

V. Yenseyeva^{1*}, N. Shedenova¹, P. Finke²

¹Farabi University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

²University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

*e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com

SOCIAL PRACTICES OF REPATRIATE INTEGRATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE CASE OF THE ZHETYSU REGION

The issue of repatriates' integration into society has become increasingly important in the context of global migration processes, demographic changes, and state policies aimed at supporting ethnic return migrants. The purpose of this study is to identify the main social practices influencing the integration of repatriates living in the Zhetysu Region of Kazakhstan and to determine the factors that facilitate or hinder their social adaptation. The methodological framework of the study is based on a quantitative sociological approach. Empirical data were collected through a structured survey of 787 repatriates permanently residing in different districts of the Zhetysu Region. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and tests of association between variables. The findings demonstrate that the social integration of repatriates is a complex and multidimensional process shaped by a combination of social, cultural, and institutional factors. The most significant predictors of a sense of belonging include stable social ties with local residents, understanding of cultural norms, and participation in everyday social interactions. The value of the study lies in providing large-scale empirical evidence on the everyday integration practices of repatriates within the regional context of Kazakhstan. The results expand current understanding of the mechanisms underlying social belonging and confirm the need to conceptualize integration as a multi-level process involving social relationships, cultural adaptation, and institutional interaction. The practical significance of the study lies in the potential use of its findings by regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, and social service providers for the development of targeted support measures for repatriates. The implementation of such measures may contribute to strengthening social cohesion, increasing repatriates' participation in local community life, and improving the overall effectiveness of social integration policies.

Keywords: repatriates, social integration, social practices, sense of belonging, Kazakhstan.

В.Т. Енсеева^{1*}, Н.У. Шеденова¹, П. Финке²

¹Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

²Цюрих университеті, Цюрих, Швейцария

*e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com

Қазақстандағы репатрианттардың интеграциясының әлеуметтік тәжірибелері: Жетісу өңірі мысалында

Репатрианттардың қоғамға интеграциялану мәселесі жаһандық көші-қон үдерістерімен, демографиялық өзгерістермен және көшіп келген этникалық қазақтарды қолдауға бағытталған мемлекеттік саясатпен байланысты ерекше өзектілікке ие болып отыр. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстанның Жетісу облысында тұратын репатрианттардың интеграциясына ықпал ететін негізгі әлеуметтік тәжірибелерді анықтау, сондай-ақ олардың әлеуметтік бейімделуіне ықпал ететін немесе кедергі келтіретін факторларды айқындау. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін сандық әлеуметтанулық тәсіл құрады. Эмпирикалық деректер Жетісу облысының әртүрлі аудандарында тұрақты тұратын 787 репатриант арасында жүргізілген құрылымданған сауалнама нәтижесінде жинақталды. Деректерді өңдеуде сипаттамалық статистика, корреляциялық талдау және белгілердің өзара байланысын талдау әдістері қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері репатрианттардың әлеуметтік интеграциясы әлеуметтік, мәдени және институционалдық факторлардың жиынтығына тәуелді күрделі әрі көпқырлы үдеріс екенін көрсетті. Жергілікті тұрғындармен тұрақты әлеуметтік байланыстардың болуы, мәдени нормаларды түсіну және күнделікті әлеуметтік өзара әрекеттестікке қатысу тиесілілік сезімінің қалыптасуына ең маңызды ықпал ететін факторлар ретінде анықталды. Зерттеудің құндылығы Қазақстанның өңірлік контекстіндегі репатрианттардың күнделікті интеграциялық тәжірибелері туралы ауқымды эмпирикалық деректер ұсынуында жатыр. Алынған нәтижелер әлеуметтік тиесілілік

түсініктерді кеңейтіп, интеграцияны әлеуметтік қатынастарды, мәдени бейімделуді және институционалдық өзара әрекеттестікті қамтитын көпдеңгейлі үдеріс ретінде қарастыру қажеттігін дәлелдейді. Зерттеудің практикалық маңызы оның нәтижелерін өңірлік мемлекеттік органдар, үкіметтік емес ұйымдар және әлеуметтік қызметтер тарапынан репатрианттарды қолдаудың нысаналы бағдарламаларын әзірлеуде қолдану мүмкіндігімен айқындалады. Мұндай шараларды жүзеге асыру әлеуметтік бірлікті нығайтуға, репатрианттардың жергілікті қауымдастықтар өміріне қатысу деңгейін арттыруға және олардың әлеуметтік интеграциясының тиімді жүйесін қалыптастыруға ықпал етеді.

Түйін сөздер: оралмандар, әлеуметтік интеграция, әлеуметтік тәжірибелер, тиесілілік сезімі, Қазақстан.

