

**ETHNO-MEDIATION IN CONFLICT PREVENTION:
AN INSIGHT ON THE COUNCIL OF AKSAKALS
AND THE COUNCIL OF MOTHERS**

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Executive Summary

In Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic society, managing interethnic relations is a key element of national policy. Traditional institutions such as Councils of Aksakals and Councils Mothers occupy a special place in cultural and social life, helping to maintain ethnic harmony and prevent conflicts at the local level. However, their influence is limited due to the lack of formal status and integration into the state system. The events in Kordai district in 2020 highlighted the importance of rethinking approaches to ethnomediation and revealed the need to strengthen interactions between state structures, local communities and traditional institutions.

The purpose of this study is to assess the role of traditional councils, in particular the Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, in ethnomediation and conflict prevention within the framework of Kazakhstan's state policy in the field of interethnic relations. Based on the events in the Kordai district in 2020, the study analyzes how state policy, media narratives, and public perceptions coincide or diverge in their approaches to resolving interethnic tensions. The work aims to identify existing problems and develop practical recommendations for integrating traditional institutions into the formal conflict management system to ensure sustainable interethnic harmony in a multiethnic society.

Despite the state's efforts to strengthen interethnic harmony, the current model of interethnic relations governance faces several challenges. The policy is based on centralized and formalized mechanisms, but it is often not flexible enough to consider local characteristics and community needs.

Traditional institutions, such as Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, are recognized in society for their ability to resolve local conflicts and strengthen social ties. However, their influence remains limited due to the lack of a legislative framework and integration into the official conflict management system. These institutions are dependent on local authorities, which reduces their independence and trust in them.

The events in the Kordai district in 2020 demonstrated the existing gap between state policy, public expectations, and real problems on the ground. Media and public narratives highlight the need to revise approaches to preventing and resolving interethnic conflicts. In the context of Kazakhstan's multinational society, there is an urgent need to develop a

more flexible, integrative and adapted system of managing ethnic processes that combines traditional institutions and state mechanisms.

This study uses a qualitative approach, including three key methods of analysis:

1. Analysis of government documents: A detailed analysis of legal acts and political concepts governing interethnic relations in Kazakhstan was conducted. This made it possible to assess how government policy shapes the conditions for ethnomediation and the integration of traditional institutions, such as Councils of Aksakals and Mothers.

2. Analysis of media discourse: Publications of 10 media outlets covering the events in the Kordai district in 2020 were analyzed. Kazakh-language and Russian-language sources were studied to identify differences in coverage, criticism of government policy, and an emphasis on the socio-economic aspects of the conflicts.

3. Interviews with participants and experts: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents of Kordai district, representatives of Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, as well as experts in the field of ethnomediation. This method allowed us to obtain a deep understanding of public perceptions of state policy and traditional institutions.

These methods provided a comprehensive analysis that allowed us to compare the vision of the state, the media and the public, and to develop practical recommendations for improving the system of managing interethnic relations.

Based on the data analysis, the key findings are:

1. State Vision: Kazakhstan's state policy aims to formalize interethnic relations through centralized structures such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. The main emphasis is on promoting national unity and development through cultural and educational programs. However, the policy lacks flexibility and adaptation to local needs, which limits its effectiveness. Councils of Aksakals and Mothers are seen as auxiliary institutions, but their informal status and pressure from local authorities weaken their influence.

2. Media Coverage: The media analysis demonstrated criticism of state policy for its formalism, delay in response, and insufficient engagement with root cause considerations such as socio-economic thinking. Kazakh-language publications mainly focused on

harmonization, avoiding harsh criticism, while Russian-language media emphasized the need for reforms and a more flexible approach to managing interethnic processes.

3. Public perception: Interviews with residents revealed a high level of trust in Aksakals Councils and Mothers as mediation institutions based on cultural traditions. However, their limited capabilities and resources prevent them from fully realizing their potential. Residents believe that government policy often does not meet the real needs of society, that there is a gap between the problems of structures and peoples.

4. Gap between approaches: The study revealed a discrepancy between the state appearance, media coverage and public perception. This requires a more flexible and adapted model of managing interethnic relations that considers local characteristics and actively uses traditional institutions in the state system.

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations are:

1. Formalization of traditional councils: Legislatively enshrine the status of Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, granting them formal powers in the ethnomediation system. Also return the territorial divisions of “Kogamdyk Kelisim” from local executive bodies back under the auspices of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. This will ensure the independence of the Councils from local authorities, strengthen their trust among the population and increase their effectiveness in resolving interethnic conflicts.

2. Strengthening interaction between the state and local communities: Develop platforms for regular dialogue between state bodies, traditional institutions and local communities. The creation of feedback mechanisms will allow taking into account local needs and community opinions, which will strengthen trust in state policy. The introduction of locally adapted solutions will also increase the flexibility of the state system for managing interethnic relations.

3. Support for traditional institutions: Provide financial and institutional support for Councils of Aksakals and Mothers. The state should allocate resources for their activities, including organizing trainings, advanced training and developing mediation skills. This will enhance their potential in conflict resolution and strengthen their role as important social institutions.

4. Creating a hybrid model of conflict management: Introduce a hybrid approach that combines formal state mechanisms and traditional mediation practices. Such a model will consider cultural characteristics and ensure a more rapid response to local conflicts. Joint training programs for representatives of government agencies and traditional institutions will help develop agreed standards of work and improve the effectiveness of interaction.

These recommendations are aimed at eliminating existing gaps between government policy, public needs and the capabilities of traditional institutions, ensuring a more sustainable and flexible system for managing interethnic relations.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of traditional councils, in particular the Council of Aksakals and Mothers, in ethnomediation and conflict prevention in Kazakhstan. It focuses on the events in Kordai district in 2020 to analyze the extent to which state policies, media narratives, and public perceptions converge or diverge in their approaches to resolving interethnic tensions. Using a qualitative methodology, the study includes analysis of state policies, media discourse, and interviews with local residents, government officials, and experts to assess the effectiveness and challenges of existing conflict management mechanisms.

