

## Languages and Ethnic Politics in Central Asia: The Case of Kazakhstan\*

Chaimun Lee

*This paper addresses the significance of conciliatory language policies in defusing ethnic tension, especially between indigenous Kazakhs and ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan. The following language policies were identified as crucial to tolerant interethnic relations: the strategy to create divergent messages, the compromise of language titles, the soft policy on language requirements for employment and higher education, mild policy on ethnic-language ties, and the unified language policy. In the background of conciliatory language policies are the geographical aspect, the unavoidable real need for the use of Russian language, and the important role of the Russophones in running the country. Further comparative research in the former Soviet republics is suggested to confirm the findings of the current study regarding the effectiveness of language policies in making safe interethnic relations in Kazakhstan.*

**Keywords:** *ethnopolitics, Kazakh, indigenization, language policy*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Many people thought that the breakdown of the Soviet Union would lead to enormous ethnic violence in the former Soviet republics, especially in Central Asia. In this category of researchers were those who put more emphasis on ethnic and religious disputes. Their argument was not without foundation. According to the statistics, more than 1 million people were dislocated within the former Soviet Union due to ethnic tensions and conflicts (Helton 1996: 34). The typical sites of ethnic strife were Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. Ethnic groups in these countries who did not have the knowledge of indigenous language were fired from their jobs or were discriminated against in education. Sizable numbers of people had to move to neighboring countries. In particular, about 500,000 people including minorities such as Koreans, Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars,<sup>1</sup> Bashkirs, Jews, and 170,000 Russians had to leave Uzbekistan. Approximately 900,000 people were displaced by ethnic civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-93 (Helton 1996: 34).

As shown above, the literature on ethnic relations in the post-Soviet Union thus far mostly has tended to deal with ethnic animosities and conflicts alone. This has led to

---

\* This research was supported by Kyungpook National University Research Fund, 2003. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Central Asian Association for Korean Studies (CAAKS), "The Promotion of Korean Studies in Central Asia: Cultural Exchange between East and West," which was held at Uzbekistan State Pedagogical University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan (July 9-10, 2003). I appreciate the comments on an earlier draft by Prof. German Kim of the Kazakh National University and other participants.

<sup>1</sup> Koreans, Volga Germans, and Crimean Tatars in Central Asia are victims of the forced deportation during the Stalin period. See Lee, 2003 for the forced deportations of the Soviet Koreans and the Volga Germans, and Williams, 1998 for that of the Crimean Tatars.

lacunae in studies of race and ethnicity reflecting ethnic cooperation and harmony in the former Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is a typical case of tolerant interethnic relations.

Unlike the explosive ethnic situation in former Soviet republics, however, the relationship between native Kazakhs and ethnic Russians has remained relatively stable in spite of occasional ethnic clashes.<sup>2</sup> Ethnic explosion and a one-sided massive exodus of Russians that many students of ethnicity expected have not taken place in this country.<sup>3</sup> A survey in 1994 also indicated that ethnic violence would not likely occur in the foreseeable future in Kazakhstan.<sup>4</sup>

What is the reason for the absence of acute ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan? Several factors in historical, demographic, economic, cultural, and social aspects have been cited by many researchers.

However, existing literature hardly focuses on language policies as one of the crucial factors that contributes to moderate interethnic relations in Kazakhstan. If it is right that ethnopolitics, which mobilize ethnic groups for political goals, could result in positive and negative interethnic consequences (Davis and Sabol 1998: 473), I believe that ethnopolitics by means of compromising language policies could lead to a more positive outcome in Kazakhstan.

## 2. LITERATURE ON ETHNIC CONCILIATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

In this section, several factors that have been identified as guiding tolerant interethnic relations between Kazakhs and ethnic Russians by students of Central Asia will be reviewed. Then, how language can be an important tool in ethnopolitics will be presented.

There are four factors often cited in this regard: state-led coercion and institutional accommodation, modernization, ethnic stratification, and weak Islamic fundamentalism. First, state-led coercion and institutional accommodation is often suggested as one of the reasons for lack of serious ethnic struggles in Kazakhstan (Schatz 2000b: 71-3). As a part of coercion and institutional accommodation, some scholars point to ethnic equality policies like *korenizatsiya* in the former Soviet republics. *Korenizatsiya* was implemented as a set of preferential treatment in education and employment of indigenous people and the policy was expected to be a buffer against ethnic collision between Kazakhs and ethnic Russians.

However, Kazakhstan is not the only country in the former Soviet republics in which *korenizatsiya* was implemented. The policy was enforced in most nations in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Thus, the question arises why other countries like

---

<sup>2</sup> An example of ethnic strife is the Almaty riot in December, 1986. The riot was a protest against the replacement of Kunayev, a Kazakh who served as the First Secretary for the previous 25 years, by Gennadii Kol'bin, a Russian who had worked in Georgia.

<sup>3</sup> Although many Russians left Kazakhstan, those who returned from Russia to the country were also Russians. According to the statistics, about 200,000 Russians left Kazakhstan in 1993 while 160,000 Russians entered this country. For details, see, Lee (2002: 57).

<sup>4</sup> The poll, conducted by the Center for Information and Analysis of the Supreme Council, revealed that 41.8% of those surveyed regarded interethnic relations as tranquil, 28.7% as friendly, 21% as not always friendly, and merely 2.5% as tense or vulnerable to explosion. Davis & Sabol (1998), cited in FBIS SOV-95-052, March 17 (1995: 76).

