

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE NATION-BUILDING PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHNOLINGUISTIC SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates public perceptions of the nation-building process in Kazakhstan, focusing on how demographic changes and linguistic dynamics shape attitudes toward the titular nation's majority status, as well as the status of other ethnic groups residing in the Republic. A survey of 1,200 respondents across multiple regions was conducted via face-to-face interviews. Results indicate a prevailing opinion among respondents that Kazakhs should maintain demographic majority in their homeland, while a significant segment acknowledges historical complexities surrounding the demographic developments in the Soviet era, when the Kazakh SSR was the sole republic where the titular nation was not the majority. Still, many respondents also recognize the enduring significance of the Russian-speaking population, which points to a need for a balance between promoting the Kazakh language and adherence to multilingualism. Despite nearly universal view of Kazakhstan as the homeland, varying degrees of agreement emerge among respondents regarding obligatory Kazakh-language competence and whether Russians should be viewed as a national minority. Research findings highlight the interplay of historical memory, cultural revival, and practical socioeconomic factors in shaping contemporary views on the nation-building process in Kazakhstan. Further qualitative research is recommended to identify how individuals navigate multiple linguistic and ethnic affiliations within a consolidated civic identity.

Keywords: Bipolar Society, Nation-Building, Language Policy, Soviet Legacy, Public Perception.

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Қоғамның ұлт құрылысы процесін этно-лингвистикалық өзгеріс контекстінде қабылдауы

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстан Республикасындағы ұлт құрылысы процесіне қатысты қоғам көзқарасы зерттеледі. Демографиялық өзгерістер мен тілдік фактордың қазақ ұлтының көпшілік мәртебесіне, сондай-ақ елдегі барша этностың рөліне қатысты көзқарасқа қалай ықпал ететіні зерделенген. Зерттеу барысында бірнеше өңірде 1200 респондентпен жүзбе-жүз сұхбат жүргізілді; деректер қазақ және орыс тілінде жинақталып, тілдік талғамның сан алуандылығын қамтуға ұмтылыс жасалды. Нәтижеде, қазақстандықтардың едәуір бөлігін құрайтын қазақтардың тарихи отаны аумағында сандық басымдықты сақтауы керек екендігі жайлы пікірмен келісетіні расталды. Сонымен қатар, Кеңес кезеңінде қазақтардың көпшілік халықты құрамағанын білдіретін күрделі тарихи контекстке де айрықша көңіл бөлетіні анықталды. Осыған сәйкес, респонденттердің көп бөлігі орыстілді халықтың қазіргі қоғамдағы рөлін мойындап, қазақ тілін ортақ ұлттық нышан ретінде орнықтыру мен көптілділік тәжірибесін қоғамдық өмірде ұштастырудың өзекті екенін де атап көрсетеді. Қазақстанды өз Отаны ретінде жаппай мойындағанына қарамастан, қазақ тілін міндетті түрде меңгеру мен орыстарды ұлттық азшылық ретінде қарастыру мәселесіне қатысты пікірлер алуан түрлі сипатта екені расталды. Алынған деректер тарихи жад, мәдени қайта жаңғыру және әлеуметтік-экономикалық факторлардың қазіргі «көпшілік–азшылық» қатынасын түсінудегі рөлін айқындауға септеседі. Азаматтардың түрлі тілдік және этностық сәйкестіктерді біртұтас азаматтық бірегейлік аясында қалай үйлестіретінін терең зерттеу үшін қосымша сапалық талдаулар ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: Биполяр қоғам, ұлттық құрылыс, тіл саясаты, кеңестік мұра, қоғамдық қабылдау.

Общественное восприятие процессов национального строительства в контексте этно-лингвистического сдвига

Аннотация. В данной работе исследуются общественные представления о процессах национального строительства в Республике Казахстан, с акцентом на то, как демографические изменения и языковые факторы формируют отношение к статусу титульной нации как большинства и к роли других этнических

групп. В ходе исследования было опрошено 1200 респондентов в нескольких регионах посредством личных интервью; при этом сбор данных осуществлялся как на казахском, так и на русском языках, что позволило отразить многообразие языковых предпочтений. Результаты указывают на преобладающее согласие с идеей, что казахи должны сохранять демографическое превосходство на своей исторической территории, хотя значительная часть населения подчёркивает сложный исторический контекст советской эпохи, когда казахи не составляли большинство. Вместе с тем многие респонденты признают важную роль русскоязычного населения, отмечая необходимость балансировать между утверждением казахского языка как национального символа и практикой многоязычия. Несмотря на практически повсеместное признание Казахстана в качестве Родины, заметна вариативность мнений относительно обязательного владения казахским языком и вопроса о том, следует ли считать русских национальным меньшинством. Полученные данные демонстрируют, как историческая память, культурное возрождение и социально-экономические факторы влияют на современные представления о соотношении большинства и меньшинств. Рекомендуется дальнейшее качественное исследование, чтобы глубже понять, каким образом граждане совмещают различные языковые и этнические идентичности в рамках единой общегражданской идентичности.

