

## Role of Language and Age in Ethnic Qazaqs' Perceptions of the War in Ukraine

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine set in motion unprecedented processes in societies with a history of Russian rule. In Qazaqstan, the brazenly imperial character of Russia's aggression [fueled](#) the rise of previously marginalized decolonial perspectives critical of the USSR and modern-day Russia. Gaining a nuanced understanding of such developments is crucial, as they have the potential to profoundly reshape Russian power and influence in societies Russia once controlled. Previous analysis of public opinion data [shows](#) that ethnic Qazaqs are far more supportive of Ukraine and critical of Russia's aggression than their ethnic Russian compatriots. However, it is important to delve deeper into the factors associated with perspectives on the war *among* ethnic Qazaqs, especially given Qazaqstan's dramatic demographic transformation since independence.

One of the most consequential divides among ethnic Qazaqs has to do with language. As previous research has convincingly shown, it is important to [disaggregate](#) ethnicity and language because language can influence political preferences independently of ethnicity. Looking at four groups of ethnic Qazaqs – Qazaq-speakers aged 18–29, Russian-speakers aged 18–29, Qazaq-speakers aged 50 and above, and Russian-speakers aged 50 and above – we find that the vast majority of the first three groups are staunch supporters of Ukraine. They condemn the war and see Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression. Older Russian-speakers, meanwhile, stand out as the group least sympathetic toward Ukraine, with only half of the group expressing support for Ukraine and several members of the group echoing Russian propaganda narratives about the alleged need for Russian intervention in Ukraine. This pattern can be explained by media consumption, specifically TV news: Whereas young people tend not to consume TV news and older Qazaq-speakers are insulated from Russian propaganda narratives because Qazaq-language TV news

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originates within Qazaqstan, older Russian-speakers reported also watching TV news programming on Russian channels.

### **Ethnic Qazaqs: A Growing and Diverse Demographic Group**

According to the latest statistical data, ethnic Qazaqs now [comprise](#) over 70 percent of the country's population—a staggering increase from the late Soviet period, when Qazaqs made up less than 40 percent of the total. Meanwhile, the share of ethnic Russians has dwindled from near parity with Qazaqs in the 1989 census to just over 15 percent in 2023.

Importantly, ethnic Qazaqs are far from homogenous. One of the most consequential divides among them has to do with language. Since independence, Qazaq language, once relegated to rural areas and certain regions of the country (e.g., West Qazaqstan), has made a comeback. Following the abolition of the Soviet-era residential restrictions, massive numbers of Qazaq-speakers migrated from rural to urban areas in search of educational and economic opportunities. The city of Almaty, currently at [2.2 million residents](#), is by far the largest destination of such migration. As a result, Qazaq language, once largely absent from the former capital, can now be heard in public spaces throughout the city. Nonetheless, there remains a sizable community of Russified urban Qazaqs for whom Russian serves as the first language. Among members of this group, knowledge of Qazaq can range from fluent to non-existent. The division between Qazaq- and Russian-speakers among ethnic Qazaqs is often fraught because thoroughly Russified Qazaqs usually come from more privileged urban backgrounds.

Another important demographic factor to be taken into account is age cohort membership. The population of Qazaqstan is young, with about [half](#) of the country's inhabitants under the age of 30. Members of this group were born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and grew up in independent Qazaqstan. Naturally, their socialization differed markedly from those who came of age during the Soviet era. How, if at all, this has translated into distinct attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine is something we need to learn more about.

### **Methodology**

This policy memo uses data from 40 in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in Almaty in the summer of 2023 to shed light on the role of age and language in perceptions of war among ethnic Qazaqs. To capture generational differences, we focused on two distinct cohorts: those aged 18-29 (n=20) and those aged 50 and above (n=20). Members of the latter group reached adulthood during the Soviet period, while those in the former were born after the collapse of the USSR. Within each of these age groups, we further divided respondents based on the primary language spoken. Half of them predominantly used Qazaq in their daily lives, while the other half predominantly used Russian. This analytical approach yielded four distinct groups of ethnic Qazaq respondents: Qazaq-speakers aged 18-29 (n=10), Russian-speakers aged 18-29 (n=10); Qazaq-speakers aged 50 and above (n=10), and Russian-speakers aged 50 and above (n=10).

