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## **ETHNIC IDENTITY OF KAZAKHSTANI YOUNG PEOPLE IN RELATION TO LANGUAGE**

This paper explores the ways Kazakhstani young people define themselves ethnically. For this purpose, the survey was conducted among bachelor students of a Kazakhstani university to find out personal information about respondents, their linguistic competence, their religious and ethnical belonging, and their choice of ethnicity in case they had a chance to choose at birth. The results of the survey showed that participants mostly refer themselves to ethnicity of their parents in ethnically homogeneous families, and to ethnicity of fathers – in ethnically mixed families. The study did not reveal any dependence of ethnical identification on place of birth, language competence and religious attachment. The goal of this paper is to contribute to understanding of the situation in Kazakhstan and to proper elaboration of adequate national programs.

**Key words:** identity, ethnicity, language, education, religion, Kazakhstan.

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### **Қазақстан жастарының тілге этникалық тұрғыдан қатысы**

Мақалада Қазақстан жастарының этникалық тұрғыдан өздерін қай топқа жатқызатыны жайында талқыланады. Респонденттердің жеке мәліметі мен лингвистикалық құзыреттілігі, діни мен этникалық тұрғыдан қатысын анықтау мақсатында Қазақстан университеттерінің бірінде бакалавриат бөлімінде оқитын студенттері арасында сауалнама жүргізілді. Сауалнама нәтижелері бойынша ата-анасы бір ұлтты жастардың көпшілігі ата-анасының ұлтын, ал аралас ұлтты отбасында туып өскен жастар әкесінің ұлтын таңдайтыны анықталды. Зерттеу жастардың этникалық таңдауына – туылған жері мен тілдік құзыреті, діни ұстанымдары әсер етпейтінін анықтады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстанда аталған мәселенің ахуалдың дәрежесін түсіну мен алынған нәтижеге қарай тиісті ұлттық бағдарламаларды әзірлеу болып табылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қазақстан, этникалық, ұқсастық, тіл, білім, дін.

Абдраманова С.А.

### **Этническая принадлежность казахстанской молодежи по отношению к языку**

В данной статье рассматривается вопрос о том, как казахстанская молодежь определяет себя этнически. С этой целью был проведен опрос среди студентов бакалавриата казахстанского университета, чтобы получить личную информацию о респондентах, их лингвистическую компетентность, их религиозную и этническую принадлежность. Результаты опроса показали, что участники, в основном, относят себя к этнической принадлежности своих родителей в этнически однородных семьях и к этнической принадлежности отцов – в этнически смешанных семьях. Исследование не выявило зависимости этнической идентификации от места рождения, языковой компетенции и религиозной привязанности. Цель данного исследования – способствовать пониманию ситуации в Казахстане и надлежащей разработке соответствующих национальных программ.

**Ключевые слова:** идентичность, этничность, язык, образование, религия, Казахстан.

## Introduction

The Republic of Kazakhstan is an independent multinational country located in Central Asia, roughly saying, between Russia in the north and China in the south. According to the UN World Population Prospects (2016), the population of the state is more than 17 million people; 70% of the population are Muslims, and 26% are Christians; 52% are females and 48% are males; the percentage of Kazakhs is 63%, Russians 24%, Uzbeks – 3%, Ukrainians – 2%, and there are some other minority ethnicities as Uighurs, Tatars, Koreans, Chechens, and Germans, each comprise around 1%. Until recently, due to national policy of and politically and economically reasoned migration strategies by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), representatives of Russian ethnicity dominated over Kazakhs (1979: 41% and 38%, respectively). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, big demographic changes have occurred in the country – Russians, Germans, and Greeks, etc. migrated to their historical motherlands – which, together with immigration of ethnic Kazakhs from China and Mongolia, and the neighboring Central Asian republics, resulted in the increased proportion of indigenous ethnic population.

