On the Russian-Speaking Population in Kazakhstan: Between Inclusion and Exclusion

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between language practices and social exclusion within Kazakhstan's multilingual landscape. The empirical material of the study is based on a representative sociological survey conducted in 2021 across all regions of Kazakhstan (n = 1999) using a stratified quota sample. This sample ensured a balance in terms of age, gender, and place of residence. The respondents were divided into three groups: Kazakh-speaking, Russian-speaking and bilinguals. This division allowed us to examine how language proficiency influences perceptions of social integration, trust levels, and social inclusion. The χ^2-test statistical method was employed in the data analysis, enabling us to assess the significance of differences between the language groups. In addition, qualitative materials from focus group discussions conducted in several regions of Kazakhstan were used to contextualise and interpret the results. The study's findings indicate that the Kazakh-speaking group is characterised by a high level of optimism, life satisfaction, and confidence in personal and political efficacy. By contrast, the Russian-speaking group experiences anxiety, dissatisfaction, and scepticism towards government institutions, pointing to a symbolic sense of social exclusion. Bilinguals occupy a middle ground between the two language groups, combining emotional ambivalence with a high level of adaptability and potential for social mobility. The data confirm that language is not only a means of communication, but also a form of symbolic capital that defines access to social recognition and participation in society.

Keywords: social exclusion, language policy, bilingualism, Kazakhstan, symbolic capital, integration.

Introduction: Multilingualism and Integration

In multilingual states, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as an indicator of social position and access to public life. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is an important element in the structure of power, inequality and social differentiation. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1991), language and linguistic competencies can serve as a form of symbolic capital which, on the one hand, enable, and on the other, constrain an individual's participation in social and institutional systems, as well as in social fields.

Moreover, contemporary sociolinguistic research demonstrates that differences and inequalities in the social environment are shaped not only by material conditions and resources but also through processes of interaction, recognition and participation in public life (Levitas, 1998; Silver, 1995; Lister, 2004). As a result, approaches have emerged that conceptualise interaction and participation in society as a multidimensional and dynamic process, in which access to political, cultural and economic resources is directly linked to social practices and institutional mechanisms (Walker, 1997; Aasland, 2001; Bracic, 2022). From this perspective, language ceases to be merely a means of communication and instead becomes an important form of participation in public life, providing access to various social and institutional resources (Prendergast & Zambrana, 2021; Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005).

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In the countries of Central Asia, language has become an important factor shaping access to institutions, social participation, and public life, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent structural transformations (Astrov, 2010; Tasciotti, 2014). Along with the promotion of titular languages, there took place a restructuring of linguistic hierarchies that resulted in changes to the status and role of the Russian language and other languages at both the institutional level and in everyday practices. Studies conducted in Central Asia demonstrate that language practices are directly linked to opportunities for participation, social mobility and recognition, reflecting broader social and institutional processes (Mikhalev, 2004; Larsen, 2021; Bangwayo-Skeete & Zikhali, 2011).

Within this regional context, Kazakhstan represents a particular case characterised by a diverse linguistic landscape, in which access to institutional resources and participation in public life vary across linguistic and social groups (Krikorian, 2018; Werner, 2017). Research on language policy and language practices shows that language serves as a key mediator between access to institutions, social mobility and the subjective sense of belonging (Spoor et al., 2014; Riekkinen, 2021). When it comes to post-Soviet Eurasian spaces, the role and function of Russian has evolved in a variety of directions, ranging from gradual decline in some countries (e.g., Georgia, Turkmenistan) to forms of coexistence in others (e.g., Kyrgyzstan, Armenia), where it often functions as a language of interethnic communication (Dietrich, 2006; Fierman, 2009; Hogan-Brun, 2012). Scholars have described this shift as a process of revitalising the languages of Central Asia (Fierman, 2006) and as the beginning of de-Russification, understood as the replacement of decades of Russification with linguistic nativation (Weller, 2014; Kucherbayeva, 2023).

In this respect, Kazakhstan remains an intriguing case, as it is home to the largest Russian-speaking minority in Central Asia, historically deeply embedded in urban, institutional and professional domains. It is precisely this demographic balance and population composition that has shaped a more gradual and less linear trajectory of linguistic transformation in Kazakhstan compared to other states in the region. The most notable changes affected the Russian-speaking population, which historically played a central role in shaping the linguistic and institutional landscape of Kazakhstan. The Russian-speaking community traditionally held a dominant position, especially during the Soviet period, influencing the linguistic space (Kreindler, 1991; Sushchiy, 2018), as well as broader social processes (Fierman, 2009; Dowler, 2001). However, in recent decades, demographic shifts, including migration and ageing processes, have altered this balance (Suleimenova, 2021; Kalabina, 2022). These changes may contribute to increased uncertainty and identity-related challenges in linguistic and social positioning among parts of the Russian-speaking population.

In Kazakhstan, language became an essential tool of nation-building, as the state sought to strengthen identity by promoting the Kazakh language (Dave, 1996; Smagulova, 2006). The idea of resurrecting the native language strengthened linguistic nationalism, which was further reinforced by language management practices aimed at consolidating the nation (Zhumanova, 2016; Smagulova, 2019; Adibayeva, 2010). Importantly, these policy-driven transformations were not limited to formal legislation but gradually became embedded in everyday language practices, influencing language choices in public institutions, education, media, and routine interactions.

This study argues that social exclusion in Kazakhstan should be examined not only in terms of economic deprivation but also within the context of a changing linguistic landscape. The Russian-speaking group, which encompasses diverse linguistic and ethnic communities in the multinational context of Kazakhstan, faces increasing uncertainty regarding social connections, belonging and linguistic positioning. In this way, the study moves beyond an exclusive focus on ethnicity and instead explores the broader phenomenon of language-conditioned social integration. In the Kazakhstani context, language choice is closely linked to everyday interactions with institutions, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and perceptions of legitimacy and belonging. This study therefore adopts a sociolinguistically informed analytical perspective, using language as a key lens for understanding broader patterns of social integration and exclusion.

To further conceptualise these processes, it is necessary to situate them within broader theoretical approaches to social exclusion. Social exclusion has traditionally been conceptualised primarily

in terms of poverty, material deprivation, and limited access to economic resources. However, more recent theoretical approaches emphasise its multidimensional character, highlighting weakened social integration, erosion of social ties, and restricted access to symbolic and institutional resources. Walker (1997) expanded the understanding of social exclusion by moving beyond poverty and material deprivation and emphasising the role of social connections as a key factor in inclusion. He defined exclusion as a dynamic process of partial or complete detachment from political, economic, cultural, and communicative systems of society. Later, Aasland and Fløtten (2001) further developed this concept, highlighting that social exclusion is closely linked to inadequate integration and the erosion of social ties, while ethnic affiliation may, in certain contexts, increase the risks of exclusion from social, political, and cultural participation. In this respect, language can be understood as a key symbolic and institutional resource that shapes individuals' access to social participation, institutional interactions, and broader processes of inclusion and exclusion. Building on this, the study examines the relationship between language practices and social exclusion in Kazakhstan, demonstrating how proficiency in Kazakh and Russian is associated with different patterns of social inclusion among linguistic groups. In particular, we show that variations in language proficiency are systematically linked to differences in access to social institutions, perceptions of belonging, and broader experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

In this context, the present study examines the relationship between language practices and social exclusion in Kazakhstan, demonstrating that differences in proficiency in Kazakh and Russian are associated with disparities in access to social institutions, levels of trust, and perceptions of social belonging. In particular, higher levels of linguistic integration are associated with greater well-being and higher trust in state institutions, whereas language barriers are accompanied by the opposite trends. Furthermore, the analysis reveals differing patterns of social inclusion between monolingual and bilingual groups, with bilingualism being linked to broader opportunities for participation and access to resources. Consequently, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a key mechanism shaping social positioning and participation in public life. To deal with these issues, the next section proposes a literature review and the following section explains the methodology before delving into the empirics in sections three and four.