The results reveal significant gaps between centralized and formalized state policies, media criticism of their rigidity and delays, and public trust in informal mechanisms based on cultural traditions. State policies emphasize national unity and integration through formal structures such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, while the media highlights socio-economic inequalities and lack of responsiveness. Local communities trust the Councils of Aksakals and Mothers for their local mediation efforts, but acknowledge their limitations due to the lack of institutional support.

The study recommends formalizing the role of traditional councils, strengthening cooperation between the state and local communities, increasing support for traditional institutions, and introducing a hybrid model that combines formal state mechanisms with culturally sensitive practices. These measures will help to bridge the gap between policy and practice, promoting sustainable interethnic harmony and conflict prevention in Kazakhstan's multiethnic society.

The study contributes to the understanding of the potential of traditional institutions in contemporary governance and offers practical recommendations for conflict resolution practitioners and policymakers.

ABBREVIATIONS

APK : **Assembly of people of Kazakhstan**

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: The list of interviewees divided into three groups.

Table 2: Comparative table of state, media and people policy perception.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

In multinational Kazakhstan society there is a need for effective methods of preventing interethnic conflicts. Despite state efforts to maintain peace and reconciliation, interethnic tension remains an important issue, threatening social stability. In February 2020 the Kordai events took place in Kordai district of Zhambyl region. It was one of the most significant interethnic conflicts in the country in recent years, involved clashes between ethnic Kazakh and Dungan communities.

The Council of Aksakals (elders) and the Council of mothers (hereinafter – Councils) are consultative and advisory bodies to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (hereinafter – Assembly). These Councils are formed under the regional Assemblies of the People of Kazakhstan, in the region of the oblast and, if necessary, in rural districts and auls – under the local administration.

The research site for this paper is Councils in Kordai district of Zhambyl region. The Councils of Kordai district are part of the regional branch of Assembly, which itself is a part of the regional Department of internal policy. The purpose of the study is to explore the function of ethno-mediation in interethnic conflicts prevention through the activity of the Councils. These Councils are considered traditional conflict resolution methods, based on cultural norms and values, that provide opportunities for cooperation and dialogue between community representatives. Despite their recognized significance, their role, effectiveness and potential remain poorly studied and insufficiently covered.

1.2. Research questions and objectives

The objective of this study is to evaluate the role of the Councils in ethno-mediation and to develop recommendations for policy to strengthen the use and support of Councils to enhance social stability and reconciliation in diverse ethnic contexts.

The research seeks to examine the role of the Councils through policy framework:

(1) how the state is trying to promote ethno-mediation tools,

(2) how they were conceived and worked in practice. The research is guided by the principle “policy goes top-down and response is bottom-up”.

The research group assumes that there is a rapture between what is officially stated and promoted, and what the societal perception is.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Context

In multinational societies such as Kazakhstan, issues of ethnic harmony, sociocultural integration and resolution of interethnic conflicts remain relevant and are of interest to researchers and practitioners. In this context ethnomediation acquires particular importance as a tool for ensuring mutual understanding and cooperation between different ethnic groups.

Kazakhstan is a large country in Central Asia, known for its rich ethnic diversity and cultural diversity. In this regard, Assyltaeva et al. (2014) argue that Kazakhstan's geographic position has contributed to the formation of diverse ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. According to Jumageldinov (2014), the country is home to more than 130 national groups, with Kazakhs making up the largest part of the population. This ethnic multi-nationality reflects the historical processes of migration and colonization that took place on the territory of Kazakhstan at different periods of its history.

Also in this context, Jetpysbaev (2017) notes that the state of Kazakhstan actively supports the policy of multi-nationality and internal harmony. According to the author's conclusion, Kazakhstan recognizes equal rights and freedoms for all ethnic groups and promotes the joint coexistence and development of cultures. This is also reflected in the country's constitution and political practice (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). Kazakhstan's ethnic diversity enriches the country's cultural landscape and makes it a place where diversity is perceived as a source of strength and national wealth (Schatz, 2000). In such a multi-ethnic environment, it is important to create conditions for harmonious coexistence and interaction between different ethnic groups.

Sharipova et al. (2017) noted that trust in political institutions, perceptions of discrimination, income level, knowledge of the Kazakh language and ethnicity are key factors influencing support for both civic and ethnic nationalism in Kazakhstan. These factors are important for understanding the mechanisms of ethnomediation, since they can promote or hinder the strengthening of national unity and the prevention of conflicts. The study highlights the complexity of the relationships between state institutions,

ethnicity and language policy in the formation of national identity, which is relevant for the study of ethnomediation in a multinational society.

Rees & Burkhanov (2018) note that after Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the state made efforts to create a common civic identity among its multi-ethnic population. The authors analyze how the Doctrine of National Unity and language policies influence the formation of national identity, revealing the complex interaction between ethnic and civic nationalism. They conclude that Kazakhstan's desire to create a national identity among a multi-ethnic population through government initiatives faces a diversity of perceptions and reactions from citizens. These findings highlight the complexity of national integration processes and may contribute to understanding the importance of ethnomediation mechanisms, such as the Council of Aksakals and the Council of Mothers, for strengthening national unity and preventing conflicts in a multinational society.

Tutumlu & Imyarova (2021) noted that the identity of Kazakhstanis, formed by the first presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, has noticeable parallels with the Soviet identity of the Brezhnev era, expressed through a supranational model of the nation based on teleological ideology, modernization of collective consciousness and promotion of the language of the ethnic majority as the lingua franca of the new nation. This comparison highlights both the continuation of Soviet practices in post-Soviet nation-building in Kazakhstan and the emphasis on the superiority of a new, modernized supranational identity over ethnicity, while preserving and disseminating the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Kazakh people as the basis for the formation of national unity and identity.