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are plagued with serious ethnic conflicts unlike Kazakhstan. It is very difficult to answer the above question from the theory of state-led coercion and institutional accommodation.

Second, modernization has been cited as one of the factors diminishing ethnic tension in Kazakhstan (Lee 2002: 43-4). According to the modernization perspective, the process of modernization transforms a heterogeneous society with various forms of languages, culture, immigration, and customs into a homogeneous one with more standard forms of institutions. As modernized forms of culture, for instance, advanced technology and mass media help eliminate parochial ethnic discrimination, and thus ethnic conflicts between Kazakhs and Russians have tended to take mild forms. As modernization proceeds in a society, ethnic tension that often was developing in heterogeneous society tends to subside. Kazakhstan is no exception in this regard.

Modernization, however, can stimulate nationalism as well. That is, as modernization proceeds, previously forgotten parochial nationalistic sentiments can be inculcated. In particular, immigration of Kazakhs from neighboring countries to northern Kazakhstan served as a stimulus in increasing national consciousness among Kazakhs (Lee 2002: 43-4). Modernization theory then is not always supported in its role of lessening ethnic tension in Kazakhstan.

Third, another reason for the lack of serious ethnic confrontation in Kazakhstan can be examined from the perspective of ethnic stratification. This perspective is based upon the premise that "entire ethnic groups occupy systematically different positions on the stratification scale" (Flere 1992: 260). Thus, ethnic conflicts intensify among various positions in the scale that each ethnic group holds (Lee 2002: 47-8).

However, in Kazakhstan there are other stratification scales in addition to ethnic stratification. For instance, society is stratified by residence as well as traditional clan system. According to the stratification by residence, there is discord even among Kazakhs themselves; for instance, between those in urban residence who mostly speak Russian with a poor command of Kazakh and those in rural residence who usually speak Kazakh with a poor knowledge of Russian.

In addition, there is also a traditional clan stratification system among the so-called three Zhuzes. The three Zhuzes, as autonomous confederates, occupy three different areas of Kazakhstan: Kishi Zhuz (Small Horde) in western Kazakhstan, Orta Zhuz (Middle Horde) in northern and northeastern, and Uly Zhuz (Great Horde) in southeastern Kazakhstan. The Zhuz stratification system has been enforced in Kazakhstan for a long time and each Zhuz has been fought for the control of government power even after the breakdown of the former Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, according to the perspective of ethnic stratification, diverse systems of ethnic stratification in Kazakhstan could be very effective in alleviating ethnic conflicts between Kazakhs and ethnic Russians. However, internal ethnic tension among Kazakhs themselves could become more intense, replacing one with other forms of ethnic stratification.

Fourth, scanty ethnic confrontation in Kazakhstan may also be attributed to the weak influence of fundamentalist Islam. In fact, Islam has been traditionally influential in the southern area of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan and the small southern area of Kazakhstan, while its influence has been rather weak in the Steppe area covering most of

---

<sup>5</sup> For details regarding Zhuz system in Kazakhstan, refer to Otarbaeva (1998), Kolsto (1998: 8), Lee (2002: 48-9).

Kazakhstan. Some surveys show that less than 14% of the Muslims in Kazakhstan conform to Islamic rituals (Rywkın 1998). Life in urban areas is much more secularized and more Russified. Generally speaking, the fundamental Islamic movement tends to be more antagonistic against Russians, as in neighboring Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is believed that the weak role of Islam may be related to the relative absence of ethnic tension in Kazakhstan.

Several factors may explain the reasons for the absence of serious interethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan as mentioned above. The conventional approach, however, hardly addresses the effects of language policies on the lessening of interethnic confrontations. This paper focuses on conciliatory language policies as one of the most important factors.

As Davis and Sabol (1998: 474-5) argue, “language is a central component of ethnicity and identity is a major rallying point for ethnic mobilization.” For instance, the designation of ‘state language,’ ‘official language,’ or ‘language of interethnic communication’ led to hot disputes over ethnic discrimination and even out-migration of ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan.

The role of language in ethnopolitics is enormous. Ethnic identity is often inculcated by discovery or use of one’s own language. This is explained by what Anderson (1983: 15) called the thesis of “imagined communities.” That is, the nation is “imagined” in that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, or meet them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Here language plays a crucial role in recalling the values of ethnicity and nationhood. Even though members of each ethnicity do not know or do not see one another directly, language serves as means by which all the members can imagine that they are living together. In this sense, Marina Han is right in saying that “the role of the language as an ethno-consolidating factor is shifting more and more towards the elements of ethnic self-consciousness” (Han 1995: 90-1).

In the process of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, language became one of the most important causes for ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet republics. The 14 non-Russian indigenous languages were often mobilized to shatter the dominance of Russia in those countries (Tishkov 1997: 98). For instance, Moldavians rallied to make Moldavian the official language of the country in 1989. The Baltic countries also penalized Russian language as a means to make national situation in favor of indigenous nationalities after the breakdown of the USSR.

