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## Marriage in Kazakhstan: retrospective analysis and trends

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**Abstract.** *The article presents a retrospective analysis on the issues of marriage in Kazakhstan. The authors used the desk research method, as well as the analysis of studies conducted on the topic of marriage in Kazakhstan for the period from 1991 to 2022.*

*The article analyzes marriage in the context of Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), which share a common past as part of the USSR, as well as a high proportion of marriage in that period and its reduction in the future. The article considers the Kazakhstani structure of marriage. The article also considers the ethnic aspect in the structure of marriage, as well as changes in marriage in recent years. One of the key conclusions of the article is that marriage in Kazakhstan is undergoing changes. These processes are influenced by a complex of factors, including changes in the socio-economic and political spheres in Kazakhstan, which caused unique demographic reactions in society. The authors also note the lack of research in this area and this article contributes to the development of domestic research on marriage.*

**Keywords:** *family, marriage in Kazakhstan, demography, society, marital behavior.*

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### Introduction

Nowadays, family in Kazakhstan is experiencing complex changes, affected by several factors: economic, political, historical, and cultural, as well as internal conditions and external circumstances [1]. Socioeconomic conditions to some extent, force young adults to postpone their marriage and childbirth [2] as well as increasing rates of separations, especially among young couples, childbearing out of wedlock, and single-parenting, leading to societal-level issues.

To comprehend the ongoing trends in marital behavior, it is necessary to look closely at marital behavior in the historical context. The

contemporary demographic situation reflects the impacts of Soviet and modernized times [3]. The socioeconomic and political crisis that followed the Union's fall has produced unique demographic responses [4]. Most scholars considered post-Soviet and post-Communist political, economic, and cultural transitions. However, demographic alteration received very little attention [5]. Later, numerous studies exploring the demographic consequences of the Soviet Union's fall emerged. Many considered union formation behavior and reproduction (marriage and fertility) in post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic countries, Russia and Ukraine.

In comparison, only a limited number of analyses addressed fertility and family

changes in Central Asia countries [4, 6–8]. Most researchers expected that economic crises force people to postpone setting up a family following the Maltus framework, especially in Central Asia countries. As Caldwell (2006) [9] states that marriage postponement or forgoing is a 'rational response to considerable changes in material circumstances. The expected adjustment was significant in the Central Asian context since the marriage ceremony, and gift exchanges were traditionally intended to show family wealth [7, 10–13]. However, considering that Union's fall brought economic crises and a political transformation that led to more complex and multifaceted adjustments.

Moreover, this alteration varied considerably not only between Central Asia countries but as well as within the country in the case of Kazakhstan. Thus, the multi-ethnic population composition had a different union formation pattern. Besides, ethnic-defined settlement introduced differences in the marriage rate and childbirth between regions which are still present.

To understand contemporary marriage patterns and their peculiarities, we propose the following research question: How have Kazakhstanis adjusted their marital union formation pattern since 1991? Therefore, the following paper aims to fulfill the gap in research systematization examining union formation behavior in Kazakhstan.

### Research methodology

To address the proposed research question, we applied the Desk Research method and considered studies conducted from 1991 to 2022 on union formation behavior in Kazakhstan.

### Marital adjustment to the crises. Central Asia context

Until 1991 Central Asian countries (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) were part of the Soviet Union and underwent the economic transition from a planned to a market-oriented economy [6]. Within the Soviet Union, these states remained

to some extent, in a marginalized position. As producers of agricultural and raw materials for the Soviet industries, they were the poorest in the Union. The Soviet Union's fall in 1991 hit them hard [8]. Disruption of the economic ties with the rest of the former Soviet Union countries led to hyperinflation and a drastic decline in industrial and agricultural production [5], leading to a sharp increase in poverty and inequality during the 1990s [8].

Even though these countries shared somewhat similar initial conditions throughout the Soviet period, they took different paths toward a market economy, providing a unique setting to study marital and fertility adjustment to structural changes [6].

Regarding marital behavior, Central Asia countries traditionally defined marriage as universal and expected early-age marriage [5]. Structural changes into market-based orientation led to demographic alterations driven by social and economic factors. For instance, in Kazakhstan, the lack of permanent employment and a high number of unemployed people (especially among youth) resulted in decreasing marriage rates that, in turn, led to declining birth rates [14]. The crude birth rate lowered from 23.1 births per 1000 inhabitants in 1989 to 14.8 in 1997 [15]. This collapse in nuptiality and fertility was also observed in other former Soviet republics [7, 16–18], but the declines in Kazakhstan were quite significant [19]. As Dommaraju and Agadjanian (2008) [5] stated, considering the economic and political crises that preceded and followed the independence of Central Asia, some sort of adjustment in marital behavior should be anticipated. They assume that the declining marriage rate could result from the economic crises that constrained the financial capability to set up a family. However, these states experienced not only economic shock but also, they went through dramatic social and political changes, which could make their marital adjustment to these crises more complex [5]. Moreover, besides economic problems and political instability after gaining independence, two cultural influences took place in the area, western culture and the resurgence of Islam. The Islamic rituals and

