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**IDENTIFICATION PRACTICES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF
ETHNIC GROUPS OF KAZAKHSTAN***

Abstract: The main objective of this article is to study the relationship of perception by ethnic minorities of the evolution of the state policy of the formation of civic identity in the direction of the leading role of the language and culture of Kazakhs with their intercultural practices of integration into Kazakhstani society. Identification practices of integration of ethnic minorities go through gradual changes, because the discourse of ethnodemographic nationalization of the state shifts its focus, demonstrating the important role of Kazakhs in the nation-building process, providing a new framework for building the life practices of ethnic minorities. The sociological data presented in the article show that for the vast majority of Russians and representatives of other ethnic groups, «the creation of a single community without discrimination on ethnic grounds» is the most preferred nation-building policy. Although Kazakhstani ethnic groups are more comfortable with the primacy of the discourse of a «Kazakhstani nation», they are increasingly forced to give preference to the necessity to recognize a hybrid nation-building policy based on the integrating role of the state language and Kazakh culture with the preservation of ethnocultural characteristics. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict significantly contributed to the acceleration of this process.

Keywords: *nation-building, ethnic minorities, identity, Kazakh-speaking, Russian-speaking.*

**L'INTEGRAZIONE SOCIALE DEI GRUPPI ETNICI IN KAZAKISTAN E LE LORO PRATICHE DI
IDENTIFICAZIONE**

Abstract: L'obiettivo principale di questo articolo è di studiare la relazione tra la percezione da parte delle minoranze etniche dell'evolversi della politica statale di formazione di un'identità civica orientata verso un ruolo guida della lingua e cultura kazake e le loro pratiche interculturali di integrazione nella società kazaka. Le pratiche di identificazione dell'integrazione delle minoranze etniche attraversano cambiamenti graduali, perché il discorso della nazionalizzazione etnodemografica dello Stato modifica il centro della propria attenzione, dimostrando il ruolo importante dei kazaki nel processo di costruzione della nazione e fornendo un nuovo contesto per la costruzione delle pratiche quotidiane delle minoranze etniche. I dati sociologici presentati nell'articolo mostrano che per la vasta maggioranza dei russi e dei membri di altri gruppi etnici la politica di costruzione della nazione preferita è «la creazione di una singola comunità senza discriminazioni basate sull'etnia». Anche se i gruppi etnici del Kazakistan sono maggiormente a proprio agio con il prevalere del discorso di una «nazione di tutti gli abitanti del Kazakistan», sono sempre più costretti a dare preferenza alla necessità di riconoscere una politica di costruzione nazionale ibrida, basata sul ruolo integrante della lingua di stato e della cultura kazaka associata alla conservazione delle caratteristiche etnoculturali. Il conflitto russo-ucraino ha contribuito significativamente ad accelerare questo processo.

Parole chiave: *nation-building, minoranze etniche, identità, kazakofoni, russofoni.*

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Introduction

Under the leadership of its former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan managed to build successful partnerships with the interested global power centres for 30 years. Flexible hybrid multi-vector foreign policy combined with the country's natural resources enabled Kazakhstan to maintain its strategic independence from any of its neighbours' influence. The leadership of Kazakhstan also adopted a similar multi-dimensional model for its domestic national policy around the principle of *unity in diversity*. «Given the role of Kazakh people as the state-forming nation, we need to continue to strengthen interethnic harmony and interfaith understanding. Our position: is “National unity is in its diversity”». (Prezident Respubliki Kazakhstan 2019). The Kazakhstani nation-building model made it possible both to preserve and strengthen the ethnocultural identity of Kazakhs by balancing inter-clan and inter-tribe discursive practices and, at the same time, maintain the inter-ethnic and inter-group balance of the ethnic structure of society and ensure internal ethnopolitical stability:

Integrated multidimensional model, combining positive components of the principles of formation of an ethnocultural and civic nation and multicultural attitudes, meets the challenges of nation-building and formation of national identity in modern Kazakhstan to the fullest extent. (Dunaev - Kurganskaya *et al.* 2019: 111)

Foreign experts studying Kazakhstan note that the hybrid model of Kazakhstani identity is formed in the space of three nation-building layers – a regional «Eurasian» cultural identity combined with a civic «Kazakhstani identity», while promoting ethnic «Kazakh identity»:

Kazakhstan defines itself simultaneously as Kazakh, i.e. the political entity of the Kazakh nation and its historical accomplishment, as Kazakhstani, i.e. as a multiethnic nation at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent, and as a transnational country integrated into world trends. (Laruelle 2014: 1)

Of these three paradigms, the «Kazakhstani» identity receives most support from ethnic minorities and the international community. This allows Kazakhstan to meet global standards in group protection and self-determination, take a reasonable geopolitical position, and implement an appropriate domestic ethnopolitical strategy (Diener 2016). Indeed, a historically short period of independent development, the complicated demographic, multi-level ethnocultural structure of the population of Kazakhstan, and a landlocked geopolitical location between Russia and China encourage Kazakhstani leadership to remain sensitive to multiple layers of identity construction. Furthermore, integration practices of ethnic groups of Kazakhstan take place in the changing ethnodemographic and ethnocultural environment. The government has to manoeuvre carefully and flexibly, changing the accents on ethnocultural, general civic, and regional layers of the nation-building process, strengthening state sovereignty and anticipating both internal and external challenges. Over the past 30 years Kazakhstan has managed to keep a

fragile balance of interests of international public opinion (global financial and human rights organizations and the governments of the US and Europe behind them), powerful neighbours (first of all, Russia and China), and its own titular and many ethnic groups.

Methodological strategies for the study of ethnic minorities and national identity of Kazakhstan

The Kazakhstani state seeks to promote the national as civic identity around the culture and language of the titular ethnic group – Kazakhs. «Kazakh people and the state language act as a unifying core of developing Kazakhstani civic community» (Prezident Respubliki Kazakhstan 2012). The complexity of the task of forming the national identity arises from a contradictory interaction of the vectors of ethnocultural and civic identities of the country's multi-ethnic population, as well as from the regional discourses on identities, which oftentimes deepen the fragmentation of state community. The ethnic make-up of Kazakhstan is diverse and has changed in the 30 years since independence (See Table 1, also Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020). At independence, Kazakhs were not the majority ethnic groups in the country, but over the last 30 years due to emigration, immigration, and differential birth rates the situation has changed. Today Kazakhs account for just over two-thirds of the population, with Russians as the main other ethnic group, yet there is a wide range of other ethnicities too. The proportion of Russians has declined, as have some other ethnic groups. This, therefore, forms the basis upon which state policy has been developed and attitudes within different ethnic groups have evolved.