Given the significance of language, it goes without saying that language policies can be one of the most crucial means to defuse ethnic tension between indigenous people and ethnic Russians.<sup>7</sup> In this article our goal is to see how compromising language policies contributed

---

<sup>6</sup> The most powerful organizations of Islamic radicals in Uzbekistan are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IDU: *Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana*) and ‘*Khizb-ut-Takhrir*’. The goal of IDU is to overthrow the current regime and to establish Islamic government (“*Boroda – nekhorošhii priznak*,” *Izvestiya*, March 3, 2003, [http://www.izvestia.ru/world/article30790]). ‘*Khizb-ut-Takhrir*’ is another Islamic organization representing religious extremism. More than 4,000 out of about 6,000 political prisoners (*politzaklyuchionnye*) in Uzbekistan currently belong to ‘*Khizb-ut-Takhrir*.’ “*Uzbekistan: ukroshchenie stroptivnykh*” *Karavan*, March 28, 2003 [http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?].

<sup>7</sup> In relations with the significance of the Russian language in CIS countries including Kazakhstan, the International Scientific-Practical Conference on “the Russian language as a international link in the Commonwealth countries” (*Russkii yazyk kak yazyk mezhnatsional’noy obshcheniya v snranakh Sodruzhestva*) was held in Saint-Peterburg on December 6, 2002. At the conference, O. Abdykarimov, Speaker in the Senate of Kazakhstan Parliament, claimed as follows: “in Kazakhstan where more

to the settlement of ethnic tension in Kazakhstan.

### 3. LANGUAGES AND ETHNIC POLITICS IN KAZAKHSTAN

This section explains how ethnic relations in Kazakhstan have developed so far along with language policies during the era of Soviet rule, and how language policies have unfolded following the breakdown of the former Soviet Union.

#### 3.1. Background in Language Policies of Kazakhstan

The relationship between Russia and other countries in Central Asia has been imperialistic since the tsarist era. However, the relationship changed to a certain degree during the Soviet era, especially in 1920s and 1930s, with the introduction of *korenizatsiya* (indigenization) policies. The *korenizatsiya* policy sought to encourage the upward mobility of indigenous people in their home republics by giving them preferential incentives. The policy inspired indigenous people to use and study their own native language or even face unemployment (Fierman 1985: 207-8).

However, by the mid-1930 the *korenizatsiya* policy was replaced by the Russification policy. Preferential treatment in education and employment was no longer emphasized and Russian language was required. The trend of Russification continued in the 1940s and into the early 1950s.

The post-Stalin period<sup>8</sup> witnessed the much more dominant status of the Russian language. Russian language was regarded as an important asset for a successful career. Thus indigenous parents tried to have their children educated in Russian-language schools.

During the 1960s and 1970s, indigenization tended to resurface especially in the urban areas due to the efforts of titular leaders in Kazakhstan. Russian and native languages changed their status as first and second languages, while Russian language retained its dominant position in daily life. That is, Kazakh took the status of first language and Russian occupied the position of a second language (Chinn and Kaiser 1996: 218).

During the late 1980s the indigenization process accelerated owing to the changing political environment in the former Soviet Union. The movement to promote the inferior status of titular language was supported by indigenous Kazakh elites who took power. They clamored for widespread use of native language, Kazakh, in spite of strong resistance from ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

The language policy by indigenous leaders is related to the demographic situation. Until the late 1980s Kazakhstan was the only CIS country in which Kazakh, the titular nationality, constituted a minority. Only in 1989 Kazakhs made up a plurality (6.2 million), although Russians had remained a plurality until 1979 (6 million) (Table 1). Thus, in the late 1980s indigenization program including extensive use of native language was reactivated.

---

than 100 nationalities are living, the language problem deserves special attention. In particular, the Russian language is widely used in educational, scientific, informational, and administrative spheres.” “*Konferentsiya po yazykovym voprosam*,” *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, December 7, 2002, [[http://www.kazpravda.kz/archive/07\\_12\\_2002](http://www.kazpravda.kz/archive/07_12_2002)].

<sup>8</sup> Joseph V. Stalin died in 1953.

**Table 1.** Demography in Kazakhstan, 1959-1993  
(Absolute number and percent of total population)

Nation	1950	1970	1979	1989	1993
Russians (%)	3,974,229(42.7)	5,521,917(42.4)	5,991,205(40.8)	6,227,549(37.8)	6,168,740(36.5)
Kazakhs (%)	2,794,966(30.0)	4,234,166(32.5)	5,289,349(36.0)	6,534,616(39.7)	7,296,942(43.1)

Source: Chinn and Kaiser, 1996: 189.

The following Table 2 in the 1990s shows that the proportion of language users corresponds roughly to demographic ratio of two principal nationalities, Kazakhs and Russians.<sup>9</sup> During the period from 1990 to 1994 the percentage of Kazakh schools increased from 34% to 38.3%, while that of Russian schools decreased from 44.7% to 34%. The percentage of schools using both languages increased from 20.2% to 26.8%. Similarly the percentage of students enrolled in Kazakh schools increased from 32.4% to 40%, while that in Russian schools decreased from 65% to 57%.

**Table 2.** Language of Instruction

Year	% of schools			% of enrolled students	
	Kazak	Russian	Mixed	Kazak schools	Russian schools
1990-1991	34	44.7	20.2	32.4	65
1993-1994	38.3	33.9	26.8	40.1	57.2

Source: Davis and Sabol (1998), [<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>].