The representatives of the Kazakh ethnicity were heavily ‘russified’; as a result, most of them did not speak Kazakh, especially those who lived in urban areas [1]. Proclamation of independence by Kazakhstan generated a shift in the language policy which strove to revive the Kazakh language; it was declared a state language, and Russian received a status of interethnic language. The system of secondary education has undergone big changes in relation to the number of schools with Kazakh and Russian languages as media of instruction. If in 1990/1991 academic year 32% of pupils studied in Kazakh schools and 65% – in Russian ones, then in 2013/2014 year – vice versa, 65% – in Kazakh schools and 32% – in Russian ones [2]. This is also reasoned by demographic changes in the society – the increase of proportion of Kazakhs due to traditionally high birth rate in Kazakh families and migration trends. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of RK [3], in 2014 there were 7,567 schools in the country; out of them 3,794 schools provided education in the Kazakh language, 1,291 schools – in Russian. Kazakh and Russian are basic languages of instruction, though there are few schools which give instruction in Uzbek (20), Uighur (13), and Tajik (4). There are also special schools which provide education in English, French

and German; also, there are Kazakh-Turkish high schools where students are taught to four languages: Kazakh, Russian, English, and Turkish [4].

Though big efforts have been paid to upgrade the role of the Kazakh language [5; 6], it is still not typically used in all spheres of communication. Russian which has obtained some specific features under the influence of Kazakh [7] is still widely applied in everyday intercourse. This situation is reasoned by the fact that the law on languages does not have a mandatory character, and, secondly, the government has taken a course on trilingual education where the role of Kazakh could be diminished. The Ministry of Education and Research of Kazakhstan initiated a reform (2016-2022) in education for transition to a new model of trilingual system where disciplines will be taught in Kazakh, Russian and English. For example, in Kazakh schools such subjects as «Russian and Literature» and «World History» will be taught in Russian; in Russian schools «Kazakh and Literature» and «History of Kazakh» will be taught in Kazakh; lastly, starting from 2019 all schools will teach Sciences in English to students of senior grades – 10th and 11th [8].

The reforms in the system of education cause certain positive resonance in some layers of Kazakhstani society [9]; still, they raise certain concerns among educators and parents on the decrease of quality of education, and among Kazakh intelligentsia – on the failure of efforts to revive and develop the Kazakh language in the state. Besides, in the message to people of Kazakhstan – Strategy «Kazakhstan – 2050», the head of the country [10] emphasized the importance of formation of a new national identity for all citizens of the country – a Kazakhstani one; this idea is definitely politically motivated and aims to meet the challenges of a multinational state in the modern vibrant and complex world; at the same time, it causes a lot of uncertainty and vagueness in identification and language practices [11]. The aim of the present study is to find out whether Kazakhstani young people have clear notion of belonging to a certain ethnicity and how they identify themselves.

## Literature review

The concept of ‘ethnicity’ has been debated in its relation to ‘nation’, ‘ethnic identity’ and ‘national identity’ throughout its relatively short history (since 1953). This paper does not aim to dispute the basic definitions of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ but rather finds it convenient to cite here the one which is close to the author’s vision of

the issue. Thus, the definition given by Wann and Vanderwerf mostly suits; they define ‘ethnicity as «a sense of solidarity shared between people (usually related through real or fictive kinship) who see themselves as distinct and different from others» [12, 2]. Theories on ethnicity can be roughly divided into two parts: primordialist and constructivist ones. The former view ethnicity as something attached to human beings at birth, which does not change throughout their lives; I stick to the latter one, which define ethnicity as something constructed by individuals themselves that can change throughout their lives depending on social contexts. Phinney emphasizes a flexible nature of ethnic identity viewing it as a continuum from low to high depending on self-esteem of a person. He also claims that «there is, or may be, a shift over time from a low to diffuse ethnic identity to a high or achieved one» [13, 196]. I would presume that the shift may be reverse as well – from high to low – in case the change occurred in the political, economic and/or cultural context of an individual.

