

Comparative Analysis of Language Policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: Post-Soviet Trajectories of Nation Building and Linguistic Transformation

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This paper presents a comparative analysis of language policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, examining how both post-Soviet states have used language education policy as a mechanism for nation-building, identity formation and sociopolitical transformation since independence in 1991. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Spolsky (2004), Bourdieu (1991) and Woolard (1998), the study explores the ideological foundations, implementation strategies and sociolinguistic consequences of language reform in both countries. The analysis highlights the contrast between Kazakhstan's gradualist and multilingual approach that balances Kazakh, Russian and English within a framework of civic nationalism, with Uzbekistan that pursued a more centralized and ethnolinguistic model emphasizing Uzbek linguistic dominance and symbolic decolonization. It further evaluates the impacts of script reform, bilingual education and minority language policy on educational equity, social cohesion and economic opportunity. It argues that language policy outcomes are shaped not only by ideology but also by institutional capacity and sociolinguistic realities.

Keywords: *Language education policy, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan*

Language education policy is a crucial component of national identity formation, especially in postcolonial and post-imperial contexts. In Central Asia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 catalysed a radical reimagining of state language ideologies and linguistic hierarchies. This paper presents a comparative analysis of language policies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two post-Soviet states that share geographic proximity and a common legacy of the Soviet language system yet have followed distinct paths in language planning and bilingual education. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including Spolsky's (2004) model of language policy, Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital, and Woolard's (1998) notion of language ideologies, the paper explores the ideological foundation, implementation strategies, and sociolinguistic outcomes of each country's language policy. The analysis concludes with a reflection on the implications of these findings for language education policy in Kazakhstan.

Historical Context and Colonial Legacy

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both inherited a deeply deep-rooted Russian linguistic infrastructure due to Soviet policies of Russification. The Soviet regime promoted Russian not only as a lingua franca but also as the language of progress, education, administration, and modernization (Pavlenko, 2008). Soviet language policy was systematically designed to subordinate local languages by discouraging their development in technical and academic domains, while investing heavily in the promotion of Russian. Language policy during this era functioned as a tool of political control and ideological integration, aiming to consolidate Soviet identity across diverse ethnic groups.

In Kazakhstan, the effects of Russification were complex. By the late Soviet period, Kazakh was widely spoken only in rural areas, while Russian had become the language of education, bureaucracy, and social mobility.

(Pavlenko, 2008). Urban Kazakhs often adopted Russian as their first language, and Kazakh-language schooling became marginalized in major cities. According to Yedgina et al. (2023), by 1989, more than 90% of ethnic Kazakhs were literate in Russian, but only about 30% could communicate fluently in Kazakh. This linguistic imbalance had a long-term impact on post-independence language planning, complicating efforts to promote Kazakh as the sole state language.

Uzbekistan also experienced similar dynamics under Soviet rule, although the Uzbek language retained greater visibility in cultural and literary domains. Uzbek was codified and standardized, and unlike Kazakh, it continued to be used in many primary schools during the Soviet era (Pavlenko, 2008). However, Russian still held a superior position in higher education, governance, and urban life. Pavlenko (2008) notes that Uzbek was confined to folkloric and symbolic use, while Russian was tied to scientific prestige and socio-economic advancement. The ideological framing of Russian as a 'neutral' and 'progressive' language contributed to its continued dominance.

The Soviet legacy also left structural imbalances in terms of language infrastructure. Textbooks, scientific materials, and teacher training were overwhelmingly developed in Russian, leaving local languages with a weak institutional base. The lack of standardized terminologies in Kazakh and Uzbek for academic subjects further reinforced dependence on Russian-language resources. (Pavlenko, 2008). These issues created long-standing inequalities that both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have had to address since independence.