### 3.2. Politics of Language

In this section, I will discuss what kinds of language policies have unfolded in Kazakhstan. The following five policies which were thought to contribute to harmonious interethnic relations were identified: strategy to create divergent messages, compromise on language titles, soft policy on language requirements for employment and higher education, mild policy on ethnic-language ties, and unified language policy.

#### 3.2.1. Strategy to Create Divergent Messages

At the center of the conflicts between Kazakhs and ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan was how to name the 1989 and 1997 language laws. As a result, ambiguous names given to language laws had the effect of providing different meanings to Kazakh-speaking people and Russian-speaking people, enabling the former to interpret the law one way and the latter

<sup>9</sup> Please refer to the Table 1 Demography in Kazakhstan, 1959-1993.

another. This kind of ambiguity could have led to avoidance of disputes surrounding the sensitive language laws in Kazakhstan.

Specifically the nationalist Kazakhs preferred ‘a law on a single state language’ (that is, Kazakh) while ethnic Russians wanted ‘a law on languages’ (plural) as a title of the language legislation in Kazakhstan. The issue was whether the title of the language legislation should adopt a singular form meaning Kazakh language only as a centerpiece or plural forms including Kazakh language as well as Russian language on an equal basis. This issue was resolved in an ambiguous way. That is, the 1989 Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet adopted the Russian title “Law on Languages” (*Zakon o iazykakh*) in the plural form, implying that the law is concerned about various languages. This title, however, was expressed in the Kazakh name “Law on Language(s)” (*Til turaly zang*), allowing the Kazakh title to be unclear about whether it deals with one language or more (Fierman 1998: 178). The Kazakh title could let the Kazakh-speaking people believe that the language law deals with the single, state language of Kazakhstan, Kazakh. That is, the Kazakhstan Supreme Court adopted the ambiguous forms of title “Law on Language(s)” (*Til turaly zang*) to avoid ethnic conflicts surrounding the title of language rather than the unequivocal Kazakh title “Law on Language” (*Til turaly zang*) which could have touched ethnic tension in Kazakhstan.

Another example to create divergent messages between different nationalities stems from the lack of accurate linguistic equivalents between Kazakh and Russian, in particular, regarding the expressions for people. The term in Russian for nationality (*natsional’nost*) is different from that for nation (*natsiia*), but both terms are expressed in one term in Kazakh, *ult*. Therefore, as Schatz (2000b: 87) argues, “a reference in Kazakh to *ult* would connote an ethnic community to an ethnonationalist titular audience, while the same reference in Russian to *natsiia* would connote a community defined in civic terms.” This kind of equivocal interpretation could permit both Kazakh nationalists and ethnic Russians to understand one another just for their convenience. It could allow both nationalities to avoid sensitive ethnic disputes regarding linguistic designations.

### 3.2.2. *Compromise on Language Titles*

Another question is about language titles. In fact, whether the Kazakh language or the Russian should be restored as the state language became a hotly debated issue, since it was concerned with ethnic identity at the time of Kazakhstan independence. Around this time, such language titles as “official”, “state” or “language of cross-national communication” were used to indicate Russian or Kazakh. How to reach a compromise in naming of languages was very important in order to avoid thorny ethnic issues.

The 1989 language law christened Kazakh as the “state” (*gosudarstvennyi*) language. This law was a result of the long-time efforts by Kazakh nationalists. In the 1960s and 1970s, Kazakhstan witnessed a large-scale shift from Kazakh to Russian in the language of instruction in elementary schools. By the mid-1980s, approximately 40% of young Kazakh were not able to read in their native language (Olcott 1990: 68). Concerned about rapid linguistic Russification, those Kazakh nationalists made enormous efforts to reinstate Kazakh as the state language in Kazakhstan.

In 1990 several drafts of the Declaration of Sovereignty were also proposed in this regard. One draft of the Declaration of Sovereignty recommended Kazakh as the “state” (*gosudarstvennyi*) language, and Russian as the “official” (*ofitsialnyi*) language. Another draft suggested that Kazakh should be the “state language of the republic” and Russian “the

state language of the USSR” (Fierman 1998: 179; Schatz 2000a: 9), perhaps infuriating ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan. However, the language topics in the constitutions were discarded completely from the Declaration of Sovereignty. What is more important is that the distinction between ‘state’ language and ‘official’ language is quite ambiguous (Schatz 2000a: 9; 2000b: 85).

Later Kazakh was designated as the only state language in the 1993 and 1997 constitution. In a compromise between Kazakhs and Russians, however, Russian was also given the status of the language of “cross-national communication” (*iazyk mezhnatsionalnogo obshcheniia*) (Melvin 1995). In addition, Russian was ensured to be used “on an equal footing” (*naravnes*) with the state language, Kazakh, in state and local administrations.<sup>10</sup> This compromise helped alleviate anxieties of ethnic Russians who were unhappy with the coveted title of ‘state language’ given to Kazakh.

### 3.2.3. *Soft Policy on Language Requirements for Employment and Higher Education*

The lack of fierce ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan was also attributable, to some degree, to the successful resolution of successive disputes between Kazakh nationalists and ethnic Russians regarding language requirements for employment and education.

Kazakh nationalists tried to introduce mandatory linguistic requirements for employment in government and for entrance into higher education. They argued that all officials in government positions should show proficiency in the state language, Kazakh. On the contrary, ethnic Russians took issue with linguistic requirements, arguing that those stipulations were violating the constitution that prohibits discrimination. There have been contentious debates over this issue, but the issue subsided as both sides took a step back.

