



**Kazakhstan Focus Group
Discussions – Spring 2022**
National Identity in Kazakhstan

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Executive Summary

IRI designed and commissioned a qualitative study of national identity in Kazakhstan that the Sange Research Center conducted through 12 focus group discussions in four cities: Astana, Almaty, Atyrau and Shymkent. The focus groups were of mixed gender and ethnicity and were organized by age group. The primary research objectives were to understand how the people of Kazakhstan perceive national identity (i.e., what does it mean to be Kazakh or Kazakhstani?) and the role of religion and language in shaping national identity in Kazakh society. Additional research objectives were to investigate the relationship between national identity and migration, how the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is perceived, and the role of media in shaping national identity. As is common with qualitative research, findings from this study are not necessarily representative of the opinions of all people in Kazakhstan. Throughout this report, the term Kazakh is used to refer to ethnic Kazakhs, whereas the term Kazakhstani is used to refer to citizens of Kazakhstan, including ethnic minorities. Further, in Kazakhstan—as in many post-Soviet countries—the term national identity is most often understood to refer to ethnic identity. This report mirrors that usage.

Finding 1 – Defining Kazakh and Kazakhstani Identities For Kazakh participants, more so than for other ethnicities, national identity is a source of pride. This is one reason why many Kazakhs dislike using the term Kazakhstani to refer to themselves, viewing it as a more ephemeral term and thus preferring to apply it only to citizens of Kazakhstan of non-Kazakh ethnic background. In terms of their own identity, Kazakhs perceive themselves to be individuals who strive for freedom and independence but who are able to coexist peacefully with other ethnicities and exhibit tolerance and hospitality. The use of the word “free” by Kazakhs references the group’s history and nomadic way of life and stands in opposition to authoritarian political forces. They also identify themselves as a group committed to mutual support and strong family ties. Non-Kazakh ethnic minorities in this study tend to emphasize their civic identity and thus use the term Kazakhstani.

Finding 2 – Language and National Identity Ethnic Kazakhs perceive their language as an important element in preserving their national identity and culture and expect the same attitude toward the Kazakh language from other ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan. Ethnic Kazakhs often express dissatisfaction, or even anger, with the rare use of the Kazakh language in some parts of the country, even among ethnic Kazakhs. Some, especially older Kazakhs, perceive a lack of proficiency in the Kazakh language to be shameful. Russian, on the other hand, plays an important role in social mobility for both non-Kazakhs and Kazakhs, which participants stated is a legacy of Soviet rule. Consequently, Russian speakers have no real need to learn the Kazakh language. The relatively higher use of Russian compared to Kazakh in some circles can also be

attributed to the willingness of ethnic Kazakhs to switch to the Russian language when people do not speak Kazakh. Participants said that weak state policies are also partially responsible for the perceived low status of the Kazakh language. These include a lack of strict requirements for knowledge of the Kazakh language, ineffective state programs, weak legislation in regard to the development of the Kazakh language, lack of knowledge of the language by government officials, corruption, and a lack of effective educational courses.

Finding 3 - Religious Identity Religion has an important place in the daily lives of ethnic Kazakhs but has no strong connection to national identity or, in the Kazakhstan context, ethnic identity. Among ethnic Kazakhs, strict adherence to a religious canon is uncommon. Relatedly, some Kazakhs view manifestations of religious devotion in Kazakhstan as a threat to society and assert that non-Kazakh immigrants should assimilate to Kazakh norms, especially in regard to Islamic dress.

Finding 4 - Migration and National Identity When it comes to emigration from Kazakhstan, the reasons for leaving the country differ among ethnic groups. For non-Kazakhs, language and ethnic identity are important factors in the decision to emigrate, with ethnic minorities stating that they would be likely to leave Kazakhstan due to ethnic harassment or a potential for the state to mandate requirements for the use of the Kazakh language. On the other hand, Kazakhs more commonly leave Kazakhstan for economic reasons and to search for social mobility. Kazakhs also refer to the increased salience of their identity while in a foreign land.

Finding 5 - Perceptions of the Soviet Era and Identity Perceptions of Soviet rule depend greatly on age. The older generation perceives the Soviet era as a time of stability and social well-being and, simultaneously, as a time of loss of Kazakh culture, language, and identity. Youth associate the USSR with repression, executions of the intelligentsia, famine, illusions of happy life, a lack of opportunity for growth and technological breakthroughs, and stagnation. Some old and young participants stated that they do not see a difference between the USSR and modern-day Kazakhstan, pointing to a lack of democracy and freedom both now and then.

Finding 6 - Media and National Identity Participants perceived the media to be an important element that can shape, influence, and entrench national identities. Many individuals do not trust official sources of information, and young people, especially, use the internet to triangulate and filter information from traditional media. They also see the older generation as too trusting of information spread by traditional and social media.



Overview

The purpose of the focus group discussions was to identify key factors of national identity that resonate with the people of Kazakhstan, both ethnic Kazakhs and citizens belonging to other ethnic groups. In this report, the term Kazakhstani refers to citizens of Kazakhstan, including ethnic minorities, while Kazakh is used to refer to ethnic Kazakhs. Additionally, in Kazakhstan, the term national identity is generally understood to refer to ethnic identity, and this report mirrors that usage.

The FGDs focused on the following aspects:

- perception of national identity (i.e., What does it mean to be Kazakh?);
- language as part of national identity;
- the role of the Kazakh language in comparison with the Russian language;
- the role of religion in shaping national identity;
- the relationship between national identity and migration;
- the effect of the Soviet past on perceptions of national identity;
- the role of the media in shaping national identity.

Methodology

The target cities for the FGDs were Astana, Almaty, Atyrau and Shymkent. Three focus groups were conducted in each of the four cities, for a total of 12 FGDs.

Selection of participants

The preliminary selection of participants was based on a screening questionnaire (see Appendix C), which considered the following selection criteria: No participation in a FGD within the past 12 months, residence in one of the four cities studied, gender balance, representation by age group, ethnicity, language, education, occupation, and financial status. All recruited participants had to express a willingness to participate in a collective discussion. In total, 10-12 participants were selected for each FGD, of which eight to 10 were main participants and two were reserve participants. All FGD participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study.

Composition of participants

In all cities except Almaty, FGD participants were divided by age groups: FGD 1 – 18-30 years old, FGD 2 – 31-45 years, FGD 3 – 46-70 years. This composition was meant to better assess generational differences surrounding national identity. Group composition criteria took into account ethnicity, gender, education, income level, and occupation. Each group included a mix of these.

In Almaty, one focus group was held without ethnic Kazakhs in order to encourage free discussion among ethnic minorities without the presence of the majority ethnic group. The age groups for Almaty were adjusted: 18-35, 36-70 years old, and no age restrictions for the non-Kazakh group. The groups included a mix of all other criteria.

The main language of the focus groups in Astana and Almaty was Russian, and in Atyrau and Shymkent – Kazakh. At the request of non-Kazakh participants and with the consent of other participants, Russian was also used. In such cases, the moderator translated the questions and the moderator's assistant also helped with interpretation.

More information on the number and composition of participants by city and focus group is provided in Appendix A: Methodology.

Focus Group Process

Focus groups on national identity were conducted according to a customized discussion guide in Kazakh and Russian, which included six main sections. See Appendix B: Discussion Guide.

	Main sections	Subsections
1	Introduction	FGD objectives, presentation of participants, focus group rules
2	Discussion of the concept of "Identity"	"Who am I?" - self-identification of participants
3	To be Kazakh	Defining "Kazakhs", associations with Kazakhs, "Kazakh vs. Kazakhstani" <u>Religion</u> : the role of religion, whether religion is part of national identity. <u>Language</u> : the role of the Kazakh language, comparison with other languages (in particular, Russian), opportunities and barriers to language learning, the influence of the language on shaping national identity. <u>Migration</u> : the relationship between migration and national identity, the reasons for migration (who leaves and why?).

4	The USSR and national identity	The potential effects of the Soviet era perception on national identity.
5	Use of the media/media platforms and national identity	Which media are used? Trust in the media. Influence of media use in shaping national identity.
6	Closing remarks	Feedback

Context

For many Kazakhstanis, national identity refers not so much to citizenship as to ethnicity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of nation or nationality has been used in everyday language not as a word to designate citizens of a specific state, as it often indicates in English, but to refer to an ethnic group: Kazakhs, Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, Koreans, etc. The citizens of Kazakhstan are referred to as Kazakhstanis, although many ethnic Kazakhs, especially those from the western regions, are in favor of referring to the citizens of Kazakhstan as Kazakhs, regardless of their ethnic background.

