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ORIGINAL PAPER

Changing language policies and ideologies in Kazakhstan: an interview-based study

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Abstract

Language plays a critical role in society. In the Soviet Union, Russian language was leveraged as a key strategy to unify the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics, while also minimizing the function and significance of the titular and indigenous languages. This interdisciplinary study explores changes to the role of Russian language over time in the Kazakh context. Semi-structured interviews with interviewees (N = 9) were conducted investigating three periods: the Soviet era (1940s–1980s), newly-independent (1990s–2000s), present day (2010–2021). Interview data was analysed using qualitative content analysis in the light of Post-Colonial Studies and the notion of Linguistic Imperialism. The results highlight intensive policy measures to enforce Russian during the Soviet Union, resulting in its dominant use and status across society. The interviewees shared views regarding challenges to embed Kazakh language in society in the early post-independence period, citing intentionally passive policies, low-quality pedagogy and perpetuating Russian culture as hindrances to the use of Kazakh, characteristic of post-colonial scenarios. At present (2021), in parallel to the introduction of Kazakhstan's trilingual (Kazakh, Russian and English) policy, the attitudes towards Kazakh are more favourable. This current trend reflects greater national pride in being Kazakh. Kazakhstan is facing a new era of language use: colonial ties are giving way to globalization which brings increasing emphasis on English. The extent to which Kazakh may claim the status of lingua franca relies on the effective implementation of the trilingual policy and improvements in the education system.

Keywords Linguistic imperialism · Language policy · Kazakhstan · Russian language · Kazakh language

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Introduction

Languages are a fundamental part of society. They have the potential to promote certain ideas and political agendas (Woolard 2020), influence how people perceive themselves and society (Irvine and Gal 2000), and shape an individual's relationship with others of different languages (Cavanaugh 2020). Language ideology characterizes this society-defining quality of language, which Woolard (2020) describes as, "[the] morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world" (p. 1).

While language plays a critical role in shaping society, society—and more specifically, the politics and policies of that society—can shape language use and the public's attitudes towards it. In this way, language can be a tool for obtaining political ideological goals (Woolard 1998).

The Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or U.S.S.R.) demonstrates a context within which policy was used intentionally to shift language use for the purposes of societal control. The Soviet Union existed from 1917/1922 to 1991, spanning fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics (Pipes 2021). Russian was the official language across the Soviet Union. Its introduction brought significant changes to language policies of the republics and their titular (native) languages[1] (Gorham 2000, p. 20; Grenoble 2003; Brandist and Chown 2010; Lewis 2019).

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Former Soviet Republics adopted varied approaches to reclaim their new status as independent states, including revisiting their official state language and education policies (e.g. Korth 2005; Wigglesworth-Baker 2016). Their transition serves as a reminder that societies are not static and evolve over time. Similarly, the use and attitudes towards languages are also continuously changing. These changes in practice are particularly complex in multilingual, multi-ethnic contexts, and unstable societies which is the reality of some Former Soviet Union countries (Cooper 1989; Daftary and Grin 2003), including Kazakhstan. Previous studies have documented and analysed the topic of languages in Kazakhstan from a policy perspective (Fierman 1997, 1998), socio-linguistic perspective (e.g. Smagulova 2008; Burkhanov 2013; Rees 2015) and demographic perspective (e.g. Dave 2004b). While providing rich insights in their respective areas of focus, the findings are siloed to their respective fields, and often a specific period of time. In effect, the interactions and dynamic, temporal nature of these changes has yet to be systematically studied, despite the potential to offer important insights into the future of languages in Kazakhstan.

This study sets out to explore changes to the role and attitudes towards Russian over time in relation to the titular language in the context of Kazakhstan across five inter-related dimensions: politics and policies, public perception, education, society and culture, and demographic context. Three time periods are differentiated: the past era of the Soviet Union (1940s–1980s), post-independence period (1990s–2000s), and present day (2010–2021). By exploring multiple dimensions at each time interval, the study aims to observe their inter-relatedness and possible

[1] In the Soviet Union, a "titular language" was recognised with an official status but still considered secondary to Russian (Kraeva and Guermanova 2020).

cumulative influence on the future of languages in Kazakhstan. To explore changes over time and across the dimensions identified, three key questions are investigated:

1. What was the status and role of Russian and Kazakh during the Soviet Union?
2. How did the status and role of Russian and Kazakh change following independence?
3. What characterizes current societal attitudes towards languages in Kazakhstan?

The case of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world by land surface and one of the largest countries of Central Asia with a population of 18 million (2019, UN estimate) (OECD 2014; The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021a). Kazakhstan borders multiple countries, including Russia to the north, China to the east, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan to the south and Turkmenistan to the west. It shares its longest land border with Russia. Kazakhstan's geography and proximity to Russia, as well as its vast size, are among some of the contextual factors making it a particularly interesting former Soviet Union country to explore in regard to the role of languages over time.

The country has a strong vertical power structure that is heavily concentrated on the presidency and the administration (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020; The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021b). Independent, international bodies consistently describe Kazakhstan as a "hard line autocracy" and "not free" according to categories such as political rights and civil liberties (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020).

Ethnicities and languages of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's state language and the language spoken by the majority of ethnic Kazakhs is Kazakh. Kazakh language is a Turkic language belonging to the Kipchak branch under the Altaic language group. It has similarities to Turkish and can currently be written in both Cyrillic and Latin script. As of 1997, when Russian lost its status in the constitution as the language of interethnic communication (Republic of Kazakhstan 2021), Kazakh language became the sole state language.

Data from the last 40 years demonstrate that the number of ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Russians during the last 12 years of Soviet rule in Kazakhstan (based on 1979 and 1989 data) constituted approximately 40% of the population for each of the two ethnic groups (Table 1). In the first two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a heavy decline in the number of Slavs in Kazakhstan, including Ukrainians and Belarusians, with the number of ethnic Russians alone decreasing by nearly 15% (Sinnott 2003; Dave 2004a). The number of ethnic Kazakhs on the other hand, saw an increase during the same period following independence from 40% (1989) to more than half in 2009 at 63% of the population in total. This development can be explained by increasing birth-rates among ethnic Kazakhs, by the repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs and by the significant emigration of ethnic Germans, Russians and other Slavs.

Table 1 Key figures on the population and ethnicity in Kazakhstan over time

Characteristics		Years			
		1979	1989	1999	2009
Population size (n)		14,684,283	16,464,464	14,981,281	16,009,597
Ethnicity	Kazakh (%)	36.0	40.1	53.5	63.1
	Russian (%)	40.8	37.8	30.0	23.7
	Ukrainian (%)	6.1	5.4	3.7	2.1
	Belarusian (%)	1.2	1.1	0.7	0.4
	Uzbek (%)	1.8	2.0	2.5	2.9
	Uyghur (%)	1.0	1.1	1.4	1.4
	Other (%)	13.1	12.5	8.2	6.4

Notes Most recent available census data is 2009. The 2020 census was postponed due to COVID-19 (UN Statistic Division 2021) and is expected to be conducted in October 2021 (Kazakhstan Newsline 2020)
Sources 1979, 1989 (Sinnott 2003; Dave 2004b); 1999, 2009 (Smailov 2011)

According to 2009 census data, essentially all ethnic Kazakhs consider their native language to be the Kazakh language (98.9%) (Table 2) but also to be proficient in Russian (92%). For ethnic Russians, the situation is very similar in that almost all ethnic Russians consider Russian language as their native language. Importantly, scholars have speculated about the accuracy of the census data, describing that the rates of Kazakh proficiency are somewhat misleading (Schatz 2000; Dave 2004a; Reagan 2019).

Beyond differences in language use according to ethnicity, there are also geographic differences (Fig. 1). The largest proportion of ethnic Kazakhs live in the western and southern regions (more than 70%). These regions primarily border countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) whose languages also belong to the Turkic language family (Turkmen, Uzbek and Kyrgyz). In the eastern region, the population of ethnic Kazakhs constitutes less than in the western regions but is still a majority (50–70%). In the northern and central regions, the percentage of ethnic Kazakhs is less than 50 (Smailov 2011).