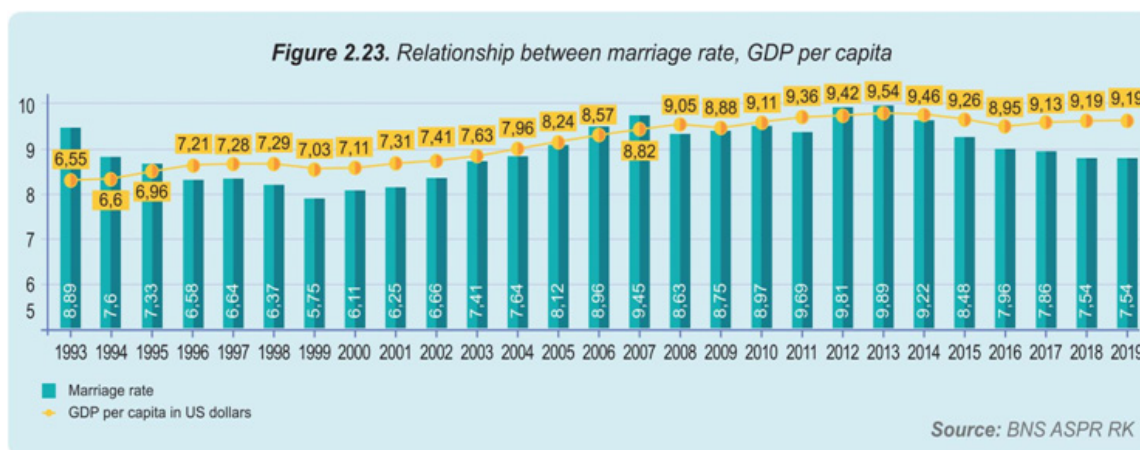


Figure 1. National report Kazakhstan families. [22]

traditional religious practices started to spread at the beginning of the perestroika period and intensified after the independence [5, 20].

### The marital pattern in Kazakhstan

The number of local scientists studying demographic issues in post-Soviet times is sparse, as well as studies on family-marriage relations in historical and demographic contexts [3, 21].

The first national report, “Kazakh Families” [22], attempted to study the marriage rate after gaining independence till 2019. The development of the marriage trend starting from gaining independence in 1991 could be divided into three main periods. The first period began in 1991 and was marked by a drop in the marriage rate. Thus, the highest marriage rate was observed in 1991, consisting of 10.9 marriages per 1000 inhabitants, remarkably that this indicator is still not surpassed. Years following the independence were noted by a considerable decline in the marriage rate. The minimum indicator was observed in 1999 when the rate was 5.75 per 1000 inhabitants. The reasons behind this drop were economic shock, the migration process, which included a significant number of young people, and many delayed marriages. A new century brought a new stage, beginning from 2000, a general upturn trend fixed, despite short periods of decrease, reached its maximum value is 2013, making up 9.89 per 1000 people. During years of relatively rapid economic development, high

social optimism, and improved citizen welfare, was a clear trend of an increase in the marriage rate. After that, a stable downward trend arose, reaching the lowest value at the moment (7.54) in 2018 and 2019. The marriage rate in 2020 declined due to the Covid-19 pandemic, during which marriage ceremonies were strictly prohibited, and delayed marriages should appear in the post-Covid period.

Correlations and a regression model identified that the marriage rate is associated with two factors, the level of gross domestic product (GDP) and the size of the labor force (as well as the number of young people separately). Pearson’s correlations showed strong positive and statistically significant relationships between these factors (0.746 for GDP and slightly lower for labor force - 0.643). It implied that the GDP and labor force growth increased the marriage rate (Figure 1). As is seen from figure 1, the first decade of independence was characterized by stagnation in the marriage rate at a time when the country experienced a deep economic crisis (GDP level as an indicator). Rapid GDP growth started in 1999, intercepted by a significant increase in the marriage rate. The crisis in 2008 negatively impacted the marriage rate in the subsequent year. After that, there was a repeated rise in both rates until 2013, but then the marriage rate declined, coinciding with the drop in economic indicators [22].

Becker and Seitenova (2005) [19] explored the impact of changing economic performance

on demographic structure (nuptiality and fertility) based on statistical data between 1991 to 2003. They concluded that marriage is linked to financial performance, but not in a simplistic fashion. They found that uncertain economic circumstances restrain males and females from entering a marriage. Especially from a future wife's perspective, setting up the family with a man who is likely to be poorly paid or unemployed enhances the risk that she will end up a single mother without a breadwinner. Moreover, during the economic crisis, fewer families could finance their marriage ceremonies [19]. On the contrary, the study which explored the effect of different economic and political trajectories on marital union formation in the post-independence crisis in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan did not reveal evidence. Neither the economic upturn after crises nor between-country variation did not affect marriage entrance; both countries demonstrated that the probability of entering into the first Union decreased continuously every year after a rise around the time of the Soviet collapse [16].

#### **Changes in marital age and variation by residence type**

Central Asian countries are traditionally characterized by earlier marriage among women and a lower rate of spinsterhood than Russians and other European females. However, during several decades, at the end of 1990, this tendency started to erode; the age of first marriage among Central Asian women gradually rose while European women's age, on the contrary, declined [4]. Nowadays, marriage has been increasingly postponed, and women delay their first birth [5, 8, 23].