Table 1. *Percentage of different ethnic groups in Kazakhstan in 1989 and 2019*

Ethnic Group	1989	2019
Kazakh	39.7	68.5
Russian	37.4	18.9
Uzbek	2.0	3.3
Uyghur	1.1	1.5
Ukrainian	5.4	1.4
Tatar	2.0	1.1
German	5.8	1.0
Korean	0.6	0.6
Belarusian	1.1	0.3

Source: Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

At the current stage of development, the state and its leader, K.-J. Tokayev, see the mission of the state as the spiritual modernization of society and the reconciliation between the various ethno-national preferences (Prezident Respubliki Kazakhstan 2019). These public preferences reflect on cultural and language *bipolarity* of the Russified ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and the traditional Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs, which emerged historically (Kolstø 1999: 45) and has remained quite strong until today. The vast majority of urban Russian-speaking Kazakhs and bilingual Kazakhs position themselves between the two conditional poles¹ in an intermediary position in the sociolinguistic identity group (Shaikemelev 2020: 130).

The need to take into account the change of the linguistic and cultural boundaries during the post-Soviet period when considering groups called “Russian-speaking population” is central. It was emphasized by D. Laitin, the pioneer of research into the processes of the ethnocultural and language identification in four USSR successor states – Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan (Laitin 1998). He noted that

it would be a terrible error to examine the strategies of the new nationalizing states or the individuals within them without careful attention to the changing cultural frame within which state actors and ordinary people act. (Laitin 1999: 292)

Within the new social-political and cultural framework of nation-building – consolidation of society around the core Kazakh culture and the Kazakh language “at the top” – the heterogeneous ethnic minorities have experienced considerable diversification of identities “at the bottom” as a result of personal loyalty or rejection of the state-sponsored ethno-political preferences which challenged and questioned the assumed overlap between the political and social-cultural groups boundaries. From our perspective, the exploration of processes of differentiation within ethnic minority groups should take account of adaptation (learning of the state language and readiness to accept Kazakh in everyday and discursive practices) or rejection (immigration, isolation, ignoring) by individuals of the state’s proposed societal integration in the Kazakh language and around Kazakh culture. In this regard, the main aim of the article is to study the relationship between the perception in Kazakhstani ethnic groups of changes in state policy that aimed at strengthening the integrative role of the Kazakh language and culture in the formation of a civic nation. How these responses to the state initiated processes have interacted with the identification practices of the ethnic minorities themselves is one the central findings of the paper. It is these aspects of adaptation / rejection and evolution of new intercultural practices that makes up the contribution of this article to the formation of a research paradigm of regional studies.

Now, the representatives of Kazakhstani ethnic groups face uncertainty in determining their own life strategies. Previously, this was an unambiguous and

¹ Nurov K., «Shala-kazakhi - most mezhdru vsemi natsional’nostiami Kazakhstana», *Zakon.kz*, 22-II-2015, <<https://www.zakon.kz/4691822-kanat-nurov-shala-kazakhi-mostFebruary22-mezhdru.html>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

exceptionless focus on the Soviet Russian culture, in the spirit of the established past practice of the dominance of Russians and the Russian language. In modern times, the new practices of the state discourse, first of all, require knowledge of the Kazakh state language. However, it is important to note that Kazakhstani authorities with the new president, K.-J. Tokayev, who pursues the policy of continuity of the political course, never attempted to force the introduction of the state language².

The fact of the authorities being tolerant of Russian-speaking citizens who do not speak the Kazakh language is confirmed by Western researchers.

Nationalizing discourses, policies and practices vis-a`-vis Russian-speaking minorities have been differentialist, not assimilationist. They have not sought to turn Russians into Kazakhs nor have they made serious efforts to get Russians to learn the Kazakh language. (Brubaker 2011: 1805)

The rhetoric of some heads of Kazakhstani Russian ethnocultural associations, who believe that the formation of a single political nation is based on the principle of soft assimilation, is poorly compatible with the local practices of primordial understanding of ethnicity and the traditional tolerance of Kazakhs (Isabayeva 2019). Ethnic entrepreneurs often propagate this understanding of the specifics of inter-ethnic interaction, on the one hand, not only due to the Soviet legacy remaining in their consciousness and marked in their passports but also partly due to the “nationalist political bias” of many leaders of ethnocultural associations. «It is difficult for them to understand the feeling of attachment of a part of the Russian population to Kazakhstan, and, hence, its indifference to “ethnic” and “collective” in the context when identity becomes an increasingly private matter» (Laruelle - Peyrouse 2007: 280). On the other hand, there is a connection with the cultural and historic, everyday practice of interaction with ethnic Kazakhs, which is largely ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism is explained by the fear of losing the most important elements of ethnonational identity – primarily the language. Only 36.1% of Kazakh respondents approve inter-ethnic marriages in contrast to 62.2% of Russian respondents and 51.0% of representatives of various other ethnic groups³. Historically, Kazakhs have overemphasized the primacy of blood ties, which do not allow them to integrate outsiders into the ethno-social familial networks, resulting in the genealogical division of society at large and marking of ethnic boundaries. The primordial worldview is an insurmountable obstacle to the integration of “outsiders” into Kazakh ethnic societal segment. Accordingly, “others,” who are not part of the Kazakh ethnic group are not believed to be able to assimilate and

² Pashkova S., «Nikto v Kazahstane ne dolzhen ushchemliat'sia po iazykovomu printsipu – Nazarbaev», *Astana Vlast*, 17-X-2013, <https://vlast.kz/politika/nikto_v_kazahstane_ne_dolzhen_usshehljatsja_po_jazykovomu_principu_nazarbaev-3206.html> (last visit 15-X-2022).

³ Ivanov R., «Smeshannye braki: “svezhaia krov” ili slom genofonda?», *365info*, 12-XI-2019, <https://365info.kz/2019/11/smeshannye-braki-svezhaya-krov-ili-slom-genofonda?utm_campaign=20541821&utm_medium=banner&utm_content=48705545&utm_source=news.mail.ru> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

become “insiders” – recognized and integrated into the symbolic ethnosocial Kazakh structure, because a large part of Kazakhs themselves do not want this. Accordingly, the hypothesis of our study is that distinct cultural and ethnic boundaries encourages non-majority ethnic groups to identify with the civic project of the Kazakhstani nation, rather than support its ethnopolitical version.

In order to test our hypothesis, we used the results of field sociological studies, which included a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the main parameters of social self-identification in various social groups of Kazakhstani society. The study was commissioned by the Institute for Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2018-2020. Annual sociological research was carried out within the framework of the project «Formation of Kazakhstani identity in the context of the tasks of modernization public consciousness» (Table 2).