Table 2 Population by ethnic group and their native languages/proficiency in Kazakhstan, 2009

Ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan	Ethnic group population (n)	Native language is of their ethnic group (%)	Native language is of another ethnic group (%)	Proficient in Russian[a] (%)	Proficient in English[a] (%)
Kazakh	10,096,763	98.9	1.1	92.0	17.5
Russian	3,793,764	98.8	1.2	98.4	12.6
Ukrainian	333.031	15.8	84.2	98.9	8.0
Belarusian	66.476	13.0	87	98.9	6.8
Uzbek	456.997	95.4	4.6	92.9	10.7
Uyghurs	224.713	85.0	15.0	95.8	15.7

Sources Smailov (2011)
[a]Proficient refers to understanding the spoken language

Fig. 1 Proportion of ethnic Kazakhs by region (oblast) of Kazakhstan. *Sources* Smailov (2011, pp. 19–20)

Language policies in Kazakhstan over time

Already during the late years of the Soviet Union, changes were made to existing policies and new policies were introduced regarding Kazakh and Russian in Kazakhstan. These policies are listed in Fig. 2 and can be characterized by three main milestones. First, in 1987, renewed attention was put to Kazakh language in the policy "On Improving the Study of the Kazakh Language." This policy put focus on improving Kazakh language in the educational system and media and was seen as a measure to make bilingualism the norm. The next big leap in policy changes happened in 1989 with the 'Law on Languages'. The law was the first example of Kazakh language being explicitly prioritized by the politicians. A third policy milestone is marked by the 1995 Constitution, which was an update of the 1993 Constitution. The law entailed a clear shift towards recognizing Kazakh as the only "state language". There was no longer any reference to Russian as a "language of inter-ethnic communication". Instead the policy now stated, Russian could be used "officially" on par with Kazakh in state organizations and local governance (Fierman 1997, 1998).

Figure 2 sums up the relevant key stages in language policy development in Kazakhstan. We can see a fluctuation between an *inclusive language policy* and an *exclusive language policy* (cf. Riegl and Vaško 2007). An inclusive language policy refers to a policy that "does not aim to marginalize the languages of ethnic minorities, neither on the legislative level, nor on the practical" (Riegl and Vaško 2007, p. 73), whereas an exclusive policy is the opposite of that. In 1987, Russian was included initially in the legislation, after which Kazakh's position was strengthened while Russian was excluded. The current policy includes not only Kazakh and

Year	Name	Described
1987	On Improving the Study of the Kazakh Language	Kazakh language receiving political attention for the first time. Policy calls to make bilingualism the norm, including the promotion of Kazakh language instruction in primary education, improved Kazakh language educational materials, creation of Kazakh course for tv and radio. Language courses not compulsory for non-Kazakh speakers.
	On Improving the Study of the Russian Language	Addressed questions regarding teaching the Russian language. Primarily a reaffirmation of previous policies. Russian still identified as "the language of friendship and brotherhood of people". Russian defined as the language of inter-ethnic communication.
1989	Law on Languages	Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) granted permission to Soviet Republics to define a state language. Kazakh language (the titular language) became "state language" in Kazakhstan. A "one-state-language" solution was adapted. Kazakh and Russian granted equal status in the work of organs of state power and administration.
1990 July	State Program on the Development of the Kazakh Language and Other National Languages	This state programme defined the use of languages in the period up to 2000. Noticeably, the section on Kazakh was longer and more detailed compared to the section on Russian. Russian still considered "language of inter-ethnic communication".
October	Declaration of Sovereignty	All drafted texts on language related issues/topics were omitted in the final draft, including any mention of any state language or official language – likely due to the sensitivity of the topic.
1991	Declaration of Independence	The issue of language was skirted and was only mentioned in very general terms in relation to the priority of the rebirth and development of culture, traditions and language.
1993	Constitution of Sovereign Kazakhstan	Some formulations regarding language issues entailed a significant level of ambiguity open to interpretation to opposing sides.
1995	Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan	Shift towards recognizing Kazakh as the only "state language". Any reference to a "language of inter-ethnic communication" was omitted. Russian language as "official language" to be used on par with Kazakh in state organizations and local governance. Requirement of "complete mastery" of Kazakh for the president of Kazakhstan.
1997	Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages	Maintained many points regarding language from the 1995 constitution.
1998-2006	Various revisions and additions to existing laws	Changes include introduction of a number of state programs and decrees in relation to the state language. For exhaustive list, see: (Smagulova, 2008).
2007	Trinity of Languages Program	Kazakhstan's citizens to be proficient in three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English.
2017	On the translation of the Kazakh language to the Latin script	Shift from Cyrillic to Latin for Kazakh language by 2025.

Fig. 2 Summary of policies over time. *Sources* Fierman (1997, 1998), Smagulova (2008), Dotton (2016), Adilet.kz (2017), egov.kz (2021), Riekkinen et al. (2021)

Russian, but also English. Further, the concept of political state strategies in multi-ethnic contexts describes a post-Soviet state's deliberate political strategy towards an ethnic minority group (Daly 2014). The framework of such strategies entails a description of different categories, including *assimilating* and *accommodating* strategies, which allow for the protection and institutionalization of the 'personal integrity' and freedoms of ethnic minority groups by the state. An accommodating state strategy does not discriminate the ethnic minority group, whereas an

assimilating strategy restricts the group's cultural expression, which may include "speaking, publishing and instructing in its [the minority group's] language or dialect" (Daly 2014, p. 386). Before 1987 Kazakh was subject to an assimilating strategy, whereas current policies and practices can be described as accommodating.

Methodology

Study design

Reporting aligns to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research checklist (Tong et al. 2007). This study adopts an explorative qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews (Ritchie et al. 2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted rather than focus groups or a questionnaire to ensure rich individual exchanges of thought and to allow respondents to discuss their individual views related to the research questions (Ahlin 2021). The research method of interviews was chosen in order to gain practical insights and a more nuanced understanding of the relevant policies in place. Interviews also help illustrate theoretical points in support of the theoretical underpinning of the study (Vogl et al. 2019). The analysis of interview data was conducted using elaborative coding (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003) and qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). Other methods were considered such as field observations or representative surveys though these were not found appropriate for the scope and aims of the study and due to ethical considerations.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary and temporal approach to analyse the role of and changes to languages in the Kazakh context. The disciplines explored span political sciences, sociology, sociolinguistics, and demographics. Specifically, demographics is applied to help explain how changes to demographic composition have impacted society. Political analysis is employed to explore the motives of language policies introduced by state actors. Sociology and sociolinguistics are applied to explore the societal factors affecting the implementation of language policies and the public's attitudes towards language changes over time. Lastly, the study draws on the domain of postcolonial studies by casting a critical look at the (post)colonial landscape of (post-)Soviet Kazakhstan and the consequences and social impact resulting from this status (Pavlenko 2008; Ashcroft et al. 2013).

The study applies the theoretical construct of *language ideology* and related theoretical concepts. *Language ideology* can be described as "[the] morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world" (Woolard 2020, p. 1). *Linguistic imperialism* is concerned with how and why some languages are dominant internationally, while attempting to explain this explicitly and in a theoretically founded manner (Phillipson 2009). Russian and English are dominant imperial languages which yield cultural and financial power

after the fall of the respective empires. Closely related to linguistic imperialism is *linguicism*, which "refers exclusively to ideologies and structures where language is the means for affecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources" (Phillipson 1992, p. 55). Linguicism characterizes an unequal structural division of power and resources between languages, such as Russian and Kazakh. Another concept relevant to the present study and (post-)colonial language situations is that of *shame (language shaming)*. Within the framework of language and ideology this concept describes situations when speakers of a (minority) language feel ashamed to speak their mother tongue, are explicitly shamed by people in their surroundings, or in a covert sense, when positive reinforcement of the majority language takes place at the expense of the minority language (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 2000).

To explore these constructs, a multidimensional approach was adopted for data collection. Analysis was pursued as visualized in Fig. 3. Five key dimensions were defined: politics and policies (the motives and effects of language policies); public perception (attitudes of the general public towards language); education (language in the schooling system); society and culture (evolution and use of language in the public sphere or domain (Boxer 2002)); and, context (demographic changes and regional differences).

