

# Negotiating national identities: Perceptions of the Soviet past among Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium students in independent Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

This small-scale research aims to explore the discourses and narratives touching upon the perceptions of Kazakhstan under Soviet rule among students receiving their education in Kazakh and Russian languages. Thirty semi-structured interviews with ethnic Kazakh undergraduate students in the capital of Kazakhstan were analysed with a focus on students' perceptions and experiences of encountering the narratives of national identity touching upon Kazakhstan under Soviet rule in school. The findings showed that compared to 15 students from Russian-medium groups, 15 students receiving their education through the Kazakh language tended to refer more often to decolonial discourses and often mentioned negative consequences of historical events during the Soviet times.

## Key Words

language and education, national identity, hybrid identities, decolonial discourses

## Introduction

Multi-ethnic and officially bilingual Kazakhstan, a former constituent republic of the USSR located in Central Asia, recently celebrated 32 years of independence. Nation-building projects and questions of national identity and belonging have been important on Kazakhstan's agenda. However, developing and fostering a sense of belonging and attachment has been a complex process, particularly due to the Soviet past, which is currently reflected in the sociocultural landscape of the state, with a large presence of Slavic ethnic groups and the dominance of the Russian language in northern and urban areas of the country (Smagulova, 2008). Moreover, the power relations between Kazakhstan and Russia, defined by Kazakhstan's geopolitical location, close proximity, and economic ties to Russia, might be seen as another factor influencing nation-building politics.

Although the notion of colonialism was absent from the official discourses and narratives in the USSR, the literature argues that Central Asian countries could be considered to have been under colonial rule during the Soviet period (Bennigsen, 1969; Gleason, 1997; Zhussipbek, 2023) and that looking at this period in Central Asia through a colonial lens is more productive rather than using a framework of modernity, modernisation, and development (Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva, 2021). Similar to postcolonial contexts, independent Kazakhstan has two official languages. Russification policies during the Soviet period resulted in the Russian language dominating, particularly in northern and urban areas (Smagulova, 2008).

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Although the current paper advocates for strengthening the Kazakh national identity project, it also acknowledges the existence of neo-colonialism and hybridity which is reflected in the plurality of the discourses on Kazakhstan's Soviet history. Given that discourses on nationalism and national identity in Kazakhstan might vary in the media in Kazakh and Russian languages (Burkhanov, 2013; Laruelle, Royce and Beysembayev, 2019; Tussupova, 2010), this paper aims to examine the perceptions of the Soviet past among Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium students in contemporary Kazakhstan. The paper also advocates for the exposure to a variety of discourses in the classrooms, and a bottom-up approach in identity construction.

## Literature review

During the Soviet period, with chief positions held by Russians, ethnic separation between the Russians and the local population, and exploitation of natural resources, the Central Asian region could be characterised as a colony (Bennigsen, 1969). Gleason (1997) considers the USSR 'not a typical colonial empire'; the Soviet Union 'came into being as an anticolonial political movement precisely to counter colonialism's economic and political forces. But the instruments and mechanisms of the 'Soviet experiment' came to resemble those of colonialism' (Gleason, 1997, p. 223-224).

Like the patterns frequently seen in post-colonial settings, post-Soviet Kazakhstan has maintained the long-established pattern of close economic ties with Russia existing before independence (Mazhikeyev and Edwards, 2021). Politically, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries remain silent with regards to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a stance Dadabaev and Sonoda (2022) call 'strategic silence', aimed at avoiding backlash.

### Kazakhstan during the Soviet period

In the USSR, Russian language and culture were the foundations of the idea of Sovietness, and 'Russians were depicted as big brothers who gathered smaller siblings under the common roof and civilized them' (Tutumlu and Imyarova, 2021). The biggest migration flows of Russians and Slavic people could be traced during the following three periods: into Kazakhstan (1) 1882-1918, under the Russian Empire and (2) 1918-1991, during the Soviet period; and (3)

post-1991, marked by a significant outflow of Slavs and an influx of ethnic Kazakhs (Kendirbayeva, 1997; Artykbayev, 2004). The first two periods saw approximately 1.3 million Russians migrate to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Bekmakhanova, 1986, p. 160). According to the 2021 national census, the ethnic composition in independent Kazakhstan is predominantly Kazakh (70.4%), followed by Russians (15.5%), with the remainder comprising various other ethnicities.

Kudaibergenova (2013) examined how Kazakh literature from the 1960s-1980s challenged Soviet narratives on nationalism. The Kazakh intelligentsia and elites created alternative historical novels, subtly avoiding Soviet censorship while invoking a proud national identity rooted in pre-Russian history. These writers navigated taboo subjects through hidden messages, fostering a collective sense of pride and patriotism, thus shaping a unique vision of Kazakh nationhood within the constraints of the Soviet system.

