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VITALITY OF THE KYRGYZ LANGUAGE IN BISHKEK

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Summary

During the first decades after its independence from the USSR, Kyrgyzstan has intended to make of Kyrgyz a real state language. Since then, a new generation has been born and raised in the independent Kyrgyz Republic. Their linguistic behaviour may have a profound effect in the future of Kyrgyz. This study examines the linguistic situation in Bishkek. A questionnaire given to 125 students aged between 14 and 18 and direct observation in the streets were used to collect data. The preliminary results of the research show both, an almost total lack of interest in the state language by the local non-Kyrgyz students and a very weak attitude towards their national language by the young ethnic-Kyrgyz. It is expected that these results may help to create realistic and effective language policies to ensure the future of the Kyrgyz language in Bishkek and consequently in all the country in a balanced way.

Key Words: Kyrgyz, language revival, Russian, bilingualism, Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek.

Introduction

1.1. The Kyrgyz Republic and the City of Bishkek

The Kyrgyz Republic, also called Kyrgyzstan, is an ex-Soviet landlocked country situated in Central Asia. Three of its four neighbours, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are also ex-Soviet republics while the fourth one is the People's Republic of China. Before its independence, the territory which is currently known as Kyrgyzstan had been a part of the Russian Empire and of the

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In 1924, it was established as an autonomous republic within the Russian SFSR by the Soviet government and twelve years later, in 1936, Kyrgyzstan became a Soviet Socialist Republic (Kyrgyz SSR), the highest level of autonomy within the Soviet Union. The Republic declared its independence on 31 August 1991 after the collapse of the USSR.^[1]

The 200,000 km² country is inhabited by about 5,363,000 people. Most of its inhabitants belong to the titular ethnicity, Kyrgyz, which accounts for about 71 percent of the population. The Kyrgyz are a Turkic speaking nation which moved from the land that is currently called Khakassia in Siberia to the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan during the centuries previous to the year 1000 AD.^[2] There are, however, two main minorities, Russians, mainly in the north, and Uzbeks in the south, who account respectively for 8 and 14 percent of the total population of the country. Other noticeable ethnic and linguistic groups include Dungans, Ukrainians, Uyghurs, Tajiks and Germans just to mention some of them.^[3]

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in Asia. Unemployment and poverty are common and it is estimated that every year between 300,000 and 500,000 leave for Russia.^[4] Corruption is also widespread in most fields, from education to the government. Both issues, economy (and development) and corruption occupy twelve out of seventeen problems pointed out by the inhabitants of the country in a poll in 2012, unemployment, mentioned by 61 percent of the respondents, being the first one, and corruption, 36 percent of the answers, the second one.^[5]

The capital of the Kyrgyz Republic is Bishkek, called Frunze during the Soviet period. The city is also the main nucleus in Kyrgyzstan with a population of 865,000 inhabitants – a 16 percent of the total population of the country.^[6] Until the independence in 1991, most of Bishkek’s population belonged to European nationalities, mainly Russians, Germans and Ukrainians. However, the massive emigration of those groups towards Russia and Germany definitely changed the composition of Bishkek’s population and nowadays about 66 percent are Kyrgyz, 23 percent are Russians and the rest belong to different minor groups. Bishkek is also the industrial, cultural and political motor of the country.

1.2 Languages of Kyrgyzstan

The state language of Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz, is a Turkic language closely related to Kazakh, Tatar and Bashkir. Other minority languages such as Uzbek and Uyghur, although Turkic themselves, differ notably from Kyrgyz.^[7] Russian, the interethnic language of the country, is a Slavonic language with no relation with Kyrgyz (See Table 1). It was first introduced in the area by explorers during the 18th century. During the Imperial and Soviet periods, Russian was an official language, used in most domains. There are also some other languages spoken by thousands of native inhabitants of the small republic, such as Uzbek, Dungan, Turkish, Persian/Tajik, Uyghur and others.^[8]