Sample and recruitment

Interviewees specializing in education, academia, media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and culture in Kazakhstan were purposively sampled and recruited

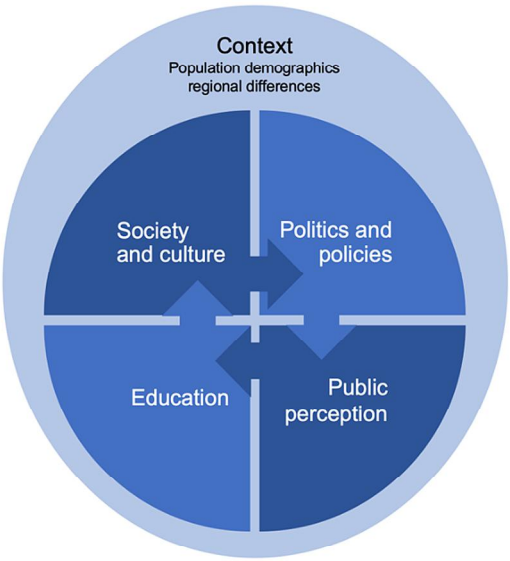

Fig. 3 Analytical approach. *Sources* Authors' own

for semi-structured interviews. A target of about 10 interviewees was pursued for manageability and sufficient diversity in perspectives to reach thematic saturation. The sample is also in line with the exploratory nature of the study. Attention was put to ensure a balance of spoken languages, range in ages (over and under 40 years) to account for different experiences during and following the Soviet Union, and ethnicity (Kazakh or Russian). Efforts were also made to account for regional variations, in order to engage interviewees from different areas of Kazakhstan. Due to limitations to the scope of this study, recruitment of interviewees focused on people who spoke English (the main inquiry language) as well as Russian *and* Kazakh (source languages[2]) (cf. Baumgartner 2012).

A participant letter was provided in English, detailing the study's aims supplemented by an interview guide. Out of the sixteen individuals contacted, nine agreed to participate and included interviewees from each of the targeted sectors: education (n = 4), academia (n = 2), media (n = 1), NGOs (n = 1), and culture (n = 1). Non-participants were either unreachable (n = 3) or referred to an alternative contact (n = 4). Table 3 provides an overview of the interviewees. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the pool of nine participants was deemed sufficient to address the research questions. Additionally, a range in geographic variation was achieved (Fig. 4), with representation from nearly all major regions of Kazakhstan.

Semi-structured interviews

An interview topic guide was developed in alignment with the research questions. All interviews were conducted virtually (Zoom or Skype) and were recorded for the purposes of detailed notetaking and transcription. One pilot interview was conducted. The findings of this interview were reviewed and adjustments to the interviewer script were made (namely, further examples and follow-up questions).

Table 3 Characteristics of interviewees and codes assigned

#	Code	Sector	Ethnicity	Region	Age	Sex	Languages[a]
1	ACA1	Academia	Kazakh	Almaty	>41	M	RU/KZ
2	ACA2	Academia	Russian	Almaty	>41	F	RU
3	EDU1	Education	Kazakh	South	>41	F	RU
4	EDU2	Education	Kazakh	South	≤40	F	RU/KZ
5	EDU3	Education	Kazakh	North	≤40	F	RU
6	EDU4	Education	Kazakh	West	>41	F	RU/KZ
7	MEDIA1	Media	Kazakh	Central	≤40	M	RU/KZ
8	NGO1	NGO	Kazakh	Almaty	≤40	F	RU
9	CUL1	Culture	Kazakh	Almaty	≤40	M	RU/KZ

RU Russian; *KZ* Kazakh
[a]Refers to interviewee's mother tongue/primary language(s)

[2]For the purposes of this study: mother tongue or second/foreign language.

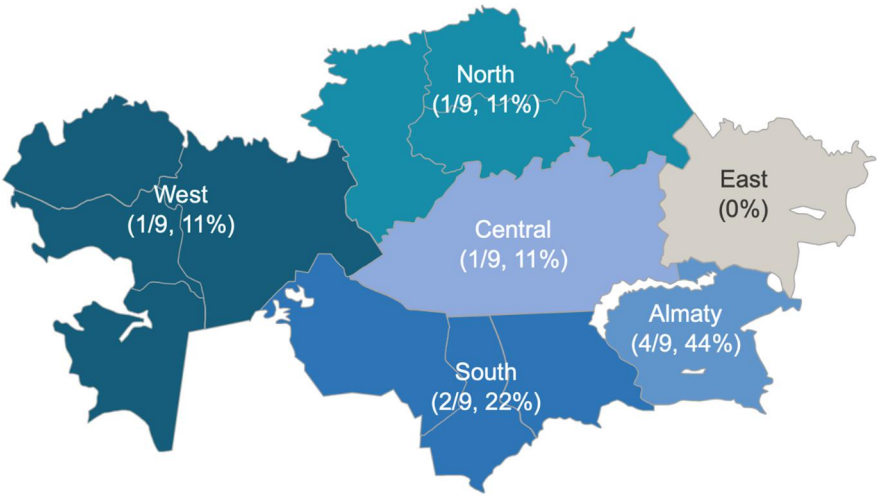

Fig. 4 Mapping regional affiliations of interviewees. *Source* Authors' own

The final interview topic guide is available as an online supplementary file and can be provided on request of the corresponding author. On average, interviews lasted 60 minutes (range 30–105). interviewees were followed-up with by email to discuss suggested additional interviewees or literature, where applicable.

Data analysis

An Excel tool was developed for the purpose of analysis, including segmenting interview transcripts and assigning themes in the approach described by Meyer and Avery (2009). Each interviewee was assigned a code (Table 3), used to de-personalize interview data.

A series of five key categories were defined at the outset of the analysis based on the interview topic guide and included: (1) characteristics of interviewees; (2) Soviet times; (3) post-Soviet times, (4) attitudes at present, (5) other. Category two to four had two subcategories: (a) Russian language, and (b) Kazakh language, with category four having additionally (c) English language.

Segmented interview text was assigned to one or more of the aforementioned categories. A note was added to each quote to document emerging themes. Once all interviews were coded, the files were merged and filtered. The filtered categories were then re-read and studied to refine the clustering and observe emerging recurrent themes. These themes were used to cluster results across research questions.

In reporting on the changes in regard to the role of Russian and Kazakh languages over time, an overall degree of change was assigned by topic (cluster) as "largescale", "moderate" or "minor" by the authors.

Ethics

This research adheres to University College London ethics guidelines stated in "Research Ethics at UCL" (GDPR) (University College London 2022). Informed and written consent was deemed adequate by the author as no human data was retained. To ensure informed voluntary participation, interviewees provided written agreement to participate during the recruitment stage. At the outset of each interview, the interviewer restated the objectives of the study and requested permission to record the interview. The interviewees were prompted that the recording had been initiated and were requested to click their consent (University College London 2022).

Analysis

Figure 5 provides a summary of results comparing changes between Russian and Kazakh languages at three time points explored with interviewees during Soviet times (1940s–1980s); the period following the fall of the Soviet Union (1990s–2000s); and present day (2010–2021). Key recurrent themes by time period are described in the following sub-sections, while also drawing on relevant literature.

During Soviet times

In the scope of policies and politics, Russian was described by the interviewees as the language of the intelligentsia and government in Kazakhstan during Soviet times. As one interviewee stated: "Government agencies or party agencies in pre-independent time was all done in Russian" (ACA1). This is in line with the broader Soviet Union agenda to promote Russian (Grenoble 2003). Some interviewees noted that the policies regarding language use, including the required use of Russian language, was a political means for the Soviet state to repress the use of Kazakh as part of colonizing Kazakhstan: "The way Russian language became predominant is because of the policies…it was not natural. It [Russian language] didn't come here to compete with Kazakh language. It was a replacement of Kazakh" (CUL1). "I don't see them [the policies] as natural…Russian became more predominant and Kazakh took a backseat. It was a result of policies and often policies that led to violence that led to deaths that led to a lot of trauma" (CUL1).

It was, however, also noted by some interviewees that the Soviet state during the first decades of Soviet rule in Kazakhstan ('30s and '40s), did allow for some usage of the titular language in politics, often referred to as "Soviet bilingualism". Olivier (1990) and Grenoble (2003) have argued this multi-language policy was merely a means to effectively Russify the native languages. Specifically, the Soviet state's "Korenizatsiia" [Nationalization][3] strategy aimed to engage the indigenous

[3]The "Korenizatsiia" strategy involved engaging the indigenous people in local governing to win their support for the political system.

