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**NARRATIVES OF LATINIZATION OF THE KAZAKH LANGUAGE:
POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND
LANGUAGE REFORM**

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ABSTRACT: Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has been implementing linguistic reforms to entrench the status of the Kazakh language, specifically the transition from Cyrillic to Latin script, officially initiated in 2017. Framed as part of a broader program of modernization, the reform seeks to entrench national identity and align with international standards; yet, it also precipitates complex debates on its geopolitical, socio-cultural, and linguistic dimensions. This narrative analysis examines the Latinization of the Kazakh language from a post-colonial perspective, exploring how the reform serves as both an anti-colonial critique of Soviet legacies and a post-colonial attempt to reclaim cultural sovereignty. From an analytical point of view based on qualitative content analysis, the study interprets policy documents, academic texts, elite discourses, and media reports as meaning-making texts that project the Latinization project as an icon of modernity and differentiation. The analytical approach helped reveal how Latinization is linked to identity formation, nationalist discourses championed by the elite, and geopolitical repositioning—primarily through the incorporation of diasporic kandas and distance from the Russophone world. As great as the reform is, a qualitative break from colonial discourses, it precipitates tensions around inclusivity, intergenerational access, and linguistic segregation. The shift to the Latin script in Kazakhstan is a reimagining of national identity that is both progressive and weighed down by history. There must be an even-handed approach to implementation so that modernizing ambitions can be reconciled with social solidarity.

KEYWORDS: Kazakh language, Latinization, post-colonialism, national identity, language policy, linguistic reform, Central Asia

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's leadership has consistently worked to enhance the status of the Kazakh language. Alongside

these efforts, the transition to the Latin alphabet has been discussed on multiple occasions, justified as a necessity to align with modern demands, similar to other Central Asian republics such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. On January 11, 2013, the First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, announced during a Senate meeting the planned transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin alphabet. In 2017, President Nazarbayev stated that by 2025, all official documents, periodicals, and books must transition to the Latin script (Назарбаев/Nazarbayev, 2017).

This program raises several questions about its short- and long-term implications. Which political groups support this initiative? What geopolitical, political, or ethnolinguistic processes influenced the first president's decision? Most importantly, what are the potential consequences of transitioning to the Latin alphabet, such as the narrowing of Russian-speaking cultural spaces and the generational gap that can arise when parents and children use different writing systems?

President Nazarbayev announced the program, eliciting diverse and often polarized reactions from both academic and public communities. Opinions on this issue vary widely. Unfortunately, due to the limited timeframe since its introduction, comprehensive monographs on this subject are lacking in Kazakh academia. In the 2010s, expert communities and online publications, written predominantly in Russian, largely shaped the discourse on the issue. The activity of these authors is understandable: the narrowing of the scope of the Russian language directly influenced their position in the Kazakh society.

Due to the program's wide-ranging response and mixed assessments, both within the academic community and among ordinary citizens, the range of opinions on this issue proved to be very broad. Most experts and academics interpret the Latinization process as either a reflection of geopolitical preferences or a language (Панфилова/Panfilova, 2017).

The transition was formalized through the *Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated October 26, 2017, No. 569 "On the transition of the Kazakh language alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin script."* To support implementation, the *Order of the Prime Minister dated November 14, 2017, No. 153-r* established the National Commission for the Transition to Latin Script, later repealed in 2022 (Order No. 176-r). Due to numerous technical problems, the National Institute of Language Studies proposed updated methodologies to ease the process for citizens.

Post-colonial theory and its relevance for Central Asia

Central Asia increasingly meets the conditions underlying post-colonial theory (du Boulay & du Boulay, 2020). Its application nevertheless yields sharp contradictions, for, although post-colonial discourse claims the need to erase the past with "the process of deconstruction of old myths" (Krishnaswami & Hawley, 2007), the discourse in substance aligns itself with the two main projects that anti-colonialism was proposing: 1) "a deconstruction of the West as the object of imperial discourse, which was represented as the *Great Colonizer*, and 2) the

legitimation of counter-discourses and the elaboration of anti-colonial strategies (Ионов/Ионов, 2009).