2.2. Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan

The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan acts as a key socio-political institution that promotes the representation and participation of various ethnic groups in the life of the country (Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan about the Regulations on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2011). Its significance lies in the fact that it creates a platform for inclusion and representation of the interests of the multinational society of Kazakhstan. The main purpose of the Assembly is to strengthen the unity and diversity of cultural traditions, as well as to promote the development of mutual

understanding and respect between different ethnic groups (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, 2008).

According to the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on approval of the Development Concept of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan for 2022-2026 (2022), the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan actively supports interethnic rapprochement, stimulating interaction and exchange of experience between ethnic communities. In this context Jones (2010) noted that the Assembly is committed to creating an environment where every ethnic group feels included in public life and participates in shaping the cultural landscape of the country.

Particular importance should be attached to the role of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan in resolving and preventing conflicts between ethnic communities (Institute of Applied Ethno-political Research, 2020). According to Ayupova & Kussainov (2018), this space stimulates the search for agreement and constructive solutions to resolve differences between ethnic groups, serving as a platform for dialogue based on respect and mutual understanding. Thus, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan is not only a symbol of diversity, but also an effective tool for strengthening social harmony and respect for the diversity of cultural traditions in the country.

2.3. Ethno-mediation

According to the Institute of Applied Ethno-political Research (2022), ethno-mediation refers to the process of resolving interethnic conflicts and creating conditions for the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups. The Institute notes that this approach emphasizes the inclusion of minorities in the decision-making process and their active participation in public life, which promotes equality and consideration of the interests and needs of all members of society.

According to Diachýk & Qojabekova (2019), an important feature of ethno-mediation is respecting the cultural characteristics and rights of representatives of different ethnic groups, which contributes to preserving and promoting cultural diversity. The authors argue that ethno-mediation contributes to creating a more just and harmonious society where the interests and the needs of all its members are for consideration, regardless of their ethnicity.

Abiyev et al. (2020) noted that ethno-mediation helps to strengthen socio-cultural harmony and create conditions for coexistence and cooperation between different ethnic communities. The authors concluded that ethno-mediation contributes to the development of respect and understanding of diversity within society, which leads to a more tolerant and inclusive society and prevents conflicts.

Also, according to the study of Diachýk (2022), ethno-mediation increases the efficiency of conflictological processes, providing methodological tools for more successfully resolving ethnic conflicts and preventing their occurrence in the future. Thus, ethno-mediation is a necessary tool in building peaceful and sustainable societies where the diversity of cultural groups is for wealth and resources rather than a source of conflict.

Also, Rees et al. (2021) found that identity in Kazakhstan is formed through various forms of attachment to place, exceeding state boundaries and including folk concepts of homeland. The authors emphasize the importance of understanding alternative forms of identity, which can play a key role in the mechanisms of ethnomediation and national integration in a multi-ethnic society such as Kazakhstan.

2.4. The Council of Aksakals and The Council of Mothers

Institute of Applied Ethno-Political Research (2021) notes that in a country with rich ethnic diversity, ethnomediation becomes the key to resolving conflicts and ensuring mutual understanding between ethnic groups. Ethno-mediation, represented in the form of institutions such as the Council of Aksakals and the Council of Mothers, plays a significant role in this process. Abiev (2020) notes that the role of ethnic mediators helps resolve interethnic conflicts and participate in the development of policies and legislation aimed at protecting the rights and interests of ethnic minorities.

The Council of Aksakals is a council of the wisest elders who have high authority in the ethnic community. They act as mediators and consultants, using their experience and wisdom to resolve conflicts and maintain peace in society. According to the Decision of the Council of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan about the Council of Aksakals of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (2022), this advisory body cooperates with the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan at the local level, including regions, districts, rural districts and sat down. Its members include representatives of local communities, public organizations, including ethnocultural associations, and other significant

individuals. The Council of Aksakals is engaged in strengthening national identity, organizing dialogue between civil society and the state, and helps in resolving social conflicts and maintaining social harmony.

The Council of Mothers is a group of women leaders with great influence among ethnic community. Their role in ethno-mediation is to use soft methods promoting peace and harmony. According to the APK information portal (Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2020), the Council of Mothers operates under the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan in the regions, cities of republican significance, and the capital. The Council of Mothers at the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan consists of representatives of the Assembly, public associations, non-governmental organizations, ethno-cultural associations, other organizations, communities, and public figures. One of the central goals of the Council of Mothers is to promote interethnic harmony, tolerant relationships and respect for national traditions and family values.

2.5. Kordai district of Zhambyl region

The Kordai district in Kazakhstan stands out for its unique inter-ethnic structure, including a Kazakh majority and a Dungan minority, as well as other ethnic groups. This region has a long history of inter-ethnic interactions, which have been mostly peaceful, but sometimes led to conflicts (Tenchikov, 2022).

Particularly important in this context are the mass riots in the Kordai district of Kazakhstan, which occurred from February 5 to 8, 2020, covering several rural districts (Sortobe and Masanchi). The conflict arose between the Kazakh majority and the Dungan minority, resulting in the death of 11 people and the injury of 185. More than 23 thousand residents fled to Kyrgyzstan. Arson and pogroms occurred, resulting in the burning of 39 houses, 20 commercial properties and 47 cars. Material damage amounted to about 1.7 billion tenge (Khabdulxabar, 2020).

According to information from the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2020), after the events of February 2020, the Council of Aksakals was created in the Kordai district to solve everyday problems and to conduct educational work with youth to strengthen unity between nationalities. The Council of Aksakals aimed to organize cultural and sports events and promote dialogue and mutual understanding between different groups of the population of the district.