English	one	two	three	father	mother	son	language
Kyrgyz	бир (bir)	эки (eki)	үч (üch)	ата (ata)	эне (ene)	уул (uul)	тил (til)

Kazakh	бир (bir)	екі (eki)	үш (üşh)	әке (äke)	ана (ana)	үл (ül)	тіл (til)
Uzbek	bir	ikki	uch	Ота	она	о'g'il	til
Uyghur	بىر (bir)	ئىككى (ikki)	ئۈچ (uch)	ئاتا (ata)	ئانا (ana)	ئوغۇل (oghul)	تىل (til)
Russian	один (adin)	два (dva)	три (tri)	отец (atyets)	мать (mat')	сын (syn)	язык (yazyk)
Ukrainian	один (odin)	два (dva)	три (tri)	батько (batko)	мати (mati)	син (sin)	мову (movu)

Table 1: Kyrgyzstan languages compared to their closest relatives

About 88 percent of the people of Kyrgyzstan affirm to be able to speak Kyrgyz and 67 have skills in Russian (see Graph 1).^[9] Unfortunately, the figures mentioned may not only include native, fluent users of the languages but also people with very limited command of them or even people who say to speak a language according to their ethnicity instead of according to their knowledge of the language mentioned.^[10]



Graph 1: Main languages spoken in Kyrgyzstan. The total percentage sums more than 100 because several languages per person were allowed.

1.3 Historical Language Policy in Kyrgyzstan

1.3.1 The Russian Empire and the USSR

By the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, a form of Arabic orthography was employed to write the local [Turkic] dialects in Central Asia, however, the literacy rates were very low. This written form of those dialects was mainly employed in religious education.^[11] In order to overcome the problem of illiteracy in the region, the Bolshevik government tried to adapt the Arabic script into a standardised orthography which would be more suitable to the Turkic phonetics and would increase literacy among all the population. The project did not succeed, however, those inconveniences did not put an end to the efforts to modernise the Turkic dialects of the Soviet

Union. In 1926, a shift to Latin alphabet was proposed and was finally implemented in 1928.^[12] Interestingly, this very same year, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a new successful orthography for Turkish, the most spoken language of the family, in the same direction, from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin one.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Turkic population of Central Asia did not have any national or even linguistic conscience. Tribalism and the Islamic religion were the links that joined together social groups. The Soviet government, then, decided to choose some majority dialects from each language variety, standardise them, and use them as a base for literary or official languages.^[13] Although some authors suggest that the Soviet governments were in fact 'creating new languages' to divide the Turkic communities, it is also a fact that it was impossible to choose a single dialect for all the tribes, since they were not mutually intelligible as proves the example of the Tatar government officials in Turkestan SSR during the 1920s, who were not understood even by educated Uzbeks.^[14]

During the following decades, the USSR languages suffered some revisions and reforms in order to make them available to larger population groups, although political reasons were also involved.^[15] One of the main changes was the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet for all the languages, except for the few with strong tradition in other alphabets, such as Armenian and Georgian.^[16]

Despite the criticism by some sources, the standardisation and the reforms carried out by the Soviet governments increased both, literacy and language prestige of Kyrgyz. In 1913, before the standardisation, no book was published in Kyrgyz, while in 1957 over 400 titles were published and 484 in 1980.^[17] In 1989, the Soviet Parliament of the Kyrgyz SSR declared Kyrgyz the state language of the Republic, while Russian would have the role of interethnic language.^[18]

1.3.2 The Kyrgyz Republic

After the Soviet law which declared Kyrgyz the state language of the Republic and until the independence in 1991, the language seemed to experience a revival and it was assigned a central role in nation building and in the preservation of the Kyrgyz identity.^[19] This fact was among the ones which provoked the migration towards Russia and Germany of about 145,000 Russian and German speakers, depriving Kyrgyzstan of thousands of skilled workers and specialists which in turn provoked a severe decline of the local economy. In order to reverse, or at least attenuate, the situation, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic declared in 1992 that in certain locations where Russian speakers constituted the majority of the population, Russian was allowed to be used in commerce and documents. Moreover, the new Criminal Code, passed in 1993, includes an article punishing discrimination of individuals for their ethnicity.^[20]