The draft of 1989 law also included the clause that Kazakh (and Russian and other languages) should be mandatory to students at the “level requisite for fulfilling professional functions and defined by the curricula” (Article 21), but the clause was eliminated from the ratified law later (Fierman 1998: 181).

In addition, the 1990 language program even set a timetable of specified linguistic employment requirements (*kvalifikatsionnye trebovaniia*). Thus, a list of high-level workers (*rukovodiashchie rabotniki*) who require a certain level of language proficiency was compiled. Linguistic requirements, however, were toned down only 4 months later and the program was amended so that the Council of Ministers could have discretion to make its own decisions regarding job requirements (Fierman 1998: 181). The topic of language requirements continued to be at the center of hot debates between Kazakh nationalists and ethnic Russians, but the heat surrounding the issue was lost with time.

The same can be said of the draft of the 1996 language law. The draft also included the clause that “the government, ministries, and departments, as well as local representative and executive organs” to “confirm and introduce an approximate list of positions for which a certain level of knowledge of the state language [was] required and in accordance with the job requirements” (Article 1). The draft was later rewritten so that the government could be endowed with discretion to check the list of jobs for which language proficiency is needed. The revision was also made so that it could be carried out only “annually, in states, in accordance with the state program, and reinforced with the necessary material, technical, and

---

<sup>10</sup> “Nursultan Nazarbaev: *russkii yazyk nam nuzhen, kak khleb.*” *Karavan*, June 23, 2000, [<http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?>].

financial resources” (Fierman 1998: 182). However, even the revised draft was subsequently changed by the Constitutional Council. That is, the Council advised the President that the government be stripped of the right to judge the list of jobs in need of language requirements, since the draft violated the constitution.

Thus, potential danger in interethnic tension was eliminated by taking a soft stance on requirements for employment and higher education in Kazakhstan.

#### *3.2.4. Mild Policy on Ethnic-Language Tie*

One of the most important issues regarding language policy in Kazakhstan is how to force the Kazakhs to acquire their own language, based on the assumption that the connection between ethnic Kazakhs and the Kazakh language not be broken.

In fact, so many Kazakhs are not equipped with proper knowledge of their own Kazakh language due to the extensive Russification policy under the Soviet rule (Schatz 2000a; Fierman 1998: 183). In reaction to this linguistic situation, many Kazakh nationalists were dissatisfied with the fact that Kazakhs who do not know the native language of Kazakhs could be Kazakh. This might be based upon the assumption that none of other nationalities in Kazakhstan would be bothered to learn or speak Kazakh unless a large number of Kazakhs are willing to do so. Even the expression “Kazakh orphans”, meaning children of Kazakh parents who were brought up and educated in Russian was frequently appeared in the local press.

The atmosphere at the time was well summarized by the following statements: “May a Kazakh speak the state language with other Kazakhs”<sup>11</sup> or “It is desirable for everyone in Kazakhstan to know Kazakh. For managerial jobs it is acceptable if non-Kazakhs do not know the language. But for ethnic Kazakhs, knowledge of the mother tongue should be required. Without knowledge of it, ethnic Kazakhs are not worthy individuals to hold management positions.”<sup>12</sup>

The movement of Kazakh nationalists to encourage ethnic Kazakhs to acquire Kazakh language was expressed in the 1987 resolution, whose goal was to provide Kazakhs with chances to learn their own language. In spite of the growing nationalist sentiment for acquiring the native language, however, requirements for language acquirement or punishment for failure to do so were not spelled out in any official document before 1997. Only in 1997 when the relationship between Kazakh nationality and Kazakh language was fueling debates, the center of hot debates, the draft of 1997 law required ethnic Kazakh workers in state administration to gain the knowledge of Kazakh language ahead of other nationalities. Later, the draft, which was passed by the lower house of the parliament, allowed Kazakh employees to have 4 years (that is, until 2001) and non-Kazakh employees to have an additional 5 more years (that is, until 2006) before proving their abilities in Kazakh language (Fierman 1998: 183-4). The draft, however, was thrown out by the upper house of parliament.

Thus, the failure of several attempts to strengthen the weak connection between ethnicity and language among Kazakhs has contributed to the abatement of ethnic tension between

---

<sup>11</sup> It was the informal slogan in 1998 at the Department for the Development of Language (Astana) (Schatz 2000a).

<sup>12</sup> *Sotsialistiq Qazaqstan*, June 16, July 13, and August 5, 1989; *Qazaq adebiiyeti* August 18, 1989, cited in Fierman(1998: 183).

Kazakhs and ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

### 3.2.5. *Unified Language Policy*

One of the most significant factors allowing various nationalities to co-exist peacefully may be the unified language policy in Kazakhstan. In spite of the various demands to meet the needs of many provinces, the federal government did not allow them. This is crucial in keeping the nation integrated since Kazakhstan is very large and distribution of many nationalities is significantly different from one province to another.

Generally speaking, Russians are a majority or a plurality in northern Kazakhstan, while ethnic Kazakhs live in southern Kazakhstan. Thus, the implication of language policy that was drawn up on a federal level could be naturally quite different from region to region.

