
KAZAKHSTAN SAYS RUSSIAN NOT BANNED FROM GOVERNMENT AFTER ALL

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Kazakhstan will allow cabinet and parliament members to speak Russian, the Central Asian nation's government said on Thursday, softening the tone of an earlier statement by President Nursultan Nazarbayev who had ordered a switch to Kazakh.

Language is a sensitive issue in the oil-rich former Soviet republic of 18 million, where ethnic Russians make up a fifth of the population and many ethnic Kazakhs, including senior officials, also speak Russian more fluently than Kazakh.

Nazarbayev, 77, is fluent in both languages and has routinely switched back and forth between them in his speeches as president, a post he has held since the 1991 declaration of independence.

Members of Kazakhstan's cabinet and parliament have usually spoken whichever language they were more fluent in during public meetings, although it has become customary among government ministers to at least open their speeches in Kazakh.

On Monday, however, Nazarbayev's office said in a statement he had instructed ministers and deputies to only use Kazakh in their work - while providing simultaneous translation to those not fluent in it.

The following day, all but one cabinet members spoke exclusively Kazakh at a weekly meeting which was broadcast live.

But later this week, senior officials, including Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga, who is a deputy of the upper house of parliament, said his instructions had been misinterpreted and were not an outright ban on the use of Russian.

"No one has banned the Russian language, and this is unlikely to ever happen," she was quoted as saying by privately owned news website Tengrinews.

Nazarbayev's office has also amended its statement, dropping the word "only" from the phrase in which he ordered government business to be "carried out only in the state language".

"...It is clear that there is no ban on speaking Russian in parliament and government," Talgat Zhumagulov, chairman of the International Information Committee at Kazakhstan's foreign ministry, told Reuters in an email.

While there has been no noticeable negative public reaction to Nazarbayev's instructions in Kazakhstan - many Kazakh-speakers welcomed them - some media in Russia criticized the move as infringing on the rights of ethnic Russians.

"This is silent de-Russification," the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper wrote this week, referring to the policy of severing links with Moscow, which has been implemented by many ex-Soviet republics after independence.

The newspaper also asked a Russian political commentator if Kazakhstan could follow the path of Ukraine - whose stand-off with Russia has led to loss of territory and fighting between the army and armed separatists.

Kazakhstan maintains close ties with its former Soviet overlord and main trading partner, but is also on good terms with the West and China.

Kaynak/Source: