

“In fact, representatives of all ethnic minorities, including the Uzbeks, are experiencing the same difficulties with employment and other issues, as the representatives of the titular nation. They are also facing the problems of corruption, lack of good education and everything else, like the Tajiks”, said political analyst Nurali Dawlat (Dushanbe, Tajikistan) in an article written for [cabar.asia](http://cabar.asia).

During the years of independence, Tajikistan has virtually turned into a mono-ethnic country, although a quarter of a century ago, it was a multi-ethnic republic, and the titular nation constituted just over 60% of the population.

According to official data, in the 1980s, there lived more than 100 nations and nationalities in the Tajik SSR, but the main ethnic minorities of the republic were Uzbeks and Russians.

According to the last population census in the USSR in 1989, there lived 3,172.4 thousand Tajiks (62.3%), 1,197,841 Uzbeks (23.5%) and 388,500 Russians (7%) in Tajikistan. Other ethnic groups accounted for about 5%.

The second census, conducted in independent Tajikistan in 2010, showed that Tajiks constituted 6373.8 thousand people (83.4%), Uzbeks - 926.3 thousand (12.2%), and Russians - 34.8 thousand (0.5%).

During the years of independence, the proportion of the Kyrgyz population has not changed; it has remained at the level of 1%. At the same time, the proportion of the Uzbek population has declined by almost 8% and constituted around 15%.

In recent decades, the decline in the proportion of Uzbeks and Russians in Tajikistan has been the subject of political speculation on the Internet, online forums, as well as in a number of foreign (mainly Russian) print media.

Russian nationalists and skinheads, and even some prominent members of the Russian government, like Dmitry Rogozin, have long found the answer to this: according to them, Russians were killed in Tajikistan, and those Russians whom God had saved immigrated to Russia. But the authors of these horror stories forget that these events occurred not so long ago, in the late 20th century, and the genocide or ethnic cleansing of an entire people was impossible to hide.

In reality, the reduced number of Russians and Uzbeks occurred as a result of the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s. This war forced hundreds of thousands to leave Tajikistan. Not

only the representatives of ethnic minorities but also ethnic Tajiks were leaving. This process is still ongoing.

Currently, the program of “Family resettlement” into the Russian Federation is particularly popular in Tajikistan. Only during the last year, more than 5 thousand families have emigrated from the Republic under this program.

Today in Tajikistan, there are more than 20 national communities, including communities of Turkmens, Kazakhs, various small Caucasian people, the Uighurs, Tatars and Bashkirs, Kyrgyz, Koreans, Uzbeks, Armenians, Ossetians, Georgians, Poles, and several communities of Russian compatriots.

### **Problems in the field of language and culture**

As part of the international community, the Republic of Tajikistan has claimed responsibility for the security and protection of the rights of national minorities on its territory.

In this regard, the Government of Tajikistan has ratified the major international instruments, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Tajikistan’s Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin.

In general, the situation of ethnic minorities in the country is not bad. In Tajikistan, there is a large number of mixed marriages – Tajik-Uzbek, Tajik-Kyrgyz, Tajik – Russian, although their number during the last 20 years has significantly dropped.

Most of the ethnic minorities in Tajikistan speak Russian, the language, which is not recognized as a second state language but has a high status, reflected in the Constitution of the Republic as a language of international communication.

To receive information and education, most representatives of national minorities, in general, use Russian. Only Uzbeks, the main minority, have an opportunity to receive education and information in their native language.

In Tajikistan, there are 16 theaters; more than 10 of them give performances in Tajik. Three theaters, including the Theater named after Mayakovsky in Dushanbe, the Drama Theater named after Pushkin in Khujand and the puppet theater in Chkalovsk show their

performances in Russian. A theater in Uzbek is working in Spitamen district of Sogd region.

According to official figures, there are 412 print media in the country, including 268 newspapers and 136 magazines. 34 are printed in Russian, 10 - in Uzbek, and 1 - in Kyrgyz.

In Sogd region, there are private television stations broadcasting in Uzbek. Also, six private television channels broadcast their programs in two languages, Tajik and Uzbek.

