

PECULIARITIES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN: A POLITICAL SCIENCE ANALYSIS

¹Zh. Burkitbayev, ²A.Kaya

ABSTRACT

This article examines the distinctive features of national identity formation in the Republic of Kazakhstan through the lens of comprehensive political science analysis. The study analyzes the complex interaction between ethnic diversity, historical legacy, state-building processes, and modernization efforts that shape contemporary Kazakhstani identity in a country uniting more than 130 ethnic groups. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of nation-building, including models of civic and ethnic nationalism, as well as empirical observations of post-Soviet transformation covering three decades of independence, the study identifies key mechanisms through which Kazakhstan implemented national consolidation while maintaining its multinational character. The work argues that Kazakhstan represents a distinctive case of a balanced approach to nation-building, where the state strategically coordinated the promotion of Kazakh ethnic identity through language policy, reconstruction of historical narrative, and demographic changes, while simultaneously supporting the principles of civic equality and institutional mechanisms of minority representation. The analysis demonstrates that this approach, illustrated by the constitutional distinction between Kazakh ethnic and Kazakhstani civic identity, contributed to relative stability and allowed the avoidance of ethnic conflicts that affected other post-Soviet states. The research findings indicate that Kazakhstani national identity represents a synthesis of civic and ethnic dimensions, characterized by strategic state policies within institutional structures that are oriented toward gradual national consolidation with observance of the principles of civic equality.

Key words: National Identity, Kazakhstan, Nation-Building, Multi-Ethnicity, Civic Nationalism, Post-Soviet Transformation.

¹ Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

² Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey

Author-correspondent:
Burkitbayev Zh.,
zhaskairatburkitbayev@gmail.com

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Қазақстан Республикасындағы ұлттық бірегейліктің ерекшеліктері: саяси талдау

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала Қазақстан Республикасындағы ұлттық бірегейліктің қалыптасуының ерекше белгілерін кешенді саяси талдау призмасы арқылы зерттейді. Зерттеу этникалық алуандық, тарихи мұра, мемлекет құру процестері және жаңғырту әрекеттері арасындағы күрделі өзара әрекеттесуді талдайды, олар 130-дан астам этникалық топты біріктіретін елде қазіргі қазақстандық бірегейлікті қалыптастырады. Ұлттық құрылыстың теоретикалық негіздеріне, оның ішінде азаматтық және этникалық ұлттықтың модельдеріне, сондай-ақ тәуелсіздіктің үш онжылдығын қамтитын посткеңестік трансформацияның эмпирикалық бақылауларына сүйене отырып, зерттеу Қазақстанның көпұлтты сипатын сақтай отырып, ұлттық біріктіруді жүзеге асырған негізгі механизмдерді анықтайды. Жұмыста Қазақстан ұлттық құрылысқа теңдестірілген тәсілдің ерекше жағдайын білдіреді деп тұжырымдалады, мұнда мемлекет тіл саясаты, тарихи баяндаманы қайта құру және демографиялық өзгерістер арқылы қазақ этникалық бірегейлігін ілгерілетуді стратегиялық түрде үйлестірді, сонымен бір мезгілде азаматтық теңдік қағидаттары мен азшылықтарды білдірудің институционалдық механизмдерін қолдады. Талдау қазақ этникалық және қазақстандық азаматтық бірегейлік арасындағы конституциялық айырмашылықпен көрсетілген бұл тәсіл салыстырмалы тұрақтылыққа ықпал етті және басқа посткеңестік мемлекеттерге әсер еткен этникалық қақтығыстардан аулақ болуға мүмкіндік берді екенін көрсетеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері қазақстандық ұлттық бірегейлік азаматтық және этникалық өлшемдердің синтезін білдіретінін көрсетеді, бұл азаматтық теңдік қағидаттарын сақтай отырып, біртіндеп ұлттық біріктіруге бағдарланған институционалдық құрылымдар шеңберінде стратегиялық мемлекеттік саясатпен сипатталады.

Түйін сөздер: ұлттық бірегейлік, Қазақстан, ұлттық құрылыс, полиэтникалық, азаматтық ұлттық, посткеңестік трансформация.

Особенности национальной идентичности в Республике Казахстан: политологический анализ

Аннотация. Данная статья исследует отличительные особенности формирования национальной идентичности в Республике Казахстан через призму комплексного политологического анализа.

