



Reassessing classification of Kazakhstan's ethnic management model: A comparative approach

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Abstract

Kazakhstan's model of ethnic management is often classified as a typical example of national identity-building. Kazakhstani politicians and media, however, prefer to refer to it as their unique third way. The article attempts to disprove both these claims. It argues that Kazakhstan merely uses two different ethnic management approaches—national identity-building and hegemonic exchange. The article tests this hypothesis by conducting a comparative analysis of various theoretical approaches to ethnic management and applying them to Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it explains what this dual approach means in terms of operability by outlining the key challenges the model faces. The final section of the article summarizes its findings and provides recommendations.

Keywords

Central Asia, ethnic management, ethnic politics, hegemonic exchange, Kazakhstan, national identity-building, nation-building

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Introduction: research question and methodology

This article is a case study of the Kazakhstani ethnic management model that attempts to classify it using contemporary ethnic management theories. Quite often, authors in the field refer to Kazakhstan as a typical example of national identity-building. Others, mostly Kazakhstani officials and policymakers, claim that the Kazakhstani model is somehow “unique” or pursues a third way.¹ This article tries to disprove both these claims by arguing that the Kazakhstani model represents a mixture of two different ethnic management theories—national identity-building and hegemonic exchange.

For the purpose of testing the hypothesis, this article uses a number of different methods. First, it performs a literature review to show how the study of ethnic management in Kazakhstan evolved and how the current approaches to classifying Kazakhstan's model formed. Then it conducts a comparative analysis of major ethnic management approaches and applies them to the case of Kazakhstan. To assess the model's operational aspects, this article utilizes

the method of qualitative analysis in examining the quantitative data of social and expert polls on interethnic relations and identity perception.

Structurally, the article is divided into five parts, including this introduction, three research parts, and the final section, which summarizes the article's key findings and provides policy recommendations.

Study of ethnic management in Kazakhstan: a brief literature review

With more than 100 different ethnic groups and around half a dozen confessions (Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2017), Kazakhstan faced the urgent need to clearly identify

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Table 1. Ethnic dynamics: Main ethnic groups in Kazakhstan (1991–2019).^a

Ethnic groups	1991 (Benner, 1996, p. 151), %	1999 (Ministry of National Economy, Committee on Statistics, 2010), %	2009 (Ministry of National Economy, Committee on Statistics, 2010), %	2016 (Ministry of National Economy, Committee on Statistics, 2016), %	2019 (Vlast, 2019), %
Kazakhs	43.1	55.3	63.1	66.5	67.9
Russians	37.3	29.9	23.7	20.6	19.3
Uzbeks	2.1	2.5	2.8	3.1	3.2
Ukrainians	5.3	3.6	2.1	1.6	1.5
Uighurs	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.3
Tatars	2	1.7	1.3	1.1	1.1
Germans	5.1	2.4	1.1	1	1

^aThe most significant decrease in non-Kazakh population has happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The economic crisis of the 1990s was much stronger in Kazakhstan than it was in Russia, which in turn triggered a massive migration wave of ethnic Russians to Russia (Khazanov, 1994, pp. 145–150; Trud, 2019). As the economic situation began to improve, it slowed the emigration stream. Other factors have to be taken into consideration as well. Fertility rates, on average, are higher in ethnically Kazakh families compared with Russians and other ethnic groups (Ministry of National Economy, Committee on statistics, 2016). Apart from that, the Kazakh government is actively supporting the so-called *oralman* (“returnee”) program, which encourages ethnic Kazakhs residing outside of Kazakhstan to return back to their homeland (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2006). The question whether the statistical data could have been manipulated for political purposes (considering the undemocratic nature of the Kazakhstani government) remains open for further research. However, the articles have found no evidence to assume that this was the case.

its ethnic management strategy since the very first days of independence in 1991. The post-1991 period made the language question become more controversial, because in the Soviet times Russian dominated both in public and in private life, whereas Kazakh was more or less marginalized. Therefore, with the fall of the Soviet regime, many non-Kazakh people, who represented a majority in the country (comparative data on ethnic dynamics in Kazakhstan can be found in Table 1), were not sure what to expect from the new government. As Akiner (1995) rightfully argues, there was a growing fear that Kazakhstan would transform into an “apartheid state” (p. 71). Feeling the pressure from all sides, the government had to balance between adjusting its ethnic management model to the needs of minorities and ensuring the renaissance of the Kazakh language and culture.

Kazakhstan’s attempts at policy formation provoked the interest of ethnic politics researchers. Most of the early literature on the topic of ethnic politics in Kazakhstan analyzed the government’s strategy without taking the domestic political architecture of the country into consideration (Akiner, 1995; Olcott, 2010; Schatz, 2000). Until the early 2000s, it was not clear how Kazakhstan’s political future would look like (and, particularly, how democratic/authoritarian it would be). That led to some discussions on relevance of power-sharing and consociational approaches in Kazakhstan, but they died away pretty quickly as the Nazarbayev clan established itself politically (Ishiyama et al., 2002, pp. 236–237). At the same time, however, new approaches to the case of classifying Kazakhstan began to form, with Bremmer (1994) and Akiner (1995) being among the first prominent authors to claim that the Kazakhstani ethnic management model is a typical case of national identity-building strategy. Even though this point

of view remains to be prevalent today (Aitymbetov et al., 2015; Blackburn, 2019; Davenel & Yim, 2016; Rees & Webb Williams, 2017; Spehr & Kassenova, 2012), there are some significant differences between the actual Kazakhstani policymaking process and the theoretical concept of national identity-building (for more details on that, see the next section).