Inclusion and exclusion in literature: a short overview

Social exclusion was originally understood as a form of poverty or material deprivation. Over time, this concept has transformed into a multidimensional category. Levitas (1998) and Silver (1995) employed ideological and structured approaches to define and analyse social exclusion, while Farrington (2002) and Rodgers, Gore, and Figueiredo (1995) emphasised the importance of a cumulative approach. Scholars of poverty, including Lister (2004), Rank (2004), and Wilson (1987), emphasise that social exclusion extends beyond material deprivation to encompass internalised states such as shame, vulnerability, and diminished dignity. Furthermore, Layte (2004) and Duflo (2011) examined its connection to the labour market, while Bullock (1999) and Lewis (1969) explored its relationship with symbolic and cultural alienation. Taken together, these approaches demonstrate that social exclusion is a multidimensional process shaped by structural inequalities, labour market dynamics, and symbolic forms of marginalisation.

Walker (1997) broadened the understanding of social exclusion beyond narrowly defined concepts of poverty, deprivation, and disadvantage to include inequality, discrimination, marginalisation, the notion of an "underclass," alienation, and dispossession (Silver, 1995; Burchardt et al., 1999). Importantly, Walker emphasised the significance of social ties, arguing that their presence or absence constitutes a critical dimension of social exclusion. He maintained a clear distinction between poverty and social exclusion, defining poverty as a lack of material resources, particularly the income necessary for participation in society, while conceptualising social exclusion as a more comprehensive and dynamic process. In this sense, social exclusion refers to total or partial isolation from the social, economic, political, or cultural systems that enable an individual's integration into society (Walker, 1997).

Subsequently, Aasland expanded the concept of social exclusion by situating the loss of social ties within broader social processes (Aasland, 2001). Accordingly, he proposed viewing social exclusion through the lens of insufficient integration and the erosion of social ties, emphasising how structural and social factors, including ethnicity, may affect opportunities for socialisation and integration among national minorities. Belonging to an ethnic group may, in certain contexts, be associated with a higher risk of partial or complete exclusion from economic, political, social and cultural integration. In a similar vein, Bracic (2022) develops this concept by suggesting that social exclusion is a cumulative process, where exclusion from one sphere strengthens exclusion from others, focusing on the phenomenon of "double visibility" for language minorities, where they are simultaneously invisible in institutions and hyper-visible as "different."

The research by Prendergast and Zambrana (2021) broadened the understanding of exclusion by proposing the "acceptance – fitting in – belonging" model, in which integration into society is viewed as a process rather than a binary state. They demonstrate that language identity can generate latent forms of exclusion, even in the presence of formal access. Using the "language of belonging" method (Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005), the scholars uncover how accents, intonation, and behavioural markers indicate inclusion or, conversely, alienation. In this context, it is crucial not only to achieve mutual understanding but also to experience recognition and a sense of belonging.

Language in sociolinguistic scholarship is viewed not only as a means of communication but also as a form of symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu (1991), language proficiency can serve as a resource that provides access to social status, recognition, and participation in public life, or conversely, it can become a barrier that limits such opportunities. In this framework, language functions as a marker of inclusion, determining not only communicative but also social boundaries. Studies conducted in Canada, Finland, and Wales demonstrate that even in countries with formal bilingualism, members of language minorities often experience feelings of suppression, diminished confidence, and symbolic exclusion due to the inability to be heard in the public sphere (Nyqvist et al., 2021). These effects are not captured by formal restrictions but are revealed in everyday practices of communication and social interaction.

In the post-Soviet context, social exclusion is conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon that emerged from structural transformations following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market-based economy (Tasciotti, 2014; Astrov, 2010). Research in Central Asia and Eastern Europe demonstrates that exclusion is not necessarily rooted in poverty or material deprivation but is more often associated with the erosion of social ties, social vulnerability, and institutional insecurity (Bangwayo-Skeete & Zikhali, 2011). Empirical studies in Central Asia further emphasise the contextual and everyday nature of social exclusion, showing that it is shaped not only by economic change but also by ethnicity, social participation, and the lived experiences of belonging (Mikhalev, 2004; Larsen, 2021; Tasciotti, 2014).

Studies on ethnic and institutional exclusion in Central Asia demonstrate that, despite relatively exclusive political frameworks, Kazakhstan exhibits a model of differentiated inclusion, in which access to institutional resources and participation in public life vary across social and linguistic groups (Krikorian, 2018). Research focusing on Kazakhstan highlights that processes of social exclusion are often linked to symbolic and institutional mechanisms that do not necessarily take the form of overt discrimination. Within the post-Soviet reality, a form of "privileged exclusion" emerges, whereby certain groups experience constraints on recognition and participation despite formal inclusion in social processes (Werner, 2017).

Kazakhstan possesses a distinctive linguistic landscape within Central Asia; as a result, processes of inclusion and exclusion are shaped primarily by language practices and institutional mechanisms (Spoor, Tasciotti & Peleah, 2014). Studies on language policy and changing communicative regimes illustrate that language practices function as a key mediator between access to institutions, social mobility, and subjective experiences of belonging (Riekkinen, 2021; Spoor et al., 2014).

Methodology and its limitations

This article is based on research conducted in August 2021 across all regions of Kazakhstan (n = 1999) as part of the project "Protest Potential in Kazakhstan: Factors, Features, and Trends." A survey was conducted in both Russian and Kazakh languages, with respondents having the freedom to select their preferred language, ensuring comfort and accuracy in understanding the questions. A detailed description of the methodology is provided in Appendix A.

The study employed a multi-stage stratified sampling technique with a quota-based selection method for the observation units. The sample was designed to approximate the adult Kazakhstan population aged 18 and older with respect to key socio-demographic characteristics. The sample includes representatives of the main ethnic, age, and gender categories present in Kazakhstan, enabling comparative analysis across groups rather than a precise population-level estimation. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 23). Cross-tabulation and Pearson's χ^2 test were applied to assess relationships and statistical significance between groups. Differences in sample size across individual tables (N = 1997–1999) reflect item-level missing responses and do not affect the overall sample size of 1,999 respondents.

Between July and September 2021, 16 focus group discussions were also conducted with a total of 121 participants. In addition to the survey data, the focus group discussions were conducted using a semi-structured discussion guide developed by the research team. Focus group discussions were conducted in two languages – Kazakh and Russian – depending on the language preferences of the participants. Of the total number of respondents, 57 participated in discussions conducted in Russian, while 64 participated in Kazakh.

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the non-representative nature of the sample restricts the possibility of extrapolating the results to the entire population of Kazakhstan or to specific social groups in a population-level sense. The observed differences and statistical associations reflect the characteristics of the analysed sample and should not be interpreted as quantitative estimates of the prevalence or levels of social exclusion in society as a whole.

While the survey captures language practices, it cannot reflect the situational and fluid nature of everyday linguistic behaviour. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as trends and associations, rather than a comprehensive account. The non-representative nature of the sample restricts extrapolating the results to the entire population of Kazakhstan. The findings should not be interpreted as estimates.

In addition, the use of survey data implies that the results depend on the respondents' subjective assessments and does not allow for a full capture of the dynamic and situational aspects of language practices. In this regard, the study's conclusions should be understood as an analytical contribution to the understanding of the relationship between language and social inclusion, rather than an exhaustive description of the social structure or the scale of social exclusion in Kazakhstan. These limitations were taken into account in the analysis of the data and in the formulation of the conclusions.

Language and Perceptions of Social Inclusion

The survey helps illustrate how language practice relates to perceptions of social inclusion, well-being, and attitudes to social and political change in Kazakhstan while suggesting that linguistic affiliation functions as a significant social factor shaping everyday perceptions and orientations in Kazakh society.

Within the framework of this study, Table B1 (see Table B1 in Appendix B) illustrates the prevailing moods among respondents belonging to different linguistic groups. The results presented in Table 1 allow us to identify several key tendencies within the analysed sample. Among Russian-speaking

respondents, an elevated level of anxiety and tension was identified (O = 278, E = 223.5; χ^2 = 8.1, p = 0.004). By contrast, the Kazakh-speaking respondents show a statistically significant surplus of positive attitudes (O = 144, E = 107.1; χ^2 = 12.7, p < 0.001), as well as a marked reduction in tension (O = 164, E = 228.0; χ^2 = 18.1, p < 0.001). Bilingual respondents display a statistically significant deficit in positive attitudes (O = 48, E = 66.3; χ^2 = 5.0, p = 0.025), mirroring the tendencies found among the Russian-speaking respondents, who also evaluate the current situation in a pessimistic light.