During the Russian Civil War (1917-1920), the Alash movement worked for Kazakh autonomy within the Russian state (Rsymbetova, 2017). However, once the Bolsheviks were victorious in the Civil War they banned the Alash Party and established the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the Soviet Union (Ubiria, 2015; Rsymbetova, 2017). The big political event in Kazakhstan under Soviet rule was the Almaty demonstrations in December 1986, triggered when Kazakh First Secretary Dimmukhamed Kunaev was replaced with the 'Russian outsider' Gennady Kolbin. The protest symbolised the Kazakh people's desire for liberation from Moscow's colonial dominance and signalled the decline in Russian/Soviet influence in Central Asia (Stefany, 2003).

### Nation-building in independent Kazakhstan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, independent Kazakhstan embarked on a nation-building project. This involved reviving Kazakh language and culture (Diener, 2005), renaming streets and erecting new monuments as symbols of new collective identity, but at the same time re-appropriating Soviet legacy and discourses by incorporating them as part of the state's nation-building project (Bekus, 2017; Rees, 2020). In 1991, when Kazakhstan gained its independence, the government addressed a call to ethnic Kazakhs to return to independent

Kazakhstan (Diener, 2005), to redefine the country's identity by reviving the Kazakh language and culture and increasing the proportion of Kazakhs in the population. To steer away from the collective identity of Soviet citizens, heroes of World War II such as Aliya Moldagulova – the Kazakh Soviet sniper awarded the title 'Hero of the Soviet Union' – were reimagined as national heroes, part of social memory central to independent Kazakhstan's narratives of national identity (Rees, 2020). Analysing the changes in the capital city of independent Kazakhstan, Bekus (2017) reported that some aspects of the Soviet legacy were preserved in Astana, 'the meaning of the preserved Russian and Soviet names and sites of cultural and historical memory was, however, reframed and recast: instead of being viewed as "agents" of Russian influence, they became perceived as contributions to Kazakhstani multiculturalism' (Bekus, 2017, p. 801).

Studies on nationalism and national identity in Kazakhstan reported a variety of discourses about the Soviet past (Blackburn, 2019; Kravtsova, 2022). A study investigating decolonial discourses through interviews with feminist activists in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan showed conflicting views, such as emancipation and oppression during the Soviet times, and different perspectives on certain practices being linked either to decolonisation or nationalism (Kravtsova, 2022). Another study examining how Russian-speaking non-Kazakh youth in Kazakhstan identify with the country observed: 'a dominant and fairly coherent pro-Russian narrative that dismisses the alternative story of Kazakh victimhood at the hands of Russian and Soviet rule' (Blackburn, 2019, p. 2023).

Given the consequences of Russification policies, according to Kucherbayeva and Smagulova (2023), 'In the case of Kazakhstan, the choice of MOI (medium of instruction) is perceived as a key tool to strengthen national identity and resist the domination of Russian' (p. 166). Despite an increasing number of Kazakh-medium schools in Kazakhstan, teaching in Kazakh at the university level faces challenges like insufficient educational resources and a shortage of Kazakh-speaking staff, which perpetuates social inequalities and hinders access to quality education and cultural autonomy in academia (Kucherbayeva and Smagulova, 2023).

Several studies examined changes in school textbooks in Kazakhstan after independence (Asanova, 2007; Burkhanov and Sharipova, 2023; Kissane, 2005; Mun, 2014). The analysis of history textbooks showed that although Soviet narratives were excluded from the post-independence textbooks, and new history texts were altered to present alternative readings of historical events and provide information about language loss, ecological problems, and other tragic events during the Soviet period (Kissane, 2006), at the same time some discourses reflecting Soviet ideology were reported to be still present in history textbooks (Burkhanov and Sharipova, 2023). A recent study examining the portrayal of the famine during 1931–1933 in seven secondary school history textbooks published during 1992–2021, reported that the textbooks provided diverse discourses related to the causes of the famine, its perpetrators and victims, revolts against collectivisation and evaluation of the famine as a genocide or tragedy, reflecting cautious state-led narratives, Kazakh nationalist narratives and narratives from academic history (Dukeyev, 2023). Studies examining multiculturalism in textbooks for Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium classrooms in independent Kazakhstan reported the prevalence of ethnonationalist content in literature textbooks in the Kazakh language (Asanova, 2007) and somewhat greater cultural and ethnic diversity present in early literacy textbooks in Russian compared to the early literacy textbooks in Kazakh (Mun, 2014).