Under modern conditions of globalization and extensive migration, the phenomenon of transnational identity has emerged and become an object of research. It refers to people who tend to combine their old and new identity (of the country they migrated from and the country they came to) and who find themselves, as a result, in the state of in-betweenness and hybridity [14]. Another impact of globalization can be traced in the notion of cosmopolitanism, ‘a sense of belonging to the world’, a loose identity. Based on the data from World Values Surveys (1995-1997), Schueth and O’Loughlin studied this phenomenon and one of their conclusions was that younger generation is more prone to be cosmopolitan, i.e., less attached to any local community and feeling more a world citizen [15]. A paper by Koukoutsaki-Monnier [16] is focused on the relations between national culture and official institutions. On the example of discourse samples taken from Linked-In, she finds out that different migrant groups (i.e., Greeks and French) perceive the issue of ethnic group differently, and their perception is grounded by the position that their countries have on the international stage. Thus, the author emphasizes the importance of external factors that impact people’s self-identity and the necessity of deeper and wider examination and analysis of issues related to national identity.

The relationship between ethnical identity and language is rather complicated and fluid [17]. First of all, language is an indicator and a means that

help people to identify each other in an interaction: «An individual negotiates a sense of self within and across different contexts at different times through language. In other words, languages are used to legitimize, challenge, and negotiate identities» [18]. Also, a choice and usage of language may introduce shifts into a person’s identity and worldview [19]. Edwards [20] in his historical observation of the societal development provides the facts that prove the connection of identity (‘groupness’) to language, religion, and gender. Ige [21] stresses the role of language in the construction of identity, and, vice versa, the impact of identity on the choice of language. In her study, she examined the behavior, attitudes and language of young Zulu students who did not want to lose their ingenious identity and, thus, tended to protect and sustain it. Through their behavior and language, young people resisted to diverse University environment, new to them. The research, done by Kemppainen, Hilton, and Rannut [22] in Estonia, shows that there is a close link between ethnic identification and language, i.e., school language. The data collected from Russian-speaking students who entered schools with different language of instruction – Estonian and Russian – revealed dependence of school language on their self-identification: those who attended Estonian schools mostly referred themselves to Estonian ethnicity, and vice versa.

There have been several attempts to study different aspects of identity at citizens of Kazakhstan. The scholars considered, for example, cultural values at Kazakh and Russian young people, their reference to and identification level to ethnic groups [23]. Jumageldinov [24] surveyed young representatives of different nationalities in the city of Karaganda (Kazakhstan) to research a role of ethnicity in identity construction by Kazakhs, Russians, and minority ethnic groups. He found out that the category of ethnicity appeared to be decisive in the construction of identity at all respondents; moreover, the results showed that representatives of Russian and minority groups revealed a certain level of concern and perceived threat to their ethnic identity from the side of title nation. The author concludes that «interethnic relations in Kazakhstan possess an inherent conflict potential and raise issues about the existence of national unity» [24, 785]. Consequently, these tendencies hinder realization of the national policy of forming a new Kazakhstani identity. The present paper is believed to be contributing to understanding the situation in Kazakhstan and to proper elaboration of adequate national programs.

## Methodology

The aim of the present study is to learn which ethnicity Kazakhstani young people refer themselves to and which factors define their choice. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among bachelor students of a Kazakhstani university; the results were analyzed and described. Descriptive statistics has been applied to calculate the participants' responses. The research aims to find out if young people in Almaty (Kazakhstan) identify themselves as belonging to a definite ethnicity and what criteria define their self-identification. Similarly, a certain attention is given to the relationship between ethnicity and language. Thus, the research questions are the following: «What ethnicity do Kazakhstani young people refer themselves to?» and «What role does the language have in their self-identification?»