According to Table B2 (see Table B2 in Appendix B), the Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate a notably high level of satisfaction with their lives. A total of 230 respondents selected the option "completely satisfied", which significantly exceeds the expected value (E = 163.3) and produces a positive deviation of +66.7. This divergence is statistically significant, as evidenced by a χ^2 contribution of 27.27. By contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents show a significant excess of dissatisfaction. For example, 259 respondents selected "rather dissatisfied" compared to the expected value of 202.1, a positive deviation of +56.9 with a χ^2 contribution of 16.05.

The bilingual respondents show a moderately elevated level of satisfaction. Specifically, 193 respondents selected "rather satisfied", exceeding the expected value of 169.0 by +24.0 responses, with a χ^2 contribution of 3.40. This finding indicates that bilinguals, unlike the Russian-speaking respondents, are less likely to express dissatisfaction, but at the same time they do not declare complete satisfaction as frequently as the Kazakh-speaking respondents.

The Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate a high level of social engagement (see Table B3 in Appendix B): the share of those reporting a broad circle of social contacts is significantly higher than expected (χ^2 = 9.4, p = 0.002). At the same time, there is a notable deficit of social isolation (χ^2 = 18.1, p < 0.001). By contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents show the highest level of restricted social ties: the observed number of individuals with a narrow circle of contacts is significantly higher than expected (χ^2 = 14.5, p < 0.001). In parallel, there is a deficit of broader socialisation, with the number of respondents reporting wide networks being statistically lower than expected (χ^2 = 5.9, p = 0.015). Bilingual respondents, in turn, display the most neutral profile: the share of those with a narrow circle of contacts is only slightly higher than expected, suggesting no marked deviations. This neutrality may indicate flexible social behaviour and adaptability to different cultural and linguistic codes.

A total of 242 respondents selected "Yes", which significantly exceeds the expected value (E = 175.1), producing a positive deviation of +66.9 and a significant contribution to χ^2 (25.54; p < 0.001) (see Table B4 in Appendix B). This tendency is reinforced by the fact that "Rather yes" was chosen 296 times against an expected value of 270.2 (+25.8), though this deviation did not reach statistical significance (χ^2 = 2.47; p = 0.117). Taken together, within the analysed sample, the Kazakh-speaking respondents express moderate but consistent optimism. By contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents demonstrate significantly higher levels of scepticism regarding opportunities for success. The response "Rather no" was selected 274 times, substantially exceeding the expected value of 195.3 (+78.7) and yielding a strong χ^2 contribution (31.69; p < 0.001). In addition, the strictly negative response "No" was chosen 81 times versus an expected 59.9 (+21.1), which is also statistically significant (χ^2 = 7.46; p = 0.006).

A total of 207 bilingual respondents selected "Rather yes," exceeding the expected 167.2 by +39.8 and contributing to an χ^2 of 9.49 (p = 0.003), a statistically significant result. This finding suggests that bilinguals, as observed in previous dimensions, tend to maintain a more balanced and moderately positive perception of opportunities for success as reflected in their survey.

The Kazakh-speaking respondents selected the option "keep everything as it is" far more often than expected (+83.8; χ^2 = 87.45), indicating a strong orientation toward stability (see Table B5 in Appendix B). By contrast, respondents from the Russian-speaking respondents chose this option significantly less frequently than expected (–56.8; χ^2 = 40.91). Instead, they showed preference for "substantial changes" (+53.7; χ^2 = 9.54) and, to a lesser extent, for "radical changes" (+16.8; χ^2 = 1.96). Bilingual respondents also deviated significantly from the expected distribution. They were less likely to support the status quo (–26.8; χ^2 = 14.46) and more inclined toward change, both in the form of "substantial changes" (+22.7; χ^2 = 2.69) and "radical changes" (+22.1; χ^2 = 5.34).

Overall, the statistical evidence reveals clear divergences: the Kazakh-speaking group tends to favour stability, the Russian-speaking respondents express a demand for systemic change, and bilingual respondents occupy an intermediate position, leaning toward transformation of the country.

Language and Power: Boundaries of Political Inclusion and Exclusion

Using survey data, this section focuses on political efficacy, trust in state institutions, and assessments of the political situation, revealing clear differences between linguistic groups. These patterns shed light on how language mediates experiences of political inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, 335 individuals chose the option "Yes, influence is possible," which produced a highly significant χ^2 contribution (24.33, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, within the same group, the option "No, influence is not possible" was chosen 237 times – less often than expected – with a significant deviation ($\chi^2 = 20.12$, $p < 0.001$) (see Table B6 in Appendix B).

By contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents show pronounced scepticism and political alienation: 382 individuals selected "No, influence is not possible," with a significant χ^2 contribution of 16.41 ($p < 0.001$). A similar pattern is found among respondents identifying with "other" languages or categories: 4 of them also chose the option "No, influence is not possible," with a deviation ($\chi^2 = 0.14$).

The strongest sense of influence is found among the Kazakh-speaking respondents, while the most pronounced alienation is observed among the Russian-speaking respondents and respondents outside the two dominant groups. The Kazakh-speaking respondents express support for Parliament significantly more often: 279 individuals selected "approve," which substantially exceeds the expected value (E = 195.42), producing a positive deviation of +83.58 and a strong χ^2 contribution of 35.74 ($p < 0.001$). At the same time, disapproval is expressed less frequently than expected (O = 323, E = 367.58, deviation –44.58, $\chi^2 = 5.41$, $p = 0.024$) (see Table B7 in Appendix B). In contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents demonstrate a cautious and ambivalent stance. Their disapproval of Parliament (O = 354) closely matches the expected value (E = 359.42), with a negligible χ^2 of 0.08 ($p = 0.780$), suggesting the absence of a clear position. Yet what stands out more is the substantial increase in uncertainty: 252 respondents selected the "undecided" option, compared to the expected 197.54, with an χ^2 of 15.01 ($p < 0.001$). The bilingual respondents present a different picture, showing a significantly higher level of criticism. A total of 281 respondents expressed disapproval, compared to an expected 227.42, producing a deviation of +53.58 and a χ^2 contribution of 12.63 ($p < 0.001$).

Table B8 presents attitudes to the figure of the President (see Table B8 in Appendix B). Among the Kazakh-speaking respondents, we observe a high level of support for the President: 461 respondents expressed approvals compared to an expected value of 367.4, yielding a positive deviation of +93.6 and a statistically significant χ^2 contribution of 23.8 ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, negative evaluations are statistically fewer than expected: 150 respondents compared to 182.1 (deviation –32.1, $\chi^2 = 5.7$, $p = 0.017$).

In contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents express a more neutral or uncertain stance. Although the number of "disapprove" responses (O = 188) slightly exceeds the expected value (E = 178.4), this deviation is statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 = 0.5$; $p = 0.480$), pointing to the absence of sharp polarisation. What is far more significant, however, is the marked increase in uncertainty: 285 respondents selected the "undecided" option, compared to the expected 210.5, resulting in a deviation of +74.5 and a highly significant χ^2 contribution of 26.4 ($p < 0.001$). Bilingual respondents adopt a restrained stance, showing statistically insignificant behaviour: 218 respondents expressed approval compared to an expected value of 227.3 (deviation –9.3, $\chi^2 = 0.4$, $p = 0.540$).

Table B9 presents attitudes toward the Government of Kazakhstan (see Table B9 in Appendix B). The Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate strong support for the Government: 329 respondents expressed approval compared to the expected 243.0, producing a positive deviation of +86.0 and a

significant χ^2 contribution of 30.4 ($p < 0.001$). Negative assessments in this group are statistically lower than expected (290 vs. 342.9, deviation –52.9, $\chi^2 = 8.2$, $p = 0.004$), and the share of uncertain responses is also below expectation (146 vs. 179.1, $\chi^2 = 6.1$, $p = 0.016$).

By contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents show a low level of support for the Government. Approval is reported significantly less often than expected: 186 respondents compared to 237.6 (deviation –51.6, $\chi^2 = 11.2$, $p < 0.001$). The level of direct criticism ("disapprove") is almost equal to expectations ($\chi^2 = 0.2$, $p = 0.655$). However, there is a marked increase in uncertainty: 219 respondents selected the "undecided" option, exceeding the expected value of 175.1 by 43.9 cases ($\chi^2 = 11.0$, $p < 0.001$). This repeats the broader tendency observed for other institutions: the Russian-speaking respondents often lack a clear stance, avoid answers, or express doubt. Bilingual respondents show an interesting position. Here, however, we observe a significant deficit of approval: 116 respondents compared to the expected 150.3 ($\chi^2 = 7.8$, $p = 0.005$), alongside a notable surplus of disapproval: 261 respondents compared to 212.0 ($\chi^2 = 11.3$, $p < 0.001$).

The data illustrates statistically significant differences in how the political situation in the country is perceived (see Table B10 in Appendix B). The Kazakh-speaking respondents are more likely to evaluate the current situation as "favourable" ($O = 254$, $E = 186.4$; $\chi^2 = 24.5$; $p < 0.001$), while, by contrast, the Russian-speaking respondents and bilingual respondents give this assessment less frequently ($\chi^2 = 10.8$ and 5.1; $p < 0.024$). Moreover, the Russian-speaking respondents tend to view the situation as "tense" ($O = 369$, $E = 321.5$; $\chi^2 = 7.0$; $p < 0.01$), whereas the Kazakh speakers report such an assessment significantly less often than expected ($\chi^2 = 12.2$; $p < 0.001$). Bilingual respondents, similar to the Russian-speaking respondents, also note the tension, although the difference here is weaker ($\chi^2 = 1.3$; $p > 0.05$). In the category of "critical situation," the differences between the groups are statistically insignificant, which suggests that the assessments converge at this level.

Discussion (quantitative data): Language, Social Inclusion, and Political Belonging

In this study, the Russian-speaking respondents demonstrate a distinct configuration of emotional, social, and institutional perceptions that collectively shape their experience of social integration and alienation. This suggests that they are more prone to feelings of uncertainty, worry, and heightened critical perception of reality. Such emotional dynamics are consistent with earlier research linking perceived marginalisation to increased anxiety and emotional strain in minority or linguistically vulnerable groups (Walker, 1997; Aasland & Fløtten, 2001).

At the social and institutional level, the Russian-speaking respondents point to frustration, lower confidence in opportunities, insecurity about the future, and a sense of social isolation or weakened sense of alignment with dominant social and political frameworks (Kuzhabekova, 2003). The feeling that "the system is not for us" reflects not only emotional dissatisfaction, but also a gradual abandonment of active social and civic engagement. This is consistent with Brubaker's (2011) argument that language-based nationalisation projects may inadvertently reproduce the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, especially among groups whose linguistic practices no longer conform to the dominant symbolic order. Moreover, the Russian-speaking respondents are more likely to believe that success in Kazakhstan cannot be achieved through personal qualities and professionalism alone, reflecting deeper distrust in the mechanisms of the social system. This is considered an indicator of the respondents' subjective perceptions of social mobility and the fairness of the social system.

Within the framework of this study, the Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate a relatively stable and optimistic pattern of social perceptions, which contrasts with the more critical and ambivalent positions observed among other linguistic groups. This pattern can be interpreted as a consequence of their stronger integration into the national and cultural discourse, where proficiency in the state language functions as an important resource of symbolic inclusion and institutional belonging (Abdam, 2016).

Moreover, the Kazakh-speaking respondents are considerably more likely than expected to express complete life satisfaction. This outcome may be seen as an indicator of higher trust in society, a more consolidated sense of social positioning. Previous research suggests that groups positioned closer to the symbolic and institutional centre of nation-building projects tend to demonstrate higher levels of subjective well-being and personal efficacy (Karin, Chebotarev, 2002).

The Russian-speaking respondents show pronounced scepticism and political alienation. Such a stance may stem from a more critical perception of the system, a lack of trust, and the sense that "the system is not for us." This orientation intensifies social distance and may reduce civic engagement. At the same time, this pattern is not limited exclusively to the Russian-speaking respondents. It suggests that groups situated outside the two dominant linguistic fields also experience limited access to political influence – possibly due to underrepresentation, stigmatisation (Brewer, 2015), or a lack of communication channels with the authorities. In this broader context, these differences confirm the existence of a language-marked line of political trust, where language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a mediator of access to state structures, as well as a marker of trust or disillusionment with the system.

This logic becomes particularly visible in attitudes toward political institutions. The Russian-speaking respondents demonstrate a cautious and ambivalent stance toward Parliament. This pattern can be described as a form of political distancing based not only on criticism but also on emotional indifference or a sense of futility regarding participation.

A similar pattern is observed in attitudes toward executive power. The Russian-speaking respondents express a more neutral or uncertain stance. Such a stance is less a "neutrality" than a form of political distancing, in which individuals refrain from building communicative ties with authority because they do not consider it part of their self-identification. This creates a symbolic boundary where language separates the "integrated" from the "distanced."

This distance is further reinforced in evaluations of the Government. The Russian-speaking respondents show a low level of support for the executive branch. In this case, language functions as a boundary of inclusion or distance – not necessarily expressed as overt criticism, but often in the form of silence, non-participation and scepticism. By contrast, the Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate a markedly different pattern. Their approval reflects not only a political stance but also a symbolic sense of belonging to state structures. A similar tendency is observed in attitudes toward the President: the Kazakh-speaking respondents demonstrate stronger trust in the political leader, express legitimacy, and perceive the President as "their own," with whom they identify. Such attitudes are shaped by cultural and linguistic proximity to political institutions, as well as by a shared media space that reinforces a positive image of political authority. Bilingual respondents, by contrast, simultaneously inhabit two cultural and informational spheres. At the same time, bilingual respondents tend to be more socially mobile and self-assured in other domains. This indicates that, despite emotional fluctuations, they remain more adaptive and possess stronger internal resources for adjustment.

At the level of social relations, bilinguals display a neutral profile, which may indicate flexible social behaviour and adaptability to different cultural and linguistic codes. Moreover, bilinguals maintain a more positive perception of opportunities for self-realisation. They are neither as categorical as the Kazakh-speaking respondents, nor as sceptical as the Russian-speaking respondents. This may be linked to their higher adaptability, ability to integrate into both cultural environments, and greater flexibility in believing in personal responsibility for one's career trajectory.

Structural and Political Exclusion

The focus group respondents note a decline in trust in formal political procedures in Kazakhstan, such as elections. Elections are perceived not as instruments for influencing political processes, but rather as symbols or symbolic practices that do not entail meaningful action or decision-making. As a result, a stable tendency toward non-participation in Kazakhstan's political system is

taking shape. Importantly, this phenomenon should not be understood as political apathy in the classical sense, but rather as a form of conscious disengagement from political institutions, which are perceived by the Russian-speaking population of Kazakhstan as unjust or merely fictitious.

This process further intensifies social alienation and exclusion, as exclusion in this context functions not as an external constraint, but as a compelled form of withdrawal from the political sphere.

> *Yes, I basically agree that going to vote is meaningless and pointless, because your vote will be counted for whoever it needs to be counted for anyway. So to say that we chose someone means, in essence, that we didn't really choose anyone. Personally, no matter how many times I've gone to elections, I've never felt that they were conducted honestly or fairly—but that's just my opinion.* (AST-R1)

Focus group respondents report that their everyday experiences of the urban environment and interactions with local institutions generate feelings of irritation. This irritation is primarily associated with the state of the infrastructure, the quality of healthcare services, and the availability and condition of public spaces. Respondents experience frustration accompanied by a conscious sense of powerlessness to influence the situation as a whole. There is little expressed inclination to appeal to the authorities, as such actions are perceived as failing to produce tangible outcomes. Consequently, feelings of social exclusion intensify and become entrenched in the form of an adaptive strategy of passive adjustment to the existing social reality and institutional system.

This phenomenon should be understood not as political apathy, but as conscious disengagement from institutions. In Kazakhstan, declining trust in formal mechanisms does not eliminate civic engagement; rather, it shifts it toward less visible, more individualised, and digitally mediated forms, particularly after the events of January 2022 (Polese et al., 2026).

