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# DEMOGRAPHIC AND LANGUAGE POLITICS IN THE 1999 KAZAKHSTAN CENSUS

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## **Abstract**

No state in the former Soviet Union was more eager to conduct a census in the post-1991 years than Kazakhstan. For nationalists and ruling elites, the census was expected to confirm that Kazakhs had achieved a majority status within their "own" country, after having been reduced to a minority of the population under Soviet rule. This study analyzes the both the results of the 1999 census in Kazakhstan and, just as important, the demographic and language politics that shaped the census.



## Introduction

Conducting national censuses in a climate of enormous population changes, migrations, deterioration in the health and welfare structure, and resource scarcity has proved to be a challenging undertaking for the post-Soviet states. Despite these obstacles, no state was politically more determined, and psychologically more anxious to conduct the census than Kazakhstan, where demographers, nationalists and the ruling elites eagerly awaited the anticipated data attesting to the majority status attained by Kazakhs in their "own" historical homeland, after having been reduced to a minority over the past 60 years. An estimated loss of two-fifths of the Kazakh population during the ill-fated forced settlement of nomads in the 1920s, followed by waves of settlers and migrant workers from the European parts of the former USSR, transformed Kazakhstan into the most "international" of all the Soviet republics in the post-1945 period.

The 1999 census established that Kazakhs have crossed the crucial demographic and psychological barrier and now constitute a majority with 53.4 percent, up from 39.7 percent in 1989 (Table 1). The Russian share dropped from 37.7 percent to 29.9 percent over the same period. The census results also demonstrate that Kazakhstan is fast becoming more Turkic or Muslim, thus diluting its Slavic or "European" ethnic profile. The Turkic groups (Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Uighur, Karakalpaks, and Tatar) together form 61 percent of the population, up from 48 percent in 1989, and continue to have a higher birth rate, with the exception of the Tatars.

While these data may not augur well for Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev's fervent desire to maintain a "Eurasian" profile, in which a sizeable share of Slavic and "European" ethnic groups is crucial, it certainly affirms the vision of Kazakhstan as a homeland of Kazakhs. The ongoing emigration of Slavs and Germans and the rapidly growing share of Kazakhs have bolstered the nationalizing trends, paradoxically easing the tension between ethnonational and civic or multinational visions of statehood.

Kazakhstan is the most Russified of all Central Asian republics in both ethnic and linguistic terms. The expected increase in the Kazakh share at the aggregate level, as well as in all oblasts and cities, generated tremendous incentives for the state elite to avail themselves of the statistics to attest to the demographic edge of the Kazakhs, the continuing "youthfulness of the Kazakh nation" in the face of the aging of the Slavic and

European ethnic groups, and most importantly, to portray an optimistic picture of the increasing proficiency in the state language (Kazakh) among all citizens.

Indeed the most surprising outcome of the 1999 census pertains to knowledge of the state language: if in 1989 less than one percent of the Slavic and European nationalities claimed any knowledge of Kazakh, just a decade later almost 15 percent of them claim to know it. Virtually all Kazakhs (99.4 percent) claim knowledge of the state language, i.e., the language of their "own" nationality. In a state where Russian remains the dominant language of inter-ethnic communication and a vast majority of Kazakhs are more at ease functioning in Russian at all levels, these data go against the thrust of all major sociological and ethnographic studies of the linguistic dynamics within the country over the last decade (Dave 1996; Fierman 1997). The census did not directly inquire about knowledge of the "native language"; instead it inferred the respondent's knowledge of his or her nationality language on the basis of the responses to the questions on the knowledge of the state language and of other languages. This provides a context for understanding the surprising statistic that 99.4 percent Kazakhs know the state language.

Though appeasing the cultural and linguistic anxieties of Kazakh elites, the 1999 census results have also uncovered troubling depopulation trends that fuel a sense of insecurity and vulnerability to rapidly growing populations to the south and east and dash Kazakhstan's aspirations for regional hegemony. With its total population reduced to 14.9 million, Kazakhstan has lost almost nine percent of its population in the last ten years, largely due to emigration. Kazakhstan is, in terms of size of territory, the ninth largest country in the world, almost the size of Argentina, although it ranks about 70<sup>th</sup> in terms of population. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan's major rival for regional hegemony, has an estimated population of 24 million (about 17 million of whom are Uzbeks), and is growing by nearly two and a half percent (about 450,000) annually.

Due to its landlocked location, rich natural resources and sparse population, Kazakhstan was turned into a target of economic and demographic incursion for much of the twentieth century, which also accounted for its rapid industrial and urban development. These changes rendered the country's population census and ethnic composition particularly sensitive political issues. According to the Russian imperial census of 1897, Kazakhs numbered 3.39 million and formed 81.7 percent of the total population in the pre-Soviet borders. According to

the first Soviet census of 1926 Kazakhs constituted 57.1 percent of the population in their newly-constituted national republic whereas the Slavic groups together formed 31 percent.

The national delimitation of Central Asia, executed by the Bolsheviks during 1924-25, forged a sense of territorial nationhood by identifying distinct nationalities from a plethora of ethnic, sub-ethnic, clan, and religious groupings. It created two full-fledged national republics, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Tajikistan was constituted as an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Uzbek national republic until 1929 when it was granted the status of a union republic. Though the national delimitation promoted a territorialization and an enhanced sense of national identification among the Uzbeks and Turkmen, it played a less salient role in boosting the national power of the Kazakhs.