In the survey 38 respondents participated; 14 males and 24 females. All of them are young people aged from 18 to 25; 36 participants were born in Kazakhstan (31 – in urban areas and 5 – in rural ones) and two respondents were born in Uzbekistan (with later migration to Kazakhstan). By nationality, there participated 32 Kazakhs, 1 Korean male, 1 Russian female, and four respondents of mixed identity. They were asked to fill in hard copies of a questionnaire consisting of 13 questions which were divided into three main sections: the first part sought to obtain personal information on participants' age, gender and place of birth; the second section – the information on language(s) knowledge, level and length of study languages, the native language and the language of school instruction; lastly, the third part – the information on ethnicity of parents, ref-

erence to their own ethnicity and religion, and the nationality they would choose at birth if they had the second chance to be born. The study was based on convenience sampling; the participation of respondents was voluntary and anonymous. The limitation of the research is that it was geographically limited to Almaty (a city in the south of Kazakhstan) and to bachelor students of a Kazakhstani educational institution.

## Results

Table 1 shows the mastership of languages and the level of their knowledge by respondents. The results indicate that Russian and Kazakh are two basic languages of possession. Almost all participants know the Russian language (95%; one Kazakh female did not indicate she spoke Russian; another Kazakh female responded that she knew Russian but did not indicate its level) and the Kazakh language (97%; one Kazakh female did not indicate the level of her Kazakh though stated that she knew it). But if the participants' mastership of Russian is homogeneously advanced, the level of knowledge of Kazakh is intrinsically diverse: advanced – 47%, medium and low – 27% each. Other languages in the list are known only by few participants, and, as analysis showed, knowledge of those languages did not introduce any shifts to self-identification of respondents. One male from a mixed family (Kyrgyz and Kazakh) had advanced competence of four languages – Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek. He was born and raised in Uzbekistan; then, his family moved to Kazakhstan. He identified himself as Kyrgyz – his father's ethnicity.

**Table 1** – Knowledge of languages and their mastership by survey respondents (in numbers)

Language	Low		Medium		Advanced	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Kazakh	2	8	5	5	7	10
Russian	-	1	-	-	14	22
Chinese		1				
German		1				
Kyrgyz	1				1	
Turkish			1	1		
Ukrainian		1				
Uzbek					1	

As it was mentioned above, majority of survey participants (32) were representatives of Kazakh nationality: 21 females and 11 males. Table 2 shows

their mastership of Kazakh and Russian. Out of 32 Kazakh participants, 30 males and females know Russian on advanced level (two respondents did not

indicate the level). As for knowledge of Kazakh, out of 31 Kazakh participants 48% had advanced level, 26% – medium and low levels, each; one respondent did not indicate her level of knowledge. This result of the survey is a reflection of the language situation in

the country where the interaction mostly occurs in the Russian language not only between representatives of different ethnicities but also between Kazakh people themselves as far as many of them do not know their native language or have a low level of it.

**Table 2** – Level of mastership of Kazakh and Russian by Kazakh respondents (in numbers)

	Kazakh			Russian		
	Low	Medium	Advanced	Low	Medium	Advanced
Males	1	4	6	-	-	11
Females	7	4	9	-	-	19

It is believed that the Kazakh language is mostly spoken in villages with dominant Kazakh population, and rural residents have better mastership of the language than urban ones. Our data refutes this belief; regrettably, the questionnaire did not include a question on the period of staying in villages after birth to clarify the findings. Out of 21 Kazakh females, 17 respondents were born in cities, while four females – in villages. Out of four Kazakh females born in villages, only two respondents had advanced level of Kazakh, other two females – low level. Out of nine females who had advanced level of Kazakh, seven were born in urban areas. Out of 11 Kazakh males, ten were born in urban areas and one male – in a village. Half of those males born in a city (five respondents) had advanced level of Kazakh; four of them studied in schools with Kazakh as language of instruction, and one – with English as language of instruction. Five other respondents had lower level of Kazakh (4 – medium; 1 – low) which determined their choice of schools with Russian language of instruction. The level of mastership of Kazakh did not determine the choice of school instruction language of Kazakh females as well: 14 out of 21 students finished schools with Russian as language of instruction (4 – with advanced level of Kazakh, 3 – medium, 7 – low); five respondents finished schools with Kazakh language of instruction (4 – with advanced level of Kazakh, 1 – medium). Thus, among Kazakhs there is no dependence of the level of knowledge of Kazakh on the choice of school with certain language of instruction. That may hugely depend on family language policies and decisions.