> *I feel irritated because of the roads. Every day, twice a day, I take my children to the park and outside. And these roads really irritate me. The children want to walk on their own, not sit in a stroller all day, but the roads are uneven, and they fall and hurt themselves – scraping their noses and faces. You immediately think: what is the akimat doing? You feel like going there to argue with them, but you know that nothing will change anyway. It's really the roads that irritate me every single day.* (KAG-R1)

An important emotional narrative articulated by respondents is anxiety – specifically, anxiety about the future. This anxiety reinforces feelings of instability and social isolation, as the future is perceived as uncontrollable and uncertain. Under such conditions, individual action and personal effort emerge as the only viable responses, understood as the sole available mechanisms of protection for the family. It is also important to note that, within these narratives, the role of the state is largely absent: the state is not perceived either as a guarantor of security or as an agent of development.

> *Lately, I've been feeling anxious overall – about the country, the economy, and our future. About what will happen to us. People say there may be another devaluation – what will happen to the tenge, what kind of future we'll have. Education is especially frightening, particularly for our children. Nowadays they're always on their phones and the internet, and children seem to be getting less and less capable. I feel like they're not really developing.* (PET-R2)

Migration constitutes a distinct emotional dimension in the respondents' perceptions. It is viewed as both a rational and, at the same time, a forced choice under conditions of declining faith in the possibility of meaningful change and social mobility. In addition, a tendency towards the rejection of patriotic ideas and identification with society is observed. This rejection is not rooted in cultural alienation, but rather in a pragmatic assessment of the structural constraints operating within society.

Statements made by the focus group participants indicate the collective nature of these attitudes and outlooks, which affect Russian-speaking populations, young people, and various professional

groups with high levels of human capital. In this context, migration intentions may be interpreted as an indicator of social disintegration.

> *I would like to speak out. There is really no patriotism in our society right now. First and foremost, everyone thinks only about themselves. Of course, people think about leaving – if there is an opportunity, you should leave, because you only live once.* (AST-R2)

The respondents identify language and interethnic relations as a sensitive layer of societal problems. Linguistic issues are perceived as a source of social tension that, under certain conditions, may escalate into conflict. Isolated incidents are interpreted by respondents as indicators of deeper instability and insufficient state control and regulation in the sphere of language and interethnic relations. This perception intensifies feelings of vulnerability and contributes to the formation of closed behavioural strategies, including withdrawal from public processes and the public sphere, as well as declining trust between different social groups.

> *When conversations about language and nationality begin, it becomes very dangerous. The country is multiethnic, and similar issues in the south have already led to serious problems. This affects the country's image and all of us.* (PET-R1)

Another factor highlighted in focus group narratives concerns the issue of "language patrols." These language patrols are perceived not as an element of cultural policy, but rather as an everyday form of coercion and symbolic pressure. The absence of a visible institutional response contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity and interethnic tension.

> *Another thing that really affected me is the issue of language patrols. When they come into a shop and demand that you speak Kazakh. If you don't speak Kazakh, they provoke a scandal and force you to apologise. Do they want the Russian-speaking population to flee the country or what? No one has influenced these organisers of language patrols – no one has warned them, no one has held them to account. So this starts to smell like nationalism and interethnic hostility?* (PET-R2)

Everyday Social Disintegration

The image of society articulated in the narratives of the focus group participants is shaped by perceptions of a pronounced deficit of civic activity and social agency. Passivity is understood not as a temporary condition, but as a stable social system.

Various forms of collective participation – from local self-governance practices to the public expression of personal views – are perceived by the respondents as largely ineffective and potentially associated with risk for citizens. Concerns about personal and family safety significantly constrain individual willingness to engage in any form of public action or participation. As a result, a model of forced endurance becomes entrenched.

Endurance functions as a dominant strategy of survival and adaptation to prevailing socio-economic conditions. This perception reinforces social isolation and reproduces a cycle of passive participation, in which collective action loses legitimacy and responsibility for survival is fully transferred to the individual level.

> *In Kazakhstan, people are passive and don't strive for anything compared to other republics. No one wants to express their opinion. Even at the most basic level – within an apartment building – no one wants to participate or attend meetings. People tolerate everything: prices go up for transportation and food, and no one says anything. Everyone is afraid for themselves and for their family.* (AST-R1)

A rise in aggression is noted manifesting in routine interactions within the public space. This sense of aggression is not linked to isolated conflicts or specific events, but is instead interpreted as the outcome of accumulated social tension, economic instability, and institutional failures in the spheres of healthcare, public administration, and social support. Otherness becomes a trigger for aggressive reactions, thereby intensifying social fragmentation and reinforcing symbolic

boundaries within society. Public space is no longer perceived as neutral or safe, and social interactions increasingly take on defensive or alienated forms.

> *People have become angrier. Wherever you look – supermarkets, buses, roads – there is irritation and aggression everywhere. There is a real lack of acceptance; people are xenophobic toward those who look or think differently. Service is rude, relationships are cold, and it leaves an unpleasant aftertaste.* (KAG-R1)

Political apathy emerges against a backdrop of distrust toward state institutions and toward alternative forms of political representation. Protest activity is perceived as ineffective and largely symbolic, incapable of producing meaningful change. This perception reinforces disengagement from public politics and consolidates an orientation towards private survival strategies.

Taken together, these narratives point to a condition of social disintegration in which passivity, aggression, and distrust mutually reinforce one another. Social exclusion manifests not through direct restrictions on participation, but through the erosion of belief in the possibility of collective action and meaningful influence over social processes.

> *The opposition has discredited itself. There are no ideas, no plan, only populist slogans. People see that these rallies solve nothing, which is why they do not participate. In the Karaganda region, people are mostly apolitical.* (KAG-R2)

Discussion (qualitative): From Language Policy to Everyday Practices

Against this background, policies of *Kazakhisation* have been implemented by the state, influencing the existing linguistic landscape. In practice, this process affects not only patterns of linguistic communication but also conditions of access to power, resources and social status. Research by Masanov, Karin, and Chebotarev (2002) identified a structural contradiction between the officially proclaimed civic character of the state and the de facto prioritisation of a national approach. As a result, social tensions may intensify among parts of the Russian-speaking population, contributing to migration processes within this group.

Subsequent studies of *Kazakhisation* (Abdam, 2016) conceptualise this process as a hybrid project that combines language promotion with the construction of national identity through institutional mechanisms aimed at preventing open ethnic conflict and maintaining external political balance with neighbouring states. Empirical research by Abik (2025) demonstrates that for ethnic minorities, proficiency in the Kazakh language constitutes an important but insufficient condition for full institutional integration. Consequently, unequal access to resources and symbolic capital persists, reinforcing existing linguistic hierarchies and contributing to the formation of hybrid identities, particularly among younger generations.

Language policy in Kazakhstan thus shapes not only the institutional frameworks governing language use but also contributes to the reproduction of social tensions at the level of everyday linguistic practices. Drawing on Brewer's analysis (2015), it can be argued that the institutionalisation of normative expectations regarding the Kazakh language interacts with broader discursive processes in society, within which mechanisms of symbolic pressure and stigmatisation may emerge. This interaction is visible in the circulation of labels such as "mankurt" and "shala-Kazakh," used in reference to Russian-speaking Kazakhs. Foster's study (2017) demonstrates that these categories function as instruments of shaming and disciplining, reinforcing a hierarchy of *proper* and *improper* identities and transforming linguistic differences into markers of cultural deficiency. As a result, such hybrid linguistic practices acquire the status of sources of social conflict and accelerated language shift, particularly within intra-ethnic interactions.

From an analytical perspective, Ayazbayeva's work (2017) shows that the linguistic environment is not merely a product of state policy but constitutes a space of the continuous use and reinterpretation of languages and linguistic practices. Ayazbayeva (2017) notes that social tensions

emerge within the ethnic majority as a result of the circulation of stigmatising labels in everyday communication. This points to the formation of mechanisms of symbolic exclusion operating at the level of linguistic practices rather than solely through institutional decisions. In this sense, language policy functions not only as a tool for strengthening national unity but also as a mechanism through which new forms of social differentiation may emerge.