Migration towards Russia continued and the Kyrgyz government became forced to officially increment the presence of Russian. Thus, in 1994, Russian became official in all areas where Russian speakers were majority. Nevertheless, up to 38 percent of the Russians of Kyrgyzstan continued expressing their wish to leave the country.^[21] In 2000, Russian changed its status becoming an official language in all the country, while Kyrgyz retained its status as state language, as stated in Article 10 of the 2010 Kyrgyzstani Constitution.^[22]

Although the government has understood the need to recognise Russian as a main language in all the country, the other minority languages do not enjoy the same conditions, even when, as in the case of Uzbek, there are more native speakers than native Russian speakers. Uzbek speakers continue seeing their schools getting closed and their language rights ignored.^[23]

1.4 Language education in the Kyrgyz Republic

Kyrgyzstan has an educational system structured in times of the Soviet Union which has been partially reformed during the two decades of the history of the Kyrgyz Republic. The results, however, have not proved to be very successful. According to the 2010 PISA Report, 80 percent of the Kyrgyz students are under the minimum level in science, ranking number 57 out of the 57 countries surveyed.^[24]

In 2012, there were 203 Russian schools in all Kyrgyzstan which is about 11 percent of the total schools of the country. Most of the rest of schools also offer bilingual teaching or Russian as a subject.^[25] Russian schools are highly prestigious and in high demand by Russian parents and by those from other ethnic groups since students of those schools not only learn an international language, but also perform much better than their counterparts in Kyrgyz or Uzbek schools.^[26] Higher education in Kyrgyzstan is available in several languages, including Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek, English, Turkish and a few others.^[27]

Between 33 and 50 percent of the time spent in education is devoted to language and literature which includes Kyrgyz, Russian and a foreign language, usually English or German (See Table 2). Despite that fact, Kyrgyzstan occupies the last position in the PISA ranking in reading and only 7 and 1 percent of its inhabitants declare to know English or German respectively.^[28] See also Graph 1.

	1 st Grade	2 nd Grade	3 rd Grade	4 th Grade	5 th Grade	6 th Grade	7 th Grade	8 th Grade	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade
Kyrgyz Language	7	7	8	8	5	4	3	3/2	2	2	2
Kyrgyz Literature	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	2/3	3	3	3
Russian Language	3	4	4	4	2	2	2	1	1	2	2
Russian Literature	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Foreign language	2	2	2	2	4	3	2	2	2	2	2

Table 2: Language education in Kyrgyz medium schools in Kyrgyzstan^[29]

Methodology: Survey and Observation

The following study has been carried out in two different steps: 1) an initial survey with students aged between 14 and 18 and 2) by observation of language behaviour in different locations of the city of Bishkek.

2.1 First step: the survey

2.1.1 Centres

Three different centres were chosen to carry out this part of the research during April and May 2015. The first one is a national school, where students learn in Kyrgyz and in Russian. The ethnic composition of the group fits almost perfectly with the ethnic composition of Bishkek. The second school is an English-Russian-Kyrgyz international school managed by a Turkish organisation. Although most lessons are taught in English, pupils receive education in Russian and Kyrgyz as well. The number of students with Kyrgyz background is considerable but they are outnumbered by foreign students, mainly children of Turkish immigrants. The last school surveyed is an international school which offers education through the medium of English only. Although most students in this centre are ethnic Kyrgyz from the upper social classes of Bishkek there is also a relatively high percentage foreign pupils, mainly from Pakistan. In all three schools, the rest of the students belong to ex-USSR nationalities such as Russians (mostly in the national school), as well as Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uyghurs and others.