Several years ago, the problems of ethnic minorities in Tajikistan were periodically reported in the Tajik media. The general opinion was that there were some problems, but this did not mean that their rights were violated at the national level.

For example, Ulmas Djamol, a well-known Uzbek poet in the country, argued that one of the problems of the Uzbeks in Tajikistan was the lack of textbooks in the Uzbek language, as they had been previously delivered from Tashkent.

“When Uzbekistan adopted the Latin script, we have stopped receiving textbooks in Uzbek”, he said. ([Link](#)).

In fact, the transition to the Latin alphabet in Uzbekistan and the termination of the supply of textbooks from Tashkent to Uzbek-language schools in Tajikistan have become a major headache for the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan.

In the past, during the Soviet era, Uzbekistan printed textbooks for Uzbek schools in Tajikistan, in turn, Tajikistan supplied textbooks in Tajik to Tajik schools in Uzbekistan.

However, Tajikistan is now trying to independently solve the problem. How well it turns out, it is difficult to judge, as the level of education is getting low in Tajik and Uzbek, and even in Russian schools.

According to official statistics, by the end of 2013, the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan published 31 textbooks for schools with Uzbek language of instruction, 21 - for schools with Kyrgyz language of instruction, and 13 - for schools with Turkmen language of instruction.

Over the last 5 years, there has seen reduction in the number of classes and students with Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Turkmen languages of instruction. Speaking about the reasons, the Tajik journalist V. Kasymbekova in her article “National minorities in Tajikistan. A clever tongue will take you to Dushanbe?”, notes that the decline is due to the transition to per capita

funding for education, and the desire of parents to educate their children in the Tajik language, because ethnic Uzbeks have weak prospects for career advancement in Tajikistan. Also, they cannot count on the continuation of education in higher education institutions in their native language. There operated about 900 school institutions in Tajikistan in 2014, in which the training was carried out in the Uzbek language. These institutions taught about 500 thousand students in their mother tongue ([link](#)).

### **The problem is the law on language?**

Some experts believe that the law on language, adopted by the Tajik parliament in 2009, limited the influence of other languages. As a result, minorities were forced to choose the learning of the Tajik language.

Some time ago, Rahmatillo Zoyirov, leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, in an interview for the IWPR, stated that there was a contradiction in the law on language. One article states that all education should be conducted in the Tajik language, while another article states that schools, colleges and universities can “carry out activities” in other languages.

“Does the word “activities” include training in other languages?”, asks Zoyirov.

Officials of the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan say that the number of hours of Uzbek language in the capital fell, and also, there are not enough qualified Uzbek-language teachers. (Z. Ergashev, B.Shams. Article “Tajikistan: the realities of the Uzbek community” [link](#)).

In 2014, the Uzbeks of Tajikistan faced another problem. A unified national testing center began to operate in the country, where all applicants who wished to enroll in universities of the country had to pass exams and tests. This center had first launched exams for admission to universities in the state language, but it did not accept the test results of graduates of Uzbek schools.

Tajik service of Radio “Liberty”, Ozodi, said that ignorance of the Tajik language closed the doors of universities for the Uzbek school children in Tajikistan. As the representative of the Center for the Development of Education of Tajikistan Bakhtiyor Buriev said, suggestions to address the problems of Uzbek-language students were submitted to the National Testing Center, but they were not fulfilled. A spokesman for the National Testing Center Sitara Nazarova says that Tajikistan’s legislation requires that all applicants, even the

representatives of national minorities, know Tajik language.

“It is a common international practice. There is not an opportunity to take examinations in three or four languages in the national testing center”, she said. (Link).

### **Representation in government**

In private conversations, some ethnic Uzbeks complain that representatives of this ethnic group were being pushed to the margins of public and political life and had no access to economic resources.

Ergashev Z. and B. Shams in the above article write that in April 2014, the Uzbeks held only 7.6% of posts in the public service, which is much lower than their overall share in the population.

B. Kasymbekova claims that by the end of 2013, 97.6% of judges were Tajiks (366 judges), and only 2.1% – Uzbeks (8 judges) and 0.3% Kyrgyz (1 judge).

It is unlikely that the situation in Tajikistan has changed today.

