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ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SHAPING SOCIAL TENSIONS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In a multiethnic society the dynamics of national identity, language use, and questions of political and economic sovereignty significantly influence public attitudes and social processes. Nationalism, in this context, functions as a central driver that can escalate societal tensions and contribute to the emergence of conflict potential. Over the past few years, such sentiments have gained momentum amid economic uncertainty, demographic changes, migration trends, and evolving geopolitical conditions. These developments are especially pronounced in the media sphere, where nationalist narratives frequently serve as a catalyst for public polarization and heightened identity-based discourse. The purpose of the article is to explore the impact of nationalist discourse in the media on the formation of conflict potential in Kazakhstan. The study incorporates discourse analysis of media publications, including news portals and social media platforms. The data runs from January to October 2024, tracking how nationalism in Kazakhstan has shifted across political, economic, and cultural life. One pattern comes through clearly: nationalist sentiment tends to spike around specific high-profile events. When something happens a summit, an earthquake, a controversial deal it moves quickly through both traditional and digital media. The study identifies key trends in the dissemination of nationalist discourse and contributes to a deeper understanding of the media's role in shaping social tension. The findings offer valuable insights for further research into societal conflict potential and for the development of strategies aimed at managing information processes.

Keywords: conflict potential, nationalism, rhetoric in the media, the role of the media, discourse analysis.

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Медиа құралдарының әлеуметтік шиеленісті қалыптастырудағы рөлі: дискурстық талдау

Полиэтностық жағдайдағы ұлттық бірегейлік, тіл саясаты, экономикалық және саяси егемендік мәселелері қоғамдық пікір мен әлеуметтік динамиканы қалыптастыруда маңызды рөл атқарады. Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік шиеленіс деңгейі мен қақтығыс әлеуетіне әсер ететін негізгі факторлардың бірі – ұлтшылдық. Соңғы жылдары ұлтшылдық көзқарастардың күшеюі экономикалық мәселелермен, демографиялық құрылымдағы өзгерістермен, көші-қон процестерімен және геосаяси жағдайдың ауысуымен байланысты. Бұл үрдіс әсіресе медиа кеңістікте айқын көрініс табуда, мұнда ұлтшылдық көбіне қоғамның поляризациясына алып келеді. Мақаланың мақсаты – Қазақстандағы қақтығыс әлеуетінің қалыптасуында медиадағы ұлтшылдық дискурсының ықпалын талдау. Зерттеу медиада, соның ішінде БАҚ пен әлеуметтік желілерде жарияланған материалдарға дискурс-талдау жүргізуді қамтиды. Эмпирикалық деректер базасы 2024 жылғы қаңтар-қазан айлары аралығында жарияланған материалдарға негізделген. Зерттеудің басты назарында – елдегі ұлтшылдықтың трансформациясы және оның саяси, әлеуметтік-экономикалық және мәдени контексттердегі көрініс табуы. Талдау көрсеткендей, ұлтшылдық көзқарастар көбінесе нақты резонанстық оқиғаларға жауап ретінде күшейе түседі және олар БАҚ-та да, әлеуметтік желілерде де көрініс табады. Зерттеу ұлтшылдық дискурсының таралуындағы негізгі үрдістерді айқындауға мүмкіндік берді. Алынған нәтижелер медиа құралдарының әлеуметтік шиеленісті қалыптастырудағы рөлін тереңірек түсінуге ықпал етеді. Зерттеу қорытындылары қоғамдағы қақтығыс әлеуетін әрі қарай зерделеуге, сондай-ақ ақпараттық үдерістерді басқару стратегияларын әзірлеуге пайдалы болуы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: қақтығыс әлеуеті, ұлтшылдық, медиадағы риторика, медианың рөлі, дискурстық талдау.

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Роль медиа в формировании социальной напряженности: дискурс-анализ

В полиэтничном обществе динамика национальной идентичности, использование языка и вопросы политического и экономического суверенитета существенно влияют на общественное мнение и социальные процессы. Национализм в этом контексте выступает в качестве основного фактора, который может усилить напряженность в обществе и способствовать возникновению конфликтного потенциала. За последние несколько лет такие настроения усилились на фоне экономической неопределенности, демографических изменений, миграционных тенденций и меняющихся геополитических условий. Эти изменения особенно заметны в медиа, где националистические нарративы часто служат катализатором общественной поляризации и усиления дискурса. Цель данной статьи – анализ влияния националистического дискурса в медиа на формирование конфликтного потенциала в Казахстане. Исследование включает в себя дискурс-анализ публикаций в медиа, включая новостные порталы и платформы социальных сетей. Данные за период с января по октябрь 2024 года позволяют проследить, как национализм в Казахстане распространился на политическую, экономическую и культурную жизнь. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что националистические настроения, как правило, усиливаются в связи с конкретными кейсами. Исследование выявляет ключевые тенденции в распространении националистического дискурса и способствует более глубокому пониманию роли СМИ в формировании социальной напряженности. Полученные результаты дают ценную информацию для дальнейших исследований конфликтного потенциала общества и разработки стратегий, направленных на управление информационными процессами.

Ключевые слова: конфликтный потенциал, национализм, риторика в медиа, роль медиа, дискурс-анализ

Introduction

Kazakhstan's path since independence has not been straightforward. Building a national identity while keeping a multi-ethnic society stable meant dealing with decolonisation, economic hardship, and competing political pressures – usually all at once. Kazakhstani nationalism developed inside that tension.

In the years right after the Soviet collapse, the work was mostly cultural. The Kazakh language needed reviving; a distinct state identity needed building from near-scratch. Language became state policy, cultural initiatives were pushed actively, and both were aimed at consolidating national consciousness among ethnic Kazakhs (Momynkulov, 2011).