В.Т. Енсеева^{1*}, Н.У. Шеденова², П. Финке³

^{1,2} Казахский национальный университет им. аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан

³ Университета Цюриха, Швейцария

*e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com

Социальные практики интеграции репатриантов в Казахстане: на примере Жетысуского региона

Проблема интеграции репатриантов в общество приобрела особую актуальность в связи с глобальной миграцией, демографическими изменениями и государственной политикой в отношении возвращения мигрантов. Целью исследования является выявление основных социальных практик, влияющих на интеграцию репатриантов, проживающих в Жетысуской области Казахстана, а также определение факторов, способствующих или препятствующих их социальной адаптации. Методологическую основу исследования составил количественный социологический подход. Эмпирические данные были получены в результате структурированного опроса 787 репатриантов, постоянно проживающих в различных районах Жетысуской области. Для обработки данных использовались методы описательной статистики, корреляционного анализа и анализа сопряженности признаков. Результаты исследования показали, что социальная интеграция репатриантов представляет собой сложный и многомерный процесс, зависящий от совокупности социальных, культурных и институциональных факторов. Наиболее значимыми предикторами чувства принадлежности выступают наличие устойчивых социальных связей с местными жителями, понимание культурных норм и участие в повседневном социальном взаимодействии. Ценность проведенного исследования состоит в получении масштабных эмпирических данных о повседневных практиках интеграции репатриантов в региональном контексте Казахстана. Полученные результаты расширяют современные представления о механизмах формирования социальной принадлежности и подтверждают необходимость рассмотрения интеграции как многоуровневого процесса, включающего социальные отношения, культурную адаптацию и институциональное взаимодействие. Практическое значение работы заключается в возможности использования полученных результатов региональными органами власти, неправительственными организациями и социальными службами для разработки адресных мер поддержки репатриантов. Реализация таких мер может способствовать укреплению социальной сплоченности, повышению уровня участия репатриантов в жизни местных сообществ и созданию более эффективной системы их социальной интеграции.

Ключевые слова: репатрианты, социальная интеграция, социальные практики, чувство принадлежности, Казахстан.

Introduction

The study of the social integration practices of returnees is due to increased global migration, demographic changes and government programmes. Repatriates often find themselves in unique situations related to their ethnic origin, but they are also exposed to the social and cultural influence of the countries of previous residence, which creates complicated ways of adaptation (Barrett, 2013). Research shows that successful integration depends not only on structural conditions, such as employ-

ment, housing and education, but also on daily social activity, which contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging, recognition and participation in community life (Ager, 2008; Ryan, 2017). In the post-Soviet and Central Asian contexts, repatriation has become an important strategy of state-building and demographic change. In this context, government repatriation programmes have served as demographic and political instruments. Their aim is to address population decline, promote resettlement in key areas and help ethnic minorities who have returned home to join the nation-building efforts.

However, the mechanisms of support from state institutions are often inconsistent and applied unevenly (Zhanbossinova, 2019). Returnees often face language barriers, bureaucratic complexities and limited access to social networks, which makes their integration difficult despite the existence of formal citizenship rights (Diener, 2007). Analysis of everyday social practices such as community interaction, cultural participation, support networks and identity reconciliation provides important insights into how returnees adapt to the new social environment and form a sense of belonging. Given these factors it is important to understand the factors that promote or hinder the integration of returnees into contemporary societies. It complements broader discussions on migration, citizenship, social cohesion and the role of the state in creating an enabling environment for returning populations. By focusing on social practices, not just structural indicators, the study presents a detailed, human-centred perspective that is crucial for informed policy development and targeted social support programs.

Research hypotheses:

H₁: Returnees with wider social networks, such as relatives, neighbors and social groups, exhibit a higher level of integration.

H₂: The level of education and the degree of professional involvement are positively related to the overall level of social adaptation.

The results of the study provide valuable data to the regional authorities in Zhetysu, enabling them to improve integration programmes and address existing problems such as language adaptation, access to public services and uneven availability of support networks. Results can also help NGOs, social service providers and community organizations to design targeted interventions that reflect the real experiences of returnees and contribute to long-term social cohesion in the region.

