

**NATIONAL MODELS OF ETHNOPOLITICS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND
UZBEKISTAN: INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES AND BILATERAL
DIMENSION**

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comparative institutional analysis of national ethnopolitical models in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan within the context of bilateral interaction. The empirical framework draws on legal documents, official statistics on ethnic composition and settlement patterns, and data on ethnocultural and educational infrastructure. The findings reveal that, despite similar multiethnic structures, the two countries diverge in their institutional logic of ethnic inclusion. Kazakhstan demonstrates a more formalized and representative model, while Uzbekistan relies on centralized administrative coordination and cultural integration. The study identifies three stages in the evolution of Kazakh–Uzbek relations, emphasizing the post-2017 phase marked by intensified institutionalization of humanitarian and ethnocultural cooperation. Attention is paid to the role of cross-border ethnic communities and humanitarian initiatives in mitigating latent conflict risks. The results contribute to understanding how institutional design shapes interethnic stability and offer practical insights for enhancing interethnic harmony and bilateral cooperation in Central Asia.

Keywords: Ethnopolitics, National model, Institutional analysis, Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan relations, Central Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of post-Soviet transformation, national models of ethnic policy in Central Asian states have acquired particular significance as instruments for managing multi-ethnic societies, nation-building, and ensuring social stability. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, being the largest countries in the region in terms of demographic and political potential, have faced the need to develop their own approaches to regulate interethnic relations since gaining independence, combining the tasks of strengthening state identity and preserving ethnocultural diversity.

The relevance of this issue is due, on the one hand, to sustained scientific interest in ethnopolitics as a key element of the domestic policy of multi-ethnic post-Soviet states and, on the other hand, to the lack of comprehensive answers to the question of how differences in the institutional organization of ethnopolitics affect the stability of political systems and the nature of interstate interaction (Terzyan, 2021). Despite a significant number of studies devoted to the ethnopolitics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan separately, a comparative analysis of their national models, especially in the context of bilateral relations, remains fragmentary.

Previous studies convincingly show that the ethnopolitical strategies of the two states were formed within several different institutional and ideological frameworks (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022; Serikzhanova & Nurtazina, 2024). The scientific literature emphasizes that since the early 1990s, Kazakhstan has built a relatively formalized system of interethnic relations management, including specialized institutions and mechanisms for public dialogue, while Uzbekistan has predominantly used a centralized and administrative-regulatory approach, supplemented by informal practices of local governance (Urpekova, 2022; Daminov, 2021). At the same time, a number of authors point to the contradictory nature of these models: formal inclusiveness and rhetoric of interethnic harmony are often combined with restrictions on the real participation of ethnic groups (minorities) in political and social processes (Tsyryapkina, 2023).

Foreign studies analyzing the rights of ethnic minorities, institutional mechanisms for their protection, and practices for their implementation in Central Asian countries have made a significant contribution to the development of this issue (Sadvokassova et al., 2026). These works demonstrate that existing legal guarantees do not always translate into equal access to resources, education, and cultural representation. A separate area of academic literature focuses on the study of political cultures, identities, and informal institutions, such as local communities and mediation practices, which play an important role in regulating interethnic relations, especially in conditions of limited public political participation (Daminov, 2020; Kappassova, 2018).

At the same time, an analysis of existing publications reveals a number of gaps. First, most studies focus either on the domestic dimension of ethnic politics or on individual cases of ethnic groups, without reaching the level of systematic comparison of national models (Albogachieva & Kemper, 2024; Dadabaev, 2013).

Second, the influence of bilateral Kazakh-Uzbek interaction – in the sphere of cultural diplomacy, diaspora policy, and humanitarian exchanges – on the trans-

formation of ethnopolitical practices and the reduction or, conversely, the reproduction of latent conflict potential has not been sufficiently studied (Minority Rights Group International, 2023; Khomitov, 2024).

Third, there are relatively few studies that consider the period after 2017 as a separate stage characterized by a noticeable intensification of interstate contacts and the institutionalization of humanitarian cooperation.

In this regard, the object of this study is the national models of ethnic policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the post-Soviet period. The subject of the study is the institutional, legal, and sociocultural mechanisms for regulating interethnic relations, as well as their manifestation in bilateral interaction between the two states.

The aim of the study is to identify the characteristics and differences between the national models of ethnic policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and to substantiate their impact on the stability of interethnic relations in the context of bilateral cooperation. Achieving this goal involves the following tasks: analyzing the evolution of ethnic political institutions since independence; a comparative review of language, education, and cultural policies in the ethnocultural dimension; the identification of mechanisms for managing conflict potential; and an assessment of the role of transnational ethnic communities and humanitarian initiatives in Kazakh-Uzbek relations.

The methodological basis of the study consists of comparative and institutional analysis, analysis of regulatory and legal documents and official statistics, as well as elements of case studies used to examine specific aspects of ethnopolitical practice. The working hypothesis is that differences in the institutional architecture of ethnic politics in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan determine not only the characteristics of internal management of ethnic diversity, but also the specifics of bilateral interaction, including in the field of humanitarian cooperation and work with transnational ethnic groups.