In summary, the dual nature of post-colonial discourse is reflected in its opposition to colonial legacies while simultaneously fostering a new self-identification model. In "nationalizing" states like Kazakhstan, this model focuses on creating a distinct ethnic identity. Indicators of this identity evolve as state policies adjust to new priorities. For example, in specific periods of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, nationalist rhetoric played a significant role in shaping major political decisions, particularly in language policy. Understanding the nuances of nation-building involves examining prevailing trends, such as whether nationalism is civic, statist, separatist, or ethnic.

The duality of post-colonial discourse is also evident in its fragmentation into themes such as nationalism, gender, empire, and regionalism (Surucu, 2002). This trend complicates efforts to establish a stable ethnic identity in a multi-ethnic state that strives to meet international norms and standards. However, in the process of *nationalizing* states, the balance between global and local histories shifts toward the latter due to the dominance of anti-colonial and post-colonial discourses. It often sidelines global themes in favor of academic interest.

Research objectives

This study aims to examine the post-colonial and anti-colonial dimensions of the ongoing Latinization (Romanization) of the Kazakh language. Post-colonial theory provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the ideological and political forces driving this reform, situated at the intersection of post-colonial reclamation and anti-colonial resistance within Kazakhstani society. To analyze this process, it is necessary to identify the dominant sociopolitical trends of the current period and assess their alignment with shifting markers of ethnic identity, which evolve in response to nation-building imperatives. The study incorporates an analysis of contemporary online discourse surrounding the reform, focusing on its significance, implications, and impact on the status of the Russian language, to evaluate the prevalence and resonance of post-colonial narratives in public debate. Additionally, the research revisits previous historical episodes of Latinization to trace continuities and discontinuities, to determine whether the reform is primarily anti-colonial, post-colonial, or a hybrid of both.

Literature review

Post-Soviet legacy and nationalizing language policy

The role of the Soviet and post-Soviet legacy in nation-building, which also affected changes in the status of the Kazakh and Russian languages, was widely discussed by several authors, including how the political elite utilized Soviet tools to promote the status of Kazakh as the state language (Schatz, 2000). Some authors, following Brubaker's idea of "nationalizing nationalisms," have shown how nationalism was used by the state in the name of building a stable nation, combining the problem of language with the survival of its nation (Davé, 2007; Shakhanova, 2018).

Language policy and the construction of national identity

Representatives of the Western academic community were more interested in the role of language policy as part of nation-state building. For example, Rees and Williams (2017) believe it led to the emergence of an exclusive *Kazakh nation* speaking its own language.

Post-colonial discourse and identity construction

Only a few authors have linked post-colonial studies with the promotion of language reforms through the nationalizing regime (Fierman, 2009) in Kazakhstan. Kudaibergenova (2016) insists that the governing elites appropriated the post-colonial rhetoric that transformed their understanding of post-coloniality into the dominant narrative. It is this factor, she believes, that makes it possible for political post-colonialism, represented by “national patriots,” to advance their projects, namely to stop the marginalization of the Kazakh language.

However, this is not a complete explanation of the fundamental reasons for translating the Kazakh language into the Latin script. The demographic factor should also be included: an increase in the proportion of Kazakhs (63.3%) and the mass departure of the Russian-speaking population (Laruelle, 2015). It should be noted that the program for the repatriation of compatriots also contributed to an increase in interest in the Kazakh language. The first Kazakh president consistently advocated fulfilling the dream of Kandas (repatriates) to return to their historic home (Прохоров/Prokhorov, 2021). This problem originated not only from the desire to restore historical justice; it also addressed a practical problem: restoring the demographic balance in favor of Kazakhs. It is this group that is the most active supporter of distancing itself from Russia. In their political program, Kazakhstan was a colony of Russia not only during the tsarist period, but also as part of the Soviet Union. The mixing of interests among various groups, where colonial, post-colonial, and post-Soviet problems intersect, poses a significant challenge for researchers (Moore, 2001).