The scholarly assessment of the government’s reasoning behind the governmental policies changed with the time. While in the 1990s researchers argued that the governmental strategy intended to mainly ease “tensions between Kazakhs and Russians” that could damage an already poor economic environment (Olcott, 1995), this point of view eventually developed, especially under the influence of postcolonial approaches. The reason was that colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory are the main critiques of the process of production of knowledge about the Other (Williams & Chrisman, 2013, p. 8), in this case the Other being Russians and other ethnic minorities. Kudaibergenova (2016), for example, states that the political postcolonial discourse in Kazakhstani ethnic politics represents “a highly contextual tool for the regime’s legitimation and the framing of political opponents” (p. 933). She claims that the country’s colonial past represented a crucial building block in post-1991 nation-building project, even though the government’s approach was contested by political opposition and Kazakh ethnic nationalists (Kudaibergenova, 2016, p. 917). Moreover, Kazakhstan did not have much experience in the field with the exception of the Soviet ethnic management model (Burkhanov, 2017, pp. 1–2; Spehr & Kassenova, 2012, p. 135). Dual approach to the question of national identity-building—whether it should be a civic or an ethnic approach—was also reflected in the discussions within the opposition and between the

opposition and the government, as well as between ethnic Kazakhs and minorities (Aitymbetov et al., 2015, pp. 5–7; Laruelle, 2014).

Duality of the Kazakhstani policy line is the main reason of the incorrect classification of Kazakhstan as a show-case example of national identity-building theory. On the one hand, the government is adamant in its attempts to promote the concept of an inclusive civic state judging by its official rhetoric (Davenel & Yim, 2016, pp. 46–47). On the other hand, most of the ethnic minorities have to deal with unofficial discrimination toward them based on their Kazakh proficiency (Davenel & Yim, 2016). Russian as a language still plays an enormous role in the country, and there is still no single language of national education. Methodologically speaking, there are two other problems that hinder the careful study of the case. The first one has to do with the lack of data. The strict governmental restrictions on who is eligible to conduct social polls in the country and under what conditions create a problem for social science experts. Normally, only public institutions such as national ministries or agencies can easily order a comprehensive sociological research without any problems. As most of the time they prefer not to publish these data, the data pool is not very rich. The second problem is that there are not many researchers who qualitatively analyze the quantitative data of social and expert polls available online both in Kazakh and in Russian. As most of these data are normally not translated into English, it presents a methodological problem for certain ethnic politics specialists, who do not solely focus on Central Asia.

Comparing theoretical approaches with the Kazakhstani model: a case study

To properly categorize and assess the ethnic policy line conducted by the Kazakhstani authorities, the article will compare three most fitting ethnic management theories with the actual policy measures taken by the government. That comparison is performed in two steps in the next sections on respective theories. First, each subsection identifies key characteristics of the theory and then checks whether the policy measures of the Kazakhstani government correspond to these criteria. With this goal, theories of consociationalism, national identity-building, and hegemonic exchange were chosen as the most fitting ones. Consociationalism and national identity-building (also known as nation-building) were chosen based on the literature review conducted in the first section of the article. The theory of hegemonic exchange, however, was chosen because it focuses on multi-ethnic authoritarian nations. Other popular ethnic management strategies such as ethnofederalism and institutionalized power-sharing were not considered to be relevant in the context of the study. While ethnofederalism in the broadest sense equates to “ethnically

defined territorial autonomy” (Anderson, 2015, p. 3), Kazakhstan is, territorially speaking, not a federative state, neither has its leadership indicated any willingness to change the system of government or establish a territorial autonomy for any of its minorities (like Uzbekistan, Moldova, or Ukraine). Moreover, the power in the country is monopolized by one ethnic group and one political party, so the system does not envisage any institutionalized frameworks for power-sharing.

Consociationalism

The basic idea of consociationalism is that governmental policies are normally focused on guaranteeing the rights of every major ethnic group and on ensuring their maximal autonomy within the national political architecture. Even though it is somewhat similar to the concept of power-sharing, which causes a lot of confusion, these two approaches are different (Guelke, 2020, p. 1). In fact, consociationalism can be defined as a form of power-sharing. As Bogaards et al. (2019, p. 6) formulate it, the concept of consociationalism is based on four main principles of grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto. The principle of grand coalition means that the government is run by a coalition of parties representing every major ethnic group. Segmental autonomy means that there should also be a solid legal framework for regional or cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities (Cordell & Wolf, 2009, pp. 141–145). Proportionality implies that the government should establish a system of proportional representation when it comes to awarding public offices (Cordell & Wolf, 2009). Finally, mutual veto implies that all the major ethnic groups have to reach consensus when defining and implementing policies (Lustick, 1997, pp. 89–94). If these criteria are not met, the system cannot be defined as consociational.

In terms of policy formulation, one could argue that both language and cultural policies of Kazakhstan are targeted at ensuring segmental autonomy of its ethnic groups. Section 3.1 of the Cultural Policy Concept, which defines key goals and tasks of cultural policy, contains a paragraph on the main goals (§2). This paragraph states the following: “to develop Kazakhstani cultural space based on preservation of ethnic diversity and harmonious development of culture of Kazakhstan’s people with active participation of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan” (Zakon, 2019b). Similar principles can be found in the “Law on Culture.” Article 3, Paragraph 6 states that the state guarantees “preservation of historic heritage of the Kazakh people and other ethnic diasporas” (Paragraf, 2019). As for the languages, the 1993 Constitution proclaimed Kazakh as the state language and Russian as the language of interethnic communication (National Digital History of Kazakhstan, 2017). The 1995 Constitution continued this tradition, slightly changing the wording. According to Article 7, Paragraph 2 “. . . In state institutions and local self-administrative bodies the Russian

language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazakh language” (Akorda, 1995).

Furthermore, there is a body that represents all ethnic minorities living in the country,² which is called the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. However, the Assembly does not have any executive or legislative functions. It is a mere consultative organ under the President of Kazakhstan that also sends its representatives to the lower chamber of the Parliament, Mazhilis (Akorda, 1995, Article 51). Politically, the role of the Assembly is very limited to being the instrument of government’s strategy dissemination. Otherwise, it does not draft any documents independently, does not serve as a mediator in ethnic clashes, and even does not comment on the issues causing ethnic tensions in the country. The reason for that is that this body is not politically independent. Despite this major flaw, this institution still serves as a platform for ethnic education and intercultural exchange.

That said, apart from the principle of segmental autonomy, all the other three criteria are not met in the case of Kazakhstan. First, there is no consensus rule practice in the political system of the country, where ethnicities do not have any mutual veto powers. Second, Kazakhstan represents a typical example of developmental presidential dictatorship, where ethnic groups do not build any coalitions in the parliament to form governments. Finally, there is no legally defined proportional representation and practice of using ethnic quotas for jobs in the public sector. Even though consociational engineering is often hailed as “the most promising way to achieve stable democracy in strongly segmented societies” (Andeweg, 2000), Kazakhstani elites opted not to choose this approach. Of course, one might ask themselves whether there are any consociational authoritarian or hybrid regimes, but this is very hard to imagine since the consociational model requires to abide by a number of power-sharing principles, which contradicts the notion of authoritarianism.³

National identity-building

The national identity-building theory is based on the idea of creating a common civic identity for different ethnic or racial groups living in a country (Aitymbetov et al., 2015; İnaç and Ünal, 2013; Ishiyama et al., 2002). There are several policy lines that the government has to adhere to in order to be successful in national identity-building. First and foremost, a national identity-building strategy requires the citizens of a country to adhere to the same values and show common allegiance to the same institutions and symbols (Ishiyama et al., 2002, pp. 16–30). Second, a single national language has to be used within the framework of the educational system (Dora, 2009, pp. 3–9). Third, unlike in consociational democracies, ethnical background does not have to play a defining factor in allocating representation in political institutions. The distribution of jobs and

benefits is inclusive and is not based on one’s ethnic background either. For the same reason, ethnic campaigning or ethnicity-based political parties are strictly banned, because they are seen as having politically destabilizing effects on a multi-ethnic state (Laitin, 1998). The last criterion is that there has to be a strong national leader or a powerful dominating political force in the country, which is required for the purpose of pushing through unpopular policy measures or suppressing occasional surges of radical nationalism (Aitymbetov et al., 2015; Dora, 2009, pp. 5–8).

Does Kazakhstan fit all these criteria? After all, the idea to create a common Kazakhstani identity emerged right after the country’s independence and has been actively promoted and integrated into governmental policies ever since. The ruling elites chose the concept of Kazakhstani people (not “Kazakh”) to serve as the foundation of the new state, wanting to stabilize the political situation and to ensure that the postcolonial discourse on ethnicity does not endanger their political future (Akiner, 1995, p. 69; Kudaibergenova, 2016, pp. 918–920). Kazakhstan is one of the two countries in the post-Soviet region (the other one being the Russian Federation) that adopted duality of ethnic/civic identity terms. There is a special term to define one’s civic identity (Kazakh: *khazakhstandyktar*; Russian: *kazahstantsy*) and different ones to define one’s ethnic identity.

When applying the theoretical framework of national identity-building to the Kazakhstani model, one sees that there are some clear similarities between them. First, the concept of Kazakhstani national identity-building was developed and supported by the country’s first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev (Akiner, 1995, pp. 72–73; Blackburn, 2019, pp. 214–215). Again, considering the authoritarian nature of the country, Nazarbayev and his party can be seen as the domineering players on the political arena, who could push through certain initiatives despite resistance on the behalf of the population.⁴ Some authors rightfully argue that Nazarbayev was and is still seen as an interethnic mediator and a guarantor of the current moderate ethnic policy line by ethnic minorities (Akiner, 1995, p. 73; Blackburn, 2019, p. 225).