### Language and hybridity in postcolonial contexts

In historical contexts like post-communism, language adaptation fosters hybrid identities (Danila and Manu-Magda, 2016). Hybridity, as a concept in postcolonial and cultural studies, emerges where cultures meet, influence, and transform one another, often leading to new, hybrid identities. Bhabha (1994) calls this the 'Third space', an in-between zone for cultural interaction. By acknowledging hybridity, the authors of the current paper do not aim to romanticise or negate power imbalances and unequal exchanges between the colonisers and the colonised. Hybridity is seen here as an inevitable outcome of the colonial histories, where the colonised, by mimicking the language and culture of the colonisers (Bhabha, 1994), create ambivalent and hybrid identities.

Azada-Palacios argues that colonial and post-colonial history might lead to important implications for teaching national identity in schools. It is important for educational practitioners to see national identity not as fixed but instead as a fluid and malleable identity that is constantly negotiated: 'The question that can be posed to children, then, is no longer: Is it desirable to have a strong sense of national identity? Rather, it becomes: How might your generation shape your national identities?' (Azada-Palacios, 2022, p. 1438). Educational theorists and teachers seeing national identity as fluid 'might be useful in helping pupils who identify with coloniser-nations to work through ambivalences or even guilt that they may feel, arising from an awareness of their nation's complicity in global historical injustices' (Azada-Palacios, 2022, p. 1440).

School students do not possess their own memories of the Soviet past, and form their perceptions of Kazakhstan during that time based on the discourses they are exposed to. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1988), 'Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (p. 15). Therefore, students studying through the Kazakh language and students educated through the Russian language might be exposed to different discourses and perceptions of the Soviet past.

## Methodology

The present study attempts to answer the following research question: 'What are the perceptions of the Soviet past as part of nationalism narratives among students from Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium groups?'. Thirty one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students in Astana. Fifteen participants were doing bachelor studies in the Kazakh language after completing school in the Kazakh language. The other fifteen participants were doing their bachelor studies in Russian, having attended school in Russian. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were recorded and later transcribed. During the interviews, no specific questions were asked about students' perceptions of the Soviet period. Instead, broad questions were asked concerning the perceptions of national identity and narratives of national identity that students encountered in school through teachers, textbooks, classrooms, and school events.

The references to the USSR and the Soviet past in the data were later coded as a separate theme, with the codes about this theme compared across the two groups. The transcribed data was analysed in NVivo using thematic analysis.

## Findings and discussion

### Fighting for independence

Talking about nationalism and what they remembered from teachers and schools about national identity, students sometimes referred to the 'Soviet past' or 'Kazakhstan under the Russian empire'. An interesting pattern emerging during the analysis was that Kazakh-medium students referred to the theme of fighting for independence and protecting Kazakh land and culture more frequently than their peers educated in the Russian language. For instance, Gulzira, a Kazakh-medium student, associated Kazakhstan with an uprising leader: 'I remember Isatay. They were making an uprising for independence against the khan, who was connected to Russia'. Another Kazakh-medium student, Murat, mentioned the importance of protecting Kazakh land:

*My native village has been transferred under the control of Uzbekistan. And the reason for that was... Dinmukhamed Konaev, I mean, signed the transfer of Kazakh lands. [...] Kazakhs at the time could not have given away [the territory] if the leaders had taken action in time.*

Aina, also a Kazakh-medium student, referred to a woman who, during the Soviet era, courageously published an article defending 'Kazakhs and their culture and music.' Alina elaborated: 'at that time [during the Soviet times], to say that the Kazakhs had some kind of high culture, it was outrageous and unacceptable. [...] despite the risks... she understood what she was doing, and nevertheless she did it.' Although most participants who mentioned fighting and resistance studied at school in the Kazakh language, a Russian-medium student, Yerbol, also referred to the theme of resistance: 'There was also such a formation as the Turkestan Legion. These were representatives of the Turkic peoples who fought against the Soviet Union'. A stronger emphasis on resistance and fighting for independence in Kazakh-medium than in Russian-medium classrooms is also reflected in the literature

stating that the narrative common among Russian-speaking non-Kazakh young people rejects the narrative of Kazakh victimhood during the Soviet times (Blackburn, 2019). Russian-speaking non-Kazakh young people often receive their education in the Russian language.