A distinct feature of recent post-colonial discourse is its emergence from academic circles in post-colonial regions, which are increasingly integrated into the global scientific arena. At the same time, this arena is witnessing a crisis of Eurocentrism and Americentrism, adding disruptive elements to the processes analyzed through post-colonial discourse (Июнов/Ionov, 2009). Although post-colonial discourse aims to mediate between the colonized and the colonizer, it is not free from internal contradictions. The mainstream literature on the history of the nation-state (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021) insists that the dominant European narrative erases the dimension of colonialism as a constituent force of the modern state. Apparently, such an intersection of conflicting narratives leads newly founded states to adopt the concept of an ethnic nation-state.

Confronting the colonial past necessitates constructing a new identity model—one that positions segments of the Kazakh population, previously excluded from the dominant post-colonial narratives of the 1950s–1980s, as key stakeholders and drivers of the 'Latinization' project. The latter represents the final stages of Kazakhstan's post-colonial development, although this process primarily concluded during the Soviet period, from the 1950s to the 1980s (Dadabayeva &

Sharipova, 2015). If in the Soviet period the post-colonial aspect was represented by broad integration into the all-Union Russian-speaking cultural space, then for independent Kazakhstan, the tasks of Kazakh nation-state building require, on the contrary, a departure from the common space in order to focus on the development of culture in the native language. Paradoxically enough, the combination of missed post-colonial and even anti-colonial discourses coincides with the post-Soviet trends.

Kazakh language, national identity, and the nation-building project

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping Kazakhstan's national identity, particularly in the post-Soviet era. Several studies explore the sociopolitical and cultural significance of language as a mechanism for identity construction and resistance. Davé's *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language, and Power* (2007) provides a comprehensive structural analysis of language policy in a multilingual society, noting how Russian maintains its dominance in education, business, and urban life. Russian continues to symbolize modernity and socioeconomic status, and Kazakh is often built as a repository of national heritage and ethnic authenticity.

Kudaibergenova (2016), in *The Use and Abuse of Post-colonial Discourses in Post-independent Kazakhstan*, queries the politicization of language as a political strategy. She refers to the tension involved in using Kazakh for national unification and the possibility of exclusionary nationalism that would marginalize Russian-speaking minorities to the periphery. This charge is echoed in more general scholarship warning against symbolic exclusion in language reform.

Modernity, Nationalism, Resistance: Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan situates language within larger modernization and nation-building projects, for instance, the transition to the Latin alphabet. It highlights the symbolic break with Soviet tradition and the embrace of a global, modern identity, and notes divergence between urban and rural engagement with these reforms.

Imagining Community in Soviet Kazakhstan: An Historical Analysis of Narrative on Nationalism in Kazakh-Soviet Literature provides further historical background. This work continues Soviet literature in both embracing and resisting dominant discourses, making the Kazakh language a strategy of cultural survival and identity.

Historical trajectories of Latinization and national narratives

In order to understand the Latinization of the Kazakh language, it is important to situate it within a historical context. The 1930s–1940s comparative linguistic reforms and post-independence vary in their ideological agenda and agents. Mobilizing forces of the Kazakh identity were language, traditions, and history, and less religion. Linguistic and historical continuity serve as principal markers of identity. Ремнев/Remnev (2011) complements this view, emphasizing the importance of language and traditions over religion in shaping national belonging. This trend reflects what can be termed a post-colonial nationalism that distances itself from Russia and reorients toward a traditional, ethnocentric identity, rather than creating a hybrid or symbiotic cultural model. Both Kazakh

and Russian scholars emphasize the importance of aligning language policy with “historical policy” to legitimize statehood and strengthen collective memory.

Latinization as post-colonial reclamation

The Latin script reform is more than an orthographic adjustment; it is a symbolic act of cultural sovereignty and identity reconstruction. It signifies a rupture with Soviet-imposed Russification and a realignment toward global modernity and post-colonial independence.

The *Modernity, Nationalism, Resistance* volume tracks the reform’s symbolic and strategic dimensions, but also uncovers urban-rural divides in receptivity and implementation. Extending this, Bekzhanova and Makoelle (2022) argue that Latinization can unify the nation and foster inclusion—if carried out equitably. However, the researchers warn that the reform may devolve into another top-down governmental initiative unless accompanied by participatory mechanisms.