Second, most of the governmental ethnic policy initiatives have the ultimate goal of creating a common civic identity for all people of Kazakhstan based on the Doctrine of National Unity. This document, which was proposed in 2004 despite some weak protests from the ethnic Kazakh nationalists, became a crucial strategy that outlines the basic values for the Kazakhstani citizens (Aitymbetov et al., 2015, pp. 8–9). The Doctrine was developed with the assistance of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and it contains the main guidelines of Kazakhstan’s policy toward minorities. Section 4 of the Doctrine sets the goals in different subfields of ethnic policies such as institutional, cultural, educational, legal, information, and inter-confessional policy measures (Zakon, 2019a). Even though it does not contain specific implementation measures, one

gets a general understanding of the main ethnic policy guidelines. The Doctrine, explicitly using the word *khazakhstandyktar*, stresses that despite different ethnic origins, all citizens of Kazakhstan possess equal rights. The document also mentions that minority organizations are entitled to receive financial support from the state for the purpose of preserving their own languages and cultures. Even though the scope of this document is very broad, the Doctrine of National Unity was the first attempt to create a system of common principles and values for all Kazakhstanis, to forge a common civic identity. Its provisions were further developed in the Cultural Policy Concept. The Cultural Policy Concept, in particular, stresses the need to “support the new Kazakhstani patriotism” by means of cooperating with “ethnocultural associations” (Zakon, 2019b, Section 4.1). According to the data published by the government, there are more than 900 ethnocultural associations in Kazakhstan, and 192 ethno-educational facilities and “houses of friendship”⁵ (Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2019). These institutions conduct national festivals, provide education in various languages, serve as interethnic communication hubs, and also help in organizing free Kazakh courses for minority groups (Kazakhstan Halkhy Assambleyasi, 2019).

Third, Kazakhstan has a rather inclusive benefit distribution system when it comes to jobs and social benefits, as it does not use any ethnicity-based quotas. Ethnic background does not play any decisive role in the public sector according to the official policy lines. Moreover, conducting political campaigns on ethnic platforms is legally banned in Kazakhstan (unlike in Israel or Lebanon). It is normally classified as “incitement to interethnic hatred” according to the Kazakhstani legislation (Adilet, 2019).

The only criterion Kazakhstan does not check is the single language of national education. Parents and children are free to choose which language their children are taught in at schools. Both Kazakh and Russian are available at all public schools and both are used at universities. In 2012, there were totally 3,843 Kazakh schools and 1,508 Russian schools (Lee, 2016). More than 60% of university programs are taught in Kazakh and around 30% are taught in Russian (Ministry of National Economy, Committee on Statistics, 2017). In some cases, programs are taught in English (around 1.5%). The language question will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. Nevertheless, the Kazakhstani model surely fits the theoretical description of this model in other ways.

Hegemonic exchange

The theory of hegemonic exchange is the last theoretical model that will be considered in this section. Even though it is a relatively old theory, this article believes that it has its merit when applied to the Kazakhstani case. The authors of the theory envisaged an ethnically diverse community living in the framework of an authoritarian system that either

bargains with various ethnic groups or regularly threatens them with the use of force. Both options are supposed to maintain the stability of the regime (Lake & Rothschild, 1996, pp. 59–60). This carrot-and-stick approach is the key principle of the model. Rothschild and Lake in their work argue that the hegemonic exchange approach is normally not a very long-lasting model, but they do not specify their potential longevity (Lake & Rothschild, 1996). Their argument is based on the assumption that most of the authoritarian regimes, especially the personalized ones, are generally not known for their long-term stability and, therefore, crumble at a certain point in time.

When looking at Kazakhstan, one sees certain similarities with the theoretical model described in the previous paragraph. To begin with, there is an authoritarian system in place, which enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the ethnic minorities. While the ethnic minorities believe that the current regime ensures their safety (Blackburn, 2019), the ruling elites keep using the multiculturalism discourse for the purpose of regime legitimation (Kudaibergenova, 2016; Laruelle, 2014, pp. 14–16). Burkhanov (2017) in his research points out that the main idea behind the current policy is “. . . assuring Kazakh hegemony while allowing nominal minority representation” (p. 1). There is some value to that statement. The government introduced liberal language laws and established the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan as an institutionalized framework for representing different ethnic groups. It is plausible to argue that those measures were adopted for the sake of appeasing ethnic minorities and winning their loyalty.

The question of the use of force, however, is more delicate. So far, there has been no evidence of the Kazakhstani government’s major violations of minority rights. There are no “use of force” threats in the official or semi-official discourses either. Even if massive minority protests ever take place, then the government is likely to use hybrid suppression tactics.⁶ The reason is that any open mass-scale repressions will be destructive for the country in two ways. First, using force against ethnic minorities will undermine the government’s reputation both domestically and internationally and go against its goal of ensuring minority’s political support. Second, the elites know that Russia will be very likely to interfere in any large-scale ethnic conflict in Kazakhstan. For those two reasons, the government always sticks to its bargaining strategy and does not actively enforce national language learning on ethnic minorities (the contrast is particularly stark when compared with the cases of Estonia and Latvia that also have big Russian minorities). While there is no evidence of publicly endorsed discrimination policies that target a particular ethnic group, some experts point out that unofficial discrimination takes place based on the knowledge of Kazakh as most Russians do not speak the language because of the ongoing Kazakhization process (Davenel & Yim, 2016; Smagulova, 2008).