Literature review

The problem of ethnic return migration to Kazakhstan has been widely studied in terms of its historical context, political framework and consequences for integration. Early studies of Kazakh diasporas highlight the diversity of historical paths that led to the formation of Kazakh communities abroad. Some groups have faced forced displacement, hunger or political repression, especially during the Soviet era. Others, such as the Kazakhs in Mongolia and parts of China, have experienced longer-term problems related to changes in imperial borders, resettlement

policies, and socio-economic marginalization rather than direct coercion (Amanzhol, 2014; Diener, 2007). Therefore, the Kazakh diasporas were formed in different historical contexts and developed unique social, cultural and linguistic characteristics. After Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the State repatriation policy was aimed at encouraging the return of ethnic Kazakhs, but reverse migration was selective, partial and uneven. Many diaspora communities have settled abroad for long periods, sometimes for generations, while others have engaged in cyclical or delayed migration rather than permanent return. In these circumstances, repatriation has served as an instrument of demographic and nation-building. Symbolically strengthened ethnic succession, increased the share of ethnic Kazakhs and supported the state's efforts to redefine national identity in the post-Soviet era rather than acting as a universal or mandatory process. However, the returnees faced considerable difficulties in adapting to the social, economic and cultural realities of their «historical homeland». A considerable amount of research is devoted to the institutional and political context of repatriation. A comparative study by Zeveleva (2014) conducted in Germany, Russia and Kazakhstan shows that repatriation programmes are only effective when they include practical support such as material assistance, legal status and demand in the labor market along with ideological narrative about statehood. In Kazakhstan, this view suggests that repatriation was presented as a way to correct past injustices and strengthen the indigenous nation. But it is also limited by changing economic priorities and migration policies.

Werner (2017) introduce the concept of «privileged exception» to describe the contradictory situation of returnees who enjoy legitimate rights and welcome, but still face language barriers, daily discrimination and incomplete belonging to post-Soviet society. In this broader context, a number of studies focused on adaptation and integration. Amanzhol (2014) documents the wave of Kazakh emigration and the extent of return after independence. They found that many returnees face bureaucratic obstacles, difficulties in recognizing their qualifications and finding housing and work even with official support. Zhapakov (2020) analyzes employment issues, arguing that unemployment and underemployment often force returnees into internal migration, making them a vulnerable part of Kazakhstan's labor force. The results highlight that citizenship alone is not sufficient for integration, access to stable employment and effective inclusion in local labour markets are crucial.

Other researchers stress the importance of civil society and community organizations in promoting integration. Kaiser (2020) explores membership-based returnee organizations providing services to NGOs established by returnees to facilitate settlement and social integration. He shows that these organizations provide legal assistance, language courses, cultural events and mutual support, which is very important for new arrivals. At the same time, the authors argue that these organizations are difficult to become effective collective voices and have limited ability to influence public policy or mobilize as a social movement for returnees (Bokayev, 2012). Recent studies are increasingly focusing on the experiences of young returnees and students. Taldybayeva (2021) studies the fate of young «kandastar», who came to Kazakhstan on state scholarships, and compares their hopes for a «historical homeland». Despite opportunities for education, young returnees still face barriers related to language, social networks and regional inequalities. This suggests that the state's initiative to attract young people from the diaspora has had mixed results for their long-term integration. Zharkynbekova et. al. (2024) discusses the socio-cultural integration of young returnees, showing that higher education and participation in areas such as construction, services, medicine and teaching, along with strong family ties, help them adapt. However, traditional attitudes and strong group bonds also form certain cultural bonds. Based on the concept of transnationalism Zharkynbekova et. al. (2024) study the role of the family in the adaptation of ethnic Kazakh students from Mongolia and China. Their study, conducted using mixed methods, shows that many young returnees maintain close transnational family ties that support their emotional health and allow them to focus on possible re-migration. Students from Mongolia, who often have more extensive family ties in Kazakhstan and communicate with relatives more frequently, adapt more smoothly than students from China, who often experience emotional distance from their families and are more likely to return home after graduation. The study refutes previous perceptions of return migration as a one-off event, showing that the lives of returnees are closely linked to ongoing cross-border social dynamics (Zhailybayev, 2020).

Comparative analysis also contributes to the understanding of identity and belonging among returnees. The study by Kość-Ryżko (2016) on Poles returning from Kazakhstan reveals serious «identity dilemmas» and a sense of estrangement. Although

many of them yearn to return home, in Poland they are often considered «too Soviet» and their claims of national identity are disputed. The results relate to the situation in Kazakhstan, where local residents may call returnees «Chinese» or «Mongols» which illustrates how ethnic backward migration can lead to new forms of isolation rather than direct acceptance. In general, the literature on returnees from Kazakhstan highlights several key aspects of integration: (1) the historical and political context of repatriation programs, (2) the conflict between legal-symbolic inclusiveness and socio-economic or cultural isolation, (3) the importance of employment, education and civil society organizations for adaptation, as well as (4) the unique vulnerabilities and resources of young returnees in transnational family networks. However, most existing studies are based on qualitative interviews, policy analysis or case studies focused on major cities and individual subgroups. There is a need for systematically collected quantitative data reflecting the daily practice of integration in regional settings and medium-sized cities. Focusing on repatriates living in the Zhaoyusy region and using a large-scale survey, this study addresses this gap and allows for a more detailed analysis of factors such as demographic characteristics, place of origin and local social conditions.