Исследование анализирует сложное взаимодействие между этническим разнообразием, историческим наследием, процессами государственного строительства и усилиями по модернизации, которые формируют современную казахстанскую идентичность в стране, объединяющей более 130 этнических групп. Опираясь на теоретические основы национального строительства, включая модели гражданского и этнического национализма, а также на эмпирические наблюдения постсоветской трансформации, охватывающие три десятилетия независимости, исследование выявляет ключевые механизмы, посредством которых Казахстан осуществлял национальную консолидацию, сохраняя при этом свой многонациональный характер. В работе утверждается, что Казахстан представляет собой отличительный случай сбалансированного подхода к национальному строительству, где государство стратегически координировало продвижение казахской этнической идентичности через языковую политику, реконструкцию исторического нарратива и демографические изменения, одновременно поддерживая принципы гражданского равенства и институциональные механизмы представительства меньшинств. Анализ показывает, что данный подход, иллюстрируемый конституционным различием между казахской этнической и казахстанской гражданской идентичностью, способствовал относительной стабильности и позволил избежать этнических конфликтов, которые затронули другие постсоветские государства. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что казахстанская национальная идентичность представляет собой синтез гражданского и этнического измерений, характеризующийся стратегическими государственными политиками в рамках институциональных структур, которые ориентированы на постепенную национальную консолидацию с соблюдением принципов гражданского равенства.

Ключевые слова: национальная идентичность, Казахстан, национальное строительство, полиэтничность, гражданский национализм, постсоветская трансформация.

Introduction

The question of national identity in post-Soviet states has emerged as one of the most significant challenges in contemporary political development. The Republic of Kazakhstan, as the largest landlocked country in the world and a multi-ethnic state with over 130 ethnic groups, presents a particularly compelling case for examining the dynamics of national identity formation [1]. Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has navigated the complex process of constructing a cohesive national identity while managing ethnic diversity, modernizing its economy, and establishing its position in regional and global politics [2].

The peculiarity of Kazakhstan's national identity lies in its dual nature, combining elements of ethnic Kazakh nationalism with broader civic identity frameworks. This duality reflects both the demographic composition of the country, where ethnic Kazakhs constitute approximately 70% of the population alongside significant Russian, Uzbek, and other minorities, and the strategic choices made by political leadership [3]. As Oka [4] argues, Kazakhstan's approach to nation-building differs significantly from other post-Soviet states, emphasizing gradual ethnic consolidation within a framework of nominal civic equality.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive political science analysis of the distinctive features of national identity in Kazakhstan, examining both theoretical dimensions and empirical

manifestations. The research addresses several key questions: What are the primary components of Kazakhstani national identity? How have state policies shaped identity formation? What role do historical narratives, language policies, and symbolic politics play in this process? How does Kazakhstan balance ethnic and civic dimensions of national belonging?

The formation of national identity in post-Soviet states occurs within unique historical and political circumstances that distinguish it from classical models of nation-building. Anderson's [5] concept of nations as «imagined communities» provides a foundational framework for understanding how collective identities are constructed through shared symbols, narratives, and institutions. However, the post-Soviet context requires additional theoretical considerations that account for the legacies of Soviet nationality policy, sudden state independence, and the challenges of simultaneous political and economic transformation [6].

Smith's [7] distinction between civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood proves particularly relevant for analyzing Kazakhstan's identity formation. Civic nationalism emphasizes political unity based on shared territory, laws, and civic institutions, regardless of ethnic origin, while ethnic nationalism prioritizes common descent, language, and culture. As Kolstø [8] demonstrates in his analysis of post-Soviet nation-building, most newly independent states have navigated between these two models, often combining

elements of both in what he terms «ethnic democracy».

Kazakhstan's national identity formation can be understood through the framework of strategic nation-building, where state elites deliberately employ various mechanisms to forge national cohesion [9]. These mechanisms include historical narrative construction, language policy, educational reform, symbolic politics, and institutional design. Cummings [10] emphasizes that Kazakhstan's leadership has pursued a distinctive path of «managed diversity», seeking to strengthen Kazakh ethnic identity while avoiding the radical exclusion of minorities that characterized some other post-Soviet states.