As late as the mid-19th century, Kazakhstan was inhabited mainly by one ethnic group – Kazakhs. But by 1897, the percentage of Kazakhs dropped to 81.7 percent, with Russians comprising 10.9 percent of the population, Ukrainians 1.9 percent, and Tatars 1.3 percent. By 1939, the ethnic Kazakh population dropped to 37.8 percent, while the ethnic Russian population increased to 40 percent.¹ In subsequent decades, as a result of the Stalin-era forced migration of ethnic minorities and the large number of prison camps which drew from across the Soviet Union, non-Kazakhs continued to make up a significant portion of the population.² Kazakhstan was the only republic within the USSR in which the titular ethnic group was a minority. Only after independence from the Soviet Union did ethnic Kazakhs become the majority. In the present day, Kazakhstan can be considered a bilingual country: 97.9 percent of the population speaks Russian.³

The most significant episodes of protest in the history of Kazakhstan stem from the issue of national identity, be it the national liberation uprisings of the 18th and 19th centuries, the uprising of 1916, the December events of 1986, or the land protests of

¹ demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_26.php, <https://e-history.kz/ru/seo-materials/show/29324/>

² <https://epc2012.princeton.edu/papers/120586>

³ Ценности Казахстанского общества в социологическом измерении, фонд Ф.Эберта, Алматы, 2020
<https://opinions.kz/images/books/%D0%A6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%20%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%85%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE%20%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B0,%202020.pdf>

2016. The January protests of 2022, as discussed below, could not be described as such, although their participants were mostly ethnic Kazakhs.

This study of national identity was preceded by several significant political events in Kazakhstan: the January events of 2022, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, and preparations for a referendum on amendments to the Constitution of Kazakhstan on June 5.

The January events of 2022 began in the western region of the country and were triggered by a sharp increase in prices for liquefied gas. The protests quickly eclipsed their economic origins and took on a broader anti-government flavor. The underlying causes included increased social stratification, illegal enrichment of elites, arbitrariness of law enforcement agencies, and restrictions on freedom of speech. The slogans of the protesters were almost exclusively in Kazakh, rather than Russian: "Gas elu!" "Shal ket!" "Alga, Kazakhstan!"⁴ The peaceful protests then spiraled into unrest. The police used stun grenades and rubber bullets against civilians, resulting in injuries and death. During the events, more than 4,000 people were injured, more than 200 died,⁵ and about 7,000 people were arrested,⁶ which sparked public outrage. The Kazakhstani government shut down the internet and cellular service and turned to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to request troops, claiming that the unrest was due to a terrorist attack.⁷ Many residents of Kazakhstan were opposed to the introduction of the CSTO troops — the majority of which were provided by Russia — and viewed this as a threat to national sovereignty.⁸

The events of January, although not explicitly ethnically motivated, highlighted different attitudes of various ethnic groups to the events. In addition to the fact that the participants of the events were almost exclusively Kazakhs⁹, while members of other ethnicities mostly observed the events, discussions of national identity manifested due to the deployment of CSTO troops. Some ethnic Kazakhs expressed strong opposition to the introduction of CSTO troops¹⁰. These events showed that the national identity of some citizens (often non-Kazakhs) remains Russian, while the majority of the population of Kazakhstan, mostly ethnic Kazakhs, identify as Kazakh regardless of language proficiency.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to influence national identity in Kazakhstan. The situation with Ukraine is closely monitored by the people of Kazakhstan; some believe there is a risk of a similar scenario happening in Kazakhstan. Even prior to the invasion of Ukraine, some ethnic Kazakhs were indignant that some Russian politicians claimed sovereignty over Kazakhstan's northern territories, where many

⁴ Author's translation: "Gas - 50 (tenge)!", "Old man, go away!", "Forward, Kazakhstan!"

⁵ <https://ortcom.kz/en/novosti/1647250717>

⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-january-protesters-tortured-death/31921393.html>

⁷ <https://fortune.com/2022/01/06/kazakhstan-protests-almaty-russia-fuel-prices-internet-shutdown/>

⁸ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-csto-troop-russia-analysis/31642847.html>

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/voting-with-their-feet-emigration-in-the-aftermath-of-kazakhstans-bloody-january/>

¹⁰ <https://eurasianet.org/csto-agrees-to-intervene-in-kazakhstan-unrest>, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-csto-troop-russia-analysis/31642847.html>

ethnic Russian Kazakhstani citizens reside.¹¹ Since the war began in February 2022, provocative statements from Russian politicians to 'protect' the Russian-speaking population in Kazakhstan have become more frequent¹². The reaction of ethnic Kazakhs to these statements is now more pronounced, including online, where angry social media users demand that Kazakhstani authorities issue official statements of protest and prohibit broadcasting of Russian TV channels in Kazakhstan. According to Internews, in 2019, 11 percent of the population preferred to watch TV in Kazakh, and 41 percent watched only in Russian,¹³ indicating the high degree of influence of the Russian media in Kazakhstan. The war in Ukraine compels some Kazakhstanis to examine at their national identity in a new light. As a result of sanctions against Russia, the closure of international companies, and mass recruitment into the Russian army, there is an influx of Russians from Russia to neighboring countries, including to Kazakhstan. The influx of Russians has provoked a mixed reaction from Kazakhstanis, some of whom offer assistance to the new arrivals and express sympathy, while others demand that the authorities tighten entry and residence regulations for such visitors .

On April 29, 2022, the president of Kazakhstan announced a referendum on amendments to the Constitution that was held on June 5. The people of Kazakhstan voted on 56 amendments to 33 articles of the Constitution that the government says will curtail the powers of the president, bolster the Parliament's role and increase public participation in politics.¹⁴ However, the imminence of the referendum and the lack of explanatory work on the planned amendments provoked a strong reaction among civil society organizations; some called the referendum "ostentatious" and "another attempt by the President to rehabilitate his reputation after the January protests."¹⁵ In early May, there were intense discussions on social media in Kazakhstan about changing the official status of the Russian language in the Constitution,¹⁶ which since independence has designated both Kazakh and Russian as state languages. Government officials refuted calls to change the status of the Russian language; this change was not included on the list of constitutional amendments put forward in the referendum in June. However, the discourse speaks to the mood among some ethnic Kazakhs who believe that removing the official language status of Russian from the Constitution would help motivate citizens to learn the Kazakh language.

¹² <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-russian-gift-comments/31035059.html>, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/is-northern-kazakhstan-at-risk-to-russia/>

¹² <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-kazakhstan-russia-toqayev/31908810.html>

¹³ Media Consumption and Media Literacy in Central Asia, Internews. 2021, 195 p.

¹⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-voters-ok-constitutional-changes-but-meaning-illusory-to-many>

¹⁵ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/politolog-o-referendume-v-kazahstane/31885970.html>, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-weak-information-campaign-leaves-voters-in-the-dark-ahead-of-constitutional-referendum>

¹⁶ https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/feyk-planah-lishit-russkiy-yazyik-ofitsialnogo-statusa-468455/



Findings

Finding 1. For Kazakhs, national identity - both ethnic identity and civic identity - is more of a source of pride than it is for other ethnicities represented in the focus groups. Understanding of national identity varies from region to region among participants. National identity in ethnic terms, as in belonging to a certain ethnic group, is the most emotionally salient conception of identity for many participants in this study; however, other participants view citizenship rather than ethnicity as the basis of national identity. Kazakhs are more likely than other ethnic groups to express pride in their ethnicity and identify a number of qualities and behaviors that define what it means to be a member of this ethnic group. The Kazakh language plays an important role in Kazakh national identity. For participants from Atyrau and Almaty, the issues surrounding the use of Kazakh language are especially important, and their statements were emotional and categorical; they also refused to speak Russian, despite reporting to have a good command of it. Members of non-Kazakh ethnic groups often mentioned their ethnic identity but did not emphasize it. This is a complex issue for participants with mixed ethnic origin, and they tended to define themselves by other categories such as gender, marital status, having children, or their occupation. The use of the words Kazakh and Kazakhstani depends greatly on participants' ethnicity. Self-identification on the basis of citizenship, rather than ethnicity, is common among non-Kazakh participants.

