A Central Asian début in ET89

Since ET was founded in 1985 its quarterly issues have covered many locales and kinds and uses of English, but only now has it become possible to focus on Central Asia. The cover article in our 89th issue arrived as a complete surprise – and a most welcome one at that. Not only does it deal with English in Uzbekistan; it touches on the Uzbek language itself and the changing role of Russian in Central Asia.

English had no significant role in the vast territory formerly known (in English) as the Soviet Union or USSR or (more simply, traditionally, and inaccurately) as Russia. The trans-Eurasian empire of both the czars and the commissars now survives only in the history books, and a new patchwork of autonomous names and shapes has appeared in atlases published in the years after 1989.

Many ‘emerging’, ‘underdeveloped’, or ‘post-colonial’ nation-states have become everyday names in the world’s Western-dominated news media: the former Belgian Congo is now simply ‘Congo’, the British colonies of Tanganyika and Zanzibar now make up Tanzania, and a once German then divided British and French West African territory is now ‘Cameroon’, which belongs only to itself. Many such nation-states and UN members have had associations with one or more European language(s) – and most have in recent times either retained English or added it alongside an already available ex-imperial language, such as French in Tunisia and in Vietnam, and Spanish in the Philippines and Argentina.

However, as long as the Soviet Union existed, the names and natures of territories within its bounds remained less well known elsewhere, and, if known, primarily via Moscow. Perhaps the best known beyond this ‘Second World’, apart from Russia itself, have been Armenia and Georgia.

It is therefore a matter of particular interest (and satisfaction), in the present typically varied issue, to highlight the land of the Uzbeks, from which Dilbarhon Hasanova has emailed a brisk account of rising local interest in English. Her welcome contribution whets the appetite for more on the role(s) of this and other languages, not only among the ‘-stans’ but elsewhere across the Eurasian north, from Oslo to Vladivostok. 

Tom McArthur

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