These processes unfold within the context of a historically established Kazakh-Russian diglossia shaped during the Soviet period, in which a reduction in the role of the Russian language in the public sphere may disrupt the communicative balance and intensify social tensions (Kuzhabekova, 2003). Comparative studies of language policy indicate that similar strategies in other post-Soviet and postcolonial societies lead to the escalation of ethnopolitical tensions and the weakening of social stability (Yedgina et al., 2023).

The current stage in the development of Kazakhstan's linguistic landscape is characterised by the growing symbolic and identificational significance of the Kazakh language, particularly among younger generations. The implementation of the trilingual policy constitutes an additional source of social tension, as the English language is positioned as a global resource granting access to education and professional mobility. In combination with the normative promotion of Kazakh, this dynamic contributes to the formation of a hierarchical language order and intensifies symbolic pressure, including practices of shaming directed at ethnic Kazakhs who do not possess sufficient proficiency in the state language (Ayazbayeva, 2017; Kuzhabekova, 2003).

Conclusion

This article has examined the influence of linguistic practices on the social integration of the Russian-speaking group in Kazakhstan and how proficiency in Russian or Kazakh affects perceptions of social inclusion and interactions with political and social institutions. Kazakhstan is a bilingual country undergoing significant changes in its linguistic and sociocultural environment. These changes primarily concern the transformation of the linguistic landscape, where the Kazakh language is assuming a central role. While Russian had been the dominant language for a long time, it is gradually losing its symbolic significance.

The article employs χ^2-tests for analysis, and the results reveal significant differences in perceptions of the social situation across linguistic groups. The Kazakh-speaking group generally evaluates the current situation more positively, which corresponds to a higher level of expressed trust in state institutions. By contrast, the Russian-speaking group more frequently reports anxiety and dissatisfaction, indicating a lower level of confidence in institutional responsiveness. Bilingual respondents tend to occupy an intermediate position between these two groups: while they demonstrate lower levels of emotional inclusion than Kazakh speakers, they also show greater adaptability alongside elements of scepticism and tension regarding the country's development.

In line with the aim of this study, these findings suggest that differences in social inclusion and participation among linguistic groups in Kazakhstan are closely associated with ongoing changes in the linguistic landscape. Language practices and language affiliation appear to be linked to variations in subjective well-being, emotional states, and trust in state institutions. In particular, the more frequent expressions of uncertainty among the Russian-speaking group point to challenges in institutional engagement, while the intermediate position of bilinguals indicates that access to multiple linguistic resources may facilitate more flexible forms of social integration. Overall, the results underscore the value of a sociolinguistic perspective that focuses on everyday language practices when analysing processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

These findings highlight several important directions for future research. In particular, future studies could examine the long-term dynamics of language-related inequalities and their impact on institutional access and social participation. Additionally, more detailed analysis of specific linguistic groups and regional variations would help to better understand the mechanisms linking language practices to patterns of social integration and exclusion.

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Appendix A. Methodology and its limitations

Ethical Considerations and Language Criteria

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Protocol No. IRB-A307, 19 May 2021).

Respondents were thoroughly informed about the objectives of the study and provided their consent to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to skip any question.

For the purposes of this study, linguistic groups were defined not on the basis of ethnic affiliation, but according to self-reported language practices, including the language primarily used in everyday communication and the language chosen to complete the survey as an indicator of language use in a formal public context. Ethnic self-identification was collected as a separate variable and was not used as a proxy for language affiliation. This approach is grounded in the understanding of language as a social practice and communicative resource that shapes access to social institutions, public interaction, and symbolic recognition. Accordingly, differences in language practices are analysed in relation to subjective well-being, trust in state institutions, and experiences of social inclusion and exclusion.

To achieve a more accurate assessment of sociolinguistic changes in Kazakhstan, the results of previously conducted empirical studies were also examined. The findings of earlier empirical research highlight the importance of factors such as education level, gender, and age in the context of proficiency in Kazakh or Russian languages, both within the Russian ethnic group and among Kazakh ethnicities and other minority groups (Khasanov, 1987; Kopylenko and Saina, 1982; Laitin, 1998; Rivers, 2002).

Sampling design and limitations

The specified sample size corresponds to a 3% confidence interval with a 95% probability. The quota sampling method is the most accurate and widely used in public opinion surveys, selected when statistical data on key characteristics of population groups are available before the study begins. Using the quota sampling method, respondents were deliberately selected by interviewers according to specific quota parameters: place of residence (urban/rural), gender and age. This method ensured representativeness based on key socio-demographic indicators. However, it is important to note that this method does not adhere to the strict rules of probabilistic selection. Accordingly, while the sample approximates the adult population of Kazakhstan with respect to key socio-demographic characteristics, it should be interpreted as quasi-representative rather than fully probabilistic. Confidence intervals and significance tests are therefore used in an

analytical sense to assess patterns and differences within the surveyed population, rather than to produce precise population-level estimates. This approach is consistent with the use of quota-based samples in public opinion research when the analytical focus lies on group comparisons rather than exact parameter estimations.

The use of quotas can introduce biases, particularly when analysing subjective assessments and attitudes. Consequently, perceptions of social exclusion may reflect not only objective socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender or ethnicity), but also individual experiences that are not always evenly distributed within a quota-based sample. In this regard, the data allows for the identification of patterns and differences between linguistic groups, while acknowledging the potential presence of sampling biases.

Sample composition

The final sample consisted of 1,399 ethnic Kazakhs, 497 Russians, and 99 representatives of other ethnic groups (including Uzbeks, Uighurs, Tatars, Turks, Kyrgyz, Azerbaijanis, Koreans, Germans, Chechens, and others). This composition allows for analytical comparison between the majority population, a significant minority, and smaller ethnic groups, which is particularly relevant for examining linguistically conditioned patterns of social inclusion and exclusion.

Statistical analysis

A descriptive statistical approach was applied (frequencies and percentages) at the initial stage of the study. This allowed analysis of key variables (language affiliation, subjective well-being, trust in political institutions) across respondent groups. Subsequently, cross-tabulation was used to determine the relationships between language practices and social exclusion.

In this study, statistical analysis is used primarily as an analytical tool to identify patterns, differences, and associations between linguistic groups within the surveyed population, rather than as a basis for strict population-level inference. Given the quota-based nature of the sample, the results do not claim to provide precise population estimates for the entire adult population of Kazakhstan. Instead, descriptive statistics and the Pearson's χ^2 test are employed to assess the statistical significance of observed differences within the sample, allowing for the identification of sociolinguistic trends and relationships relevant to the study's analytical objectives.

Focus group design

The focus groups covered 10 cities in Kazakhstan: Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Taraz, Kyzylorda, Zhanaozen, Atyrau, Aktobe, Zhezkazgan, Petropavlovsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and Karaganda, which made it possible to include all macro-regions of the country in the analysis. Respondents were recruited by regional supervisors. Participant selection was carried out taking into account language, gender and age characteristics, as well as employment status, which ensured a diversity of socio-demographic profiles within each group.

Each focus group included an average of 7–8 participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The discussions were conducted in both offline and online formats using video conferencing platforms. During the discussions, audio recordings were made in order to subsequently produce interview transcripts in Word format and subject them to analytical processing. In all cases, the principles of voluntary participation and confidentiality were strictly observed. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on recurring narratives, emotional patterns, and shared interpretative frames across groups.

The focus groups were conducted to explore everyday perceptions, emotional experiences, and interpretative frameworks related to language use, social inclusion, political trust, and expectations for the future. This qualitative component complements the quantitative survey data by examining how language-related inclusion and exclusion are articulated in everyday contexts, allowing us to assess whether and how the observed quantitative patterns resonate with lived experiences and everyday language practices.

A1. Classification of focus group discussions

Region	City	Description	Codes
Metropolis	Almaty	Largest city, high education and mobility	ALA-R1; ALA-R2
Capital	Nur-Sultan	Administrative and political centre	AST-R1; AST-R2
Southern region	Taraz	Densely populated, traditional structures	TAZ-R1
Southern region	Kyzylorda	Agrarian region, mixed economy	KYZ-K1
Western region	Zhanaozen	Oil industry, protest history	ZHN-K1
Western region	Atyrau	Oil economy, high-income inequality	ATR-K1
Western region	Aktobe	Industrial and transport hub	AKT-K1
Central region	Zhezkazgan	Mining and industrial economy	ZHZ-R1
Northern region	Petropavlovsk	Border region, Russian-speaking population	PET-R1; PET-R2
Eastern region	Ust-Kamenogorsk	Industrial city, complex ethnic structure	UKG-R1
Central region	Karaganda	Major industrial hub	KAG-R1; KAG-R2

The classification presented in Table A1 identifies focus group discussions by city, region, language and group number. Each code consists of the city abbreviation, followed by the language of the discussion (R for Russian-speaking, K for Kazakh-speaking) and the group number.