### **Problems in relations between the two countries affect the Uzbeks in Tajikistan**

The number of civil servants, representatives of the Uzbek community in Tajikistan, is reducing, in my opinion, due to two factors. The first is the deterioration of relations between Tashkent and Dushanbe, and the second is a violation of the rights of Tajiks in Uzbekistan.

The infringement of the rights of Tajiks in Uzbekistan was already noticed in the Soviet period. Then they claimed that the Uzbek government forced ethnic Tajiks to change their nationality to Uzbeks, forcing them to write “Uzbek” in the nationality column in the passport, instead of “Tajik”. This topic is raised periodically in the Tajik national media and becomes the subject of heated discussions in the Tajik segment of the Internet.

Relations between the two neighbors have deteriorated in the late 1990s. Since 2000, there is a visa regime between the countries. Transport links between the two countries have been terminated, too. Uzbekistan withdrew from the unified energy system and had repeatedly raised the tariffs for natural gas. In the end, the country completely abandoned natural gas supplies from Uzbekistan for domestic consumption and now buys gas in small

quantities only for industrial purposes. Despite the repeated attempts to bring closer the positions, the relations are only getting worse. Uzbekistan has repeatedly blocked the railroad tracks from Russia. Tashkent prevents transit of Turkmen electricity in winter, too, and blocks the construction of the Rogun HPP, the most important for Tajikistan.

It is believed that the Tajik authorities consider the Uzbek minority a fifth column. And there are reasons for this opinion. In 1998, a former colonel in the Ministry of Defense of Tajikistan, an ethnic Uzbek, Mahmud Hudoyderdiyev invaded from neighboring Uzbekistan in the Sughd region and decided to separate it from the territory of Tajikistan. But the rebellion was suppressed, the colonel fled to Uzbekistan, where, according to unconfirmed reports, he still resides.

It should be noted that the same colonel Khudoiberdiyev, during the Civil War, went freely to the territory of neighboring Uzbekistan through the territory of southern Tajikistan, where the vast majority of the population were ethnic Uzbeks.

An employee of the weekly "Ozodagon" Azizi Nakibzod recalls that Uzbeks in Tajikistan during the civil war of 1992-1997 were part of the Popular Front. In turn, the Popular Front, who fought on the side of the current government, was supported and armed by Tashkent. "Of course, Uzbeks enjoyed privileges".

After coming to power of the current government, as it happened with the direct participation of Tashkent during the Civil War, the Uzbeks, as allies of the Popular Front of Tajikistan, had a number of privileges.

For example, one of the Vice-Presidents, the chairman of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan were ethnic Uzbeks. Also, the parliament had three working languages - Tajik, Russian and Uzbek.

But over time, due to the policy of cooling, the situation has changed. As a result, the parliament of the previous convocation (2000-2015) had only two MPs representing national minorities - one Uzbek and one Kyrgyz.

In the current convocation, all the candidates to the Majlisi Namoyandagon necessarily take the test on knowledge of the Tajik language, because the parliamentary sessions are conducted only in the Tajik language.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that the Tajik Uzbeks who fled in Uzbekistan during the civil

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war were not welcomed with open arms in their homeland. Almost all refugees Uzbeks came back after the Civil War, because the Uzbek government adopted a tough law on citizenship, placing a ban on obtaining citizenship for many of its fellow countrymen from Tajikistan.

### **Household chauvinism**

Some representatives of ethnic Uzbeks complained that sometimes when conflicts arise in everyday life, Tajiks necessarily indicate their nationality, pronouncing the word “Uzbek” instead of “Uzbek.”

“It’s a shame, – said Uktam Ibragimov, one of the representatives of Tajik Uzbeks. – I was born and grew up in Dushanbe, I’m a native of Dushanbe. And now, those who came from villages call me “uzbak”.

However, many Tajiks say there is nothing offensive in the word “uzbak”. Pronunciation of the word “Uzbek” came from the Russian language, but in Tajik the title of that nation is pronounced that way.

Discrimination at the household level, of course, exists. But this is typical not only for Uzbeks and Tajiks. After independence, there increased regionalist sentiment, fraternity and nationalist ideas in the republic. Most likely, this is due to the impoverishment of the population and poverty. In addition, some analysts believe that this is characteristic of societies where national identity is being formed. So it is in Tajikistan. Despite the long history, Tajik society undergoes reformation.