For instance, according to the appendix to the 1990 language program, a sliding schedule was suggested to do office work in state language, but it was to be implemented differently according to the region. However, the President of Kazakhstan subsequently rejected the program and instead introduced Kazakhstan's Concept of Language Policy based upon the unified language policy (Fierman 1998: 184).

The reason for the unified language policy may be have arisen due to the fear of disintegration by the federal government. Various demands for divergent language policies on a provincial level might result in insurmountable gap in linguistic policies among different regions, possibly blurring the national identity of Kazakhstan.

This kind of fear is not unfounded as seen in the following instance. According to the 1989 language law, many Russian language schools were converted into Kazakh language schools. The trend was extensive in the southern Kazakhstan where Kazakhs took a majority or plurality. Fiercely opposing the use of Kazakh language, however, many ethnic Russians took a step to move their residence to the northern region where Russians are in a majority or plurality and even demanded rights of self-government.

Thus, any language policy accommodating each of diverse provinces could worsen ethnic conflicts. In this sense, the unified language policy could be very effective in maintaining the ethnic integration of the nation.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the unified language policy carries a potential danger. The unified program, which could not respond to the diverse demands of separate regions, happened to give rise to dissatisfaction in a certain province, as in the following case. The 'State Program for Development of the Kazakh Language' in 1990 demanded that all the government regulations and documents be followed by their translated editions in Kazakh by 1994. Ethnic Russians and other nationalities were very angry about the Program and the relations between Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs became tense, especially in the northern Kazakhstan where Kazakhs were in a minority. A certain chairmen of local collective farms were even fired for being incapable of communicating in Kazakh, official language, with their Kazakh supervisors (Tishkov 1997: 99). The unified language program despite its shortcomings, however, is related to the identity of Kazakhstan. The unified language program might be effective in making Kazakhstan's identity cohesive, even though it may be vague and contradictory in certain aspects.

4. DISCUSSION ON THE BACKGROUND OF CONCILIATORY LANGUAGE POLICIES

What is the background of conciliatory language policies in Kazakhstan, as seen in the previous section? The discussion should be based upon the following factors including geographical aspect, the unavoidable real need for the use of Russian language, and the important role of the Russophones in running the country. I will go over those factors in greater detail.

First of all, geographically speaking, the northern part of Kazakhstan has long been strongly linked to the southern Russian territory and the ambiance there is heavily pro-Russian. Russians are a plurality or majority in the composition of residents in the northern half of the nation (See Figure 1). In particular, such cities as Uralsk, Petropavlost, Pavlodar, and Ust-Kamenogorsk have formed a pro-Russian bulwark since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Melvin 1995: 117).

**Figure 1.** Geographical and Demographic Composition of Oblasts in Kazakhstan



Source: Reuel Hanks, 1998: 8. Some different geographical names were adopted according to “*Karta Avtomobil’nykh Dorog Respubliki Kazakhstan*,” published in 2000.

In the worst case of interethnic confrontation, the Russophones constituting a solid majority in those regions may secede in protest against the pro-Kazakh language policies and consequently civil war may ensue. This kind of geographical and ethnic situation might have forced Nazarbaev, the President of Kazakhstan, to take a conciliatory step towards Russian language.

Second, what should be remembered with regard to conciliatory language policies in Kazakhstan is the realistic situation of language use in daily life. Even though Kazakh nationalists argue for a policy mandating the use of Kazakh language, the map of language use in the country shows a very different picture. Even indigenous Kazakhs use Russian extensively for practical needs. The situation is well shown in the remark by a leader of

*Qazaq tili* (= the Kazakh language), the Kazakh cultural organization:

“one turns on the television and sees Kazakhs in high offices speaking Russian or speaking Kazakh in a very stuttering, clumsy way, having great difficulty with the pronunciation. If this is the situation with of our best and the brightest, what will then happen to our language? ... First and foremost the Kazakhs themselves ought to show respect for the state language, there can be no question about it.”<sup>14</sup>

Although more than 98% of Kazakhs in 1989 identified Kazakh as their ‘*rodnoi yazyk*’ (mother tongue), the figure would appear to be overestimated given that the literacy among ethnic Kazakhs remained about 60-72% (Kolsto 1998) and 30% of Kazakhs speak only Russian (Esenova 1996: 692).

Regarding the preference of language for education, about 46% of the inhabitants of Kazakhstan want their children to be educated in Russian while about 28% of those prefer their children to be educated in Kazakh (Table 3). Around 9% of those want their native language, and 4% favor some other language, for instance, English.

Given the present situation in Kazakhstan, it can be assumed that it would have been very difficult to take any one-sided step in favor of indigenous Kazakh group only.

**Table 3.** In Which Language Do Inhabitants of Kazakhstan Prefer Their Children to Be Educated?

(Unit: %)

Profession, social position	Kazakh	Russian	Language of their nationality*	Some other language	Find it difficult to answer
Blue-collar workers	19.46	53.69	9.40	3.36	9.40
Collective-farm members	40.74	44.44	9.26	0.00	5.56
Engineering & technical personnel	20.25	50.28	11.86	3.39	8.47
White-collar employees	29.69	44.37	8.07	5.73	5.99
Entrepreneurs	45.00	47.50	7.50	2.50	7.50
Nonworking persons	21.43	50.00	7.14	0.00	14.29
College students	34.21	31.58	0.00	2.63	2.63
Retired persons	20.63	42.06	10.32	5.56	7.14

\* This column includes the responses of persons who were not Kazakh or Russian

Source: Arenov and Kalmykov, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> *Karavan*, February 9, 1996, cited in Kolsto (1998). Although this quotation describes the situation in 1998, the harsh reality in the use of Kazakh, the native language, did not improve much even in recent years. It is well shown by the report that much effort is being made to guarantee the equal amount of TV broadcasting in Kazakh and in Russian. Aigerim Mekisheva, “*Kazakhskii yazyk ubytkane prinosit*,” *Karavan*, December 13, 2002, [http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?].