This classification is used throughout the article to more clearly identify the regional and linguistic backgrounds of the participants and to contextualise the qualitative data presented in the analysis. (Polese et al., 2026).

General limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted in the post-pandemic period, which affected both the format of the focus group discussions and the availability of respondents. In particular, in several western regions, discussions were conducted online, which may have influenced the dynamics of group interaction, levels of participant engagement, and the depth of discussion compared to face-to-face formats. Despite the use of a unified discussion guide, differences between online and offline focus groups should be considered in the comparative analysis of the data. Second, although conducting focus groups in both Kazakh and Russian was an important element of the research design and allowed for the identification of potential differences in perceptions, the language of communication in some cases overlaps with other socio-demographic and regional characteristics, such as age, level of education, type of employment and region of residence. In this regard, observed differences between language groups should be interpreted in the context of these factors. Third, as with most qualitative research, the focus group findings reflect respondents' subjective assessments and do not claim statistical representativeness. The study aimed at identifying key trends and practices across different regional and linguistic contexts.

Appendix B. Supplementary Tables

This appendix presents supplementary statistical tables supporting the results discussed in the main text.

Minor variations in valid sample size across tables (N = 1997–1999) reflect item-level missing responses. The overall sample size remained N = 1,999.

Table B1. Mood in Recent Times

Mood in recent times	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Positive attitude	144 (18.8%)	87 (11.6%)	48 (10.1%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	280 (14.0%)
Normal, stable mood	332 (43.5%)	263 (35.1%)	165 (34.9%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (100.0%)	766 (38.3%)
Tension, irritation	164 (21.5%)	278 (37.1%)	152 (32.1%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	596 (29.8%)
Fear, anxiety	82 (10.7%)	81 (10.8%)	66 (14.0%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	230 (11.5%)
Hesitate to answer	42 (5.5%)	40 (5.3%)	42 (8.9%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	126 (6.3%)
Total	764 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	473 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1998 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 80.44$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B2. Life Satisfaction by Language Group

Life satisfaction	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Completely satisfied	230 (30.1%)	124 (16.6%)	72 (15.2%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	427 (21.4%)
Rather satisfied	261 (34.2%)	251 (33.5%)	193 (40.8%)	6 (66.7%)	3 (100.0%)	714 (35.7%)
Rather dissatisfied	135 (17.7%)	259 (34.6%)	144 (30.4%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	539 (27.0%)
Completely dissatisfied	75 (9.8%)	75 (10.0%)	25 (5.3%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	176 (8.8%)
Hesitate to answer	63 (8.2%)	40 (5.3%)	39 (8.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	142 (7.1%)
Total	764 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	473 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1998 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 115.52$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B3. Group Self-Identification by Language Group

Group self-identification	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
I have many friends and acquaintances of different professions, with different interests	251 (32.8%)	171 (22.8%)	111 (23.5%)	5 (55.6%)	3 (100.0%)	541
I have enough friends and acquaintances, but almost all of them are from my circle and my interests	223 (29.2%)	161 (21.5%)	127 (26.8%)	3 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	514
I have few friends and a narrow social circle	202 (26.5%)	329 (43.9%)	179 (37.8%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	711
I have no friends, I hardly communicate with anyone	49 (6.4%)	61 (8.1%)	35 (7.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	145
Hesitate to answer	39 (5.1%)	27 (3.6%)	21 (4.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	87
Total	764 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	473 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1998 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 76.03$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B4. Perceived Merit-Based Success in Kazakhstan by Language Group

Is it possible to achieve success in Kazakhstan thanks to your personal qualities, education, professionalism and dedication?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Yes	242 (31.6%)	137 (18.3%)	77 (16.2%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	457 (22.9%)
Rather yes	296 (38.6%)	194 (25.9%)	207 (43.7%)	5 (62.5%)	3 (100.0%)	705 (35.3%)
Rather no	120 (15.7%)	274 (36.6%)	126 (26.6%)	2 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	522 (26.1%)
No	45 (5.9%)	81 (10.8%)	34 (7.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	160 (8.0%)
Hesitate to answer	63 (8.2%)	62 (8.3%)	30 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	155 (7.8%)
Total	766 (100.0%)	748 (100.0%)	474 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1999 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 158.33$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B5. Perceived Need for Change in the Country by Language Group

In your opinion, are any changes necessary in the life of the country?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Personally, I am interested in keeping everything the same as it is	164 (21.5%)	22 (2.9%)	23 (4.9%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	210 (10.5%)
In general, I am happy with the situation, but some areas need to be changed	192 (25.2%)	172 (23.0%)	104 (21.9%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0.0%)	473 (23.7%)
A lot of things in today's life need to be changed	232 (30.4%)	356 (47.5%)	214 (45.1%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (100.0%)	806 (40.4%)
Drastic changes are needed at any cost	110 (14.4%)	162 (21.6%)	114 (24.1%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	387 (19.4%)
Hesitate to answer	65 (8.5%)	37 (4.9%)	19 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	121 (6.1%)
Total	763 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	474 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1997 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 216.47$, df = 16, $p < 0.0001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B6. Perceptions of the Ability to Influence Authorities by Language Group

In your opinion, can ordinary people influence the authorities in the country?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Yes, the authorities can be influenced	335 (43.8%)	179 (23.9%)	153 (32.3%)	3 (37.5%)	0 (0.0%)	670 (33.5%)
No, the authorities cannot be influenced	237 (31.0%)	382 (51.0%)	203 (42.8%)	4 (50.0%)	3 (75.0%)	829 (41.5%)
Hesitate to answer	192 (25.1%)	188 (25.1%)	118 (24.9%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (25.0%)	500 (25.0%)
Total	764 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	474 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	4 (100.0%)	1999 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 85.07$, df = 8, $p < 0.0001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B7. Attitudes toward the Parliament by Language Group

Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the Parliament operates?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
I approve / I rather approve	279 (36.5%)	142 (19.0%)	85 (17.9%)	4 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	510 (25.5%)
I do not approve / I rather disapprove	323 (42.2%)	354 (47.3%)	281 (59.3%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	959 (48.0%)
Hesitate to answer	163 (21.3%)	252 (33.7%)	108 (22.8%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (100.0%)	529 (26.5%)
Total	765 (100.0%)	748 (100.0%)	474 (100.0%)	8 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1998 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 114.65$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B8. Evaluation of the President by Language Group

Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the President performs his duties?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
I approve / I rather approve	461 (60.3%)	275 (36.8%)	218 (46.0%)	6 (66.7%)	0 (0.0%)	960 (48.0%)
I do not approve / I rather disapprove	150 (19.6%)	188 (25.1%)	137 (28.9%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	476 (23.8%)
Hesitate to answer	154 (20.1%)	285 (38.1%)	119 (25.1%)	2 (22.2%)	3 (100.0%)	563 (28.2%)
Total	765 (100.0%)	748 (100.0%)	474 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1999 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 109.75$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B9. Attitudes toward the Government by Language Group

Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the Government is running the country?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
I approve / I rather approve	329 (43.0%)	186 (24.9%)	116 (24.5%)	4 (44.4%)	0 (0.0%)	635 (31.8%)
I do not approve / I rather disapprove	290 (37.9%)	343 (45.9%)	261 (55.2%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	896 (44.8%)
Hesitate to answer	146 (19.1%)	219 (29.3%)	96 (20.3%)	3 (33.3%)	4 (100.0%)	468 (23.4%)
Total	765 (100.0%)	748 (100.0%)	473 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	4 (100.0%)	1999 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 103.12$, df = 8, $p < 0.0001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Table B10. Assessment of the Political Situation in Kazakhstan by Language Group

How would you characterize the political situation in Kazakhstan?	Kazakh	Russian	Bilingual	Other	Refusal	Total
Favourable, calm	254 (33.2%)	138 (18.4%)	91 (19.2%)	4 (44.4%)	0 (0.0%)	487 (24.4%)
Tense	265 (34.6%)	369 (49.3%)	219 (46.3%)	2 (22.2%)	3 (100.0%)	858 (42.9%)
Critical, explosive	133 (17.4%)	128 (17.1%)	80 (16.9%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	342 (17.1%)
Hesitate to answer	113 (14.8%)	114 (15.2%)	83 (17.5%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	312 (15.6%)
Total	765 (100.0%)	749 (100.0%)	473 (100.0%)	9 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	1999 (100.0%)

Pearson $\chi^2 = 64.40$, df = 12, $p < 0.0001$.

