



# Access to Education and Labour Market Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Kazakhstan: The Case of Uzbeks

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## INTRODUCTION

The language policies of Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, often have to deal with the challenging task of simultaneously promoting national identity, maintaining linguistic diversity, and incorporating languages of wider communication, including Russian, English, and minority ethnic group languages. Given the close link between language, identity, and ethnicity, this issue is crucial in light of the prevalence of ethnic conflicts worldwide. One example is the Kyrgyz-Uzbek interethnic conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Hanks, 2011; Rezvani, 2013). Policymakers should consider the socio-economic and political situations in other Central Asian countries when addressing the language and education needs of ethnic minorities.

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Kazakhstan is home to a diverse and multicultural population and has a significant proportion of non-Kazakh communities, constituting nearly one-third of its total population. Ensuring socio-economic conditions that enable equal access to higher education and human capital development is crucial in this context. It is particularly important to explore this situation through the lens of language policies because during the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, language emerged as a significant factor contributing to ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet republics (Lee, 2004). Language has a critical role in ethno-politics, and language policies have been identified as a crucial factor in promoting peaceful inter-ethnic relations in Kazakhstan (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2011; Lee, 2004).

Language policies can play a crucial role in managing ethnic tensions, and Kazakhstan's harmonious inter-ethnic relations have been attributed to soft language requirements for employment and higher education, tailored messaging for different ethnic groups, compromise on language titles and a mild approach to ethnic languages (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2011; Lee, 2004). A unified language policy has facilitated peaceful coexistence among various nationalities and maintained national integration despite the dispersion of ethnicities across regions. However, limited research exists on the impact of language policies on ethnic Uzbeks, who are the third largest group in Kazakhstan and predominantly use Uzbek alongside Kazakh and Russian (Lee, 2004). As the proportion of Uzbeks increases, it becomes important to examine how language policies affect their socio-economic well-being, as these policies can potentially create inequalities in education and labour market access for ethnic minorities.

This could further exacerbate the situation of ethnic minorities because additionally they experience other inequalities in the labour market, such as disparities in entry into the labour market, occupation types, earnings, working hours, career progression barriers, and levels of self-employment (Zwysen et al., 2021). During the hiring process, employers tend to prefer locals to minorities due to their suspicion of lower productivity levels of ethnic minorities compared to the local population, leading to higher unemployment among minority groups (Veit & Thijsen, 2021).

This study investigates the educational opportunities for ethnic minorities within the Kazakhstani system and the relationship between their education and occupational levels through the lens of language skills and within the framework of the 4Rs. The 4Rs stand for recognition, representation, redistribution and reconciliation, a framework used to

understand the role of education in building sustainable peace in conflict and post-conflict contexts (Novelli et al., 2017). The 4Rs framework for sustainable peacebuilding in education involves addressing inequities through *redistribution* of resources and opportunities to tackle disparities in access and outcomes, *recognising* various forms of diversity, such as cultural, ethnic, linguistic, gender and age diversity, promoting *representation* through inclusive participation in governance and decision-making processes and addressing past and present injustices through *reconciliation* (Novelli et al., 2017).

There has been little scholarship examining the socio-economic situation of Uzbeks in independent Kazakhstan. This study intends to contribute to a better understanding of the role of multilingual education within minority communities in their access to further education and career development. In a country where Russian language proficiency is viewed as a persisting hegemony of the colonial language, and the level of Kazakh language skills is a sensitive nationalist concern, minority groups could be the most vulnerable groups to cultural and material anxieties related to language skills. Therefore, the research question that guided this study is: How do Uzbek, Kazakh and Russian language skills influence the access to education and labour market experiences of ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, and what opportunities and barriers do they face in the local labour market as a non-titular population?

According to the data from the Bureau of Statistics of Kazakhstan ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2023), Kazakhstan's population has experienced significant growth since gaining independence in the 1990s, increasing from around 14 million individuals to over 19 million in 2022 ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2023). Alongside this growth, there has been a notable shift in the ethnic composition of the population, with the proportion of Kazakhs rising from 40% in the 1990s to almost 70% in the 2020s, while the share of Slavic ethnic groups has decreased from 44 to 18%, and Uzbeks have experienced stable growth, rising from around 2% in 1990s to 3.5% in the 2020s ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2023).

The educational landscape in Kazakhstan has also undergone significant changes over the past two decades. During the 2000s, the total number of schools decreased from 8,200 to 7,440, with the share of Kazakh-language schools increasing from 42 to 51%. Uzbek schools experienced the most significant decline, from 1% (78) in 1999 to just 0.2% (13) in 2020.