For this conflict the Oxus Society (2023) focused on the roles and perceptions of various actors involved in the violence, including government officials, local law enforcement, community members, and the media. They examined the antecedents, dynamics and consequences of the conflict, highlighting systemic problems and informal practices that exacerbated the situation. Recommendations include strengthening the role of independent media, increasing minority participation in governance, improving conflict prevention mechanisms and reforming the judiciary to ensure fair justice.

2.6. Lack of debate

Despite the importance and potential of the Council of Aksakals and the Council of Mothers in the context of ethno-mediation, literature on this topic remains limited. The lack of extensive debate and research may be due to insufficient attention to this aspect of traditional conflict resolution methods in modern society. This creates a need for further research to fully understand and effectively use the role of these institutions in modern ethno-mediation.

Ethno-mediation, including the Council of Aksakals and the Council of Mothers, is an important tool for harmony and inter-ethnic cooperation in Kazakhstan. Although this topic is not widely covered in the scholarship literature, it is important to understand cultural diversity and national integration, as well as prevent inter-ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan.

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Data

3.1.1. Primary data

The research team conducted 11 interviews and participants of which were divided into three groups: (1) representatives of local executive authorities, (2) residents and representatives of public associations of the Kordai district, (3) experts. Interviews conducted to identify the differences between the official policy promoted by the state and how it is perceived and implemented in practice in local communities. List of interview questions is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1: The list of interviewees divided into three groups.

Representatives of local executive authorities	Residents of Kordai district	Experts
Interview 3: Representative of Kordai district administration	Interview 1: A representative of the Veterans Council of one of the villages in Kordai district	Interview 4: A representative of the scientific community studying the activities of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan
Interview 8: Representative of the Zhambyl regional administration	Interview 2: Muslim parish representative (religious leader) in Kordai district	Interview 5: Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan expert on mediation
	Interview 7: A representative of the Veterans Council of one of the villages in Kordai district	Interview 6: A representative of the scientific community, an expert in the field of ethnopolitical studies
	Interview 9: Representative of Veterans Council of Kordai district	
	Interview 10: Representative of Mothers' Council of Kordai district	
	Interview 11: A resident of one of the villages of the Kordai district	

3.1.2. Secondary data

The research group used official policy documents, legislative acts and media publications. The following documents and legislative acts analyzed within the framework of the state vision: two laws, two president's decrees, two government's decree, one order of culture and information minister, and charter of the republican public association "Kogamdyk Kelisim".

1. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of October 20, 2008 «On the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan»;
2. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of July 11, 1997 «On Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan»;
3. Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated September 7, 2011 «On the Regulation on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan»;
4. Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated September 15, 2022 «On approval of the Concept for the development of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan for 2022-2026»;
5. Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated May 30, 2014 «On approval of the Concept for the development of friendship houses of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan»;
6. Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated October 4, 2023 «On certain issues of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan»;
7. Order of the Minister of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated September 27, 2023 «On approval of the Regulation of the Republican State Institution Committee for the Development of Interethnic Relations of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan»;
8. Charter of the Republican public association «Kogamdyk Kelisim».

10 publications published between February and March 2020 were used, of which three in kazakh language and seven in russian laguage. Ten publications were selected for analysis, three of which were in Kazakh and seven in Russian, covering events in the Kordai district. Among them were independent publications such as Azattyk Radiosy, Uralskweek, and international media such as Deutsche Welle and Fergana News. Also in the sample were major Kazakh news portals such as Tengrinews and Informburo.kz,

Sputnik Kazakhstan and the official publication Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. The publications represent private, state media, and international media:

1. Azattyk Radio;
2. Uralskweek;
3. Deutsche Welle;
4. Tengrinews;
5. Informburo;
6. Sputnik Kazakhstan;
7. Fergana News;
8. Kazakhstanskaya Pravda.

3.2. Methods

3.2.1. Content analyses for semi-structured interview data

Research group used content and discourse analysis to find narratives and discourse in the responses of interviewees. It is important to determine how people perceive government policy locally. It involves (1) coding (2) and thematic analysis (group related codes together to form themes and patterns).

3.2.2. Media discourse and state discourse

Research group analyzed media publications in Kazakh and Russian languages to find the narratives and tone among Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking audiences, national and regional media outlets. Research group considered publications related to public policy in ethno-mediation and interethnic relations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This section is devoted to the analysis of the work of the ethnomediation institute in Kazakhstan through three different approaches: “state vision” (state discourse analysis), “media coverage” (media discourse analysis) and “people's perceptions” (interviews).

4.1. State vision

The state vision emphasizes the role of Councils in maintaining interethnic harmony, preventing conflicts, and strengthening national unity. Official documents and legislation articulate the importance of these institutions as part of state policy aimed at strengthening interethnic harmony.

The state vision of interethnic policy in Kazakhstan demonstrates the desire to maintain national harmony and stability through a comprehensive approach to managing ethnic diversity. The policy reflected in legislative documents is aimed at creating conditions for the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups, their integration into a single social space while preserving unique cultural identities. The Kazakhstan model of interethnic relations, according to the state, is based on a combination of formal and cultural mechanisms that ensure ethnic communities' participation in public life and the protection of their rights.

The central institution of interethnic policy is the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, which is endowed with a unique constitutional status and broad powers to participate in the formation and implementation of state policy in this area. The Assembly acts as a link between the state and ethnic communities, and performs the functions of monitoring and regulating the interethnic situation in the country. Thanks to this institution and its representatives at all levels of government, interethnic policy is transferred from central bodies down to local communities, where it is implemented through Friendship Houses and other cultural venues that support exchange and mutual understanding.

The Ministry of Culture and Information and its Committee for the Development of Interethnic Relations perform a coordinating and analytical function, developing regulations and analyzing data on the state of interethnic relations. These structures organize interaction between government agencies and ethnocultural associations, providing methodological support and organizing information work aimed at

strengthening tolerance and integration. Particular attention is paid to such platforms as "Kogamdyk Kelisim", which contribute to strengthening ties between ethnocultural associations, the state and civil society, organizing cultural and educational events to improve mutual understanding and trust among ethnic groups.