The concept of «nationalizing states», developed by Brubaker [6], captures the tension inherent in post-Soviet nation-building. Kazakhstan, like other titular-nationality states, has faced the challenge of promoting the interests and identity of the core ethnic group while maintaining the allegiance of significant minority populations. This balancing act requires sophisticated political management and creates distinctive patterns of identity formation [11].

Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive methodological approach that combines theoretical analysis with empirical examination of national identity formation in Kazakhstan. The research is grounded in constructivist perspectives, which understand national identity as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by historical processes, state policies, and collective practices rather than as a fixed or inherent characteristic.

The methodological framework integrates several complementary approaches. The comparative-historical method allows for analysis of Kazakhstan's nation-building trajectory within the broader context of post-Soviet transformation, identifying both unique features and common patterns shared with other newly independent states. Critical discourse analysis provides tools for examining how official narratives, symbolic representations, and policy documents construct and communicate understandings of national identity. Institutional analysis focuses on the

formal structures and mechanisms through which identity formation occurs, including legislative frameworks, state institutions, and educational systems.

Main part

Understanding contemporary Kazakhstani national identity requires examining its historical foundations, particularly the impact of Soviet nationality policy. The Soviet system, while proclaiming internationalism, institutionalized ethnicity through its passport system, territorial-administrative structure based on nationality, and policies of affirmative action for titular nationalities [12]. In Kazakhstan, these policies had profound and contradictory effects that continue to shape identity formation today.

The Soviet period brought dramatic demographic changes to Kazakhstan. The forced settlement of nomadic Kazakhs during collectivization, the arrival of millions of deportees from various Soviet republics, and the Virgin Lands Campaign transformed Kazakhstan from a territory with a Kazakh majority into one where ethnic Kazakh became a minority in their own republic by the 1960s [13]. The demographic consequences of Soviet policies created a unique situation where, at independence, ethnic Kazakhs constituted only about 40% of the population, with Russians forming approximately 38% [14].

Soviet nationality policy also created institutional frameworks for Kazakh national consciousness even while suppressing nationalist expression. The establishment of Kazakh-language education, cultural institutions, and a national intelligentsia provided resources for post-Soviet nation-building, despite the dominance of Russian language and culture in urban areas and political life. As Akiner [15] notes, this created a bifurcated linguistic situation that persists today, with significant portions of ethnic Kazakhs more comfortable in Russian than in Kazakh.

The historical narrative promoted in Soviet Kazakhstan emphasized class struggle, internationalism, and integration into the Soviet Union, marginalizing pre-Soviet Kazakh history and traditional culture. The post-independence period has witnessed a systematic rewriting of historical narratives, rehabilitated previously suppressed

aspects of Kazakh history while reinterpreted the Soviet period [2]. This historical revisionism forms a crucial component of contemporary identity construction, though it must navigate the complex memories and experiences of Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic population.

State-Building and Identity Formation Policies

The Kazakhstani state has employed a comprehensive set of policies aimed at fostering national identity since independence. These policies reflect a strategic approach that prioritizes gradual ethnic consolidation while maintaining stability in a multi-ethnic society [3]. The political leadership, particularly under President Nursultan Nazarbayev's three-decade rule, pursued what can be characterized as «soft nationalism» that avoided the ethnic conflicts that afflicted some other post-Soviet states [10].

Language policy represents one of the most significant instruments of identity formation in Kazakhstan. The Constitution designates Kazakh as the state language while granting Russian the status of «language of interethnic communication». This framework reflects the demographic and linguistic realities while signaling the priority of Kazakh language development [13]. Successive state programs for language development have aimed to increase Kazakh language competence across the population, though implementation has faced significant practical challenges given the widespread dominance of Russian in business, higher education, and urban life [16].

The policy of trilingual, introduced in 2007, represents an attempt to balance multiple linguistic identities while positioning Kazakhstan for global integration. The goal of developing fluency in Kazakh, Russian, and English acknowledges the practical importance of Russian while framing Kazakh as the unifying national language and English as the language of modernization [17]. As Pavlenko [18] observes, this policy reflects Kazakhstan's pragmatic approach to identity formation, which seeks to combine ethnic consolidation with economic and political objectives.