Out of 32 Kazakhs, 30 respondents preferred to stay Kazakhs in case they had a choice of choosing the ethnicity at birth. Only two participants chose other nationalities: one male preferred to be a

Norwegian, and one female wanted to be an Italian. Both were born in urban areas of Kazakhstan, their parents ethnicity is Kazakh; the only difference is that the female refers herself to a Muslim, and the male is an Atheist.

Out of total 38 respondents, two participants turned out to be of other nationalities and four respondents were of mixed ethnicity. One male was a Korean, and one female was a Russian one; they both chose their ingenious ethnicity, both indicated they were atheists. A Russian, together with another female who referred herself to a «mixed ethnicity» (father is Kazakh, and mother is Tatar + Ukrainian), did not give a direct answer to the question on choosing ethnicity at birth – they gave comments: «it does not matter for me, what kind of person you are – that is what really matters» and «I do not care, honestly». Other three respondents of mixed ethnicity (a male – father is Tatar, and mother is Russian; a male – is father Kyrgyz, mother is Kazakh; one female – father is Tatar, and mother is Kazakh) referred themselves to the ethnicity of their fathers, i.e., Kyrgyz and Tatar, correspondingly. Interestingly, in case they had a chance to be reborn, the males would have chosen their own ethnicity, the female would like to be a Kazakh. Also, she identified herself as agnostic in reference to religion.

Out of all 36 respondents of the survey who stated they knew Russian, six participants named Russian as their native language, a language different from their ethnicity: they are three females and three males. One male is a Korean by nationality; he did not claim he knew Korean; instead, he mastered English and Kazakh on the medium level, and named Russian as his native language. The same reason lies behind the answers of three respondents from families of mixed ethnicity: a male (Tatar + Russian) and two females (the first is of Tatar/ Kazakh origin,

and the second is Kazakh + Tatar/ Ukrainian. They did not state they knew the language of their father though referred themselves to his identity. All of them named Russian as their mother tongue. Lastly, one Kazakh female and one Kazakh male stated that their native language was Russian due to the fact that the level of their Kazakh was low; the female commented that she has been speaking Russian «from the time when I started to speak». All other 34 respondents claimed the language of their ethnicity as their native language, no matter whether the level of their linguistic competence was low, medium, or advanced.

### Discussion

Thus, the majority of respondents clearly refer themselves to the ethnicity of their parents, or, in case of mixed ethnicity, to ethnicity of fathers. For example, all 32 Kazakhs referred themselves to Kazakh ethnicity, though only 15 of them had advanced level of the Kazakh language, eight of them had medium level, and eight – low (Table 2). Almost all of them would stay Kazakhs if they were given an option to choose a nationality at birth (30 respondents). Three respondents of other nationalities also referred to the nationality of their parents (a Korean male, a Tatar male, and a Russian female). Jumageldinov [24] in his paper stated that identity at young people in Karaganda has substantial ethnical grounding. The results of the present study confirm this conclusion; here, the participants of the survey have a clear perception of their identity which is ethnically reasoned. This could be explained by objective factors – during the Soviet Union Kazakh people appeared to be more vulnerable to political, economic and cultural experiments by the CPSU, became ‘russified’ and downsized in population. Since independence in 1991 efforts to revive the Kazakh language have been paid in Kazakhstan, and they brought to growth of national consciousness and salience of ethnical identity. This process involved other nationalities residing in the country as well, as a resistance to outstanding Kazakh identity and as a survival strategy.

This survey also revealed that cases of mixed families may cause a difficulty when identifying ethnicity. There were three respondents of mixed ethnicity; two of them referred to the ethnicity of their fathers – Kyrgyz and Tatar, correspondingly; one female in the survey failed to refer herself either to a Tatar as her father, or to a Kazakh as her mother. Fina and Perrini [14] attached the term ‘transformational identity’ to people who migrated

from one country to another, and, as a result attained a transitional state where their identity seeks compromise or contradicts to a new environment, culture and mentality of people in an arrival country. The same could be said in relation to children from mixed families: they live within mixed cultural conditions, and their identity construction does not have clear boundaries. It depends on the ‘quality’ of relations between parents – where there is parity or competition, or domination/submission. There are also external factors that can impact their identity formation. Generalizations cannot be done due to limited number of respondents, and there is a need for further research in this sphere, especially in Kazakhstan – a country of 140 different ethnicities and 40 confessions, and numerous cases of mixed marriages.