Materials and methods

Data were collected through a structured survey of returnees permanently residing in various parts of the Zhetysu region during the period from July to November 2025. The final sample included 787 reliable responses. The survey covered areas such as:

- demographic and socio-economic characteristics;
- country of origin;
- household composition;
- education, employment and material well-being;
- social integration indicators and everyday social practices.

The data were processed with SPSS Statistics using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and correlation analysis. The socio-demographic structure of the respondents shows a significant internal diversity in terms of age, education, employment and country of origin, which ensures representativeness of the data set for analysis of the integration patterns of returnees in the Zhetysu region (see Table 1).

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 787)

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	295	37.5
	Female	492	62.5
Age	18–24	41	5.2
	25–34	103	13.1
	35–44	333	42.3
	45–54	130	16.5
	55–64	158	20.1
	65+	22	2.8
	Place of residence	Taldykorgan (<i>urban – regional capital</i>)	219
Tekeli (<i>urban – city of regional significance</i>)		100	12.7
Panfilov district (Zharkent) (<i>semi-urban – district centre</i>)		40	5.1
Sarkand (<i>semi-urban – district centre</i>)		15	1.9
Alakol District (Usharal) (<i>semi-urban – district centre</i>)		50	6.4
Karatal District (Ushtobe) (<i>semi-urban – district centre</i>)		226	28.7
Aksu District (<i>rural</i>)		19	2.4
Eskeldi District (<i>rural</i>)		56	7.1
Kerbulak District (<i>rural</i>)		14	1.8
Koksu District (<i>rural</i>)		48	6.1
Marital status		Single (never married)	131
	Married	549	69.8
	Divorced	73	9.3
	Widowed	34	4.3
Children	1–2 children	234	29.7
	3–4 children	272	34.6
	More than 4 children	140	17.8
	No children	141	17.9
Education	Primary and general secondary education	91	11.6
	Secondary vocational education (college)	169	21.5
	Higher education (bachelor's degree)	426	54.1
	Postgraduate education (master's, doctoral)	84	10.7
	No formal education	17	2.2
Employment status	Employee in the public sector	237	30.1
	Employee in the private sector	74	9.4
	Entrepreneur	108	13.7
	Self-employed	52	6.6
	Student	138	17.5
	Homemaker	60	7.6
	Pensioner	29	3.7
	Unemployed	37	4.7
	Other	52	6.6

Continuation of the table

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Material situation	Insufficient even for food	40	5.1
	Enough for food, but buying clothes is difficult	91	11.6
	Enough for daily expenses, but large purchases are difficult	247	31.4
	Enough for all necessities, but cannot afford a car or housing	218	27.7
	Enough for everything, including expensive purchases (car, housing, etc.)	125	15.9
	Difficult to answer	66	8.4
Country of residence before migration	China (PRC)	568	72.2
	Uzbekistan	85	10.8
	Mongolia	50	6.4
	Russia	56	7.1
	Kyrgyzstan	20	2.5
	Turkmenistan	8	1.0

The study met standard ethical standards, participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were aware of the purpose of the study, the anonymity of the data and their right to opt out at any time. No personal information was collected. The use of targeted sampling is suitable for hard-to-reach groups such as returnees, but it limits the generalizability of results beyond the Zhetysu region. Data reported by respondents may also be affected by social desirability bias. However, the large sample size ($N = 787$) and the coverage of several areas enhance the reliability of the dataset and enable meaningful comparisons.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the survey data began with an examination of the links between key socio-demographic characteristics of returnees and their sense of belonging to the local community. As belonging to a community is an important element of social integration, the identification of patterns among demographic groups helps to understand basic trends in integration. Table 2 presents an analysis of the distribution of responses by main categories, where the strongest links were found for age, place of residence, marital status and number of children, as well as sex, showed significant differences but they were comparatively weaker.

The results show that the sense of integration among returnees varies and changes systemati-

cally according to different demographic factors. Integration varies greatly between different age groups. Young respondents were more likely to express a positive sense of belonging, while older age groups were more likely to say «not at all» (46.2%) or «rather not» (44.3%) when asked about their sense of belonging to the local community. Young people may have better social mobility, a wider range of communication and greater involvement in work and education. The findings are consistent with previous studies which show that older migrants often face large structural and language barriers (Smarika, 2023). Problems hinder their ability to connect with host communities and feel part of them. Further, the place of residence proved to be an important factor determining the integration process, so that the returnees living in different parts of Zhetysu region reported significant differences in their sense of belonging, according to local conditions, urban or rural, access to social services and community openness. Similar results are corroborated by existing studies on the social integration of migrants, which highlight how social ties and resettlement conditions affect emotional and social attachment to new places. Studies on migrant integration and attachment to place show that building meaningful relationships and access to support networks greatly enhance the sense of belonging of migrants, regardless of economic factors or interaction with the majority population (Wessendorf, 2019; Bruhn, 2023).