2.1.2 Subjects

Initially, students of 9th, 10th and 11th grades (students aged between 14 and 18) of three different schools in Bishkek (See Table 3).

	Ethnic Kyrgyz (at least 1 parent)	Other ex-USSR nationalities	Foreigners	TOTAL
Kyrgyz-Russian National School	30 (64%)	17 (36%)	0 (-)	47
English- Kyrgyz/Russian School	20 (43%)	5 (11%)	22 (46%)	47
English-medium School	17 (51%)	3 (10%)	11 (39%)	31
Total	67 (54%)	25 (20%)	33 (26%)	125

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by school and nationality

2.1.3 Instruments

The basic instrument used in this study was a very simple questionnaire designed to enquire about the basic language use of the students within the family circle. It included questions about communication between family and parents, between parents, common language within the family, and language use among siblings (See Appendix 1). More direct questions such as *'what is your*

native language? or *what is your family language?* were avoided due to the generalised confusion between mother tongue (first language) and ethnic tongue (the one that they are supposed to speak due to their ethnic origin). Questions about other domains such as language at school or with friends were not included since the instruction language differs from school to school and Kyrgyz is not a universal language spoken by all ethnicities. The document containing the questionnaire included all the items in both versions, a Russian one (common language among the ex-USSR people) and an English one (common language among foreign students).

2.1.4 Procedure

In some cases, the questionnaires were handed out by the researchers. In other cases, some local teachers gave them to their students.

2.2 Second step: observation

2.2.1 Location

The Linguistic behaviour of the residents in Bishkek was monitored in various districts of the city including the wealthy southernmost micro-districts, the city centre and the north-western districts, which are among the poorest ones (see Figure 1).

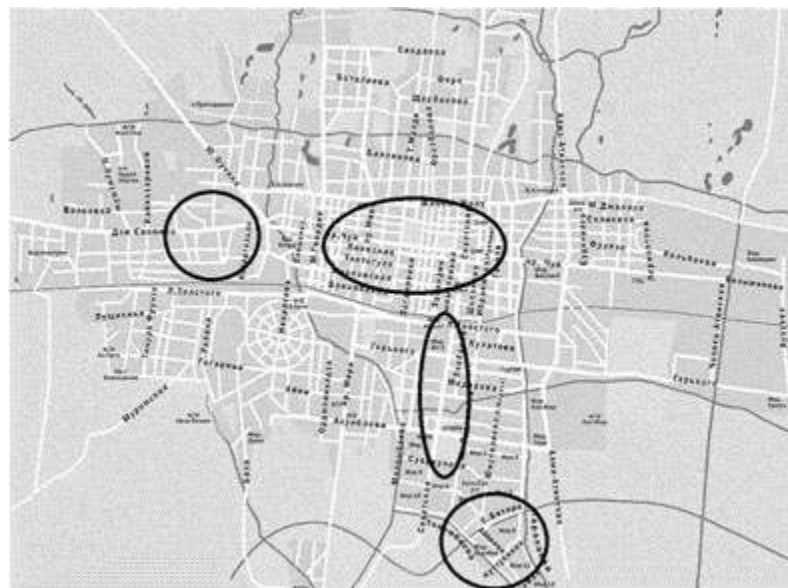


Figure 1: Areas where the study was carried out.^[30]

2.2.2 Procedure

For the first part of the observation, the researchers took note of the language displayed in shops and businesses including small food shops, supermarkets, furniture shops, travel agents, notary publics and beauty salons to mention a few. It was specified whether the signs were 1) *fix*, such as a big neon sign with the name of the business, or 2) *temporary*, such as public short notes as ‘back in 5 minutes’, ‘open’, ‘close’, ‘please, call this number’, etc.