The scientific significance of the study lies in clarifying the comparative characteristics of national models of ethnic policy in Central Asia and bridging the gap between the analysis of internal ethnic-political processes and their interstate dimension. The practical significance is related to the possibility of using the conclusions obtained in the development and adjustment of policies in the field of interethnic harmony and humanitarian cooperation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological basis of the study is built taking into account the complex nature of the problem under analysis and is focused on identifying the characteristics of the national models of ethnic policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the post-Soviet period. The study is comparative and interdisciplinary in nature, combining elements of political, sociological, and institutional analysis.

The empirical basis of the research includes official statistical data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan and National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, updated as of January 1, 2026, as well as preliminary estimates for the beginning of 2025.

Official statistical data: materials from national statistical agencies reflecting the ethnic composition of the population, settlement dynamics, language and

educational infrastructure, as well as indicators indirectly related to interethnic processes.

Scientific publications: highly rated foreign articles (Q1 – Q2 Scopus/WoS) devoted to ethnopolitics, minority rights, political cultures, and diaspora politics in Central Asian countries.

Analytical and expert materials: academically oriented policy papers and reviews used to reconstruct the stages of ethnopolitical evolution and institutional changes.

This combination of qualitative and quantitative data increases the reliability of conclusions and ensures the comparability of the analyzed aspects of ethnopolitics in the two countries.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the structural features of the national models of ethnic politics in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that have emerged since independence?
- What institutional, legal, and sociocultural mechanisms are used in the two countries to regulate interethnic relations?
- How do differences in ethnopolitical models affect conflict management and the inclusion of ethnic minorities?
- How does the intensification of bilateral Kazakh-Uzbek cooperation after 2017 affect ethnopolitical practices and cross-border ethnic communities?

The working hypothesis is that differences in the institutional architecture of ethnic politics in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan determine not only the characteristics of internal management of ethnic diversity, but also the specifics of bilateral interaction, including in the field of humanitarian cooperation and diaspora policy. It is assumed that the Kazakh model, focused on formalized institutions of interethnic harmony, and the Uzbek model, based on vertical and informal mechanisms of integration, have different effects on the stability of interethnic relations and the nature of cross-border ties.

The research was conducted through a sequence of analytically connected stages designed to interpret the logic and evolution of ethnopolitical governance in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It began with a theoretical–analytical stage grounded in a critical reading of foreign academic literature, through which the key concepts and interpretive frameworks for analyzing ethnopolitical models were developed. This was followed by an institutional–comparative stage that examined how legal norms and core institutions structure state approaches to interethnic relations in both countries. The empirical stage focused on the interpretation of statistical indicators, educational and cultural practices, and approaches to managing ethnopolitical tensions, with attention to their embedded social and political meanings. The final interpretative stage synthesized these findings and assessed how bilateral cooperation—particularly since 2017, has reshaped ethnopolitical processes and narratives in both states.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist orientation centered on comparative analysis as its primary analytical strategy. Rather than seeking causal generalization, comparison was used to illuminate how similar institutional settings produce distinct ethnopolitical arrangements and meanings. Institutional analysis supported this approach by examining the role of formal

and informal rules in shaping practices of interethnic governance. Content analysis of legal and policy documents was employed to trace state narratives, priorities, and legitimizing discourses in ethnopolitics, while statistical data were interpreted contextually to situate these narratives within broader demographic and educational dynamics. Finally, selected elements of the case study method were applied to diaspora policy and cross-border ethnic communities, enabling a more nuanced understanding of localized practices and transboundary interactions.

The novelty of the methodological approach lies in the combination of institutional and comparative analysis with an emphasis on the bilateral dimension of ethnic policy, which allows national models to be considered not in isolation, but in the context of inter-state interaction and humanitarian dynamics.

The unit of comparative analysis is national models of ethnic policy, considered through a set of institutions, regulatory mechanisms, and practices for the inclusion of ethnic groups.

In this study, a national model of ethnic policy is understood as a set of institutional, legal, and sociocultural mechanisms for regulating interethnic relations that are consistently reproduced within a particular state. The following analytical indicators are used to assess the model:

- the type of institutional participation of ethnic groups;
- the nature of language and education policy;
- the role of formal and informal institutions;
- methods of managing conflict potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign literature on the ethnopolitics of Central Asia converges on the idea that formal institutions and legal guarantees alone are insufficient to explain the mechanisms of ethnic inclusion and the stability of interethnic relations. Rather than being achieved solely through pluralism, stability is often maintained through varying degrees of political controllability and regime influence (Kaplan et al., 2024). In this regard, an important analytical starting point is the argument that the broader regime environment exerts a direct impact on the position and opportunities of ethnic groups (Terzyan, 2021: 2), framing ethnopolitics as an integral component of the political system shaped by institutional constraints and governance logics.

Building on this perspective, several influential scholars emphasize the interaction between formal institutions and identity construction processes. David Laitin (2007) and Pål Kolstø (2019) argue that ethnopolitical regimes combine symbolic recognition with mechanisms of control, while Edward Schatz (2004) highlights the enduring role of informal networks and patron–client relations in structuring participation beyond formal frameworks. Similarly, Marlène Laruelle (2015) demonstrates that nation-building in the region relies on the selective incorporation of ethnic diversity into dominant national narratives rather than fully pluralistic inclusion.