Clusters	Language	Soviet times (1940s–1980s)	Post-Soviet times (1990s–early 2000s)	Present (2010–2021)	Overall degree of change
Policies & politics	Russian	Language of intelligentsia; dominant language in politics and government; political strategy for colonization; shift to one-language policy.	Changes to status in constitution; deeply embedded in political systems; dependency for sustaining Russian relations.	Trilingual policy promotes Russian; use in official documents; spoken language among politicians; Russia ties remain strong/delicate.	Moderate
	Kazakh	Soviet bilingualism "rodnoj jazyk "[homeland language]; enabled as second-language policy, though repressed through colonization to follow; elevated to state language in 1989.	Active government prioritization of use and info in Kazakh; Bolashak programme introduced; repatriation of Oralmans; emphasis as state language (constitution); Kazakh as multi-national; absence of ethnic conflict.	Lower priority in trilingual policy (due to English); intro of Latin alphabet; use in official contexts; needed for career in public service;	Largescale
Society & culture	Russian	Lingua franca across sectors; dominate language of media and signs and symbols; celebration of Russian holidays; access to Russian books, songs, stories; identity as one 'Soviet people'; accelerator for career.	Lingua franca across sectors; native languages forgotten; language for employment; language of popular culture (movies, media); means to engage with western world (globalization); mixed language use ("half" bilingualism)	Lingua franca; language of information and communication with the outside world; remains dominate media content; language of business, IT and industry; seen as common language across post-Soviet countries.	Minor
	Kazakh	Spoken among families only. Kazakh traditions and holidays not celebrated; famines and marginalized status of Kazakh make resistance weak; tokenized.	Spoken publicly; national identity re-connected to Kazakh language; promotion of Kazakh art/ media; city names changed to Kazakh; celebration of Kazakh traditions; mixed language use ("half" bilingualism).	No longer tokenized; more predominant in music; movies dubbed in Kazakh; mainstreamed in media; language used to discuss contemporary topics (e.g., feminism).	Largescale
Education	Russian	Dominate language of education; Russian schools as majority.	High literacy achieved through Russian education system. Decrease in Russian elementary schools but remains language of higher education.	Remains common in schools; better education system; more affordable resources (than English); remains language of school admin.	Minor
	Kazakh	Obligatory until 1950s; limited access to textbooks/materials; not well-documented language. Curriculum focused on Soviet society.	Obligatory in schools; 're-learning' of Kazakh for many; curriculum development; "new" role emphasised by teachers.	Underprioritized; students unmotivated; pedagogy remains conservative, lacking modern methods and incentives to motivate youth.	Moderate
Regions & demographics	Russian	Cities predominately Russian-speaking; north and east more Russian speaking.	Dominant in the north/cities, though exodus of Russian-speakers.	Dominate in cities (especially Almaty) and north; tendency to speak Russian to people that appear 'urban' regardless of ethnicity.	Minor
	Kazakh	Rural areas, south and west predominately Kazakh speaking; Kazakh population representing less than half of population.	Promoted in western Kazakhstan, linked to oil sector; widely spoken in south; higher birth rates; increase in cities.	Dominate in western and southern regions; more dominant in rural areas; Kazakh used more commonly among ethnic Kazakhs.	Moderate
Public perception	Russian	Prestigious, language of high social status; necessary to follow policy context and professional success; mainstream, liberal, modern language.	Preferred spoken language; language of higher class; more esteemed.	Remains 'worth knowing' for practical reasons (spoken widely) but sense it should not be obligatory/should not be prioritized; considered the 'neighbour language'; language of opportunity abroad.	Moderate
	Kazakh	Traditional conservative views; 'backwards', unsophisticated language; shaming for using Kazakh.	Sense of national pride and identity; patriotism; imposed on Kazakhs; 'uncool'; shaming for *not* using Kazakh; translation issues.	'Cool' and 'trendy'; expectation ethnic Kazakhs should speak Kazakh; being ethnic-Kazakh more closely linked to the language.	Largescale

Fig. 5 Summary of the role of Russian and Kazakh languages over time

populations and make them part of the workforce. Nevertheless, a hard shift in policies that prohibited any use of Kazakh for political affairs was later introduced, making Russian the sole language.

In society, Russian was dominant across all sectors. In media, Russian language was the primary language on TV and radio, and in culture, through the celebration of only Soviet holidays (indirectly through the absence of Kazakh holidays). Through Russian language, Soviet songs and stories were promoted, as one interviewee described: "we would hear songs in Russian and we celebrated Russian, for instance Slavic holidays" (MEDIA1). As a result, Kazakh held a marginalized status. Its use was limited to more narrow cultural situations, such as dedicated Kazakh newspapers, theatrical productions and literature. During Soviet times, the identity as a common Soviet people was pervasive, meaning people's ethnicities were secondary to the Soviet identity: "the Soviets had created them [and us] as a 'Soviet people'" (MEDIA1). Instating a pan-national or supra-national Soviet identity connecting people across nations and ethnicities is well-covered in the literature (see: Blum 2003; Suny 2012; Wojnowski 2015).

During this period, knowing Russian was a means to accelerate one's career. Kazakh was, therefore, mainly spoken privately among ethnic Kazakh families and had little to no use in many sectors of society. Russian was predominately the lingua franca, in contrast to Kazakh: "It was even difficult for me to hear Kazakh speech in the street" (ACA2).

Some interviewees noted that ethnic Kazakhs had little choice in terms of language preference. Firstly, the share of the population they represented was lower than that of ethnic Russians during most of Soviet rule. Secondly, the trauma from famine and the Soviets' attack on Kazakh way of life and nomadic culture had marginalized the status of Kazakh to an extent that made any resistance to Soviet language policies weak. As a consequence, Russian was adopted by a majority of ethnic Kazakhs at the time.

According to the interviewees, during Soviet times Russian was the predominant language in education. The division between "Russian" and "Kazakh" schools was in favour of Russian, making up almost all of the schools in urban areas. In Almaty[4] —the capital of Kazakhstan during Soviet times—only a few Kazakh schools were available. As one interviewee described: "Every school was targeted at studying the Russian culture and the Russian language…very little was on Kazakh or ethnic Kazakh history" (EDU1).

Interviewees also described that materials in Kazakh were limited, poor quality, or not developed. One interviewee stressed that Kazakh had not been a written language for long prior to Soviet rule. The interviewee argued that this may explain why Kazakh language was not more resistant to the Soviet regime. Scholars have explored the policies of Lenin and their influence on language building in Kazakhstan, with translations into Kazakh of Lenin's own works to "enrich" the Kazakh language (Khasanov Bakhytzhan 1976; Aldaberdikyzy 2013). Demko (1969) and Campbell (2017) have also argued that already in the late nineteenth

[4]In Soviet times known as "Alma-Ata".

century, Kazakh language was being supressed by Russian imperial rule and colonization strategies.

Interviewees overall reported that there was a clear distinction in language use between urban and rural areas of Kazakhstan. During Soviet times, Russian was lingua franca in urban areas versus Kazakh in rural areas—with a few exceptions. But Russian, overall, held the status of language of communication with the outside world. For example, some described that even in rural areas there would be someone who would know Russian well enough to communicate in Russian with guests and officials if needed. In terms of demographics, interviewees reported that while Russian was predominant in most parts of Kazakhstan, it was especially dominant in the north and east, whereas the south and west tended to be more Kazakh speaking. Still, the cities and bigger towns in most regions were Russian speaking. In terms of representation in the population, the interviewees stressed that ethnic Kazakhs accounted for less than half of the population during Soviet rule. According to census data, since 1939 until 1979, Kazakhs indeed were a minority compared to ethnic Russians (Sinnott 2003).

The interviewees reported that during the Soviet period, Russian was considered prestigious and a language of high social status: "if you lived in the city you had to speak Russian in order to succeed financially or to improve your social status" (NGO1). Russian was described as "mainstream" and the language of technology and advancement. It was associated with modernity, industrialization and liberalism. Knowing Russian was a way for people to advance professionally and in society, and it was a means to follow politics and public discourse:

> Speaking Russian was more beneficial for you even in your individual life, but also just to understand what is happening in society, and perhaps to understand what the party [the Communist Party of Kazakhstan] has decided. And Russian was important to propel yourself individually in life and to get better jobs and to compete with people who are migrating to Kazakhstan usually from Russia. (NGO1)

Russian was, thus, seen as a language of the elite and of advancement. According to the interviewees, this was in sharp contrast to Kazakh, which was rather associated with conservatism, low-status and "backwardness" and as the language of uneducated and rural people.

In society, there were often examples of Kazakh speakers being met with dismissive and degrading comments often alluding towards Kazakh as an uncivilized language. In other words, a form of "language shaming" was conveyed towards the use of Kazakh in certain circles, often in cities. This is an example of a minority language being exposed to a linguistic authority or dominance, which within linguistic ideology (Woolard 2020) is viewed as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1988, 2009).