The Kirgiz (Kazakh) Autonomous SSR, created within the RSFSR in 1920, was enlarged by including the mainly Kazakh-inhabited Syr Darya and Semirech'ye regions in the south, which had earlier been placed under the administration of the Turkestan Autonomous Republic.<sup>1</sup> However, the Cossack-dominated region of Orenburg, including the city of Orenburg, which had served as the capital of the Kirgiz (Kazakh) Autonomous SSR since 1920, was transferred to the RSFSR. The Karakalpak Autonomous oblast, placed under the jurisdiction of the Kazakh SSR between 1926-34, was transferred to the Uzbek SSR in 1934. The Kazakh and Kirgiz ASSR were removed from the administration jurisdiction of the Russian Federation only in 1936 when they obtained the status of union republics.

The Kazakhs suffered considerable population loss as their nomadic economy reached a critical point in the early twentieth century due to numerous famines. The overriding concern for Kazakhs in the early 1920s was not simply to obtain union republic status (as it was for the Turkmen communists), nor to elevate the "tribal" or *zhuz*-based<sup>2</sup> consciousness into a national one (as the new Soviet policies on nationalities called for), but to facilitate the settlement of nomads at minimal economic, human and cultural costs. In 1926 only about a fourth of

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<sup>1</sup> Kazakhs used the self-designation 'Kirgiz-Kaisak' and referred to the contemporary Kirgiz as Kara-Kirgiz. Kirgiz ASSR was renamed Kazakh ASSR in 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Kazakhs have traditionally been divided into three major tribal confederations or hordes (*zhuz*), each composed of a number of clans claiming common ancestry and inhabiting a shared territory. The Elder horde (*uli zhuz*) inhabited the southern territories; the Middle horde (*orta zhuz*) occupied the territory of the central steppe and northern and eastern regions; and the Younger horde (*kishi zhuz*) predominated in the western and central parts of Kazakhstan.

the Kazakhs led a sedentary mode of life, the rest dependent on the livestock economy and seasonal agricultural farming. Unlike the sedentary agrarian groups, which were undergoing high population growth, the size of the pastoral nomadic populations tended to remain stable due to their dependence on the available grazing area. Population density in the nineteenth century was just over one person per sq. km, but the arrival of Slavic and Cossack settlers led to a shrinking of the nomadic pastures and increased pressures on land and water resources, leading to the outbreak of famines.

Disputes over land were among the most acrimonious issues in Kazakhstan in the 1920s, leading to violent ethnic riots between the Slavs (Cossacks) and Kazakhs (Martin 1996: 532-48). F. I. Goloshchekin, who became the First Secretary of the Communist Party in 1925, believed that an immediate settlement of nomads (collectivization of the nomadic pastures) was the only solution to the land question, thus justifying the necessity for carrying out a "small October" (*mal'yi oktiabr'*), which he claimed, had hitherto bypassed the Kazakh *aul*.

The extent of demographic havoc wreaked by forced settlement of nomads in the 1920s was reflected in the 1937 census, which showed the Kazakh population dropping sharply from 3,637,612 in 1926 to 2,181,520, a loss of 39.8 percent (Table 1). The alarming drop in the number of Kazakhs, Ukrainians, and other people led to the abrogation of the 1937 census and the arrest and purge of many prominent specialists on charges of "nationalism."

The depopulated lands of Kazakhstan soon became the "dumping ground" for deportation of various "enemy" nationalities, as well as for convicts sentenced to hard labor. In 1937, a special decree issued by Stalin led to the deportation of 95,241 ethnic Koreans to Kazakhstan from the Far Eastern regions of the RSFSR bordering with Korea. Fearing possible collaboration between the Soviet Germans and the Nazis, Stalin abolished the Volga German autonomous republic in 1941, deporting most Germans from the Volga region and other parts of the European regions of the USSR to Siberia and Central Asia. During 1941-42 444,000 Volga Germans were deported to Kazakhstan. By 1949 the number of the deportees into Kazakhstan had risen to 820,165, which included 30,2526 Chechens and Ingush, 33,088 Karachai, 28,130 Poles, 28,497 Meskhetian Turks, and 17,512 Balkar (cited in Alekseenko 1998: 98).



The Virgin Lands campaign inaugurated by Nikita Khrushchev led to the arrival of about 640,000 settlers from the Slavic and Baltic republics during 1954-56. The 1959 census unveiled a totally transformed ethnic profile of the republic, with the Kazakh share reduced to a mere 30 percent of the population and the Slavic and European nationalities together forming nearly 60 percent of the total (Table 1). The Slavic influx into Kazakhstan had ceased by 1970 with the economic downturn in Central Asia. Altogether, between 1970 and 1989, the number of Slavs and Germans in Kazakhstan decreased by 940,000, and Kazakhstan encountered the highest loss as a result of inter-regional migration between 1970 and 1980 (Alekseenko 1998).

### **Angling for demographic superiority: pre-census politics**

Against this background, the first post-Soviet census was seen as the moment for Kazakhs to at last assert their sovereignty over the vexed demographics in the country. Given their relative youthfulness and higher rates of natural growth, the attainment of a majority status for Kazakhs and an increase in their numbers and share in all previously Russian-dominated oblasts appeared inevitable in the aftermath of post-imperial demographic developments. Kazakh demographers and academics, as well as the state apparatchiki, saw the confirmation of their nationalist visions in the country's demographic swing in favor of the titular group. Makash Tatimov, a prominent Kazakh demographer who has enjoyed considerable state support and has held positions as an advisor on nationalities and migration issues, emphasized in 1992 that "objective changes in demography" will determine the course of Kazakh national and linguistic revival.<sup>3</sup> The nationalist view that changes in "demography" (a euphemism for the increasing share of Kazakhs) will bring about a shift in favor of the Kazakh language found widespread endorsement among the Kazakh state officials.