This view is supported by the broader *indigenization* reform frame of Kazakhstan’s linguistic and cultural ecosystem. Du Boulay & du Boulay (2020), examining regional trends across Central Asia, interpret Latinization as a form of semiotic liberation, integral to the revival of post-colonial identities. These works position Latinization as a project that is simultaneously national, regional, and symbolic.

Linguistic hierarchies and symbolic power

Language reform in Kazakhstan is embedded within preexisting sociolinguistic hierarchies. Russian continues to occupy a privileged status, while Kazakh is often relegated to cultural representation. Davé (2007) provides empirical evidence of this imbalance, demonstrating how the institutional and symbolic strength of Russian has hindered attempts to elevate Kazakh. Similarly, Kudaibergenova (2016) cautions against replacing one form of linguistic dominance with another, stressing the dangers of excluding minorities in the name of decolonization. Tussupbekova and Enders (2016) examine how the Latin script reform reconfigures the linguistic landscape of public signage and communication, often marginalizing citizens more familiar with Cyrillic. Du Boulay & du Boulay (2020) highlight that new scripts often perpetuate old rules—reinforcing power asymmetries under the guise of reform and benefitting nationalist elites more than the broader population.

Educational inclusion and methodological challenges

Latinization also reshapes the educational system, influencing curriculum design, teacher training, literacy, and access to digital communication. The reform’s impact on education is both promising and problematic. Bekzhanova and Makoelle (2022) argue that Latinization presents an opportunity for greater global integration, but caution that it may exacerbate inequalities if marginalized communities are not adequately supported. They also state that there is a need for coordinated efforts among government, academia, and civil society, with genuine stakeholder participation to ensure legitimacy and success.

Analytical approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in post-colonial theory to explore the Latinization of the Kazakh language as a political and discursive endeavor. Rather than being based on formal coding procedures typical of empirical content analysis, the study is dependent on narrative synthesis, thematic clustering, and interpretive reading of primary and secondary sources. The objective was not to quantify occurrences of specific terms, but to reconstruct meaning, identify recurring narratives, and interpret the underlying symbolic logic driving or resisting the reform. The following five-step approach guided the analytical process:

1. Textual Immersion

The researchers engaged in iterative, close readings of selected materials—including presidential addresses, scholarly essays, policy commentaries, media publications, and public letters—pertinent to language reform, identity, and national modernization. This process enabled the identification of discursive tensions and shifting narrative frames.

2. Topic mapping and manual annotation

Instead of systematic coding, meaningful excerpts were annotated and grouped manually based on recurrent post-colonial motifs. These included references to Soviet linguistic legacies, the symbolic meaning of Latin versus Cyrillic, constructs such as *Mankurt*, and narratives of historical continuity or rupture.

3. Thematic clustering

Emergent annotations were aggregated into analytical themes reflecting ideological tendencies in the discourse. Core themes included:

- Post-colonial identity formation
- Language and sovereignty
- Cultural modernization vs. colonial legacy
- Geopolitical reorientation (Russia vs. Turkic World)
- Generational and ethnolinguistic tensions

These themes structured the interpretation of both elite-driven and societal responses to Latinization.

4. Narrative pattern recognition

Patterns across themes were then explored to reconstruct dominant and countervailing narratives. The analysis identified conflicting impulses—between decolonial distancing and global alignment, between ethno-nationalism and inclusive civic identity—that structure public debate on the reform.

5. Interpretive synthesis

Finally, the themes and patterns were interpreted through a post-colonial theoretical lens, drawing on scholars such as Ashcroft et al. (2002), Bissenova & Mukasheva (2020), and Brubaker (1996). It allowed the researcher to position the reform not merely as administrative language planning, but as a symbolic articulation of nationhood, memory, and cultural sovereignty.

Findings

Latinization as a convergence of political, geopolitical, and ethnolinguistic factors

The analysis of Kazakhstan's Latinization initiative indicates that its prioritization in 2017, with an intended completion by 2025, emerged at the intersection of geopolitical imperatives, domestic political strategies, and ethnolinguistic transformations. These factors are evident in Kazakhstan's diplomatic relations, regional integration efforts, and participation in global governance structures. The ethnolinguistic dimension is particularly significant, shaped by demographic shifts and the nationalizing discourse of the titular ethnic majority, revealing the broader post-colonial framework in which the reform is embedded.