Taken together, these approaches suggest that ethnopolitical systems represent complex and hybrid configurations, where institutional inclusion coexists with structural constraints on political agencies. However, despite these theoretical

advances, the existing literature remains limited in several respects: it is largely focused on single-country analyses, provides insufficient comparative examination of institutional mechanisms across Central Asia, and pays limited attention to the interaction between domestic ethnopolitical models and bilateral relations, particularly in the context of cross-border ethnic communities. In addition, the post-2017 period of intensified regional cooperation remains under-conceptualized in terms of its impact on ethnopolitical transformation. Addressing these gaps requires a comparative institutional approach combined with a transnational perspective, which underpins the analytical framework of this study.

KAZAKHSTAN: INSTITUTIONAL INCLUSION AND ITS LIMITS

In studies describing the Kazakh model, there is a particularly noticeable line where ethnic politics is interpreted as a hybrid of two logics: nation-building and administrative domination. In Kazakhstan's Ethnic Policy 1991–2021, this construct is formulated very clearly: “The Kazakh model essentially combines two different theoretical approaches – the approach of forming national identity combined with a hegemonic approach” (Daminov, 2021). At the methodological level, this is important because the model no longer appears to be “simply inclusive”: it is described as a system where recognition of diversity coexists with the consolidation of the symbolic priority of the titular nation.

The strength of the Kazakh case in the literature is considered to be the development of institutional infrastructure in particular, the role of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan as a key link in ethnic politics. This is stated directly: “The government's ethnic policy today is coordinated and implemented by the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan” (Daminov, 2021). This conclusion is important not only as a description of the institution, but also as an indicator of the specificity of the model: the ethnopolitical agenda is formalized and “gathered” into a centralized mechanism, which increases manageability but may narrow the space for autonomous articulation of the interests of ethnic groups.

In a broader comparative field (Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan – the region), this manageability is linked to the political context: the logic of inclusive institutions does not negate the fact that the inclusion of minorities takes place in conditions of relatively limited political pluralism (Nuriddinov, 2022; Isaacs & Polese, 2015). In the comparative study mentioned above, this is expressed through the diagnosis of the environment in which minorities live (Terzyan, 2021: 2). As a result, the Kazakhstani model is often interpreted in the literature as “inclusive in form” but dependent on the vertical structure in terms of content—it is on this basis that subsequent critical questions about the effectiveness of participatory institutions are built.

UZBEKISTAN: VERTICAL INTEGRATION AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS (MAHALLAS)

To understand Uzbekistan's ethnic policy, foreign authors often use the lens of local governance and informal mechanisms, where mahallas play a key role (Minority Rights Group International, 2023). An article on mahallas shows that they are in fact integrated into the administrative system: “Mahallas help local government bodies to implement a wide range of issues, effectively turning them into sub-districts that continue local self-government” (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022: 4). This point is valuable in that it takes the conversation about

ethnopolitics beyond formal declarations: integration and control become not an “abstraction” but a concrete institutional practice at the micro level.

It is telling that in later publications, the authors note the targeted use of mahallas in social policy: “Recent political initiatives by the Uzbek authorities have been aimed at using mahallas for social policy” (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022: 6). In the context of ethnopolitics, this can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, such “embeddedness” helps to reduce everyday conflicts and create channels for daily mediation. On the other hand, it does not necessarily mean the development of equal ethnic pluralism: the mechanisms work more as vertical and functional than as representative ones.

This is particularly important in conjunction with the comparative framework on minority rights, which highlights the slow pace of reform even in the face of political change: “Although the change in leadership has had a positive impact on the situation... reforms are still slow” (Terzyan, 2021: 3). For the Uzbek case, this creates an understandable background: external modernization rhetoric does not guarantee structural restructuring to include minorities, and stability can be maintained through the controllability of local institutions.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: POLITICAL CULTURE, PARTICIPATION AND THE LIMITS OF “SOFT” INTEGRATION

Comparative studies of the region add another layer of analysis political and cultural. Research on political cultures emphasizes that the problem of forming a democratically adequate political culture remains unresolved: “The problem of forming... political culture more adequate to the democratic course” (Serikzhanova & Nurtazina, 2024: 2). This is an important clarification: even when instruments of “soft” integration (education, media, cultural exchanges) are formed, they unfold within a more rigid framework of participation and political socialization.

The same body of work points to the importance of new media and participation factors, but without the direct illusion that the media automatically creates inclusion: “The study identifies factors of public political participation... in the context of the development... of new types of media” (Serikzhanova & Nurtazina, 2024: 1). For the topic of bilateral relations (especially in 2017–2024), this allows us to carefully justify why humanitarian and information initiatives can reduce tensions “diffusely” but do not become a full-fledged mechanism for the political representation of minorities.

Finally, the section on diaspora policy is important for the bilateral dimension: it is this section that links internal models of ethnic policy with transnational communities and practices of interaction. The comparative case study directly specifies the research framework: “Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan... were selected as cases for studying... the activation of policy in both countries” (Urpekova, 2022: 42). In methodological terms, this is useful for two reasons:

- it provides a legitimate bridge between internal ethnopolitics and the external contour (diasporas, repatriation, support for compatriots),
- it helps to avoid “vague” statements in your text – a clear link emerges between institutions, politics, and channels of cross-border mobilization/support.