Seeking to fill in the "blank spots" in Kazakhstan's history, Tatimov, along with historians Manash Kozybaev and Zhuldyzbek Abylkhozhin (1989), termed the collectivization of 1929-33 the "genocide" of the Kazakh nation, which claimed 2.3 million Kazakh lives. Masanov (1999: 137) argued that the loss of Kazakh population was a regrettable, though inevitable consequence of socio-economic policies of the Bolsheviks and cannot be attributed to any deliberate "nationalities policies" or a "Russification drive." For Kazakh nationalists,

however, the destruction of the traditional nomadic life-style, an (imposed) urban and industrial ethos, including the drinking culture inculcated by the Russians in which vodka replaced the traditional drink *kumys*, are all seen as measures contributing to the shrinking of the Kazakh genetic pool (*genofond*). Some parliamentary deputies have even proposed a legalization of polygamy as a means of reviving the genetic potential of Kazakhs (*RFE/RL Newswire*, 13 May 1998). Tatimov was emphatic in 1992 that Kazakhs will fully restore their genetic pool by the year 2010 and number about 12 million. These projections of the growing number of Kazakhs in their homeland were fuelled by a nationalist euphoria over the return of the Kazakh diaspora.<sup>4</sup>

In order to facilitate the installation of titular Kazakhs into all echelons of power, especially in areas where Slavs are dominant, the Kazakhstani leadership has resorted to such measures as relocation of the country's capital and alteration of the internal regional boundaries. By moving the capital from Almaty in the Kazakh-dominated south to Astana in the Russian-dominated heartland, President Nazarbaev has sought to channel a movement of Kazakhs from the south to the north, as well as procure the loyalty of Russified Kazakhs in the northeast who have been under-represented in the central political and administrative organs.

Further consolidating its unitary and centralized structure, Kazakhstan undertook a significant gerrymandering of its internal territorial boundaries in 1996-98. The Semipalatinsk and Zhezkazgan oblasts, containing 54 and 49 percent ethnic Kazakhs respectively, were merged with East Kazakhstan (67 percent Slavic in 1989) and Karaganda (63 percent Slavic in 1989). Parts of Kokshetau (the Kokshetau town and the surrounding areas) were incorporated within Akmola and North Kazakhstan. Similarly, the Kostanai oblast was enlarged to include parts of Torgai. The changes, affecting all Russian-dominated border regions (except Pavlodar), enlarged the size of these oblasts and increased ethnic Kazakh share in the reconstituted units. The decision was presumably guided by the calculations that their large size and high share of Kazakhs would serve as an antidote to any potential secessionist claims.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Makash Tatimov, December 14, 1992, Almaty.

<sup>4</sup> His *Halyq nama* was published in 1992 on the eve of the First All-Kazakh *qurultai* (World Congress of Kazakhs) in Almaty.

### Projecting "multiethnicity" in a nationalizing context

The Kazakhstani elites have compelling incentives to portray the country primarily as a homeland of Kazakhs *and* a multiethnic republic in which various nationalities peacefully cohabit. No longer required to maintain an "international" profile by accommodating waves of settlers and speaking Russian, as in the Soviet period, a significant Slavic presence is nonetheless seen by the state leaders as a strategic necessity for maintaining a "Eurasian" image and establishing credentials as an aspiring civic state, committed to preserving its multiethnic make-up and "inter-ethnic harmony". Post-Soviet Kazakhstani internationalism, however, is shaped by many of the discursive and institutional legacies of its Soviet-era predecessor and displays a distinctively "Kazakh face" (Schatz 2000: 129-130).

An earlier draft of the present Constitution (adopted in 1995) described Kazakhstan as a state founded on the principle of the "self-determination of the Kazakh people". The clause was then deleted but a distinction between "Kazakh" and "other" people of Kazakhstan has continued to prevail in semi-official, academic, journalistic and popular references. The preamble to the Constitution refers to Kazakhstan as the "indigenous homeland of the Kazakhs," inhabited by "Kazakhs and other nationalities." The present Constitution also coined the concept "the people of Kazakhstan (*narod Kazakhstana*)," reminiscent of its ideological precursor, "the Soviet people." Notwithstanding Nazarbaev's trumpeting of the notion of *narod Kazakhstana*, there is little official effort to institute a supra-ethnic "Kazakhstani" identity. No census category for "Kazakhstani" was created; instead, "nationality" continues to remain firmly inscribed in all identity documents.

Since its introduction in the 1930s as a mandatory passport and identity category, *nationality* has served as a most influential mechanism of institutionalizing a biologically-governed, "backward-looking" conception of a language-based identity (Arel 2000: 168), in which any departure from one's ascribed nationality or native language is an instance of (forced) assimilation. This mandatory "fifth line" (*piataia grafā*) on identity papers has been viewed as a major obstacle in realizing a civic vision of state and moving from a racialized, group-centered conception of identity to an individual-centered one. In the long run, the disappearance of official nationality in one's identity documents could significantly influence a sense of national belonging, remove obstacles for inter-

generational assimilation and cultivate a "civic" or territorial attachment to the state (Arel 2001).<sup>5</sup> In the short run, however, the remedial nature of the post-Soviet state-building policies designed to benefit the titular nationality militates against the removal of the nationality category from official documents.

