

Nation-building and language policies: The perspectives of ethnic Uzbeks on the Latinisation project in Kazakhstan



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Abstract

This paper examines Kazakhstan's Latinisation project and its impact on ethnic dynamics, focusing on the perspectives of ethnic Uzbeks—a group often overlooked in language policy debates. Framed by Brubaker's concept of 'nationalising states' and Mamdani's reflections on political modernity, the study situates Kazakhstan's language reforms within broader nation-building processes. Drawing on interviews with 20 ethnic Uzbeks, the research explores attitudes toward the transition to the Latin script, revealing generational and occupational divides. While younger respondents generally view the reform positively, concerns persist regarding its implications for minority education and interethnic communication. As Kazakhstan negotiates its multilingual identity through ongoing reforms, the findings illustrate the need to acknowledge diverse community perspectives. This study contributes to academic discussions on language policy, ethnic identity, and social cohesion in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Key Words

Latin script, ethnic minority, language policies, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Central Asia, and particularly its southern region and the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, has been a focal point for inter-ethnic conflicts. Kazakhstan stands out as having the most harmonious situation among Central Asian countries regarding ethnic conflicts (Tabaeva *et al.*, 2021). These conflicts arose post-independence as nations sought to reconstruct their national identities, emphasising sovereignty, nation-building, religion, ethnicity, and language over the last three decades (Tabaeva *et al.*, 2021).

Policymakers in Central Asia have prioritised using education to foster social harmony and unity, emphasising the construction of new national identities (Silova *et al.*, 2007). Curriculum reforms were used to simultaneously 'nationalise' and 'internationalise' education, by detaching it from Russian influence while preparing graduates for global competitiveness (Chapman *et al.*, 2005). In Kazakhstan, to avoid ethnic tensions and ensure political stability, the concept of 'Kazakhstani' people has been chosen over 'Kazakh' in national identity narratives (Tabaeva *et al.*, 2021). However, multiethnicity remains a potential source of conflicts, evident in inter-ethnic conflicts in the region over the past three decades (Tabaeva *et al.*, 2021).

In this context, the concept of 'nationalising states' (Brubaker, 1994) explains best the nation-building approach of the Kazakhstani government after gaining independence to promote the national identity through the state language, symbols, institutions and practices, and the expectation that ethnic minorities should assimilate to institutions and practices by learning the state language (Isaacs, 2015). However, Russian remains widely used, even among Kazakhs and other non-Slavic ethnic groups such as Uzbeks (Shaibakova, 2019). The country's constitution allows equal use of Kazakh and Russian in government and local self-

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governing bodies; however, since independence the position of the Kazakh language has been steadily strengthening (Zhuravleva and Agmanova, 2021). To further strengthen its position a complex project of modernising the Kazakh language through transfer to the Latin script was launched in 2006, which was planned to be finalised by 2025 (Bekzhanova and Makoelle, 2022). Usually, changing national alphabets is a significant and controversial issue due to its connection to the legitimisation of power in the past and present (du Boulay and du Boulay, 2021).

Given this backdrop, it is crucial to examine minority groups' attitudes toward language reforms which could seriously impact their socio-economic well-being. While previous studies have explored the situations of various ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, such as Russians (Florick, 2015; Turgaleyeva *et al.*, 2022), Poles (Maskevich, 2022), Koreans and Tatars (Oh, 2006), Uzbeks have received little attention in the literature. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perspectives of ethnic Uzbeks on the Latinisation project in Kazakhstan. The research question guiding this study is: What are the perspectives of ethnic Uzbeks on the Latinisation project in Kazakhstan?

Literature review

A substantial body of literature exists on the Latinisation process in Central Asian contexts and beyond (Bartholoma, 2016; Clement, 2008; Dwyer, 2005; Du Boulay and Du Boulay, 2021). Du Boulay and Du Boulay (2021), who analysed this phenomenon in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, observed that the transition to the Latin script in these countries has a distinct legitimisation aspect of emphasising the ruling elite's personalistic legacies, cultural and linguistic sovereignty, and the pursuit of modern identity. Alphabet policies in Central Asia are closely linked to state-building processes, reflecting existing social behaviours and authority structures (Du Boulay and Du Boulay, 2021). These policies often aim at de-Sovietisation, nation-building, redefining national identities, overcoming post-colonial sentiments, and projecting a desirable future (Dwyer, 2005).