Ключевые слова: Биполярное общество, национальное строительство, языковая политика, советское наследие, общественное восприятие.

Introduction

The study of the nation-building process in Kazakhstan is inevitably linked to the concept of a bipolar societal structure that took shape during the Soviet era. At that time the titular nation of the Kazakh SSR existed alongside another demographically and culturally significant group, the Russians. This model, in which two major ethnic communities were clearly distinguished within a multiethnic state and occupied a significant position within the republic, shaped the socio-political development of Kazakhstan for several decades. Despite the historical ties Kazakhs have to this territory, they did not constitute a majority in their own Soviet republic, especially at the latter stages of its existence. The Russian population was a stable presence in the urban environment and formed a sizable portion of the population of the Kazakh SSR in general. In essence, this situation was unique within the broader context of the USSR, as no other republic had such a trend of demographic development.

With Kazakhstan's transition to independence, the country gradually overcame this paradox. Demographic changes, migration flows, and new ethno-political orientations led to Kazakhs slowly regaining the majority status. The "Kazakhization" trend took shape in the demographic composition of the country, which included programs that support the repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad, along with natural population growth. This resulted in a situation where Kazakhs currently comprise over 70% of the total population (as per latest census in 2021). Consequently, the bipolar society model has undergone a significant transformation; however, the question of how the population itself perceives these changes remains open. It is important to establish

the view of the population regarding questions related to the historical nation-building process, as well as its current stages of development. Was the historically large Russian presence justified in earlier periods? How is the gradual strengthening of the Kazakh language and its role in interethnic relations currently perceived? Should Russians be considered a "national minority" or should they continue to be viewed as "the second pole" of the bipolar Kazakhstani nation?

This article aims to analyze public perceptions of ethno-political demography in Kazakhstan, specifically the views on the titular nation, its majority status, and how it influenced contemporary linguistic and cultural practices. The empirical basis of the research comes from a mass survey conducted in six regions of the country: the cities of Astana and Almaty, as well as one region from each geographic axis of the republic, including Atyrau (West), East Kazakhstan, Kostanay (North), and Turkestan Region (South). A total of 1,200 respondents were surveyed regarding their views of the historical and current demographic realities, from the initial dominance of the Russian population during the Soviet period to the current situation of Kazakhs reestablishing a significant presence in state institutions and cultural spheres.

The survey was conducted by means of face-to-face interviews, taking into account quota structures based on sex, age, and place of residence (rural or urban areas). This approach made it possible to ensure a representative socio-demographic composition of the sample. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh or Russian.

Along with the consideration of historic and contemporary dynamics of the nation-building process, the research aims to establish public perception of two distinct components of this process.

On the one hand, the research aims to identify the views on the ethnic composition and majority-minority status of Kazakhs and Russians. This is an important issue to consider in light of the fact that the share of the Kazakh population has increased gradually to a clear majority. At the same time, despite losing ground in the demographic composition of the republic (a decline from 40.8% in 1979 to around 15.5% in 2021), Russians and the Russian language continue to serve a significant role in the process of nation-building for Kazakhstan, along with other ethnicities. Whether any future nation-building project needs to incorporate the increasing prominence of Kazakhs as the ethnic core of the nation or to preserve the bipolar structure will need to take into account the public view of the subject.

On the other hand, an even more salient issue is that of language. The realm of national language policy, even as it continues to modernize, addresses not only the question of “who is the majority and who is the minority,” but also the actual usage of Kazakh and Russian as languages in various communicative contexts. Kazakh has gained significant ground in recent years, and with population growth in Kazakh-speaking regions of the republic one should expect this trend to continue into the future. However, Russian retains the status of the language of interethnic communication to a certain extent, and remains the primary language for some ethnic Kazakhs. Considering this, the current article aims to study the ethno-linguistic development of Kazakhstan as a historical and contemporary phenomenon, as it would largely determine the trajectories for future evolution of Kazakhstan as a nation.

Literature Review

Nation-building, as a multi-dimensional process, has long been linked to shifting demographic and linguistic landscapes within modern states. Scholarly inquiries often focus on how historically dominant languages and majorities have been shaped by colonization, migration, and policy interventions, a theme explored in both international contexts and in studies specific to Kazakhstan. Miheeva’s [1, p. 155–161.] emphasis on the “demographic factor” in social development underscores the material underpinnings—population growth, migration flows, and birth rates—that can alter the balance of power

between ethnic communities over time. Likewise, Sakaev [2, pp. 45–51.] addresses the role of these demographic dynamics in fueling or mitigating ethno-political conflicts, suggesting that population structures intersect with broader political and cultural forces.