Overall, the core of foreign studies forms a fairly coherent understanding of the differences: the Kazakh model is more often described as institutionally formalized and publicly inclusive but combining nation-building with a dominant logic (Daminov, 2021); the Uzbek model is described as vertically integrated, relying on local informal institutions that can perform control and social mediation functions (Urinboev & Eraliev, 2022: 4). The regional perspective warns that the political environment itself limits the transformation of formal guarantees into real practices of minority inclusion (Terzyan, 2021: 2), and changes in political culture and the media landscape do not automatically mean greater participation (Serikzhanova & Nurtazina, 2024: 2).

Despite the abundance of research, there remain three persistent gaps that are critical to our topic (1991–2024; focus on 2017–2024):

There is a lack of works comparing Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as models not only in terms of institutions and rights, but also in terms of mechanisms of inclusion (formal and informal) in a single analytical matrix (Sadvokassova et al., 2025).

The bilateral dimension is more often present in fragments: diaspora policy is described as a case study (Urpekova, 2022: 42), but the connection between humanitarian activism after 2017 and the stability of ethnopolitical systems is revealed unevenly (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026).

The period 2017–2024 is recorded in the literature as a context of reforms and “policy activation”, but its consequences for the practices of inclusion of minorities and transnational communities remain insufficiently conceptualized (Terzyan, 2021: 3; Serikzhanova & Nurtazina, 2024: 1)

It is precisely this set of gaps that logically leads to our research approach: to compare national models of ethnic politics through institutional architecture, local practices (including mahallas), and the cross-border dimension (diasporas and bilateral humanitarian initiatives).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings should be interpreted considering broader theoretical debates on ethnopolitics, which emphasize the interaction between institutional design and political culture. In this context, the identified differences between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reflect not only policy choices but also deeper structural logics of governance, where inclusion mechanisms are embedded in distinct models of state-society relations.

The results obtained in the course of the study show that the evolution of Kazakh-Uzbek relations after the collapse of the USSR was gradual, reflecting not only changes in foreign policy priorities, but also the transformation of national models of ethnic politics embedded in different types of political culture and strategies for the inclusion of ethnic groups. Differences in institutional decisions and practices of interethnic interaction at each historical stage were determined not so much by formal agreements as by dominant ideas about the role of the state, acceptable forms of participation, and mechanisms of social consensus.

In this context, the evolution of Kazakh–Uzbek relations can be divided into three stages: an initial period of institutional uncertainty from 1991 to 1998; a stage of formalization of the contractual framework between 1998 and 2016, characterized by limited humanitarian and ethnocultural interaction; and a period since 2017 marked by the institutionalization of humanitarian and ethnocultural cooperation.

Stages in the evolution of Kazakh-Uzbek relations and their ethno-political dimension

The early 1990s were characterized by caution and mutual wariness, which was due to unresolved issues of territorial demarcation, water use, and differences in approaches to regional security. These factors, which have also been noted in previous studies, formed the backdrop for potential ethno-political vulnerability, especially in border areas.

The signing of the Treaty of Eternal Friendship in 1998 established a normative framework for good neighborliness, but, as the analysis shows, its impact on practical ethno-political interaction during that period remained relatively limited. A significant turning point came after 2017, when the intensification of political dialogue and symbolic gestures (the Years of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2018 and 2019) created conditions for the institutionalization of humanitarian and cultural cooperation. This stage culminated in the signing of the Treaty on Alliance Relations in 2022, which qualitatively changed the framework of bilateral interaction and strengthened coordination in the ethno-political sphere.

The identification of three stages allows us to view the current period as a qualitatively new phase not only in terms of political declarations, but also in terms of practical mechanisms of interaction affecting issues of support for ethnic groups and management of interethnic risks.

The 2022 treaty on alliance relations and the transformation of the role of ethnic minorities

The signing of the Treaty on Alliance Relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2022 was an important milestone in the development of bilateral cooperation, consolidating the transition from a pragmatic partnership to a more sustainable and institutionalized form of cooperation. In the context of ethnic politics, this step is significant not only in terms of inter-state obligations, but also in terms of changing the status of cross-border ethnic groups, traditionally perceived as a sensitive element of bilateral relations.

In previous periods of Kazakh-Uzbek relations, ethnic minorities – primarily Kazakhs in Uzbekistan and Uzbeks in Kazakhstan – were often viewed in terms of potential risk: as groups whose situation could be exacerbated in conditions of political tension or used as an argument in foreign policy rhetoric. The 2022 alliance treaty institutionally established a different framework for interaction, in which the protection of the rights, cultural and educational interests of compatriots on both sides of the border became part of a coordinated agenda rather than a subject of mutual suspicion.