We used a survey of the population based on a national representative sample, i.e. quantitative method of data collection. In addition we conducted focus group discussions with populations of settlements and cities, as well as in-depth interviews with representatives of the expert community. The questionnaires included questions aimed at establishing the value foundations of various models of group and individual identification, the perception of models of nation-building, various cultural and religious practices, and the nature of interethnic interaction in the country. Within the framework of the study, groups were composed according to socio-demographic and ethnocultural characteristics in order to maximally reflect differences in worldview, cultural stereotypes, value and behavioural attitudes. Representation in the sample of the structure of the general population was ensured by a multi-stage selection of respondents - stratified at the stage of selecting survey points, interval at the stage of selecting households, simple random at the stage of selecting a respondent in a household.

Table 2. *Methodology of sociological research in the project «Formation of Kazakhstani identity in the context of the tasks of modernization public consciousness» (2018-2020).*

№	Year and month of conduct	Agency conducting the study	Regions and cities of republican significance	Number of interviewed respondents	Distribution by nationality
1.	July 2018	“Public Opinion” Research Institute	14 regions, Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent	3,500 respondents	Kazakhs (67,1%), Russians (26,2%), other ethnic groups (6.7%).
2.	July 2019	Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia	14 regions, Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent	1,800 respondents	Kazakhs (68.5%), Russians (18.9%), other ethnic groups (12.6%).
3.	May-June 2020	Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia”	14 regions, and Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent	1,800 respondents	Kazakhs (66.4%), Russians (21.2%), other ethnic groups (12.4%).

When studying the integration practices of Kazakhstani ethnic groups, it is necessary to note two characteristics of research methodologies. While in the Western social-political and scholarly discourse some groups are designated «national (ethnic) minorities», Kazakhstani ethnopolitical discourse (including studies and media reports) refers to these as «ethnicities» or «ethnic groups». In Kazakhstani studies and sociological surveys, ethnic groups, except for Russians as the second-largest ethnic group in the country, are, as a rule, positioned in questionnaires and articles in the non-differentiated form as «other nationalities, ethnicities». The state discourse prefers not to distinguish between Kazakh- and Russian-speaking populations: «...the category of Russian-speaking (russoyazychnie) citizens is avoided by the authorities» (Blackburn 2019: 218). On the one hand, this is the result of the tradition inherited from Soviet-era nationalities policy. On the other hand, the definition of «others» objectively reflects ethnodemographic factors, such as the small sizes of the vast majority of Kazakhstan’s ethnic groups, other than Russians. Insufficient differentiation of «other ethnic groups» makes it impossible to study the characteristics of

everyday social connections, and the degree of integration of a particular ethnic group into the space of national identity.

It is necessary to note the main feature of our use of specific sociological research data that determines both the current situation and the prospects for studying the position of small ethnic groups: it is impossible to analyse the identification practices of small ethnic groups of Kazakhstan in isolation from the practices of the country's two main ethnic groups – Kazakhs and Russians. Additionally, the presence of common values, interests, and political and cultural attitudes in ethnic groups of «others» with Kazakhs and Russians (common, matching, or opposing) is rather unquestioned and is not given much consideration in Kazakhstani scholarly and ethnopolitical discourse for various reasons. With few exceptions (Dunaev - Bizhanov *et al.* 2019), the processes of internal differentiation of ethnic groups, boundaries, and their ethnolinguistic practices, which clearly do not coincide with the boundaries dividing the ethnic groups, remain largely unexplored. Reference can be made only to a few Western studies on certain ethnic minorities of Kazakhstan – Uzbeks, Koreans, and Germans (Diener 2006; Oka 2007).

The position of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in Kazakhstan, in all their many manifestations, has largely been better studied in Western literature than the scientific profile of small ethnic groups and, perhaps, even the modern portrait of the titular group. Let us recall the now classic work of D. Laitin *Identity in Formation: The Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Laitin 1998) and subsequent numerous studies of Russians and Russian-speaking populations in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries with substantial Russian-speaking populations (Barrington *et al.* 2003; Laruelle - Peyrouse 2007; Brubaker 2011; Kosmarskaya 2014; Cheskin - Kachuyevski 2019), etc.

Kazakhstani researchers of older generations are following the official discourse closer and are more prone to collapse methodologically the state-sponsored discourse encouraging attention to all ethnic groups and not to the largest or titular one in their research (Alekseenko 2001; Tojbayeva 2016; Kim 2018). While media articles on certain elements of ethnic cultures abound, there are only a few systemic research papers dedicated to certain ethnic groups – Uighurs (Kamalov 2016), Koreans, (Kim 2013) and Dungans (Kamalov - Imyarova, 2016) autochthonous to Kazakhstan.

Interpretations of the processes of integration / differentiation of ethnic minorities in different discourses

According to many experts, ethnic entrepreneurs and the majority of Western specialists who study Kazakhstan and the Central Asia region, the issue of recognizing Kazakhstan's ethnic groups as ethnic minorities is one of the key issues. The Head of the Republican Slavic Organization “*Lad*” believes that

domestic law avoids using the international term «national minority». Instead, it uses the terms «ethnic groups of Kazakhstan», «people of Kazakhstan» and «Kazakh people», which officially gives the right to speak about the absence of any minorities. (Isabayeva 2019)

In his interview, President K. Tokayev noted: «In fact, Kazakhstanis, regardless of their ethnic origin, consider themselves as one people, a single nation. There is no term “national minority” in Kazakhstan»⁴. Thus, Kazakhstani authorities firmly comply with the continuity of the political commitment to the unity of a multi-ethnic Kazakhstani society stipulated in the «Kazakhstan-2050» Strategy (Prezident Respubliki Kazakhstan 2012), thus setting the scientific analytical discourse without the «diasporization» of society.

Many Western researchers insist that there is no diasporization in the Kazakhstani official discourse in the form of recognized boundaries of minorities (diasporas):

Avoidance of the term minority is indicative of a deeply embedded psychological and institutional resistance to the emergence of an open, Western-style «liberal» polity. The ruling authorities see the introduction of Western-style institutions of ethnic representation as conferring legitimacy upon all minorities' claims and thus threatening to the prevalent «stability». (Dave 2007: 131)

The reluctance of Kazakhstani authorities to use the concept of «diaspora», «minority», in practice dividing «one people» into ethnic groups, stimulates a detailed analysis of the concepts of «nationalizing state», «Russianness», «Kazakhness», «Russification», and «Kazakhization», whilst at the same time constraining even the discursive differentiation of groups in question. However, in reality, minorities' self-perception and the boundaries of their groups map neither upon projections of their «historical homeland», nor reflect the ideas about transnational «Russianness» (Barrington *et al.* 2003).