In the Kazakhstani context, Zhumaly [3] highlights how nation-building processes after independence brought to the fore “fears, both imagined and real,” revealing varying perspectives on whether the Soviet-era demographic balance was “normal” or historically contingent. This resonates with Horowitz’s [4, p. 697] notion that inter-group relations, especially in post-colonial or post-imperial states, can be fraught with competition for symbolic and institutional dominance. Milne’s [5, p. 279] concept of “bipolar states” similarly points to structural features where two numerically and / or culturally influential groups define the sociopolitical environment, while other ethnicities often occupy minority roles. In some works, such as those compiled by Kolsto, the trajectories of titular vs. Russian-speaking communities in post-Soviet republics are brought into comparative relief, revealing patterns of ethnic integration or divergence that parallel developments in Kazakhstan. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, the trajectory of nation-building in Soviet Kazakhstan has been quite unique in that two strong poles emerged and influenced this process until recent times, much more so than in other SSRs.

Brubaker [6, pp. 1785–1814.], examining “nationalizing states,” sheds light on processes whereby newly independent states prioritize the titular nation’s historical claims and language. In line with Sztompka’s [7, p. 6-16] argument on collective trauma, such nationalist agendas often emerge from historical memory of marginalization or forced assimilation, suggesting that policies explicitly aimed at cultural “revival” can become key vehicles for cementing and re-establishing the legitimacy of the titular group. This pursuit of “national majority” status, as documented in research by Kadyrzhanov and Eshpanova [8], intertwines with issues of adopting an official state language, demographic engineering (through repatriation and higher birth rates), and institutional consolidation in Kazakhstan.

Research on modern Kazakhstan also addresses the role of cultural institutions. For instance, the collective monograph *Kultur’naya integratsiya etnosov v Kazakhstane* (“Cultural

Integration of Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan,” see Kadyrzhanov ed. 2020) underscores how institutional frameworks can either reinforce or mediate ethnic boundaries, with language policy typically situated at the core of such debates. Sarsenbayeva [9, p. 306] views language as a “marker of values,” situating it as an element in forging cohesive civic identity while acknowledging the complexities introduced by persistent bilingualism. Ismagambetov [10, p. 71-80] takes a more micro-level lens, analyzing how Kazakhstani citizens self-present their linguistic identities, showing that official discourses on “one state – one language” coexist with everyday multilingual practices. Similarly, Eshpanova et al. [11,12] describe how the actual usage of Kazakh and Russian evolves, particularly as younger generations negotiate both national imperatives and pragmatic realities.

Taken together, these works illustrate that nation-building in Kazakhstan is neither a seamless nor a monolithic progression. Instead, it arises from the dynamic interplay of historical memory, cultural revival, and socio-economic developments [13]. Understanding public perceptions demands a methodology that captures the complexity of demographic shifts, institutional policies, and individual life experiences. This includes views people hold on the legitimacy of the titular majority, the status of other ethnicities, or the prominence of the Russian language. By situating the survey findings of the present study within this broader scholarly conversation, it is possible to interpret how social attitudes and historical legacies converge in the ongoing redefinition of ethno-linguistic relations in Kazakhstan.

Methodology

The present study aimed to assess how the population of Kazakhstan perceives the concept of nation-building in light of demographic and linguistic shifts that have shaped social structures of the republic since the Soviet period. In order to gather comprehensive data, researchers conducted a face-to-face survey from September 30 to October 5, 2023, across several regions of Kazakhstan. These regions included the cities of Astana and Almaty as well as the Atyrau, East Kazakhstan, Kostanay, and Turkestan regions, to ensure geographic representation of the sample. The age composition ranges from a group of indi-

viduals between 18 and 34 that forms the basis of the sample, and gradually decreases across older age groups, up until a smaller cohort of respondents aged 66 or older. Gender proportions are fairly balanced, with a slight predominance of female respondents over male ones (Table 1).

Table 1 - Age, Gender, and Ethnic Composition (n = 1200)

Variable	Category	Number	%
Age	18–34	410	34.2
	35–50	372	31.0
	51–65	273	22.8
	66+	145	12.0
Gender	Male	554	46.2
	Female	646	53.8
Ethnic Composition	Kazakh	863	71.6
	Russian	209	17.4
	Tatar	28	2.3
	Uzbek	24	2.0
	Ukrainian	18	1.5
	Uighur	13	1.1
	Other (all remaining groups combined)	45	3.8
Total	–	1200	100.0

Source: Compiled by the authors

Education levels are varied, with vocational or technical qualifications prevailing (37.3%). A sizeable proportion of respondents indicates incomplete (19.6%) or complete higher education (19.1%). Patterns in marital status indicate a higher share of those in registered marriages (57.9%), while the housing data underscores the prominence of one-story family homes (50.5%) and apartments (48.6%). Self-assessments of well-being, spanning from those who feel they live excellently to those who believe they live poorly, demonstrate a bell-shaped distribution, with a majority of respondents falling in the middle of income distribution (share of respondents stating they “live at a satisfactory level, possess everything they need and can make ends meet” is 50.1%).

Family income, compiled from wages, pensions, and all other sources of financial support, forms another dimension in understanding the economic conditions of respondents. Nearly one in six households (16.4%) enjoy higher earnings (in excess of 300,000 tenge per month), although it should be noted that a sizable share (30.1%, almost a third) earns below 150,000 tenge per month.