As a result, the functional role of ethnic minorities in bilateral relations is changing. From objects of potential vulnerability, they are increasingly transforming into an important resource for cooperation and “bridges” of humanitarian in-

tegration, contributing to the development of cultural, educational, and social ties. This transformation is reflected in the expansion of cultural exchange programs, support for ethnocultural centers, academic mobility, and coordination in the field of education, which reduces the risk of politicizing ethnic issues and strengthens trust at the community level.

It is important to emphasize that allied status alone does not eliminate structural differences in the national models of ethnic policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However, it creates an institutional framework in which these differences are no longer perceived as a source of potential conflict and, on the contrary, can be used to complement each other. In this sense, the 2022 Treaty is not so much an instrument of unification as a mechanism for depoliticizing the ethnic issue in bilateral relations and shifting the focus from control to cooperation.

Thus, analysis of the alliance treaty allows us to conclude that there has been a qualitative change in the place of ethnic minorities in the system of Kazakh-Uzbek relations. Their role is shifting from a peripheral and risk-oriented perception to more active participation in the formation of a sustainable humanitarian space, which is directly relevant to reducing ethno-political risks and strengthening long-term stability in border regions.

Institutional and legal mechanisms of ethnic policy: similarities and differences

All tables presented in this study are original and developed by the authors based on the synthesis of official statistical data, regulatory documents, and analytical materials. Their purpose is to systematize comparative indicators and ensure analytical clarity rather than to reproduce previously published datasets.

An analysis of the regulatory framework and institutional architecture (Table 1) shows that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have built fairly complex systems for regulating interethnic relations.

Table 1
Regulatory and institutional foundations of ethnic policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (1991–2026)

Criterion	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
Constitutional guarantees	Equal rights regardless of ethnicity; recognition of Kazakh as the state language while preserving the rights of other languages	Equality of citizens regardless of nationality; Uzbek is the official language. Respect for languages, customs, and traditions is ensured, and conditions for their development are created.
Key institution of ethnic policy: 1. Executive Branch	Committee for the Development of Interethnic Relations (CDIR) of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan and “Kogamdyq Kelisim” state organization	Committee on Interethnic Relations and Compatriots Abroad of the Republic of Uzbekistan

2. Public platform	Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (APK) – consultative and representative body under the President of Kazakhstan	
3. Analytical component	Institute for Applied Ethnopolitical Research (IAER) under CDIR MCI RK	
Forms of institutional participation	Ethnocultural associations, representation in the APK, public councils	National cultural centers, coordination through state structures
Language policy	Multilingual model: official language + languages of ethnic groups in education and culture	Integration model with priority given to the Uzbek language while supporting cultural diversity. Education in seven languages.
State support	Funding for NCCs, cultural programs, friendship houses	Funding for cultural events and national centers

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2026), the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2023), official documents of the Committee for the Development of Interethnic Relations of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Committee on Interethnic Relations and Compatriots Abroad of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and relevant regulatory legal acts.

The adoption of the new Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan following the nationwide referendum of March 15, 2026, represents a fundamental transformation of the country’s institutional architecture. Unlike the previous constitutional model, which relied on a combination of symbolic representation and formalized mechanisms of inclusion, the new constitutional framework reflects a systemic redesign of governance structures and a reconfiguration of the balance of powers. The reform introduced significant changes, including the restructuring of the legislative system, the expansion of executive authority, and the creation of new institutional platforms for public participation and strategic coordination. In this context, the role of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan has undergone a qualitative transformation. It is no longer embedded within the constitutional structure as a mechanism of political representation, but rather functions as a societal and consultative platform facilitating dialogue, civic engagement, and interaction between state institutions and ethnocultural actors.

Thus, the Kazakhstan model demonstrates a transition from a representation-based paradigm toward a system of professional governance, institutional coordination, and evidence-based policy implementation in the field of interethnic relations. This shift reflects the broader logic of the constitutional reform adopted in the Republic of Kazakhstan on March 15, 2026, which is aimed at enhancing the governability, functional efficiency, and strategic coherence of state policy. Within the framework of this reform, particular attention is given to the transformation of institutional mechanisms of public representation and dialogue, including the prospective establishment of the People’s Council of

Kazakhstan (Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi) as a consultative and integrative platform designed to consolidate public participation, strengthen civic engagement, and ensure continuity between state and society. This development reflects a transition from symbolic forms of representation toward more professionalized, system-oriented governance models (see Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026; Presidential Decree No. 1144, 2025).

Both states have constitutionally enshrined principles of equal rights and non-discrimination on the basis of nationality, as well as guarantees for the preservation of the languages and cultures of ethnic groups.

At the same time, fundamental differences have been identified. The Kazakh model is characterized by greater institutional formalization, with the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan playing a key role as a centralized mechanism for coordinating the ethno-political agenda. In Uzbekistan, a similar function is performed by the Committee on Interethnic Relations and Compatriots Abroad, but its activities are more integrated into the vertical structure of state administration and focused on coordinating cultural and social initiatives.

In Uzbekistan, the new version of the Constitution, adopted by referendum on April 30, 2023, also reaffirms the basic principles of equality of citizens and respect for the languages and cultural practices of all ethnic groups. At the same time, a number of observers and expert assessments indicate that the constitutional reform was focused primarily on expanding and detailing the general rights and social obligations of the state and did not include specific changes addressed specifically to national minorities. In practical terms, this means that guarantees of minority rights remain largely tied to the general human rights framework and state administration practices, whereas Kazakhstan has a separate “built-in” institution of representation through the APK, which further highlights the difference between the models not in rhetoric but in mechanisms of inclusion.