The last question is for how long will this model work effectively. So far, it has been functioning properly for almost 30 years but only in the framework of personalized dictatorship. That is why the major test for it will be the post-Nazarbayev period when the ex-president finally leaves the political scene for good. At the moment, Kazakhstan's political system suffers from discourse monopolization. As Kudaibergenova (2016) rightfully states, "the absence of major intellectual discussion" allowed the elites to re-appropriate the policy discourse "in the political rather than critical intellectual domain" (p. 917). The absence of constructive discussion, in turn, makes the systemic more rigid and unsusceptible to change. Apart from that, there are demographic factors at play. As Laruelle (2014) rightfully argues, the discourse of "Kazakhstanness" (Kazakhstani civic identity) might as well disappear in the long run because the current Slavic minority populating the country has been dwindling for the past 30 years (pp. 16–17). Nevertheless, it is hard dispute that the *current policy line* does indeed use the hegemonic exchange strategy and is likely to adhere to that strategy in the nearest future.

Classifying Kazakhstan

Based on the results of the comparative analysis conducted above, the article concludes that Kazakhstan's ethnic policy line is a combination of national identity-building and hegemonic exchange strategies despite the existing tendency in academic literature to classify Kazakhstan as a typical example of national identity-building. Using the approach suggested in this article allows to understand the peculiarities that the Kazakhstani case tends to demonstrate when analyzed merely through the prism of national identity-building paradigms. It successfully explains why there is no single language of national education in the country—it is nothing but a bargaining concession that the regime made to ensure its legitimation and good relations with its biggest neighbor. It would also explain why the Kazakhstani elites are very unlikely to make the system more consociational or introduce any power-sharing institutions. For the sake of better understanding of the main challenges that such an approach faces, the article will turn to analyzing the operational aspects of Kazakhstani ethnic policy.

Assessing the operational aspects: challenges and problems

While the previous chapter dealt with the issues of comparative analysis, this one will focus on assessing how the combination of methods that the Kazakhstani elite chose influenced the policymaking process on practice. The article will use two methods for the purpose of this assessment, which are quantitative and qualitative analysis of opinion and expert polls. Applying a combination of these

three different approaches to policy assessment will show a comparative insight into how the model functions and provide some ground for the policy recommendations made in the final section of the article.

When addressing the question of using opinion polls as a research methodology in the Kazakhstani political context, one should bear in mind that there are not much data available because of the strict legal restrictions on who is eligible to conduct these polls and under what conditions. Nevertheless, the government as well as some internationally renowned nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or international organizations (IOs) occasionally publish the necessary bits of information. The article accumulated the existing data by analyzing the results of the biggest social and expert polls on the issue of ethnic politics and self-identification in Kazakhstan.

So how do security concerns and ambitions pushing the elites toward the hegemonic exchange strategy combine with the attempts to legitimize itself and stabilize the ethnic situation using the national identity-building strategy? Opinion polls show a rather interesting picture in that respect. In 2011, the government of Kazakhstan for the first time requested to conduct a *public* comprehensive social research project to assessing the efficiency of its ethnic management efforts based on the opinion polls (Mukhamedzhanov & Jusupova, 2011). The results of the polls were quite positive, with more than 65% of people describing interethnic relations as "rather calm." Nevertheless, even though more than three quarters of the population positively viewed the government's policy in the field, people's lack of awareness about the key policy instruments was quite evident. Respondents were badly informed on both major documents and implementation mechanisms in the field of ethnic policy. Forty-two percent of the population could not properly assess how effective the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan worked, because they have never heard of the institution before. Moreover, only a quarter of population admitted they knew something about the Doctrine of National Unity (Mukhamedzhanov & Jusupova, 2011) (Table 2).

The results of this study covering the period of the 2000s and early 2010s are confirmed by the results of another project that was conducted by independent researchers from the KIMEP University (Kazakhstan's Institute of Economics, Management, and Entrepreneurship) in 2012. That project focused on the study of the population's civic identity by analyzing the data from social polls of the 2000s and found out that 87% of the citizens of Kazakhstan had a rather strong or a very strong civic identity (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012, p. 142). The result also showed that this belief held for all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan with the sole exception of Chechens, who had a slighter preference for their religious identity. The result of this project can also explain why society saw interethnic relations as rather stable, because most of the people identified themselves with the "Kazakhstani" values.