Post-Soviet times (Kazakh independence)

After the fall of the Soviet Union, changes were made in the constitution regarding Russian and Kazakh. As one interviewee recounted: "Kazakh language was

elevated to the rank of the state language while Russian became the language for international [interethnic] communication" (EDU4). Intentional efforts were made by the government to promote Kazakh. For instance, one interviewee recalled the aspirations of the President that all citizens would speak Kazakh by year 2000. By elevating the titular language to a state language and demoting the status of Russian, Kazakhstan followed a similar path as other newly independent post-Soviet states, distancing themselves from Russia and the language (Pavlenko 2013).

The repatriation programme for ethnic Kazakhs living abroad is described as one government initiative having the most significant impact on the number of Kazakh speakers: "Then you also have the incoming flow of the "Oralmans" as they're called, the ethnic Kazakhs, coming from China, from Uzbekistan, from Mongolia, from some other places. And it's a government sponsored program" (ACA1).

According to the Kazakh government, more than one million ethnic Kazakhs resettled in Kazakhstan since independence (RFL 2015). This initiative characterizes the government's "Kazakhification" programme in the post-colonial years, aiming to reinstate Kazakh culture and traditions (Zeveleva 2014). The programme is illustrative of the ethnic-oriented tendency characteristic of Kazakhstan's nation-building processes, though some scholars suggest it was a pragmatic measure that sought to strike a balance in the dualistic "civic-ethnic nationalism balance" (Zeveleva 2014, p. 814).

The interviewees reported that in the early post-Soviet period, Russian remained the dominant language in politics. As one interviewee suggested, the official status of Russian was intentionally unclear: "it's very ambiguous and I think it's deliberately done that way so that basically we allowed it to be used for the time being at least" (ACA1). This statement can be considered in reference to the 1995 Constitution, Article 7, where Russian was given the status to officially be used on par with Kazakh (Fierman 1998). This status remained following amendments to the constitution in 1997 (Fierman 1997), and is still in effect today. However, Russian is not officially a state language in Kazakhstan—despite both this constitutional position and, what interviewees describe as its use as a *de facto* or "second" state language. Scholars have noted that this ambiguous status of Russian in policies may have helped maintain Russian language in Kazakh society and politics after independence (e.g. Burkhanov 2013).

The interviewees described that the ambiguity of Russian's status in the constitution may have been intentional to maintain good political relations with Russia. The interviewees also noted that retaining Russian and Kazakh in policies was part of the government's strategy to promote Kazakhstan as a multi-ethnic country. The strategy can be described as a non-violent assimilating or accommodating state strategy towards ethnic minorities[5] (Daly 2014). It could be argued that the minority group of ethnic Russians in post-Soviet Kazakh society was being subject to such inclusive state strategies, which was also the case in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It meant that the Russian speaking minorities were not being restricted (Daly 2014). This scenario was in sharp contrast to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan following

[5]In the 1990s, ethnic Russians decreased significantly in number and increasingly became a smaller and smaller minority.

independence, where the political leaderships applied more aggressive and repressive strategies (Daly 2014), immediately elevating the titular languages to state language and unequivocally demoting Russian. This was also the case in Estonia (Siiner 2006). As a result, people who only spoke Russian became disadvantaged: the titular languages became a prerequisite for social life and politics and ethnic Russians were often being denied citizenship and political opportunity (Daly 2014; Clement 2018). As one interviewee recalled:

> I have some relatives who had to move out of Turkmenistan due to ethnic conflict. It was very sad. They just left everything they had there. They needed to run to Russia, literally. It was very sad. We had nothing like that in Kazakhstan. And I think our society is quite friendly in this way. (ACA2)

Some scholars (e.g. Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019) have argued that in the case of Kazakhstan, the government was trying to strike a balance between not alienating the ethnic Russian population and avoiding ethnic conflict internally.

In parallel to shifting politics, there were also changes to the use of Kazakh and Russian in society and culture, with Kazakh taking on a more prominent role: "In the 90s, there was a shift towards more people using Kazakh and towards more situations where Kazakh was being used" (ACA2). The interviewees noted that active, more visible measures to promote Kazakh in society were taken, such as renaming cities and streets from Russian into Kazakh. This can be considered a typical post-colonial strategy, with similar practices of semiotic change (Johansen and Larsen 2002; Chandler 2017) found in post-colonial Africa, including Senegal and Algiers after their independence from France in the early 1960s (Grabar 2014; Uluocha 2015; Gorny and Gorna 2020). Kazakh traditions and holidays were celebrated again, instead of Soviet ones. In media, Kazakh also saw a revival, but Russian language media inevitably remained dominant. As one interviewee described in reference to Russian-produced film: "Kazakh language media could not compete with that" (CUL1).

In general, this period was marked by a tendency for Kazakh advancements to be overshadowed by the perpetuating role of Russian. For example: "In the shop "продукты" [«produkty»—"products" in Russian] were "продукты". …everything we had still was from the Soviets. The only thing that changed was the currency" (MEDIA1). In this situation, economic and practical concerns seem to have outweighed ideological ones, which could otherwise have positioned Kazakh more centrally in society. Similar circumstances have been observed in the linguistic landscape of Greenland where most products in the supermarket have Danish labels although the only official language of the state is (West) Greenlandic (Valijarvi and Kahn 2020).

Within sociolinguistics, the concept of domain (of language use) refers to a compound of inter-actional situations grouped around a shared set of experience (Mioni 2020; Preston 2020). The public domain in the early 1990s is described by the interviewees as continuously dominated by a Russian language discourse, including in media and other everyday activities in the public sphere, such as shopping or commuting. However, Kazakh in some instances was used in the domain of the family, making Kazakh the language through which rapport was

established to reaffirm social relationships. In effect, a clear contrast between types of domains (public and family) regarding language use continued to exist at this point.

Russian also remained an important language for people's career, and interviewees reported Russian language skills as a prerequisite for finding a good job. However, in the 1990s, Kazakh had been made a requirement for people working in government (Aksholakova and Ismailova 2013), which, according to the interviewees, improved career opportunities for Kazakh-speakers. But this was still a niche sector at that point. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Russian was a prerequisite for finding a job, in contrast to Turkmenistan where knowing only Russian quickly became problematic for one's employment opportunities (Landau et al. 2001; Daly 2014; Clement 2018).

In terms of language use among the public, one interviewee described the situation as "half bilingualism", whereby people would use slang and mixed-languages through code-switching (Auer 1998; Gardner-Chloros 2009): "people used mixed languages, for instance Russian-Kazakh slang, and that situation was more common than people speaking exclusively Kazakh" (ACA2). The situation was also described as "awkward", since prior to independence, Kazakh language had not been used as a lingua franca, meaning people in this period of transition often were unsure how to address their interlocutor. This meant that ethnicity started to play a decisive role regarding choice of language when addressing one another at the time: "If the person is not Kazakh, then I'll just switch to Russian" (ACA2). This is a fairly typical situation when there is language contact between majority and minority languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988).

There were also reported examples of "language shaming". For example, "one of my family members went to the store and addressed a salesman in Kazakh, but the salesman told the family member to speak Russian and not Kazakh" (EDU3). This is, thus, an example of linguicism, which takes place when actors in an institutional or societal setting contribute to marginalizing and stigmatizing a (minority) language (Phillipson 1988). In the above example, this also happens overtly (ibid.), since the salesperson explicitly states which language is prohibited.

An important change in the immediate post-Soviet period appears to have happened in the educational system. There was a significant increase in the number of new Kazakh elementary schools and promotion of Kazakh language by teachers (see Toleubekova and Zhumataeva 2018). Despite this, Russian was still dominant. As one interviewee commented: "during the independence in the 90s Russian was the only language for us and through Russian we could learn something academically" (MEDIA1).

In parallel, this period also saw important changes to demographics, which many of the interviewees credited as a key factor for changes to language use. With Slavs leaving the country in large numbers and the repatriation of the Oralmans[6] (Fleming and Ansaldo 2020), the increase in the number of Kazakh speakers after 1991 was seen as pronounced. Despite these changes, certain regions maintained an ethnic-Russian dominance. This was especially the case in Kazakhstan's northern and

[6]Ethnic Kazakhs, repatriated post-independence.

central regions, whereas the southern and westerns regions became increasingly more dominated by ethnic Kazakhs (Dave and Sinnott 2002).