A comparative analysis shows that, despite the similarity of the declared goals – interethnic harmony and stability – the instruments for achieving them differ. Kazakhstan emphasizes public institutional inclusion, while Uzbekistan emphasizes administrative coordination and social integration through state structures. A summary of the identified differences between national models of ethnic policy is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparative characteristics of national models of ethnic policy

Parameter	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
Model type	Institutionally inclusive	Centralized integration
Key tools	APK, NCC, cultural programs	State coordination, mahalla
Approach to identity	Civic identity	Titular-nation integration
Risk management	Institutional prevention	Administrative and social control

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from comparative institutional analysis and synthesis of regulatory documents and academic literature (Daminov, 2021; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022; Terzyan, 2021).

As can be seen from Table 2, the differences between the models are structural rather than declarative in nature. The Kazakh model focuses on institutional representation and public forms of inclusion of ethnic groups, while the Uzbek model focuses on centralized administration and the use of both formal and informal integration mechanisms. These differences largely determine the specifics of managing interethnic risks and transnational ethnic communities. An important aspect that complements the formal architecture is the activity of informal and semi-formal mediation institutions. While in Uzbekistan integration and control are implemented through mahallas, which are effectively embedded in the administrative vertical and perform the functions of everyday mediation, in the Kazakh model the functional equivalent is the Councils of Public Consensus (CPC), operating under the auspices of the APK.

Unlike the mahalla, which is territorial and domestic in nature, Kazakhstan's CPC are focused on creating dialogue platforms at the local community level to prevent conflict. However, this apparent similarity requires substantial clarification. While both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan utilize elements of local authority and informal mediation practices, their institutional trajectories are increasingly diverging rather than converging.

In Uzbekistan, mechanisms of conflict regulation remain largely embedded in traditional community structures, particularly mahallas, where mediation is grounded in social authority, customary norms, and informal governance practices.

In contrast, in Kazakhstan especially in the context of institutional transformations after 2024 and reinforced by the broader logic of the 2026 constitutional reform there is a clear shift toward the institutionalization of professional mediation in interethnic relations. This includes the development of a multi-level system of trained and certified mediators, the introduction of standardized procedures, and the application of structured, evidence-based conflict resolution algorithms.

As a result, mediation in Kazakhstan is evolving from a tradition-based and authority-driven practice into a professional, technologized, and policy-integrated mechanism of managing interethnic relations. This transformation represents a key point of divergence between the two national models and significantly strengthens the analytical distinction between administrative-traditional and institutional-professional approaches.

Social and cultural rights of transnational ethnic groups: Empirical results

The results of the analysis of Tables 3 and 4 allow us to move from the normative level to the empirical measurement of ethnic policy. Both countries are home to large cross-border ethnic communities: Uzbeks in Kazakhstan and Kazakhs in Uzbekistan. This creates an objective need to develop educational and cultural infrastructure in their native languages.

Table 3
Number and distribution of transboundary ethnic groups (as of January 1, 2026)

Ethnic group	Country of residence	Population	Percentage of population	Main regions of settlement
Uzbeks	Kazakhstan	≈ 695 thousand	≈ 3.2%	Turkestan Region, Zhambyl Region, Astana, Almaty City
Kazakhs	Uzbekistan	≈ 850 thousand	≈ 2.2%	Karakalpakstan, Tashkent, Navoi, Syrdarya regions.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2026) and National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2026a).

A limitation of the analysis is that ethnic accounting methods in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan differ, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. In interpreting statistical data on educational infrastructure, differences in definitions and institutional content of the concept of “ethnic school” in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan should be taken into account. In Kazakhstan, such schools are generally understood to be general education institutions in which the language of an ethnic group is taught as a separate subject or used as a component of the educational process, whereas in Uzbekistan, they are mainly schools offering a full cycle of education in the language of the relevant ethnic group. This difference limits the direct quantitative comparability of indicators and requires their interpretation in qualitative rather than exclusively numerical terms.

Table 4
Educational infrastructure for ethnic groups (qualitative assessment), 2024/2025 academic year

Criterion	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
Schools offering instruction in the language of ethnic groups	Yes (Uzbek, Uyghur, Tajik, etc.)	Yes (Kazakh, Russian, Tajik, Kyrgyz, etc.)
Full ethnic schools	No	Yes
Higher education institutions with programs in the languages of ethnic groups	Limited (select programs/branches)	Yes

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, including the letter of the Chairman of the Committee of Secondary Education K. Zhumashev (No. 3880-15-8523/15, October 24, 2023), National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2026b) and other analytical materials.

Statistical data on educational infrastructure is updated as of January 1, 2024, taking into account preliminary estimates for the beginning of 2025. It should be noted that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan use different institutional definitions of “ethnic school”, which limits the direct quantitative comparability of indicators

and requires their interpretation in the context of national education models. Compared to 2021–2022, no significant structural changes have been recorded in the network of schools teaching in ethnic minority languages, which indicates the institutional stability of the relevant models.