The new passports retain nationality on the first page, written in the state language and in Russian, whereas the second page, written in English and Russian, omits all reference to ethnicity, replacing it instead with a line indicating citizenship (Smith et al. 1998: 155). This suggests that information on nationality is primarily intended for "internal consumption." Article 10 of Kazakhstan's Constitution allows a citizen to "indicate or not indicate his/her national, party, or religious affiliation" (Konstitutsiia 1996: 9). Although it is no longer mandatory to respond to the question on nationality, respondents habitually fill in the column. It is not uncommon for officials to either "guess" the nationality of the respondent or simply ask for nationality affiliation if the respondent has failed to provide it. Kazakhstan has introduced a system of personal identification cards, which contain a place for nationality although it can be left blank. The state has made little effort to educate its citizens that indicating one's nationality is a matter of choice and not a requirement. Few citizens seem anxious to exercise such a choice. One Russian citizen of Kazakhstan, a Shymkent-based journalist, caused a stir in 1997 by claiming "Kazakhstani" as his nationality. He was allowed this choice only after making special petition with the authorities and expending his personal resources.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Language and census: fabricating a new linguistic reality through statistics**

Census-takers, crudely speaking, seek to measure the demographic and ethnic profile that is objectively "out there." Yet the classification of what is "out there" and the categories employed to measure it are invariably subject to larger policy issues, ideological objectives, and developmental agendas pursued by the state. Statistical measures, when applied to subjective categories, such as "language proficiency" and "ethnicity", are never

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<sup>5</sup> The Baltic States, with the exception of Latvia, have dropped nationality as a passport and a census category and Latvia may be pressured to remove it in the foreseeable future in order to expedite the much sought-after integration with Europe. Ukraine has also removed the nationality entry from the passport though it has retained it as a census category. Debates are raging in Russia over the definition and the pros and cons of retaining nationality as a census and passport category (Perepis 2001).

<sup>6</sup> *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 4 March 1997.

obvious and neutral devices, especially in a highly fluid and changing ethnographic and linguistic climate. Thus the census becomes a snapshot of the demographic scene in a carefully calibrated ethno-linguistic landscape. Consequently, the official projection of the changing social reality into an objective statistical category becomes the baseline for inducing more change along the projected marker in subsequent years.

The positivist legacy of Soviet social sciences endowed facts, numbers and nationalities with an objectified existence. The questions about "nationality" and "mother tongue" (*rodnoi iazyk*) in the Soviet censuses were first and foremost questions of "primordial" or ascriptive ethnic self-identification and not a measure of cultural attachment or actual proficiency in the language (Silver 1976). According to the 1989 census data, 98.5 percent of Kazakhs claimed Kazakh to be their "mother tongue." These figures, if isolated from the socio-cultural setting, would imply that 98.5 percent of Kazakhs use Kazakh as their "first language," and presumably, speak it most of the time. The 1989 statistics also showed that 64 percent of Kazakhs claimed fluency in Russian as the "second language." Among the Muslim groups, only Bashkirs (83.4) and Tatars (82.2 percent) were ahead of the Kazakhs in 1989 in proficiency in Russian as the second language (Kaiser 1994: 290-91, 276-77).

On the basis of these data, Anderson and Silver (1990) claim the presence of "unassimilated" bilingualism among Central Asians, including the Kazakhs. The contention by Silver in an earlier article (1976: 418) that "bilingualism is not simply a transitional stage but may be an end point in the process of linguistic Russification," perhaps inadvertently endorsed the pervasive denial by the Soviet rulers of a gradual linguistic Russification of several non-Russian groups. In the absence of field observations and sociological accounts of language use, analyses based singularly on census data failed to reveal the profound changes in language repertoire and a progressive shift away from the mother tongue in favor of Russian, the "second language," taking place among Kazakhs from the 1970s onwards.

Sociological surveys and articles in the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated the pervasive Russification of urban Kazakhs, particularly those under age forty. Kazakhs formed 27 percent of Kazakhstan's urban population in 1989. Informal observations in early 1990s suggested that just under one third of the urban Kazakhs were able to speak Kazakh with any fluency and even fewer had any ability or need to read and write in



it. What the Kazakh nationalists in the post-Soviet climate came to deplore as a loss of language and ethnic memory – a *mankurtizatsiia*<sup>7</sup> of their national identities – is a consequence of a dislocation of the traditional nomadic culture, and the elimination of national intelligentsia and literary elites under the Stalinist purges. This sense of dislocation pushed the Kazakhs, especially the urbanizing stratum, toward the adoption of Russian language, which served as a vehicle of social mobility and integration into a “world” civilization (Dave 1996).

It was left to concerned linguists and cultural intelligentsia riding the wave of national revival in the late 1980s to highlight the painful fact that a vast majority of young Kazakhs, especially those living in urban and Russian-dominated settings, were not proficient in their native language. There were varying estimates of “proficiency” in Kazakh and conflicting views on how “proficiency” is to be determined; as a result, the levels of “proficiency” and the numbers of those not proficient in the native language became a matter of highly subjective assessments. Abduali Qaidarov (1992), later Qaidar, a Kazakh linguist and the head of the language revival society *Qazaq tili*, estimated that some 40 percent of Kazakhs were not able to speak the language, though he was quick to add that it was not their fault, but their misfortune.

Tatimov (1993) disputed these numbers, arguing that the native language proficiency of Kazakhs should be determined not by the extent of public usage (in multiethnic settings), but by the extent to which the language is spoken in the family (i.e., intra-ethnic settings). On this criterion, the number of Kazakhs who do not know their own language is only 28 percent, and not 40 percent as widely believed. My own ethnographic observations during the period 1992-95 suggest that almost two thirds to three fourths of Kazakhs living in urban settings spoke Russian almost exclusively though many of them claimed to understand Kazakh and speak it if necessary. Few of them felt a necessity to read or write in Kazakh. There was no significant difference in language behaviour in multiethnic rural settings, though Kazakh was more commonly spoken in Kazakh-dominated rural areas or towns. Although Kazakh has gained immensely in terms of its symbolic salience, a wide disparity still exists between claims of proficiency in the language and its actual use.