- *"I am proud that I am Kazakh...As for national identity, since I am Kazakh, I want everything to be in Kazakh. I myself am not a nationalist, I don't divide people by nationality, but because we are in our country, in Kazakhstan, I would like everything to be in Kazakh. I am proud that I was born here, in Atyrau. Because Atyrau and Mangystau regions are more Kazakh, we have preserved and observed our traditions."* (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 48, higher education, teacher)
- *"I'm proud of my nationality. I am often mistaken, for example, for a Korean or some other nationality, for a Chinese woman when I am abroad. I was not quite pleased, because I have my own nationality, I have my own country. I wanted people to know that I am Kazakh."* (Female, Astana, Kazakh, 30, higher education, dentist)
- *"I am proud I am Kazakh! Our ancestors have kept our language intact for millennia, no transformations, no [assimilation has] taken place. There are Kazakhs living in 40 countries of the world... That's what I'm proud of!"* (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 70, degree, pensioner)



"I am proud of our history. I am proud that the blood of batyrs,¹⁷ warriors, great khans flows in us, that our ancestors once created such a huge state. Unfortunately, we're not the top nation right now, but we have the blood of our ancestors, the strength of our batyrs, the wisdom, so we can build a prosperous country if we want to." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, teacher)

Sub finding A) s between Kazakh and Kazakhstani, participants tend to associate the word Kazakh with origin, language, culture, and tradition. Many Kazakh-speaking Kazakh participants tend to believe that an affectionate attitude towards Kazakhstan is intrinsic only to those who call themselves Kazakh; others say it is also felt by members of other ethnic groups. A different view is that those who call themselves Kazakhstani are more loyal to their country because it is their conscious choice to identify as such, as opposed to something hereditary. The term Kazakhstani is more attractive to members of other, non-Kazakh ethnicities, as it allows them to preserve their ethnic identity, which is important; they are not comfortable being called Kazakhs. The perception of the term Kazakhstani is twofold. Many Kazakh-speaking ethnic Kazakhs, especially from the western regions, consider the term Kazakhstani to be temporary, formal, or belittling, while the term Kazakh is a full-fledged representative of their country, culture, proficiency in the language, and patriotism. Kazakhs from other regions, who encounter discrimination based on ethnicity, also oppose the use of the term Kazakhstani in reference to ethnic Kazakhs. Self-identification as Kazakhstani is more common among people of non-Kazakh ethnicity, Russian-speaking Kazakhs, and those who find it difficult to self-define their national identity due to mixed ethnic origin.

- *"Kazakhstanis can always leave the country. And the real Kazakh - no. The real Kazakhs will always remain on their land, no matter what. It is impossible to compare Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis at all. These are different concepts. Yes, we live in the same place, and we have common problems and business. But we have different goals and different heritage. For example, Russians are now coming to Kazakhstan. Russians may have different goals. To be a patriot of your country ... you should always be with [that] country." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 43, education level unknown, civil servant)*
- *"My mother is from Belarus. She is half Belarusian, half Polish. My father is half Ukrainian, half Jewish. What is my nationality? I am Russian [on government documents]. ... if there would be an opportunity to write 'person' or 'Russian' or a*

¹⁷ Batyr is an honorific term in Kazakh meaning hero or warrior.

'citizen of Kazakhstan', I would rather refer to myself as a citizen of Kazakhstan.. (Female, Shymkent, Russian, 35, higher education, entrepreneur)

- *"I mean, historically, we were forcefully taken from our environment and relocated here. My national identity is very weak. Because I don't feel Korean or like someone who lives in their historical homeland. At the same time, I am not Russian or Kazakh. We do not know our Korean language, our generation. We speak Russian and our children do too ... We grew up in Kazakhstan." (Female, Shymkent, Korean, 49, higher education, engineer)*

"Kazakhstani is the same as Kazakh." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 53, higher education, construction worker)

Sub finding B) Some participants view national identity in terms of citizenship and responsibility for one's country, regardless of ethnicity.

- *"We need to improve our citizenship so that we can be proud to be citizens of our country. Whether you're Russian, Korean, or another ethnicity, the most important thing is that you're a citizen of this country. Being a citizen must be more important than national belonging. Only then can we unite and create a functioning state." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)*
- *"I think we should not focus on being Kazakh, we just push away people who want to integrate into our society. Therefore, the idea of citizenship is very important." (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 33, higher education, journalist)*

Sub finding C) Participants identify hospitality, mutual assistance, and freedom as defining what it means to be an ethnic Kazakh. According to ethnic Kazakh participants, this is due to their history and nomadic way of life, which is counter to authoritarianism. In their explanations of the words free or freedom, participants referred primarily to the historical period preceding the Soviet era. According to participants, nomadic lifestyles and geographic location formed a behavioral pattern associated with democracy and independence. Freedom is also perceived as a value that Kazakhs regained after the collapse of the USSR. Further, the ethnonym Kazakh is of particular importance. It is often interpreted as "free man." For participants, the identity of Kazakhs is collectivist rather than individualistic. This is expressed in the desire to maintain good relations and provide care, but also in a dependence on the opinions of others. A sympathetic attitude toward other cultures and languages and the ability to avoid conflict is perceived as an inherently Kazakh trait.

- *"Unlike many countries, we are nomads, we are free. The word Kazakh means 'a free man' and I really like that because we have never worshipped anyone or anything. We have always walked proudly on our land." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 23, high school education, entrepreneur).*

- *"My soul resonates with Kazakh identity. When I hear a dombra,¹⁸ I imagine the steppe. Free life, love for life, and love of freedom - this is what I hear in this sound. Maybe Kazakh means freedom." (Female, Kazakh, Astana, 31, higher education, occupation unknown)*
- *"I cannot call all Kazakhs super tolerant. But there is this quality... humanism of some sort. If we see that someone is in trouble, a person of a different ethnicity, for example, no one will ask him about his origin, we will just help him." (Female, Almaty, 32, education level unknown, small business owner)*
- *"The Kazakhs have solidarity, I guess. The Kazakhs have large families, and they always help each other. That is, no matter whose comes up with any problem it is, everyone will gather, and everyone will help. That's what I really like." (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 33, incomplete higher education, occupation unknown)*

Sub finding D) Participants describe an image of Kazakhs as people who pay great attention to the opinions of others and value their image in society. To be successful, for Kazakhs, is to gain the approval and admiration of others. Kazakhs are attributed with certain personal traits - dependence on the opinion of others, fear of public censure, wastefulness, vanity, and the habit of displaying wealth.

- *"This is some kind of petty-bourgeois attitude. There is a beautiful dinnerware set in the house, but it is for the guests. The habit of not living here and now but postponing something to appear better than it is. Showing off. Taking out a loan [for] a fancy wedding, which is better than the one your neighbors had." (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 32, education level unknown, small business owner)*
- *"As a nation, we have a competitive streak - we want to be better than others. It is in our blood. We always try to get in the way and gossip. Sometimes we speak with envy - 'I know how he made his way to the top,' - dig up dirt about someone, but perhaps the person has changed, and we refuse to see it." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 36, high school education, tradesman)*

Sub finding E) Participants believe that historically, the treatment of women reflects the value of freedom in Kazakh culture. Study participants mentioned that women have always held a special place in society and had specific rights, were free-spirited, and actively participated in public life. This was also reflected historically in external attributes. Women did not cover their faces and rode horses. In modern Kazakh society, participants say that this is reflected in the active social participation of women, who often become leaders of social movements. Nevertheless, Kazakh participants tended to emphasize the dominant status of the man in the family, even in situations where important decisions and basic income of the family depend on the woman.

¹⁸ The dombra is a two-string instrument typical of traditional Kazakh music.

- *“We should be proud of our women. They deserve praise and attention. I'm saying it because it was our Kazakh women, our mothers, who pushed our nation forward despite any hardships they had to face.” (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 70, higher education, pensioner)*
- *“For some reason, I have this image of a Kazakh woman: she is always in the background, she does not stand out, and she is [supportive]. The ideal woman based on our traditions and mentality is not the one who shows off but the one who [is supportive].” (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 48, higher education, teacher and manager)*
- *“They [men] think that women should serve them. A girl is raised to serve a man and a man to serve a woman. And he is sitting there on his sofa, watching TV, like he is tired.” (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, housewife)*



“‘Ar kazagym – zhalgyzym’ (the words of the poet Magzhan Zhumabaev - ‘Every Kazakh is the only one for me’). No matter how corrupt or deceiving he [a Kazakh] is, he does it for a reason, for the sake of his family. The Kazakh nation is beautiful, kind, and hospitable. Kazakhs are very responsive. When we visit each other, we do not ask permission. For us, the doors are always wide open; I haven't seen this in other nations.” (Female, Shymkent, Kazakh, 31, higher education, teacher)

Finding 2. The use of the Kazakh language in relation to identity was the most contentious and emotionally charged topic among participants. Kazakhs often express dissatisfaction and even anger with the perceived low status of the Kazakh language in society. Ignorance of the Kazakh language among ethnic Kazakhs is perceived as a serious weakness and can lead to shaming. For other participants, whether a person respects the Kazakh language is more important than fluency. However, according to participants, Kazakhs nowadays are very sensitive about their language, regardless of the degree of proficiency. Kazakh participants who do not speak what they consider to be their native language see it as a drawback and regret it. Some participants believe that being a Kazakh means knowing and speaking Kazakh, yet ignorance of the language does not deprive a person of their national identity. Participants reported that the Russian language continues to play an important role for both non-Kazakhs and Kazakhs and is a requirement for social mobility. Some participants report switching from Kazakh to Russian to accommodate Russian speakers. Russian-speaking non-Kazakh participants see no real need to learn the Kazakh language. Among discussion participants, Kazakh-

Russian bilingualism in Kazakhstan is considered an asset and something to take pride in. This dismissive attitude towards the Kazakh language is perceived as inherited from the Soviet era when the Kazakh language was repressed.

