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**ETHNONATIONALISM AND MINORITY RIGHTS IN KAZAKHSTAN:
CONTINUING CHALLENGES**

Kazakhstan's post-Soviet nation-building process has been accompanied by significant tensions concerning ethnicity, language, national identity, and the social and political position of minority communities. The transition from Soviet rule to an independent Kazakhstani state fundamentally altered the relationship between the titular Kazakh majority and the country's large non-Kazakh population. Although the most visible forms of ethnic conflict have generally been episodic rather than continuous, the underlying tensions have persisted through changing political and social circumstances.

The history of ethnic relations in independent Kazakhstan demonstrates that the problems confronting minorities cannot be understood solely through isolated incidents of physical violence. Discrimination may also operate through less visible mechanisms, including linguistic exclusion, unequal access to employment and public institutions, social pressure to assimilate, stigmatization of minority identities, inadequate official recognition of ethnic dimensions of violence, and the failure of law-enforcement authorities to provide effective protection. The resulting pattern is particularly significant because it can create an environment in which minority communities experience insecurity even when overt violence is not occurring.

The scale of demographic change following independence illustrates the significance of these developments. Approximately 2.17 million non-Kazakhs, approximately 12 percent of the country's population, left Kazakhstan during the first seven years following independence. The emigrants included Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Koreans, Jews, and members of other minority communities. A substantial part of this emigration can be

attributed to the growth of Kazakh nationalism and to the perception among minorities that their social and political position was becoming increasingly uncertain.

This demographic transformation should not be viewed merely as a consequence of economic migration. emigration as also reflecting political and social concerns, including the changing status of Russian speakers and other minorities. The resulting demographic shift has contributed to the consolidation of a more explicitly Kazakh-centered national identity, thereby reinforcing the structural transformation that began with independence.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union created a fundamental political and ideological transformation throughout Central Asia. Kazakhstan, like the other newly independent republics, faced the task of constructing a national identity around the titular nationality while simultaneously maintaining a multiethnic population inherited from the Soviet period.

This process created an inherent tension. On the one hand, Kazakhstan sought to establish the Kazakh language, culture, history, and national symbols as central elements of the independent state. On the other hand, substantial portions of the population were Russian-speaking or belonged to ethnic communities whose historical, cultural, and linguistic identities had developed within the Soviet framework.

The resulting nation-building process therefore had consequences extending beyond the formal recognition of citizenship. A person could remain legally equal as a citizen while nevertheless becoming increasingly disadvantaged in linguistic, cultural, professional, or social terms. This phenomenon represents a transition from more overt forms of discrimination to more subtle forms of implicit exclusion, particularly through the gradual reduction of the Russian language's role in state institutions and public administration.

The distinction between formal equality and substantive equality is important. The existence of constitutional or statutory guarantees against discrimination does not necessarily mean that members of minority communities experience equal treatment in everyday life. Where access to employment, education, government services, or public participation becomes increasingly dependent upon knowledge of the dominant language or conformity with dominant national narratives, minorities may experience a gradual reduction of their opportunities without any single discriminatory act being readily identifiable.

Kazakh nationalism has played an important role in the construction of the post-Soviet state. National consolidation is not inherently equivalent to discrimination, and the promotion of the Kazakh language and culture does not, by itself, establish persecution of minorities. Nevertheless, nationalist policies can become problematic when national identity is constructed in a manner that implicitly or explicitly places members of the titular nationality in a privileged position and minorities in a subordinate or conditional position.

The underlying phenomenon is well known. Members of minority communities have encountered social exclusion, hostility, harassment, and unequal treatment in educational and employment settings, as well as pressure to conform to dominant ethnic narratives. Complaints concerning ethnic hostility have sometimes been minimized or overshadowed by official efforts to maintain the image of Kazakhstan as a harmonious, multiethnic society.

This distinction between the official narrative and the experience of minority communities is significant. Kazakhstan has an interest in presenting itself as a stable and ethnically harmonious state, particularly because interethnic stability is an important component of its domestic and international legitimacy. Consequently, individual incidents may be characterized as ordinary criminal disputes rather than manifestations of broader ethnic tensions.

Such characterization can prevent the underlying ethnic dimension from receiving adequate public or institutional attention.