Table 2

Association between socio-demographic characteristics and sense of belonging, N = 787

Socio-demographic factor	χ^2	df	p-value	Interpretation
Gender	22.14	4	<0.001	Significant but weak association
Age	475.47	20	<0.001	Strong association; younger groups report higher belonging
Place of residence	210.33	36	<0.001	Respondents living in urban areas (Taldykorgan, Tekeli) report higher levels of belonging compared to those residing in semi-urban district centres and predominantly rural districts.
Marital status	101.51	12	<0.001	Married respondents most integrated
Number of children	80.22	12	<0.001	Families with children report stronger belonging
Education	155.77	16	.406	Higher education linked to higher belonging
Employment status	187.94	28	<0.001	Students and public-sector workers most integrated
Material well-being	92.88	20	.152	Better-off households feel more included
Country of origin	160.65	20	<0.001	Significant differences in belonging are observed across countries of origin, with comparatively higher levels reported by respondents from China and Mongolia than by those from Uzbekistan and Russia.

Note: Sense of belonging is based on respondents' answers to the question "Do you feel yourself to be part of the local community?" (five-point Likert scale). Statistical significance was assessed using Pearson's chi-square test.

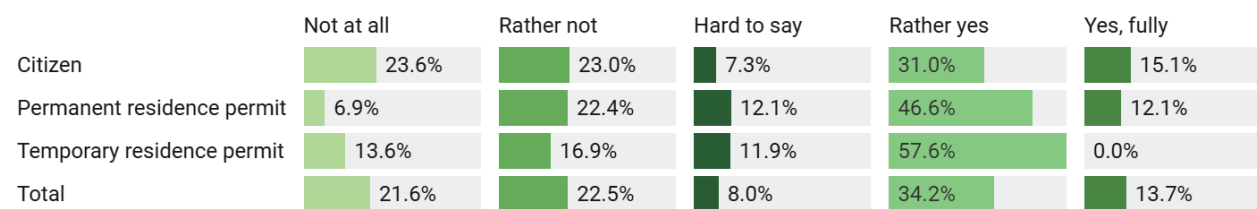
Further, family status and household structure also influenced the sense of belonging, so respondents who are married and have children, especially in large families, were more likely to feel strongly connected with their local communities. Trends confirm theories that emphasize the importance of family and kinship ties in promoting integration processes. Families often provide both emotional support and access to broader social networks, resulting in stronger connections and greater involvement in community life (Spitzer, 2018). Integration in this context is a complex process involving both objective circumstances and personal experience. It seems to be shaped by individual resources and local capacities, consistent with migration studies that emphasize the diversity

of migrants' integration and the need to take social relationships into account.

The analysis shows a link between the legal status of respondents and their sense of belonging to the local community. The answers show a clear and significant trend, so those returnees who have already obtained citizenship of Kazakhstan report the highest level of sense of belonging, followed by people with permanent residence. Furthermore, holders of temporary residence permits have the lowest sense of belonging (see Fig. 1). The pattern is consistent with existing studies that highlight how legal security, stable residence and access to rights have a significant impact on migrants' emotional connections and their participation in community life (Montes, 2025).

Figure 1

Distribution of sense of belonging by legal status, N = 787



The chi-square results show that these differences are highly significant ($\chi^2 = 35.48$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$), where it is shown that legal status plays an important role in subjectivity. The criterion for a plausible relationship gives a similar result (43.848, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$), which confirms the force of the bond. Although the linear relation is not significant at the level of 0.05 ($p = 0.055$), this is not surprising since the legal status categories are not strictly ordinal, so they do not form a linear progression. However, the overall distribution clearly shows how legal instability affects integration outcomes. The results are consistent with international studies

showing that migrants with unstable or temporary legal status often experience weaker emotional attachment, less trust and more limited access to social institutions (Rottmann, 2020). Taken together, these factors have a negative impact on their subjective integration and studies on legal instability and the sense of belonging of migrants show similar trends in Europe and Asia (Platt, 2022; Fouka, 2022). Further correlation analysis of the internal structure of social integration between the sense of belonging of respondents showed that the sense of belonging is moderately and positively related to the main indicators of social integration (see table. 3).