That process created its own friction. Other ethnic groups had to adjust to a new reality, and that adjustment wasn't always smooth. The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan was one government attempt to hold inter-ethnic relations together and head off open conflict. It had some effect – but nationalism, identity, and culture kept getting crowded out by more immediate economic concerns.

In the 2000s, against the backdrop of economic reforms and rising prosperity, nationalist sentiments

began to take on more diverse forms. Alongside economic growth, the desire to preserve and develop national identity intensified. During this period, issues related to cultural and economic sovereignty came to the forefront. The emergence and strengthening of movements advocating for the protection of the country's natural resources under state control and the prohibition of land sales to foreigners exemplify the phenomenon of so-called *resource nationalism*.

Political reforms and generational shifts in leadership have also influenced the development of nationalism. New public leaders and activists emerged, openly addressing national issues such as the status of the Kazakh language, the rights of ethnic Kazakhs, and their role in the country's social and economic life. This led to the rise of *linguistic nationalism*, manifested in demands for expanding the use of the Kazakh language and gradually reducing the role of Russian in official and public spheres (Olcott, 2010).

In recent years, nationalism in Kazakhstan has taken on *more radical forms*. This shift is driven by several factors, including changes in the geopolitical landscape, rising social tensions, and the expansion of social media, which has become a key platform for discussing nationalist ideas (Beissembaev, 2015).

Over the years of independence, Kazakhstan has witnessed several conflicts in which Kazakhs were one of the involved parties. These clashes were driven not only by socio-economic factors but also by ethno-cultural issues related to identity, resource distribution, and interethnic relations. Some of these conflicts gained significant public attention due to media coverage and active discussions on social networks. One of the most large-scale incidents in the sphere of interethnic relations was the Korday conflict (February 2020), during which clashes between Kazakhs and Dungans resulted in significant human casualties and widespread destruction. Nationalist rhetoric in the media contributed to the mobilization of participants and the escalation of the conflict (Habdulhabar, 2020).

Furthermore, the January 2022 events can be viewed as an expression of national (civic) consciousness. The mass protests, which initially arose from socio-economic demands, revealed deeper societal fractures, including issues of power, justice, and national unity.

Thus, nationalism has the potential to generate conflict within Kazakhstani society. A discourse analysis of media narratives can help determine how rhetoric associated with nationalist sentiments influences social processes. Examining this discourse will provide insights into how media shape public opinion, either fueling or restraining radicalization, and how they contribute to or mitigate ethnic and social tensions in Kazakhstan.

Literature review

The study of nationalist discourse in the media space is based on an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating theories of nationalism, media studies, and discourse-analytical concepts.

The term «nationalism» gained widespread use in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, largely due to the influence of the French Revolution (1789–1799) (Bickford, 2014). The revolution contributed to the development of the concept of the nation as a sovereign political community rather than merely a group of people united by common ancestry, language, or culture. During this period, nationalism was closely associated with struggles for independence, democracy, and self-governance.

The French priest Abbe Barruel used the term «nationalism» in a negative sense, condemning revolutionary ideas that, in his view, disrupted the traditional social order (Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, 1995). Thus, in its early us-

ages, «nationalism» often carried a pejorative meaning, linked to radical change and perceived threats to established traditions.

Later, in the 19th century, the term was actively employed by Italian and German nationalists such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Otto von Bismarck. Nationalism became a key force behind the unification of Germany and Italy, as well as in national liberation movements across Eastern Europe and Latin America.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nationalism had become something scholars felt compelled to explain – as a social force, a political project, and a cultural phenomenon simultaneously. It moved to the centre of political life after World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires collapsed and new nation-states emerged in their place. The concept fractured from there: liberal and democratic nationalisms on one end, ethnocentric and aggressive variants on the other (Rybakov et al, 2016).

It now gets studied across political science, sociology, history, cultural studies, and anthropology – each discipline pulling it in a slightly different direction. The core disagreements haven't gone away: where nations actually come from, and what sustains nationalist feeling over time.

Primordialism treats the nation as something old and deep – rooted in ethnic, cultural, or linguistic bonds that long predate modern politics. National identity, on this view, grows out of kinship and historical continuity rather than being invented or imposed. Geertz and Anthony Smith are the names most associated with making this argument.

Instrumentalism is less romantic about it. Nationalism here is a tool – constructed and deployed by political elites to consolidate or expand their grip on power. Identity isn't fixed; it gets shaped to serve specific interests at specific moments. Brass and Hobsbawm are the sharpest proponents of this view, and their argument is essentially that if you want to understand nationalism, follow the power.

Modernism ties nations and nationalism to modernity itself – industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratic growth, mass education. Nationalism, on this reading, is a response to structural upheaval, not an expression of something ancient. Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm are the central figures.

Constructivism goes further. Nations aren't natural or permanent – they're built within specific historical, political, and social contexts, then rebuilt as those contexts change. Nationalism gets reproduced through narratives: in classrooms, newsrooms, po-

litical speech, cultural production. Foucault, Breuilly, and Brubaker work in this tradition (Abikenov, 2024).

Taken together, these frameworks treat nationalism as a moving target – shaped by history and ideology, meaning different things in different hands. The concept has gone through several distinct transformations:

From cultural and linguistic concepts: Johann Gottfried Herder argued that national identity is defined by language and culture (2005); Johann Fichte, in his speech «*Addresses to the German Nation*» (1808), insisted that Germans should unite based on their linguistic and cultural heritage (2016).

To political and state theories: Max Weber defined nationalism as a people's aspiration to establish their own state (Norkus, 2004).