At the country level, Clement's (2008) study on Turkmenistan revealed a shift away from the Soviet legacy through Latinisation of public signs, education, and teacher training. However, the radical nature of the reform seems to have negatively

affected literacy levels, leading to mass migration and a strengthened personality cult (Clement, 2008). In Turkey, one of the successful cases of the transition to the Latin script, it is explained by the fact that before the Latin script, the literacy levels in the Arabic script were rather low, and the switch helped to improve population literacy and facilitate socio-economic transactions with other countries (Yilmaz, 2011). In Tatarstan, according to Bartholoma (2016), the script reform's main goal was the reconstruction of the post-Soviet national identity and revitalisation of the heritage language of the Tatar people. The Latinisation of the Uzbek alphabet in 1995 faced criticism for its 'half-hearted' transition and inadequate implementation (Kadirova, 2018; Kumar *et al.*, 2022). Azerbaijan encountered challenges with a shortage of quality learning materials during its Latinisation process (Hatcher, 2008).

Kazakhstan, motivated by global trends and the desire to distance itself from Russian influence, is adopting the Latin alphabet to project a more 'Western' image (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013; Shervin and Gunkel, 2019; Buchko, 2019; Shingaliyeva, 2020). Lessons from other countries highlight concerns about potential literacy decreases, cultural-linguistic erosion, and educational challenges during the Latinisation process (Dianova, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Kosmarskii, 2007; Reagan, 2019). There is also a political dimension that involves a cautious policy toward Russia to reduce influence, with potential risks of over-politicisation leading to social conflicts (Du Boulay, S. and Du Boulay, H., 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2022).

Kumar *et al.* (2022) note that Kazakhstan's shift to the Latin script has been deliberately delayed to address potential negative consequences for non-Kazakh speakers, considering urbanisation and the projected growth of the Kazakh-speaking population (Shingaliyeva, 2020). Similar to other countries, the Latinisation process in Kazakhstan is viewed with a distinct nationalistic goal, aligning with Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities,' constructing a nation-state based on Kazakhs as the titular ethnicity (Bekzhanova and Makoelle, 2022). This nomination strategy divides society into several groups, potentially disadvantaging Russian speakers and Russian-speaking Kazakhs (Bekzhanova and Makoelle, 2022).

Educational aspects of Latinisation in Kazakhstan are explored by Kadirova (2018), emphasising teachers' perceptions and readiness for the process. Teacher training emerges as crucial for effective implementation, with trained teachers finding it less confusing to introduce the new alphabet (Oralbayeva, 2020). Asselborn *et al.* (2021) investigated the transfer of handwriting skills between Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in Kazakh students, revealing a positive transfer of fine motor control skills. However, concerns arise regarding potential learning difficulties for specific groups, such as repatriated students and ethnic minorities (Oralbayeva, 2020). Yerdembek (2020) explored public attitudes toward the Latinised Kazakh language (LKL), revealing varying opinions influenced by media genre, purpose, and content of the news outlets.

While existing literature extensively covers various dimensions of the Latinisation project, a gap remains in understanding the perspectives of other ethnic groups. This study aims to address this gap by specifically exploring the views and opinions of ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan regarding the Latinisation project. Taking a 'nationalising states' concept proposed by Brubaker (1994), where Kazakhs are considered the main, titular nation in the country, which faced discrimination before gaining independence and encountered vulnerabilities in demographic, economic, and social indicators, this study explores how this position is utilised to legitimise and justify the Latinisation policy, and the expectations placed on other ethnicities within the country to adapt and learn from these reforms. This study aims to provide a more inclusive understanding of how the Latinisation process is perceived within ethnic minority populations.

Brubaker's (1996; 2004) critique of the nation-state as an institutionalised form of nationhood aligns with Kazakhstan's ongoing challenges in managing its multinational composition. The nation-state model, which favors one dominant group, parallels Kazakhstan's emphasis on Kazakhs as the titular nation in the Latinisation policy. Brubaker's triadic relational model—including nationalising states, national minorities, and external homelands—helps to explain the tensions between the Kazakh government and its Russian-speaking minority population (Brubaker, 1996). By reinforcing national identity through script reform, Kazakhstan potentially

risks further marginalising these minority groups, echoing Brubaker's critique of the exclusionary tendencies inherent in nation-state politics.

Incorporating the theoretical insights of Mamdani (2020), it is important to recognise the broader context of political identity reform and state-building in Kazakhstan. Mamdani (2020) argues that contemporary individuals can be persuaded to discard divisive identities of political modernity and view themselves as survivors of an era shaped by such identities. Applying Mamdani's framework to Kazakhstan's Latinisation process, the reforms may be understood as part of a broader decolonising effort to reshape national identities beyond the constraints of Soviet or ethnic legacies. However, as Mamdani (2020) emphasises, such efforts must include all survivors of historical violence and repression rather than reinforcing binary categories of victim and perpetrator, which may still be reflected in ethnic divisions within the country.