There have been few interesting findings on links between ethnic identity and language competence. Some respondents do not see any connection between ethnicity and their mother tongue; two Kazakh participants stated Russian as their native language, though still referred themselves to Kazakh nation. Out of six participants of non-Kazakh nationality, five respondents (a Korean male, a Tatar male, a Russian female, and two females of mixed ethnicity) named Russian as their native language, and one male wrote two languages – Kyrgyz and Kazakh. According to answers of some respondents, language was not an indicator of ethnicity. Almost all of them referred themselves to the ethnicity of their parents/ fathers, no matter how good the level of their mother tongue was. As it can be concluded, there is no direct dependence of the respondents’ ethnic identity on linguistic competence. Thus, the present research does not confirm the findings of scholars who stated that there is a close link between language and identity [20; 21; 22]. This could be due to external factors – different historical background and language situation in countries under research.

The level of language competence did not impact the respondents’ national identification as well: they could have a very poor mastership of the native language, or they could not know it at all, or they could have better mastership of another language rather than mother tongue – these factors did not change their reference to ethnicity. As it was mentioned above, 30 Kazakh respondents stated that they knew the Russian language very well (advanced level) and 19 of them finished a secondary school with Russian as language of instruction, though all of them referred themselves to Kazakh ethnicity. Four respondents (two of them are Kazakhs and two are from mixed families) named Russian as their native

language, though they still referred themselves to ethnicity of their parents (Kazakh, Korean, Tatar, Tatar/Kazakh, and Kazakh/ Tatar + Ukrainian). The survey also found no dependence of religion on ethnicity of participants. Seven respondents did not refer themselves to any religion: five of them stated they were atheists, one was agnostic, and, lastly, one female just wrote «none» which can be referred to agnostic as well.

Finally, as it was mentioned above, the Kazakhstani government has been conducting a policy on formation of unified nation for the purpose of cohesion and consolidation of society – of Kazakhstani people. As the results of the present research imply, this process may have a long run; at present, people tend to stick to their ethnic identity, to the ethnicity of parents/fathers, and there is indication that the core of the Kazakhstani unity will be mainly comprised of people from mixed families and those Kazakh people who have poor mastership of their mother tongue, the so called ‘shala’ Kazakhs.

### Conclusion

The present study was aimed to find out if Kazakhstani young people identify themselves as representatives of different ethnicities, and if so, which criteria define their identification. For this purpose, the survey was conducted among 38

bachelor students of a Kazakhstani university. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire which sought personal information about respondents, their linguistic competence, their religious and ethnical belonging, and their choice of ethnicity in case they had a chance to choose at birth.

The results showed that participants of the survey refer themselves to ethnicity of their parents belong to; 35 respondents clearly stated they were Kazakhs, a Russian, a Tatar, and a Korean. Two participants from mixed families referred themselves to ethnicity of their fathers, not mothers (Kyrgyz and Tatar). One student from a mixed family (Kazakh + Tatar/ Ukrainian) failed to name any ethnicity (mixed ethnicity). The results showed no dependence of respondents’ reference to ethnicity on place of birth, language competence and religious attachment. Finally, if participants were reborn, they would most obviously choose the same ethnicity they had at the moment of filling in questionnaires (only two Kazakh respondents chose had other options – Norwegian and Italian). Thus, the present study showed that Kazakhstani young people have a clear perception of their identity, and the basic criterion of their identification in ethnically homogeneous families is the ethnicity of parents, in mixed families – the ethnicity of fathers. Further and wider research should be done to confirm or refute the findings of the present study for generalization.

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