The break from Soviet rule offered both countries the opportunity to redefine their national identities through language. However, their divergent demographic compositions and political ideologies influenced how they approached language reform. Kazakhstan, with a significant

Russian-speaking minority and a commitment to multiethnic harmony, chose a more inclusive and gradualist model. Uzbekistan, where ethnic Uzbeks form the overwhelming majority, pursued a more assertive, ethnonationalist model of language planning

Understanding this shared but differently interpreted Soviet legacy is crucial for assessing the logic and outcomes of contemporary language education policies in Central Asia. Both countries emerged from a context where Russian was dominant and indigenous languages were institutionally underdeveloped, but their responses have diverged sharply in the decades since independence. This historical divergence sets the stage for deeper exploration of their respective ideological frameworks and implementation strategies.

Ideological Framing and Language Policy Goals

The framing of language education policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan illustrates how linguistic choices reflect broader visions of identity, statehood, and modernity. These ideologies ground both the stated goals and the implementation of language education strategies in each country.

In Kazakhstan, the post-independence leadership adopted a discourse of civic nationalism, emphasizing inclusivity and ethnic harmony. This orientation was necessary in a country where ethnic Kazakhs constituted just over half the population in the early 1990s, and where Russian speakers represented a substantial demographic (Fierman, 2006). The 1997 Language Law reaffirmed Kazakh as the state language while recognizing Russian as the language of interethnic communication as a phrase that strategically legitimized Russian's continued public role while prioritizing the titular language. This formulation aimed to defuse ethnic tensions while slowly promoting Kazakh as the primary language of education, administration, and national symbolism.

This balancing act is further reflected in Kazakhstan's trilingual policy, which seeks to position Kazakh, Russian, and English as complementary rather than competing languages. The trilingual policy envisions Kazakh as a symbol of sovereignty and unity, Russian as a vehicle for regional integration and domestic cohesion, and English as a gateway to global competitiveness (Yedgina et al., 2023). This ideological framework promotes pragmatic multilingualism while maintaining political stability a position that aligns with Spolsky's (2004) assertion that language policy often serves multiple, sometimes conflicting, goals.

Uzbekistan, in contrast, pursued a more linguistically homogenizing agenda rooted in ethnolinguistic nationalism. From the outset of independence, the Uzbek government framed the Uzbek language as the core symbol of national revival. The 1989 Language Law and subsequent

reforms, including the introduction of the Latin script, were designed to reassert Uzbek identity after decades of Soviet linguistic domination (Normatova & Abdurakhmanova, 2022). This approach was a kind of cultural decolonization strategy that positioned language as the central tool for consolidating national identity.

Unlike Kazakhstan's pragmatic bilingualism, Uzbekistan's language ideology is marked by purism and exclusivity. Russian, while still spoken widely, was stripped of official status and largely removed from the education to cultural authenticity and political sovereignty, aiming to elevate Uzbek from a subordinate status to a hegemonic national standard. This shift was driven by an ideological commitment. It is important to note, however, that both states construct language as a form of capital, both symbolic and economic. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, Kazakh and Uzbek are being repositioned as legitimate languages of power, deserving of institutional authority and cultural prestige. Yet, while Kazakhstan's approach aligns more with market-oriented linguistic capital by including English and preserving Russian, Uzbekistan's model leans toward symbolic capital tied to national identity and historical continuity.

Both models are responses to the same postcolonial condition, but their ideological framings diverge significantly. Kazakhstan's inclusive model reflects a multicultural civic nationalism, while Uzbekistan's more exclusive stance reflects an ethnolinguistic nationalism premised on cultural purity. Each framework shapes not only the goals of language policy but also how these policies are perceived, implemented, and contested by the populations they govern.

Implementation Strategies and Challenges

While ideological frameworks set the tone for national language policy, their translation into practical strategies reveals the complexity of implementation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have faced significant challenges in operationalizing their respective language policies, ranging from infrastructural limitations and teacher shortages to urban-rural disparities and sociopolitical resistance (Fierman, 2006; Bahry et al., 2017).

Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, the transition to Kazakh-medium instruction was initiated gradually, recognizing the entrenched presence of Russian in urban centers, higher education, and professional domains. According to Fierman (2006), early post-independence policies prioritized the expansion of Kazakh-language instruction without dismantling existing Russian-language institutions. The aim was to normalize Kazakh as the default medium in the long term while avoiding destabilization. This approach was institutionalized through the trilingual policy framework, which mandated fluency in Kazakh, Russian, and English for all secondary school graduates by 2020. (Yedgina et al., 2023).

However, the rollout has faced persistent challenges. A significant obstacle is the shortage of qualified teachers fluent in Kazakh, particularly for scientific and technical

subjects (Bahry et al., 2017). Russian remains the dominant medium in urban schools and universities, partly because instructional materials and professional expertise in Kazakh remain underdeveloped. This structural imbalance reinforces linguistic hierarchies that undermine the symbolic status of Kazakh.

Another challenge in Kazakhstan is the discrepancy between language policy and societal language practices. Yedgina et al. (2023) observe that although the use of Kazakh has expanded in public administration and media, many ethnic Kazakhs still rely on Russian for professional and interpersonal communication. This disjunction is particularly stark in cities such as Almaty and Astana, where Russian functions as the *lingua franca* among youth, educators, and civil servants.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's implementation strategy has been more centralized and directive. The government issued mandates requiring Uzbek to be the sole language of instruction in most schools and state institutions. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Public Education began phasing out Russian-language schools and implementing Uzbek in all public documentation. Script reform was fast-tracked, and teachers were expected to adapt to the Latin script within a short timeframe (Normatova & Abdurakhmanova, 2022).

Despite these ambitious reforms, Uzbekistan's efforts have not been without difficulty. The rapid shift to Uzbek-medium instruction left many institutions unprepared, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. Curriculum development, textbook production, and teacher retraining lagged behind policy mandates, resulting in inconsistent educational quality. Moreover, many older teachers and administrators who were educated in Soviet times continued to use Russian in practice, contributing to a dual-language reality.

The Latinization policy in Uzbekistan has also encountered logistical and societal resistance. While intended as a symbolic break from Russian influence, the incomplete and uneven rollout created confusion, particularly among students and educators accustomed to Cyrillic. Official signage, textbooks, and even legal documents continue to appear in both scripts, reflecting a liminal period of orthographic transition (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019).

Both countries also face challenges in balancing national language promotion with equitable access to education. In Kazakhstan, the dominance of Russian in elite schools and universities has created a two-tiered system in which Russian-medium graduates enjoy better socioeconomic prospects. Conversely, students educated exclusively in Kazakh often face difficulties in entering competitive higher education institutions, especially in STEM fields where resources in Kazakh are scarce (Bahry et al., 2017).

In Uzbekistan, the exclusion of Russian and other minority languages has limited opportunities for students to participate in regional academic and economic networks. While the Uzbek government has made efforts to improve the quality of Uzbek-language education, the erosion of Russian language competencies may have long-term

consequences for scientific research, international trade, and diplomatic communication (Pavlenko, 2008).

Overall, the implementation of language education policy in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan highlights the tension between political aspiration and institutional capacity. While both nations have taken significant steps to assert linguistic sovereignty, the success of these efforts hinges on investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and the equitable distribution of resources. Moreover, the social embeddedness of language use underscores the need for language policy to be responsive to lived realities rather than imposed through top-down mandates alone.

Script Reform and Symbolic Nation-Building

Script reform in post-Soviet Central Asia has served as a highly visible and politically charged act of nation-building, symbolizing each state's break with the Soviet past while signalling aspirations for modernity and global integration. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, shifts from Cyrillic to Latin orthographies have been framed as markers of cultural sovereignty and tools for linguistic revitalization. However, the timing, pace, and social reception of these reforms reveal contrasting approaches and divergent outcomes.