The second part of the observation, also carried out in different locations of Bishkek, consisted of taking note of the language in which Kyrgyz-looking people talked to other Kyrgyz-looking individuals.

2.2.3 Subjects

The study requested businesses with fix and temporary signing, with the exception of those situated in the markets, where fix signing is not common. In total, 76 businesses were monitored according to the distribution shown in Table 4.

Micro districts	40
Market	7
Shopping Centre	6
City Centre	22

Table 4: Businesses according to its location

A total of 20 conversations by Kyrgyz-looking people were identified as Russian or Kyrgyz. The subjects belonged to all age groups from children to adults, families and older people.

3 Survey results

3.1 Use of Kyrgyz in families – Language spoken by parents to each other

Most of the ethnic Kyrgyz individuals aged 20 and over are either immigrants or first generation in the city. These immigrants come from all over rural Kyrgyzstan, where most people function only in Kyrgyz. It is, therefore, understandable that an overwhelming majority of the parents still use only Kyrgyz to talk to each other. Evidently, that rate is totally different when one of the parents is not Kyrgyz, and it is virtually inexistent among ethnic non-Kyrgyz parents.

	Russian without Kyrgyz	More Russian than Kyrgyz	More Kyrgyz than Russian	Kyrgyz without Russian	Only other languages
Kyrgyz (both parents)	21%	10%	17%	52%	-
Kyrgyz (one parent)	50%	-	12%	-	34%

Total Kyrgyz	24%	10%	17%	45%	5%
Other USSR nationalities*	96%	-	-	-	4%
TOTAL	41%	6%	11%	31%	4%

*It may include the use of Russian along with the student's native language

Table 5: Language used by parents to talk to each other

3.2 Use of Kyrgyz in families – Common language spoken between generations

Despite being fluent Kyrgyz speakers and users of Kyrgyz in their relationship with their spouses, most ethnic-Kyrgyz parents settled in Bishkek choose either only Russian or mainly Russian to talk to their children and only one third maintain Kyrgyz as their main intergenerational language. It is also interesting to notice that after more than 20 years of officiality, Kyrgyz has no attraction for families of any ethnic background since most families choose Russian as the most adequate linguistic tool to function in the city.

	Russian without Kyrgyz	More Russian than Kyrgyz	More Kyrgyz than Russian	Kyrgyz without Russian	Only other languages
Kyrgyz (both parents)	32%	27%	24%	17%	-
Kyrgyz (one parent)	64%	18%	18%	-	-
Total Kyrgyz	37%	26%	23%	14%	-
Other USSR nationalities*	100%	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	55%	19%	16%	10%	-

*It may include the use of Russian along with the student's native language

Table 6. Common language in families

3.3 Use of Kyrgyz in families – Language spoken by students with their siblings

About two thirds of the students regardless their nationality and more than a half of the Kyrgyz teenagers from Bishkek speak with their siblings in only in Russian without using any Kyrgyz. Therefore, it must be concluded that Russian is also the main language employed to chat with friends, to play and other features of social life.

Although this tendency is clear in all schools surveyed, there are notable differences among them. Those differences seem directly related to the language in which students are educated *at school*. As a rule, it can be concluded that the less the influence of Russian is, the slower the shift from Kyrgyz towards Russian seems to be. Therefore, those who use more Kyrgyz with their siblings are pupils who study in the English-medium school while those who attend national schools are more likely to employ Russian with their siblings in a monolingual way.

Language spoken→	Russian without Kyrgyz			More Russian than Kyrgyz			More Kyrgyz than Russian			Kyrgyz without Russian			Only other languages		
	ENG ¹	EN-LO ²	LO ²	ENG	EN-LO	LO	ENG	EN-LO	LO	ENG	EN-LO	LO	ENG	EN-LO	LO
Student's nationality:															
Kyrgyz - both parents	40	47	67	33	11	19	27	37	7	-	5	7	-	-	-
Kyrgyz - one parent	50	100	75	-	-	-	-	-	25	-	-	-	50	-	-
Total Kyrgyz by school	41	50	68	29	10	16	24	35	10	-	5	6	6	-	-
Total Kyrgyz General	55			18			21			5			2		
Other USSR nationalities ²	66	100	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	33	-	-
TOTAL By school	47	61	78	26	8	11	21	27	6	-	4	4	5	-	-
TOTAL General	66			13			15			3			2		

Table 7. Language behaviour among the surveyed students excluding non-eet nationals (percentages).