Another factor that should not be overlooked is the important role of the Russophones in running the economies, services, and technological areas in Kazakhstan. Those Russian-speaking persons were products of the former Soviet Union. In an attempt of the Soviet Union to Sovietize national elites, the current elites in Kazakhstan were mobilized. Later they were accustomed to Russian culture, receiving education in the large cities of Russia. Many of those national elites could recite poems by Pushkin and Lermontov, but could not speak their native language properly (Gammer 2000). After the collapse of the USSR, the role of these Russian-speaking elites both in running the country and in keeping cooperation with neighboring Russia was of paramount importance.<sup>15</sup> Thus, conciliatory language policies towards Russian may be indispensable in order to lure them to stay in Kazakhstan.

Behind all these kinds of conciliatory language policies is Nazarbaev, the President of Kazakhstan. He serves as a unifying force of divisive interethnic relations. He has played an important role both in defusing ethnic conflicts and in addressing the fears and anxieties of ethnic Russians. His concerns about interethnic relations are well verified by his decree "On the Formation of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan," an advisory organization whose goal is to lessen ethnic conflicts and racial discrimination. He also proposed to create both the association of cultural and scientific activities under the heading "For the Eternal Friendship between Russian and Kazakhstan People"<sup>16</sup> and the fund for the defense and support of the Russian language in CIS countries.<sup>17</sup>

Those efforts of Nazarbaev<sup>18</sup> make smaller have received a strong support from both Russians and Kazakhs. The referendum in 1995 on Nazarbaev's Presidency showed both extensive and multiethnic support with 95.4% approval rate out of more than 91% of Kazakhstan's eligible ballots (Davis and Savol 1998).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary and conclusion, my research is about languages and ethnic politics in Kazakhstan. Thus far the literature on ethnic relations in the post-Soviet Union has mostly dealt with ethnic tension and conflicts, ignoring ethnic cooperation and harmonies in the former Soviet Union. But Kazakhstan turns out to be a good example of compromising interethnic relations.

The relationship between native Kazakhs and ethnic Russians could have remained relatively calm and peaceful in spite of occasional ethnic clashes. As this paper showed,

---

<sup>15</sup> During his visit to Moscow in June, 2000, President Nazarbaev even emphasized that "Kazakhs need the Russian language, as if they need bread every day" (*Dlya kazakhov russkii yazyk nuzhen, kak khleb, kazhdyi den*'). "Nursultan Nazarbaev: russkii yazyk nam nuzhen, kak khleb." *Karavan*, June 23, 2000, [<http://www.caravan.kz>].

<sup>16</sup> "Za vechnuyu druzhbu rossiiskogo i kazakhstanskogo narodov"

<sup>17</sup> "Nursultan Nazarbaev: russkii yazyk nam nuzhen, kak khleb." *Karavan*, June 23, 2000, [<http://www.caravan.kz>].

<sup>18</sup> Presumably in response to Nazarbaev's friendly endeavours so far, Russia declared "The Year of Kazakhstan in Russia" (*God Kazakhstana v Rossii*) and invited the President of Kazakhstan in its opening ceremony on February 17, 2003. "Gody respublik' kak sposob resheniya ekonomicheskikh problem" *Strana*, February 18, 2003, [<http://www.strana.ru>].

behind conciliatory ethnic relations in Kazakhstan are such language policies as the strategy to create divergent messages, the compromise of language titles, the soft policy on language requirements for employment and higher education, mild policy on ethnic-language ties, and the unified language policy.

Although my paper is based upon limited information from secondary data, internet, newspapers, and other sources, the results of this study are very meaningful to other ethnic minorities, for instance, Soviet Koreans in Central Asia. Currently most of Soviet Koreans in CIS<sup>19</sup> countries are concentrated both in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. According to recent statistics, about those Koreans in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan numbered about 99,700 and 230,000 respectively.

These Koreans are suffering hardships resulting from ethnocentrism in those countries following the breakdown of the former Soviet Union. That is, most of the Soviet Koreans in Central Asia, who did not acquire native language, encounter the same discriminatory ethnic problems in occupation and education as ethnic Russians. Therefore current research on language politics between Kazakhs and Russians could help to shed light on similar interethnic problems the Soviet Koreans have faced. Further, the present study on language and ethnic politics could provide useful insights to the resolution of those tasks ethnic Koreans had to deal with in those countries in Central Area.

