



ROYAL THAI EMBASSY
IN ASTANA

LANGUAGE POLICIES IN KAZAKHSTAN: BALANCING MULTILINGUALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

OCTOBER 2024

BY THE ROYAL THAI EMBASSY IN ASTANA

INTRODUCTION

The promotion of the Kazakh language in Kazakhstan has had a significant impact on interethnic harmony, fostering both unity and tension among the country's diverse ethnic groups. This dual effect stems from the government's strategic language policies aimed at enhancing national identity while maintaining social cohesion.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the Soviet period, Russian dominated as the lingua franca across the republics, including Kazakhstan. Soviet language policies, aimed at fostering unity within the Union, prioritized Russian as the language of administration, education, and professional domains, leading to a significant decline in Kazakh language use. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point for Kazakhstan, where national policies shifted to prioritize Kazakh as a symbol of independence and identity. This reorientation involved promoting Kazakh language proficiency and use across various sectors, an initiative viewed as essential for strengthening national identity.

CURRENT STATUS

Kazakhstan's constitutionally recognized language framework designates Kazakh as the state language since it gained independence in 1991, while Russian is granted official status as the language of interethnic communication. These designations reflect an effort to balance the symbolic and practical needs of a multicultural population.

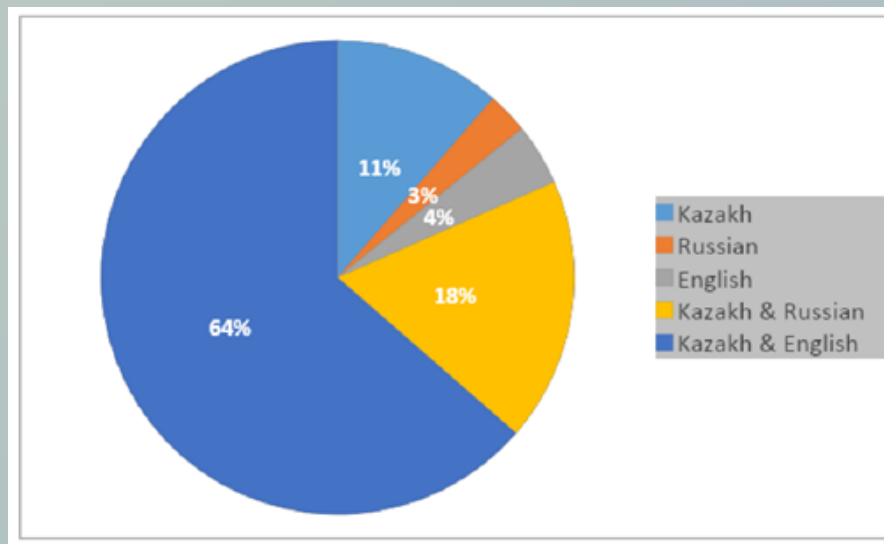
THE TRINITY OF LANGUAGES POLICY

In 2007, the former Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed a phased introduction of the one of the most notable policies, the "Trinity of Languages" initiative, which encourages fluency in Kazakh, Russian, and English. Kazakh serves as the language of national unity, Russian facilitates regional and interethnic communication, and English connects Kazakhstan to the global community.

Various institutions support this policy framework. Schools, universities, and public service institutions emphasize Kazakh proficiency, while Russian and English are introduced early to foster a trilingual population. Government media and publications are increasingly bilingual, with Kazakh prioritized but Russian remaining accessible.

Kazakhstan's language policies reflect the government's efforts to foster a national identity rooted in Kazakh heritage while accommodating Russian and promoting English to meet international demands.