A convenience sampling technique was used to select respondents. While non-random sampling has its limitations, including the potential for selection bias and the inability to make population-level inferences, convenience sampling is valuable for [generating](#) thick descriptions that can yield rich insights into social phenomena like attitudes toward the war among ethnic Qazaqs. Needless to say, obtaining state-of-the-art nationally representative survey data is also very important. A comprehensive understanding of decolonization developments triggered by the Russian aggression in Ukraine will require a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

### **Attitudes toward the War among Ethnic Qazaqs Aged 18–29**

#### *Qazaq-Speakers*

In discussions about the war, most of the young Qazaq-speakers were heavily pro-Ukrainian. They described Ukraine as a victim of unprovoked aggression by a larger enemy and highlighted the need for international assistance.

“Ukraine didn’t attack anyone and is fighting to preserve its territorial integrity” (Female, 29).

“After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine took the first steps to liberate itself from Russian influence. I support Ukraine” (Female, 26).

“They are defending their country, their land, they did not attack...Therefore, Ukraine is right. I support Ukraine. Because they are for a just cause, they are doing the right thing” (Male, 29).

“I support Ukraine. Different countries should help them. Because Russia, in order to expand its territory, started a war. Ukraine is not to blame for anything” (Female, 18).

“If a person is attacked, he defends himself. Ukraine is defending itself in the same way. I support Ukraine” (Male, 24).

Ukraine’s defensive position in the conflict was emphasized repeatedly by members of this group. Ukrainians’ dedication to safeguarding their homeland was also a theme that came up several times. A third theme raised by young Qazaq-speakers was solidarity with Ukraine’s effort to distance itself from Russian influence following the dissolution of the USSR.

Two people said that they were against the war but did not support either side. Importantly, none of the respondents in this group expressed support for Russian aggression.

### *Russian-Speakers*

Interestingly, with just one exception, responses from young Russian-speaking Qazaqs were uniformly pro-Ukraine. The recurring themes among members of this group were disapproval of the war and a perception of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression.

“Ukraine is not at fault in this situation...” (Female, 20)

“This war is like a nightmare unfolding... No nation has the right to attack someone else’s territory” (Female, 25).

“I was shocked, I didn’t believe this could happen... When I used to watch news about wars in far-away countries, it always seemed so distant, but this one seems very close... Couldn’t help projecting that this could happen to us and everything in one’s life would crumble in an instant... I hope that the Ukrainians are able to restore their 1991 borders...” (Male, 29).

“Of course, I support Ukraine. There is no argument here” (Female, 27).

“Wars bring death and suffering, this is why I am strongly opposed to all wars. I support regular people. In this situation, Ukraine is a victim and this is why I support the Ukrainian people” (Male, 22).

“Ukraine is a victim. I hope that they will be able to fight back successfully” (Male, 27).

One person articulated a neutral position, maintaining that the war had little bearing on his own life:

“I don’t care who is fighting... Qazaqstan has enough of its own problems.... I have enough of my own problems” (Male, 27).

Much like their Qazaq-speaking peers, none of the young Russian-speaking Qazaqs expressed support for Russia’s actions.

### **Attitudes toward the War among Ethnic Qazaqs Aged 50+**

### *Qazaq-Speakers*

Most of the older Qazaq-speaking respondents were unequivocal in their support for Ukraine. Condemnation of the war and a view of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression were recurring themes.

“I support Ukraine because it was attacked. I feel sorry for Ukrainians” (Female, 62).

“[Russia] is destroying peaceful people... I support Ukrainians, they lived peacefully and were attacked by Russia” (Female, 55).

“War is bad, God forbid. Of course I support Ukraine” (Female, 71).

“In Ukraine, children and young people are being killed... Ukraine is protecting its land” (Male, 58).

“Ukrainians are good people, I feel sorry for them, they didn’t attack anyone... This is real fascism.. We fought against Hitler in 1941, fought for our Motherland; Ukrainians are doing the same today – fighting to liberate their land and free their country from aggressors. We support them” (Male, 68).

“We support Ukraine. The people of Ukraine proved resilient and the government of Ukraine proved capable of carrying out policy independent of Russia. Ukraine is trying to become a part of Europe and Russia doesn’t like it... We are unable to support Ukraine by sending soldiers and weapons, but Qazaqs morally support Ukrainians” (Male, 62).

“We are afraid that the same can happen to Qazaqstan” (Female, 66).

Overall, among people in this group, sympathy for Ukraine was nearly universal, as was condemnation of the Russian invasion. Interestingly, having come of age during the Soviet period has not made people in this group more receptive to Russia’s revanchist narratives.