Lastly, in terms of the general public perception towards Kazakh and Russian, Russian was still associated with being "superior". Language and social status are closely connected, and in some societies, the majority language can be considered more prestigious and of higher-status (Hannum 2020). As one interviewee reported:

> In the 90s it was mostly people in the rural areas or the south and they're traditionally conservative. And people in urban Almaty maybe didn't want to associate themselves with them. So for people in the city, Russian was like: "oh, I'm different. I am Kazakh, but I do speak Russian, so I am better than those people." (NGO1)

At the same time, for ethnic Kazakhs, an increasing sense of pride in speaking Kazakh was described on the premise that, given the newly independent status of the country, at least ethnic Kazakhs should speak Kazakh. Ethnic Kazakhs who did not (or chose not to) speak Kazakh were subsequently exposed to "language shaming" from other ethnic Kazakhs. As one interviewee recounted, which could be considered an example of "counter"-shaming and linguicism (Phillipson 1988; Smagulova 2021), took place:

> There is a little negative connotation about people who are Kazakh and don't speak Kazakh. … [When] trying to speak Russian to a cab driver and getting backlash from that. "Well, are you not in Kazakhstan? Are you not in Kazakhstan? Why are you not interested in trying to speak Kazakh? Because I can see you are Kazakh." (NGO1)

Present day

The government's trilingual policy (Republic of Kazakhstan 2015) was a recurrent theme among the interviewees with regards to the continued promotion of Russian at present. The policy measure not only guarantees Russian a continued presence in Kazakhstan, but additionally—due to its framing as part of a wider policy that includes three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English)—a potential division between Kazakh and Russian is minimized. Some interviewees saw the trilingual policy as a means to prioritize Russian through measures that appear "hidden". They appear hidden in the sense that Russian is secured 'a seat at the table' under the pretence of the trilingual policy measure. This approach could be seen as an "exclusive language policy", whereby language policies deliberately exclude or marginalize a language, for instance through the promotion of another language (Riegl and Vaško 2007).

At the same time, the interviewees described Kazakh language at present appears to have been given less explicit attention. As one interviewee stated:

> The whole focus was only on English instead of also simultaneously to do something with Kazakh…all the financial focus was only on English.

> Everyone forgot about Kazakh language…and while they tried to promote these two languages, they forgot about actual Kazakh. (EDU3)

At present, Kazakh is a requirement for working in public service and the interviewees describe a general trend towards politicians using Kazakh for public appearances. However, it is noted that Russian in large part remains the operational language. Situations were described in which one visits a government building and is addressed initially in Kazakh, and depending on the preferred language of the citizen, the officials either continue to speak in Kazakh or switch to Russian. There are also regional differences, with one interviewee noting in the north, officials still opt for Russian after an initial introduction in Kazakh, regardless of the citizen's preferred language: "If I was in north maybe in the beginning they [the officials] would say to you "Sälemetsiz be" ["hello" in Kazakh] and that would be all they would say in Kazakh language" (EDU3). The role of Kazakh in this context is symbolic or ceremonial, and warrants further research.

The interviewees also described that while Kazakh is the required language of reporting, in some instances Russian versions are also necessary. One interviewee stated this creates additional work for public employees (often resulting in poor translations) but also a conflict in the language expectations for public service employees:

> I want to see things from the perspective of my colleagues who have problems writing their reports in Russian. I think it's humiliating to them that they have to spend hours and hours just translating [their reports] from Kazakh into Russian. (EDU2)

In discussing government initiatives promoting the Kazakh language, several interviewees mentioned the "Bolashak programme" which offers high-performing students the opportunity to study abroad, conditional to their return to work in Kazakhstan for 3–5 years following graduation. A prerequisite for enrolling in this programme is knowledge of Kazakh (Bokayev et al. 2020). Aside from this initiative, the interviewees reported that government efforts towards Kazakh continue to be passive and without tangible results. As one interviewee described: "I think in terms of government policies, I would be sort of more on the sceptical side here. I don't think a lot of those policies were designed well. I don't think they really encompass the reality" (ACA1).

The interviewees noted that ties to Russia, and the importance placed on keeping good relations with Russia, continue to explain the passive approach adopted to promoting Kazakh. As one interviewee described: "why are we in Kazakhstan still trying to be friends, trying to be politically correct to our neighbours [Russia], at our own expense, at our own language?" (EDU3). Kazakhstan might have "learned a lesson" from other post-Soviet republics by seeing how Russia has reacted in incidents where local governments have taken measures that could potentially weaken or threaten the status of the local ethnic Russians. For instance, when the post-independence Baltic states adapted some of their policies to comply with EU and NATO accession conditions Russia became quite hostile in their rhetoric towards these initiatives (Hogan-Brun and Melnyk 2012) and in Ukraine, where

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was presented by Russia as defensive measures to protect the Russian-speaking population (Arel 2017).

Overall, interviewees noted that Russian to a large extent is still lingua franca in many parts of Kazakhstan. However, in the last 5–10 years, there seems to be a shift. As one interviewee replied "No, Russian is not lingua franca. Today the answer is no. If you had asked me five years ago, I would have said yes" (MEDIA1). Nonetheless, there are a number of use cases for Russian and there was agreement it remains the language to communicate between different ethnicities (language of inter-ethnic communication) and for communication with the outside world (e.g., people in rural areas can use Russian to communicate with visitors who might only know Russian). Russian also continues to be used as a tool to communicate with citizens of other post-Soviet countries, often used for business and work purposes (Liu et al. 2017).

In addition, as the interviewees noted, there is still significant exposure to Russian through Russian-language media and entertainment which continues to have a predominant role in Kazakhstan—a view, shared by Brown et al. (2017). Other interviewees alongside scholars such as Ibrayeva, Myssayeva and Alzhanova (2012) note that Kazakh-produced entertainment has improved considerably over the last few years. This change may be credited in part to the mainstream role of Kazakh in media and music, including foreign language movies now being dubbed into Kazakh. And while Kazakh speakers have previously been described as "conservative" (CUL1), according to some of the interviewees the language is now also being used for discussing more progressive topics such as feminism and sexuality.

At present, there are more Kazakh schools than Russian schools which is the reverse of the situation during Soviet times (Fierman 2006). According to the interviewees, this development is based on a political apprehension that the number of Russian and Kazakh schools should align with population demographics. Challenges facing the Kazakh school system were described to include a lack of suitable and up-to-date teaching materials, in contrast to widely available and affordable Russian materials. According to the interviewees, this is due to a lack of scholars who could be developing and publishing original Kazakh-language textbooks. Instead, there is a tendency to translate existing Russian textbooks into Kazakh, often with poor results and little attention to linguistic or pedagogical considerations. According to the interviewees, parents are well aware of this, and it is a contributing factor why so many children are being sent to Russian and not Kazakh school.

Another challenge Kazakh language continues to face in the educational system is the pedagogical approach to teaching Kazakh. The interviewees reported that Kazakh teachers often apply conservative and outdated teaching methods, stating: "My Kazakh teachers used only the translation method and we had to translate everything from Russian into Kazakh or from Kazakh into Russian. I don't think it is so effective" (EDU4). More specifically, the grammar translation method (Siefert 2013) tends to be applied, with a word-for-word translation between a source and target language with only limited attention to communicative language teaching (Savignon 2002). According to the interviewees, this methodology fails to

significantly improve the linguistic and communicative abilities of students, which in turn contributes to low motivation for students and teachers alike.

In terms of regional differences, Russian was described to remain dominant in cities and large towns across Kazakhstan, though with some exceptions. As the interviewees described, Kazakh seems more dominant in the southern and especially western regions, whereas Russian appears to be dominant especially in the northern regions. This aligns with the most recent census data on the geographic distribution of ethnic Kazakhs (Smailov 2011). One of the interviewees challenged the framing of Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication in the north, arguing it is the *only* language of communication in that region.

Beyond the north, Russian was described as the language of inter-ethnic communication. Some interviewees noted a tendency that people who appear "urban" will typically be addressed in Russian (and not Kazakh)—regardless of their ethnicity. One interviewee (from northern Kazakhstan) describing a visit to western Kazakhstan (where Kazak is widely spoken) stated: "I feel like I'm in Kazakhstan because everyone was speaking Kazakh" (EDU3). One interviewees described that when one does hear Kazakh spoken in the north, it has taken on a new connotation: "I've seen some young people (…) and when they speak Kazakh, they sound really interesting to me. It's not just the Kazakh coming from a village person, but rather academic Kazakh language" (EDU3). This description reflects a shift in perception towards Kazakh language of a more respectful, less discriminatory sentiment. Scholars have explored this distinction between more and less prestigious languages in relation to rural vs urban settings (e.g., Rivers 2002; Hannum 2020). This renewed perception of Kazakh contributes to making the social divide between rural and urban Kazakhstan less pronounced.