To an instrument of imperialism: Under Adolf Hitler, nationalism was transformed into the racial doctrine of Nazism; Joseph Stalin reinterpreted it as «Soviet patriotism».

To contemporary global and digital forms: Benedict Anderson described the nation as an «imagined community» constructed through education and media; Rogers Brubaker viewed nationalism not only as a political ideology but also as a mode of self-identification, particularly in the context of migration (2020); Yuval Noah Harari suggests that in the future, humanity will have to choose between global cooperation and isolationist nationalism (2019).

This article examines contemporary approaches to nationalism in greater depth.

Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of the nation as an «*imagined community*» in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). He argued that a nation is not a tangible, objective entity but a collective construct formed in people's consciousness. According to Anderson, members of a nation do not personally know one another (especially in large states), yet they believe they belong to a shared community with common interests, values, and culture. A key mechanism in shaping these imagined communities is the mass dissemination of information. Media such as newspapers, radio, television help create and sustain a sense of national belonging. Anderson emphasizes that language in media acts as a unifying force, reinforcing national consciousness (Anderson, 1991).

In the context of Kazakhstan, Anderson's theory can be applied to explain how media contribute to fostering a sense of unity and national iden-

tity among citizens, even those from diverse ethnic backgrounds who may not interact directly. This perspective suggests that nationalism in Kazakhstani media discourse appears more pronounced and radical than in everyday reality, constructing a virtual national community bound by shared language, culture, and history. Based on this, one could hypothesize *that media serve as an amplifier of national identity*.

On the other hand, *the concept of «media as borders»* in the context of nationalism allows for an analysis of how media define who belongs to a particular community or nation. The media not only reinforce national identity but also create «boundaries» between «us» and «them», as well as between different ethnic and cultural groups within a country (Eide, 2016). In the context of Kazakhstan's discourse, given its multiethnic composition, *the media serve as a crucial tool in shaping perceptions of «ours» vs. «others»*.

Samuel Huntington, an American political scientist and the author of the *theory of the clash of civilizations* (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996), argued that nationalism and cultural identities are key components in broader global conflicts. He hypothesized that future conflicts would occur along the «fault lines» between civilizations, which he defined as large cultural and religious blocs, such as Western, Islamic, Confucian, Indian, Slavic, and Latin civilizations. According to Huntington, nationalism emerges as a response to perceived external threats from other civilizations, reinforcing cultural self-identification (2002). In this framework, nationalism is not just an internal phenomenon but part of a broader struggle to preserve cultural identity in the face of external pressures.

Kazakhstan, as a multiethnic and multi-confessional state, occupies a unique geopolitical position between European and Eastern civilizations. Strategically located as a bridge between Asia and Europe, the country plays a significant role in international politics and economics. In Kazakhstan's case, *nationalism may manifest as a reaction to external pressures*, such as cultural or political influences from powerful neighbouring states – Russia and China, as well as from Western nations. Nationalism, in this sense, serves as a mechanism for maintaining Kazakhstan's sovereignty and distinct identity as an independent state. Nationalism in Kazakhstan also runs through culture – protecting Kazakh heritage from what many see as economic, political, and cultural encroachment by the West, China, and Russia.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language produces and sustains power, ideology, and social structures. Fairclough and Van Dijk are its two most influential theorists, and their emphases differ in useful ways.

Fairclough's argument is that language and ideology can't be separated. Ideology gets reinforced through everyday speech and through institutions like media, politics, culture until particular positions stop feeling like positions at all and start feeling like common sense (2013).

Van Dijk is more interested in social divisions – race, ethnicity, gender, class. Discourse can entrench those divisions or unsettle them. One of his central observations is that language does the work of sorting people into “us” and “them,” and that this sorting has real political consequences (2015: 466-485).

In practice, CDA is widely applied to the analysis of media discourse, particularly in the context of nationalist rhetoric, political campaigns, and mass communication.

In the context of Kazakhstan, considering the multiethnic composition of the population, media discourse can serve *as a tool for either fostering or undermining ethnic solidarity and reinforcing national (ethnic) identity*. This approach also allows for an examination of how language in public discourse is used to maintain stereotypes, particularly ethnic ones.

Thus, the study of nationalist rhetoric in Kazakhstani media through the lens of the aforementioned approaches allows for the *formulation of the following hypotheses*:

- The media act as an amplifier of national identity.
- The media play a crucial role in shaping the concepts of «us» and «them».
- Nationalism may emerge as a response to cultural, political, and economic external threats from the West, Russia, and China.
- Nationalism serves as a method for protecting the Kazakh cultural code from economic, political, and cultural «expansion».
- Media discourse around nationalism cuts both ways – it can build ethnic solidarity or erode it, and either way it leaves a mark on national identity.

Materials and methods

This study looks at how nationalism shows up in Kazakhstan's media, using Critical Discourse Analysis as its main framework. Fairclough and Van

Dijk guide the approach – their work provides the tools for examining how language reinforces ideology and power.

The methodology runs in two stages.

The first was a literature review: a critical read-through of scholarly work on nationalism theory, media studies, and discourse analysis. The review incorporated both international and local (Kazakhstani) sources, enabling the construction of a multidimensional theoretical framework. The analysis considered several major perspectives on nationalism, namely, primordialist, instrumentalist, modernist, and constructivist approach as well as conceptual models such as Benedict Anderson's «imagined communities», «the notion of media as borders», and Samuel Huntington's «civilizational fault lines».

Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Content.