Although the number of children attending Uzbek-medium schools fell from around 87,000 in 2000 to 79,000 in 2010, it increased again to 86,000 by 2020, with the proportion of children attending Uzbek-medium schools remaining relatively constant over the past two decades at 2.7% ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz)). In recent years, there has been an increase in the representation of ethnic Uzbeks across various tiers of post-compulsory education. In 1999, the economically active population was around 4 million, with 98,000 Uzbek ethnicity, and it rose to over 6.5 million in 2009, with 161,000 ethnic Uzbeks. In 2009, the ethnic Uzbeks were mainly employed in agriculture, trade, education, health care and construction ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2009).

Following this introductory section, the subsequent section presents the theoretical framework and literature review. The methodology is then explained in the ensuing section, followed by the presentation of the findings. The chapter ends with a concluding section.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Two key concepts of this study are *ethnic minorities* and *bilingual/multilingual education*. Churchill's study on linguistic and cultural definitions of ethnic minorities in 15 countries identified four key criteria for ethnic minorities: they differ from the mainstream group in ethnicity, race, language or cultural heritage; they are socially non-dominant; they reside in a country with a numerically and culturally-economically dominant group sharing a common culture and language; and ethnic minority children and youth tend to have educational problems primarily due to difficulty integrating into an educational system based on a mainstream model (Churchill, 1996).

Bilingual education involves the use of two languages in education to make students bilingual and biliterate or enhance comprehension and linguistic competence in a dominant language for language-minoritised people (Baker, 2011). Multilingual education involves using more than two languages in education, and it has become increasingly important in a globalised world where two languages may not be sufficient (Ursell, 2012).

Education and language are critical factors in creating and maintaining modern nation-states, as the pursuit of national identity often revolves around achieving linguistic and cultural dominance (May, 2012). In some cases, the significance of language to one's identity may vary widely across

individuals and groups, ranging from negative evaluation of the language, indifference, general positive evaluation and personal positive evaluation (Smolicz & Secombe, 1985). While some individuals may see a particular language as a vital element of their ethnicity, loyalty to that language may only persist if economic and social circumstances are conducive to it (Edwards, 2010). Kay (1993) supports this idea by highlighting the displacement of African languages as a means to escape poverty and the limitations imposed by ethnic identity.

Language shift is becoming more common in the modern world, as members of ethnolinguistic minorities often choose to bring up their children in the majority language, leading to the eventual displacement of the historically associated language (May, 2012). The concept of “communicative currency” or “languages of wider communication” is often used to justify the greater socio-political status of majority languages (May, 2012, p. 156). However, maintaining a minority language alongside a dominant one can require adeptness in navigating multiple cultural and linguistic identities. It is possible to retain both narrower and broader identities, and insisting on doing so can be a way of avoiding reductionism (May, 2012).

According to Parekh (1995), communities need to respect their history and traditions while meeting present and future needs when reconstituting their identity. Bilingual education can effectively promote second language learning for minority languages while maintaining their cultural and linguistic heritage. Churchill’s (1996) typology is a useful tool for analysing policy responses to minority language and education (May, 2012). Six policy responses have been identified, with the first stage being the dominant approach of modern nation-states and their education systems (Churchill, 1996). These policies aim to ignore or actively suppress minority languages, viewing them as a threat to social mobility and majoritarian controlled institutions (Grant, 1997). Examples include the Irish and French state education systems, the Welsh language proscription from schools and the abandonment of Māori language in New Zealand (May, 2004). Some of these language restrictions still exist today, such as the Chinese government’s ban on the Tibetan language in schools in favour of Mandarin Chinese and the Turkish state’s repression of the Kurdish language (Skutnabb-Kangas & Fernandes, 2008).

In Stage 2, assimilationist education is still implemented to maintain a common language and culture, compensating for the supposed inadequacies of the minority student’s family background to mitigate their

underachievement in schools (Churchill, 1996). Stage 3 policies and programmes are categorised as multicultural education, which emerged in response to the demands of minority groups in the 1970s for greater recognition of their ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity within education (Churchill, 1996). Multicultural education acknowledges that the disadvantages faced by minorities are not solely due to personal or familial factors but are also systemic. In response, multicultural education advocates for “cultural pluralism”, which recognises the cultural values and practices of minorities and includes them in the school curriculum (Churchill, 1996). Stage 4 recognises the significance of the connection between language, identity and learning, but in a mostly instrumental manner, utilising transitional bilingual programmes that use a minority language.