Symbolic politics constitute another crucial dimension of state identity-building efforts. The relocation of the capital from Almaty to Astana

in 1997 represented a major symbolic statement about Kazakhstan's future, creating a new center free from Soviet associations and located in a predominantly Russian-speaking region [19]. The architectural development of the new capital, featuring monumental buildings that blend modern design with Kazakh cultural motifs, serves as a physical manifestation of the desired national identity – modern, confident, and rooted in Kazakh traditions [20].

The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, established in 1995, represents an institutional mechanism for managing ethnic diversity while promoting a common civic identity. This consultative body provides representation for ethnic minorities and serves as a platform for dialogue on inter-ethnic issues. While some scholars critique it as a tool for political control rather than genuine democratization [13], others recognize it as a pragmatic instrument for maintaining stability in a diverse society [4].

Historical memory policy plays a crucial role in identity formation. The state has promoted historical narratives that emphasize Kazakh statehood traditions, celebrate resistance to external domination, and rehabilitate historical figures previously marginalized in Soviet historiography. The commemoration of events such as the Zheltoqsan protests of 1986 and the recognition of the Soviet-era famine as genocide against the Kazakh people serve to strengthen ethnic Kazakh identity while problematizing the Soviet legacy [21].

Demographic Dynamics and Identity Transformation

The demographic transformation of Kazakhstan since independence has profoundly affected national identity formation. The emigration of approximately 2.5 million people, primarily Russians and other Slavic groups, between 1991 and 2002, combined with higher birth rates among ethnic Kazakhs and the immigration of ethnic Kazakhs from neighboring countries, fundamentally altered the country's ethnic composition [14]. By 2020, ethnic Kazakhs constituted approximately 70% of the population, compared to only 40% at independence.

This demographic shift has enabled a more confident assertion of Kazakh identity in public

life, language policy, and cultural expression without triggering the interethnic tensions that might have occurred if attempted earlier. The increased demographic dominance of ethnic Kazakhs has changed the context for identity politics, making civic nationalism more feasible as the titular nation no longer fears demographic marginalization.

The repatriation program for ethnic Kazakhs from abroad, known as the «oralman» program, represents an explicit policy to strengthen the ethnic Kazakh population. Since 1991, over one million ethnic Kazakhs have returned from China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and other countries [22]. However, the integration of oralmans has revealed complexities within Kazakh ethnic identity itself, as returnees often face discrimination and challenges integrating into Kazakhstan society despite their ethnic Kazakh identity [23]. This phenomenon highlights that Kazakhstani identity involves not just ethnic identification, but also cultural, linguistic, and social dimensions shaped by the Soviet and post-Soviet experience.

Generational differences in identity formation represent another crucial demographic dimension. The post-independence generation, which has come of age in sovereign Kazakhstan, exhibits different patterns of identity formation compared to older generations who experienced Soviet socialization [9]. Young Kazakhs generally show stronger Kazakh language competence and identification with Kazakh culture while also demonstrating more cosmopolitan orientations influenced by globalization and digital connectivity.

Language, Culture, and Symbolic Resources

Language serves as both a practical instrument of communication and a powerful symbol of collective identity. The politics of language in Kazakhstan reveals the tensions inherent in the nation-building project. While state policy aims to strengthen the position of Kazakh, Russian remains dominant in many spheres, particularly in urban areas, higher education, and technical fields [18]. This linguistic situation creates a complex identity landscape where language use does not always correlate with ethnic identification.

The gradual increase in Kazakh language use represents one of the most significant

social transformations in post-independence Kazakhstan. According to the 2009 census, 74% of ethnic Kazakhs claimed fluency in Kazakh, compared to lower percentages in the Soviet period [24]. However, significant regional variations exist, with southern regions showing much higher Kazakh language dominance than northern regions. The persistence of Russian as a lingua franca, particularly in inter-ethnic communication, reflects both demographic realities and the legacy of Soviet language policy [16].

Cultural policy has focused on reviving and promoting Kazakh traditional culture while constructing a modern national culture that can accommodate the country's diversity. The promotion of traditional practices such as nomadic heritage, national holidays, traditional music, and crafts serves to strengthen ethnic Kazakh identity while providing distinctive content for broader Kazakhstani identity [2]. State support for cultural institutions, including theaters, museums, and educational programs, aims to ensure the transmission of Kazakh culture to younger generations while making it accessible to non-Kazakhs.