### Awareness of the colonial past

Although Russian-medium students mentioned protecting Kazakh land and fighting for independence less frequently and were less vocal about the negative aspect of the USSR compared to Kazakh-medium groups, several students acknowledged the negative consequences of Soviet rule, showing awareness of the USSR's colonial regime. For example, Yerbol, a Russian-medium student, stated:

It is advantageous to understand that there is no future without the past. History shows that it should not be forgotten. It should be remembered since it tends to repeat itself. We must know and properly present and study it. A vivid example of this is our policy towards the fact that Kazakhstan was part of the USSR. I mean, it was a bad era for us, just as the era under tsarist Russia was bad.

Raushan, a Russian-medium student, expressed a similar thought: 'If we talk about some sad moments from the pages of our history, this is, of course, colonialism. It is also important to know and understand this because... well, for further development'.

### School events and experiences

Kazakh-medium students frequently referred to the events of December 1986, describing them vividly. When asked about significant events for Kazakhstanis, a Kazakh-medium student, Rakhat, said: 'We all know that. It was the December revolution in 1986'. Several participants referred to individuals participating in the December Uprising. Rakhat mentioned Kairat Ryskulbekov, a student revolutionary who stood against the authorities and joined the protests. Murat, another Kazakh-medium student, admired Lyazzat Assanova, saying: 'At the age of 16, despite the cold, even though she was a girl, empathising with the Kazakhs, she went to the square [where protests took place] without fear. These are the real heroes'. Such narratives reinforce a collective memory of struggle against Soviet

control and resilience, shaping Kazakh identity and fostering a sense of national pride among the youth.

When discussing events fostering national identity, the participants from both groups would refer to Independence Day (December 16). However, more students from Kazakh-medium groups, compared to Russian-medium groups, would use such words as 'remembering history' and 'achieving independence'. Additionally, more students from Kazakh-medium groups mentioned events commemorating the Alash Party and the December Riots. Azhar, a Kazakh-medium student, stated: 'On December 16, we would remember our history, how we achieved it [independence] and congratulate each other and celebrate'. Maira and Yesbol, Kazakh-medium students, remembered participating in events and learning about the Alash Party. Maira said: 'We were taken to the theatre, and various things were shown in the assembly hall. What I remember is about the Alash Party. The fact that they went to prison, and so on'. While members of the Alash Party faced repression and execution (Rsymbetova, 2017), yet their contribution is believed to have elevated national self-awareness among Kazakh people under Soviet rule, as suggested by Suleimenova (2015). The references to school events devoted to the Alash Party and the December Riots reflect the theme of fighting for independence being more present in Kazakh-medium classrooms.

Interestingly, when discussing school events fostering national identity, five students from Russian-medium groups also referred to World War II. Salima remembered the following events: 'Historical dates, especially round dates, arranged concert programs. For example, if it was World War II, we remembered the stories that the heroes of World War II told us'. Bakhtiyar, another Russian-medium student, shared: 'On May 9, we were told about outstanding Kazakh warriors, batyrs [in Kazakh – heroes]. For instance, Aliya Moldagulova, and Bauyrzhan Momysuly'. Remembering events on national identity, Yerbol, a Russian-medium student, also said: 'Patriotism is celebrated, at least with regard to topics related to wars: the war in Afghanistan, World War II.'

### Perceptions of the heroes of World War II

Notably, referring to the Heroes of World War II, three Kazakh-medium and two Russian-medium students presented these heroes slightly differently.

Rakhat, a Kazakh-medium student, said: 'Bauyrzhan Momyshuly was a great commander. During the Great Patriotic War, he showed his bravery, showed what real strong Kazakhs are capable of, and showed the spirit'. Referring to two female Heroes of World War II, a machine gunner Manshuk Mametova and a sniper Aliya Moldagulova: Rakhat said: 'the most important thing was the spirit of their ancestors, true Kazakhs, and bravery, courage, one might say, desperation.' Similarly, Nurbol described these female heroes as 'Citizens who were ready to do anything for the sake of their Motherland.' Murat, another Kazakh-medium student, described Bauyrzhan Momyshuly as 'a real Kazakh guy', saying: 'Kazakh guys should be as brave as he was'. On the other hand, two Russian-medium students referred to these individuals as heroes who were protecting the USSR and Moscow. Samat, a Russian-medium student, described Bauyrzhan Momyshuly's heroism: 'He defended Moscow together with soldiers from Almaty, because the Muscovites themselves were unable to defend their city from the Germans. [...] he performed a feat and defended Moscow. And if he had not defended it, then most likely Kazakhstan might not have existed'. Another Russian-medium student, Bakhtiyar, described Aliya Moldagulova's bravery similarly: 'There were classroom hours and open classes about her. Such a brave woman. A person who fought for our Kazakhstan, for the Soviet Union, and the people. This is what history tells about her heroism'.