Stage 5 acknowledges the importance of preserving minority languages and cultures while recognising the need for their active protection to prevent them from being replaced by the dominant national language (Churchill, 1996). The maintenance approach to bilingual education is a common policy response to this challenge, where school instruction is predominantly or exclusively in the minority language, ensuring that the minority language is sustained and encouraged. Successful bilingual programmes are found in various parts of the world, including North America, Europe and among different indigenous groups. Finally, Stage 6, known as the “language equality” stage, requires the dominant ethnic group to accommodate minority groups and their languages in all shared domains (Churchill, 1996). Formal multilingual policies are implemented in this stage, granting language rights to individuals or territories and ensuring the maintenance of a particular language. Belgium and Switzerland provide examples of formal multilingualism achieved via the territorial language principle, where language rights are limited to a particular territory to maintain a particular language. India is an example of the personality language principle, where language rights are granted to individuals, regardless of where they are located geographically (Beardsmore, 1980; Blommaert, 1996; Nelde, 1997).

Overall, the first four stages advocate for minority groups to pursue the same social, cultural and linguistic goals as the dominant or majority ethnic group, with little regard for minority languages and cultures. This approach was reminiscent of the Soviet era approach to local languages of the republics and Russian language dominance, seeking to integrate minority groups into the dominant civic culture of the nation-state.

Churchill (1996) argues that the fifth and sixth stages are the only stages that incorporate the cultural and linguistic values of minority groups into the objectives and outcomes, challenging the notion of a monocultural and monolingual society. These later stages acknowledge the importance of minority groups preserving their language and culture over time, whereas the initial four stages take the opposite approach.

The current study aims to determine at which stage of Churchill's typology Kazakhstan is situated in terms of its education and language-related policies with respect to ethnic Uzbeks. Based on the regulations related to education and language policies in Kazakhstan, as well as interviewing members of the ethnic Uzbek community, this research provides insight into Kazakhstan's approach to minority language and culture preservation.

## METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was chosen, along with official statistics. The latter provided an overall account and trends on socio-economic indicators for minority ethnic groups in the country, with a specific focus on Uzbeks. Interviews were selected as the best method because they enable researchers to construct the experiences of ethnic minorities and gain deeper insights.

The target population for this research comprises individuals who identify as ethnic Uzbeks, born and raised in Kazakhstan, who attended school starting from 1991 when Kazakhstan gained independence and language reforms were initiated. Participants had to be below 40 years of age and be in the labour market for at least one year to help understand their education to employment transition.

The research site is Kentau, a town in the north of the Turkestan region, which is situated in South Kazakhstan. More than 92% of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan live in this region ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2023). Given the feasibility of attracting the appropriate participants to the study, a non-probabilistic convenient sample was chosen which involved selecting individuals who were conveniently available and willing to participate in the research. Additionally, snowball or chain sampling was applied to establish several key informants who had the required characteristics and helped identify other participants and put the researcher in touch with them.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview protocol included nine open-ended questions with sub-questions, which

were pilot-tested on two participants selected from the same target population but excluded from the main data set. The first section of the questions related to the schools participants attended and their linguistic skills, while the second section related to their occupational status and employment situation. The last section addressed the current language-related policies, particularly, the trilingual policy for ethnic Uzbek children and the switch to Latin script. Kazakhstan's trilingual policy promotes an understanding of three languages, namely Kazakh, Russian and English and use these languages as languages of instruction for STEM disciplines at schools in Kazakhstan (Klyshbekova, 2020).

To ensure the clarity and relevance of the interview questions, the participants received the interview questions before the scheduled meeting and were informed that the interviews would be tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim in advance. Despite these precautions, many potential participants refused to be interviewed.

I used traditional procedures to analyse the interview data, which included coding and thematic development. I also used NVivo software for storing and analysing both the qualitative data and official statistics on minority groups. Ulster University provided ethical clearance for the study. All participants provided written consent for audio-recording the interview.