Western researchers believe that the reluctance of the nationalizing states to perceive ethnic groups as ethnic minorities leads to the uncertainty of their status, which means automatic discrimination of the rights of «disempowered minorities» (Dave 2007: 118-139). Do Russians consider themselves a national minority in the country of their birth and residence? In the responses to the question, «Do you consider yourself a national minority?» in Belarus and Ukraine, very small percentages of the respondents claimed to be part of a national minority (9.2 percent and 18.8 percent, respectively). In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, most of the ethnic Russian respondents felt this way (59.3 percent and 67.0 percent, respectively) (Barrington *et al.* 2003: 298). More likely, then, the term «national minority» does not mean to ethnic Russians what it means to some scholars. While the data do show a greater tendency for Russians in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to dis-identify from Russia, most Russians living in these Central Asian states seem to consider these countries as their homelands (Barrington 2003: 299).

⁴ «Prezident Kazakhstana Kasym-Zhomart Tokaev: V Kazakhstane net poniatia “natsional’noe men’shinstvo”», *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 3-VI-2020, <<https://www.kp.kz/daily/27137/4228949/>> (last visit 30-XII-2022).

Thus, we see the major differences in self-identification in representatives of ethnic groups. Other foreign scientists also think that Russians largely do not recognize themselves as an ethnic minority. «What is found is that Russian-speaking minorities largely accept their status beneath the Kazakh “elder brother” and do not wish to identify as a “national minority”» (Blackburn 2019: 217). But this reluctance to recognize themselves as a minority cannot be extended to all ethnic groups. «While Russians remain psychologically resistant to acceding to their status as a minority, groups such as Germans, Koreans and Uighurs have readily sought an institutionalization of their de facto minority status» (Dave 2007: 133). As we see, in the integration process, the identification practices of ethnic minorities are influenced by various factors, and this is not only a matter of external differentiation factors related to “humanitarian” influence of the historical homeland.

Of importance is a reliable analysis of the context of titularisation of the Kazakh national state, in which experts input and interpret empirical data and reach scientific theoretical conclusions. Accordingly, over 30 years the state, in turn, formed its own hybrid nation-building discourse, insisting on the equality of the civic and ethnocultural layers of the Kazakhstani national model, which shows practical results and rejects scientific stigmatization and accusations of the ethnocentric vector of political development. In the context of revealed major differences in the methodological approaches to determining the status of ethnic groups, the opinion of ethnic groups on the principles of their identification “at the bottom” – integration / disintegration within the framework of ethnic policy proposed by the state is of the greatest interest.

Opinions “from the ground up”

How do ordinary Kazakhstani respondents of all ethnic groups assess the nation-building and ethnocentric political development; and which model is most preferable for them? Let us turn to the sociological data of a 2018 survey. Representatives of all ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan agreed that, concerning interethnic relations, *a single community is formed in the country without any privileges and discrimination on ethnic grounds*, while enabling the preservation of their ethnocultural characteristics (Kazakhs – 43.3%, Russians – 50.4%, other ethnic groups – 38.9%) (Table 3). Thus, the opinions of almost half of the respondents of all, including titular ethnic groups, are in line with the main provisions of the National Unity Programme (NUP), that is: «Different origin – Equality of opportunities from the ethnic perspective» (Doktrina 2010).

About a quarter of the surveyed respondents of all three categories (Kazakhs – 24.5%, Russians – 23.6%, and other ethnic groups – 24.4%) believed that it is expected that all ethnic groups are united in a single civic nation with a common Kazakhstani culture (Table 3). Their opinions are in line with the other main provisions of the NUP:

the foundation of social harmony and stability has become the initial choice in favor of the formation of civic but not ethnic communities; active opposition to any influence that disintegrates us and corrodes our unity.

Finally, the opinions of the third group of respondents (Kazakhs – 12.2%, Russians – 6.8%, and other ethnic groups – 9.8%) on establishing a multi-ethnic state taking into account the culture, language, and mentality of Kazakhs (Table 3) are also in line with the other main provisions of the NUP:

further consolidation of all citizens of the Republic around Kazakh people aimed to enhance the independence of the state, priority for development and promotion of the state language as the most important factor of strengthening the national unity. (Doktrina 2010)

Thus, the different elements of the NUP along with the other strategic documents – «Kazakhstan 2050» Strategy, Law on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, etc., actually reflects the opinion of the vast majority of the population of the country, regardless of their ethnic origin.

In addition, it should be noted that about a quarter of respondents – representatives of other ethnic groups – had difficulty in answering this question (24.8%). This indicates a certain ambivalence and uncertainty of the respondents in relation to national ethnic policy (Table 3).

Table 3. *What policy, in your opinion, is pursued in Kazakhstan in the field of interethnic relations? The results are given as percentages of respondents.*

Possible answers	Kazakhs	Russians	Other ethnic groups
The state is established as a common home for all ethnic groups without any privileges or discrimination on ethnic grounds, enabling each ethnic group to preserve its ethnocultural characteristics	43.3	50.4	38.9
It is expected to unite all ethnic groups into a single civic nation with a single common Kazakhstani culture	24.5	23.6	24.4
A polyethnic state is established taking into account the characteristics of the culture, customs, traditions, and mentality of the state-forming Kazakh nation	12.2	6.8	9.8
A mononational Kazakh state is established with subsequent cultural assimilation of the representatives of other ethnic groups	6.5	8.8	2.1
Not sure	13.6	10.3	24.8

Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Scientific Research Institute "Public Opinion"

One of the objectives of the questionnaire survey was to clarify the political preferences and expectations of ethnic groups to give an idea of their identification practices regarding their desired nation-building model. It should be noted that for the great majority of Russians and representatives of other ethnic groups *establishing a single community without discrimination on ethnic grounds* is the most preferable nation-building strategy (63.8% and 57.3%, accordingly). About a quarter of Russians and representatives of other ethnic groups also expressed that they viewed the state-building strategy as based on the idea of establishing a (mono-)ethnic state (24.4% and 23.5%, respectively).

In addition, worthy of note is the fact that more than one third of the respondents and representatives of other ethnic groups found it difficult to determine the level of preference of the state policy based on establishing a multi-ethnic state taking into account the cultural characteristics of Kazakhs (38.9%) and (mono-) ethnic state (39.3%) (Table 4).