The second phase of the research was devoted to examining media materials that reflect nationalist themes. This analysis covered the period from January to October 2024. The empirical base consisted of more than 1500 textual units, including news reports, social media posts, user-generated comments, and descriptions accompanying video content. These materials were collected from major Kazakhstani news portals and popular digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram, which serve as primary spaces for public discourse and the dissemination of nationalist rhetoric.

Data Collection Technique

Content was collected manually using targeted keyword-based searches conducted through the Google search engine. Search terms included: nationalism in Kazakhstan, language policy, ethnic tensions, Russophobia, Sinophobia, Kazakh language, Russian language, and national identity, among others.

The inclusion criteria for selecting materials were as follows:

- Topical relevance to nationalist discourse;
- High engagement levels (likes, comments, shares);
- Origin from recognized media outlets, bloggers, or prominent Telegram channels;
- Publication date within the research timeframe (January – October 2024).

Each entry was categorized by platform, subject matter, content type (state media, independent outlets, bloggers, opinion leaders), and degree of public interaction. The critical discourse analysis then identified key narrative structures, rhetorical strategies that differentiate between «in-groups» and «out-groups», and methods used to legitimize

or delegitimize social actors. Special attention was paid to the linguistic and pragmatic features of nationalist discourse in the public media space.

This comprehensive methodological design allowed for tracing how nationalist sentiments are constructed, reproduced, and disseminated in Kazakhstan’s media, while also assessing their potential influence on social cohesion and public tensions.

Coding procedure

The coding process was not limited to counting individual words or expressions. The primary objec-

tive was to identify underlying meaning structures, emotional mechanisms, and the ideological functions embedded in the discourse.

The initial stage of coding made it possible to distinguish recurring categories, which were subsequently grouped into broader types of nationalist discourse. The units of analysis included individual words, phrases, sentences, headlines, user comments, as well as fragments of publications and paragraphs containing nationalist, conflict-related, or emotionally charged narratives (Table 1).

Table 1
Example of the Coding Framework

Publication / comment excerpt (The original texts were presented in Kazakh or Russian languages)	Primary code	Final category
“The Kazakh language must be mandatory for all citizens”, “mocked the Kazakh language”, “insulted the Kazakh language”, etc.	Protection of the state language	Linguistic nationalism
“The Russian language is being pushed out of the public sphere”, “My daughter does not need the Russian language”, “The Russian language is yesterday’s language for Kazakhs”, etc.	Linguistic conflict / Russophobia	Linguistic nationalism
“Occupiers”, “vatniki”, “aggressors”, “empire”, etc.	External threat / Russophobia	Ethnic nationalism
“Russia still considers Kazakhstan its territory”, “separatism”, “annexation”, etc.	Threat to sovereignty	Ethnic nationalism
“China is buying up Kazakh land”, “China has laid its hands on Kazakhstan’s uranium”, etc.	Economic threat / Sinophobia	Ethnic nationalism
“A nuclear power plant will lead to dependence on foreign states”, “If a nuclear power plant is built in Balkhash, dependence on Russia will increase, and dependence on China regarding water issues will become even stronger”, etc.	Threat to national resources	Economic nationalism
Use of terms such as “mankurt”, “traitors”, “chukcha”, etc.	Stigmatization / ‘us vs. them’ opposition	Ethnic nationalism

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was conducted at three analytical levels.

At the macro level, the study examined dominant narratives and ideological frameworks related to national identity, language, sovereignty, external influence, historical memory, and decolonization. The analysis focused on identifying which issues became central in public discussions and how these themes shaped perceptions of nationalism within the media space.

At the meso level, attention was given to the representation of social actors. The analysis explored how the state, society, ethnic groups, foreign countries, bloggers, opinion leaders, and social media users were portrayed in the discourse. Particular emphasis was placed on the mechanisms through which symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them” were

constructed, as well as on the ways polarization was intensified in publications and user comments.

At the micro level, the study focused on the linguistic and rhetorical features of the texts, including emotionally charged vocabulary, metaphors, sarcasm, accusatory rhetoric, oppositional framing, ethnic markers, stigmatizing expressions, and techniques used to intensify the emotional dimension of conflict-related content. Special attention was paid to publication headlines and user comments, as these represented the most emotionally saturated elements of media discourse.

Case-oriented analysis

The study was also based on the analysis of the most high-profile cases of 2024 that generated broad discussions in the media and on social networking platforms.

Each case was examined according to the following analytical logic: the triggering event; framing strategies; representations of “us” and “them”; the construction of threats; emotional tone; the dynamics of public reaction; and the impact on the escalation or de-escalation of social tensions.

Interpretation of the results

At the final stage, the findings were interpreted in relation to major theoretical approaches to nationalism and media discourse. This made it possible to move beyond the description of individual cases and identify more stable discursive patterns and recurring tendencies.

The interpretation focused on identifying which types of events most frequently acted as triggers for the growth of nationalist sentiments, how media and social networks contributed either to the intensification or reduction of conflict potential, and which forms of nationalist rhetoric were most prevalent in Kazakhstan’s information space.

The study identified several dominant forms of nationalist discourse, including linguistic, ethnic, and economic nationalism, as well as Russophobic and Sinophobic narratives.

Research limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the data collection process was conducted manually, which made it impossible to cover the entire volume of media content. Second, the analysis primarily focused on the most resonant and publicly visible cases. Third, indicators of user engagement do not always accurately reflect broader public attitudes and sentiments.

Nevertheless, the qualitative research design made it possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms through which nationalist rhetoric is formed and disseminated within Kazakhstan’s media space.

Results and discussion

Analysis of key trends and events related to nationalism and their coverage in the media and social networks

An analysis of the information space indicates that *nationalist sentiments often intensify in response to specific high-profile events* and find expression in both traditional media and social networks. The study identified several key trends in the manifestation of nationalist sentiments in Kazakhstan during the examined period.