- *"Everywhere you go, be it a staff meeting ... if there is at least one Russian among us, everyone, even the administration, would switch to Russian. I'm against it. My soul aches. I can speak Russian perfectly, but I prefer to speak Kazakh, I greet everyone [in Kazakh], [and so on]. My substitute at school is ethnically Russian. I only speak Kazakh to her. She understands everything." (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 48, higher education, teacher)*
- *"The role of the Kazakh language should be strengthened. The Kazakh language should become the language of communication among nations [i.e., ethnic groups]. In the future it will, I think. The Kazakh language was too repressed in the Soviet era. It must now be supported. I can read Russian - it is easier for me - but as Kazakh, as a patriot of my country, I want my children to watch movies in Kazakh." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, teacher)*
- *"Kazakhstan is a multinational state, and everyone needs to realize that. And the unifying factor should be the Kazakh language." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)*

Sub finding A) The dominance of the Russian language is seen as a legacy of the USSR, when knowledge of the Russian language created opportunities for social mobility. This issue is especially contentious because of ethnic Kazakhs' attitude toward their language, Kazakhs' perceived unwillingness of non-Kazakhs to make an effort to learn the language, and non-Kazakhs perception of it as having no special value for them. However, some Kazakh participants enroll their children in schools where the teaching is in Russian because they think that Russian will give them opportunities in the future. This caused a heated discussion during the focus group session in Atyrau, because some participants said that putting Kazakh children in Russian schools would create a new generation of *mankurts*.¹⁹ Some participants felt that Russian speakers take Kazakhs' willingness to speak Russian for granted, neglecting to learn the language of the dominant ethnicity.

- *"It cannot be eradicated in any case; we will still speak Russian. Cartoons are all in Russian and children comprehend them in Russian. I am sorry - I am Kazakh but I still do not understand movies and cartoons that are now translated into Kazakh. The vocabulary is very difficult." (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 43, higher education, teacher)*

¹⁹ *Mankurt* is a Kazakh word for a captive person who is turned into an indifferent being, completely subordinate to his master, who has no memory of any previous life.

- *"I mean, if you don't speak Russian, you're nothing! We've grown up so much. Kazakhs living in the villages do not speak Russian. They still live in agony, and no one can help them talk to the government. If you can't speak Russian, you're nothing. You can't build a career." (Male, Shymkent, Kazakh, 58 years old, male, technical education, pensioner and electrician)*
- *"Kazakhs believe that language influences national identity. It's a kind of payback for all those years when it was, I wouldn't say exterminated but repressed. I have a lot of Kazakh friends and they told stories of their parents telling them that they would only achieve something if they knew Russian, so they only spoke Russian with them because only Russian-speaking people could achieve something." (Male, Almaty, Russian, 56, higher education, scientist)*

Sub finding B) Participants say that the reason for the Kazakh language's low status is weak state policies, including ineffective state programs, weak legislation promoting Kazakh language development, officials' lack of knowledge of the language, corruption, a lack of educational courses, methodologies, and textbooks, and the sheer complexity of the language itself. Russian-speaking participants tended to emphasize the lack of accessible courses and well-written textbooks as obstacles to learning the Kazakh language. Meanwhile, ethnic Kazakh participants frequently spoke about officials' inability to disseminate the Kazakh language and improve its social status since independence. According to FGD participants, state programs do not achieve the desired effect and are a waste of money.

- *"I do not blame our generation or the younger generation. It is the fault of our government. I can say that to anyone: it is the fault of our state. Why? Because they do not do their job properly. Why? Because they themselves do not know Kazakh. ... All these ministers and deputies. They all studied in the Soviet times in Russian schools." (Male, Shymkent, Kazakh, 46, higher education, dean of university)*
- *"Kazakh should remain the only language in Kazakhstan. ... We do not use the Kazakh language because it is not adapted to the situation. Cartoons and movies are impossible to watch. But if we keep translating them, we'll get used to them. Therefore, the Kazakh language must be the only language." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 32, higher education, project manager).*

Sub finding C) Among study participants, Kazakh-Russian bilingualism is considered an asset and something to take pride in. This opinion is particularly common among representatives of non-Kazakh ethnicities and young people in Almaty. Many participants, Kazakhs and ethnic minorities alike, believe that Kazakhstan's citizens should know both Kazakh and Russian. Younger discussion participants expressed confidence that the Kazakh language will develop and eventually gain a higher societal status despite the dominance of the Russian language. They believe that the Kazakh language will become the country's main language.

- *“There are many states where there are two state languages, or three. Switzerland, Belgium, Canada even... and they live alright. We too should make Kazakh our priority and not forget it, but also give other languages the right to exist.” (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, teacher)*
- *“Bilingualism is our pride. It is necessary to preserve it. It is possible to talk and be understood easily in two languages in Kazakhstan. Learning the language takes time. We are in the process and, in a few years, the Kazakh language will be used in every family. There is no need to create drama over not speaking the language ... gradually everyone will become bilingual.” (Male, Almaty, Russian, 59, higher education, scientist)*



“Why do people fight so hard for their language? Because language is not just a means of communication - it is important for any nation to keep it. It’s a worldview, how one thinks, how one feels, how one sees, what one values.” (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 48, higher education, teacher and manager)

Finding 3. Among study participants, religion is not often seen as an integral part of national identity. For ethnic Kazakh participants, religion is a part of everyday life and religious thinking is built into people’s world views. However, strict adherence to religious canon is not common. Further, study participants do not note a strong link between ethnicity and religion. Though participants define Kazakhs as Muslims, they do not believe that Kazakhs of a different faith cease to be Kazakhs. Kazakh participants tended to look for the roots of their national identity in other areas, such as a common history, language, tradition, culture, and land. Some pointed out that every religion for Kazakhs is imported and so cannot be a determining factor in national identity. While some participants do see religion as an integral part of what it means to be Kazakh, most participants do not see religion as something with a strong connection to national identity.

- *“I can say this: most of my friends are Muslims. They identify as Muslims. But I can only call one of my friends a Muslim. This is a man who adheres to the rules and laws. The rest are just show-offs...” (Male, Almaty, Russian, 19, student)*
- *“I’m a Muslim, I’m not a strict follower, but I think I owe it to my daughter to say that she’s also a Muslim. I don’t want to force her to wear a hijab, to recite prayer five times a day, but she must believe in Allah, and there are some basic things I consider my duty to do or not to do.” (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, housewife)*

- *"The second thing on my list after language is religion. That's why we are Muslims. Our ancestors were Muslims. From the very beginning of our meeting, language [and] religion were spoken of several times. That is our national trait. There is a nation, there must be language and religion. It is all one thing. All three go together, I do not separate them." (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 57, higher education, self-employed)*

Sub finding A) Nearly every participant indicated that their family adheres to Islam or Christianity, but the spectrum of religiosity is quite wide. Some reported being more agnostic while observing some religious traditions as family traditions. Others organized their lives around religious canon and fast and pray. Those participants emphasized the ethical side of religion, which regulates moral norms in relation to others.

- *"I have Russian friends who keep Oaza [the holiday at the end of Ramadan] and Kazakh friends who celebrate Easter. Our country is multinational." (Male, Almaty, Russian, 19, student)*
- *"I think Kazakhs, as a nation, do not adhere to fundamental Islamism, as, for example, the Middle East does. We have taken only the good, all that is necessary for a person to feel comfortable and good. Every religion has its commandments, not to kill, not to steal, not to do bad things, and so on." (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 56, higher education, special education teacher)*

Sub finding B) Participants believed that strict religious adherence, specifically Islamic dress, was contradictory to the values and practices of ethnic Kazakhs.

- *"Many today perform namaz [pray] and fast ...but these people follow the traditional religion. And those who have gone into unconventional religion are covered up. We got it from Syria. There should be a law that forces them either to leave the country or to remove their hijab ...When you're in Kazakhstan, dress like Kazakhs." (Female, Atyrau, Kazakh, 56, higher education, self-employed)*
- *"Our mosques need to be thoroughly inspected... When you're older and your son grows a beard, wears short pants, and makes his wife wear something completely inappropriate for Kazakh women, although Kazakhs never covered their faces or hands. This is the government's negligence, most likely." (Female, Shymkent, Kazakh, 45, higher education, seamstress)*



"You must understand: We are not an Islamic state. Our Constitution does not state that our religion is Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. This is a personal choice for every citizen. You can't bring religion to the state level. We must clearly distinguish these concepts: our duties as citizens of Kazakhstan, and our personal duties". (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)

Finding 4. Participants report a connection between emigration and ethnic national identity. For Kazakhs, emigration is due to economic reasons, such as searching for social mobility, as well as due to a lack of democracy and freedom of speech. There is a connection between reasons for emigration and ethnicity. For non-Kazakhs, the reason for emigration could be related to language or a fear of ethnicity-based harassment, especially after the events of January 2022, according to participants.