Even though the results of these polls and research projects might look satisfactory, the trend began to change in the second half of the 2010s. An expert poll conducted among the Kazakhstani political scientists and sociologists in 2016 paints a more negative picture. That study was published by the center of political and social research “Strategiya,” which conducted a similar poll in 2002 and decided to compare the results after more than a decade to see how the situation changed. In 14 years, the number of experts who claim that there is a positive atmosphere for interethnic cooperation decreased from 20% to 10%. Furthermore, the number of experts, who were concerned with the ethnic situation, increased from 13% to 20%. According to the same research published by Strategiya in

2016, there has been a huge increase in interethnic contradictions in different spheres of daily life. These include private sphere (the number doubled from 27.5% to 55%), public life (a double increase from 25% to 55%), and especially work of governmental agencies (a dramatic jump from 7.5% to 40%) (Figure 1).

A similar problem can be seen from the results of a sociological research project of the Southern Kazakhstan State University’s scientific center “History and Ethnology.” The poll was conducted among ethnic Russians and then published by the information agency “Fergana.” More than 80% of participants polled did not know the Kazakh language and felt uncomfortable because of that. Paradoxically, they still claimed that they did not want to learn it (Fergana, 2015). The most mentioned reason was that they saw Kazakh as relatively useless and preferred to study English and other European languages instead. Second, almost half of the respondents indicated their willingness to migrate, even though most admitted that they did not have opportunities to do so. One of the key reasons for migration mentioned in the poll was the “ethnic and language policies of the government.” Another reason mentioned was the general “deterioration of interethnic relations” and “mistreatment” (of Russians by Kazakhs). The results of these two national polls were confirmed by a study that was performed by Rees and Williams in 2017, which intended to find out how strongly the population of the country associates itself with the Kazakhstani identity (basically pursuing the same goal like Spehr and Kassenova in 2012). Their findings demonstrate that despite “the Assembly of People’s rhetoric, there are still significant barriers to citizen-level adoption of a supraethnic identity in Kazakhstan, particularly regarding language” (Rees & Webb Williams, 2017, p. 815).

Table 2. Interethnic relations in Kazakhstan in September 2010.

Question:

How would you describe interethnic relations in your country, in your region, and in the place of your permanent residence in general? (Identify your nationality/ethnicity^a), September 2010

	Kazakhs (%)	Russians (%)	Other ethnic groups (%)
Country-wide index			
Generally calm	70.8	61.1	60.6
Neutral	19.9	30.1	30.8
Rather tense	4.4	5.7	7.1
Tense	3.0	1.0	1.0
Very tense	0.4	–	–
Hard to tell	1.5	2.0	0.5

Source: Mukhamedzhanov & Jusupova (2011, pp. 11–12).

^aThe notion “nationality” here (as well as in many post-Soviet contexts) refers to the ethnic identity of a person, not their citizenship.

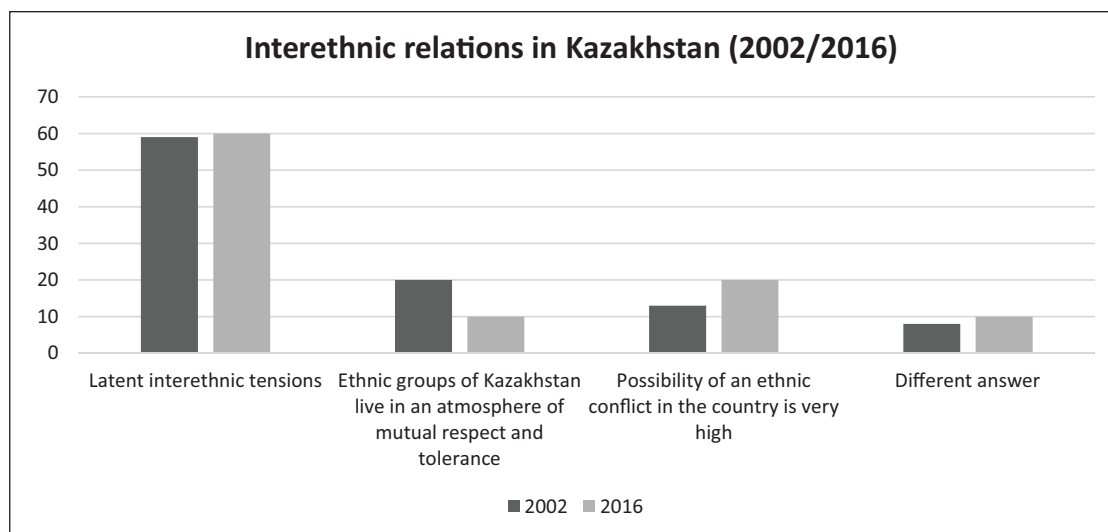


Figure 1. Contemporary interethnic situation in Kazakhstan in the eyes of Kazakhstani experts: data of 2002 and 2016 compared (Strategiya, 2016).