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<sup>7</sup>Mankurt, derived from a novel by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, refers to a person who has lost his or her ethnic and cultural roots.

### A refusal to know?

Arel (2000: 141) points at three language "situations" that census-takers generally seek to capture: (a) the language *first* learned by the respondent, (b) the language most commonly used by the respondent at the time of the census and (c) the knowledge of particular *official* language(s) by the respondent. Most censuses elicit information on the first two situations, either deriving ethnic affiliation on the basis of the claimed mother tongue or determining what languages are most widely used, and among what groups. The Kazakhstani census takers have primarily targeted the third situation – knowledge of the state language – for eliciting (and manufacturing) the necessary data. This is a significant departure from the Soviet era censuses, which asked respondents to indicate their "mother tongue." The instructions to census takers in the 1926 Soviet census clearly specified that if a respondent is unable to identify his nationality (ethnic markers were fluid in agrarian communities), nationality was to be inferred on the basis of the "mother tongue."

From 1970 onwards, respondents were asked to designate not only their native language but also any (though only one) other language of the peoples of the USSR in which they were fluent, thus allowing the state to compile data on the extent of bilingualism among the various nationalities. "Mother tongue" was largely understood as an ethnic marker, a symbol of ethnic or cultural identity, and not the preferred language of use or the language the respondent was most fluent in. Once stamped on the passport, "nationality" more or less remained unchanged and "mother tongue" as an ethnocultural marker became inextricably linked with one's nationality affiliation. The figures on the growing proficiency in the "second language" (invariably Russian, the language of inter-ethnic communication), yielded more useful insight into the extent to which the mother tongue had been pushed out.

An illustrative case is that of ethnic Koreans in the Soviet Union, a majority of whom live in Central Asia. The 1999 census results show that 25.8 percent of Kazakhstan's Koreans claimed knowledge of Korean. Hardly any Koreans under age sixty have a Korean first name or any facility in their purported native language. Thus, those who claimed proficiency in Korean were endorsing the symbolic salience of language for ethnic identity and not claiming actual proficiency. The finding that 97.7 percent of Koreans are fluent in Russian (second language) reflects their actual language repertoire. In an interview with the author in Almaty in August 1999, Gennadii

Mikhailovich Ni, the president of the Korean Association of Kazakhstan, unhesitatingly referred to Koreans as a "Russian-speaking nation" (*russkoiazychnaia natsiia*).

The 1999 census questionnaire no longer has the category "mother tongue," although question five of the pilot census form used in 1997 did contain this category.<sup>8</sup> Question 8 in the census form only asks about knowledge of the "state language." It asks respondents to indicate knowledge of the state language by choosing one of the four categories: [i] know (*vladeiu*); [ii] know weakly (*slabo vladeiu*); [iii] do not know (*ne vladeiu*); and [iv] learning (*izuchaiu*). The final data computed on the basis of these responses indicate that 99.4 percent of Kazakhs know the state language, followed by other speakers of Turkic languages – Karakalpak, Kyrgyz and Uzbek – over 70 percent of whom claim knowledge of Kazakh. While only 15 percent among the ethnic Russians claim to know the "state language," this is a remarkable improvement from 1989 when less than one percent claimed any facility in Kazakh. Equally heartening for state-building purposes are figures stating that a vast number (1.32 million, about 27 percent) of Russians are "learning" the state language. In contrast, only 95,976 out of 7.98 million Kazakhs, or about 1.2 percent, mentioned that they were "learning" the language. The instructions to the census takers (*Instruktsiia* 1998) state that the category "learning" the state language applies to those who know it "weakly" or "not at all."

Moreover, the instructions state that "knowledge" of the state language refers to those who "use the state language without difficulties as a mode of communication in various social spheres and understand it well, irrespective of the fact whether they can read or write in it" (Italics author's; *Instruktsiia* 1998: 17). One can thus infer that a significant proportion of Kazakhs do not habitually use Kazakh, have only a very basic knowledge of it, and are not investing the effort to learn it. Quite ingeniously, the sub-question following the question about the "state language" asks respondents to "mention languages (except the state language) which you know *fluently*" (emphasis mine, *iazyki, kotorymi vy svobodno vladeete*), offering a choice of up to two languages. Thus the question on "state language" is about a basic familiarity and not proficiency or command. Therefore, I have

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<sup>8</sup> The next question in the Pilot census asked respondents to indicate language that they have a fluent command of (*ukazhite drugi iazyk, kotorym svobodno vladeete*). The question on 'nationality' was framed as "to which nationality, *narodnost* or ethnic group do you belong," the wording very similar to that used in the 1926 census which emphasized the self-designation principle.



translated the question on state language as a question about the "knowledge" of the state language (which does not presuppose fluency). This sub-question is the only means of gleaning data on fluency in (and consequently, pervasive use of) Russian.

The question on the knowledge of the state language, based entirely on subjective evaluation, is methodologically flawed though politically convenient. Overestimation of language skills is common in self-evaluation and evaluation of students. The question on state language seeks neither to distil the actual use of the language nor competence in distinct domains (writing, speaking, comprehension). One might think that a state determined to carry through a language revival project is keen to obtain accurate and elaborate data on the degree of proficiency in that language.

Since the state language facility expectations under the sub-categories "know," "know weakly," "learning," are not at all rigorous, one can surmise that perhaps only a rare Kazakh will admit on an official document, or to the census takers that he or she *does not* know Kazakh, or has a very rudimentary facility in the language. Only 1.4 percent of Kazakhs admitted that they have a "weak knowledge" of the state language. Not only is there a stigma and embarrassment attached to not knowing (or *admitting* that one doesn't know) one's native language, such an admission in public could also needlessly jeopardize one's career prospects or reputation.