In this regard, when analyzing differences in educational infrastructure, it is important to take into account that they reflect the characteristics of national language and education policy models, rather than the direct level of institutional support for ethnic education.

A comparison of the data shows that the level of institutional support for ethnic education is higher in Uzbekistan: there are more schools offering instruction in ethnic languages, including fully ethnic schools, as well as a wider presence of higher education institutions offering instruction in the relevant languages. In Kazakhstan, despite the existence of schools teaching in minority languages, there is no format for fully-fledged ethnic schools, which reflects a different model of integration – through multilingualism and a common civic educational space.

These differences testify not so much to “greater” or “lesser” support as to different strategies of ethnic policy: in Uzbekistan, through the institutional consolidation of ethnic specificity, and in Kazakhstan, through the inclusion of ethnic groups in the general educational model.

The effectiveness of ethnic policy and conflict potential

Analysis of the data in Table 5, combined with comparative institutional analysis, shows that the existence of developed institutions of interethnic harmony does not preclude the existence of conflict potential.

Table 5
Conflict potential in ethnic policies: A Comparative analysis, 1991–2026

Type of conflict potential	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan
Local interethnic incidents	Individual local incidents that are not systemic in nature	Individual local episodes reflected in scientific and analytical sources
Latent tensions	Associated with socio-economic and migration-related factors	Associated with regional disparities and identity-related differences
Cross-border factors	Border issues, migration	Regional water resource issues

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the data from Terzyan, (2021) Cornell, (2025).

In Kazakhstan, it manifests itself in the form of local conflicts and latent tensions between individual ethnic groups, which indicates the relevance of discussing and further developing early warning and mediation in interethnic relations mechanisms. Conflict potential refers to a combination of factors that, under certain conditions, may lead to increased social or interethnic tension, without implying the existence of an ongoing conflict. In Uzbekistan, the potential for

conflict is of a different nature and is mainly linked to regional and resource factors, as well as issues of identity among individual ethnic communities.

It is important to note that in both cases, the conflicts are not systemic in nature and are largely localized due to institutional and administrative mechanisms. However, the results of the study show that the further stability of ethnopolitical systems depends not only on control, but also on the expansion of the real participation of ethnic groups in socio-political processes.

Cultural and humanitarian cooperation as a factor in reducing ethnopolitical risks

The results confirm that cultural and humanitarian cooperation is one of the key factors in stabilizing interethnic relations in a bilateral context. Joint cultural events, educational projects, the opening of university branches, and academic cooperation create stable horizontal ties that complement formal political agreements.

The practical implementation of mediation in interethnic relations mechanisms is clearly evident in the resolution of local interethnic incidents in the border areas of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In recent years, episodes of social tension arising from everyday life and socio-economic issues in the border areas of Kazakhstan have generally been resolved with the participation of representatives of local executive bodies and ethno-cultural associations, which has prevented their ethnicization.

Similar practices were observed in the border areas of Uzbekistan, where local disputes involving representatives of different ethnic groups in 2021–2023 were resolved through the mahalla institution in coordination with local authorities. The use of the authority of local mediators and informal mediation mechanisms contributed to the localization of incidents and reduced the risk of them escalating into inter-ethnic conflicts.

Overall, unlike earlier stages of interaction, contemporary humanitarian cooperation is systematic in nature and contributes to building trust between the societies of the two countries. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies, according to which “soft” instruments do not replace institutional mechanisms, but significantly reduce the likelihood of escalation of latent ethno-political conflicts.

Discussion of results in comparison with previous studies

A comparison of the results obtained with existing literature allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the transformation of ethnopolitical governance models in Central Asia, particularly in the context of recent institutional reforms in Kazakhstan following the adoption of the updated Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). These reforms introduce a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of state–society interaction, shifting the analytical focus from symbolic representation toward professionalized governance and functional differentiation of institutions.

To explain the differences identified in the functioning of formally comparable ethno-political institutions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it remains productive to refer to the categories of political culture and acculturation profiles (Almond & Verba, 1963; Berry, 1997). However, the present study extends this analyti-

cal framework by incorporating the concept of institutional transformation under conditions of administrative modernization and governance rationalization (North, 1990; Peters, 2019). Institutional mechanisms for the inclusion of ethnic groups are thus interpreted not as static arrangements, but as adaptive systems embedded in evolving configurations of political expectations, behavioral norms, and policy instruments.

From the perspective of political culture, Kazakhstan in the 2010s and early 2020s was characterized by a hybrid model combining declared inclusiveness with a relatively high degree of institutional mediation and symbolic participation (Dave, 2007; Schatz, 2004). However, the constitutional reform of 2026 marks a transition toward a model emphasizing governability, functional efficiency, and strategic coherence (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). In this context, the role of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan is being reconfigured from a predominantly representative and symbolic platform into an institution embedded in a broader system of professional mediation, expert coordination, and civic engagement (Presidential Decree No. 1144, 2025).