### **Ethnic discrimination is not there?**

Not everyone agrees with the opinion that the Uzbeks in Tajikistan are oppressed. For example, Azizi Nakibzod convinced that before the revolution, the Uzbeks enjoyed the privileges, as they owned the best fertile land in the plains. And in today’s Tajikistan, Uzbeks are not deprived of economic privileges. It is very rare to see poor members of this ethnic group, probably because they are entrepreneurs by nature and usually have good entrepreneurial skills, and in Tajikistan, no one forbids them to have their own business.

The system of trade in large cities such as the capital, Dushanbe, and the regional center, Kurgan-Tube, is by 80 per cent in their hands. Even though tensions between Tashkent and Dushanbe happen, in the most profitable areas, including the airport and the railway station, there work mostly Uzbeks.

In regions of the country, there are many villages where Tajiks and Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley were relocated during the Soviet era, where they later successfully got engaged in farming, cultivated gardens and vineyards.

### **Change of nationality - a solution?**

There is a perception that some Uzbeks are trying to assimilate, changing the “nationality” in the passports. Last year, it was discussed in the article of Ergasheva and Shams, which I mentioned above. Perhaps, this trend exists somewhere, but given the high level of national consciousness of Uzbeks, it could be argued that it is only a small number of people.

There is not any accurate official statistics on the percentage of the Uzbeks who “became” Tajiks, so it’s hard to say whether the practical changing of passports has led to a decrease in the number of Uzbeks in Tajikistan.

A representative of the Uzbek intelligentsia, who asked to stay anonymous, said that people who had changed their nationality from mercantile considerations might change it a second time.

“I am an Uzbek, and my homeland is Tajikistan. I serve my country, while remaining Uzbek”, he says.

On the eve of the presidential election in Tajikistan, the Uzbek community supported the candidacy of incumbent President Emomali Rakhmonov. Previously, the community defended the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power station, which had become a serious stumbling block between the two countries. This indicates that, despite the existing problems, many ethnic Uzbeks consider themselves Tajiks.

Conclusion: it would be unfair to say that Tajikistan solved all the problems of ethnic minorities. But there is not any tragedy as the society as a whole is tolerant of other ethnic groups. In fact, all members of ethnic minorities, including the Uzbeks, are experiencing the same difficulties with employment and other issues, as well as representatives of the titular nation. They are also facing the problems of corruption, lack of good education and everything else, like the Tajiks. All the members of other ethnic groups are citizens of Tajikistan and have the same rights and problems.



Nurali Dawlat: “It would be unfair to say that all issues of ethnic minorities are resolved in Tajikistan”

### **Recommendations:**

To improve the situation of ethnic minorities in one Central Asian republic is not an easy task. Problems of all ethnic minorities are about the same.

And to address the priority issues, such as the supply of books in their native language and teachers, it is necessary to cooperate at the level of the states, whose ethnic groups are residing in the territory of Tajikistan.

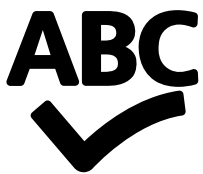
Of course, if Tashkent wants to support in this area ethnic Uzbeks in Tajikistan, it should print textbooks in the Cyrillic alphabet, and Tajikistan, in turn, must publish textbooks in Cyrillic for Tajiks in Uzbekistan. It is necessary to restore the forgotten Soviet-era practice of sending students, teachers seconded to the neighboring republics.

Tajik government should pay attention to the fact that each ethnic group should have their own representatives in parliament or in the local authorities, in order to enable them to communicate problems and aspirations of ethnic minorities to a higher level, and in a timely manner to solve these problems.

In the case of Uzbekistan, it is necessary to improve relations, as good-neighborly relations are always better than unfriendliness and hostility. Residents of the two neighboring countries have very many things in common, including family relations. The hope for the abolition of the visa regime and resumption of transport links between the two countries is still there.

**Nurali Dawlat, a journalist and political analyst**

***The views of the author do not necessarily represent those of CABAR***



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