The language law adopted in 1997 states that it is the duty of every citizen of Kazakhstan to master the state language, while dodging the corresponding issue of the obligation of the state and financial allocation facilitating the acquisition of proficiency in the state language. Quite consistent with Soviet era practices, the 1999 census results indicate that citizens' responses do tend to endorse the official line and validate the identity categories employed by the state. The results show that Kazakhs are at the forefront of having successfully performed their "duty" to master the state language and other Russian-speaking groups are also making impressive strides.

These results also confirm how statistics are used to construct "objective" facts and justify a non-existing reality. Yet these figures need to be placed and understood in a wider political and socio-linguistic context. When the pool of people possessing spoken and written fluency in an "aggrieved" language is narrow, what

matters is not simply the degree of claimed or demonstrated proficiency in the language, but also a shift in psychological orientation toward it. The demonstration of facility in an aggrieved language by a non-native language speaker invariably is taken as an indicator of his/her goodwill and respect for the language and culture of the particular people. For a vast majority of Russophone groups, the lack of proficiency in Kazakh during the Soviet period was above all a reflection of an "imperial" disposition. In their perception, consistent with the Leninist-Stalinist evolutionary thinking on nations and language, Kazakh was not a "full-fledged" language, but a "dialect" that did not even have its "own" script and was "unworthy" of learning.

Conferring state language status on Kazakh has led to a shift in public *attitude* toward the language, both among Kazakhs and others. In the Soviet era, speaking Kazakh in public, or even in private, was derided as a mark of "provincialism," whereas speaking Russian was seen as a sign of being "cultured" (*kul'turnost'*). The shift in public attitude toward Kazakh among Russian-speaking Kazakhs, triggered by the elevation in the symbolic status of Kazakh, has also influenced Slavic groups to modify their attitude toward the language.

During interviews between 1993-95, Kazakhs who were unable to speak their native language offered a dual set of responses. Regretting their own lack of proficiency in their native language, they emphasized that they wanted their children to command the native language, also highlighting that it is now "prestigious" to know the language. Had Kazakh not been accorded the status of the state language, it is doubtful if these Russian-speaking Kazakhs would place a similar emphasis on acquiring proficiency in Kazakh. In other words, the support and legitimation for Kazakh among Kazakhs with weak knowledge in their native language derive from its status as the state language. Thus the desire to learn one's "native language" is politically induced and is not a reawakening of a "primordial" aspiration. Blessed with state patronage, Kazakh is overcoming the Soviet-era stigma of "backwardness" and being "devoid of future prospects" (*besperspektivnyi*).

While Kazakh may not displace Russian, certainly not in the next couple of decades, there is an increasing recognition that proficiency in Kazakh is important. Its importance derives not from its communicative ability (which remains very limited and is of value only when accompanied with proficiency in Russian), but from its symbolic status and normative value as the state language. In this regard, what is crucial here is not linguistic ability per se – for social expectations about linguistic facility in that language are low – but the broader social

and cultural implications of demonstrating an effort to speak that language. A little knowledge and effort can take one quite far.

In most social settings, uttering phrases such as *"salemitsiz be"* (a form of greeting), *"qalngiz qalai"* (how are you?), *"zhaqsy"* (good), *"rakhmet"* (thank you), *"keshiringiz"* (excuse me) significantly aid in breaking cultural or political barriers. The very willingness and ability to utter some of these phrases is an indication of a positive attitude toward the language. Once a non-Kazakh speaker (whether an ethnic Kazakh or other) has established a certain degree of "credibility" by uttering some Kazakh greetings and demonstrating a desire to speak in the language, conversations subsequently shift to the language that is mutually easy and "natural" for both parties in the given setting.

The questions that the census-takers have opted to *avoid* yield a more vital clue than the ones they have asked. Information about knowledge of Kazakh, measured in degrees (fluency, basic proficiency, do not know) and in distinct domains (speaking, writing, comprehending) is what they have chosen *not* to obtain. On this basis one can surmise that the priority for state elites is not to fully capture the various contours of current language use, but to procure the necessary data to demonstrate the "steady success" of its ethno-linguistic policies, as well as the maintenance of "ethnic harmony," while restoring the lost status of Kazakh.

The 1999 census results reinforce the linkage between nationality and language ("mother tongue") by indirectly eliciting information on the knowledge of the language ascribed to one's own nationality on the basis of responses to the questions on proficiency in the state language (for Kazakhs) and fluency in other languages (for non-Kazakhs). This information is presented in the section on "the population structure according to nationality and language proficiency," which contains the column "proficiency in the language of one's own nationality" (*tazyk svoei natsional'nosti*). Continuous with the Soviet census practices, the primordialist conception of an inextricable nationality-language nexus remains deeply entrenched in the mindset of the Kazakhstani census-makers and officials, although politically expedient reasoning has dissuaded them from directly asking about native language proficiency or fluency in Russian.

The fundamental issue for the state elites in Kazakhstan was not whether Kazakh could become the primary language of intra-ethnic communication or the effective language of state business. The primary

challenge for the post-independent Kazakhstani leadership was whether a legal status as the sole state language could be conferred upon Kazakh in view of the fact that Russian already prevailed as the *de facto* language of inter-ethnic communication. Kazakh's status as the sole state language was justified above all on the twin grounds of affirmative action and a primordialist linkage of nationality and language. These can be summarised in views such as: "Where else can Kazakh be spoken, if not on its own homeland? Kazakh needs protection as the state language precisely because it is a weak language, unable to withstand a natural competition with Russian."