Incorporating these theories, the study illustrates the need for Kazakhstan's Latinisation project to be sensitive to the concerns of ethnic minorities. Recognising the potential differential impacts of language policies on various ethnic groups is crucial for formulating policies that consider the interests and concerns of all communities within the multicultural context of Kazakhstan, thereby helping to mitigate ethnic tensions.

Methods and data

This study is based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with 20 ethnic Uzbeks who were born and educated in Kazakhstan. The research was conducted in June–July of 2022 in Kentau, a town situated in the north of the Turkestan region which borders with Uzbekistan and where 92% of the ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan reside (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was employed, involving the selection of individuals who were readily available and willing to participate. These initial participants aided in the identification of additional participants through a snowballing technique.

Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical clearance was secured from Ulster University, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants was

ensured. Before the recording of interviews, each participant signed a consent form after being fully informed through a participant information sheet. Refusal rate was rather high among ethnic Uzbeks during the recruitment process. Even those who initially agreed for interviews declined to participate when they learnt that they had to sign the consent form. The interview data underwent analysis through coding and thematic development using the NVivo software. The Interview Protocol questions were pre-tested on two participants from the same target population but were not included in the primary data set. The participant recruitment was stopped when the data saturation level was reached, and due to the project timeline constraints.

Participant description

In 2022 the population of Kazakhstan exceeded 20 million people, with Kazakhs, the indigenous group, constituting 70% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). The remaining 30% include many ethnic groups. Language preferences vary across regions, with a notable concentration of Russian speakers in the Northern regions, while fluency in Kazakh is considerably higher in the southern and western regions. This paper focuses on the linguistic landscape of the Turkestan region in the southern part of the country. The Turkestan region features diverse minority languages like Uzbek, Azeri, Anatolian Turkish, and Tatar.

Ethnic Uzbeks, the second-largest population after Slavs in the country, have steadily grown from 1% in the 1960s to 3% in the 2020s (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). Kazakhstan’s constitutional provisions permit regions with concentrated ethnic groups to educate schoolchildren in their respective languages. Despite this, the number of children studying in ethnic languages has declined post-independence, contrasting with the notable increase in attendance in Kazakh-medium schools (stat.gov.kz, 2023). Attendance in Uzbek-medium schools fluctuated modestly, ranging from 87,000 in 2000 to 79,000 in 2010, rebounding to 86,000 by 2020, constituting 2.5% of the total (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023).

This study is based on interviews with 20 ethnic Uzbeks, aged 21 to 40, born and educated in Kazakhstan. Nine participants are male, 11 female, mostly residing in urban areas in the Turkestan region. Two participants are from rural areas. Thirteen are married with children, with educational backgrounds varying: 11 attended Uzbek-medium schools, two Kazakh-medium, and seven Russian-medium. Three stopped education after secondary school, six pursued vocational education, and 11 obtained higher education degrees. Participants in vocational education mostly enrolled in Kazakh-medium groups, while university students primarily chose Russian-medium groups (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Participant description

	Alias	Sex	Place of residence	Age	Language of school	Type of further education	Language of further education	Employment status	Sector of employment	Self-reported proficiency in languages		
1	Umida	Female	Urban	40	Russian	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Catering	0	Russian	Uzbek
2	Rustam	Male	Urban	39	Uzbek	none	none	Self-employed	Retail	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
3	Yulduz	Female	Urban	38	Russian	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	Russian	0
4	Aziza	Female	Urban	37	Russian	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Education	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
5	Alisher	Male	Urban	36	Uzbek	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Education	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
6	Dilshod	Male	Urban	36	Russian	none	none	Full-time	Mining	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
7	Nigora	Female	Urban	34	Uzbek	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Education	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
8	Nilufar	Female	Urban	33	Russian/ Kazakh	VET	Kazakh	Self-employed	Personal care services	Kazakh	Russian	0
9	Ulugbek	Male	Rural	31	Uzbek	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
10	Sardor	Male	Rural	30	Uzbek	HEI	Kazakh	Full-time	Telecommunication	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
11	Anvar	Male	Urban	30	Russian	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Telecommunication	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
12	Nodir	Male	Urban	30	Russian	HEI	Russian	Unemployed	Telecommunication	Kazakh	Russian	0
13	Sherzod	Male	Urban	30	Uzbek	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Education	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek
14	Fatima	Female	Urban	28	Russian	HEI	Russian	Full-time	Education	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek

	Alias	Sex	Place of residence	Age	Language of school	Type of further education	Language of further education	Employment status	Sector of employment	Self-reported proficiency in languages		
15	Akmal	Male	Urban	25	Uzbek	none	none	Self-employed	Auto service	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
16	Nargiza	Female	Urban	23	Uzbek	VET	Kazakh	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
17	Zarina	Female	Urban	22	Uzbek	VET	Kazakh	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
18	Zuhra	Female	Urban	22	Kazakh	VET	Kazakh	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
19	Sitora	Female	Urban	22	Uzbek	VET	Kazakh	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	0	Uzbek
20	Arofat	Female	Urban	21	Uzbek	VET	Kazakh	Full-time	Medicine	Kazakh	Russian	Uzbek

Employment-wise, only one participant is unemployed, four are self-employed, with participants engaged in sectors like telecommunication, education, medicine, services, retail, and mining. Eleven out of 20 participants earn a monthly income ranging from US\$200 to US\$400, as compared to the regional average of US\$500 for 2022 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). Most participants earn less than the country's average monthly income of US\$630. Language proficiency reveals that only one participant cannot speak Kazakh, with the majority being trilingual, fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and their native language Uzbek.

Findings

Generational differences

One participant, Ulugbek, shared that ‘the switch to the Latin script is beneficial for the younger generation. We are moving closer to the West, and this opens up new opportunities.’ This perspective aligns with many younger participants, including Yulduz, who viewed the Latin script as a ‘gateway to modernity’ and believed that the change would have a positive impact on Kazakhstan’s integration into the global arena. Rustam expressed similar views, stating that the Latin script ‘is the future,’ adding that ‘for my children, learning it will make them more competitive.’

On the other hand, older participants such as Aziza were less enthusiastic. She expressed concerns about the challenges in adapting to the new script: ‘For us older people, it’s not easy to learn a new alphabet. We’ve spent our entire lives using Cyrillic. Changing it now feels unnecessary.’ Dilshod, a teacher, echoed these concerns, particularly regarding education: ‘Our students already have enough on their plates. Switching to the Latin script adds another layer of difficulty for those who are still struggling with basic literacy.’

Anvar also pointed out the potential issues in minority communication, sharing that ‘for those of us who speak Uzbek at home, the Latin script could complicate things. We’ve gotten used to using Cyrillic in our official communication, and now we’re expected to change everything.’ This sentiment was

shared by Sitora, who worried about the long-term impact on inter-ethnic communication: ‘I fear that it might create a divide between those who are able to adapt to the Latin script and those who struggle.’

However, some participants, like Nargiza, highlighted the resilience of the Uzbek community in Kazakhstan. She remarked, ‘We have always managed to adapt, whether it’s language or culture. The Latin script is just another change. We will find a way to adjust.’ Zarina, who works in IT, mentioned the potential benefits for certain sectors: ‘For us in tech, the Latin script makes things easier. Most programming languages use Latin characters, so the transition actually simplifies things.’ Lastly, Fatima summarised the divide between generations and professions: ‘Younger people in modern fields like technology are more optimistic about the change. Older people and those in more traditional fields see it as an obstacle. It’s not just a language issue; it’s about how people view their place in the world.’

Educational and logistical concerns

Participants expressed significant doubts about the feasibility of the transition, particularly with respect to the educational challenges. Alisher emphasised the need for a top-down approach in re-education: ‘Teachers—all the people—need to be taught again. Teachers should be taught first and then the children.’ His comment highlights the logistical challenges that come with such a significant shift in the education system, where the burden of adaptation falls on both educators and students alike.

Umida expressed concerns about the increasing demands placed on students: 'It's not like in our time when education was one plus one, two plus two. Now the demands from them are very huge... It's a burden on children, so children don't have a childhood.' This suggests a fear that the transition to Latin script will exacerbate the already high pressures on children in school, leaving little room for anything beyond academics.

Economic and practical concerns

From a practical and economic perspective, participants also questioned the financial feasibility of the Latinisation project. Dilshod pointed out that while the switch might seem economically beneficial in some areas, it ultimately misses the point: 'Even from the economic side, printing books in the Latin alphabet is probably profitable. But anyway it's the Kazakh language, not Latin or English.' His perspective implies that while there might be immediate economic gains, they don't justify the long-term implications of changing the script. Akmal was particularly concerned about how the change would affect access to literature: 'Many good books, they are written in Cyrillic. Oh, I can't imagine how to read a book in Latin.' This highlights a potential cultural loss, as older literary works and resources may become less accessible to future generations.