- *"We got our freedom as a country, but we didn't give it to our people. I see it like that. Because of that, many are leaving. First of all for economic reasons. Many leave just because it's hard to live here and hard to earn money. Many of the people I know left because they were afraid to live here. Not in an economic sense, but in the sense that they will be oppressed here." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 35, high school education, self-employed)*
- *"We have no conditions for personal development. By and large there are no conditions simply for living." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)*
- *"If they switch to only one language [Kazakh], I will also leave. If I don't learn the language in three years, I'll have to leave because I won't get a job here. I mean not because I want to. I am comfortable here. I'm not saying that one doesn't have to learn the language. One has to support them. I've never felt any oppression from Kazakhs. But my colleagues say that on the outskirts, it feels like people of other ethnicities are oppressed." (Female, Atyrau, Russian, 45, higher education, nonprofit)*

Sub finding A) Many Russian-speaking non-Kazakh participants see no real need to learn the Kazakh language, and introducing Kazakh-language knowledge requirements may lead non-Kazakh participants to depart from the country. At the same time, they believe that when they emigrate and establish permanent residence in a new country, they will have to learn the language of that country. Kazakh is not widely spoken due to the willingness of Kazakhs to switch to the Russian language in situations when other speakers do not speak Kazakh. At the same time, Kazakh participants express remorse for their habit of trying to accommodate other speakers

and expect immigrants to adopt the culture and language of Kazakhs. However, it is acknowledged that the current state of affairs and the lack of legal requirements to learn the Kazakh language allows immigrants to manage without knowledge of the language.

- *"We Kazakhs always fear to be shamed by other people who do not speak our language. That is why we always try to adjust and speak their language." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 30, high school education, self-employed)*
- *"Of course, I would like Russians, who live here, and Jews also, to learn our language. Why? Because I think they should respect our country and our culture... We have a multiethnic country, but we would still like other ethnicities to speak our language, respect our culture, and speak the Kazakh language." (Male, Shymkent, Kazakh, 46, higher education, dean of university)*
- *"We live here, we grew up here, we have children growing up here. I have no plans of going anywhere. But if they say you either learn Kazakh or you get out of the country, then there will be no other way but to leave." (Female, Atyrau, Russian, 68, higher education, pensioner)*
- *"When I see that I cannot understand business Kazakh, and I have no other options, then the first thought that crosses my mind is 'well, I need to leave.'" (Almaty, other details unknown)*

Sub finding B) Among many participants, national identity and emigration are connected. A sense of belonging to a nation can be a motivation for returning to one's homeland. In some focus groups, participants pointed out that emigration can erase national identity due to the influence of the outside environment as an inevitable process of assimilation.

- *"As soon as I leave Kazakhstan, I feel Kazakh. I get this feeling when I am abroad. I might even speak more Kazakh than back home." (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 32, education level unknown, small business owner)*
- *"I went to Russia for a funeral. All the relatives are Kazakh. I was first surprised by how well Kazakhs living in Russia spoke Kazakh, and secondly, how they respected traditions. You can't say a word in Russian there. Although they live in Russia, and so on. I was surprised. It was a culture shock for me. Because they stick to their traditions more than Kazakhs do here." (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 33, higher education, journalist)*
- *"It was in the news... two Kazakhs living in Germany saying that they will never forget their language and traditions. But their children, since they were born in Germany, may not learn the Kazakh language and forget traditions." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 43, higher education, civil servant)*



"We unite when we are abroad, cherish our flag, respect our language, meet often, feel one another and try not to forget about our traditions, thus promoting our traditions more than we do back home." (Female, Shymkent, Kazakh, 55, higher education, housewife)

Finding 5. For many participants, the period of Kazakhstan's membership in the Soviet Union resulted in a perceived loss of national identity for Kazakhs. Some participants view the Soviet period as a time of Russian imperialism and forced assimilation that impeded the development of Kazakh identity. Some older participants expressed positive feelings of nostalgia about the USSR, while others had a negative attitude towards it that is informed by their understanding of Soviet history. Some participants connect modern Kazakhstan's struggle to democratize to its Soviet past.

- *"We've been assimilated. Meaning they tried to get rid of the Kazakh language, of our national identity... Because of the Soviet Union, I do not know my native language or native culture." (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 34, higher education, entrepreneur)*
- *"The abbreviation of the USSR means the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But there was in fact no union. It was the hegemony of Russia. It was just Russia. You had to know Russian. If you didn't know Russian - you could not achieve anything. This is what I don't like about that time. If we continued being a part of the Soviet Union, what would have happened to us? We would ... be called Michaels or [something] else." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)*

Sub finding A) Some participants, mainly those over the age of 50, had a positive attitude towards the USSR, referencing nostalgia for stability and social security. Memories of free education, medicine, and housing obscure memories of the lack of free speech and other totalitarian manifestations of those times.

- *"It had been a good period, although my family had to move here. They were exiled, and some died here, but others had a good life here. In Soviet times, they were normal people. They worked; everything was fine. There was no negativity. Most importantly, there was a great demand for industrial workers, and they were educated in vocational schools." (Female, Astana, Russian, 60, higher education, pensioner)*

- *“Our parents lived in the USSR when they were still young. Everything is green when you're young... Well, young people [today] have a different perception. How can we see the Soviet Union in a positive light knowing that, as a nation, we lost half our population to starvation and repressions during the Soviet era. My attitude is very negative.” (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, teacher, higher education)*

Sub finding B) Some participants' negative attitude towards the Soviet Union was informed by their understanding of the historical context of that era, including totalitarianism, repression, and the famine and genocide of Ukrainians. Participants connect Kazakhstan's negative experience as part of the USSR to a loss of identity.

- *“When I hear the USSR, Russia comes to my mind and the pre-war years, revolution, hunger, and wartime. We did not witness this period, but we learned about it in school. We know it from history and from the stories of our fathers about the times of Brezhnev and Khrushchev.” (Male, Shymkent, Kazakh, 33, higher education)*
- *“The USSR is the continuation of Russia's colonial imperial policy. This must never be forgotten. I sometimes see people waving red flags, reaching for the USSR. The USSR [was] a prison for people. ... Comrades, we need to change our psychology and not watch programs broadcasted on the zombie boxes [on television] about national identity ... We almost lost our national identity under the USSR.” (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 59, higher education, logistics)*

Sub finding C) Some representatives of the older generation and young people view a connection between the political environment in the USSR and modern Kazakhstan, describing a continued lack of democracy and freedom. In the perception of participants, the roots of the problems that exist in modern Kazakhstan – corruption, problems with the Kazakh language, etc. – stems from the politics that existed in the USSR. This negative heritage is emphasized by ethnic Kazakhs, for whom the Soviet era is a period of domination of Russian culture and the Russian language that is still strongly felt by them today.

- *“We didn't bow to anyone. If some khan²⁰ came by, we were like 'go away, we're not going to elect you, go back to your home,' figuratively speaking. And now? Three hundred years have passed. We had the Soviet Union, when the state decided everything for us and treated us like dirt, like we were some [kind of] disposable material. Now we have our own government, which decides everything for us, and we again cannot assemble, do things, and decide for ourselves...” (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 23, high school education, entrepreneur)*

²⁰ Khan is a Kazakh word that refers to a head of state or tribe.

- *"In my opinion, the 30 years of the so-called independence of Kazakhstan has been the continuation of the USSR..." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 54, higher education, economist)*



"[This] is a very difficult question. Everyone associates the Soviet Union with stability. How was this stability guaranteed? By the fact that there was no freedom of speech [...] one ideology, a totalitarian regime. There were no different opinions, there were no disputes, and everyone accepted it. People miss the days when you didn't have to think too much and choose, but where is the truth?" (Female, Almaty, Kazakh, 48, female, higher education, teacher and manager)

Finding 6. Participants view media as a key element in shaping and entrenching people's national identities and believe that the source and type of media consumed both depends on and shapes the identity of the consumer. Many participants do not trust official sources of information. Some participants express the opinion that the media provokes ethnic tension and believe that it impacts the formation of national identities in this manner. Some view Russian media as exerting particular influence.