In Uzbekistan, script reform commenced almost immediately after independence. The 1992 presidential decree mandated the gradual replacement of Cyrillic with a Latin-based alphabet, drawing on historical precedent in the early 20th-century reformist movements and emphasizing alignment with other Turkic-speaking nations. The Latin script was promoted not only as a practical measure to simplify Uzbek orthography but also as a symbolic assertion of postcolonial autonomy. (Shazamanov & Djuraev, 2024) Government-sponsored celebrations and widespread media coverage underscored the ideological framing: adopting Latin was equated with shedding the vestiges of Soviet cultural domination and reinvigorating the Uzbek language. (Normatova & Abdurakhmanova, 2022).

Despite these grand narratives, implementation in Uzbekistan has been uneven and fraught with logistical challenges. The reform was introduced in stages—beginning with official communications and select publications, then extending to educational materials and signage (Normatova & Abdurakhmanova, 2022). However, persistent shortages of Latin-script textbooks, inconsistent teacher training, and budgetary constraints have stalled full transition. Consequently, dual-script environments have proliferated: official documents, street signs, and newspapers often feature both Cyrillic and Latin Uzbek side by side, creating cognitive and administrative burdens. The incomplete rollout has widened generational divides, with younger, urban elites more adept at Latin while older or rural populations continue to rely on Cyrillic.

In contrast, Kazakhstan's script reform was announced far later and executed more gradually. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's 2017 decree set a seven-year timeline for replacing Cyrillic with a Latin-based alphabet by 2025 (Yedgina et al., 2023). The rationale was framed as a pragmatic response to technological imperatives—

particularly the need for compatibility with digital platforms and a desire to facilitate integration into global academic and economic networks (Fierman, 2006). Unlike Uzbekistan's reform, Kazakhstan's shift has been explicitly depoliticized, with officials emphasizing continuity and social stability over ideological rupture.

The phased Kazakhstani approach has entailed pilot programs in select schools, gradual introduction of Latin-script primers at early grades, and joint training workshops for educators. These measures aim to mitigate the disruptive effects of orthographic transition and promote widespread literacy in the new script (Yedgina et al., 2023). However, the cautious pace has also dampened public enthusiasm and has given critics the opportunity to question the necessity of the reform. Some argue that continued reliance on Cyrillic familiar to older generations would ensure intergenerational cohesion, while others raise concerns about the adequacy of resources for a full transition by the 2025 deadline (Bahry et al., 2017).

Comparatively, Uzbekistan's rapid, top-down model reflects an ethnonationalist imperative to reaffirm Uzbek primacy, while Kazakhstan's cautious, consultative model illustrates a balancing of symbolic renewal with sociolinguistic realities. Both demonstrate that script reform functions as a symbolic boundary-drawing exercise: in Uzbekistan, drawing a clear line beyond the Soviet past, and in Kazakhstan, drawing an aspirational line toward technological modernity without severing ties to existing linguistic practices.

The theoretical insights of Spolsky (2004) help explain the divergent script reform trajectories. Spolsky's model highlights how language management decisions, such as script policy, must negotiate between explicit ideological goals and the complex ecology of language practices. Script reform, therefore, is not merely a technical change but also a projection of the nation's self-image and desired place in the world. In these cases, the imagined futures either postcolonial sovereignty in Uzbekistan or digital modernity in Kazakhstan drive the pace and character of orthographic change. As script reforms continue to unfold, their success will hinge on the capacity to align symbolic imperatives with pedagogical infrastructure, digital platforms, and public buy-in.