Table 4. *Which nation-building policy, in your opinion, is the most preferable, and meets the fundamental interests of the people of Kazakhstan? The results are given as percentages of respondents.*

Possible answers	Kazakhs	Russians	Other ethnic groups
Establishing the state as a common home for all ethnic groups without any privileges and discrimination on ethnic grounds, enabling each ethnic group to preserve its ethnocultural characteristics			
Most preferable	44.2	63.8	57.3
Acceptable	43.4	28.9	33.8
Unacceptable	3.3	1.6	4.3
Not sure	9.1	5.7	4.7
Uniting all ethnic groups into a single nation with a single common Kazakhstani culture			
Most preferable	21.0	15.9	19.2
Acceptable	48.5	48.3	43.6
Unacceptable	16.7	19.0	15.0
Not sure	13.8	16.9	22.2
Establishing a polyethnic and multiethnic state taking into account the characteristics of the culture, customs, traditions, and mentality of Kazakhs			
Most preferable	21.8	13.5	16.2
Acceptable	40.9	44.7	26.5
Unacceptable	16.0	14.5	18.4
Not sure	21.3	27.3	38.9
Establishing a mononational Kazakh state with subsequent cultural assimilation of representatives of other ethnic groups			
Most preferable	17.6	21.8	5.1
Acceptable	39.9	26.1	32.1
Unacceptable	17.5	24.4	23.5
Not sure	25.0	27.7	39.3

Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Scientific Research Institute "Public Opinion"

It follows from the answers given in Table 4 that the respondents were most committed to the first nation-building model – building of a civic nation on the foundation of the balanced interests of all ethnic groups. At the same time, an ethnonational nation-building vector is preserved, which, in the opinion of the public, does not contradict the civic ideas at all – consolidation around the core of the nation consisting of Kazakhs.

Yet, there are serious methodological discrepancies in the interpretation of the status of ethnic minorities in the official declarations of Kazakhstani authorities; definitions of minorities provided mostly by Western scholars; and preferred self-identification of ordinary citizens. This apparent boundary forces us to accept the hypothesis of a clear distinction between the understanding of own status by minority citizens, and the way in which it is explained by scholars. To this may be added the difference in views on the status of ethnic minorities of ethnic entrepreneurs and the official authoritative discourse. The greatest uncertainty in identification practices is observed among other ethnic groups, especially in relation to the integrating role of the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture.

Unifying role of the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture

According to the 2018 survey, the great majority of respondents share the opinion that the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture help to unite and bond all Kazakhstani ethnic groups - 75% of combined answers «completely agree» or «partially agree» Respondents who partially disagreed with the provision of the «Kazakhstan-2050» Strategy made up only 8.8%, and those who completely disagreed accounted for 6.5%. By ethnic group, there was a significant percentage of those who disagreed with this provision among the Russian ethnic group – 22.7% with a combination of «partially disagree» and «completely disagree» (Table 5).

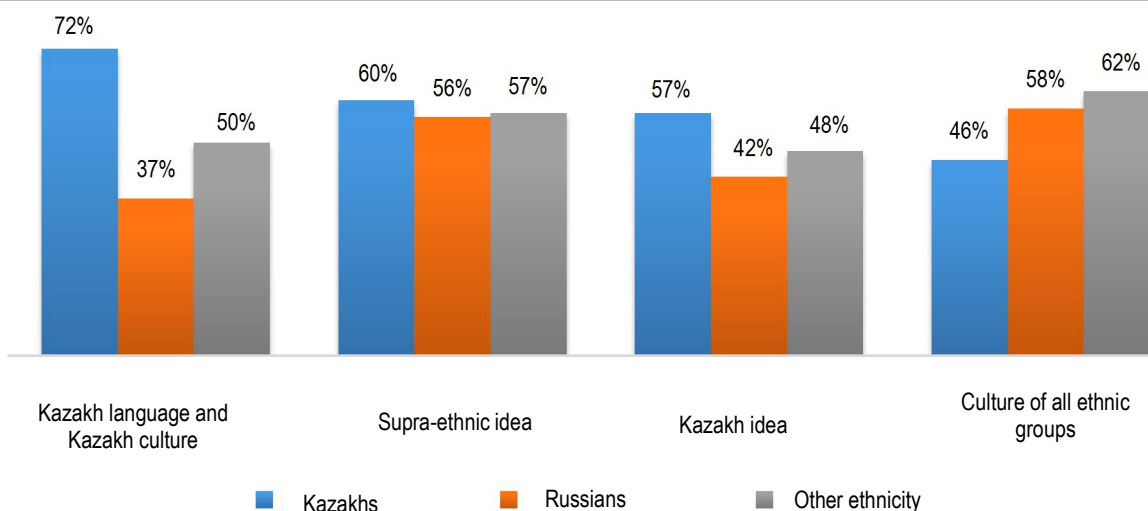
Table 5. *Do you agree with the provision of the «Kazakhstan 2050» Strategy that the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture help to unite and bond all Kazakhstani ethnic groups? The results are given as percentages of respondents.*

Options	Kazakhs	Russians	Other ethnic groups
Strongly agree	45.2	42.6	20.1
Partially agree	33.3	27.8	39.3
Partially disagree	8.4	8.9	12.8
Strongly disagree	3.8	13.8	4.7
Not sure	9.4	6.9	23.1

Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Scientific Research Institute "Public Opinion"

Let us compare these data with the data of a sociological survey conducted in 2019. On average, almost two-thirds of those surveyed (mainly Kazakhs - 72% and representatives of other ethnic groups – 50%) believed that integration of various ethnic groups in Kazakhstan should *mandatorily* be based on the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture. Two opposing models of society consolidation – supra-ethnic and Kazakh – received approximately the same level of support. Both were almost equally supported by Kazakhs. Among Russians and representatives of other ethnic groups, there were noticeably more supporters of supra-ethnic models. However, the weight of supporters of the Kazakh model was also quite significant both among Russians and other ethnic groups (see Figure 1).

Petcentage of support for different cultural, ethnic, and supra-ethnic society consolidation models by ethnic group (answer option “certainly”)



Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia.”

In a 2020 sociological survey, the question, «Do you agree that the Kazakh language unites the peoples of Kazakhstan into a single nation?» was answered as follows (Table 6).

Table 6. *Do you agree that the Kazakh language unites the peoples of Kazakhstan into a single nation? The results are given as percentages of respondents.*

	Kazakhs	Russians	Other ethnic groups
Strongly agree	45.0%	29.1%	39.9%
Rather agree	25.8%	18.8%	20.2%
Both agree and disagree	12.6%	27.0%	19.7%
Rather disagree	11.0%	13.4%	13.0%
Absolutely disagree	4.0%	9.2%	5.8%
Not sure	1.6%	2.6%	1.3%

Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia.”

In comparison with the 2018 survey (Table 5), we see that the opinion of Kazakhs remained within the same limits – 45% completely agree. The opinion of Russians has changed towards an increase in hesitancy and disagreement. Data on other ethnic groups show that those who completely agreed – 39.9% in 2020 and 20.1% in 2018 – switched places with those who partially agreed – 20.2% in 2020 and 39.3% in 2018. Thus, among Russian respondents, there were more who doubted the correctness of the state’s course towards integration around the language and culture of the titular ethnic group, while among other ethnic groups, by contrast, the number of those fully supporting the official course of ethnic policy increased. It is common knowledge that ethnic Russians are the least willing to learn the state language. But an increasing number of citizens, particularly from among ethnic minorities, recognize the need for common ground for the consolidation of the nation in the form of a common Kazakhstani culture and the need to know the state language.