There is no separate legislative regulation for the activities of the Councils of Aksakals and Mothers in Kazakhstan. These Councils operate under the auspices of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and are considered rather as informal institutions supporting the general goals of state policy in the sphere of interethnic relations. Due to the lack of regulatory norms, they operate mainly at the local level and perform mediation functions in resolving interethnic issues, relying on traditional forms of mediation.

As a result, the state vision of interethnic policy in Kazakhstan is aimed at creating a system where ethnic diversity is supported at the institutional level and harmoniously integrated into the national space. Councils of Aksakals and Mothers play the role of informal mediators in this system, although they do not have separate legislative regulation. Nevertheless, the measures developed by the state and the mechanisms enshrined in legislation maintain stability and facilitate prompt responses to ethnic challenges, strengthening peace and harmony in society.

4.2. Media coverage

In contrast to state rhetoric, the media offer a more critical and emotional perspective on conflicts, identifying both successes and problems in the process of their resolution. An analysis of the media discourse on the events in the Kordai district in February 2020 shows that Kazakhstani media generally view the policy of interethnic harmony as formal and insufficiently effective in preventing and managing interethnic conflicts. Private and international media outlets such as Azattyk Radiosy, Uralskweek, and Deutsche Welle emphasize that government actions are often delayed, and the policy itself does not always correspond to the real needs and challenges on the ground. These publications emphasize that existing mechanisms are not flexible enough and do not have time to prevent conflicts, which increases the feeling of alienation among ethnic communities.

Particular attention in media coverage is paid to the fact that the causes of interethnic conflicts are often linked not only to cultural but also to socio-economic issues, such as inequality and exclusion of certain groups. Publications, including Fergana News and

Sputnik Kazakhstan, point to the possible cross-border consequences of such conflicts, emphasizing the need to review state policies. The media emphasizes the need for more localized and flexible mechanisms that can quickly respond to emerging challenges and take into account the needs of local communities, rather than just following centralized decisions.

At the same time, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, as an official publication, emphasizes the positive aspects of state policy, focusing on recovery measures and efforts to stabilize the situation, which reflects the official position of the state.

An analysis of materials in the two languages reveals some differences in the coverage of the conflict. Kazakh-language articles (*Azattyq* and *Uralskweek*) tend to cover events more neutrally, avoiding harsh assessments. They also devote less attention to criticism of the state approach to managing interethnic relations. In contrast, Russian-language materials contain more explicit criticism of the authorities' actions and an emphasis on the need for reform. For example, articles in *DW* and *Azattyq* in Russian emphasize the shortcomings of the interethnic harmony model and the insufficient integration of ethnic minorities into the country's social and economic life.

Taken together, the media discourse highlights the need for more flexible and localized policies where ethnic communities play an active role in maintaining harmony, and highlights the need to take into account social and economic realities to prevent future conflicts.

4.3. Interview findings

Feedback mechanism

Based on the results of interviews with representatives of local authorities and the local community the relationship “local authorities – people” was revealed, where the Councils and voluntary associations acted as an intermediary on the problems of residents to local executive bodies and local self-government bodies (*maslikhats*). During the interviews local resident and administrators mentions issues related to land acquisition, water and accommodation.

Advocates of state policy

Local government representatives see Councils as mediators of state policy on interethnic relations and language from the government to people. Whereas representatives of local representatives of Councils do not always see or recognize themselves as mediators of state policy.

Local authorities see aksakals as a tool for advocacy of a broader state policy at the local level. For example, in interviews local administrators mention that they ask Councils and community leaders to promote or explain messages of the president of Kazakhstan among local communities. This is confirmed by the quote: *“Just recently the president gave an address yesterday, and we broadcast how the elders interpreted it and how they plan to convey it to the people”*. Or local administrators ask community leaders to help to prevent crimes collaborating with executive and law enforcement authorities: *"On crime prevention (...). The increase in crime is bad for us, so to prevent it, the police ask for help from elders and veterans. They are asking them to speak to the youth"*.

Mediators between ethnic groups

Local executive bodies and residents agree that respected elders and women are mediators in disputes between ethnic groups. The main Councils' tools of mediation are called wise instructions based on the rich life experience of such people, the use of authority among local communities. It is emphasized that such work is carried out mainly with young people, since it is this demographic group that creates problems for strengthening interethnic harmony.

Issues of family and marriage

Interview respondents assigned family and marriage issues to the work of the Council of Mothers. One respondent noted that this is a joint work of both respected elders and women, two respondents (one representative of local government and one representative of the local community) mentioned activities to prevent divorces (work on reconciliation before divorce in court). Generally, it was noted that the Council of Mothers mostly resolves *"such small disputes"*, as preventing divorces, which *"makes up the majority"* of their activities. Overall surveyed respondents presented a broader picture, which includes issues of raising young girls, early pregnancy, early marriage. In most cases this is considered the main activity of the Mothers' Council.

State interventions

The integration of closed ethnic groups, which includes the Dungan diaspora in the Kordai district, remains a pressing task for the state. Based on the interviews, it can be assumed that after 2020, the state began to conduct more interventions in the Kordai district to strengthen relations between the two ethnic groups - Kazakhs and Dungans. With the support of the Councils more sports and cultural events began to be held in the district with the involvement of both ethnic groups. This is confirmed by interviews at the level of representatives of the local administration, Councils, voluntary associations and residents.

In addition, the state has allocated significant resources to education. It has launched a program to relocate teachers who teach in Kazakh from other regions to the Kordai district and is opening new schools with Kazakh as the language of instruction. With the support of the Councils, the state conducts awareness campaigns within the Kordai communities, emphasizing the importance of learning the Kazakh language for professional development and career.

Pressure from majority and the state

These interventions are supported by both ethnic groups living in the Kordai region. However, their views on the need for such interventions differ. During the interview, two vectors of integration of the Dungan minority were identified.

