law.

3. Soviet Contradictions and the Marginalization of Uzbek. The incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the linguistic order of administration. Official documentation in governing institutions was increasingly conducted in Russian, while local languages were relegated to secondary status. Although the Soviet republics were constitutionally defined as sovereign, in practice the Uzbek language was systematically marginalized within administration, law, and institutional life. The fact that for many decades no meaningful legal framework was adopted to support the development of national languages illustrates the unequal structure of Soviet language policy [5].

At the same time, there were moments when the state formally recognized the need to strengthen

Uzbek in administration. In 1924, a decision was adopted requiring government, cooperative, and economic institutions to conduct documentation in Uzbek. In 1928, further resolutions were issued concerning the “Uzbekization” of state institutions and the compulsory teaching of Uzbek to officials and employees. These resolutions even granted institutions the authority, after a certain date, to refuse employment to those who did not know Uzbek and to replace those who treated the language with open neglect [5]. Yet these measures were never fully implemented. Their failure demonstrates that formal decrees alone were insufficient in the absence of political will and institutional enforcement.

4. The 1989 Law as a Historic Legal Turning Point. Against this historical background, the law granting the Uzbek language state status on 21 October 1989 must be regarded as a landmark legal and political event. Unlike earlier symbolic declarations, this law provided a concrete basis for the restoration of the Uzbek language in public, administrative, and cultural life. It was historically significant because it placed the language question at the center of national and legal reform in late Soviet Uzbekistan [5].

At the same time, contemporaries clearly understood that the law could not transform practice overnight. In a 1989 article, B. A. Nazarov warned against the simplistic expectation that once the law was adopted, everyone would immediately switch to Uzbek in all spheres. He argued that implementation would have to proceed gradually and would require enormous practical work in education, textbook production, technical adaptation, professional training, and financing [5]. This observation is crucial, because it reveals that the recognition of Uzbek as the state language was only the beginning of a longer and more demanding institutional process.

The major achievement of the law was that it made further indifference impossible. From that point onward, the status of Uzbek could no longer be treated merely as a cultural sentiment; it became a legal category tied to the structure of the state itself. In this sense, the 1989 law was both symbolic and practical: symbolic because it affirmed national dignity, and practical because it provided the basis for restructuring institutional and educational practice.

5. Post-1989 Achievements and Institutional Reforms. The years following the adoption of the law saw a number of important achievements. Meetings at various levels increasingly began to be conducted in the state language, public institutions launched efforts to teach Uzbek to their employees, and opportunities were created to study old Uzbek writing, which opened access to classical written heritage. Measures were also taken to regulate naming practices for settlements, neighborhoods, schools, and cultural institutions, while terminology and language standardization became the subject of more systematic institutional attention [6].

A revised version of the Law “On the State Language” was adopted on 21 December 1995. Its first article directly declared that the state language of the Republic of Uzbekistan is Uzbek. This revised version reflected the new political realities of independence: the Soviet Union no longer existed, Uzbekistan was now a sovereign state, and earlier Soviet-era terminology and assumptions had become obsolete. In 1996, the Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education issued an order requiring educational institutions to organize permanent courses in state-language office work, documentation, and terminology [5]. These developments demonstrate that language policy after independence moved from symbolic recognition toward structured implementation.

Institutional support also expanded. A separate institute of linguistics was established within the Academy of Sciences, the Uzbek Language Society was formed, and in 1990 the Republican Terminology Committee under the Cabinet of Ministers began its work. The committee undertook the regulation of socio-political and scientific-technical terms, examined terminological dictionaries, and monitored the implementation of the state language law across ministries, agencies, organizations, and enterprises [6]. One of its most delicate tasks was to identify Uzbek equivalents for Russian and international borrowings, especially in cases where native terms already existed but had been displaced during the Soviet period. This reveals that language reform was not limited to legal status, but extended into lexicon, terminology, and public usage.

6. The Role of Education and the Recovery of

Historical Continuity. The implementation of language policy depended crucially on the educational system. The law's success required not only administrative enforcement but also the cultivation of linguistic competence and love for the mother tongue among younger generations. Teachers of language and literature were expected to foster expressive, fluent, and grammatically correct Uzbek speech, as well as orthographic literacy. Alternative curricula were developed, special programs for schools with advanced language instruction were introduced, and efforts were made to strengthen connected oral and written speech through work with texts and communicative exercises [5].

A particularly important issue was the recovery of old Uzbek writing. The law's positive aspect was that it opened the way for the teaching of old Uzbek script in secondary, vocational, and higher education. This was of enormous importance, because the earlier forced transitions from Arabic-based writing to Latin and then to Cyrillic had cut generations off from the written legacy of their ancestors. According to the article, one of the gravest consequences of script replacement was the weakening of cultural continuity, literary awareness, and linguistic richness [7]. Without access to historical writing, even a literary giant such as Alisher Navoi remains partially inaccessible to modern readers. Thus, the restoration of old Uzbek script was seen not simply as an antiquarian project, but as a major cultural necessity.

The same concern applies to manuscript heritage. Vast collections of manuscripts preserved in research institutions remained inaccessible to the broader public because too few specialists could read old Uzbek and Arabic-based texts [8]. The article therefore argues that the teaching of old Uzbek language and script is indispensable for restoring the connection between present and past, recovering cultural memory, and enabling new generations to engage with the intellectual wealth of their civilization [7], [8].

CONCLUSION

The law granting the Uzbek language state status on 21 October 1989 was unquestionably a historic legal act. Its significance lies not only in the symbolic recognition of the Uzbek language, but also in its role in reorienting the cultural,

administrative, and educational life of the country. The law provided a legal foundation for strengthening national identity, restoring the prestige of the mother tongue, expanding its use in public institutions, and reconnecting the nation with its written and intellectual heritage [1], [5].

At the same time, the implementation of the law revealed how deeply language policy is intertwined with education, terminology, administration, script reform, and historical continuity. The recognition of Uzbek as the state language was therefore not the endpoint of reform, but the beginning of a broad process of national cultural renewal. The future strength of the language depends on preserving its richness, modernizing its functions without severing its historical roots, and cultivating genuine linguistic awareness in younger generations. In this respect, devotion to the mother tongue remains inseparable from devotion to national independence itself [6], [7], [8].

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