Priorities of ethnic and civic identities among Kazakhstani citizens

Concerning the priorities of general civic or ethnic identity, members of focus groups conducted in 2019 by order of the Institute for Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies, largely gave priority to civic self-identification – 44%. Priority to the ethnic form of identification was more important for 18% of the respondents. A large portion (38%) refused to oppose these two forms of identity, considering them equally important and to be used as the context may require: *we are all Kazakhs abroad and Kazakhstanis at home...* Quite illustrative were the opinions expressed during the focus group interviews:

Honestly speaking, the word “nation” does not cause me to feel patriotism. For me it is the same as nationality.
(Ust-Kamenogorsk, Korean, 52 years old)

Perhaps, I am not right, but when the President speaks to us, he says that we are the nation, not dividing us into different ethnicities. (Pavlodar, Russian, 25 years old)

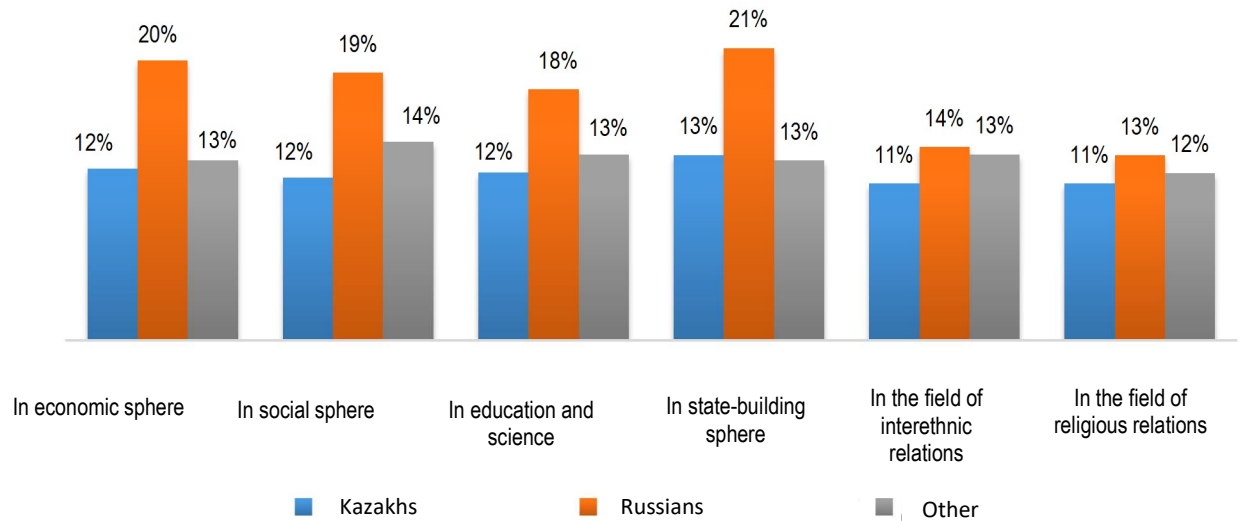
Kazakhstani society is not ready yet for everyone to be recorded as “Kazakhstani” in the line “nationality” in passports. We see and accept the differences of all ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan, but we identify ourselves primarily by ethnicity. (Shymkent, Kazakh, 43 years old)

(based on focus group interviews of the Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia”)

Therefore, the difference between two types of identity – civic and ethnic for the internal Kazakhstani context - is mainly a scientific and theoretical problem. In the mass consciousness, the difference between Kazakh and Kazakhstani identity, ethnic group and nationality emphasized by certain politicians, journalists, and scientists, if present, is in the form of a consistent difference of accents within the unity. This difference does not become a problem for the majority of ordinary people regardless of their ethnic background and does not entail any inconveniences and difficulties with self-identification. For representatives of Kazakhstani ethnic groups, the most acceptable and organic formula for self-identification is the definition - *I am Kazakhstani* (Kazakhstani Uighur, Kazakhstani Russian, Kazakhstani German, etc.).

The overall trend according to sociological data for three years (2018-2020) is that, for most questions asked, the opinions of Kazakhs and other ethnic groups are, as a rule, quite close, in contrast to the opinions of ethnic Russians, which on a number of questions differ from the opinion of the other two target groups of respondents. Most often, Russians report the inconsistency of the official political course with the interests of their ethnic group (approximately one respondent in five) (see Figure 2). From their perspective, the policy of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan does not meet the interests of the Russian population in education and science (by 1.5 and 1.4 times higher than among Kazakhs and other ethnic groups, respectively) in state-building (by 1.6 times higher than among Kazakhs and other ethnic groups), and in social (by 1.6 and 1.4. times higher) and economic spheres (by 1.7 and 1.5 times higher, respectively). Indicators among Kazakhs and representatives of other ethnic groups correlate within comparable limits. To a lesser degree, Kazakhs, Russians, and members of other ethnic groups believe that the state policy does meet the interests of their ethnic group in the field of interethnic and religious relations.

Figure 2. *Percentage of respondents who believe that the policy of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan is more likely, or completely fails, to meet the interests of their ethnic group, by nationality*



Source: own design based on a questionnaire survey of the Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center “BISAM – Central Asia.”

The data of the 2018-2020 surveys show a slight increase in uncertainty or rejection by Russians of policies aimed at consolidation of the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture. By contrast, other ethnic groups show a stable growth of those who agree with the state’s course towards integration based on the Kazakh language and culture. At the same time, their identification practices clearly signal to the state that it is crucial for them in this process that ethnocultural differences are preserved, equal opportunities are provided, and the principles of equal legal liability of all citizens are observed.

Categorization of the field of interethnic interaction in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has divided the public opinion of Kazakhstanis into those who are “for” the official position of the Russian Federation and those who are “against” it and support Ukraine and Ukrainians. The official point of view of the Kazakh government on this conflict is reflected in statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs represented by Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi. They first of all emphasize that Kazakhstan recognizes the sovereignty of Ukraine and does not recognize the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR). It is also noted that Kazakhstan will not join the EU and US sanctions against Russia, but on the other hand it is not going to allow the use of its territory to circumvent these sanctions⁵. In the resonant statements of President Tokayev, especially those made in the presence of Putin himself at the Economic Forum in

⁵ Esdyulet T., «Kazakstannyn Ukraina, Resei teketiresinde ustanymy kandai?», *Qazaqstan daniri*, 8-IV-2022, <<https://qazdauiri.kz/news/qazaqstannyn-ukraina-resei-teketiresinde-ustanymy-qandai>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

St. Petersburg, it was clear that Kazakhstan's non-recognition of quasi-state entities - DPR and LPR, is well considered⁶. However, the President of Kazakhstan repeatedly emphasized in his statements that Russia has been and remains the main strategic partner of Kazakhstan, with which we are connected by centuries-old political, economic, cultural ties and the longest land border in the world⁷. In general, the official position of Kazakhstan can be characterized as traditional – multi-vector, neutral and extremely cautious. Kazakhstan's position reflects national interests and tries to unconditionally align itself with the UN agenda and avoid discontent among global centres of influence that have their own interests in the Central Asian region. First of all, these are the interests of Russia, and then the interests of China, and of Western countries led by the United States. Thus, the Kazakhstani government has taken a neutral position, recognizing the sovereignty of Ukraine, while at the same time emphasizing its close partnership and treaty relations with Russia.