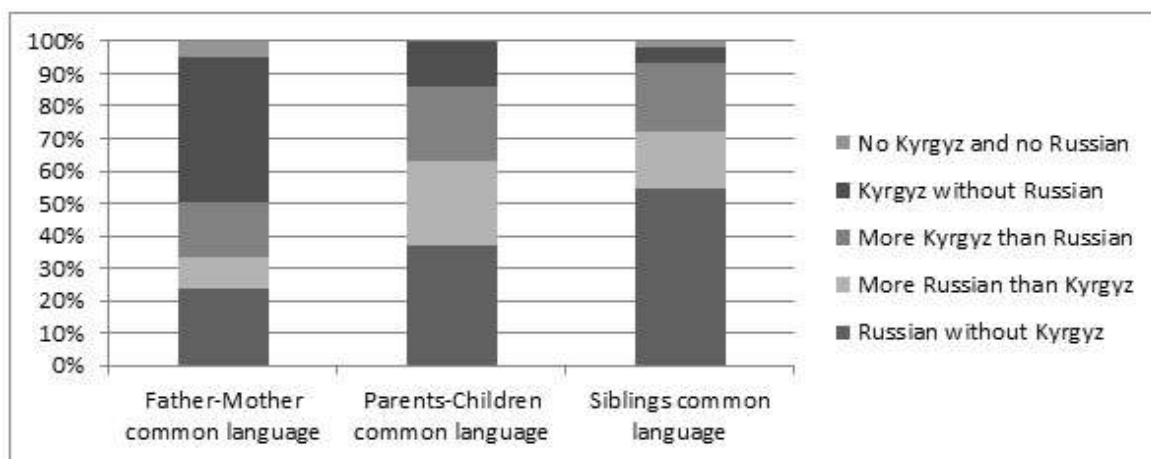
¹ENG: English-medium school; EN-LO: English/Local-medium school; LO: Local (Kyrgyz/Russian)-medium school

²It may include the use of Russian along with other native language of the student

The relation between the language used at school and the language used with siblings is also evident in the fact that a third of the students of the English-medium school use some English as an auxiliary language with their siblings, despite that none of them is an English native speaker (see Table 8).

	English-medium school	English-Local-medium school	Local Kyrgyz-Russian school
English Native speakers	0	0	0
Users of some English with siblings	33%	18%	2%

Table 8. Use of English as auxiliary language among siblings.



Graph 2. General language use among Kyrgyz inhabitants of Bishkek (at least one ethnic Kyrgyz parent)

4 Observation results

4.1 Language behaviour by Kyrgyz in informal conversations in the streets of Bishkek

Out of the 20 conversations among Kyrgyz-looking people heard by the researchers in different areas of Bishkek, 65 percent of them were in Russian and only 35 percent in Kyrgyz. Most children and youngsters were heard speaking Russian.

The span of time the conversation ranged from a few seconds to approximately one minute, therefore it is also possible that the speakers used code switching during the whole conversation, however this point have not been tested.