On demographic changes, the interviewees described that Russian is lessening its dominant status due to migration trends since independence, including the government repatriation programs as well as the emigration of Slavs. According to the interviewees and scholars, these migration patterns as well as an increased birth rate among ethnic Kazakhs after independence, had a considerable impact on the population's ethnic composition. The result is a higher number of ethic Kazakh and, in effect, more Kazakh speakers (Arkhangelsky et al. 2020; Aubakirova and Amanzholov 2021).

In general, Russian at present was described as a language "worth knowing" for a number of practical reasons. People who only know Kazakh face disadvantages with regards to accessing information, as one interviewee described:

> All information important for your career is coming from English anyway. They are translating from English to Russian. They are adopting to the Russian language environment. And if you don't speak Russian, you have to wait until they adopt it or translate it into Kazakh. (MEDIA1)

Overall, the interviewees shared the perception that Kazakh is taking on a more prominent role in society, which scholars also describe in their findings (e.g. Rees and Williams 2017; Smagulova 2021). This development was seen as positive by most interviewees. One interviewee stated that the expansion of Kazakh is happening "at the expense of Russian" (ACA1) and another interviewee expressed

a dissatisfaction with the government's promotion of Kazakh: "they impose Kazakh language. They make us understand Kazakh but there is no need for me to understand it because I don't see that this information is relevant to me that exists in Kazakh" (EDU1).

The majority of interviewees were of the opinion that Kazakh should and could be more prioritized: "We need to demonstrate that we know how to learn Kazakh. So we have to demonstrate some level of Kazakh. I believe that every citizen of every country should know their native language" (EDU4). However, according to some interviewees, there is also resistance among people to utilize Kazakh: "There's not a lot of backlash against Kazakh language vocally. People are not saying like, 'oh, we shouldn't speak Kazakh', but they're saying like, 'hey, you're Kazakh, I'm Russian, we should speak Russian'" (CUL1).

Some interviewees mentioned that there is also a generational divide in terms of people's personal attitudes towards Kazakh, with the younger generation viewing Kazakh as "trendy and cool" (NGO1). This appears to be connected to a growing sense of pride with being Kazakh:

> Students from our mainstream schools are proud to be Kazakh. The young people like to wear t-shirts with Kazakh words, and they like to demonstrate that they are Kazakh. And when a sportsman wins a championship, the students like to say that 'he was Kazakh from Kazakhstan. We're proud of this'. (EDU4)

There are divided opinions when it comes to whether (all) people should speak Kazakh in Kazakhstan. As one interviewee described there is a saying among certain groups in Kazakhstan: "a Kazakh should be speaking Kazakh with other Kazakhs" (ACA1). Another interviewee stated: "all people who live in Kazakhstan should learn Kazakh, because it's a matter of our identity" (ACA2). This dependency on ethnicity does appear at present to be a deciding factor among society as to whom the general public believe should speak Kazakh. The most pronounced of which is that the group of ethnic Kazakhs ought to speak at least a basic level of Kazakh.

Despite this expectation, one interviewee also emphasized: "I don't want to force someone [to learn Kazakh] because I know Kazakh language is still not ready to be implemented to all sectors of life" (MEDIA1). However, some interviewees also stressed the importance of learning Kazakh as well as Russian: "regardless of their age and their background, they are aware that you have to know Kazakh as well as Russian and you have to also respect your language, then I think everything will be good" (EDU2). The notion of Kazakh not being 'useful', 'ready' or 'adequate' was used by the interviewees as an argument as to why people should not be forced to learn the language. Some interviewees also argued that if Kazakh is imposed upon people to learn, leaving Kazakhstan and pursing opportunities abroad might become more attractive: "If I was a different ethnicity [than Kazakh], I would move from Kazakhstan, and I wouldn't want to learn Kazakh language" (EDU3). This again is being countered by another interviewee arguing that it is absolutely necessary to learn Kazakh: "I think that if you live in a multinational country we need to know firstly the state language of this country and we need to respect the culture and everything related to that" (EDU4).

English language

The interviewees stressed that English is being actively promoted by the government (e.g., the Bolashak programme) (Bokayev et al. 2020). The promotion and expansion of English language programmes were described as a tool to gradually push out Russian as the dominant lingua franca in many parts of Kazakhstan, potentially making English the new lingua franca. Interviewees also mentioned that English has a predominant role in the government's trilingual programme, a role that overshadows Russian and even Kazakh to some degree: "They [the government] tried to do it with trilingual policy, that is Kazakh, Russian and English, but it really went wrong in 2016. The whole focus was only on English" (EDU3). This quote illustrates the marginalisation of Kazakh by another imperial or colonising language (cf. Phillipson 1992, 2009; also Ostler 2006): in the past Russian received more attention and space, whereas now English is promoted at the expense of Kazakh.

In terms of the role of English in society, according to the interviewees, it has replaced Russian as the language of advancement given its status as a global language. In general, there is growing exposure to English in media and society, which other studies also point to (e.g. Brown et al. 2017), albeit many interviewees describe that Russian is still predominant. English exposure has increased in society through computers and technology and is growingly used to access information online (Brown et al. 2017). Some interviewees describe that English has replaced the interest of some to learn Chinese, which in the early 2000s, saw an increase in popularity, particularly in the business sector.

According to the interviewees, the trilingual policy has meant that English now holds a significant priority in the education system: "they invest lots of money in order to retrain subjects, teachers and improve the language level of English teachers" (EDU1). The interviewees describe this change is receiving great support among young parents, for whom English is a high priority. One interviewee noted it is now more common for parents to send their children to extra English classes, rather than what typically would have been extra Russian classes. Other scholars have noticed similar trends among the younger generations in Kazakhstan towards English (Akynova et al. 2014).

Despite the investment in English education, the overall implementation was described by the interviewees as suboptimal. This was primarily due to the speed with which initiatives were first introduced: "within these three months they [teachers] had to learn English class methodology as well. Two months for English and one month for methodology" (EDU3). According to the interviewees, this resulted in low-quality English teachers: "some English teachers still don't know even English themselves. Some teachers didn't know how to read in English. You can imagine what kind of English they can teach" (EDU3). However, the methods do appear to be improving, with the state investing in English and additional initiatives including the development of English language textbooks and teaching methodologies (Tlemissov et al. 2020). And, with the benefit of time, English is becoming more integrated into the education system, with new schools and universities with a special focus on English, such as a British university

in Almaty (Dauletkyzy 2021), and full English programmes at Nazarbayev University in the capital Nur-Sultan (Nazerbaev University 2021).

In terms of regional differences, Almaty was described as the area with the most spoken English in the streets and in workplaces. The western part of Kazakhstan has also seen greater exposure to English due to the oil and gas industry which brings a foreign presence. Nonetheless, while growing in popularity and presence, the overall level of English remains low across the population: "to say that English language has reached this critical mass is a bit too early" (ACA1). In rural areas, English levels remain low, with one interviewee cautioning that trends to suggest English has improved reflect only the instance of big cities.

Overall, English appears to be shifting towards the status that Russian once held. In fact, some reported that there is a fear that English may prevent the full potential of Kazakh being reached. Similar findings have been reported by others (see: Fleming and Ansaldo 2020). Despite this, English does not, overall, appear to be 'threatening' and holds a more positive position among the public, relative to Russian. Compared to Kazakh, English is described as a 'necessity', whereas Kazakh language is rather connected to a specific Kazakh identity or "Kazakhness". Similar findings have been reported by Rees (2015). The interviewees also described there is less public scrutiny if English is not spoken perfectly, unlike the case of Kazakh where there is felt to be less tolerance for different language levels. The rise of English in society, however, has contributed to a new form of language shaming towards people (especially ethnic Kazakhs) who speak English at a higher proficiency but not Kazakh. In these instances, a tendency towards ethnic Kazakhs being shamed for not learning Kazakh despite having managed to learn English instead was described. As one interviewee demonstrated in recalling a work event:

> I had to speak in three languages [Russian, Kazakh and English]. They would ask me questions in Kazakh, and I would try to respond. And obviously I'm not as good at it [Kazakh]. I would forget prepositions or some little words in between which kind of makes it loose meaning and try to repeat myself. And they would just see how much perspiration I have on my forehead and they would be like: 'Just switch to Russian!' And I could see how some people were disappointed, thinking 'I just saw you talking in English so well.' (NGO1)

Discussion

Key findings

This study set out to explore changes to the role of Russian in the context of Kazakhstan extending from the Soviet Union era, through early independence, to present day. To explore these changes, five key areas have been considered: politics and policies, public perception, education, society and culture, and the underlying contextual changes related to demographics and regional differences. The analysis

was conducted on the basis of the theoretical construct of *language ideology* and related theoretical concepts.