Sampling relied on a route-based approach, complemented by quotas set to reflect essential demographic indicators such as sex, age group, and place of residence (urban and rural). This design sought to capture a reliable representation of the country's demographic composition, ensuring that the sample corresponded in its stratification to the general population. Researchers believe such representation is critical in investigating perceptions of "national majority," the evolving status of minorities, and attitudes toward language policy.

Following the data collection procedure, responses underwent standard quantitative processing. A frequency analysis was carried out to identify how many participants chose each answer option, and percentages were calculated to illustrate the distribution of opinions on key topics: the desirability of a majority status (official or otherwise) of Kazakhs as the titular nation, perception of Soviet-era demographic developments, and the potential need for adaptation among different ethno-linguistic communities to changing linguistic realities. In addition to such frequency counts, the study drew comparisons between questions to detect correlations among views respondents hold regarding national identity, language use, and historical interpretations. More complex modeling was not the central focus here. However, preliminary cross-tabulations allowed the researchers to discern certain patterns. These include how socio-demographic factors (e.g., education, age, employment status) might influence respondents' perspectives of what constitutes a "national majority" and whether such a majority automatically implies tangible socio-political and cultural advantages or paves the way for linguistic dominance.

By presenting results in aggregated form, the study preserves respondent anonymity and strives to provide insights that highlight the nuanced interplay between demography, historical memory, and contemporary ethno-linguistic policy. Although the methods employed were primarily quantitative, the design leaves room for subsequent qualitative follow-up through in-depth interviews or focus groups, which could further elaborate the motives and convictions behind the reported statistical tendencies.

Results and Discussion

The conducted survey of 1,200 respondents sought to identify how the population of Kazakh-

stan views issues of ethno-political demographic development in their country, the transformation of a bipolar society, and the role of the titular nation as the "numerical majority". The research focused on such dimensions as perceptions of the titular nation, the status of the Russian population, attitudes toward the notion of national minorities, and linguistic practices. These remain crucial factors in interethnic relations given the historical background and multiethnic composition of Kazakhstan that resulted from historical processes.

The study was conducted in six key regions of the country (Astana, Almaty, Atyrau Province, East Kazakhstan Province, Kostanay Province, and Turkestan Region), ensuring representative coverage that accounts for variations in ethno-linguistic composition and geographic representation. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a route-based sampling method, complemented by quotas for sex, age, and location type (urban or rural).

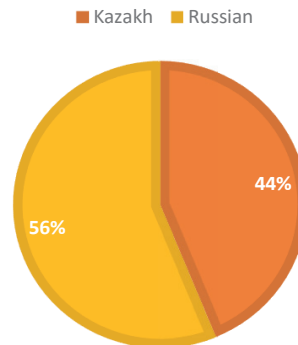


Figure 1. Language Choice for the Interview
Source: Compiled by the authors

Language choice for the interview played a critical role in understanding the ethno-cultural landscape of Kazakhstan. According to the data, 43.8% of respondents preferred Kazakh, while 56.2% preferred Russian (Figure 1). This may already indicate underlying attitudes that respondents might hold regarding historic and contemporary linguistic development in Kazakhstan, as will be discussed further.

One of the key hypotheses in this study was that most citizens of Kazakhstan ascribe particular value to ensuring that the titular ethnic group outnumbers all others. The question, "Do you agree that in a national state, the native nation must numerically surpass all other ethnicities living in that country?" aimed to capture this notion.

Views on the ethnic component of the nation-building process. As shown in Figure 2, 63.3% of respondents fully agreed with this statement, while an additional 19.8% partially agreed, which combines together amount to over 80% of those who in some way endorse the idea of numerical predominance in a national state in general. Only 15.2% expressed disagreement (combining “partial” and “fully disagree”), and 1.7% indicated uncertainty.

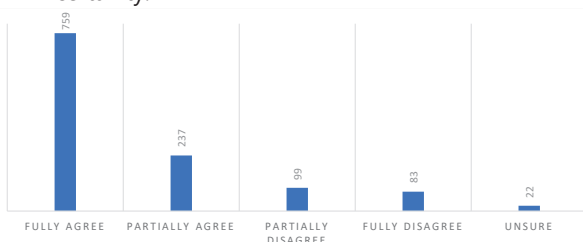


Figure 2. “Do you agree that in a national state, the native nation must numerically surpass all other ethnicities living in that country?”
Source: Compiled by the authors

Such a high level shown in Figure 2 underscores a widely held notion that the status of the titular ethnic group is perceived by respondents as an inherent feature of a national state. Possible explanations include the historical ties such a group has to the territory would have, the desire to strengthen the culture and language of the predominant group (though the Kazakh language does not enjoy a complete monopoly in this case).