Latinization and the third wave of modernization

President Nazarbayev's 2017 article on *Modernization of Kazakhstan's Public Consciousness* framed Latinization as integral to the country's third wave of modernization. This program aims to propel Kazakhstan into the ranks of the world's 30 most developed nations. Modernization initiatives in education, governance, and finance are increasingly modeled on Western standards, although Kazakhstan's system remains distinct due to its hybrid economic structure and strong state involvement (Назарбаев/Nazarbayev, 2017).

Parallel to these reforms, the state has intensified the promotion of the Kazakh language as a pillar of national identity. Drawing on Soviet-era techniques, the Kazakh elite consolidated their dominant status in the 1990s (Schatz, 2000), leading to the reclassification of Russian speakers as a minority group within a "nationalizing state" (Hierman & Nekbakhtshoev, 2014). Brubaker's (1996) framework defines such states as those that prioritize the advancement of the titular ethno-cultural group, including its language, culture, and political hegemony—a definition that aptly characterizes post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Nationalizing the state and identity construction

The dual role of the Kazakh state—as a post-colonial entity and a driver of modernization—has created a tension between global integration and ethnic nationalism. Latinization functions as both a symbolic and practical measure for redefining national identity, simultaneously compensating for perceived historical injustices and promoting state cohesion in an era of reform.

Geopolitical and regional dynamics

The Latinization policy also reflects Kazakhstan's recalibrated regional position. Peyrose (2007) observes that recent Russophobic narratives in Central Asia are less about the *Russian question* and more rooted in migration and economic policy. Kazakhstan differs from its neighbors, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—whose labor-exporting economies maintain close linguistic ties to Russia—and from Uzbekistan, which began its Latinization process in 1993 (Azimov, 2024; Султанмуратов/Sultanmuratov, 2017).

While Russian remains a lingua franca, Kazakhstan's approach diverges due to its unique geopolitical calculus. The persistence of Russian as a cultural

asset among the Kazakh intelligentsia in the Soviet period has been recast in nationalist terms as a colonial residue (Ремнев / Remnev, 2011). In contrast, anti-colonial discourse simplifies the complex cultural legacies of empire into binary oppositions between national and foreign, often through the use of state resources (Бисенова, Мукашева/Bissenova & Mukasheva, 2020).

Post-colonial tensions and the mankurt¹ paradox

Bissenova & Mukasheva's critique introduces the concept of the modern *post-colonial mankurt*—an individual alienated from their cultural roots yet compelled to adopt global norms for recognition. This paradox captures the dual pressures on Kazakhs: to reclaim their linguistic heritage while embracing globalized, Westernized standards. In this context, Latinization is both a decolonizing gesture and a re-inscription of new hierarchies, as language becomes a site for reconciling tradition and modernity.

Social and linguistic fractures

Latinization has provoked debate among stakeholders. Repatriates (kandas²) from countries like China, Turkey, and Mongolia often use Arabic or Latin-based Kazakh scripts and are unfamiliar with Cyrillic, complicating integration. Over one million kandas have returned to Kazakhstan since independence, many of whom lack fluency in either Russian or Kazakh. For them, Latinization represents inclusion; for others, especially older generations, it threatens a rupture with a Cyrillic-based cultural legacy. In an open letter, 60 Kazakh intellectuals—writers, poets, and scholars—warned of negative consequences, including reduced literacy, loss of historical texts, and a weakened position for Kazakh as the state language. These voices underscore the divide between reformist aspirations and cultural preservation.

Historical continuities and disruptions

The Latinization campaign is not unprecedented. In 1929, the Kazakh language adopted a Latin alphabet as part of the Soviet modernization effort, only to be replaced by Cyrillic in 1940 due to ideological reasons (Исаев/Isaev, 1978). This earlier Latinization effort sought to sever ties with Islamic traditions, while the later shift to Cyrillic realigned Kazakhstan within the Soviet sphere, reinforcing Russian linguistic dominance (Панфилова/Panfilova, 2017). Today's reform echoes those past dynamics—serving as a break from Soviet legacies, but also as a strategic act of historical reconfiguration.