## FINDINGS

### *Participant Characteristics*

All 20 ethnic Uzbeks interviewed were born and educated in Kazakhstan. Eleven were women and nine were men. Participants were aged between 21 and 40 years, predominantly residing in urban areas within the Turkestan region, with only two participants living in rural areas. Out of the 20 participants, 13 were married and had children, with the highest number of children being five. Eleven participants attended Uzbek-medium schools, two graduated from Kazakh-medium schools and the remainder graduated from Russian-medium schools. Only three participants did not pursue further education after secondary school, while six pursued vocational education and training, and 11 obtained higher education degrees. Participants who attended vocational education and training institutions were predominantly enrolled in Kazakh-medium groups, while those pursuing undergraduate degrees were primarily enrolled in



Russian-medium groups. This could be attributed to the regional specifications of vocational education and training institutions, which mostly offer training in the Kazakh language (Table 9.1).

During the study period, only one participant was unemployed and four participants were self-employed. The remaining 15 participants were engaged in various sectors such as telecommunication, education, medicine, different services, retail and mining. The majority of participants (11 out of 20) had a monthly income ranging between 200 to \$400, while only one participant reported a monthly income close to \$2,000. Notably, the average monthly income in Kazakhstan is around \$630, with the average income for the Turkestan region being around \$500 ([stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), 2023), indicating that most participants earned less than the regional and country average.

Regarding language proficiency, only one participant reported not being able to speak Kazakh, three participants did not speak Uzbek, while six participants reported not knowing Russian. Thus, 14 out of 20 respondents were trilingual.

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS WITHIN THE 4Rs FRAMEWORK

### *Recognition*

To date, there are 13 Uzbek-medium schools in the region. Most were sent to a school closer to their home. However, none of the 20 participants chose to enrol their own children in Uzbek schools, opting instead for Russian schools. This preference for Russian schools was explained by participants' own experiences with the Russian language and their desire to protect their children from potential linguistic difficulties. Parents also chose Russian medium schools because they perceive Russian language proficiency as essential in Kazakhstan, particularly for ethnic Uzbeks. Some participants believed that Russian schools offer higher quality education as explained by Alisher "I have better knowledge than anyone who graduated with honours from Uzbek school. It is better to be a "C" student in a Russian school than an "A" student in an Uzbek school".

Parental education levels had a significant impact on the participants' educational aspirations. Participants whose parents had higher education tended to place greater value on obtaining a university degree. Whereas participants whose parents did not have higher education often had no

Table 9.1 Participant description

N	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
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

clear plans for their future after graduation and had to rely on the guidance of their teachers or peers in making decisions about their education. Alisher explained why some ethnic Uzbeks obtain further education while others do not: “depends on a personality not the ethnicity...and on setting the right priorities during school by parents”.

In terms of the language of instruction for higher education, the majority of participants studied in Russian medium groups. Several participants explained that Russian was taught particularly well in some Uzbek schools, and they felt confident in their ability to study in Russian. Additionally, some participants took a pragmatic approach, they explained that “a lot of people went to the Kazakh groups, and they filled up quickly, while there was less competition in the Russian groups” (Sardor). Overall, participants noted that ethnicity did not pose a significant barrier to obtaining higher education, as success in this area depended more on individual circumstances, such as socio-economic background, financial resources, secondary education training and language skills.

The participants generally consider fluency in Russian essential for success in the Kazakhstani labour market. For example, Sardor observed that “if you take an ordinary business, any business is conducted in Russian. Even documentation, everything is done in Russian, negotiations, logistics, procurement”. Also, Sardor explained that “any information on the Internet, and many sites, are all in Russian or in English. In Kazakh, Kazakh needs to be developed, it has to be recognized - Kazakh is still at a basic level on the Internet”. Interestingly, participants indicated that fluency in Kazakh language does not directly impact their earnings or career development. Alisher, who is fluent in Kazakh explained, “I don’t think it had any influence...It [his fluency in Kazakh] is a sign of respect, that’s all”. Likewise, Alisher observed that “Kazakhs themselves often speak Russian. I think you need to know Russian in order to be able to be understood by others as well”.

Several participants also noted that English, in their opinion, is not particularly important in the Kazakhstani system because very few people know it. It seems ethnic Uzbeks see more potential in learning the Russian language compared to English. At the same time, they highlighted that knowing Kazakh sometimes plays a significant role where bosses may only speak in Kazakh. Umida shared that not knowing Kazakh “is not difficult but uncomfortable”.

A new trend among children of participants who attend Russian-medium schools could be observed. It seems these children tend to

use Russian language at home and school, while using Kazakh language when playing outside. In this situation, the usage of Uzbek seems to diminish. For instance, Sherzod explained “my parents speak Uzbek and my daughter understands them, but answers in Russian”.