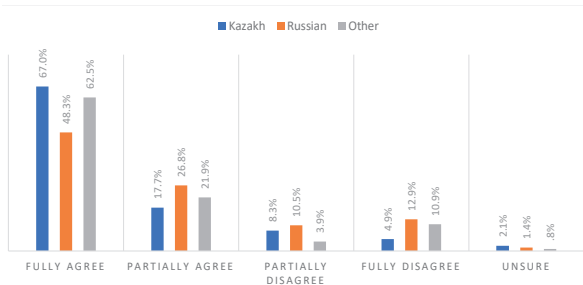


Figure 3. “Do you agree that in a national state, the native nation must numerically surpass all other ethnicities living in that country?”, Disaggregated by Ethnicity
Source: Compiled by the authors

It might also reflect concerns about a possible return to the Soviet-era situation in which the Kazakhs did not always constitute a majority in their own republic, even if the recent demographic trends show that it is unlikely. At the same time, it

should be noted that there is comparatively less agreement among Russian respondents, who are less likely to fully agree with the statement (Figure 3).

In contrast, respondents were also asked whether a situation in which the titular nation does not constitute the majority in their own state is considered normal or abnormal. Responses were more evenly distributed across the options: 22.7% deemed it completely normal, 28.9% found it partially normal, whereas 20.8% and 25.3% viewed it as partially or completely abnormal respectively. About 2.3% of respondents were unsure (see Table 2).

Table 2 - If the titular nation does not constitute a numerical majority in its own state, do you consider this normal or abnormal?

Statement	Number	Percent
Normal	272	22.7
Partially normal	347	28.9
Partially abnormal	249	20.8
Completely abnormal	304	25.3
Unsure	28	2.3
Total	1200	100.0

Source: Compiled by the authors

These data suggest two significant segments of public opinion: one with a more flexible stance about a titular ethnic group comprising under half of the population (a combined total of 51.6% of those who found it completely or partially normal), and another expressing unease or disagreement (46.1% who found it completely or partially abnormal). Such difference is striking in light of

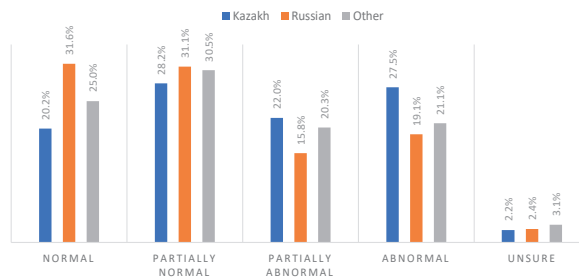


Figure 4. “Do you agree that in a national state, the native nation must numerically surpass all other ethnicities living in that country?”, by ethnicity
Source: Compiled by the authors

responses to the preceding question, suggesting that while respondents believe that the titular na-

tion should constitute the majority of the population, they simultaneously do not believe it to be abnormal if that is not the case. As in the previous question, Kazakhs were more inclined to find it abnormal compared to Russians or other ethnic groups (Figure 4).

Similar patterns emerged were produced when respondents answered questions specifically concerning the Kazakh population. In order to measure attitudes, the following question was posed, "During the Soviet period, Kazakhs were the only Soviet nation that did not constitute the majority in its republic. Do you think this was normal or abnormal?" The results were as follows: 23.3% viewed this as normal, 29.3% as partially normal, while 42.1% considered it abnormal to varying degrees. About 5.3% were unsure to formulate a definite opinion (Figure 3).

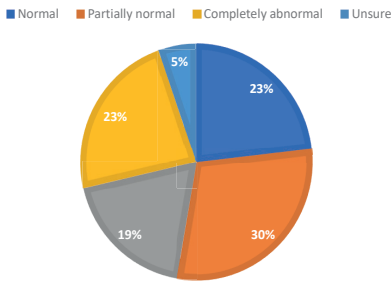


Figure 3. "During the Soviet period, Kazakhs were the only Soviet nation that did not make up the majority in its republic. Do you think this was normal or abnormal?"

Source: Compiled by the authors

Some respondents attribute the low proportion of Kazakhs during the Soviet period such as collectivization, relocation, industrialization, the 1930s famine, and migration flows that brought numerous other ethnicities to the republic as potential causes. Others argue that it contravened principles of national justice and contributed to the cultural and linguistic marginalization of Kazakhs.

Another pivotal question probed respondents' stance on the historical fact that "During the Soviet era, Russians outnumbered Kazakhs across Kazakhstan, particularly in urban areas. How do you assess this historical reality?" Overall, 53.9% considered this either justified (20.0%) or partially justified (33.9%). The remaining 38.9% found it unjustified to some degree. About 7.2% found it difficult to respond.

A subsequent significant development in the history of independent Kazakhstan was the incremental increase in the share and number of the Kazakh population to the point that they currently hold a demographic majority. The question "Kazakhstan's population is now mostly Kazakh. Do you agree that this is the way it should be?" 60.4% of respondents strongly supported this view, 27.7% in partial agreement, and just 8.8% expressing either complete or partial disagreement. These results indicate strong support for endorsement for the current reality, where the titular nation has become the dominant part of the country's population. Such a view might stem from a desire to preserve national identity, place a higher value on language and cultural revitalization, and reflect the perceptions of historical justice during the Soviet period.