During Soviet times, Russian language was predominant across all areas explored, credited in large part to strict policy measures promoting Russian. Looking across the different time periods, this is the only instance where the interviewees described that intensive policy and system-wide measures were synergistic to enforce Russian language. It means media, culture, education, and the shifting demographic context were all conducive towards the use of Russian, while also limiting the presence of Kazakh. This clarity of direction also made Russian undoubtably the dominate language and without public dispute. This follows typical measures of colonization and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1988, 1992, 2009; Ostler 2006; Pavlenko 2008; Ashcroft et al. 2013).

The post-independence period can be characterized as a time of transition, marked by political and policy flux. The ambiguous status of Russian language lingered and only gradually, were changes in policies introduced. The study's findings signal these changes in policies, while in favour of re-instating the use of Kazakh language, were intentionally passive towards Russian. The resulting shared language space is an approach that is in contrast to some of the other former Soviet republics. Other former republics tended towards stricter measures to push-out Russian and enforce the titular language (Riegl and Vaško 2007; Pavlenko 2008, 2013).

In the most recent period explored (2010–2021) an important shift can be observed, elevating the status of Kazakh language among society. The association between the use of Kazakh language and a sense of national belonging and identity has entered the public discourse that was absent in the early independence period. There appears to be a growing sense of pride in being Kazakh, which appears as an appreciation of the titular language and renewed attention to the significance of languages in society. This tendency is particularly present among the younger generation of Kazakhs, which may suggest a generational shift towards nationhood and empowerment, and potentially, their stronger political will on such matters. The effects of globalization are found to have played an important role in this recent shift in language roles and attitudes, providing new access to media, culture and education, that was less diversified in the immediate post-Soviet times.

The future of language use in Kazakhstan

The status of languages in Kazakhstan is far from static. Based on the study's findings, different scenarios may be forecasted as for the future of language use in Kazakhstan. First, in the case of Russian language, there are a number of factors to suggest its continued strong presence. For one, beyond the mere geographical presence of Russia, Russia's political influence in Kazakhstan remains intact. This was exhibited as recently as early January 2022, when protests and unrest in Kazakhstan began as a reaction to a significant increase in prices on gas (Reuters 2022). This situation drew active Russian engagement, including the deployment of Russian troops to Kazakhstan to support the Kazakh government (The New York Times 2022). Further, programmes promoted by Russian government-sponsored organisations such as "Russkiy Mir Foundation" could increase in presence in

Kazakhstan in an attempt to promote Russian language and culture, as is the case in the Estonian-Russian population in Estonia (Kallas 2016; O'Loughlin et al. 2016; Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019; Pieper 2020). Alternatively, though a less likely scenario, the presence of Russian language could decrease. This would likely require intentional political manoeuvres, such as the next generation of Kazakh politicians prioritizing the demotion of Russian in an attempt to apply a more aggressive approach to nationalisation. In the 1990s, other post-Soviet republics, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia adopted aggressive campaigns against Russian in favour of their titular languages (Pavlenko 2008). Demographic changes could also contribute to a decline in ethnic Russians and increase in ethnic Kazakhs, also possibly contributing to a decrease in the prioritization of Russian. However, the considerable decline of ethnic Russians will not necessarily result in a diminished role of Russian in policies. The case of Moldova demonstrates this, where Russian is still widely used, despite the considerable decline of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet era (Riegl and Vaško 2007).

Second, with regards to the Kazakh language, there is the possibility of it becoming the dominant language. As early colonial ties grow further distant with time, the new generations will be less affected by the former linguistic dominance of Russian, possibly allowing Kazakh a new and less contested role in society. Additionally, greater will to use and learn Kazakh and improved pedagogy may facilitate a cultural shift to support its wider use. A future scenario where Kazakh will have an increased status in society would likely be dependent on the government continuously promoting Kazakh. This could help Kazakh increasingly become the language of prestige and advancement—further supported by the alphabet changing to Latin. Moreover, changes to the demographic composition, with increasing birth-rates among ethnic Kazakhs, might contribute to the likeliness of a more dominant and growing presence of Kazakh. Despite these trends, it is also possible Kazakh remains a niche language, used primarily in the government sector. This would likely result in a scenario where the societal interest in Kazakh remains low, and parents choose to encourage their children to learn Russian and English instead of Kazakh. This trajectory is in line with findings in other research (Akynova et al. 2014; Ahn and Smagulova 2022). Additionally, the continuous challenges in the education system regarding language instruction (Suleimenova 2013; Karabassova 2020) could also threaten an increased presence of Kazakh, especially as English becomes an alternative second language. Catedral and Djuraeva's (2018, pp. 508–515) study offers an alternative view by focusing on parents who plan to send their children to non-Russian schools for patriotic reasons or for the children to learn Kazakh or Central Asian values.

Lastly, with regards to English language, it seems likely that its usage and popularity will only increase. First, the trilingual policy is likely to contribute to making English a high priority in the education system, which ultimately could mean English will be more present in everyday life. Other studies also point to English taking on a more dominant role in society after introducing trilingual programmes (Majidi 2013; Akynova et al. 2014; Agbo and Pak 2017; Kuzembayeva et al. 2018). An increased interest in English could also tricker a strategy to suppress the role of Russian, with English potentially taking over the functions that Russian has in

society at present (e.g., language of inter-ethnic communication). However, the scholar Wright (2004) argues that the extent to which English dominates and spreads as the language of globalization today, unlike no other lingua franca of the past, makes its future development difficult to predict. In effect, national language planners "can only respond to this phenomenon and not direct it" (p. 136). Ultimately, the future of English depends heavily on how well it is implemented into the education system as the trilingual policy is pushed forward. Additionally, from an emigrational standpoint, as the mastery of English increases, people may search for opportunities abroad and this could ultimately result in proficient Kazakh–English-speakers pursuing opportunities outside of Kazakhstan.

Future areas of study

This study has explored the posed research questions from the perspective of interviewees. A similar study could be conducted that examines the language preferences of the young generation (under 20 years of age) as well as the causes for these preferences. This demographic is particularly interesting because they have not directly experienced the Soviet times or the immediate post-Soviet era and have grown up in a society where discussions about languages have been comparatively more dynamic. In addition, their exposure to English has been much greater than previous generations. Studies focusing on the youth to-date have predominately explored specifically their interest and use towards English (Akynova et al. 2014).

Additionally, the methods applied here could be replicated in other Central Asian countries to afford an international comparative analysis across Former Soviet Union countries. While some parallels have been drawn to the policies adopted by other countries in this region (e.g., Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) (Daly 2014), an in-depth analysis may offer rich insights into the different trajectories of these policies over time.

Looking specifically to the education system, further study of the pedagogy of Kazakh language may provide opportunities to explore areas for improvement. This study found limitations to the method of Kazakh-language teaching as a possible cause for poor results. Exploring the root cause of this, as well as how initiatives like the introduction of the Latin alphabet will impact the Kazakh language pedagogy, appear relevant to support the optimization of these efforts. Relatedly, the further study of other Central Asian countries that have changed their alphabet could provide insights into the effects of this policy measure on the titular language to anticipate the implications of this shift in the Kazakh context.

Strengths and limitations

This study achieved representation of interviewees across essentially all regions of Kazakhstan. The high-quality interviewees engaged also drew from various sectors and met the range in age, language competencies, and nationality/ethnicity considerations sought. The anonymity of interviewees afforded candid discussions with each. However, the following considerations were noted. First, the perspective of ethnic Kazakhs (or other ethnicities, e.g., Chinese) who were speakers of Kazakh but not of Russian was not captured. This profile is a minority among the population

and ultimately, given the emphasis on exploring the role of Russian language, interviewees with Russian language *and* Kazakh took precedent. Second, the language of inquiry was not the mother-tongue of any of the interviewees which may have had implications during the recruitment stage and/or in the discussions with interviewees. However, the interviewees were all sufficiently component in English and, as the interviewer was fluent in Russian, it was possible to accommodate for unfamiliar terms speaking Russian. Third, religion is also a socio-cultural factor that may have an impact on language use and the concepts explored here. However, an in-depth analysis of its role was considered out of scope. Fourth, Kazakhstan has a number of minority languages that were also considered out of scope, such as Korean and Chinese.

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Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval The researchers have followed the ethics guidelines of University College London as stated in "Research Ethics at UCL".

Informed consent An informed written and oral consent has taken each of respondents involved in this research.

Conflicts of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest with any person or financial institutions.

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