Language has been one of the principal areas in which post-independence national policy has affected ethnic minorities. The strengthening of the Kazakh language is a central component of the country's nation-building process. At the same time, the declining institutional role of Russian has generated concern among Russian-speaking communities, particularly those accustomed to using Russian in education, government, employment, and everyday public life. The government has pursued a process of de-Russification in which Russian-language education and other spheres of public life have gradually been reduced. These policies have affected not only ethnic Russians but also other non-Kazakh minority communities. The significance of language policy extends beyond linguistic preference. Language can function as an important mechanism of access to employment, education, public administration, and political participation. When the language associated with a minority community becomes progressively less useful within state institutions, members of that community may experience pressure to assimilate.

The phenomenon commonly described as “Kazakhization” should therefore be examined not simply as a cultural process but also as a question of access and equality. The critical issue is whether members of minority communities can maintain their linguistic and cultural identity while continuing to participate fully and equally in public life.

Employment represents another important sphere in which ethnic inequality may manifest itself. Non-Kazakhs have experienced discrimination in employment, and minority individuals have at times been excluded from professional positions without an openly stated justification. Such discrimination can be particularly difficult to document. Unlike an explicit

prohibition based on ethnicity, informal exclusion may operate through hiring preferences, professional networks, language requirements, promotion practices, or assumptions concerning ethnic loyalty. These practices may be difficult for individual victims to challenge, particularly where the same institutions responsible for addressing discrimination are themselves perceived as reflecting the dominant ethnic hierarchy.

The problem becomes more serious when ethnic minorities are underrepresented in law enforcement, government administration, security structures, and other institutions that exercise substantial authority over citizens. Human-rights observers have argued that the post-Soviet transformation resulted in the replacement of Russians and other minorities by ethnic Kazakhs in important state institutions. Whether every such observation can be generalized nationally must be assessed cautiously. Nevertheless, the broader concern is important: when minorities perceive state institutions as belonging primarily to the titular ethnic group, their confidence in obtaining impartial protection may decline.

One of the most important problems is the discrepancy between the apparent level of ethnic hostility and officially recorded hate-crime statistics. The OSCE ODIHR data indicated 150 reported hate crimes in Kazakhstan in 2016, followed by a much smaller officially reported figure of 14 in 2018 and no available figure for 2019. Obviously, these statistics are unlikely to capture the full extent of ethnic hostility. Official statistics must, however, be interpreted carefully. A low number of recorded hate crimes does not necessarily establish either a low or a high actual incidence of ethnic violence. Differences in definitions, reporting practices, classification, victim willingness to report, police registration, and investigative procedures can substantially affect the statistics. Nevertheless, underreporting itself is an important indicator. If victims do not believe that authorities will investigate an incident fairly, they may decline to

report it. If police classify an ethnically motivated assault merely as “hooliganism” or an ordinary criminal offense, the ethnic character of the incident disappears from official statistics. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: inadequate reporting produces apparently low levels of ethnic crime, while the apparently low level of crime is then used to suggest that the underlying problem is insignificant.

Ethnic discrimination in Kazakhstan has not been limited to state institutions. Informal nationalist organizations and groups have operated at the local level, particularly among segments of the population with strong nationalist identities. The “New Kazakh Youth” has been identified as one organization that reportedly targeted Tajiks, Koreans, Azeris, Meskhetian Turks, Russians, Greeks, Ukrainians, and Uzbeks and was associated with harassment, cemetery desecration, and violence in places frequented by minorities. The importance of such groups lies not merely in the number of individuals involved. Informal nationalist movements can influence the broader social environment by normalizing ethnic hierarchy and making hostility toward minorities socially acceptable. When nationalist actors believe that law enforcement will treat ethnically motivated offenses as ordinary disorder rather than hate crimes, their deterrence is weakened. At the same time, minority residents may conclude that they cannot rely upon state institutions for protection. This interaction between nationalist mobilization and weak institutional accountability is one of the central structural problems affecting ethnic minorities.

A particularly important characteristic of ethnic tensions in Kazakhstan is the tendency of seemingly localized disputes to acquire a broader ethnic dimension. Individual conflicts have sometimes escalated into confrontations involving entire communities, with homes, businesses, vehicles, and other property belonging to minority residents becoming targets of collective retaliation.

The 2020 violence involving the Dungan community provides a particularly serious example. On February 7, 2020, ethnic clashes in southeastern Kazakhstan resulted in deaths and injuries and prompted thousands of people to flee across the border into Kyrgyzstan. The incident became one of the most serious recent examples of anti-minority violence in Kazakhstan.