¹ In postcolonial Central Asian discourse—especially in Kazakhstan—the *mankurt* has become a symbol of the colonized individual who has lost their language, culture, and historical consciousness. It is used to critique those who have internalized other cultural values at the expense of Kazakh identity (Bissenova & Mukasheva, 2020)

² *Kandas* (formerly *oralman*) refers to ethnic Kazakh repatriates who returned to Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly from countries such as China, Mongolia, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. The term emphasizes shared ancestry and blood ties with the titular nation. It was officially adopted in 2021 to replace the term *oralman*, which had taken on negative connotations. These repatriates are often seen as strong advocates of Kazakh national identity and linguistic revival (Davé, 2014).

Table 1. Historical contextualization of Latinization

<i>Year</i>	<i>Script policy/event</i>	<i>Purpose/Ideological framing</i>
1929	Latin alphabet introduced	Modernization and literacy
1940	Cyrillic script mandated	Russification; Soviet integration
1991	Independence of Kazakhstan	Beginning of language sovereignty discourse
2006	The Latinization idea was raised	Cultural revival, distancing from Russia
2017	Official decree on transition to Latin script	Modernization of national identity
2025	Planned full implementation of the Latin script	Cultural sovereignty and global integration

Language policy in the post-Soviet era

Since 1991, Kazakhstan’s Constitution has designated Kazakh as the state language, with Russian permitted in official contexts. While 84.8% of the population was literate in Russian as of 2009, only 62% had proficiency in Kazakh. Government programs have aimed to increase Kazakh language usage to 90% by 2020, including among non-Kazakh ethnic groups (KazPortal.kz).

Demographic shifts have reinforced Kazakh dominance—ethnic Kazakhs now make up 63% of the population. Still, Russian remains entrenched in media, science, and higher education, complicating the full realization of a monolingual national model. Latinization, then, operates at the nexus of identity, pedagogy, and geopolitical strategy.

Discussion

Latinization as a post-colonial strategy of cultural reclamation

The Latinization of the Kazakh script must be viewed not merely as a technical orthographic reform but as a symbolic act of post-colonial recovery. As the results have shown, this reform sits at the intersection of political, ethnolinguistic, and geopolitical forces, revealing Kazakhstan’s ongoing search for cultural sovereignty in a complex post-Soviet context. Scholars such as Kudaibergenova (2016) frame such reforms as elite-driven post-colonial projects where “national patriots” appropriate anti-colonial rhetoric to reclaim cultural autonomy. The Latin alphabet, in this sense, becomes a marker of symbolic resistance to Soviet-imposed Russification, a legacy that continues to dominate Kazakhstan’s sociolinguistic hierarchies (Davé, 2007).

However, this cultural reclamation is not unambiguous. As Bissenova & Mukasheva, 2020 and du Boulay and du Boulay (2020) note, post-colonial strategies can become paradoxical when they reproduce imperial dynamics under

nationalistic terms. The reconfiguration of Kazakh identity, through the erasure of Cyrillic and the valorization of Latin, may risk marginalizing Russian-speaking minorities and older generations who have limited exposure to the new script. This is the tension between symbolic sovereignty and social inclusivity—a tension central to any nationalizing language policy (Brubaker, 1996).

Nationalizing the state vs. embracing multi-vocality

A key theme emerging from the findings is the dual function of the Latinization reform: it is both a unifying narrative for Kazakh identity and a tool of ethnolinguistic demarcation. The concept of the “nationalizing state” (Brubaker, 1996) is instrumental in understanding this duality. While it promotes the titular nation’s language and culture, it may inadvertently sideline the pluralistic and multilingual realities of Kazakhstan. Schatz (2000) highlighted how the Kazakh elite skillfully deployed Soviet-era nation-building tools to reclassify Russian-speaking populations as minorities, thereby legitimizing a Kazakh-centric identity. However, this comes at the cost of inclusivity—a concern voiced by creative and academic communities in their open letter opposing the reform’s abrupt implementation.

Moreover, Peyrose (2007) and Султанмуратов/Sultanmuratov (2017) remind us that Kazakhstan’s position differs significantly from its regional neighbors. Unlike Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where labor migration necessitates the retention of the Russian language, Kazakhstan’s Latinization is more ideologically driven than pragmatic. This indicates a strategic shift in Kazakhstan’s geopolitical orientation, distancing itself from Russia while aligning with broader Turkic and global networks.