A key part of the inquiry was to determine how the population currently perceives Russians—whether they are seen as a "minority" or not. Asked, "Can Russians today be considered a national minority in Kazakhstan?" 30.2% agreed, 35.0% partially agreed, 15.8% partially disagreed, and 15.2% disagreed, which indicates a general tendency toward agreement with the statement (Figure 5).

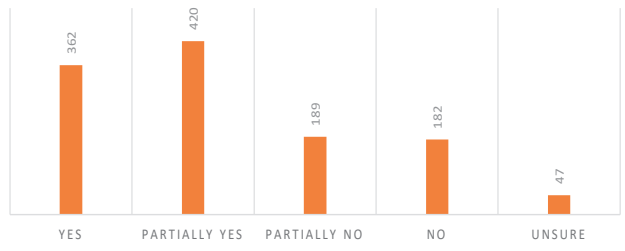


Figure 5. Perceptions of Russians as a National Minority Today

Source: Compiled by the authors

Thus, around 65% view Russians as a national minority either fully or partially, likely based on numerical considerations. The remaining 35% disagree, possibly reflecting a broader view of the social and cultural role of the Russian population, including their historically prominent role in the economy, politics, and language. Moreover, the responses do not vary drastically by ethnicity, as the majority of Kazakh and Russian and other respondents agree with the statement, suggesting general acceptance of the demographic development (Figure 6).

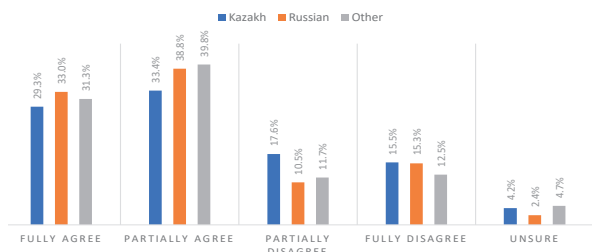


Figure 6. Perceptions of Russians as a National Minority Today, Disaggregated by Ethnicity
Source: Compiled by the authors

Respondents were also asked, “Do you agree that only Kazakhs constitute the national majority in Kazakhstan?” In total, 57.3% agreed, 25.1% partially agreed, while 15.5% either partially or fully disagreed. The remaining 2.1% were unsure. Overall, 82.4% of respondents either fully or partially endorsed the idea that Kazakhs alone represent the “national majority.” This suggests a widespread perception supporting the idea of the titular nation as the core of state, although a small minority expressed an alternative view – that other large groups could also be “majorities”.

Respondents were also asked whether they believe that “Russians, like Kazakhs, can also be regarded as a national majority”. The results shifted: 34.6% agreed, 28.4% partially agreed, while 33.9% collectively either partially or fully disagreed, and 3.1% were unsure (Table 3).

Table 3 - “Russians, like Kazakhs, can also be considered a national majority”

Response	Number	Percent
Agree	415	34.6
Partially agree	341	28.4
Partially disagree	254	21.2
Disagree	152	12.7
Unsure	38	3.1
Total	1200	100.0

Source: Compiled by the authors

This presents an interesting paradox: while over 57% stated earlier that “only Kazakhs” are the majority, a proportion of respondents now believes that Russians, too, are relatively numerous, given their historical role and cultural influence. The term “national majority” may be interpreted by some respondents in broader rather than literal terms, such as cultural or economic authority and the dominance of Russian language in urban areas.

Within a bipolar society, the concept of “two dominant ethnicities” emerges, and ethnic groups other than the dominant two are viewed as minorities. To examine this belief, respondents were asked, “Do you agree that in Kazakhstan all nationalities except for Kazakhs and Russians are national minorities?” The findings are represented in Figure 7.

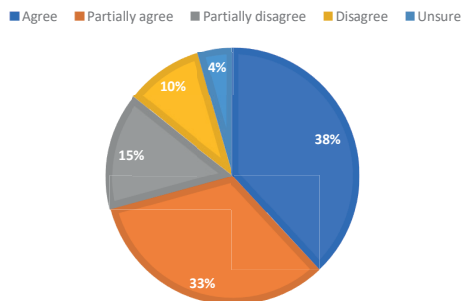


Figure 7. “Do you agree that in Kazakhstan all nationalities except for Kazakhs and Russians are national minorities?”
Source: Compiled by the authors

Overall, 70.9% support to the bipolar societal model by labeling all others as minorities. This standpoint reaffirms the hypothesis that the dual-ethnic core (Kazakhs and Russians) remains influential in public perceptions, while other ethnicities (e.g., Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Uyghurs, Tatars) are treated as minorities.