The language question resurges in all of these polls as the most sensitive and controversial one. It also represents a major obstacle when it comes to the comprehensive implementation of the national identity-building theory. Strictly speaking, the governmental policy in this field is extremely vague. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nazarbayev had to look for a new formula that would appease both the Kazakh nationalists and suit ethnic minorities at the same time. Thus, the 1995 Constitution stated that Kazakh would be a “state” language and Russian would be an “official” language. As Chaimun Lee (2004, pp. 105–106) rightfully notices, there is no clear difference between these two definitions, and most probably Kazakhstani authorities used a strategy of creating divergent messages to different social groups. The nationalists could interpret it as elevation of the status of the Kazakh language, whereas the Russian-speaking minorities could see it as a guarantee of the official status of the Russian language. This policy was further developed in the 1997 Language Act, adopted by the Parliament, which guaranteed the status of Russian as an official language in different spheres of public life. Ironically enough, the name of this document is different in Kazakh and Russian (Lee, 2004, p. 107). The title of the law in Russian is “Law on Languages” or “Languages Law” (Russian: *zakon o yazykah*), which implies a multitude of languages. The Kazakh version sounds differently—“Language Law” or “Law on (one) Language” (Kazakh: *Til turaly zangy*). A version using a plural form would sound differently (Kazakh: *Tilder turaly zangy*).

When formulating this sort of vague policy guidelines, the government is often accused of using double standards because of the slow and soft policy of Kazakhization that the minorities resist (Blackburn, 2019). At the same, it is too slow and too soft for ethnic Kazakh nationalists. This duality is also reflected in public statements of many important governmental officials. One of the best examples is the statement of Kazakhstan’s ex-president on the question of education and preservation of the Russian language. In the same speech, Nazarbayev said the following: “We must try to preserve Russian in our country, as one of the six international [UN] languages. It is important to maintain friendly bilateral relations between our country and its neighbours. . .” (Nur, 2013). In the same speech, however, he also stressed that official educational standards would imply teaching everything in Kazakh by 2025:⁷

Today the percentage of Kazakh population is more than 70%, Kazakh-speaking regions must start switching to Kazakh, when it comes to document circulation. There are some regions, where we do not have so many Kazakh-speaking people. There we have to preserve the duality of languages. But even in these regions we have counties with a dominant Kazakh-speaking population. We can implement the mentioned measures there as well. (Nur, 2013)

In a different statement, when commenting on the issue of language discrimination in governmental agencies, Nazarbayev

criticized linguistic chauvinism and demanded to sack all civil servants who issue reports and documents in Kazakh in response to inquiries in Russian or those who refuse to answer back in Russian when asked to do so (Nur, 2016). These quotes show two self-contradicting trends in the educational policy line—its attempts to foster Kazakhization and preserve ethnic harmony appeal to both Kazakh nationalists and ethnic minorities at the same time. However, despite what one might describe as hypocritical duality in the governmental approach, the long-term effects of multiculturalism discourse play a positive role for societal values. A research project conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2019, pp. 16–17) on the topic of values in Kazakhstani society, including the issues of national and religious identity, presents supporting evidence. According to the results of their surveys, the majority of respondents would like to see Kazakhstan as a trilingual multi-ethnic country in the future (with 44.6% saying that Kazakhstanis will speak Kazakh, Russian, and English). This group is followed by people who believe that Kazakhstan will be a bilingual multi-ethnic country (36.4%). Only 10.3% think that people must speak only Kazakh in the future. Finally, 5.6% believe that only Kazakhs will live in the country. Therefore, one could argue that the majority of population remains positive about the concept of multiculturalism in society.

From a political perspective, the government’s approach was effective in legitimizing the existing system domestically and strengthening its stability. This is also confirmed by quantitative evidence. Starting from 2006 and up until now, Kazakhstan has been proactively progressing in the Fragile State Index (FSI).⁸ If in 2006 it was on the 88th place, in 2019 it moved to the 116th place, thus becoming the most stable state in the post-Soviet region after the Baltic nations (FSI, 2019). As for legitimation, Kazakhstan’s relatively liberal ethnic management approach transformed ethnic minorities into the main supporters of Nazarbayev’s political system. A 2019 poll suggests that most ethnic minorities and especially Russians are actually more likely to support the sitting government than ethnic Kazakhs (Informburo KZ, 2019).

To conclude, the conducted assessment shows that Kazakhstan’s strategy had been working relatively well so far, even though it faces three challenges. First, the governmental efforts, when it comes to promoting its civic values, do not receive sufficient coverage and there is an obvious need for a clearly defined awareness-raising strategy. Second, there are concerns about the potential deterioration of the situation due to the language question that have to be addressed. They are clearly reflected not only in the social polls but also in the interviews with national experts. The key problem in that respect is that some of the existing legislation on the status of local languages is very vague, which creates ground for potential conflicts between different ethnic groups in the future. Third, it is unclear whether the existing policy line will remain effective in the long run with the discourse being completely monopolized by the

government. Having summarized the challenges, the article will present its key findings and recommendations in the next section.

Overall assessment and recommendations

Summing up all the previous observations, the article concludes that the model used by the government of Kazakhstan is not a typical example of national identity-building. Nevertheless, it is not what some Kazakh policymakers describe as a unique third way or “Nazarbayevism.” This model represents a mixture of two classical ethnic management approaches—national identity-building and hegemonic exchange. This approach allows to explain why there are some deviations in Kazakhstan’s actual policy line when it is compared with the theoretical concept of national identity-building (i.e., the unified language factor and unwillingness to introduce consociational or similar approaches).