There is, however, the one caveat to make in interethnic relations in Kazakhstan. That is, interethnic relations in Kazakhstan have remained calm so far, but there are many thorny issues to be resolved. They include the ownership of Baikonur space center, territorial conflicts in the northern territory<sup>20</sup>, ethnic stratification, inward and outward migration, and problems of provincial autonomy. It means that more comparative research in Central Asia is necessary to confirm the findings of the current study in terms of the effectiveness of conciliatory language policies in interethnic relations in Kazakhstan.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict, 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso Press.
- Arenov, M. M. and S. K. Kalmykov, 1995, "Sovremennaia iazykovaia situatsiia Kazakhstane," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 12: 76-81 (<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>).
- Chinn, Jeff and Robert Kaiser, 1996, *Russians as the New Minority: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Soviet Successor States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Davis, Sue and Steven O. Sabol, 1998, "The importance of being ethnic: Minorities in post-Soviet states: the case of Russians in Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers* 3: 473-491 (<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>).
- Esenova, Saulesh, 1996, "The outflow of Minorities from the post-Soviet state: the case of Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers* 24(4): 691-707.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Sodruzhestvo nezavisimykh gosudarstv* (the Commonwealth of Independent States).

<sup>20</sup> Talks are under way regarding the demarcation of the border between Russia and Kazakhstan. Out of the total boundary (6,740 kilometers) between two countries, the borderline between Russia and *Zapadno-Kazakhstanskaya Oblast* in northwestern Kazakhstan is 1,500 kilometers long. But five sixths of this borderline is still in dispute and has yet to be settled. "Kazakhstan i Rossiya delyat prigranichnye zemli na prigranichnoi polose," *Karavan*, April 12, 2002 [<http://www.caravan.kz>].

- Fierman, William, 1985, "Language Development in Soviet Uzbekistan," in Isabelle Kreindler ed., *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp.36-64.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1998, "Language and Identity in Kazakhstan: Formulations in Policy Documents 1987-1997," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31(2): 171-186.
- Flere, Sergej, 1992, "Cognitive Adequacy of Sociological Theories in Explaining Ethnic Antagonism in Yugoslavia." in Kumar Rupesinghe, Peter King and Olga Vorkunova, eds., *Ethnicity and Conflict in a Post-Communist World: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China*, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, pp.251-270.
- Gammer, Moshe, 2000, "Post-Soviet Central Asia and post-colonial francophone Africa: Some associations," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36(2): 124-151.
- Han, Marina, 1995, "Languages and Ethnic Self-Consciousness among Koreans in Kazakhstan," *Korea Journal* 35(2): 89-106.
- Hanks, Reuel R., 1998, "Directions in the Ethnic Politics of Kazakhstan: Concession, Compromise, or Catastrophe?," *Journal of Third World Studies* 15(1): 142-162.
- Helton, Arthus C., 1996, "Forced Migration in the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union," *Migrationworld* 24(5): 33-35.
- Kolsto, Pal, 1998, "Anticipating demographic superiority: Kazakh thinking on integration and nation building," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50(1): 51-69 (<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>).
- Lee, Chaimun, 2002, "The Applicability of Sociological Theories to Ethnic Conflicts in Central Asia: The Case of Kazakhstan," *International Area Review* 5(2): 39-63.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2003, "The Lost Sheep: The Soviet Deportations of Ethnic Koreans and Volga Germans," *Review of Korean Studies* 6(1): 219-250.
- Melvin, Neil, 1995, *Russians Beyond Russia: The Politics of National Identity*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Olcott, Martha Brill, 1990, "Perestroika in Kazakhstan," *Problems of Communism* 39(4), (July/August): 23-53.
- Otarbaeva, Bakhytnur, 1998, "A Brief History of the Kazakh People," *Nationalities Papers* 26(3): 421-432 (<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>).
- Rywkin, Michael, 1998, "Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia: Fifteen shades of difference," *Nationalities Papers* 26(3): 573-579 (<http://proquest.umi.edu/pdqweb>).
- Schatz, Edward, 2000a, "The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52(3): 489-508. (<http://infotrac.apla.galegroup.com/itw/infomark>).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2000b, "Framing Strategies and Non-Conflict in Multi-Ethnic Kazakhstan," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6(2): 71-94.
- Tishkov, Valery, 1997, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict In and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Williams, Brian Glyn, 1998, "The Crimean Tatar exile in Central Asia: A Case study in group destruction and survival," *Central Asian Survey* 17(2): 285-317 (<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>).
- "Годы республик как способ решения экономических проблем," *Страна* February 18, 2003 (<http://www.strana.ru>).
- "Казахский язык убытка не приносит," *Караван*, December 13, 2002 (<http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?>).
- "Казахстан и россия делят приграничные земли на приграничной полосе," *Караван*,

- April 12, 2002 (<http://www.caravan.kz>).
- “Конференция по языковым вопросам,” *Казахстанская Правда*, December 7, 2002 ([http://www.kazpravda.kz/archive/07\\_12\\_2002](http://www.kazpravda.kz/archive/07_12_2002)).
- “Нурсултан назарбаев приезжает открывать год Казахстана в России,” *Страна*, February 17, 2003 (<http://www.strana.ru>).
- “Нурсултан назарбаев: русский язык нам нужен, как хлеб,” *Караван*, June 23, 2000 (<http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?>).
- “Президент Нурсултан назарбаев считает себя компетентным оптимистом: Казахстан инициирует переход на новый уровень отношений с Россией,” *Независимая газета*, February 20, 2003 (<http://www.ng.ru>).
- “Узбекистан: укрощение строптивых,” *Караван*, March 28, 2003 (<http://www.caravan.kz/content.asp?>).