- *"It has a huge effect. My brother came from Novosibirsk. He does not watch TV, he gets news from the Internet. He picks up random information and when he starts talking ... Oh, my, what are you talking about?" (Female, Astana, Russian, 60, higher education, pensioner)*
- *"You don't know, it's scary. You don't know what's true or what's not true. My mom watches Russian TV and my dad is from Ukraine. They have always fought with each other their whole lives... It is clear that dad is watching Ukrainian and mom is watching Russian "Putin's" news, it is so obvious." (Female, Shymkent, Russian, 35, higher education, entrepreneur)*
- *"It is all geopolitics. Their main goal is not to foment war or conquer us but to take us under their control, to control the information space. What do we need to do to balance out the information space? Look at how many Russian TV channels we have. We need to broadcast our channels more. Why do our children speak Russian? Because from an early age they watch cartoons in Russian. We must stop broadcasting them..." (Male, Atyrau, Kazakh, 60, higher education, entrepreneur)*

Sub finding A) With regard to national identity, the media is also perceived as a tool that can propagate certain ideas, even headlines, that can appeal to ethnic divisions and evoke significant emotional responses. Participants believe that Kazakhstani society is developing an understanding that information requires careful and cautious handling to avoid being manipulated.

- *"But we have a pro-Russian population that watches Russian channels, they watch TV and watch Russian channels and believe Putin." (Male, Astana, Kazakh, 34, higher education, entrepreneur)*
- *"There are nationalist channels. I also watch them online. I watched it once or twice, so it's not interesting anymore. It is simply repulsive. I don't want to hear or watch it." (Male, Almaty, Ukrainian, 59, higher education, journalist)*
- *"It's the word. The word affects perception very much. If you read the media headlines, they always have something to do with ethnicity - "'Kazakh offended someone'" or vice versa "'Russian offended Kazakh",' or "'There is an ethnic conflict".' It is clear that they want to manipulate people. Media is always a tool, and it is a powerful tool of manipulation." (Female, Astana, Kazakh, 31, higher education, occupation unknown)*

Sub finding B) Many participants do not trust official sources of information and prefer to search for additional sources to verify information. The younger generation rarely uses television as a source of information, preferring to surf the Internet for various sources, checking and comparing facts and trying to filter information, initially taking nothing at face value. The importance of critical thinking is pointed out in connection with both the January events in Kazakhstan and the war in Ukraine. Contradictory information presented by different channels leads to division and conflict even at the family level because of some people's tendency to unconditionally trust the information received on television. The older generation (50+) tends to be less critical of sources and more trusting of information that is broadcast by media.

- *"I do not watch TV at all... you need to take information from different sources, compare it, look at it, analyze, and develop your own personal opinion. Because one [source] says one thing, and another - another thing." (Male, Almaty, Russian, 19, student)*
- *"I mean why is there demand for VPN in authoritarian countries? Why is there no demand for it in democracies? Just because people like to read alternative sources anyway ... Why do many people know about and read independent channels today, even when the state invests a lot of money in their own media? Because people are still more or less prone to critical thinking and searching for alternative information." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 24, higher education, teacher)*

- *"In Russia, they really only use propaganda ... It is the same in Kazakhstan: 90% of media outlets are funded by the state and write what they are told to write." (Male, Almaty, Kazakh, 23, high school education, entrepreneur)*
- *"My mother watches such news. I ask her, 'Where do you find all this?' and she starts to tell me everything. I say, 'Mom, it's not true. What are you saying?' and then we argue with her, and I think, 'Oh my, why did I even give her the phone?'" (Female, Almaty, Lithuanian, 26, higher education, housewife)*



Conclusions

Among study participants, national identity in Kazakhstan is highly dependent on ethnicity. For ethnic Kazakhs, national identity in ethnic terms is more often a source of affinity than it is for other ethnicities. Non-Kazakhs, however, tend to derive pride from a civic conception of national identity. Modern ethnic Kazakhs are balancing a desire for freedom and independence with a desire to avoid conflicts in order to maintain good relations with other ethnicities and languages present in the country today. Kazakh and non-Kazakh participants alike express pride in Kazakhstani society's ethnic diversity.

Freedom is the foundation on which ethnic Kazakhs build their national identity. This value is encoded in visual images, such as the steppe, open space, nomadic lands, and the word *kazakh* itself, which many interpret as "free man." Freedom is also referred to as a recently reacquired value due to the perception of the Soviet era as a time when freedom was significantly restricted. Non-Kazakhs identify themselves more with citizenship than ethnicity and use the term 'Kazakhstani' more frequently than ethnic Kazakhs. Ethnic minorities find ethnic national identity to be complicated and fraught.

Ethnic Kazakhs also take pride in their ability to be sympathetic and welcoming – even to the detriment of their own interests. Participants are proud of this but at the same time believe that it makes them vulnerable to losing their language and culture, as it forces them to adapt to the needs of other ethnic groups, which erodes the perceived 'authenticity' of Kazakh society. This manifests in a focus on collective values and the importance of the opinions of others. Attention to the needs of others and the desire to maintain good relations, even at the expense of one's own interests, is highly valued. Kazakhs point to the important role of religion in their lives, as some observe certain religious practices in their daily lives, but religion is not perceived as part of national identity. However, many participants expressed concerns about some forms of religious observance which they consider a threat to national identity.

Knowledge and use of the Kazakh language is a very serious issue for ethnic Kazakh participants and sometimes causes heated debate. Participants perceive Kazakh language as an integral part of ethnic Kazakhs' culture; they view language as a means to preserve their identity. The attitude towards the Kazakh language is equated with the attitude towards the nation and culture in general. Non-Kazakh participants, in general, express a personal disinterest in learning Kazakh, but exhibit a high degree of respect toward the Kazakh language. While some say that they would leave the country if language requirements were to be tightened, other non-Kazakh participants believe that citizens of Kazakhstan should speak both Kazakh and Russian and take pride in the fact that many are bilingual. Non-Kazakh and Russian-speaking ethnic Kazakh participants are more inclined to use the term "Kazakhstani"

as an indication of their belonging to Kazakhstan as a country, regardless of their knowledge of the Kazakh language.

Most participants regard the Soviet era in Kazakhstan as a period of loss of national identity. In the perception of many participants, the roots of many problems that exist in contemporary Kazakhstan, such as hindrances to democratic development and the status of the Kazakh language, stem from the politics of colonization and the Soviet period. Negative effects are emphasized by Kazakhs and ethnic minorities alike, for whom the Soviet era is perceived as a period of domination of Russian culture and language that significantly impacts both ethnic Kazakh identity and civic Kazakhstani identity today.



Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Twelve focus group discussions were conducted as part of the "National identity" study between May 21 and June 4, 2022, in the cities of Astana, Almaty, Shymkent and Atyrau. There were three focus groups in each city.

Selection of participants was based on a screening questionnaire, which took into account the following selection criteria: participation in the FGDs within the past 12 months (there was a requirement prohibiting participation in FGDs within the past 12 months), city of residence, gender, age, nationality, language, education, occupation, financial situation, and willingness to participate in a collective discussion of the issue. All participants in the FGD gave written and informed consent to participate in the study.

In all cities except Almaty, FGD participants were divided into age groups: 1 FGD - ages 18-30, 2 FGD - ages 31-45, and 3 FGD - ages 46-70.

Special attention was paid to the following criteria: ethnicity, gender, education, occupation, financial situation. Participants were mixed along these criteria.

In the city of Almaty, it was decided to conduct one focus group discussion without the participation of Kazakhs. This is because of the topic of the FGD, it was assumed that members of other ethnic groups would be more open and freer in their assessments in the absence of Kazakhs. The age groups for Almaty were adjusted: 18-35, 36-70 years old, and there were no age restrictions for the "non-Kazakh" group.

The main language of the focus group discussions in Astana and Almaty was Russian and in Atyrau and Shymkent it was Kazakh. At the request of non-Kazakh participants and with the consent of other participants, Russian was also used, with the moderator interpreting the questions and the moderator's assistant also helping with interpretation.