Two different narratives presenting the heroes are also reflected in the re-appropriation of Soviet legacy and discourses by their incorporation as part of the state's nation-building project (Bekus, 2017; Rees, 2020). According to Rees, after independence, Aliya Moldagulova – the Kazakh Soviet sniper awarded the title 'Hero of the Soviet Union' – was presented as a national hero (Rees, 2020). Bekus (2017) states that preserving Russian and Soviet names in Astana's landscape contributed to multiculturalism in independent Kazakhstan. Since Russian-medium classrooms might be the space for multiculturalism, this might explain the presence of an old Soviet narrative in the perceptions of Aliya Moldagulova and Bauyrzhan Momyshuly for the two participants from Russian-medium groups.

## Teachers' influence

Referring to their school experiences, participants often mentioned the influence of history, Kazakh language, and Kazakh literature teachers. Elmira, a Kazakh-medium student, shared: 'Regarding patriotism, teachers often talk about our ancestors. Our ancestors put considerable effort into our independence; we must appreciate this, and we must contribute to the future of Kazakhstan'.

Another Kazakh-medium student, Azhar, remembered similar messages from her teachers: 'Teachers, especially the history teacher, often talked about patriotism: "We must preserve the value of our country", "The future generation must also contribute to the preservation of the country".' Raushan, who studied in Russian at school and is now in a multilingual group at the university, also linked Kazakh literature and colonialism:

Kazakh literature is about patriotism. It is probably worth noting that it is quite patriotic because it is precisely connected with the days of colonialism. Some representatives from the Kazakh nation wanted to achieve Independence, and therefore, they tried to revive the Kazakh people's self-consciousness.

Raushan's quote reflects Kudaibergenova's (2013) argument that through writing historical nationalistic novels, Kazakh intelligentsia in Soviet Kazakhstan were resisting and questioning Soviet narratives and creating alternative narratives about Kazakhstan's nationhood. In our study, the participants from Kazakh-medium groups also mentioned a variety of events on national identity that involved poems, readings, essay writing, performances, plays, and events devoted to celebrating national poets.

## Conclusion

The findings showed how historical narratives, perceptions of the USSR, and patriotism interact among students studying in Kazakh and Russian. Both groups deal with the lasting effects of colonialism on their beliefs, but they develop their identities and understanding of history in their own ways. This highlights the complexity of post-colonial societies. While both Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium students often refer to the Soviet past when discussing nationalism and national identity, there are some differences in how they

interpret and engage with this history and its legacy. Kazakh-medium students embrace the discourses of resistance and fighting for independence, which is also reflected in the school events and teachers' views. Russian-medium students were less vocal about negative events and injustices in Soviet Kazakhstan, with some participants preserving certain Soviet discourses regarding World War II. This is also reflected in the events connected to World War II held during participants' school years. The data reflects the ongoing nation-building and identity formation process in post-colonial Kazakhstan, where diverse ethnic and linguistic communities coexist.

While the findings reveal differences in how these groups engage with their Soviet past and national identity, this paper does not advocate for a singular argument. Instead, it advocates for a bottom-up rethinking of identity, as it might allow Kazakhstani students to recreate national consciousness through rethinking complicated histories of Kazakhstan under Soviet rule, restoring intergenerational memories, reconnecting with the lost pieces of self, uncovering and healing colonial wounds and guilt, and acknowledging challenges and possibilities posed by cultural hybridity.

The opportunities to reflect on one's national identity might be particularly beneficial for students receiving their education in the Russian language, including ethnic Russians and other Slavic minorities, as the study's findings suggest that conversations about Soviet coloniality and decolonisation might be less present in Russian-medium classrooms. Kazakh-medium students could benefit from the reflections on whether existing decolonial discourses might reinforce inequalities such as patriarchal gender roles and other injustices, as the purpose of decolonisation is social justice (Lee, 2023). The opportunities to engage in discussions or reflect on one's national identity and history might allow a plurality of voices that include multiple and multi-layered identities and be intellectually stimulating for students.

The limitation of the study is that since it looked at the students' perspectives, the results did not provide any evidence to conclude whether the discourses and school practices related to citizenship and national identity differ in Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium classrooms or the

participants just chose to notice, embrace, or connect to, – and thus report, – the information that they see as socially appropriate. Future research might use observation, text-book analysis, or interviews with teachers and school administration to examine whether discourses and school or classroom practices on citizenship, nationalism and national identity differ in Kazakh-medium and Russian-medium classrooms.

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