Interestingly, when asked “Do you agree that there are no national minorities in Kazakhstan?” 31.6% disagreed, while 21.8% partially disagreed. This adds up to 53.4% who reject the idea that no minorities exist. On the other hand, 17.5% fully agreed with the statement that there are “no minorities”, and another 22.9% partially agreed, totaling about 40.4% who hold that all ethnicities are equal and no group should be officially classified as a minority, which is broadly consistent with Kazakhstan’s ethnic policy discourse, though it is not as widespread. This apparent inconsistency between the questions on “any form of minority” and “everyone but Kazakhs and Russians” highlights the complexity of public perceptions. On the one hand, the official interethnic harmony doctrine in Kazakhstan assumes equality, indicating “there are no minorities.” On the other hand, Kazakhstanis acknowledge differences in demographic size and sometimes use the term “minority” mostly in its technical, numeric sense.

An important dimension of the survey explored whether the numerical majority of Kazakhs affords them any advantages (Figure 8). In light of

current national policies, these numbers suggest that approximately 70% of respondents believe that being the majority yields cultural, linguistic, or practical advantages—for instance in employment, cultural affirmation, or social influence.⁴

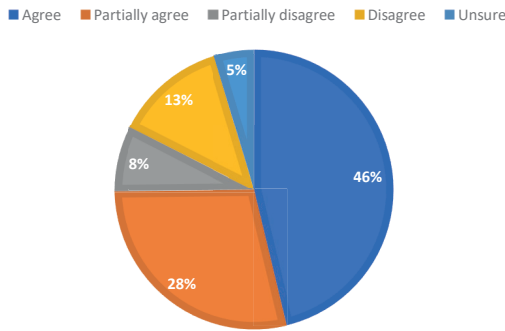


Figure 8. Does the titular majority give Kazakhs an advantage?
 Source: Compiled by the authors

Views on the linguistic component of the nation-building process. Historically, Kazakhstan’s urban areas had a strong orientation toward Russian, particularly during the Soviet era. To ascertain views on this, respondents were asked: “Do you agree that Kazakhs increasingly adopted Russian as a primary language in the Soviet era because they were a minority in Kazakhstan’s cities?” Some 43.6% fully agreed and 30.5% partially agreed; 10.8% disagreed, while 11.0% partially disagreed. Thus, a large share of respondents perceive that Russian dominance in urban centers prompted Kazakhs to switch to Russian.

In a multiethnic state, language debates often center on whether one language should become “common for all citizens” or simply remain one of several. Among the respondents, 49.3% agreed and 26.2% partially agreed with the question, “Should citizens of various nationalities speak the language of the national majority?” 9.9% of respondents partially disagreed and 10.8% completely opposed this statement, indicating a high level of agreement on the question of the national language as the common medium of communication in general.

While Kazakh is formally the state language of Kazakhstan, these findings reveal that a considerable segment of the population supports obligatory mastery of it, yet some do not view this as an absolute requirement. Quite possibly, some respondents take into account the entrenched bilingual reality and find a strict “Kazakh-only” approach impractical.

Subsequently, respondents were asked if Kazakh, as the language of the titular nation, should function as a language of interethnic communication. Here, 48% fully agreed, 25.5% partially agreed, 15.1% partially disagreed, 7.6% disagreed, and 3.8% were unsure (Table 4).

Table 4 - Kazakh should serve as the language for interethnic communication

Statement	Number	Percent
Agree	576	48.0
Partially agree	306	25.5
Partially disagree	181	15.1
Disagree	91	7.6
Unsure	46	3.8
Total	1200	100.0

Source: Compiled by the authors

When aggregating agreement responses, 73.5% of respondents support the idea that Kazakh should function as a common language of communication. Nevertheless, everyday linguistic practices indicate that Russian continues to function as the de facto language of interethnic communication. As such, partial agreement may reflect a view that a dual-language environment gradually transitioning toward more extensive use of Kazakh.

Another question was, “Do you agree that many citizens of different ethnicities do not speak Kazakh, even though it is the language of the national majority?” The data indicate that 60.9% agreed, 22.3% partly agreed (together 83.2%), with 5.2% disagreeing and 8.9% partly disagreeing. This highlights the persistent gap that persists between official status and everyday linguistic practice, despite the efforts to promote the use of Kazakh in the public space.

Despite this, one of the strongest linguistic policy positions among the respondents is that everyone should speak Kazakh considering the fact that Kazakhs are the national majority. As such, 39.6% agreed and 30.2% partially agreed, together accounting 69.8%, and this suggests strong public support for this idea. At the same time, 27.1% still disagreed to varying degrees (15.3% disagree, and 11.8% partially disagree). In light of previous findings, the public largely favors amplifying the role of the Kazakh language, though not everyone necessarily supports a strict mandate that all citizens become fully proficient in it. Here it is also possible to compare responses by ethnicity. Survey results demonstrate overall agreement, with Russians and other ethnicities demonstrating comparatively

higher degrees of disagreement, but still mostly in accordance with the idea of promoting the use of Kazakh (Figure 9).