Discussions on language policy and kazakhization. In 2024, language policy remained one of the central issues fueling nationalist sentiments.

Following President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s speech at the National Kurultai in Atyrau, a viral video circulated on TikTok claiming that he allegedly stated that people in Kazakhstan would be forced to speak only Kazakh. The video quickly gained traction, accumulating 3,577 likes, 3,978 comments, and 478 shares.

For reference: On March 15, 2024, in Atyrau, the Head of State, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, held the third session of the National Kurultai. In his speech, the President emphasized the steadily strengthening role of the Kazakh language. At the same time, he noted that excessive discussion of the language issue is pointless: «...The essence of state policy is to consistently strengthen the role of the Kazakh language in everyday life without forcing anyone. Mere discussions about the state language are useless; what matters are concrete actions...»

This issue was promptly addressed, and the “Stopfake.kz” project identified the circulating information as false (March 16, 2024). News portals such as Qaz365.kz, Kazpravda.kz, Baigenews.kz, Zakon.kz, and others informed the public about the inaccuracy of the video, citing “Stopfake.kz” as a source. At present, the video has been removed from social media, and only refuting statements from news outlets remain in circulation.

Russian Chauvinism

Nationalist sentiment in Kazakhstan gets reignited regularly by perceived Russian chauvinism. When Russian media figures, athletes, or politicians say something dismissive about Kazakhs, the backlash tends to be sharp – and it usually pulls questions of identity and sovereignty back to the surface.

January 2024 produced a clear example. Russian TV presenter Tina Kandelaki posted on Telegram objecting to proposed renaming of railway stations from Russian to Kazakh names, calling it the “systematic marginalization” of the Russian language and drawing comparisons to the Baltic states – a “dangerous trend,” in her words. The reaction in Kazakhstan was immediate. Civil society and government officials pushed back hard, and there were serious discussions about whether Kandelaki should be declared *persona non grata*. Most people read the post as outside interference in Kazakhstan’s internal affairs – a challenge, however indirect, to the country’s right to set its own language policy. Prominent figures and lawmakers responded publicly and forcefully.

A second incident came in February 2024, during a Media Football League match between Kazakhstani team SD Family and Russian club 2Drots. Russian coach Dmitry Kuznetsov directed an ethnic

slur at the Kazakh referee. The moment was caught on video and spread fast. Public calls followed to bar Kuznetsov from entering Kazakhstan for inciting interethnic hostility. The Russian Embassy put out a statement distancing itself from his remarks – noting they didn't represent broader Russian opinion but the damage was done.

Then in October 2024, after a UEFA Nations League match between Kazakhstan and Slovenia, Kazakhstan's head coach Stanislav Cherchesov was asked a question in Kazakh at a press conference. His response: "Are you speaking French now?" It landed badly. The quip was read widely as contempt for the Kazakh language, and the criticism that followed fed directly into existing anxieties about cultural respect and linguistic rights.

Russophobia

Despite the sensitivities around sovereignty, outright Russophobia isn't a defining feature of Kazakhstani society. Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking communities mostly get along. Tensions do flare, but they tend to be triggered by specific statements from Russian public figures that seem to question Kazakhstan's territorial integrity – not by hostility toward Russians as such. The target is usually geopolitical positioning, not ethnicity.

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in 2022, sharpened all of this. Across post-Soviet states, including Kazakhstan, questions of national identity, autonomy, and historical memory became harder to ignore. Any suggestion, direct or implied, of Russian dominance now lands in that charged context and tends to provoke a reaction.

August 2024 gave a concrete example. A book called *How to Manage Kazakhs* turned up in bookstores and fuel stations. The title alone was enough. It was read widely as an insult to national dignity and a marker of neocolonial thinking, and the criticism was swift.

In March 2024, Russian politician Yevgeny Fedorov further inflamed tensions by questioning President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's statement that Kazakhstan is the successor to the Golden Horde. Fedorov, known for promoting imperialist narratives, was perceived as attempting to undermine Kazakhstan's historical legitimacy and political sovereignty – an interpretation that stirred renewed nationalist sentiment.

Another significant event unfolded in April 2024, when Andrei Gurulev, a member of the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee, suggested that a drone attack on facilities in Tatarstan might have originated from Kazakhstan. The implication

led to diplomatic friction between the two countries. Shortly after, a voice recording circulated on Telegram, allegedly featuring Gurulev, in which Kazakhstan was named as the next possible target for destabilization. Although Gurulev later denied the authenticity of the recording, dismissing it as fake, the incident nonetheless caused alarm in Kazakhstani social media, feeding into the broader discourse of external threats and national defense.

In addition, the increasing influx of Russian-speaking migrants from Russia including those seeking to escape economic and political instability has contributed to potential social tensions within Kazakhstan. This evolving demographic situation has created a complex dynamic, in which both anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiments have been on the rise.

In March 2024, Russian politician Yevgeny Fedorov questioned President Tokayev's claim that Kazakhstan is the successor to the Golden Horde. Fedorov has a track record of imperialist rhetoric, and the intervention was read as an attempt to undermine Kazakhstan's historical legitimacy – which predictably stirred nationalist feeling.

April brought something more alarming. Andrei Gurulev, a member of the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee, suggested that a drone attack on facilities in Tatarstan might have originated from Kazakhstan. The claim caused diplomatic friction. Shortly after, a Telegram recording surfaced, allegedly featuring Gurulev, naming Kazakhstan as a potential next target for destabilization. Gurulev denied it was him and called it fake – but the damage to public sentiment was already done. The episode fed neatly into existing anxieties about external threats and national security.