The significance of such events extends beyond the immediate victims. Collective violence communicates to an entire minority population that an individual dispute can potentially become a threat to the community as a whole. This creates a heightened sense of vulnerability, particularly where victims perceive that the authorities are unable or unwilling to provide timely and impartial protection.

The Dungan experience demonstrates the particularly dangerous consequences of unresolved ethnic tensions. The Dungan community has lived in the region for generations, yet has periodically been portrayed as an outsider community. The 2020 violence involved attacks on Dungan villages, loss of life, destruction of property, and displacement. Concerns have also been raised regarding the adequacy and impartiality of the government's response.

Such incidents are important from a broader human-rights perspective because they demonstrate how rapidly ethnic tensions can move from verbal hostility to collective violence. They also demonstrate the importance of effective prevention. Once violence begins, police intervention after the fact cannot fully compensate for the failure to address the nationalist rhetoric, discrimination, and social tensions that preceded it.

The position of the Uyghur minority presents an additional dimension of ethnic vulnerability. Unlike certain minority groups that can rely upon a neighboring "kin state," Uyghurs in Kazakhstan occupy a particularly complicated geopolitical position because the state

with which they share ethnic ties, China, is itself the subject of serious international criticism concerning its treatment of Uyghurs. Kazakhstan's close economic and political relationship with China has influenced its approach to the situation of Uyghurs in China. Kazakhstan has been reluctant to criticize Beijing openly because China has become an important economic and political partner.

This illustrates a broader principle concerning minority rights: the treatment of an ethnic minority may be influenced not only by domestic nationalism but also by international relations. Minority communities whose identity has transnational political implications may be subject to additional scrutiny because governments can perceive cultural or diaspora connections as potential security concerns.

Ethnic Russians occupy a particularly important place in Kazakhstan's history because Russians constituted one of the country's largest minority populations during the Soviet period. The relationship between ethnic Russians and the Kazakh majority has therefore been deeply affected by the transformation from a Soviet republic into an independent nation-state.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 introduced a new geopolitical dimension into these existing ethnic tensions. The war generated increased suspicion toward some Russian-speaking residents because of concerns about separatism and the possibility that Russia might seek to exercise influence over Kazakhstan on the basis of protecting Russian speakers.

In March 2022, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prosecutor General warned citizens concerning social-media statements about the Russia-Ukraine conflict and emphasized criminal penalties for incitement of ethnic hatred and calls to violate Kazakhstan's territorial integrity. This development is significant because it illustrates the intersection of ethnic identity and national

security. Russian ethnicity or Russian-language use does not itself establish political disloyalty. Nevertheless, in an environment shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, authorities may view certain expressions of Russian political or ethnic identity through a security lens. This can increase scrutiny of individuals whose ethnic identity, language, political opinions, or public activities are perceived as connected to Russian interests.

The emergence of so-called “language patrols” in 2021 provided a particularly visible example of the social pressure surrounding language and national identity. Russian businesses were subjected to inspections by groups seeking to determine what language was being used on the premises and in business documentation. The significance of such activity lies in its symbolic character. Even where these groups do not possess formal governmental authority, their ability to conduct public inspections can communicate that ethnic or linguistic minorities are expected to justify their conduct to representatives of the titular majority. Such conduct can also blur the distinction between state policy and informal nationalist enforcement. If citizens perceive that nationalist activists can exercise authority without meaningful consequences, they may regard the state as tolerating or indirectly encouraging nationalist pressure.

The cumulative effect of these developments is that ethnic identity can become a significant source of social vulnerability. Members of minority communities may encounter different forms of disadvantage depending on their ethnicity, language, geographic location, profession, political activity, and visibility.

Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Koreans, Jews, Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Dungans, Chechens, Kurds, Azeris, and other non-Kazakh groups have experienced various forms of discrimination or ethnic tension. Importantly, these communities do not experience identical conditions. Ethnic minorities differ considerably in population size,

geographic concentration, historical relationship with Kazakhstan, socioeconomic status, and political visibility. Accordingly, the existence of discrimination against one group should not automatically be generalized to every other minority. Nevertheless, recurring patterns across different communities can reveal broader structural characteristics. These include the privileging of titular national identity, pressure toward linguistic and cultural assimilation, the marginalization of minority concerns, inconsistent official responses to ethnic violence, and difficulties obtaining effective institutional protection.