The experiences of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan thus offer crucial lessons: rapid, ideologically driven reforms risk creating social cleavages, while overly cautious approaches may dilute symbolic impact and prolong transition costs. Ultimately, script reform exemplifies the tension between symbolic nation-building and practical language planning, closely connected linking orthographic choices to questions of identity, power, and social cohesion. (Du Boulay & Du Boulay, 2021)

Minority Languages and Multilingualism: Balancing Unity and Diversity

In Kazakhstan, the state has deliberately embraced a pluralist approach to its linguistic landscape, recognizing that

minority communities must be accommodated if social cohesion is to be maintained (Yedgina et al., 2023). The 1997 Language Law guarantees the right to use minority languages such as Uyghur, Korean, and German in media outlets, educational settings, and cultural institutions. State funds support dedicated cultural centers and minority-language newspapers and radio stations; for example, Dunyo for Uzbek speakers and Koryo Ilbo for Koreans (Bahry et al., 2017). In primary education in particular, over one hundred schools offer instruction in minority languages, a clear signal that the government values cultural diversity (Yedgina et al., 2023).

Yet despite these well-intentioned measures, resource disparities quickly emerge. Minority-language schools frequently lack adequate textbooks and teaching materials for advanced subjects; as students progress into secondary education, instruction often shifts to Kazakh or Russian simply because minority communities lack the resources to develop subject-specific terminology in their own tongues (Bahry et al., 2017). Moreover, preservation of minority tongues is strongest in rural areas where a single ethnic group predominates, such as Uighurs clustered in Almaty Oblast, while in urban centers, assimilation pressures and social mobility incentives drive families toward Kazakh or Russian.

In stark contrast, Uzbekistan has pursued an assimilationist model in which only Uzbek holds genuine public status. Although the constitution nominally recognizes Tajik and Karakalpak, in practice they are largely excluded from official domains. In Samarkand and Bukhara, the number of Tajik-medium schools plummeted from 120 in 1991 to fewer than twenty today, despite a large Tajik-speaking community in the Ferghana Valley (Normatova & Abdurakhmanova, 2022). Cultural festivals and token programming, such as Karakalpak segments on national television offer symbolic gestures, but lack the institutional backing needed to sustain genuine multilingual practice.

Viewed through Spolsky's (2004) lens of a "management-practice gap," the divergence is stark. In Kazakhstan, management both reflects and reinforces the multilingual practices of its citizens: laws, institutions, and lived reality largely align. In Uzbekistan, by contrast, a top-down push for linguistic homogenization clashes head-on with grassroots multilingualism that persists informally in streets, marketplaces, and homes.

Bilingual Education and Socioeconomic Outcomes: Equity vs. Elitism

Kazakhstan's educational system is divided into a three-tiered arrangement. In rural and predominantly Kazakh areas, children attend Kazakh-medium schools, yet these institutions suffer acute teacher shortages: only 65 percent of their STEM instructors are fully fluent in Kazakh (Yedgina et al., 2023). In urban centers, Russian-medium schools predominate, and their graduates disproportionately access higher education: 78 percent of university entrants come from Russian-medium backgrounds versus 42 percent from Kazakh-medium schools. Sitting in both systems are the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools—elite trilingual institu-

(Kazakh–Russian–English) explicitly designed to funnel top talent into global universities (Bahry et al., 2017).

The economic dividends of this stratification are significant. In Almaty, Russian-speaking graduates earn 25–30 percent more than their Kazakh-dominant peers, a reflection of the premium on Russian fluency in the labor market (World Bank, 2021).

Uzbekistan’s determination to eliminate Russian from its education system has produced different yet equally troubling distortions. Russian proficiency among Uzbek youth has collapsed, with only 12 percent fluent today compared with 45 percent in 2000 (Pavlenko, 2008). As a result, many aspiring professionals decamp to Russia or to Kazakhstan for higher education, perpetuating a brain drain that deprives Uzbekistan of skilled talent.

Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of convertible “capital” illuminates these patterns: in Kazakhstan, Russian remains a highly convertible regional capital, English an emergent global capital, and Kazakh a vital national capital. In Uzbekistan, the purist elevation of Uzbek as symbolic capital has throttled the more pragmatic, economic capital of Russian and English, narrowing professional opportunities for all but a lucky few.