Running alongside all of this is a demographic shift. The influx of Russian-speaking migrants fleeing economic and political instability in Russia has added another layer of tension. It hasn't produced open conflict, but it has given both anti-immigrant sentiment and broader nationalist feeling more fuel.

In September 2024, the Telegram channel Rybar published a post "How Russia is Represented in Central Asian History Textbooks" that racked up 364,000 views. It criticised history textbooks in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, drawing on a book published by the Russian Academy of Sciences titled *Russia in the History Textbooks of the Near and Post-Soviet East, China: A Summary Collection*. The Russian outlet RBC picked it up under the headline "RAS Scholars De-

scribe ‘Negative Images’ of Russia in CIS Countries Textbooks”.

The RBC article quoted directly from a Kazakhstani 10th-grade history textbook, which describes the Russian Empire’s policy toward Kazakhstan as “territorial expansion,” a “protectorate”, and “colonial policy” – and characterises it overall as “aggressive and ineffective.”

OrdaMedia.kz asked Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs whether the study amounted to interference in internal affairs. The MFA declined to comment. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education offered a different deflection – the collection was written by political scientists, not historians, which explained its subjective reading of events.

Mazhilis deputy A. Aimagambetov took a similar line, saying the collection reflected individual authors’ views rather than any official RAS position. Others in the Kazakhstani public were less measured. The general argument was that the textbook assessment was ideological, not historical. Historian S. Akimbekov made that point carefully. Blogger and archaeologist N. Ersaiyn made it less carefully: “Every country has the right to describe historical events in its textbooks in accordance with its policies. Why is Russia interfering? Because in their fantasies, Russian authorities still see Kazakhstan as part of their empire”.

The issue of how Kazakhstan’s history portrays Russia remained relevant in October 2024. The Telegram channel Qumash reported that a roundtable discussion was held at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, organized by the Russkiy Mir [Russian World] Foundation, under the theme «*The Shared History of Kazakhstan and Russia and the Discourse of “Decolonization”*». The post attracted 39,000 views and 248 comments, reflecting the ongoing tension surrounding this topic.

For reference: the Russkiy Mir Foundation is a Russian nonprofit organization that officially promotes the Russian language and cultural heritage through educational and outreach programs worldwide. However, its presence and activities have often been a source of public debate and unease in Kazakhstan.

Before January 1, 2024, the foundation was led by Vyacheslav Nikonov, whose 2020 comment claiming that “*Kazakhstan’s territory was a generous gift from Russia*” caused significant public backlash. The remark landed as a challenge to Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity –and it wasn’t an isolated moment. In 2021, the opening of a Russian cultural center at Buketov Karaganda

University had already stirred significant backlash. Many assumed the center was connected to the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which raised immediate questions about the political and ideological agenda behind it.

In light of this background, any developments or announcements involving the Russkiy Mir Foundation tend to generate polarized responses within Kazakhstani society. While some may view its efforts as cultural diplomacy, others interpret them as subtle attempts to reassert influence or interfere in the country’s internal affairs.

The roundtable discussion on «*The Shared History of Kazakhstan and Russia and the Discourse of “Decolonization”*», held at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and organized by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, triggered widespread criticism in Kazakhstan. Public reaction was particularly intense on social media, where users denounced both the event itself and the university’s decision to host it. The most common themes in the criticism included: condemnation of the authorities and the President for allowing such discussions; concerns that the event was an attempt to justify Kazakhstan’s colonial past; fears that Russia was once again interfering in Kazakhstan’s internal affairs; reinforcement of the «enemy image» narrative regarding Russia’s influence.

One of the most frequently used expressions in the comments was «*Mankurt*», a historical and literary term referring to a person who has lost their national and cultural identity, often used pejoratively in nationalist discourse. Examples of such comments include: «*Byndaj sanasy zhok mangyrtterge birdene zhazyp uakyt zhogaltu kazheti zhok*» [«*There is no point in wasting time writing to such brainwashed mankurts*»]; «*Mankurnja oni rabami zhivut, rabami pomrut caluja sapog belogo hozjaina i preziraja korni*» [«*These mankurts live as slaves and will die as slaves, kissing the boots of their white master while despising their own roots*»]; «*Nam zapretjat skoro ljubuju samostojatel’nost’ i nash jazyk, vot radosti mankurtam budet*» [«*Soon, we will be forbidden from any form of independence and our language, and the mankurts will rejoice*»].

Kazakhstani media also covered the controversy. The news portal *Ulysmmedia.kz* published an article titled «*Kruglyj stol o dekolonizacii v KazNU: kak Rossija prizyvaet Kazahstan i strany CA ne “zaciklivat’sja na proshlom”*» [«*Roundtable on Decolonization at KazNU: How Russia Urges Kazakhstan and Central Asian Countries Not to “Dwell on the Past”*»]. This coverage further fueled public debate.

Anything connected to the Russkiy Mir Foundation tends to hit a nerve in Kazakhstan. The sensitivities around sovereignty, national identity, and historical memory run deep enough that many citizens read such initiatives as a direct threat to national interests.

Sinophobia

Sinophobic sentiments have also been evident in Kazakhstan's political discourse. Certain political factions and nationalist groups have employed anti-Chinese rhetoric to rally support and voice concerns over the country's economic dependence on China. Criticism has been directed at the government for its perceived overreliance on Chinese investments. Following the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Kazakhstan, such sentiments intensified. The dominant narratives centred on anxieties regarding the «*increasing economic influence of China*», «*loss of national control over key industries and economic sectors*», and «*the potential transfer of Kazakhstani land into Chinese hands*».