Table 3
Correlations between sense of belonging and key indicators of social integration

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Do you feel that you are part of the local community?	1									
How many close friends do you have among local residents?	,368**	1								
How well do you understand local cultural norms and traditions?	,351**	,280**	1							
How often do you spend your free time with local residents?	,184**	,088*	,227**	1						
How often do you participate in local cultural events?	,013	,013	,197**	,287**	1					
Do you participate in the activities of local public or non-governmental organizations?	-,044	,037	,189**	,208**	,230**	1				
How do you assess the accessibility of government services?	,116**	-,015	,084*	,085*	,036	,053	1			
Have you experienced difficulties in completing administrative procedures or obtaining legal status?	,061	,010	,007	-,002	-,021	-,005	,301**	1		
Have you experienced discrimination because you are a repatriate?	,105**	,004	,022	,029	,008	,003	,308**	,324**	1	
How comfortable do you feel expressing your cultural identity?	,078*	-,045	,028	,038	,039	,011	,237**	,294**	,266**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

The strongest relationship with a sense of belonging to the local community is found in the number of close local friends ($r = 0.368$, $p < 0.01$) and understanding of local cultural norms and traditions ($r = 0.351$, $p < 0.01$). The results point to a close relationship between belonging, social connections

and cultural knowledge among returning migrants. Stronger links with local residents and better understanding of cultural norms are associated with a higher level of perceived sense of belonging, although the direction of this relationship cannot be established in this study. There is a weaker, but still

significant positive relationship between sense of belonging and the frequency of free time with local residents ($r = 0.184$, $p < 0.01$), that informal daily interaction contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging, although not to such an extent, as stable social connections and cultural understanding. It is interesting that participation in local cultural events does not demonstrate a significant direct relationship with the sense of belonging ($r = 0.013$, $p = 0.707$). Occasional attendance at public events may not be enough to create a strong sense of belonging without constant personal interaction. Participation in local public or non-governmental organizations also does not demonstrate a significant direct connection ($r = -0.044$, $p = 0.214$). In this case, formal civic participation does not automatically lead to a sense of belonging, especially when such participation is limited or not accompanied by meaningful social interaction. Institutional factors show a different but more complex picture, so the sense of accessibility of public services is positively related to the sense of belonging ($r = 0.116$, $p < 0.01$) and may indicate that a sense of involvement in institutional affairs and administrative support contribute moderately to a sense of belonging. Perceived discrimination is weak but strongly related to sense of belonging ($r = 0.105$, $p < 0.01$), while administrative difficulties do not demonstrate a statistically significant direct connection ($r = 0.061$, $p = 0.089$). These findings suggest that negative institutional experiences related to discrimination may coincide with lower levels of belonging, although their overall impact is much smaller than the impact of interpersonal and cultural aspects. It is noteworthy that administrative difficulties and experiences of discrimination are strongly correlated with each other ($r = 0.301-0.324$, $p < 0.01$) and are also related to lower perceived accessibility of public services. Taken together, these correlations point to the pattern of institutional isolation, understood here as a combination of bureaucratic barriers and perceived discriminatory treatment that forms a negative perception by returnees of the institutional environment, rather than as a separate analytical cluster. Comfort in the expression of its cultural identity demonstrates a weak but statistically significant positive relationship with the sense of belonging ($r = 0.078$, $p < 0.05$). At the same time, this indicator is more strongly related to institutional factors and experiences of discrimination, suggesting that the expression of cultural identity among returnees depends not only on individual confidence, but also from perceived acceptance and security in the social and institutional context. The

analysis shows that the sense of belonging among returnees is largely determined by interpersonal and cultural factors rather than formal participation or individual events. Strong social ties with local people and a good understanding of cultural norms are the strongest predictors of belonging. At the same time, access to institutions and experiences of discrimination play a secondary but important role in this context. The results confirm the idea that integration is a relational, context-dependent and multidimensional process where regular social interaction and cultural exposure are more important than formal or sporadic participation.

Following the scheme introduced by Ager and Strang (2008), integration occurs at the intersection of social relations, cultural acquaintance, access to institutions and personal experience of belonging. Previous studies indicate that older migrants and returnees often face additional challenges related to language learning, access to work, and social mobility, resulting in reduced social connectivity and increased vulnerability (Barrett, 2013; KC et al., 2023). The current results support this view by showing that the sense of belonging of returnees diminishes with age. Also, integration policies should not be universal, but use age-appropriate strategies to meet the special needs of older returnees and develop a sense of belonging through daily interactions in specific local conditions, not only through national politics (Ryan, 2017; Wessendorf, 2019). Regional differences observed in the Zhetysu region indicate that differences in local infrastructure, social networks and openness of host communities affect the chances of meaningful participation. Family factors are also crucial for understanding integration dynamics. The relationship between family status, household structure and sense of belonging supports theories that consider family and kinship networks as essential for social integration. Previous studies show that families provide emotional support, help connect people to informal networks and encourage participation in public life, especially in post-Soviet and Central Asian contexts where family ties are vital (Spitzer, 2018; Zharkynbekova et al., 2024). For returnees, family networks appear to fill the gaps left by institutions and reduce the risk of social exclusion, reinforcing the idea that integration is deeply rooted in everyday public practice.