An extremely sensitive and emotional issue of a gross violation of the sovereignty of a neighbouring country and the seizure of its territory leaves no one in Kazakhstan neutral or indifferent. In the eyes of the Kazakh public, the issue of attitude towards the Russian invasion is given a deep emotional colour by the ongoing attacks, threats and claims of public figures in Russia including by journalists and political scientists on the northern territories of Kazakhstan, which began in early 1990s with statements by A. Solzhenitsyn, E. Limonov and V. Zhirinovskiy. As is known, the lands of northern Kazakhstan bordering Russia are populated by many ethnic Russians and are to this day an object of discursive manipulation by Russian politicians who dream of keeping their neighbours, rich in land and natural resources, in de facto subordination⁸.

Confirmation that there is a place for separatist sentiments in the north of Kazakhstan is the recent meeting of the so-called "Petropavlovsk People's Council", which declared independence from Kazakhstan⁹. It should be noted that this kind of calls and actions are not isolated and in the 1990s of received a very harsh rebuff from Kazakh national patriots. Suffice it to recall their 1991 confrontation with the Ural Cossacks, who demanded complete autonomy from Kazakhstan. Currently, this kind of call is regarded by the authorities as incitement to inter-ethnic hatred and calls for separatism and, as a rule, is promptly and harshly suppressed by security and judicial authorities at all levels.

⁶ «Tokaev nazval DNR i LNR kvazigosudarstvennymi territoriyami v prisutstvii Putina na forume v Peterburge», *Nastoiashcheye Vremia TV*, 17-VI-2022, <<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/tokaev-na-forume-nazval-dnr-i-lnr-kvazigosudarstvennymi-territoriyami/31903169.html>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

⁷ «Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev Kazakstannyn Ukrainadagy zhagdajga katysty ustanymyn zhetkizdi», *KazAqparat*, 20-VI-2023, <https://kaz.inform.kz/news/kasym-zhomart-tokayev-kazakstannyn-ukrainadagy-zhagdajga-katysty-ustanymyn-zhetkizdi_a4081213/> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

⁸ «Kovtunovskij o reaktsii ne kazahov na Nikonova i Fedorova: Nashe molchanie sochtut soglasiem», *KazTag*, 15-XII-2020, <<https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/kovtunovskiy-o-reaktsii-ne-kazakhov-na-nikonova-i-fedorova-nashe-molchanie-sochtut-soglasie>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

⁹ «Delo o separatizme: prigovor uchastnikam «Narodnogo soveta» vynesli v Petropavlovsk», *Tengri News*, 28-XI-2023, <https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/delo-separatizme-prigovor-uchastnikam-narodnogo-soveta-518349/> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

The war between Russia and Ukraine became a new challenge for Kazakhstan. First of all, this affected residents of the northern cities of the country and the two largest cities - Almaty and Astana. Since the beginning of the war, thousands of Russian men of military age began to arrive in these cities. Starting in September 2022, after the partial mobilization into the Russian army announced by the President Putin, the number of Russians who crossed the Kazakh-Russian border was counted in tens of thousands. The fact of mass migration of by the standards of Kazakhstan a huge number of people from a neighbouring state has already begun to concern the interests of apolitical people, not to mention civic activists and nationalists. The negative attitude towards the Russian migrants manifested itself mainly in the form of hidden discontent, since they did not need a foreign passport to cross the border of Kazakhstan, and could easily obtain temporary registration and then a “residence permit”. Although outwardly everything looks very calm and the pro-government media are pleased to report numerous facts of assistance to migrants from ordinary Kazakhstanis, social network discussion forums often testify to a different opinion in population.

What specific threats did the people of Kazakhstan feel in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and how could they affect internal socio-political stability, the interethnic and social situation? After all, the situation after the Covid pandemic, the Kordai conflict of February 2020 between the Kazakhs and Dungsans and the January events of 2022, popularly nicknamed «kandy kantar» (“bloody January”) still remains quite fresh.

According to Dosym Satpayev, politics expert, the first wave of Russian migrants to Kazakhstan was likely dominated by those who left their country for political reasons, speaking out or silently protesting against the invasion of Ukraine. In the second (autumn 2022) wave, in his opinion, some of the people were voters who had already actively supported Putin and the war in Ukraine, which could in a certain way affect the situation in Kazakhstan. According to Satpayev, a large number of people arriving had a strong impact on the labour markets, rental housing, and the social sphere in general. He also mentions the danger of separatist sentiments that already exist in the north of the country. «The arrival of people who do not want to die for Putin, but support the Russian world, could lead to the strengthening of the fifth column in Kazakhstan»¹⁰.

At the same time, Darkhan Sharipov, an activist of the civic movement of Kazakhstan “Oyan” believes that among those who came from Russia to Kazakhstan, there are many people who believe in the ideas of imperial superiority. Given the enormous influence of Russian propaganda in Kazakhstan, all this could cause tension in the country¹¹. In contrast, political activists who in the country usually are called “national

¹⁰ Kyzyrbekuly E. , «Mobilizatsiyadan kashyp kelip zhatkan reseylıklar Kazakstanga kanshalykty kauipti?», *Masa Media*, 27-IX-2022, <<https://masa.media/kz/site/mobilizatsiyadan-ashyp-kelip-zhatan-reseylıklar-azastana-anshalyty-auipti>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

¹¹ Trotsenko P., «V Kazakhstan sbezhalo okolo 300 tysyach rossiyan. Est' li sredi nih “marginaly-propuhtintsy” i kak idet integratsiya?», *Azattyq radio*, 13-X-2022, <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32079407.html>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

patriots”, and “Kazakh nationalists” in Western media, also express their fears about the growth of the “fifth column” in Kazakhstan. In their opinion, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is supported by a significant number of Kazakh citizens, which threatens to repeat the Ukrainian scenario in Kazakhstan. A well-known national-patriotic public figure, Dos Koshim, believes in the possibility of such a scenario repeating and calls for the discussion of the very tangible threat to country’s societal peace and stability¹². It is worth noting, of course, that the Kazakh official discourse does not welcome discussions on the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on society, and especially the relationship between the conflict in Ukraine and Kazakhstani internal interethnic relations could, from the point of view of state officials misbalance the situation and thereby influence peace and harmony in the country.