At the same time, in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Almaty on 4 March 2024, a theory began circulating on Kazakhstani social media, alleging that the disaster had been triggered by a superdeep borehole being drilled by Chinese scientists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The conspiracy theory spread fast online and gave nationalist voices a fresh platform for criticising China's presence in the region. The underlying themes were familiar – environmental and security concerns about Chinese activities in Kazakhstan, unease about China's growing economic and political weight in Central Asia, and a layer of historical and cultural grievance running underneath all of it.

Economic Nationalism

The nuclear power plant debate became another flashpoint in autumn 2024. Public figures including Mukhtar Taizhan, Zhanbolat Mamai, and various environmental activists threw themselves into the discussion, and much of what they said carried clear nationalist undertones – concerns about sovereignty, environmental safety, and dependence on foreign states. Their posts generated real public traction.

The sharpest anxiety centred on Rosatom. For many, the NPP wasn't just an infrastructure project – it was a strategic asset that Kazakhstan should control entirely, without outside interference. Environmental fears ran alongside this: Chernobyl and Fukushima weren't abstract references but live precedents. These concerns got framed in explicitly nationalist terms – protecting “our land,” securing “our future. «Nationalist discussions have also cen-

tered around the proposed referendum on the NPP project. A segment of the population has expressed doubts about the integrity of the voting process, citing Kazakhstan's past experience with elections and similar public initiatives. Due to growing suspicions of potential result manipulation, many social media users have questioned the effectiveness of participating in the referendum, seeing little point in expressing their civic stance.

Thus, the nationalist rhetoric surrounding the NPP construction represents a fusion of different types of nationalism: *Economic Nationalism*, focusing on protecting national resources and infrastructure from foreign control; *Ethnic Nationalism*, emphasizing the preservation of national identity and preventing the influence of foreign powers.

The results of the discourse analysis make it possible to move beyond the descriptive level of individual cases and interpret them through the main theoretical approaches to nationalism and media discourse.

The analysis of a corpus comprising more than 1,500 units of media content published between January and October 2024 demonstrates that nationalist discourse in Kazakhstan's media space does not exist as a constant mass background. Rather, it becomes significantly more visible around issues connected to symbolic values, particularly language, sovereignty, historical memory, and control over strategic resources. Three major rhetorical lines proved to be the most persistent: linguistic, ethnic, and economic nationalism. At the same time, the spread and intensity of these narratives depended not only on the substance of the event itself, but also on the way it was framed, titled, and amplified online.

Media outlets and social networking platforms function not merely as spaces for discussing such issues, but also as independent mechanisms involved in the construction and dissemination of nationalist narratives.

Theoretical interpretation of the findings

The findings largely correspond with the constructivist approach, which views nationalism as a socially and discursively constructed phenomenon. The analysis demonstrated that nationalist rhetoric is produced and reinforced through media narratives, symbolic oppositions, and emotional interpretations of events. This was particularly evident in discussions surrounding language policy, decolonization, relations with Russia and China, and debates related to the construction of a nuclear power plant.

The results also support the ideas of Teun A. van Dijk concerning the division of discourse into “us” and “them.” Nearly all of the examined cases contained elements of opposition between internal and external actors. Within nationalist discourse, the category of the “other” included foreign states, political structures, public figures, migrants, as well as domestic participants in discussions who were perceived as a threat to language, culture, or sovereignty. These mechanisms were especially visible in user comments, where stereotypical labels and emotionally charged vocabulary were frequently employed.

The approach developed by Norman Fairclough is also reflected in the findings of the study. Nationalist rhetoric was reproduced not only through the substantive content of publications, but also through linguistic forms such as headlines, emotionally loaded vocabulary, sarcasm, conflict-oriented framing, and metaphors. In many cases, the emotional style of presentation intensified the conflict potential more strongly than the events themselves.

The findings can also be partially interpreted through the framework proposed by Samuel Huntington, who viewed nationalism as a reaction to external cultural and political threats. During the period under study, this was reflected in Russophobic and Sinophobic narratives, discussions of decolonization, debates surrounding the activities of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, as well as broader concerns regarding the influence of Russia and China on Kazakhstan.

A distinct place within the structure of the identified discourse was occupied by economic nationalism. The analysis demonstrated that issues related to nuclear power plants (NPP), foreign investment, and control over strategic resources were interpreted not merely as economic matters, but also as questions of national security, independence, and the protection of national interests.

At the same time, the findings indicate that nationalist rhetoric in Kazakhstan is not homogeneous. It manifests itself in different forms, particularly linguistic, ethnic, and economic nationalism, and tends to intensify under the influence of specific informational triggers and public controversies. Social media platforms play a particularly important role in this process, as emotionally charged content spreads there much faster and more frequently takes on radicalized forms.

Mechanisms of the dissemination and intensification of nationalist rhetoric

The material collected in the corpus makes it possible to trace quite clearly the mechanisms

through which nationalist rhetoric gains momentum. In most cases, the process begins with an event that can easily be interpreted as a symbolic offense, a threat, or an external intrusion. This is followed by mediatization: an isolated phrase, a controversial episode, a video fragment taken out of context, or an emotionally framed headline acquires a second life through comments, reposts, short retellings, and online disputes. At this stage, emotional markers such as humiliation, devaluation, danger, the “loss of one’s own,” and betrayal become especially significant. These elements make the message not only visible, but also highly reproducible and adaptable for further circulation. Even subsequent clarifications or refutations do not necessarily reduce tensions, since the initial interpretative frame often becomes firmly embedded in public discussion.