(1) Some residents acknowledge the importance of peace and harmony, but they believe it lies not only in mutual understanding but also in the dominance of one culture over another, as it could be seen from this quote: *"We are forcing them to learn Kazakh language. It is the state language, you must know it"*.

A representative of the Dungan community supports this conclusion, stating that they experience negative attitudes from certain segments of the region's population due to their lack of proficiency in the Kazakh language. For instance, the representative shared, *"Teachers force us (to speak Kazakh language - note). Sometimes they hit children because they do not understand. They scold and humiliate us, saying that we came from China"*.

(2) A representative of the local Dungan community, along with a member of the local administration, highlights that the Dungan community voluntarily and enthusiastically learns the Kazakh language. However, another member of the Dungan community expresses a different perspective, suggesting that there is little need to learn Kazakh for everyday life within the Kordai district. According to this view, the necessity might arise when traveling outside the district to interact with the Kazakh-speaking population or in the future professional careers of their children.

Independence of the Councils

All three groups of interview respondents have different perceptions of the ethnomediation institution. If the state aims to formalize Councils of Aksakals and Mothers through legislation by placing them under local administrative offices, they remain informal, voluntary associations. Meanwhile experts see them as part of a large ethnomediation institution, which includes various public associations and opinion leaders. Experts understand the hierarchy of ethnomediation sub-institutions well, starting from the republican (central) level to the regional level. Residents and representatives of these Councils do not see a clear hierarchy of ethnomediation sub-institutions and generally do not consider themselves part of this institution (in some cases they oppose themselves), created and regulated by the central authorities.

Ethnomediation is multilayered

The Institute of ethnomediation in Kordai District is multilayered. It is a complex institution that includes not only Council of Aksakals and Mothers, but other voluntary association, as associations of veterans and religious leaders. Ethnomediation in Kordai district does not limit with abovementioned organizations, but it also about creating capacity for integration: schools and good education that help children to pass national exam and apply for regional and national universities, mass events and celebrations.

During the interview there was interesting finding about how official religious organizations create capacity to integration. Local imams (leaders in Islamic communities of Kordai districts) organize informal public events, jointly help to solve everyday problems of residents working together with other voluntary associations. Local religious leaders considered another channel of communication and intermediaries in Kordai district.

It is worth noting that the interview analysis revealed that ethnomediation does not compete with or replace the law enforcement system.

Relationships before and after the events of 2020

Since the Kordai district was chosen as research site, where a major interethnic conflict happened in 2020, it is important to look at how this relationship changed before and after 2020.

Speaking about the events of 2020 and beyond, a local community representative, who is also one of the leaders of the voluntary association, noted that *"The Dungan people, they were a little bit rebellious, and we put them in their place. They understood that we respect them, and they respect us, we live in a such way. The Dungan people arrived in 1878, there is no point in arguing or fighting with other nations"*, adding that *"there is no mistrust, they loste courage"*.

Residents of Dungan villages note that they have become more active in learning the Kazakh language, and not only schoolchildren, but also the older generation. Residents send their children to Kazakh schools and classes, and hope that the new generation of young teachers will not be rude to Dungan children because of their lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language. *"My eldest daughter went to kindergarten in Russian language, and we send our second daughter to Kazakh (kindergarten – note). Teachers there are Dungans and they speak completely in Kazakh. There is an woman, she is over 40 years old, even she tries to speak completely in Kazakh, and does not add Dungan language to her speech"*.

At the same time some of the interviews residents mention that *"knowledge of the state language"* remains prerequisite for some *"incidents"*, when *"someone speaks Russian, but another asks why he do not address him in Kazakh"*.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

State, media and people see ethnomediation differently. This research concludes that there is gap between what officially declared and reality. The state and local administrations (top-down) see ethnomediation as an extension of power/state and use the institution of entomediation for their own purposes. An analysis of official documents reveals a clear desire of the state to formalize interethnic harmony and manage interethnic conflicts through legislative and institutional mechanisms. The state formalized them by introducing them into the Department of Internal Policy of local executive authorities under the supervision of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. In contrast, local communities (bottom-up) see it differently: for them, the formalization of this institution is not important, they act on their own and come to the aid of local authorities when necessary and of their own free will.

Despite the state having conflict prevention measures through the development of multi-level mechanism, media outlets, especially independent ones, are critical of state policy in the area of interethnic relations. The media outlets emphasize that formal mechanisms for conflict resolution are not always effective, and state structures can be slow and inadequate in resolving conflicts. Media reports on the events of 2020 often accuse state bodies of being insufficiently prepared for crisis situations and the weakness of the existing model of interethnic harmony. In contrast to the government's emphasis on unity and harmony, the media pays more attention to the social and economic issues that underlie inter-ethnic conflicts. Articles focus on governance shortcomings, economic inequality, and the social marginalization of ethnic minorities. The issue of trust between ethnic groups and the government is also highlighted.

In its approach to ethnic differences, the state acknowledges cultural diversity, but places emphasis on the integration and unity of all ethnic groups within a single nation. This reflects the state's desire to create a national identity that would be above ethnic differences. While the media highlights the problem of ethnic segregation and social inequality, often emphasizing the need for reforms and adjustments to state policy.

This research concludes that the state executing two polarized policies at the same time: (1) multi-ethnic Kazakhstan and (2) one nationality for all citizens. Presence of

ethnomediation institution formalized under state-controlled bodies and local administration on the ground, that promote peaceful cohabitation of multiethnic communities of Kazakhstan is the evidence that the state sticks to the multiethnic Kazakhstan policy. However, state interventions in multiethnic communities by example of Kordai district reveal that the state of Kazakhstan moves towards one hegemonic nationality or culture for everyone based on Kazakh culture.