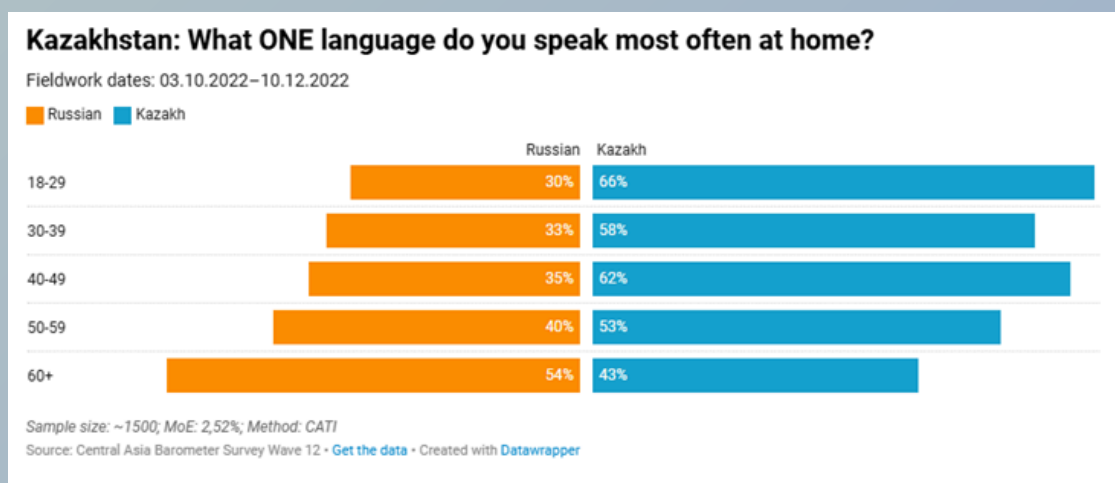
The former president of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized that for the Kazakh language to gain traction, it is essential for Kazakhs to use it themselves; otherwise, they cannot expect others to adopt it. He asserted that government officials should lead by example in advancing scientific, educational, and social-linguistic development.



The most prestigious language in Kazakhstan.

Source: mdpi.com

The Kazakh language is increasingly viewed as a symbol of civic identity, uniting citizens across ethnic lines. President Tokayev emphasized that learning Kazakh should become a societal norm, reinforcing the notion that proficiency in the state language reflects cultural refinement and civic responsibility. This shift promotes a collective identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. Programs like the **Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan** play a crucial role in promoting the Kazakh language among various ethnic groups. Initiatives such as **"Speak at Home"** encourage language learning within communities, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect among different ethnicities. The increasing number of non-Kazakh speakers learning Kazakh indicates a growing acceptance and integration of the language across diverse populations.



Source: Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 12

The Law on Languages, adopted in January 24, 1997 establishes Kazakh as the state language, mandating its use in government, legislation, and public administration. This law ensures that every citizen has the right to use their native language and choose their preferred language for communication, education, and creative work. The government is tasked with creating conditions that facilitate the mastery of Kazakh by all citizens, while also supporting the preservation of minority languages.

In 2023, the Kazakh Ministry of Science and Higher Education introduced a draft concept for language policy development for 2023-2029. This document aims to boost the prevalence of the Kazakh language across various sectors, including education, media, and public administration. It emphasizes modernizing the Kazakh language using the Latin script and expanding its presence in science and technology.

Key Objectives of the New Language Policy

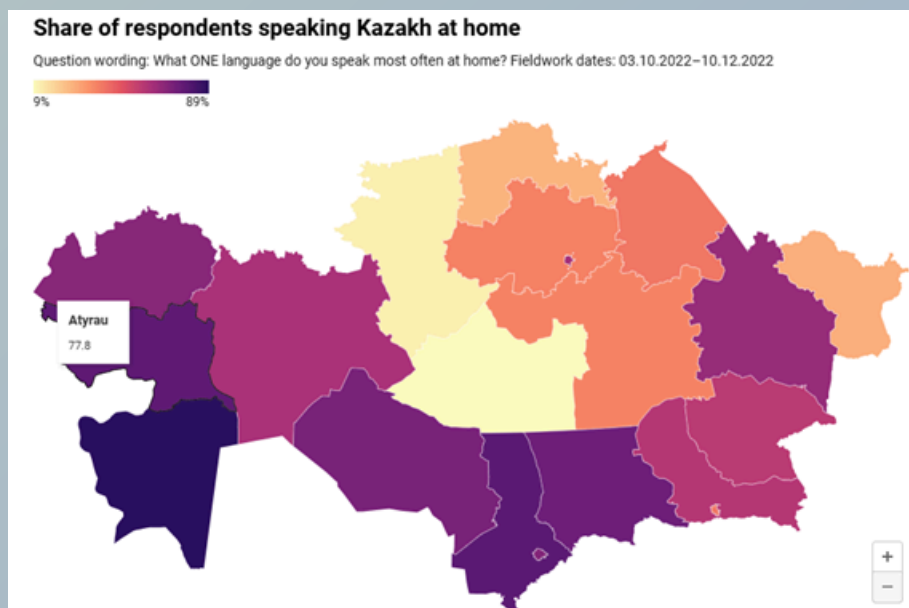
*Increase Kazakh language use:
The government aims for 94% of official documentation to be in Kazakh by 2029.*