Table 2. Identity discourses: post-colonial vs. anti-colonial vs. nationalizing state

Discourse	Purpose	Latinization role	Risks/Contradictions
<i>Post-colonial</i>	Cultural decolonization	Reclaiming cultural space, global relevance	May still rely on Western (white mask) norms
<i>Anti-colonial</i>	Political rupture with Russia	Erasure of imperial legacy	Risks of isolation, nationalist exclusion
<i>Nationalizing state</i>	Strengthen the Kazakh titular nation	Central to ethnic identity and language revival	Marginalizes Russian-speakers, multi-ethnicity

Symbolic power of script and identity formation

The choice of script is never neutral. Ремнев/Remnev (2011) and Panfilova (2017) emphasize how orthographic reforms throughout Soviet history were closely tied to state-building objectives—first modernizing with Latin, then consolidating with Cyrillic. Today’s Latinization reverses that trajectory, but its

symbolic weight is no less significant. du Boulay, and du Boulay (2020) aptly describes this as “semiotic liberation,” where script reform signals the disentanglement of cultural meaning from the legacy of empire.

Nevertheless, such *liberation* is unevenly felt. As Smagulova (2018) and Bekzhanova and Makoelle (2022) caution, the reform’s success hinges on inclusive implementation—through pilot programs, teacher training, and grassroots participation. Without this, the reform risks becoming a technocratic exercise lacking social resonance. The very group it seeks to empower—the Kazakh-speaking majority and repatriates—may experience disruption, not emancipation, if institutional readiness is lacking.

Toward a reflexive post-colonial policy

The Latinization project is symptomatic of the post-colonial situation's paradoxes in Kazakhstan. It seeks to decolonize culture and redefine national identity on the one hand. On the other hand, it unfolds under a global condition where acknowledgment is often secured at the cost of conformity to hegemonic standards—a "white mask" donned, so to speak, to obtain international visibility. This simultaneous call—to enunciate an indigenous identity while living in a global modernity—places Kazakhstan in a position of liminality between authenticity and adaptation (Bissenova & Mukasheva, 2020; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021). Policy must navigate this space. To do so, policy must be more reflexive. Post-colonial reform must not only deconstruct imperial legacy, but also build inclusive futures. It includes an appreciation of the value of multilingualism, the preservation of cultural heritage written in Cyrillic, and the inclusion of diverse communities in reform processes. Only then can Latinization function as a symbolic and substantive transformation of Kazakhstan's cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The Latinization of the Kazakh language is a multifaceted issue, encompassing cultural, political, and social dimensions. While the reform attempts to resolve the post-colonial identity and modernize the language situation of Kazakhstan, it is resisted by those concerned with the protection of the nation's cultural heritage and the intergenerational conflict it may engender. Thus, it is not surprising that the final implementation of the Kazakh language transition to the Latin script was postponed until 2030. The government's reconciliatory measures resonate with Kazakhstan's bumpy journey towards national rejuvenation in a post-Soviet and globalizing world. A study of articles during the past ten years has had no difficulty in demonstrating that the *Latinization* initiative holds uncertain meanings for Kazakh society. Having preserved the Cyrillic alphabet, independent Kazakhstan, in the opinion of certain groups of the population, will not be able to move away not only from the Soviet past but also from Russia's influence.

One can partly agree with Kudaibergenova’s conclusion that political elites use post-colonial discourse to promote their goals. However, we believe that the process of using this rhetoric to advance one's interests is actually mutual. The intersection of the interests of the kandas and some of the Kazakhs, who during

the Soviet period could not fully align with the post-colonial trend, provides them with the opportunity today to implement their political program, which includes distancing themselves from Russia and rapprochement with Turkey, the most Westernized Muslim country. Thus, by supporting this part of Kazakh society, the ruling elite is trying to maintain a balance of interests of various actors within the country and abroad. However, a complete transition to the Latin script, in addition to political and geopolitical gains, could also add tension to society, due to splits along cultural and linguistic boundaries.

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