The role of Islam in Kazakhstani identity formation presents additional complexities. While Islam historically formed an important component of Kazakh identity, Soviet secularization policies suppressed religious practice for decades. Post-independence Kazakhstan has witnessed a revival of Islamic practice and identification, though within a framework of state-controlled secularism [25]. The state promotes a moderate, traditional form of Islam as part of national identity while suppressing forms perceived as extremist or foreign, balancing religious revival with secular modernization [26].

Conclusion

The national identity of Kazakhstan represents a distinctive synthesis emerging from the intersection of ethnic Kazakh nationalism, Soviet legacy, demographic transformation, strategic state policies, and contemporary globalization. The analysis reveals that Kazakhstani identity operates simultaneously on multiple levels: ethnic Kazakh identity strengthened through language policy, cultural revival, and demographic change;

civic Kazakhstani identity promoted through inclusive institutions, citizenship, and territorial belonging; and regional identities reflecting Kazakhstan's internal diversity and geopolitical position.

The relative success of Kazakhstan in avoiding the ethnic conflicts that afflicted some post-Soviet states while gradually strengthening national cohesion stems from several factors: pragmatic political leadership that prioritized stability over rapid ethnic mobilization, demographic trends that increased Kazakh predominance without requiring coercive policies, economic development that provided resources for managing diversity, and institutional mechanisms like the Assembly of the People that channeled ethnic politics into controlled forums.

However, significant challenges persist. The tension between civic and ethnic principles remains unresolved, creating ambiguity about the nature of Kazakhstani nationhood. Language policy continues to generate controversy as efforts to strengthen Kazakh encounter practical obstacles and minority concerns. Generational changes, internal migrations, and global influences introduce new dynamics that may destabilize existing compromises.

The theoretical implications of Kazakhstan's case extend beyond the country itself. It demonstrates that post-Soviet nation-building can follow multiple paths, with varying balances between ethnic and civic principles. The concept of «soft ethnic nationalism» or «asymmetric civic nationalism» may better capture the reality of many post-colonial states than pure ideal types of either civic or ethnic nationalism. Kazakhstan's experience suggests that national identity formation is a prolonged process involving continuous negotiation between state policies, demographic realities, historical legacies, and citizen practices.

Looking forward, Kazakhstan's national identity will continue to evolve under the influence of leadership changes, demographic trends, economic developments, and international dynamics. The transition from founding president Nazarbayev to President Tokayev has initiated discussions about national direction and identity narratives. Continued urbanization, generational change, and global integration will shape identity

patterns in ways that are difficult to predict. The ongoing challenge will be maintaining national cohesion while accommodating diversity, balancing ethnic Kazakh aspirations with minority rights, and navigating between regional powers and global influences.

Understanding Kazakhstan's national identity formation provides insights into broader processes of nation-building in post-colonial and post-Soviet contexts. It reveals the complexity of constructing national communities in diverse societies, the strategic nature of identity politics, and the enduring tension between particularistic ethnic identities and universalistic civic principles. The case of Kazakhstan demonstrates that national identity is not a fixed essence, but a political project continuously constructed through state policies, social practices, and collective negotiations.

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INFORMATION ABOUT AUTHORS

<i>Zhaskairat Burkitbayev</i>	PhD student, Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, email: zhaskairatburkitbayev@gmail.com
<i>Ayhan Kaya</i>	Professor of Political Science, PhD., Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey, email: ayhan.kaya@bilgi.edu.tr
<i>Жаскайрат Газымович Буркитбаев</i>	докторант, Абай атындағы Қазақ ұлттық педагогикалық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан Республикасы, email: zhaskairatburkitbayev@gmail.com
<i>Айхан Кая</i>	саясаттану ғылымдарының профессоры, PhD, Стамбул Билги университеті, Стамбул, Түркия, email: ayhan.kaya@bilgi.edu.tr
<i>Жаскайрат Газымович Буркитбаев</i>	докторант, Казахский национальный педагогический университет имени Абая, Алматы, Республика Казахстан, email: zhaskairatburkitbayev@gmail.com
<i>Айхан Кая</i>	профессор политологии, PhD, Стамбульский университет Билги, Стамбул, Турция, email: ayhan.kaya@bilgi.edu.tr