### *Redistribution*

According to most of the participants, there are no significant barriers to employment for ethnic Uzbeks in the Kazakhstani labour market because, as Alisher stated “good workers are needed everywhere, bosses are another thing, but workers are needed everywhere”. The participants emphasised that individual personality, rather than ethnicity, determines one’s ability to pursue any profession, acknowledging that some individuals may wrongly attribute their lack of success in the labour market to their ethnicity, while also highlighting the abundance of opportunities for those who actively seek them.

While several participants reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace, it mostly came from colleagues rather than supervisors. Nigora working in a state institution recalled an incident with a colleague who stated, “why an Uzbek was hired...there are so many Kazakhs with diplomas who cannot find jobs, why not hire them”? Several participants acknowledged that there are limits to professional development for ethnic minority groups in Kazakhstan. Specifically, ethnic Uzbeks may face challenges in reaching higher managerial positions compared to their Kazakh counterparts; Nodir explained, “even if you work in a state organisation, a Kazakh will be promoted, but not an Uzbek”.

Additionally, Alisher, Zuhra, Nigora and Sardor noted that “some kind of nationalism is present in Kazakhstan”. Nationalism is often visible through social media platforms and sometimes at workplaces, where supporters of the Kazakh language demand that other ethnic groups use Kazakh, observed several respondents. Participants noted that usually graduates of Uzbek schools, who did not speak Kazakh or Russian much, faced more difficulties in the local labour market. At the same time, some participants expressed a lack of active pressure to become fluent in Kazakh.

One-third of participants secured their first employment through the Employment Road Map 2020 programme. The programme was established to reduce the unemployment rate among youth in the country (Employment road map programme 2020, 2011). However,

some participants reported using their social capital (family, friends and acquaintances) to secure job positions. Several respondents identified a concerning trend of bribery in the southern region, particularly in state organisations, where certain positions have fixed prices for acquiring employment, thus, ethnic Uzbeks reported preferring to seek employment in the private sector, usually with ethnic Uzbek owners.

Several participants also reported experiencing a mismatch between their education and employment. They were unable to find suitable employment with their diplomas and had to resort to low-skilled jobs. Nodir stated “after graduation, there was nowhere to work, and I was not willing to pay a bribe that was worth a year’s salary; it would have been as if I worked one year for free, so I went to the construction site in Astana”. This trend was particularly relevant for men who could not afford bribes or had no acquaintances in good positions to help them secure employment. Other participants who did not obtain further qualifications after secondary school cited family circumstances that pushed them to start working immediately, usually in low-skilled jobs.

Almost all participants claimed to be satisfied with their income level, and they did not feel overqualified or underpaid. This can be attributed to a realistic attitude towards earnings within the region and the country shown by the respondents. Participants’ ideal salaries varied based on their age, field of work and work experience, ranging from \$400 to \$2,000.

### *Representation*

The two most significant language-related policies under discussion are the trilingual reforms of secondary education and the adoption of the Latin script. The opinions of participants on both policies are divided. Some argue that a trilingual policy, whereby children learn English from the first grade, would be beneficial, as Ulduz, Ulugbek and Nigora explained “English is needed everywhere”. Some also draw on their personal experiences with English and the difficulties they have encountered, lending support to the idea of early English education.

However, others are opposed to this policy; for example, Fatima stated that “it is such a pressure on my child”. Given that English would be the fourth language for ethnic Uzbeks, some believe that mastering the mother tongue should be prioritised over adding any foreign language. Sherzod observed “Russian itself is difficult. Many have difficulty differentiating ‘he’ from ‘she’ in Russian”.

Regarding the adoption of the Latin script in Kazakhstan, some participants oppose it, perceiving it as lacking purpose. While some suggest that learning English may be facilitated by adopting the Latin script, others argue that “Uzbekistan switched to the Latin alphabet 20 years ago, so what? Do people there speak English better now? I did not notice. It is just a waste of money” (Sardor). Participants also note the difficulties of converting textbooks from Cyrillic to Latin and teaching teachers to instruct in the new script. Moreover, a generation divide may emerge as the younger generation adapts more easily to the Latin script than those educated solely in Cyrillic. Participants recognise that such policies may create various difficulties in the education system, especially for ethnic minorities. While some believe that these policies are necessary for continuous development and keeping pace with global changes, others question their efficacy and highlight their potential drawbacks.