Aspect	Top-Down Perspective (State Vision)	Bottom-Up Perspective (Local Perception)	Media coverage
Regulation of ethnomediation	The state implements policies on interethnic relations through the creation of official institutions, such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, which coordinates the Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, based on legislative and regulatory acts. Regulation through laws and state institutions: The state relies on formal mechanisms, such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, Laws and development concepts, such as “On Languages” and “On the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan”, emphasize the role of the state as the main guarantor of interethnic peace, focusing on respect for the rights and equality of ethnic groups.	Local communities do not perceive the Councils of Aksakals and Mothers as part of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, and do not see themselves as implementers of state policy in the area of interethnic relations. They see themselves as independent actors interacting with the authorities when necessary.	

<p>The goal of state policy in the field of interethnic relations</p>	<p>The state policy is aimed at maintaining national unity and harmony through a comprehensive approach that includes both formal and cultural mechanisms, including the integration of ethnic minorities into the Kazakh-speaking community. Focus on integration and unity: State rhetoric places a strong emphasis on integrating all ethnic groups into a single society, which is reflected in legislative requirements to preserve the state language, national identity and unity. State programs are aimed at creating a sense of common national identity, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining stability through cultural unity.</p>	<p>Residents see the condition of interethnic harmony as the imposition of one culture over others, using the example of forced study of the state language.</p>	
<p>Functions of the Councils of Elders and Mothers</p>	<p>The state views them as important mediating institutions for strengthening interethnic harmony.</p>	<p>Residents perceive these Councils as mediators solving social and everyday problems (for example, preventing divorces), rather than a tool for strengthening interethnic harmony.</p>	
<p>Media coverage of conflicts</p>	<p>Official publications cover interethnic policy positively, emphasizing the state's efforts to stabilize the situation.</p>		<p>Independent and international media describe the policy as ineffective and lagging, emphasizing the socio-economic causes of the</p>

			conflicts, which causes alienation among ethnic groups.
The role of ethnomediation (Council of Aksakals and Mothers)	The vision of aksakals as an instrument of propaganda and transmission of official state policy at the local level.	Local residents see aksakals as part of the local community, who help resolve everyday issues without competing with the official law enforcement system.	
Changes after the events of 2020	Local government officials are talking about stabilizing interethnic relations after 2020, including through state intervention in improving infrastructure and creating capacity for integrating closed ethnic groups through the opening of Kazakh schools. Experts note that government interventions to integrate closed ethnic groups are yielding initial results: the level of proficiency in the state language among the Dungans is increasing, and young people are leaving to study in neighboring regions.	Residents believe that changes in the behaviour of ethnic groups occurred more in response to pressure from the local community and the conflict that occurred than because of state policy.	

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Formalize Traditional Councils

Traditional institutions such as Councils of Aksakals and Mothers play a significant role in maintaining interethnic harmony and preventing conflicts. However, their current status as informal structures significantly limit their capabilities. To increase their effectiveness and build trust among the population, comprehensive changes are needed that include both legislative recognition and institutional reforms.

First, it is necessary to formalize the status of Councils of Aksakals and Mothers by integrating them into the state ethnomediation system. Formalizing their roles will allow Councils to participate in resolving interethnic conflicts at a higher level and will also expand their powers to perform mediation functions. This will strengthen their legitimacy and make them more significant for both the state and local communities.

Second, an important step will be to return the territorial divisions of “Kogamdyk Kelisim” from local executive bodies back under the auspices of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK). Currently, dependence on local authorities weakens trust in these institutions, as they may be perceived as instruments of local politics rather than neutral mediators. Transferring these units back to the APK will ensure the independence of the councils of elders and mothers, which will increase their objectivity and strengthen their status as authoritative mediators in conflict resolution.

In addition, additional measures for institutional support are necessary for the successful work of the Councils. The state should provide them with resources and funding, and develop training programs for Council members. Such training could include training in modern mediation methods, conflict management skills, and understanding of the socio-economic factors influencing interethnic relations.

Finally, independence from local authorities will not only strengthen trust in these traditional institutions, but will also allow them to act in the interests of the whole society, rather than individual groups or power structures. This will be an important step in building a more sustainable model of ethnomediation that combines traditional values and modern approaches.

Overall, formalizing and strengthening the roles of Aksakals and Mothers Councils will create a basis for more effective management of interethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan. It will ensure a balance between state policy and local needs, which is especially important in a multinational society.

6.2. Enhance Collaboration Between State and Local Communities

To strengthen the effectiveness of state policy in the field of interethnic relations, it is necessary to develop closer cooperation between state bodies and local communities. Currently, the existing gap between centralized policy and local needs reduces trust in the state system and limits its ability to effectively prevent and resolve conflicts.

First, it is necessary to create sustainable platforms for regular dialogue between state structures, ethnocultural associations and local leaders, including Councils of Aksakals and Mothers. Such platforms can be organized in the form of public forums, round tables or regular meetings at which topical issues of interethnic relations will be discussed and joint decisions will be developed. This will allow the state to consider local realities and respond more quickly to emerging challenges.

Second, it is necessary to introduce feedback mechanisms that will allow local communities to influence the formation of state policy. For example, it is possible to organize regular reporting on the state of interethnic relations in specific regions to take into account the opinions and proposals of local residents. This will strengthen the sense of community involvement in the governance process and increase trust in public policy.

In addition, it is important to develop the participation of local communities in the implementation of public policy at the local level. This may include the creation of working groups that will include representatives of traditional institutions, local authorities and public organizations. Such groups can help monitor the interethnic situation, plan events to strengthen harmony and develop preventive measures.

Another area is the organization of educational and awareness-raising events aimed at raising awareness of public policy in the field of interethnic relations and the role of traditional institutions. This will help eliminate existing misunderstandings and stereotypes, creating more transparent and constructive communication between the state and local communities.