We do not have data on even an approximate ratio in Kazakhstan of those who support the war and those who are against the Russian invasion. Yet, a year after Russia invaded Ukraine, Radio Azattyk journalists asked residents of seven of Kazakhstan’s largest cities: «What do you think about Russia’s war against Ukraine? Which side are you on?». It is noteworthy that, judging by the footage of an express survey of Kazakhstanis, the overwhelming majority of ethnic Kazakhs take the side of Ukraine in this conflict. While the absolute majority of ethnic Russians surveyed, with the exception of one appear to be on the side of official Russian propaganda¹³.

We see a certain contradiction between the official position of the government and the categorical attitude with which citizens perceive the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This means that there is practically no room for conscious neutrality in the minds of citizens. In a military conflict, there are only advantages and disadvantages for one side or the other, even if the government’s official position proclaims neutrality. And even if this confrontation has not yet turned into an open challenge, this does not mean that this latent conflict has no potential to develop into deeper division in society and requires no analysis. Despite the different view on the conflict in Ukraine, there have been no visible change in the relationship between Kazakh- and Russian-speaking people; neither has the official position of the Kazakh authorities regarding the Russian-speaking minority changed: the introduction of the state language in the country is not being forced, and Russian-language schools, which include a significant contingent of ethnic Kazakh students, are quietly operating and developing. Moreover, President Tokaev, at the recent CIS summit, took the initiative to create an International Organization for the Russian Language¹⁴. The Kazakh state has shown no ambiguity in its commitment to Russian-speaking people as has been typical over the past decades. It appears therefore that in the context of the protracted

¹² «Resej-Ukraina sogysy: Putin Kazakstan askerin bejbitshilik kush esebinde engizgisi keledi», *Alash.kz*, 4-III-2022, <<https://alash.kz/resej-ukraina-sogysy-putin-qazaqstan-askerin-bejbitshilik-kush-esebinde-engizgisi-keledi/>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

¹³ «“Putin zhaksy goj” VS “Orystar agressorlar”. Kazaktar Ukrainadagy sogys turaly ne dejdi?», *Azattyq radio*, 24-I-2023, <<https://www.azattyq.org/a/32286215.html>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

¹⁴ Artiunov S., «Tokaev vystupil za prodvizhenie russkogo yazyka v SNG», *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 13-X-2023, <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/27568.5/4837082/>> (last visit 30-XII-2023).

conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it is most likely that the government's traditional commitment to Russian-speakers diasporas and to the Russian language will not change. At the same time, ethnic minorities themselves are likely to be actively reconsidering and appreciating their positionality in the state of residency, in some minority communities, particularly those with an assertive kin-state, these processes are likely to be more contentious and ambiguous. Absent a push-back from the Russian Federation, we are likely to witness gradual yet, likely, inevitable adaptation of Russian-speakers to the increasingly dominant position of the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture in the nation-building. The external factor of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will only more sharply underline the importance of the state-bound communication between non-majority ethnic groups in the country. Additionally, the gradual shift in minority/majority interactions in the state language and with respect of Kazakh cultural norms should be conducive of deeper societal integration of ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities into the "Kazakhstani nation".

Conclusion

The Kazakh State is not in a unique position of transitioning from the Soviet to post-Soviet model of nation-state building, yet it stands out in its open-ended and gradual approach to fostering common values and benchmarking linguistic proficiency as the basis for the integration of all ethnic groups into a civic Kazakhstani society. But it has so far proven far from sufficient to resolve the challenges of establishing a civic nation united under the shared ethno-national label. Our research suggests that many subjective factors support various societal integration strategies supporting ethnic groups' relations with the ethnocultural majority and the state.

One of the features of the state-sponsored policy in Kazakhstan has been the avoidance of the term «minority», which helps to obvious hierarchisation of ethnic groups in societal perception. In this regard, Kazakhstani approach is in line with many European countries pursuit of their citizens' equality. In contrast, several countries members of the Council of Europe do not recognize the existence of «minorities» on their territory, and therefore have not ratified several European conventions on rights of minorities, in particular, the 1998 «Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities» (Council of Europe 2023). In case of Kazakhstan, avoiding the references to «Russian – or any other – diaspora», the state has foregone distinguishing majority from minority throughout, rejecting thus the assimilationist nation-building model that would seek to encourage integration as subordination of minority groups to Kazakh language and culture. This is because then the social and status gradation of a "privileged" state-building ethnic group and other ethnic, as minority groups is reflecting their position in the ethnic stratification. Hence, one has to rely on a purely civic concept of society as the foundation for nation-state building, and cultural and political consolidation of society around shared norms and expectations. To encourage preferences of a significant portion of Kazakhstani «minorities», account has not been taken of the affinitive practices in the Kazakh «majority».

This state-building community is largely influenced by the legacy of the Soviet policy of cultural and linguistic Russification, alongside the discourse of titular weakness and ethnic redress in the late Soviet period (Brubaker 2011: 1788). Thus, in the event of complete rejection of the concept of «minority», the ideology and rhetoric of nation-building could have seen greater success. At this point, the Kazakhstani state is launching the steered political reform in this area and encourages all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, to articulate their preferences for calibrating social and political aspirations of the nation-state more clearly. In the context, political participation of ethnic minorities is expected to follow the principles of meritocratic competition, to articulate political preferences on the basis of membership in a political nation, not in an ethnic collective.

Overall, given the complicated ethnopolitical demographics, particularly in the south of the country, despite the stable indicators of the government policy support in this area, the economic, political, and sociocultural practices of ethnic groups require more in-depth study, particularly on their perspective of opportunity to change their position in the national state as Kazakhstani citizens. Only through the mechanisms of civic engagement and political participation of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, will they be able to legitimately identify, express, and pursue their interests as members of the same political community. The practices of ethnic minorities go through changes since the main discourse of and ethno-demographic references to the state unambiguously stresses the leading role of Kazakhs in the nation-building process. This, therefore, determines the opportunities for ethnic minorities to identify their contribution to state building and its stability.

Contemporary demographic and ethnopolitical situation in Kazakhstan is significantly different from that even 10 years ago, the preferences and ethnocultural practices in ethnic minorities are still taking place as “situational manoeuvring” between the said layers of nation-building. The sociological data presented in this article confirm the pragmatic choice of ethnic minorities in favour of Kazakhstan’s civic integration project centred on the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture. Although ethnic groups in Kazakhstan are more comfortable with the domination of the discourse of «Kazakhstani identity» and «Kazakhstani nation», these practices, as evidenced by sociological materials are increasingly tending to recognition of an integrating principle of ethnic policy. This, primarily taking place with the pressure of ethno-demographic and socio-cultural factors, which almost half of the surveyed representatives of “other ethnic groups,” and following the government could guarantee the integrative role to the state language and offer opportunities for the emergence of the common Kazakhstani culture.

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