The results of the legal status study further clarify the discussion on symbolic and real integration. Although returnees are often seen as members of the core country and recipients of government support under the repatriation policy, the results show that

legal security is a key factor in forming a sense of belonging which confirms the concept «privileged exception», described by Werner et al. (2017), according to which the repatriates officially belong to the country but still face social distance and uncertainty. Studies from other countries also show that unstable or temporary legal status can harm the sense of belonging by limiting access to rights, services and stable positions (Rottmann et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2022). Thus, legal status is not simply a category of documents but a social factor of integration that affects daily interaction and how people perceive their own integration. Also, the relational and cultural aspects of integration are more associated with a sense of belonging than formal or episodic participation. According to the studies of differentiated inclusion by Ryan (2017) and relational affiliation by Bruhn & Gonzales, (2023) stable connections with local residents and understanding of cultural norms are the most powerful factors associated with belonging. By contrast, the weak link between belonging and formal participation in organizations or events suggests that symbolic participation alone is not sufficient for deep social integration without permanent, meaningful social interaction. The study shows that social integration among returnees is a multi-layered and coordinated process influenced by personal resources, family structures, local contexts and institutional frameworks. It deepens our understanding of how the sense of belonging is formed in practice. The conclusions are important for integration policy, suggesting that effective support to returnees should take into account not only legal and economic aspects but also social and interpersonal foundations of everyday integration.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that social integration among returnees is not a simple or automatic process after their return. The data obtained confirm the first hypothesis, which assumes that returnees with wider informal social networks experience a higher level of social integration. Key indicators related to personal relationships such as having close friends among the local population, regular communication with local residents and awareness of cultural norms

are crucial for a sense of belonging and show that informal relationships and deep connections are vital to the integration of returnees into local communities. Furthermore, the second hypothesis is partially confirmed because although education and employment are linked to the results of integration, their influence seems to be conditional. Higher education and labour force participation are conducive to integration, mainly in combination with the opportunities for social interaction, access to institutions and participation in community life, indicating that human capital alone does not guarantee integration, if it does not exist in a favourable social and institutional framework. The results also confirm the third hypothesis, showing that returnees from different countries of origin have different integration paths. Differences are due to differences in cultural distance, previous cultural experience, language adaptation and mobility models. The country of origin shapes not only structural capabilities, but also everyday social practices and a sense of belonging, emphasizing the need to take into account diversity within the returnee population. The study highlights the significant role of legal status as a key factor for integration. Legal security strengthens the sense of belonging, reducing uncertainty, providing access to institutions and strengthening a sense of recognition and inclusion. On the contrary, legal instability impedes integration by limiting everyday interaction and weakening emotional bonds with the host society. Overall, the results confirm the view of integration as a relational, context-dependent and complex process. Social connections, family networks, local environment and institutional experience all shape how returnees relate to belonging and participation in everyday life.

Author Contributions

Yenseyeva Venera – conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted data collection and analysis, and drafted the manuscript.

Shedenova Nazym – contributed to the theoretical framework, supervised the research process, and critically revised the manuscript.

Finke Peter – contributed to the conceptual development of the study, interpretation of results, and final editing of the manuscript.