Information about the National Identity FGDs

Location	Date	Number of Participants	Gender	Age	Education	Ethnicity	Occupation	Level of Income	Comments
Almaty	May 21	9	5 females	18-35	higher, secondary	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Lithuanian	entrepreneurs, students, internship at medical school, housewife, teacher	average, below average, above average	
			4 males						
Almaty	May 21	11	5 females	36-70	higher, secondary	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Uighur	cook, pensioner, builder, security service, manager, nurse, driver, economist, entrepreneur, self-employed	average, below average, above average	
			6 males						
Almaty	June 4	9	6 females	mix	higher, specialized secondary, incomplete higher	mix (no Kazakh): Russian, Ukrainian, Korean, Tajik	civil service, TV editor, culturologist, journalist salesman, student, pensioner, housewife	above average, average	
			3 males						
Astana	June 4	5	4 females	18-30	higher, secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Bashkir	journalist, dentist, administrator, student	below average, average	9 people were supposed to participate, but due to sudden change of weather conditions (rain, strong wind, drop in air temperature), four participants could not attend
			1 male						
Astana	May 21	9	7 females	31-45	higher, secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Tatar, Russian	civil service, entrepreneur, chief editor, educator, a housewife	average	
			2 males						

Astana	May 21	8	5 females	46-70	higher, secondary	mix: Kazakh, Tatar, Russian	retired, journalist, cleaning company employee, teacher, salesman, logistician	average	
			3 males						
Atyrau	May 26	7	7 females	18-30	higher, secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian	civil service, self-employed, coordinator, housewife	average	12 participants were invited, but five could not attend due to work
			0 males						
Atyrau	May 27	12	6 females	31-45	higher, secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian	civil service, teachers, tradesman, volunteer	average, below average, above average	
			6 males						
Atyrau	May 28	8	6 females	46-70	higher, secondary	mix: Kazakh, Russian	nurse, teacher, entrepreneur, self-employed, retired	below average, average	
			2 males						
Shymkent	May 29	7	3 females	18-30	higher, specialized secondary, secondary	mix: Kazakh, Russian	self-employed, entrepreneur, taxi driver, employee of a private company, teacher, student	below average, average	
			4 males						
Shymkent	May 29	10	7 females	31-45	higher, specialized secondary,	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Tatar	teacher, neuropathologist, rehabilitation specialist, handyman, nurse, cashier, entrepreneur, seamstress, office manager	average, below average, above average	
			3 males						
Shymkent	May 27	12	6 females	46-70	higher, specialized secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek, Korean, Jewish	medical worker, unemployed, electrician, teacher, professional singer, deputy dean, operator, housewife, nurse, engineer	average, below average, above average	
			6 males						

Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus group discussion guide

Notes for Moderator:

The moderator should emphasize that it is important that the participants speak freely and openly. The participants should understand that their comments, both positive and negative, will be appreciated.

This discussion guide is not a script; rather, the main purpose of this guide is to familiarize the moderator with the questions and issues that we would like to see addressed during the focus groups and to recommend a general order and flow of the topics to be discussed.

The focus groups themselves should be as free and spontaneous as possible. So long as the moderator investigates the issues in this guide, he/she is free to combine questions, change questions, omit questions that do not seem to be working and add questions in response to interesting trends as they become apparent.

The moderator should aim to get specific and detailed answers through probing and follow-up questions, and by encouraging a true exchange of views among the participants. It is important that the moderator conducts a group discussion, not a group interview.

It is similarly important to ensure that the conversation is tolerant of diversity in a group and considerate of anyone's perceived limitations – be it a language, an ethnicity, some disability, religion, home region, sexual orientation, preferred lifestyle, etc.

Please keep the following study objectives in mind throughout the group discussions.

FGDs on National Identity:

Participants invited to discuss this topic should be divided by age groups and by language of discussion (according to the selection requirements).

The main aspects on the topic «National identity» ("What does it mean for you to be Kazakh?")? What role does their usage of different media platforms (esp. the use of social media among the youth) plays in their understanding of national identity? What role does the memory of the USSR times play ("What does USSR mean to you, your family/friends")? What role does the Kazakh versus Russian languages play? What about the role of religion, and is there a connection to language? What might be the connection between national identity and plans for migration?

- **Introduction (5 minutes)**

1. Introduction of moderator and participants

Write down your Name (nickname), gender/sex, age, education, occupation, and city.

Your name is important so that I and the participants are able to refer to you during our discussion.

2. Consent: My colleagues have already filled out the consent form with you. Do you still have questions about your agreement to participate in the FGD?

3. Explanation of the FGD objectives: We want to know what you think about the national identity of Kazakhstanis.

4. Explanation of the «rules» of the FGD:

- Speak freely and openly.
- There are no good or bad opinions. Everyone has the right to speak out. Be tolerant and respectful of everyone's opinions, there are no right or wrong answers.
- Try not to speak at the same time, otherwise it will be difficult to understand who said what.
- Be as specific as possible, provide concrete examples where possible.
- Turn off your mobile phones. If necessary, put them on silent mode.
- Permission for audio/video recording. Recording is important for the analysis, as it is impossible to write down opinions and answers of all participants, and it is very important for the moderator to be able to record everything that is said during the FGD.
- Confidentiality reminder. Everything discussed during the FGD will remain here. The analysis is conducted on the basis of impersonal text information.

- **«Who am I?» (20 minutes)**

Objectives: to explain the concept of Identity and to allow participants to identify themselves «Who am I?»

- *There is such a thing as Identity - this is how you are similar to some and different from others. Try asking yourself "Who am I?" and write down your answer.*

To do this, I will distribute sheets of paper to each participant, on which you must write no more than 5 things that define you, which, in your opinion, accurately describe the ways you are similar to some and different from others. One definition per sheet.

- Once the participants have finished this task, ask them: *"Which of the following are you most proud of?"* Give participants an opportunity to briefly comment on their characteristics.
- Group all statements into groups (gender, clan (ru), ethnicity/nationality/nation, profession, language, religion, hobbies, personality, family role, etc.). Announce the results.
- Group discussion. If the group "Nation", "Nationality", "ethnicity" is indicated, then start the discussion with it. If this group is not indicated, then find out why no one identifies themselves by nationality.

(Moderator: If the phrase "I am a Kazakh" is used, ask: What makes those who listed it proud "to be Kazakh"?)

If someone says "I'm not like ...", find out why this particular wording is used.

- **To be Kazakh (60 minutes)**

Objective: To gain a better understanding of participants' views on what it means to be Kazakh.

- When I say "Kazakh", what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
What does it mean "to be Kazakh", what defines it? How are "Kazakhs" different from other nations?
- What qualities would make a person of a different nationality Kazakh?

(Moderator: List features (values) specific to Kazakhs that bring out a sense of pride or the opposite feelings in you (hospitality/қонақжайлылық, бауырмалдық/бауырмашылдық, мақтаншақтық/showing off, жалқаулық/idleness, etc.)

Non-Kazakh participants also should say what it means "to be Kazakh" for them. It is possible that someone among them associates himself/herself with Kazakhs: "I am Kazakh". Ask why, etc.

Those who do not associate themselves with Kazakhs should simply provide a description of Kazakhs, etc. Then ask them why they do not associate themselves with Kazakhs?

- What objects (animate, inanimate), natural phenomena, art, concepts, symbols, words do you associate Kazakhs with?

(Moderator: it is great if they list their associations in Kazakh or Russian, but do not push it, it should come naturally.)

- "Kazakhs" and "Kazakhstani" - what is the difference between these words and what is in common? Who do you consider yourself to be more and why, etc.?

(Moderator: you can graphically (by drawing a circle) show the words "Kazakh" and "Kazakhstani" and mark intersections, contradictions, differences, etc. with arrows)

- The question to all participants whatever their ethnic affiliation is: What makes a Kazakh a Kazakh, a Russian - Russian, a Uighur - Uighur, a Tatar - Tatar, etc. (mention all ethnicities listed by the participants). Pay attention to negative characteristics.
- Are there any stereotypes about nations, nationalities, are they justified? What are the stereotypes about Kazakhs?

Religion

- The moderator returns to the «Who am I?» question. If religion is mentioned, say the following: Some participants identify themselves by religion. Let's discuss it.

Or, if religion is not mentioned, then ask why. Discuss it.

- What role does religion play for each of you?
- Is religion practiced in your families? At work? In your community? In your city? On social networks?
- Is it a part of national identity? Why "Yes" and why "Not"? How do people in your city treat other religions?

- What reactions does discussing religion trigger among people in your community/society?
- In your opinion, does religion have an effect on shaping your national identity?

(Moderator, every participant speaks of one's personal understanding of religion. Kazakh - what religion means for him/her. Russian - what religion means for him/her, etc.)

Language

- For many, language is important as a means of self-expression/self-perception.

Ask everyone: What language is important to you? (Kazakh is important for Kazakhs, Russian for Russians, etc.)

- What language should Kazakhstanis speak?
 - What does Kazakh language mean for each participant?
 - What role does Kazakh language play for each participant as compared to Russian language?
 - Ask about the reaction of people when someone speaks Kazakh or Russian. *Moderator, participants may say that some deliberately pretend they do not speak Russian or Kazakh, thereby showing hostility. Let people talk about specific situations. It is necessary to analyze this problem, understand why this is happening, hear people's opinions about such cases, and find out what needs to be done so that there are no such conflict situations.*
 - Do non-Kazakh focus group participants know Kazakh language? What are the opportunities or obstacles to using or studying it?
 - In your opinion, does language influence the formation of national identity/sense of belonging to a nation?

Consider the following examples: (1) nation exists as long as people speak their native language (2) people living in Kazakhstan may not know Kazakh language, but they consider themselves Kazakhs, patriots of Kazakhstan; other examples may be provided by the FGD participants.