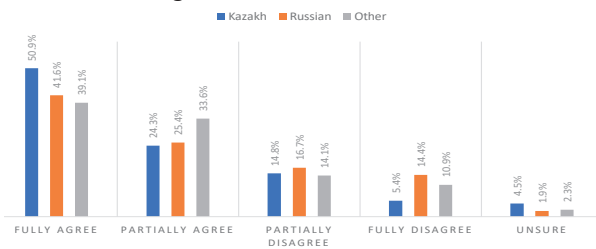


Figure 9. Whether Kazakh, as the language of national majority, should be spoken by everyone, by ethnicity
 Source: Compiled by the authors

A core measure of patriotic and civic identity is the question: “Do you consider Kazakhstan to be your homeland and your state?” Over 95% responded “yes,” and another 1.7% said “partly yes,” meaning nearly 97% altogether. Just 1.3% answered “partly no,” and 0.7% “no.” Despite historical complexities and ethno-cultural differences, these figures show strong civic identification with the state.

Resume. Data from the survey confirm the idea that the notion of a bipolar societal structure persists in Kazakhstan’s collective mindset, as both Kazakhs and Russians are perceived as the two largest ethnic communities vested with distinctive statuses and rights in the republic, while other ethnicities are mostly perceived as minorities. The historical experience of the Soviet period that saw Russian communities outnumbering and culturally influential the rest shapes perceptions of contemporary realities in the present. Many view that period as partly justified in terms of industrial development, while acknowledging that it negatively affected the Kazakh language and national identity.

Contemporary circumstances, in which Kazakhs make up the majority, are clearly accepted by most respondents as a natural development, since Kazakhs are the native population of the republic. Furthermore, a considerable portion believes that their majority affords them key advantages, such as promoting the Kazakh language, preserving and expanding cultural traditions, and influencing governance structures.

At the same time, the status of the Russian population remains an open question. Although the majority of respondents either consider Russians to be a “national minority” in technical quantitative terms or are at least inclined to that view, a significant share maintains that historic role of the Russian population, along with their economic

and linguistic leverages, prevents labeling them as a “typical minority.” Consequently, contradictory views coexist, e.g., “only Kazakhs are truly the national majority” and “Russians may also be perceived as a majority”. This ambivalence reflects to the complexity of the interplay between sheer numbers, cultural prominence, and historical legacy of any specific ethnic group.

As for language, findings suggest substantial degree of approval for the notion that Kazakh, being the language of the national majority, should be used more extensively and serve as a medium of interethnic communication. Yet the actual situation is more nuanced: respondents commonly recognize that “many people do not speak Kazakh”, and more than half feel that adopting the state language should be required for all ethnic groups, although views are rather split. A substantial proportion, especially Russian speakers, do not regard universal usage of Kazakh as mandatory for everyone.

Lastly, nearly unanimous recognition of Kazakhstan as one’s homeland at over 95% indicates a strong civic sense of belonging, despite disagreements in the interpretation of several historical and cultural issues. Typically, such an indicator reflects that, notwithstanding internal complexities, interethnic accord remains a cornerstone of social stability for the republic.

Conclusion

An in-depth analysis of the sociological data suggests a trend of reinforcing the role of the Kazakh language and consolidating the standing of Kazakhs as the “state-forming nation”. Nonetheless, the status of the Russian population remains unique: statistically, they may be considered a minority, but they have retained significant historical and cultural weight. This dual-core structure within the country’s ethno-demographic structure means that Kazakhstan is still widely perceived as a bipolar society, albeit one open to diverse cultural influences going forward.

Overcoming the Soviet legacy, in which Kazakhs were relegated to a minority status within their polity, entails a conscious effort to solidify a new reality in which they are not only numerically dominant but also culturally anchored. Meanwhile, the terms “majority” and “minority” are generally understood as normal, either as something entirely acceptable or as a consequence of shift in historical development. A rather large proportion of respondents acknowledges that “Russians, as well as Kazakhs”, might be considered as the “national majority”, underscoring the

continuing importance of the Russian language and culture in daily life of Kazakhstani society.

Thus, survey findings illustrate a complex social context wherein multiple interpretive frameworks exist simultaneously within the society: one that emphasizes historical justice and reclaiming demographic primacy for Kazakhs, and another that highlights the contributions of the Russian community, resisting any monolithic classification of them as “just one group among the minorities”. As such, language policy calls for balance between fortifying full-fledged use of Kazakh and maintaining the long-standing practice of bilingualism across various domains.

Notably, given the strong sense of Kazakhstan as “our homeland” and widespread consensus on interethnic harmony, gradual approaches to strengthening the position of the Kazakh language and further strengthening the Kazakh cultural legacy can be pursued without marginalizing Russian-speaking populations. In the foreseeable future, government measures may continue focusing on raising the status of Kazakh in education, state bodies, and the media, while respecting the bilingual reality of Kazakhstan, thereby avoiding conflicts and preserving mutual respect among ethnic groups.

Overall, the above data provide a coherent picture, confirming that, although bipolar structure of Kazakhstan remains present in public perceptions, it is evolving in light of the independence of the republic and the demographic ascendancy of Kazakhs. Crucial factors include not only raw demographic statistics but also societal demands for fairness, historical continuity, and real linguistic usage in daily life.

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