Ethnic nationalism in Kazakhstan should not be understood as a temporary phenomenon associated exclusively with the early post-Soviet period. Rather, nationalist attitudes have adapted to changing political circumstances. During the first decades of independence, nationalism was closely connected to the restoration of Kazakh language, culture, and political identity after decades of Soviet rule. More recently, geopolitical developments, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have added a national-security component to ethnic relations. Russian speakers and other minorities may encounter pressure to demonstrate conformity with dominant national expectations. Minority communities have also experienced social exclusion, harassment, unequal treatment, and hostility from local officials. Contemporary ethnic tensions therefore cannot be reduced to a simple majority-versus-minority conflict. Rather, they reflect an interaction among nationalism, language policy, historical grievances, geopolitical concerns, and institutional weaknesses.

For purposes of assessing the position of ethnic minorities, the central question is not simply whether discrimination or ethnic violence occurs. The more important question is whether the state provides effective protection against such conduct. A functioning system of minority protection requires more than formal legal equality. It requires effective investigation of

hate crimes, impartial policing, accountability for perpetrators, reliable statistical reporting, meaningful access to judicial remedies, and institutional recognition of ethnic motivations when they are present.

Significant weaknesses remain in these areas. Police have been accused of failing to recognize ethnic motives, nationalist perpetrators have at times received comparatively limited sanctions, and minority victims have often lacked confidence in state institutions. Where state institutions fail to respond adequately, the consequences extend beyond individual cases. Lack of accountability can encourage future perpetrators, discourage victims from reporting abuse, and reinforce the perception that minorities occupy a less protected position within society.

The more recent developments indicate that these issues have not disappeared. There are continuing concerns regarding ethnic discrimination, nationalist pressure, and the vulnerability of minority communities. Recent years have been characterized by increased nationalist sentiment and greater pressure concerning ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity. The significance of these developments is that they demonstrate continuity rather than a purely historical phenomenon.

Kazakhstan has undergone major demographic, political, and economic changes since independence, yet the underlying question of how the state reconciles Kazakh national consolidation with the rights and identities of non-Kazakh communities remains unresolved. The post-2022 geopolitical environment has made this question even more sensitive. Kazakhstan must simultaneously maintain its sovereignty, strengthen its national identity, manage relations with Russia, and preserve stability among a population containing substantial Russian-speaking and other minority communities. These objectives can come into tension when expressions of ethnic identity are interpreted through the lens of national security.

The experience of ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan demonstrates the complexity of post-Soviet nation-building. The country's transformation from a Soviet republic into an independent nation-state inevitably involved the strengthening of Kazakh national identity, language, and culture. However, this process has also generated persistent concerns regarding the position of ethnic minorities, particularly where national consolidation has been accompanied by linguistic pressure, social exclusion, unequal treatment, nationalist mobilization, or inadequate institutional protection. The more significant issue is the cumulative effect of numerous factors: demographic change, assimilation pressures, ethnic hierarchy, nationalist rhetoric, periodic collective violence, underreporting of hate crimes, and inconsistent responses by law-enforcement institutions.

The history of the past several decades demonstrates that the underlying problem has not disappeared. Rather, its manifestations have changed. Earlier concerns surrounding post-Soviet nationalism and the emigration of non-Kazakh populations have been followed by disputes over language and cultural identity, episodes of communal violence, and, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, heightened suspicion surrounding Russian ethnicity, Russian-language use, and perceived political loyalties. The resulting environment remains particularly challenging for individuals who belong to visible minority communities, who are strongly identified with a minority language or culture, or who are perceived as insufficiently conforming to dominant nationalist expectations. Minorities may experience hostility, intimidation, social marginalization, and unequal treatment. Accordingly, the situation of ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan is best understood not as a series of isolated incidents but as a continuing structural issue involving the relationship between national identity, minority rights, and state protection.

The persistence of these tensions demonstrates that the formal existence of a multiethnic state does not, by itself, guarantee substantive equality. The long-term stability of Kazakhstan's

interethnic relations will depend on whether the state is able to reconcile the legitimate development of Kazakh national identity with effective protection of the linguistic, cultural, social, and physical security of all minority communities.

In this sense, the principal concern is not simply the existence of nationalism, but the possibility that nationalism may become a basis for unequal citizenship, where members of minority communities are increasingly perceived as outsiders, tolerated residents, or conditional participants in national life rather than as equal members of the state. This remains an important human-rights concern in contemporary Kazakhstan.

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