(Moderator, each participant speaks about one's language, about one's understanding/meaning of the language for him/her).

- Is there a big connection between religion and language in our country?
- Does this connection affect the shaping of national identity?
- We talked about national identity, about the concepts that shape it. But still, in our country there are differences in the understanding of "national identity".

Why do you think that is? Why do Kazakhs rely on language in their understanding of national identity, and other nations may not. Or, for some Kazakhs, religion is important as an indication of belonging to a nation, while for others it is not.

Moderator: look out for mentions of language, age, experience with USSR days, religion, media usage, and probe for each.

For example, someone mentions watching it on TV... You can immediately ask: *What programs did you watch it on? Or someone says that in the USSR issues of nation, religion, language were not discussed. Then you immediately ask why they were not discussed? Why weren't the issues of nation, religion, languages discussed in the USSR?*

Migration

- Let's talk about migration. In your opinion, is there a connection between migration and national identity? Does population migration affect national identity?
 - How does national identity affect the desire to leave or come to Kazakhstan?

For example, the Kazakh language knowledge requirement influences the desire to leave Kazakhstan. What are the reasons people want to leave or come to Kazakhstan?

- Conversely, does the migration of people affect their understanding of national identity? For example, does the return of Kandastars (oralmans) to Kazakhstan change their national identity? Or does the departure of other nations affect the national identity of the population remaining in the country?
- Who is leaving the country now and why? Are you ready to leave yourself?

- What do you think about those leaving (Kazakhs) to other countries?
- What do you think about people coming to Kazakhstan?
- If you leave, are you ready to speak the language of the country you are going to live in? Accept traditions? Should you learn the language of that country?
- Should those who come to Kazakhstan accept the traditions and language of the Kazakhs?
- Do people lose their national identity when they leave the country?
- And conversely, when they come to Kazakhstan, do they acquire a national identity?

Moderator *it is very important that the participants discuss real life examples.*

- **The USSR and national identity (10 minutes)**

Objectives: To examine the potential impact of USSR memories on national identity.

- When I say "the USSR", what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
- What does the USSR mean to you, your family/friends?
- Imagine that a foreign tourist comes to you and asks you to objectively describe life in Kazakhstan during the Soviet era and now, what differences are there? (*Moderator: see if the participants describe life as better then or now, and what makes it better or worse now as compared to the USSR times.*)
- Is there a generational difference in terms of perception of the USSR?

- **Use of the media/media platforms and national identity (15 minutes)**

Objectives: To examine the potential impact of media use on participants' thoughts on national identity.

- Let's talk about what media/media platforms (social networks, Internet, YouTube, websites, etc.) you use.
 - What does television, social networks, the Internet, websites (and last but not least, radio, newspapers, magazines) mean to you?

- How important is each source of information to you in order to receive news?
- Let's now look at each platform you use and name specific media you consider the most reliable on your platforms.

By media I mean the names of specific TV channels, websites, accounts (profiles) on social networks that you trust.

- Which media (name of TV channel, website or social media account) do you trust and why are they trustworthy? (*Moderator: pay attention to the language of these media. If it is not clear, clarify.*)
- How does the country of origin, language and other factors affect listed sources of information?
- Do you think there is a connection between the media people use and how they think about national identity? If yes, please, explain.
- What effects does the use of different media platforms (especially the use of social media among young people) have on the shaping/understanding of national identity?

- **Summary (about 5 minutes)**

Objective: To elicit open feedback to potentially raise points of importance for participants that were not addressed earlier in the discussion

Thanks to all participants! Our discussion helped all of us look at the perception of national identity. We have discussed different issues with you. There may be other aspects, issues we haven't covered, but in your opinion, they play an important role in this discussion.

- Is there anything else that we all need to know in order to better understand national identity in Kazakhstan?

Appendix C: Participant Selection Criteria/Screening Questionnaire

Recruitment Screener: National Identity FGDs

Dear Recruiter,

You are recruiting for 12 focus groups:

Group	Location	Primary Language	Gender	Age	Education	Ethnicity
1	Astana	Russian	mixed	18-30	mixed	mixed
2				31-45		
3				46-70		
4	Almaty	Russian		18-35		
5				36-70		
6				mix		
7	Shymkent	Kazakh		18-30	mixed	mixed
8				31-45		
9				46-70		
10	Atyrau	Kazakh		18-30		
11				31-45		
12				46-70		

Each group must have a minimum of 8 participants (if in person), and a maximum of 10 participants. It is advisable that you recruit several back-ups (2 people) for each session.

To the extent possible, participants in the same focus group session may not know one another. Therefore, if you use snowball recruiting, avoid putting direct referrals into the same group as the referring person.

To introduce this project to a potential candidate, please feel free to use your own words, but make sure you cover the following points:

Hello,

- My name is _____, I work at the Sange Research Center. It's an independent organization in Kazakhstan, which researches socio-economic issues in our country.
- At the moment, we are conducting focus-group discussions on the topic of "National Identity". We are looking for willing participants, who would be able to share their views and opinions.

- The focus-group format is for participants to get together and discuss social and other issues for about 90 minutes.
- An audio recording of the discussion will be made, it is necessary so that the thoughts and words of the participants during the conversation would not be lost. Everyone's opinion is very important to us. When we write a report, it will contain only summarized thoughts, views, and conclusions.
- The audio recording will not be passed on to third parties.
- Your name will NOT be used in the report—as per research ethics we will **guarantee the confidentiality** of your identity
- Our company will provide a small gift as a thank you for participating in the study.
- If you have any questions, you can contact the researchers directly on

After the introductory part you need to say: “We are looking for people who have a specific profile, so that our discussion group is diverse and interesting for everyone. So, may I ask you a few questions?”

• Have you participated in a focus group study in the past 12 months?	
Yes	<i>Terminate</i>
No	<i>Continue</i>

• Where do you live?	
Astana	<i>Keep for groups 1-3</i>
Almaty	<i>Keep for groups 4-6</i>
Shymkent	<i>Keep for groups 7-9</i>
Atyrau	<i>Keep for groups 10-12</i>
Elsewhere	<i>Terminate</i>

• Gender (DO NOT ASK, CODE BY OBSERVATION) But if recruiting online or by phone, you can ask the gender	
Female	<i>Recruit for roughly balanced groups</i>
Male	

• How old are you? WRITE DOWN EXACT AGE: _____	
Under 18	<i>Terminate</i>
18-30	<i>Keep for groups 1, 7,10</i>
18-35	<i>Keep for group 4</i>
31-45	<i>Keep for groups 2, 8,11</i>
36-70	<i>Keep for group 5</i>
46-70	<i>Keep for groups 3, 9, 12</i>
mix	<i>Keep for group 6</i>
Over 70	<i>Terminate</i>

• What is your ethnicity?	
1	<i>Kazakh</i>
2	<i>Russian</i>
3	<i>Ukrainian</i>
4	<i>Tatar</i>
5	<i>Uzbek</i>
6	<i>Korean</i>
7	<i>Other (specify)_____</i>

• Which language do you consider to be your primary language? Warn about the spoken language of the discussion	
Russian	<i>Keep for groups 1-6 (Astana, Almaty)</i>
Kazakh	<i>Оставить для групп 7-12 (Shymkent, Atyrau)</i>
Other	<i>Terminate</i>

• What is the highest level of education you have attained?	
Incomplete secondary (school, 8-9 grades)	<i>Recruit a mix of education levels within all groups (not every level needs to be present in each group)</i>
Complete secondary (high school)	
College, technical college, vocational school	
Incomplete higher education	
Higher education received in Kazakhstan	
Higher education received abroad	
Other (specify)_____	

• How comfortable are you discussing social and political issues that affect our country with others?	
Very comfortable	<i>Keep for all groups</i>
Somewhat comfortable	
Somewhat uncomfortable	<i>Terminate</i>
Very uncomfortable	

• What is your occupation? WRITE DOWN:_____			
1	Employee of a private company, farm	7	Self-employed
2	Entrepreneur, businessperson, farmer	8	Homemaker, on maternity leave
3	Government employee	9	Student
4	Public organization employee	10	Senior
5	Employee of a large company	11	Unemployed
6	NGO employee	12	Other

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Please select the statement that best describes your current economic situation:
I have trouble feeding myself and those who depend on me, and buying even the most essential things for survival
I have enough means for survival, but I do not have enough money for extra things
I can afford things like new clothes, furniture, home appliances and electronic devices but not often
I can afford anything and also support other members of my family who are not able to do these things

Conclusion: Thank you very much for answering my questions. I would now like to collect your name and contact information, so we could get in touch with you and invite you to the focus-group discussion when we will be compiling the participant list.

Name _____

Phone number _____

Other contact details _____

If you are a match for our research project, we will get in touch with you..

We anticipate that the discussion will be held on [**DATE/TIME**].

Would you be available then?



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