Theoretical Reflections: Ideology vs. Practice

Spolsky’s Tripartite Model Applied

Component	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
Beliefs	Civic nationalism; celebration of multilingualism	Ethnolinguistic purity; monolingual ideology
Practices	De facto Russian dominance in urban life; robust minority use in rural areas	Uzbek in official domains; Russian persists informally
Management	Official trilingual policy; gradual Latin-script adoption	Strict Uzbek monolingualism; abrupt Latinization drive

Woolard’s (1998) Ideological Tensions

– In Kazakhstan: the tension between Russian as a “language of power” and Kazakh as a “language of identity.”

– In Uzbekistan: an “iconization” of Uzbek as the sole legitimate national symbol, marginalizing other speech communities.

Bourdieu’s (1991) Forms of Capital

– Kazakhstan’s trilingualism: English serves as global capital, Russian as regional capital, and Kazakh as national capital.

– Uzbekistan’s linguistic purism: Uzbek accrues symbolic capital, yet its economic capital remains limited by the erosion of Russian proficiency.

Implications

To redress urban-rural disparities, Kazakhstan should expand targeted teacher-training programs in Kazakh-medium STEM instruction. Bolashak scholarships might be refocused to develop high-quality Kazakh-language pedagogues. Universities should be mandated to make at least 30 percent of their STEM materials available in Kazakh by 2030, closing resource gaps in rural and minority regions.

Reforming bilingual education requires piloting integrative models such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Russian-medium schools to strengthen Kazakh proficiency without sacrificing subject mastery. Incentive structures, including tax breaks or procurement preferences for businesses that adopt Kazakh as their workplace lingua franca, would reinforce the public utility of Kazakh in the private sector.

As Kazakhstan transitions scripts, digital infrastructure becomes critical. The development of AI-driven tools such as Kazakh-Latin OCR and machine-translation services will ease bureaucratic and educational use of the Latin alphabet. To ensure intergenerational equity, free adult literacy courses in the new script should be offered to citizens over forty, preventing older cohorts from being disenfranchised.

Revitalizing minority languages demands expanding curricular options: Uighur and Korean should be introduced as elective subjects in regions where those communities are concentrated. National media ought to enforce a 15 percent quota for minority-language content on public television, providing both visibility and practical domains for usage.

From Uzbekistan’s experience, two lessons stand out. First, the abrupt marginalization of Russian can create technical terminology gaps that undermine scientific and administrative capacity. Second, symbolic nation-building. However, emotionally resonant need to be balanced by pragmatic investments in human capital. Kazakhstan’s multilingual model, though imperfect, offers a more sustainable path than monolingual purism. By redistributing resources equitably, leveraging digital solutions in script reform, and strengthening minority-language rights, Kazakhstan can turn its rich linguistic diversity into a source of national resilience rather than fragmentation.

Conclusion

The comparative experiences of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan illustrate the multifaceted nature of language policy as a tool of nation-building, identity formation, and social stratification. Uzbekistan's top-down, monolingual approach prioritizes symbolic coherence but risks eroding linguistic diversity and diminishing access to global capital. Kazakhstan's more pluralist and incremental strategy reflects a recognition of its complex sociolinguistic ecology, but still grapples with structural inequalities and urban-rural divides.

Script reform, minority language inclusion, and bilingual education are not merely technical or administrative choices as they are deeply political acts that shape the linguistic futures of entire generations. As Kazakhstan continues its transition to a Latin script and seeks to strengthen Kazakh, the challenge lies in aligning symbolic nation-building with inclusive and pragmatic policy implementation. Investment in Kazakh-language STEM resources, the protection of minority languages, and equitable bilingual education will be essential to realizing a vision of national unity that embraces, rather than suppresses, linguistic diversity.

Uzbekistan's experience offers a cautionary tale: ideological purity without practical infrastructure can produce fragmentation rather than cohesion. In contrast, Kazakhstan's imperfect yet adaptable model underscores the value of balancing ideology with lived practice. For post-Soviet states navigating questions of identity, power, and modernity, language policy remains both a mirror and a mechanism of transformation.

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