### *Russian-Speakers*

The opinions of older Russian-speaking Qazaqs about the war vary widely. Whereas clear majorities of the other three groups held pro-Ukrainian views, only half of this group expressed support for Ukraine. Among those who supported Ukraine, the sentiments were very similar to those expressed by Ukraine-supporters in the other groups.

“This is a war of aggression and conquest. Of course I support Ukraine” (Female, 64).

“Ukraine is defending its sovereignty. I am for Ukraine. Russia is an aggressor” (Male 54).

“I am very critical of Putin’s government. They are always attacking nations that try to escape [Russia’s] control” (Female, 64).

“Ukraine is fighting for her land and Russia is an aggressor” (Male, 67)

Three people blamed Ukraine for the war, echoing narratives put forth by Russian media.

“It all started with discrimination against ethnic Russians in Ukraine... Putin tolerated this as long as he could” (Female, 63).

“Ukrainians themselves are to blame for the war... They were killing their own citizens in Donetsk and Luhansk for several years. Russia tried to stop this for eight years, but when all efforts failed, it was forced to begin the war” (Male, 75).

“I don’t like the government of Ukraine, I can see what Zelensky is like” (Female, 51).

Several respondents in this group deliberately refrained from expressing support for Ukraine. They described war as something bad but insisted that they did not take sides in this conflict.

“I feel bad for the children, the elderly, homes being destroyed, civilian population suffering. I don’t support either side. Just feel bad for them” (Female, 63).

“War is terrible both morally and economically. Russia hurt itself because it is experiencing difficulty due to sanctions. It is bad for Europe as well because their prices went up... I try to stay away from politics, I don’t support either side” (Male, 70).

As these responses demonstrate, older Russian-speaking Qazaqs are more divided in their views of the war. While expressions of neutrality could also be found among members of the other three groups, explicitly anti-Ukrainian positions were limited to members of this particular group.

## **Discussion**

Language and age combine to create a distinct pattern of attitudes toward the war. Those who consume news and information in Qazaq rather than Russian tend to be more critical of the war and supportive of Ukraine. Importantly, this pattern is evident even among older Qazaq-speakers who came of age during the Soviet era. In contrast, older Russian-speaking Qazaqs stand out as the group least sympathetic toward Ukraine and most open to Russia's narratives about it. Perhaps most intriguingly, the views of young Russian-speaking Qazaqs are more similar to those held by members of the two Qazaq-speaking groups than to those of older Russian-speaking Qazaqs. What explains this result? Patterns of media consumption appear to be an important factor.

At the outset of the interviews, we delved into our respondents' media consumption habits. We aimed to understand the extent of their engagement with both domestic and international news and identify their preferred sources of information. When asked about Internet-based news sources, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook were mentioned by respondents in all four groups. However, there was a crucial divergence in TV news consumption. Notably, among both Qazaq- and Russian-speakers in the 18-29 age group, consumption of television news was found to be extremely limited. The prevailing reasons cited were a lack of time due to busy schedules; concerns about one-sided and government-influenced TV news content; and the inconvenience of TV's fixed schedule, which contrasts with the preferences of younger people accustomed to viewing the content of their choice at a time of their choosing. By contrast, TV was a major source of news for respondents aged 50 and above. The majority of Qazaq-speakers relied on Qazaqstan-based TV channels for news coverage. Older Russian-speaking respondents, meanwhile, reported getting their news from a diverse array of sources, including multiple Russian TV channels.

This clear divergence in media consumption habits goes a long way toward explaining the attitudes found among the four groups in our study. Two processes operate concurrently. First, because Russian propaganda is simply not available in Qazaq, those who consume news entirely in Qazaq (young and old alike) are shielded from it. Second, while Russian channels broadcast with impunity in Qazaqstan, young people no longer rely on TV for news and information. This means that young ethnic Qazaqs who use Russian to learn about world events escape the bulk of Russia's propaganda delivered via television.

## **Conclusion**

While the effectiveness of Russia's formidable propaganda machine is [well-documented](#), the audience receptive to Russia's anti-Ukrainian narratives in Qazaqstan is small and shrinking. This process is propelled by the inexorable force of demographic transformation: the share of ethnic Qazaqs in the population is growing rapidly, with the result that Qazaq language is increasingly prevalent in the country's largest cities. Of the

four groups of ethnic Qazaqs under study, only older Russian-speakers were open to Russian narratives about Ukraine. Thus, while the shadow of Russian colonial domination of Qazaqstan is long, it is visibly fading. Ukraine's heroic resistance against Russia's attempt to turn back time is accelerating this process.

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