The ten-year state program on language policy introduced in early 1999 focuses on "increasing demand for the use of the state language" and "creating conditions for learning it." It lays down how these objectives are to be realized through administrative and bureaucratic measures, overtly steering clear of any discussion of "political" or "ethnic" dimensions of language. It requires official bodies to complete the majority of documentation in Kazakh, and stipulates that at least 50 percent of all TV and radio broadcasting should be in Kazakh (*RFE/RL Newsline*, 9 February 1999).

Most Kazakh officials at the top levels have better facility in Russian than in Kazakh, which is a major reason for the ineffective implementation of the language program. No formal means for testing proficiency in the state language exists, nor is any documentation required for attesting to the proficiency. The Kyrgyz parliament debated a bill on introducing a Kyrgyz language proficiency test, but eventually withdrew the bill in April 2001 (*RFE/RL Newsline*, 27 April 2001), justifying the withdrawal in terms of a desire to stem the emigration of Russian-speakers.

In both countries, candidates for presidential election have to pass tests for proficiency in the state language and the criteria are unmistakably political, and not linguistic. Wherever language testing requirements exist, it is entirely a matter of either subjective assessment. In an interview with the author on 9 September 1999, Erbol Shaimerdenov, the head of the Committee on Implementation of the State Language, pointed at the increasing official documentation in the state language as a measure of the "success" of the language policy. The overall thrust of the state language program in Kazakhstan is on increasing the demand for Kazakh and

demonstrating success in meeting targets rather than a qualitative improvement and widening of the linguistic domain.

### **A politicized demography**

Some prominent critics of the "nationalizing policies," or "Kazakhization," maintain that since Nazarbaev enshrined the notion of constructing Kazakhstani statehood on the "ancestral land of the Kazakhs" in the preamble of the Constitution, the study of demography and migration has become politicized (Masanov 1999, Alekseenko 2001). Documenting the rapidly increasing representation of Kazakhs in the government and administration, Kolsto (1998) also argues that the dynamics of ethnic representation are *anticipating*, and thus jumping ahead of, rather than resulting from changes in the ethno-demographic structure. If ethnic representation were indeed to follow demographic changes, one would have to wait until the next generation comes of age, as "after all not infants but adults fill public offices" (Kolsto 1998: 61).

The years 1994-95 constituted the crucial defining period when non-titular emigration reached its peak. Altogether, 481,000 people left Kazakhstan in 1994, with 309,600 in 1995 and 229,400 in 1996 (*Statisticheskii Bulletin* 1997: 12-15). While non-titular emigration is a combined outcome of post-imperial migration trends and Kazakhization policies, the crucial tipping point was reached during 1994-95 after which emigration became the norm, no longer needing a trigger. A large proportion of the emigrants were ethnic Germans, who constituted the fourth largest nationality within Kazakhstan, numbering 958,000 in 1989. Though a small number of Kazakhstan's Germans have moved to Russia, most others have left for Germany. The German exodus is motivated mainly by immigration policy in Germany, which entitles a person of German descent to obtain German citizenship. Nearly half of Kazakhstani Germans had emigrated by 1996 and by the year 2000, almost three fourths had left Kazakhstan (*RFE/RL Newsline*, 31 May, 2001).

According to estimates from the Kazakhstan Statistical Agency, a total of 1,846,466 people left Kazakhstan between 1991 and 1999.<sup>9</sup> It is very difficult to obtain the exact figures on emigration because many

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<sup>9</sup> <http://kazstat.asdc.kz/111/migr.htm>, Appendix 4, M.Kh Asylbekov and V.V. Kozina, *Kazakhi Demigraficheskie Tendentsii 80-90-ikh godov*, Almaty: Oerkeniet, 2000, pp 99-100.



decide to emigrate without formally processing papers in Kazakhstan and some others return to the original place of residence. In the typology of Albert Hirschman, "exit" has been the dominant response by culturally and politically disgruntled Russians who perceive the nationalizing course as irreversible and see little future for their children in the ethnically reconfigured landscapes of Caucasus and Central Asia. The acceleration of Kazakhization and anxiety over a deterioration of their status are among the key factors that have triggered an exodus of the Russian-speaking population from Kazakhstan since 1991.

Independent scholars in Kazakhstan and in Russia have contested the census statistics on the number of Slavs in Kazakhstan. Aleksandr Alekseenko, a Kazakhstani Russian demographer, points to the disparity between the official data released by Kazakhstan's State Statistical Agency (*natskomstat*) in the intercensal period and the 1999 census data on the number of Slavs in Kazakhstan. The 1999 census results offered an amended number of the total population in 1989, originally counted as 16,464,464. The revised total for the 1989 census was 16,199,154, which is 265,310 or 1.6 percent less than the earlier figures (Alekseenko 2001). The decrease mainly pertains to the number of Russians (2.6 percent), Belarusians (2.6 percent) and Ukrainians (2.3 percent) and only 0.6 percent for Kazakhs. President Nazarbaev justified the "correction" of the 1989 census data by claiming that 250,000 more Russians (the reference is intended to say "Slavs" – BD) had been erroneously added on ("pripisali") in the 1989 census (*Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, 6 April 2000).

Computing the data released by various sources such as *Demograficheskiy ezhegodnik Kazakhstana*, *Statisticheskii sbornik* (years 1997 and 1998), *Regional'nyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik Kazakhstana* (1997), and *Statisticheskii biulleten* (1997), Alekseenko contends that the Kazakh share only comes to 48.7 percent, and not 53.3. Correspondingly, the Slavic share is 35.8 and not 34.4 as per the 1999 census. The disparity between the 1999 census results and the preceding statistics provided by the National Statistical Agency, according to Alekseenko, may be explained by the extreme fluidity of the migration process and the fact that many Russian-speaking groups in the northeastern regions refused to let census-takers into their apartments.<sup>10</sup> However, he

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<sup>10</sup> The refusal by many Slavs to let the census takers into their apartments does not seem to have merited any official attention, nor did the state 'plan' to deal with such a possibility. In contrast, the Kyrgyz census-takers undertook serious measures to enhance public participation in the 1999 census. One means to procure public participation was

holds the "politicization of statistics" and the various "demographic calls" in the Kazakh press, such as "Kazakhs must constitute a majority," "the Rubicon must be crossed," responsible for this disparity.