References

- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>
- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *J. Refugee Stud.*, 21, 166. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>
- Amanzhol, K. & Egamberdiyev, M. (2014). Challenges of adaptation returnees in Kazakhstan. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 131, 124-129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.090>
- Barrett, A., & Mosca, I. (2013). Social Isolation, Loneliness and Return Migration: Evidence from Older Irish Adults. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(10), 1659–1677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.833694>
- Bokayev, B., Zharkynbekova, S., Nurseitova, K., Bokayeva, A., Akzhigitova, A., & Nurgalieva, S. (2012). Ethnolinguistic Identification and Adaptation of Repatriates in Polycultural Kazakhstan. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 11(5), 333–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2012.723579>
- Bruhn, S., & Gonzales, R. G. (2023). Geographies of belonging: Migrant youth and relational, community, and national opportunities for inclusion. *Social Sciences*, 12(3), 167. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030167>
- Diener, A. (2007). Negotiating Territorial Belonging: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Mongolia's Kazakhs. *Geopolitics*, 12(3), 459–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040701305658>
- Fouka V., Mazumder S., Tabellini M. (2022). From immigrants to Americans: Race and assimilation during the Great Migration. *The Review of Economic Studies*. 89(2), 811-842. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdab038>
- Kaiser, M., & Beimenbetov, S. (2020). The role of repatriate organisations in the integration of Kazakhstan's Oralmandar. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(8), 1403-1425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1779183>
- KC, S., Clarke, K., & Seppänen, M. (2023). A scoping review on ageing migrants in Finland through the lens of intersectionality and vulnerability. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(3), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.561>
- Kość-Ryzko K. (2016) Identity Dilemmas of Polish Repatriates from Kazakhstan—Between Fulfilment, Hope and Disappointment. *Ethnologia Polona*. 36, 209-236.
- Mena Montes, N., & Boland, C. (2025). In her multimedia words: Ukrainian women in the Netherlands, belonging and temporary protection status. *Social Sciences*, 14(7), 422. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070422>
- Platt L., Polavieja J., Radl J. (2022). Which integration policies work? The heterogeneous impact of national institutions on immigrants' labor market attainment in Europe. *International Migration Review*, 56(2), 344-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183211032677>
- Rottmann, S. B., Josipovic, I., & Reeger, U. (2020). Beyond Legal Status: Exploring Dimensions of Belonging among Forced Migrants in Istanbul and Vienna. *Social Inclusion*, 8(1), 241-251. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i1.2392>
- Ryan, L. (2017). Differentiated embedding: Polish migrants in London negotiating belonging over time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 233–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341710>
- Spitzer, D. L. (2018). Family Oriented Migration Policies and Social Integration. In Contribution présentée au United Nations Expert Group Meeting on “Family Policies for Inclusive Societies.” New York, USA (15-16).
- Taldybayeva, D. (2021). Young repatriates in Kazakhstan: problems and solutions. *Young Repatriates in Kazakhstan: Problems and Solutions*.
- Werner, C. A., Emmelhainz, C., & Barcus, H. (2017). Privileged Exclusion in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Ethnic Return Migration, Citizenship, and the Politics of (Not) Belonging. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69(10), 1557–1583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1401042>
- Wessendorf, S., & Phillimore, J. (2019). New migrants' social integration, embedding and emplacement in superdiverse contexts. *Sociology*, 53(1), 123-138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518771843>
- Zeveleva O. Political aspects of repatriation: Germany, Russia, Kazakhstan. A comparative analysis. *Nationalities Papers*. 2014;42(5):808-827. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.916663>
- Zhailybayev, D. Z., Serikkaliyeva, A. E., & Taldybayeva, D. A. (2020). Some aspects of socio-cultural integration of young repatriants. *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 95(4), 15-20. <https://doi.org/10.26577/JOS.2020.v95.i4.02>
- Zhanbossinova, A. S., Karibaev, M., Atantayeva, B., Kulshanova, A., & Shaimerdenova, M. (2019). Socio-cultural adaptation of repatriates of East Kazakhstan and migration attitudes of the Kazakhs of Mongolia. *Space & Culture, India*, 7(1), 154-169. <https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v7i1.414>
- Zhapakov, S. M., Omirzhanov, Y. T., Maulen, A., Omirtay, R., & Azhinurina, D. A. (2020). Problems of employment and adaptation of repatriates and their influence on the internal labor migration in Kazakhstan. *Human Systems Management*, 39(2), 141-154. <https://doi.org/10.3233/HSM-190626>
- Zharkynbekova, S., Tazhibayeva, S., Shakhputova, Z., Agabekova, Z., Azamatova, A., & Kuzar, Z. (2024). Transnational practices of Kazakh repatriates: the role of family in the adaptation of ethnic Kazakh students from Mongolia and China. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, 1452785. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1452785>

Information about the authors:

Yenseyeva Venera (corresponding-author) – PhD Doctoral Student in the Educational Program “8D03101 – Sociology”, Farabi University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com).

Shedenova Nazym – Doctor of Sociological Sciences, Professor, Farabi University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: nshedenova@gmail.com).

Finke Peter – Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Zurich (Zurich, Switzerland, e-mail: peter.finke@uzh.ch).

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Енсейева Венера Тұрсынақыңқызы (корреспонденттік автор) – «8D03101 – Әлеуметтану» білім беру бағдарламасының PhD докторанты, Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com).

Шеденова Назым Утегалиевна – әлеуметтану ғылымдарының докторы, профессор, Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: nshedenova@gmail.com).

Финке Петер – әлеуметтік антропология профессоры, Цюрих университеті (Цюрих, Швейцария, e-mail: peter.finke@uzh.ch).

Сведения об авторах:

Енсейева Венера Тұрсынақыновна (автор-корреспондент) – докторант PhD специальности «8D03101 – Социология», Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: venseeva@gmail.com).

Шеденова Назым Утегалиевна – доктор социологических наук, профессор, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: nshedenova@gmail.com).

Финке Петер – профессор социальной антропологии Университета Цюриха (Цюрих, Швейцария, e-mail: peter.finke@uzh.ch).

Келіп түсті: 03 қаңтар 2026 жыл

Қабылданды: 17 сәуір 2026 жыл