These measures will allow for the construction of a more flexible and adaptive system of interaction that will consider both national interests and the specifics of local communities. Strengthening cooperation between government agencies and local communities will be an important step towards strengthening interethnic harmony and preventing conflicts.

6.3. Increase Support for Traditional Institutions

In order to increase the effectiveness of traditional institutions such as Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, it is necessary to strengthen their support from the state. Despite their cultural and social significance, their capacity is limited due to a lack of resources and formal integration into the state system. Strengthening these institutions through additional funding, training, and resource provision will be an important step in improving their work.

First, the state should develop a program of financial support for traditional institutions. This may include providing the necessary resources for mediation work, organizing cultural events, and implementing initiatives aimed at strengthening interethnic harmony. Funding can also cover administrative costs, which will allow Councils to focus on fulfilling their functions.

Second, it is important to create a system of training and advanced training for members of Councils of Aksakals and Mothers. Such programs can include training in modern methods of mediation, conflict management, and effective communication. In addition, it is necessary to train Council members to understand the socio-economic factors that affect interethnic relations. This will increase their professionalism and readiness to resolve difficult situations.

Thirdly, it is necessary to develop a network of interaction between Councils at the regional and national levels. Organizing regular seminars, conferences and exchanges of experience between different councils will strengthen their connections with each other and develop best practices for work in different regions. This will also create an opportunity to develop more coordinated and effective strategies in the field of ethnomediation.

In addition, the state should create tools for monitoring and evaluating the work of traditional institutions. This will help identify the most successful approaches and disseminate them to other regions, as well as promptly eliminate the problems that Councils face in their activities.

These measures will ensure sustainable support for traditional institutions, which will not only strengthen their role in managing interethnic conflicts, but also increase trust in state policy in general. Strengthening traditional institutions will allow for the creation of a more sustainable and effective system of ethnomediation that will consider both national interests and local characteristics.

6.4. Promote a Hybrid Model of Conflict Management

To improve the effectiveness of interethnic conflict management, it is necessary to introduce a hybrid model that combines state formal mechanisms with traditional mediation practices. Such a model will allow for a more flexible, adaptive and culturally sensitive approach to conflict prevention and resolution.

First, the state should formally recognize the role of traditional mediation practices and integrate them into formal structures. This may include the creation of joint platforms where state bodies, traditional institutions such as Councils of Aksakals and Mothers, and public organizations can work together to develop comprehensive solutions. Such integration will allow for both cultural specificities and legal norms to be considered.

Second, it is important to define clear boundaries and mechanisms of interaction between formal state structures and traditional institutions. For example, Councils of Aksakals and Mothers can be authorized to deal with the primary resolution of local conflicts, and in more complex cases, transfer them to the level of state bodies. This will create complementarity between the two systems and allow for a more effective distribution of responsibility.

Third, flexible conflict management procedures should be introduced that consider local conditions. For example, traditional mediation practices based on cultural values and customs can be used in combination with legal instruments, which will ensure trust in the process and increase the likelihood of achieving a sustainable outcome.

In addition, it is necessary to conduct joint trainings for representatives of state bodies and traditional institutions. Such programs will help to strengthen mutual understanding, improve coordination and create uniform standards for working with interethnic conflicts. This will also help to eliminate potential disagreements and increase the effectiveness of joint activities.

A hybrid model will combine the best aspects of state and traditional approaches, ensuring a balance between centralized efforts and local adaptation. This will not only strengthen interethnic harmony, but also create conditions for sustainable peace and stability in a multiethnic society.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

7.1. Research summary

The situation on the ground shows that there is a different perception of state policy in the field of interethnic relations. This study showed a gap between what is declared at the official level or what the state wants to see in interethnic relations and reality, where the state's attempts to form a single identity are broken by closed ethnic groups that declare themselves as part of Kazakhstani society but live separately and do not see a great need to integrate into this society.

The study also showed that after the events of 2020, certain changes did occur in the Kordai district of the Zhambyl region. The interviews shed light on the fact that society has become more wary of domestic disputes and disagreements that arise between residents of the district in cases where they are representatives of different ethnic groups. This is confirmed by the fact that when such cases arise, local authorities rely not only on the Law and the law enforcement system, but also use ethnomediation tools, inviting opinion leaders from among aksakals and women to mediate disputes and disagreements. This is additionally confirmed by the fact that the Dungan population of the Kordai district began to send their children to schools with instruction in the state language and go to study outside their region.

The study also shed light on the existing expectations of representatives of the Kazakh ethnic group towards representatives of the Dungan ethnic group in terms of using the state language and respect for the culture and traditions of the Kazakh ethnic group. The study revealed different opinions on this issue. Representatives of the local government do not see the aforementioned contradictions, while representatives of the Kazakh ethnic group see this not just as an expectation, but as an obligation of the district residents to study and know the state language. Interviews with representatives of the Dungan community reveal different views on this issue within the community: (1) the state language is being mastered by the Dungans actively and of their own free will, (2) the state language is not currently necessary, only when it is necessary to travel outside the district, and aggressive demands from the Kazakh ethnic group do not contribute to the growth of interest in studying the state language.

7.2. Limitations of the study

As the research titled “Ethnomediation in Conflict Prevention” aimed to explore how ethnomediation contributes to preventing conflicts, the research team initially expected to gain focused insights into conflict prevention mechanisms. However, during the study, it became evident that ethnomediation is a broader and more complex institution than initially anticipated. The findings provided a more comprehensive understanding of how Councils operate, rather than specifically addressing the mechanisms of conflict prevention. A key limitation of this study is its inability to fully explain how conflict prevention is achieved through ethnomediation. To address this, a revised methodology focusing specifically on the conflict prevention aspects of ethnomediation would be necessary.

Additionally, an important question remains unanswered whether the residents of the Kordai district changed their behavior under the influence of state interventions and policies in the field of state language and ethnomediation, or whether this was a consequence of a lesson learned from the consequences of the 2020 conflict.

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