The main reasons why the government uses a combination of these approaches is because it can alleviate the potential of ethnic conflict in the country and legitimize itself with the political support of ethnic minorities at the same time. This model, so far, has been functioning satisfactorily despite several flaws, including vague language laws and the question of stability and power transition. On the one hand, there is a slowly growing negative trend in interethnic relations despite the government’s attempts to preserve security and stability in society, if one looks at the results of the expert polls. The social poll results conducted among ethnic minorities also demonstrate a number of latent problems. These include unofficial language discrimination in the public sector, political underrepresentation, and ambivalence of many ethnic groups toward the idea of learning Kazakh. Some critics point out that the most obvious sign of the increasing level of contradictions between ethnic groups is the decreasing number of ethnic minorities in the country. On the other hand, despite the negative trend, the predominant majority of the country’s citizens believe in the concept of multiculturalism and see the country’s future as “a multi-ethnic and a multi-lingual nation.” Apart from that, the lack of public awareness about the government’s ethnic policy strategy and its key instruments is also of main problem. Many ethnic minority groups are not well aware of the existing legislation that guarantees their rights. Only half of the population knows about the existence of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, only a quarter knows about the Doctrine of National Unity.

To be fair on the Kazakhstani authorities, they are trying to address these concerns by passing new legislation in relevant areas, especially in the sphere of language discrimination. Still, other problems—particularly, underrepresentation in the governing institutions—are still extremely relevant for minorities of any country. The sitting government of Kazakhstan as of 2020 consists of 20 Kazakhs and only 1 Byelorussian. The underrepresentation of Russians and

other minorities is a major issue for some Kazakhstani citizens. This results of this research clearly show that it is not enough to give only nine places in the lower Chamber of Parliament, for the representatives of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, introducing ethnic quotas for public service would also be a bad idea because it may increase the rate of interethnic tensions in the country, as previous research on this topic has shown (Wilkinson, 2000, p. 787). A wiser approach would be to adhere to an unwritten rule of appointing at least two or three ministers, representing ethnic minorities.

Apart from that, the government should amend its strategy of promoting and teaching Kazakh. The revival of the Kazakh language, traditions, and culture is a major part of the postcolonial legitimization discourse of the current government. However, if it starts to push the topic too actively, this might bring about public backlash from ethnic minorities. Two main problems in that respect are the absence of educational stimulus and the low quality and quantity of the teaching materials available.⁹ If these two problems are not solved, abolition of education in Russian in 2025 might cause a social explosion. The government should try harder to make Kazakh more attractive and invest more into publishing high-quality textbooks. It should consider such preventive measures as multi-lingual curriculum at schools and universities. An innovative approach of publishing educational materials online could greatly enhance the learning potential for ethnic minorities (potential methods might include the use of educational software and gamification methods, e-books, and Kazakh-dedicated websites). The new administration under President Tokayev should consider the introduction of bonus systems, which could stimulate ethnic minorities to learn Kazakh more actively. On top of all that, it is essential to continuously work in the field of awareness-raising, especially when it comes to the activities of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and the government’s key policy documents. It is necessary to educate people about the existing legal tools guaranteeing and protecting their rights. Finally, strict enforcement of the existing legislation on ethnicity-based discrimination is crucial. Such legal guarantees help to create an atmosphere of safety for every ethnic group.

As it enters the new decade, Kazakhstan is undergoing a period of political transition after the resignation of its first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and the country is more vulnerable to external pressures. For that reason, the administration of Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, who is a staunch supporter of the former president, is unlikely to deviate from the established policy lines in many fields. Despite that, the real test for the system will eventually come when Nazarbayev finally walks off the political scene and then the need for well-balanced reforms will become evident. Therefore, if the Kazakhstani government truly wants to make its model of ethnic management more effective, it should pre-emptively focus on the issues of educational reform, ethnic representation, and awareness-raising.

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Notes

1. This “third way” option is often presented as a unique policy line developed by President Nazarbayev. On the discussion of “Nazarbayevism” in different sub-spheres of Kazakh ethnic policy, see Laruelle, 2014.
2. There are approximately more than 100 different ethnicities living in Kazakhstan.
3. That sentence reflects author’s personal opinion.
4. President Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled the country from 1989 to 2019.
5. Houses of friendship are special institutions that pursue the goal of promoting tolerance and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups of Kazakhstan. These institutions conduct various festive activities, mass events, and conferences involving ethnic minorities.
6. On the issues of post-Crimean separatism, see Meduza interviews with the East Kazakhstani Russians: <https://meduza.io/news/2014/10/20/ust-kamenogorskaya-narodnaya-respublika> (accessed: April 1, 2020).
7. As it has been mentioned, the educational system of Kazakhstan works in a rather peculiar way. There are mainly three types of academic groups in schools—Russian, Kazakh, or mixed. There are also a smaller number of schools teaching subjects in different languages, such as Uzbek and Tatar. All the final exams are conducted strictly in Kazakh or Russian.
8. This implies that Kazakhstan has advanced in the ranking not because other countries fell lower but because its indicators have been growing faster than the world average.
9. If one walks into a bookshop in Almaty, it is impossible to find a Kazakh language textbook for adults there.

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