Scepticism about benefits

Participants voiced scepticism regarding the benefits of the Latin script transition, particularly in terms of improving language skills or societal advantages. Alisher questioned the link between the Latin script and improved English proficiency: 'I don't understand at all—if we switch to the Latin alphabet, children will learn English better, I guess... Uzbekistan switched to the Latin alphabet 20 years ago, so what? Do they speak English better than we do? I don't think so. So it's all a waste of money.' His comment reflects a broader scepticism shared by others, who doubt that the script change will lead to any meaningful educational or linguistic benefits. In addition, Alisher expressed frustration about the lack of clear rationale for the switch: 'Why? Let those who made up this law explain what the benefit of switching to the Latin alphabet is.' His comment illustrates the confusion and uncertainty many participants felt about the motivation behind the policy. Similarly, Umida shared her confusion about

the necessity of the transition: 'Why do you need this Latin alphabet? I do not understand it.' This highlights the disconnect between policymakers and the public regarding the purpose and benefits of the script change.

Impact on ethnic identity and communication

The transition to the Latin script raised concerns about its impact on ethnic identity and communication, particularly among minority groups in Kazakhstan. Fatima was straightforward in her rejection of the script change: 'I don't support this Latin thing at all.' Her statement reflects the broader sentiment among participants who feel that the policy could undermine cultural traditions. Sardor, who works in the healthcare field, shared concerns about how the change might complicate his work: 'Now we are switching to Latin, and then so many patients will come to us that do not understand, saying "what was written in this." Our work becomes twice as difficult.' This highlights the practical implications of the transition, particularly for professionals who rely on clear communication with the public.

Impact on daily life

The script change also sparked concerns about its broader impact on daily life, especially for older generations. Dilshod emphasised the potential alienation of older adults: 'I see only disadvantages... the older generation will no longer be interested in these Latin letters.' His comment underscores the risk that the Latinisation project could create generational divides, as older individuals struggle to adapt. Nigora also echoed this sentiment: 'I think it's fine as it is. I don't see any benefit.' Her statement highlights a sense of resistance to change and a belief that the current system is sufficient for the country's needs.

Discussion and conclusion

This study's findings align with existing literature on the Latinisation process, highlighting key themes in generational perspectives, educational and logistical concerns, economic implications, scepticism about benefits, and impacts on ethnic identity and daily life.

The study reveals a generational divide: younger participants see the Latin script as a gateway to modernisation and global integration, echoing the positive outlook found in Turkey's transition (Yilmaz, 2011) and aligning with broader nation-building goals (Du Boulay and Du Boulay, 2021). In contrast, older participants express concerns about adapting to a new script and the disruption of established practices. This mirrors challenges reported in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Clement, 2008; Kadirova, 2018), emphasising issues of cultural continuity and identity.

Educational and logistical challenges are significant. Alisher's call for a top-down re-education approach highlights the practical difficulties of the transition, consistent with issues noted in other countries (Hatcher, 2008; Kumar, 2022). The added burden on educators and students, as noted by Umida, could exacerbate existing educational pressures, reflecting similar concerns in Turkmenistan (Clement, 2008).

Economic feasibility and potential cultural loss are central concerns. Participants question whether the immediate costs of transitioning to the Latin script outweigh the benefits. Dilshod's view that the economic gains might not justify the reform reflects broader scepticism about the long-term impact (Kumar, 2022). The risk of losing access to older literary works further underscores the cultural implications of the transition.

Scepticism about the benefits of the Latin script transition is notable. Alisher's doubts about the link between the Latin script and improved English proficiency mirror broader concerns about the efficacy of such reforms (Reagan, 2019; Kosmarskii, 2007). The disconnect between policymakers and the public, highlighted by Umida, suggests a need for clearer communication and justification for the policy.

The impact on ethnic identity and communication is a critical issue. Concerns from minority groups, as expressed by Anvar and Fatima, about increased ethnic division and cultural erosion align with Brubaker's (1996, 2004) critique of nationalising states. The Latinisation process risks marginalising minority populations, reinforcing Brubaker's critique of exclusionary nation-state politics.

Finally, the study's findings on daily life reflect concerns about generational divides and resistance to change. The potential for increased alienation and resistance among older generations highlights the need for inclusive policy-making that addresses these disparities (Bekzhanova and Makoele, 2022). This study shows the complex impact of Latinisation in Kazakhstan, emphasising the need for policies that consider the diverse needs of all ethnic and generational groups.

Author bio

Fariza Tolesh is an interdisciplinary scholar with a PhD in Education and an MA in Applied Data Analytics, whose research explores nation-building, language politics, and the lived experiences of ethnic minorities in Central Asia, with broader interests in employment, research methods, and data-driven analysis.

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