This pattern can be observed in several cases examined within the corpus. In one example, a short viral video distorted the official position on language policy into the claim that the Kazakh language would allegedly become mandatory for everyone. As a result, the discussion shifted away from the substance of language policy and quickly turned into a polarized debate around the ideas of “imposition” and “protection” of language. In another case, an ironic remark made by a public figure in response to a question asked in Kazakh was interpreted not as an isolated unsuccessful joke, but as evidence of disrespect toward the language and, more broadly, toward the cultural status of the titular majority.

A similar dynamic emerged after an emergency incident, when online discussions rapidly circulated the assumption that the threat originated from an external, “Chinese” source. Although the hypothesis itself lacked technical credibility, it almost immediately acquired a political and emotional dimension. Likewise, discussions surrounding the nuclear power plant project repeatedly shifted from questions of energy policy toward concerns about dependence on foreign technologies, operators, and political influence.

What unites all of these cases is the same underlying mechanism: an event acquires a nationalist interpretation once it can be incorporated into a broader narrative centered on protecting “one’s own” social and symbolic space from external control or outside influence.

Practical and socio-political implications

The findings of the study indicate that issues related to language, historical memory, external influence, and national sovereignty remain highly sensitive in Kazakhstan and can rapidly shift from

general public discussion into conflict-oriented discourse.

This is particularly evident in debates surrounding language policy. The analysis showed that discussions about the role of the Kazakh language in the media space frequently extend beyond purely linguistic issues and come to be perceived as indicators of attitudes toward statehood, national identity, and loyalty to the country. In this environment, a single statement, a leaked recording, or an outright fabrication can be enough to set off a large public reaction and deepen polarisation on social media.

The study also demonstrated that nationalist rhetoric is often reinforced by external political factors. Statements made by Russian politicians, discussions on decolonization, the activities of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, as well as debates concerning China and foreign investment, were interpreted by part of the audience through the lens of threats to sovereignty and external interference. This contributes to a heightened public sensitivity toward external information flows and geopolitical influence.

Economic nationalism also occupies an important place within the identified discourse. The debates surrounding the construction of a nuclear power plant illustrate how issues of economy and infrastructure become closely connected in public discourse with questions of independence, control over strategic resources, and trust in state institutions. As a result, even technical or economic projects begin to be interpreted in terms of national security and foreign influence.

Overall, the findings suggest that nationalist discourse in Kazakhstan is closely linked not only to questions of ethnicity, but also to broader concerns related to political sovereignty, cultural security, external influence, and public trust.

Conclusion

The analysis of nationalist rhetoric in Kazakhstan's media in 2024 points to a few clear patterns.

First, nationalist sentiment sharpens around high-profile events that touch on national identity, sovereignty, or cultural values – language policy disputes, geopolitical friction, interethnic incidents. Any significant statement or event involving Kazakhstan tends to produce an outsized media reaction. This fits Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" framework and supports the broader argument that nationalism here functions partly as a defensive response to perceived cultural, political, and economic pressure from outside.

Second, headlines do more than summarise – they set the emotional register for everything that follows. The framing established in a headline shape how the rest of the material gets read and felt.

Third, the analysis identifies a recurring pattern of behaviour on social media during surges of nationalist sentiment:

- A provocative entry point. It usually starts with a headline that distorts or inflames – an out-of-context quote, an exaggerated reading of events, a framing designed to signal conflict before the article even begins.

- Invoking the past. Earlier incidents get pulled in to raise the emotional stakes. The effect is to make current tensions feel like part of a longer, unresolved pattern – which makes the rhetoric easier to sustain.

- Polarisation in the comments. Opinion splits fast and coarsens quickly. Comment sections fill with informal, often offensive language – sarcasm, xenophobia, attacks on authorities, subjective takes stated as fact.

- Official and influencer responses. Government representatives step in to deny, clarify, or reframe. Bloggers and opinion leaders add their own readings. Between them, they push the discourse further rather than settling it.

- Misinformation that sticks. False or incomplete information spreads quickly and keeps circulating even after being debunked. Official denials don't always help – they can just as easily feed suspicion toward the authorities issuing them.

A specific information event, then, is what sets the cycle in motion. Journalists, government officials, and opinion leaders can all push it toward escalation or pull it back – the outcome depends heavily on how they choose to engage.

One important observation from 2024: nationalist sentiment in Kazakhstan has largely stayed online, expressing itself through radical-sounding rhetoric rather than spilling into real-world action. That distinction matters, but it shouldn't be reassuring. Every instance of nationalist discourse carries conflict potential, and the gap between virtual and physical can close. That alone makes continuous monitoring of media and social networks necessary.

Fourth, nationalist rhetoric in Kazakhstan takes different forms at different levels. The following key types can be identified:

- *Linguistic nationalism*. The status of Kazakh and Russian generates persistent friction. A fake video falsely attributing a statement to the President

claiming he had made Kazakh language knowledge mandatory for all was enough to trigger a significant public reaction. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Kazakh language has become a charged marker of sovereignty and national identity in ways it wasn't before.

- *Ethnic nationalism*. This strand centres on protecting Kazakh ethnic interests and asserting a stronger Kazakh presence in political and social life. Two narratives dominate: Russophobic and Sinophobic. Anti-Russian rhetoric has sharpened in recent years, driven largely by statements from Russian public figures that seem to challenge Kazakhstan's territorial integrity or sovereignty.

- *Economic nationalism*. The focus here is on national resources, economic sovereignty, and

keeping foreign actors out. The NPP debate is the clearest 2024 example the involvement of foreign companies, particularly Rosatom, got framed not as a technical or commercial question but as an ecological threat and a form of external encroachment on Kazakhstani land and autonomy.

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Mukhambetova Kuralay – *Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.*

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