### **Implications for the next census**

This census, which has dropped the category "mother tongue" used in the Soviet period but retained the category "nationality," will be the baseline for subsequent censuses in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. If the results of the 1999 census paint a flattering scenario, a far more unpalatable set of demographic facts may be in the offing in the next census, assuming it is held on schedule in the year 2009. By this time, the annual growth rate among Kazakhs is likely to fall below one percent, contributing to the aging of the titular population.

As far as language policy is concerned, what the state has failed to achieve on the ground has been attained through statistics. The near universal proficiency in the state language (and their "mother tongue") among the Kazakhs has for the time being put a lid on concerns mobilized by Kazakh nationalists over the fate of the Kazakh language and the ensuing cultural loss. "Counting" is a form of legitimization. The heartening statistics on knowledge of the state language may not be a bad thing as the relaxed criteria for measuring language proficiency make it easier both for the state and individuals to refrain from overtly politicized identity battles and concentrate on their respective priorities and concerns in a climate of mutual apathy and isolation. The absence of a political debate on language or on the census data is a mark of alienation of the citizenry from the state, in which the citizens publicly endorse the "official" identity categories while privately pursuing their individual preferences and prospects. When claiming proficiency in the state language is both easy and risk-free for the titular group, there are few incentives to fight a political battle over the language issue and resist the language policy of the state.

Yet the optimistic data on state language proficiency also impart a premature and misplaced sense of all being well with the Kazakh language revival and contribute to the overall shoddiness in teaching and widening of Kazakh language use through bureaucratic means. These data contribute to the overall deterioration in standards

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a lottery draw based on the questionnaire in which one of the prizes was an apartment in the center of Bishkek (Kudabaev 1999: 324).

of teaching Kazakh, as well as in preparation of official documents in Kazakh or translating into the state language. The implementation of the state language policy thus remains a statistically successful, though socially ineffective undertaking.



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Table 1a

National Composition of Kazakhstan  
1897 Russian Imperial and 1926, 1937 and 1939 Soviet censuses

Nationality	1897	%	1926	%	1937	%	1939	%
Kazakh	3,392,800	81.8	3,627,612	58.5	2,181,520	42.5	2,327,625	37.8
Russian	454,400	11.0	1,275,055	20.6	1,917,673	37.4	2,458,687	40.0
Ukrainian			860,201	13.9	549,859	10.7	658,319	10.7
Uzbek			129,407	2.1	109,978	2.1	120,655	2.0
Tatar			79,758	1.3	92,096	1.8	108,127	1.8
Uighur			62,434	1.0	32,982	0.6	35,409	0.6
German			51,094	0.8	80,568	1.6	92,571	1.5
Korean							96,453	1.6
Total Population	4,147,800		6,196,356		5,126,676		6,151,102	

Source: 1897 census data is from Table 2, *Istoriia perepisei naseleniia i etnodemograficheskie protsessy v Kazakhstane*, Zh. A. Kulekeev, 1998, Almaty: Agentstvo Respubliki Kazakhstan po Statistike, p. 13; 1926 census data is computed from Table 6, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' 1926 goda*, TsSU Soiuza SSR, Moscow 1929, Volume IX, pp. 15-45. The table above was computed by subtracting totals from the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Oblast from the Kazakhstan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic totals; recently restated official Kazakhstan data has a population total count only 111 higher [Kulekeev, above, pp. 36-37]. The 1937 census data is from table 14, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 g.: Kratkie itogi*, Moscow 1991, pp. 85-96. The 1939 census data is from *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 goda: Osnovnye itogi*, Moscow: Nauka, 1992.

Table 1b

National Composition of Kazakhstan  
1959, 1970, 1989 Soviet censuses and 1999 Kazakhstan census  
(population on hand)

Nationality	1959	%	1970	%	1979	%	1989	%	1999	%
Kazakh	2,787,309	30.0	4,234,166	32.6	5,289,349	36.0	6,534,616	39.7	7,985,039	53.4
Russian	3,972,042	42.7	5,521,917	42.4	5,991,205	40.8	6,227,549	37.8	4,476,620	30.0
Ukrainian	761,432	8.2	933,461	8.2	897,694	6.1	896,240	5.4	547,054	3.6
Uzbek	135,932	1.5	216,340	1.7	263,295	1.8	332,017	2.0	370,663	2.5
Tatar	191,680	2.1	287,712	.9	313,460	2.1	327,982	2.0	248,954	1.7
Uighur	59,840	0.6	120,881	0.9	147,943	1.0	185,301	1.1	210,365	1.4
German	658,698	7.1	857,077	6.6	900,207	6.1	957,518	5.8	353,441	0.7
Korean	74,019	0.8	81,598	0.6	91,984	0.6	103,315	0.6	99,665	0.7
Total Population	9,294,741		13,008,726		14,684,283		16,464,464		14,953,126	

Source: 1959 and 1970 data is from table 2, *Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1970 goda*, Vol. IV Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia SSSR, soiuznykh i avtonomnykh respublik, kraev, oblastei i natsional'nykh okrugov, Moscow: Statistika, 1973, p.13.; 1979 data is from table 10, *Itogi vsesoiuznoi*

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