In contrast, Uzbekistan continues to demonstrate a predominantly paternalistic model of political culture, where the stability of interethnic relations is ensured through administrative coordination and the integration of informal institutions, particularly mahallas, into governance structures (Kandiyoti, 2007; Ilkhamov, 2007). This divergence explains why institutions that are formally similar in their declared objectives exhibit different operational logics and levels of societal embeddedness in Astana and Tashkent.

An additional explanatory dimension is provided by acculturation theory. While Kazakhstan maintains a model of integration based on the preservation of ethnocultural diversity within a unified civic framework, recent institutional developments indicate a growing emphasis on structured participation and standardized mechanisms of interaction (Berry, 1997). In Uzbekistan, elements of an assimilation-oriented approach remain more pronounced, reinforcing a vertically integrated model of governance. These differences are reflected in educational policy, institutional design, and, importantly, approaches to conflict management.

In this regard, one of the most significant contributions of the present study is the identification of a shift toward the professionalization of ethnomediation in Kazakhstan, reflected in the growing institutionalization of mediation practices in the field of interethnic relations. Unlike traditional authority-based mechanisms relying on elders or informal leadership, Kazakhstan has developed a multi-level system of certified specialists operating on the basis of standardized algorithms, conflict diagnostics, and evidence-based intervention strategies (Moore, 2014; Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009). This “technological” model of mediation represents a critical divergence from traditional approaches observed in the region and confirms the transition toward a more institutionalized and professional system of conflict regulation.

The findings are generally consistent with the conclusions of Armen Terzyan (Terzyan, 2021: 2–3) regarding the gap between formal legal guarantees and practical inclusion mechanisms in Central Asian states. At the same time, this study advances the existing literature by integrating a bilateral dimension of analysis, including humanitarian cooperation, diaspora engagement, and

cross-border ethnic interactions, which have previously received limited systematic attention.

First, the study confirms that ethnopolitical processes in Central Asia are deeply embedded in broader configurations of political regimes and interstate relations (Hale, 2015). Second, it demonstrates that the intensification of Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan cooperation after 2017 has acquired not only symbolic but also functional significance, contributing to the development of mechanisms for dialogue, conflict prevention, and institutional coordination. Third, the analysis highlights the role of cross-border ethnic communities as an independent factor influencing bilateral relations, thereby expanding the analytical scope beyond domestic policy frameworks.

Importantly, the 2026 constitutional reform introduces a new institutional trajectory through the prospective establishment of the People’s Council of Kazakhstan as a nationwide consultative platform. This development reflects a strategic shift toward consolidating participatory governance and integrating diverse societal actors into decision-making processes (Presidential Decree No. 1144, 2025). Within this emerging governance architecture, the redistribution of functions between existing institutions and newly formed bodies should be interpreted as a process of systemic optimization rather than institutional weakening.

Thus, the results indicate that while the ethnopolitical models of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan share common normative goals, they differ significantly in their institutional logic, governance instruments, and trajectories of development. The evolution of Kazakhstan’s model toward a hybrid system combining professional mediation, institutional coordination, and participatory mechanisms enhances its adaptive capacity and resilience in the face of contemporary socio-political challenges.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the ethnopolitical models of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, formed in the post-Soviet period, despite their shared normative orientation toward interethnic harmony and social stability, differ substantially in their institutional logic, governance mechanisms, and trajectories of development. These differences are embedded not only in formal policy frameworks but also in the modes of participation of ethnic groups, the structure of institutional interaction, and approaches to managing interethnic relations.

The Kazakhstani model is currently undergoing a significant transformation in the context of the constitutional reform of 2026, reflecting a shift from symbolic representation toward a system of professional governance, functional specialization, and institutional efficiency (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). The reconfiguration of the role of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, together with the prospective establishment of the People’s Council of Kazakhstan, indicates the emergence of a more complex governance architecture aimed at strengthening civic participation and ensuring greater coherence of state policy.

In contrast, Uzbekistan’s model continues to rely predominantly on centralized administrative coordination combined with the integration of informal institutions, particularly mahallas, into governance processes. This model ensures stability through vertical integration without expanding formalized representation,

reflecting the specific features of the country's political culture and institutional development.

A key contribution of the study is the identification of bilateral Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan interaction as an additional and analytically significant dimension of ethnopolitics. The intensification of humanitarian, cultural, and educational cooperation after 2017 has expanded the space for interstate and societal engagement, including through cross-border ethnic communities. This interaction functions as a complementary mechanism that contributes to the reduction of ethnopolitical risks and the strengthening of regional stability (Terzyan, 2021).

The findings also demonstrate that the effectiveness of ethnopolitical governance depends not only on the presence of formal institutional frameworks but also on their adaptability, the openness of participatory mechanisms, and the level of trust between state and society. In this regard, the transition toward professional ethnomediation and structured dialogue mechanisms represents a critical factor in enhancing the resilience of interethnic relations (North, 1990).

The study contributes to comparative ethnopolitical research in Central Asia by refining the understanding of national models through the lens of institutional transformation and by incorporating the bilateral dimension as an independent level of analysis. At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on institutional and normative data does not fully capture micro-level interaction practices, while the focus on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan limits broader regional generalization. These limitations outline important directions for future research, including micro-level empirical studies, expanded regional comparisons, and further evaluation of professional ethnomediation practices.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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