*Enhance educational resources:
Plans include improving teaching methods and increasing the number of Kazakh-language schools.*

*Promote content creation:
There is a focus on generating high-quality content in Kazakh across media platforms to engage younger audiences.*

Despite these efforts, Russian remains dominant in many areas; **about 75% of communication occurs in Russian, with only 20% in Kazakh.** The transition to a more balanced bilingual environment is hindered by historical preferences for Russian and concerns among Russian-speaking communities about potential marginalization. The government's strategy aims not only to promote Kazakh but also to ensure that Russian speakers feel included within this evolving linguistic landscape.

As the Kazakh language gains prominence in business, science, and technology, it becomes a tool for economic opportunity. This trend encourages individuals from various ethnic backgrounds to engage with the language, further promoting its use and acceptance in daily life.



Source: Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 12

CHALLENGES

Perceptions of Marginalization

While promoting the Kazakh language aims to foster unity, it can also lead to feelings of alienation among Russian-speaking communities. Some members of these communities perceive the emphasis on Kazakh as a potential threat to their cultural identity and status, leading to tensions between ethnic groups

Political Rhetoric and External Influences:

The promotion of Kazakh has drawn scrutiny from Russian officials, who express concerns about the treatment of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan. This external pressure can complicate domestic efforts to create a harmonious multilingual society, as it may exacerbate fears among Russian speakers regarding their place within Kazakhstan's evolving national identity

Balancing Language Policies

The challenge lies in ensuring that policies promoting Kazakh do not inadvertently marginalize other languages. The government recognizes that successful integration requires careful management of linguistic diversity to prevent ethnic divisions from deepening

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan's language policies reflect a commitment to fostering a multilingual society while reinforcing national identity through the promotion of the Kazakh language. As these policies evolve, they seek to balance linguistic diversity with social cohesion, ensuring that all ethnic groups can contribute to and participate in Kazakhstan's cultural narrative. It can be said that reinforcement of the Kazakh language is a double-edged sword in Kazakhstan's quest for interethnic harmony. While it serves as a unifying force that enhances civic identity and cultural integration, it also poses challenges related to perceptions of marginalization among non-Kazakh speakers. Ongoing dialogue and inclusive policies will be essential to navigate these complexities and foster a truly harmonious multicultural society.

REFERENCES

- [1] https://el.kz/en/assembly-of-the-people-of-kazakhstan-a-model-of-unity-and-harmony_120608/
- [2] <https://nur.nu.edu.kz/server/api/core/bitstreams/12b13c24-6592-4e47-bb16-beace46b1640/content>
- [3] <https://astanatimes.com/2023/04/experts-strengthening-civic-identity-and-promoting-kazakh-language-is-crucial-for-kazakhstan/>
- [4] https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1689&context=senior_theses
- [5] <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/236413119.pdf>
- [6] <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/jnmlp-2023-0004>
- [7] <https://journals.rudn.ru/polylinguality/article/download/14659/13730>
- [8] https://www.ij scl.com/article_706566_41aac83ad3e44e362515cf1236ab9fad.pdf
- [9] https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z970000151_
- [10] <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/jnmlp-2023-0004>