Note. Values are presented as number of respondents (n) and column percentages. Percentages are calculated within each language group.

Appendix C. Supplementary Tables

This appendix presents supplementary statistical tables supporting the results discussed in the main text.

Minor variations in valid sample size across tables (N = 1997–1999) reflect item-level missing responses. The overall sample size remained N = 1,999.

Table C1. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Mood in Recent Times by Language Group

Mood category	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
Positive attitude	144 / 107.1	87 / 105.0	48 / 66.3	1 / 1.3	0 / 0.4	280
Normal, stable mood	332 / 292.9	263 / 287.2	165 / 181.3	3 / 3.5	3 / 1.2	766
Tension, irritation	164 / 227.9	278 / 223.4	152 / 141.1	2 / 2.7	0 / 0.9	596
Fear, anxiety	82 / 87.9	81 / 86.2	66 / 54.5	1 / 1.0	0 / 0.3	230
Hesitate to answer	42 / 48.2	40 / 47.2	42 / 29.8	2 / 0.6	0 / 0.2	126
Total	764	749	473	9	3	1998

Pearson $\chi^2 = 80.44$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C2. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Life Satisfaction by Language Group

Life satisfaction	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
Completely satisfied	230 / 163.3	124 / 160.1	72 / 101.1	1 / 1.9	0 / 0.6	427
Rather satisfied	261 / 273.0	251 / 267.7	193 / 169.0	6 / 3.2	3 / 1.1	714
Rather dissatisfied	135 / 206.1	259 / 202.1	144 / 127.6	1 / 2.4	0 / 0.8	539
Completely dissatisfied	75 / 67.3	75 / 66.0	25 / 41.7	1 / 0.8	0 / 0.3	176
Hesitate to answer	63 / 54.3	40 / 53.2	39 / 33.6	0 / 0.6	0 / 0.2	142
Total	764	749	473	9	3	1998

Pearson $\chi^2 = 115.52$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C3. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Social Networks by Language Group

Social network characteristics	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
I have many friends and acquaintances from different professions and with different interests	251 / 206.9	171 / 202.8	111 / 128.1	5 / 2.4	3 / 0.8	541
I have enough friends and acquaintances, but almost all of them are from my circle and my interests	223 / 196.5	161 / 192.7	127 / 121.7	3 / 2.3	0 / 0.8	514
I have few friends and a narrow social circle	202 / 271.9	329 / 266.5	179 / 168.3	1 / 3.2	0 / 1.1	711
I have no friends, I hardly communicate with anyone	49 / 55.5	61 / 54.4	35 / 34.3	0 / 0.7	0 / 0.2	145
Hesitate to answer	39 / 33.3	27 / 32.6	21 / 20.6	0 / 0.4	0 / 0.1	87
Total	764	749	473	9	3	1998

Pearson $\chi^2 = 76.03$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C4. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Perceived Opportunities for Success by Language Group

Perceived opportunities for success	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
Yes	242 / 175.1	137 / 171.0	77 / 108.4	1 / 1.8	0 / 0.7	457
Rather yes	296 / 270.2	194 / 263.8	207 / 167.2	5 / 2.8	3 / 1.1	705
Rather no	120 / 200.0	274 / 195.3	126 / 123.8	2 / 2.1	0 / 0.8	522
No	45 / 61.3	81 / 59.9	34 / 37.9	0 / 0.6	0 / 0.2	160
Hesitate to answer	63 / 59.4	62 / 58.0	30 / 36.8	0 / 0.6	0 / 0.2	155
Total	766	748	474	8	3	1999

Pearson $\chi^2 = 158.33$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C5. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Perceived Need for Change by Language Group

In your opinion, are any changes necessary in the life of the country?	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
Personally, I am interested in keeping everything the same as it is	164 / 80.2	22 / 78.8	23 / 49.8	1 / 0.8	0 / 0.3	210
In general, I am happy with the situation, but some areas need to be changed	192 / 180.7	172 / 177.4	104 / 112.3	5 / 1.9	0 / 0.7	473
A lot of things in today's life need to be changed	232 / 308.0	356 / 302.3	214 / 191.3	1 / 3.2	3 / 1.2	806
Drastic changes are needed at any cost	110 / 147.9	162 / 145.2	114 / 91.9	1 / 1.6	0 / 0.6	387
Hesitate to answer	65 / 46.2	37 / 45.4	19 / 28.7	0 / 0.5	0 / 0.2	121
Total	763	749	474	8	3	1997

Pearson $\chi^2 = 216.47$, df = 16, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C6. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Perceptions of the Ability to Influence Authorities by Language Group

In your opinion, can ordinary people influence the authorities in the country?	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other languages (O/E)	Refusal (O/E)	Total
Yes, the authorities can be influenced	335 / 256.1	179 / 251.0	153 / 158.9	3 / 2.7	0 / 1.3	670
No, the authorities cannot be influenced	237 / 316.8	382 / 310.6	203 / 196.6	4 / 3.3	3 / 1.7	829
Hesitate to answer	192 / 191.1	188 / 187.3	118 / 118.6	1 / 2.0	1 / 1.0	500
Total	764	749	474	8	4	1999

Pearson $\chi^2 = 85.07$, df = 8, $p < 0.0001$

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C7. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Attitudes toward the Parliament

Attitude toward the Parliament	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other / Refusal (O/E)	Total
Approve	279 / 195.42	142 / 191.04	85 / 121.08	4 / 2.04	510
Disapprove	323 / 367.58	354 / 359.42	281 / 227.42	1 / 3.84	959
Hesitate to answer	163 / 202.00	252 / 197.54	108 / 125.50	3 / 2.12	529
Total	765	748	474	8	1998

Pearson $\chi^2 = 114.65$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C8. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Attitudes toward the President

Attitude toward the President	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other / Refusal (O/E)	Total
Approve / rather approve	461 / 367.40	275 / 359.20	218 / 227.60	6 / 5.70	960
Disapprove / rather disapprove	150 / 182.20	188 / 178.10	137 / 112.90	1 / 2.80	476
Undecided	154 / 215.50	285 / 210.70	119 / 133.50	5 / 3.30	563
Total	765	748	474	12	1999

Pearson $\chi^2 = 109.75$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C9. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Attitudes toward the Government

Attitude toward the Government	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other / Refusal (O/E)	Total
Approve / rather approve	329 / 243.0	186 / 237.6	116 / 150.3	4 / 4.2	635
Disapprove / rather disapprove	290 / 342.9	343 / 335.3	261 / 212.0	2 / 5.8	896
Undecided	146 / 179.1	219 / 175.1	96 / 110.7	7 / 3.0	468
Total	765	748	473	13	1999

Pearson $\chi^2 = 103.12$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.

Table C10. Observed and Expected Frequencies for Perceptions of the Political Situation in Kazakhstan

Political situation	Kazakh (O/E)	Russian (O/E)	Bilingual (O/E)	Other / Refusal (O/E)	Total
Favourable, calm	254 / 186.4	138 / 182.5	91 / 115.2	4 / 2.9	487
Tense	265 / 328.4	369 / 321.5	219 / 203.0	5 / 5.2	858
Critical, explosive	133 / 130.9	128 / 128.1	80 / 80.9	1 / 2.0	342
Hesitate to answer	113 / 119.4	114 / 116.9	83 / 73.8	2 / 1.9	312
Total	765	749	473	12	1999

Pearson $\chi^2 = 69.40$, df = 12, $p < 0.001$.

Note. O = observed frequency; E = expected frequency under the null hypothesis of independence.