Most participants expressed the view that Uzbek schools should continue to exist within the Kazakhstani education system. Their rationale was that some Uzbek families should have the opportunity to educate their children in Uzbek schools. Such ethnic schools will help to preserve their language and cultural traditions. There is a fear that if all Uzbek schools were to be closed down in Kazakhstan, the Uzbek language may become extinct. However, some participants would have preferred to attend Russian schools, as it is easier to learn English there. In Uzbek schools, English is taught as the fourth language, while in Russian schools, it is the third language and the quality of education is considered to be better there. Furthermore, several participants felt that maintaining Uzbek schools in Kazakhstan was unnecessary because “children will speak Uzbek at home, they will not forget it” (Ulduz). For further education and career development, the participants suggested that Kazakh, Russian and English were the languages needed.

Participants reported seeing a clear difference between ethnic Uzbeks who attended Russian vs Uzbek schools. Sardor explained “in the Uzbek culture, we are brought up to take care of the older generation. However, ethnic Uzbeks who attended the Russian schools become more individualistic and focused on their own professional development, and they leave the elderly behind” which seems to indicate the loss of cultural values.

### *Reconciliation*

All participants expressed a preference to stay in Kazakhstan and did not consider moving to Uzbekistan, despite some frequently visiting Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan was perceived as having more economic advantages and an overall higher standard of living. Participants also noted that their different Uzbek language dialects influenced by Kazakhstani society, would lead them to be viewed as Kazakhs in Uzbekistan. Zarina explained, “I know Kazakh well and I speak it without an accent. It is easier for me to express my thoughts in Kazakh; I don’t even know some words in Uzbek, to be honest”. Nargiza and Ulugbek shared a view that “we live in Kazakhstan, well, my grandfathers, great grandfathers, all lived here, it turns out, and so our Uzbek is not the same as Uzbek in Uzbekistan. Our language is a little bit like Kazakh”. Likewise, Ulugbek explained, “Uzbek is my ethnicity but not my homeland. My homeland is Kazakhstan. I was born here. I may be an ethnic Uzbek but I’m not a patriot of Uzbekistan, I am a patriot of Kazakhstan”. It is evident that despite close interaction of ethnic Uzbeks with Uzbekistan, and they perceive Kazakhstan as their homeland, with its higher standard of living and economic advantages, leading them to prefer staying in the country over moving to Uzbekistan.

### CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the influence of language skills on the educational and labour market experiences of ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, as well as the opportunities and barriers they encounter as a non-titular population. The study revealed that language skills are closely linked to individual circumstances, socio-economic background and personality, rather than school choice, and play a critical role in obtaining further education and professional qualifications. The findings suggest that older generations, who completed their schooling in the mid-1990s, faced more challenges in continuing their education due to the socio-economic situation of their parents and their education level. In contrast, younger generations who graduated during the second decade of independence, when Kazakhstan experienced greater socio-economic stability, reported a closer relationship between individual choices and access to higher education.

The study also found that ethnic Uzbeks experience a certain level of discrimination, particularly in the southern regions of the country, and may encounter difficulties in advancing to higher managerial positions. However, the research demonstrates that there are no significant barriers in the Kazakhstani system that would significantly impede the well-being of ethnic Uzbeks in accessing education and professional development.

Nevertheless, it is evident that while there is a certain level of recognition and resource allocation for the Uzbek community in Kazakhstan; there is still a pressing need for greater representation in political and education-related governance. This would not only foster a more inclusive and peaceful society but also enable a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the importance of language choice in shaping cultural and linguistic identities and creating a sense of belonging and inclusivity for individuals and communities. The mixed reactions of ethnic Uzbeks to Kazakhstan's trilingual reforms and the adoption of the Latin script emphasise the need for more research on the impact of such programmes on ethnic minorities.

To gain a better understanding of the shifting language choices of ethnic Kazakhs in Uzbekistan and how they compare to those of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, the study recommends further comprehensive comparative research. This would provide valuable insights into the evolving linguistic landscape of the region and inform policies that promote linguistic diversity and inclusion.

The declining use of the Uzbek language among ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan can also be understood in the context of language shift, a form of cultural assimilation where a community stop using their traditional language in favour of a dominant or majority language. This trend aligns with Churchill's typology, which identifies the assimilation stage as a period when a minority group begins to adopt the language and cultural practices of the dominant group (Churchill, 1996). The government's language policies, which prioritise the use of Kazakh and Russian, also contribute to this assimilation trend. Thus, policymakers need to consider the impact of language and education policies in Kazakhstan on the diverse communities they serve and promote inclusivity and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.



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