4.2 Use of Kyrgyz and Russian in businesses in Bishkek

As seen on Table 9, the use of Russian-Kyrgyz bilingual fix signing is high in most areas of Bishkek. There are also many Russian monolingual signs and some foreign language signs, mainly containing well-known words such as *'fast-food'*, *'fashion'*, *'pizzeria'*, etc. The reason for the strength of Kyrgyz in this domain can be attributed to official regulations, compelling businesses to

sign in the state language. Since those dispositions do not apply to temporary signing, such as notes of ‘back in 5 minutes’, ‘open’, ‘close’, etc, the presence of Kyrgyz becomes minimal. In fact, no Kyrgyz monolingual sign was spotted. Moreover, all bilingual signs were posters and signs printed by brands. No Kyrgyz-only or Kyrgyz-Russian handwritten or home printed sign was discovered, although Russian monolingual notes were common all over the city.

	Russian	Bilingual	Kyrgyz	Only other
Fix Signs				
Micro-districts	14%	62%	8%	16%
Shopping centres	43%	14%	-	43%
City centre	32%	59%	-	9%
Temporary signs				
Micro-districts	84%	16%	-	-
Market	100%	-	-	-
Shopping centre	86%	14%	-	-
City centre	82%	14%	-	5%

Table 9. Use of languages in businesses in Bishkek

Conclusion

Kyrgyz could be considered an endangered language in the city of Bishkek. Although most parents still use it as their main tool to talk to each other, there is an endemic tendency not to transmit it to their children, maybe due to the feeling of superiority of Russian among the Kyrgyz, who consider that language a tool of international communication and of social progress.^[31]

This tendency has compelled many children and teenagers to learn some Kyrgyz only at school instead of at home. This fact makes them see the language as a school subject instead of a language to be used with family, friends, shopping and other daily activities and even more children and teenagers completely abandon it in behalf of Russian, which is the only language of 55 percent of the ethnic-Kyrgyz and 66 percent of the total teenage population (Kyrgyz and other ex-USSR nationalities) of Bishkek.

Outside the family circle, the situation does not help the language much. As seen, when there is no legal rule about it, most businesses choose to communicate with customers in Russian. This voluntary Russian-immersion situation is also evident in the streets and parks of Bishkek. As discussed previously, non-Kyrgyz citizens of Kyrgyzstan do not use Kyrgyz to talk to each other, but even Kyrgyz are losing the habitude of talking their national language not only with strangers but also with family and friends.

In most countries, cities and particularly the capital city act as a trend pioneer. This is also true about languages. When the urban world loses a language, the rural world follows the tendency.^[32] There is, therefore, a strong need for an effective language planning in Bishkek to implement bilingualism among its inhabitants. Otherwise, Kyrgyz may have its days numbered in Bishkek, the cultural, political and industrial nucleus of Kyrgyzstan, which might doom the language forever.

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Appendix 1

PART 1 – 1 ЧАСТЬ

Gender/Пол: Boy/Мальчик £ Girl/Девочка £
Age/Возраст:

Nationality (according to your passport)
Национальность (в соответствии с паспортом):

Ethnicity (such as Dungan, Uyghur, Kurdish, etc.):
Этническая принадлежность (как Дунган, Уйгур, Курд и т.п.):

Common language spoken at home (*Name the language or languages*):
Общий разговорный (употребляемый) язык дома (*Назовите язык или языки*)

My mother's family (grandparents, uncles, aunts) speak (*Name the language or languages*):
Семья моей матери (дедушка и бабушка, дяди, тетушки) говорят (*Назовите язык или языки*)

My mother speaks fluently (*Name the language or languages*):
Моя мама говорит свободно (*Назовите язык или языки*)

My father's family (grandparents, uncles, aunts) speak (*Name the language or languages*):
Семья моего отца (дедушка и бабушка, дяди, тетушки) говорят (*Назовите язык или языки*)

My father speaks fluently (*Name the language or languages*):
Мой отец говорит свободно (*Назовите язык или языки*)

My father talks to my mother in (*Name the language or languages*):
Мой отец разговаривает с мамой на (*Назовите язык или языки*)

With my brothers and sisters I speak (*Name the language or languages*):
С моими братьями и сестрами я говорю на (*Назовите язык или языки*)

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