In Kazakhstan, between 1989 and 1999, the rate of unmarried among 20-24 rose by nearly 10 percent for both men and women, and for men aged 30-34, the unmarried proportion increased by almost 12 percent [3]. The following downward trend could shift toward delaying marriage or leaning toward non-marital union formations such as cohabitation, non-registered marriage, or both. These alterations in marital behavior could

indicate a transformation in economic and social structures and reflect the spread of new norms about marriage and sexuality [5].

Although marriage was preserved as universal till the end of the crisis, the marriage age rose, and marriage proportions have fallen considerably for younger cohorts. Marriage age began to grow after 1994, with no signs of reverse tendency [5]. In Kazakhstan, the average marriage age rose for both genders. Between 1990 and 2007, the mean increased from 24.5 to 26.8 for males and 22.3 to 24.2 for females, approaching the European type of nuptiality. However, age variation intensity in marital behavior at some point is related to gender structural composition and the difference in normative marriage age. Eventually, females marry earlier; the lag for the average marriage age for men and women is between 2-3 years [3]. For instance, Becker and Seitenova (2005) [19] revealed that marriage is highly age-specific in Kazakhstan, especially for females. About half of all marriages are registered among women aged 20-24; more than two-thirds are among women under 25, and some 85% are women under 30. Therefore, considering this age specificity, it is evident that the marriage rate is linked to the population's demographic structure, particularly the age of 20-24. One of the factors which delays marriage age considerably is education; growing female education reduces fertility and delays marriage [19].

Starting from the middle 90s, the overall rates of first union formation decreased, mainly affected by the marriage drop among the younger cohorts. This decline is consistent with the impact of female involvement in tertiary education [7]. Dommaraju and Agadjanian (2008) [5] revealed that the marriage rates within Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan substantially varied by educational attainment. All these three countries are characterized by a clear difference in marriage age due to school level. These disparities in nuptiality age could be due to the perceived or actual incompatibility of being a student and being married [24]. Also, new norms and behaviors transmitted in school may lower the value of marriage [5, 25]. Moreover, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have



seen a considerable increase in enrolment rate for tertiary education, especially among females, composing a gender gap in higher education. Thus, 142 women enrolled in higher education for every 100 men in Kazakhstan and 125 women per 100 men in Kyrgyzstan in 2005.

Becker and Seitenova (2005) [19] stated that increasing the rate of female enrolment into higher education might reduce the likelihood of ever marrying since the country has a narrow age for women.

Since Soviet modernization focused primarily on cities, Central Asian states differed considerably in the fertility and mortality patterns between rural and urban areas [26]. In terms of marriage, Central Asia is characterized by early marriage age for both genders in a rural setting. The following marital pattern explains that rural areas stronger adhere to the traditional values and norms that place more emphasis on marriage. It is difficult to violate this order because of its closed and shared nature [5, 27]. However, since Kazakhstan was relatively more urbanized and modernized compared to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the country had a slight rural/urban difference in the late twenty century. The difference by type of residence in Kazakhstan was pronounced in the early marriage rate, which started its decline around 1991 in cities, while in rural areas, marriage stabilized around 1994 [5]. The marriage rates in 2000 in urban and rural places had almost no difference [3].

It is essential to mention that economic and political crises could have affected rural and urban areas differently. National identity and culture during independence strengthened, concordant with the existing traditional structure in rural areas, and could induce early marriages. Simultaneously, it could be the case that marriage in rural areas was perceived as a more practical step during insecurity times compared to urban areas. Thus, rural areas had a higher probability of marriage than urban areas in the period surrounding independence. All three countries showed more or less similar adjustments to the crisis in rural and urban areas. Three nations had one typical pattern: decreased marriage

probability in the 1990s. However, in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, this decline began in the first half of the decade; in Kazakhstan, it started a few years later [5].

Schumacher and Spoorenberg (2013) [6] investigated the effect of the structural changes resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union on the timing of the transition to first marriage and of successive marital births in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Following the Malthusian rationale, they expected the changes to the first marriage and subsequent deliveries to be postponed in years of economic hardship. In these countries, scholars revealed different context-specific responses to financial disturbance. The classical Malthusian reasoning was found in Uzbekistan, where the first marriage was delayed in times of low employment rates. In contrast, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had no sign of the first marriage postponement during the economic crisis. Remarkably, that rural areas had an even higher transition rate to the first marriage during these years [6].

As mentioned earlier, getting married in rural areas during crises could have increased benefits in times of economic hardship. Marriage allows for pooling resources and sharing risks in a context of crisis and shortage, securing income and consumption, and reducing household expenditures. Therefore, in some contexts, economic disaster could even accelerate marriage [6, 28].

In Kazakhstan, it should be mentioned that the country demonstrates a variation by region, which was predominantly ethnically driven. After the Union fall relative to 1991 rates, the proportionate decrease in marriage rate ranged from a low of 27% (in Akmola region, heavily Russian) and 28% (in Mangistau, heavily Kazakh) to extremes of 51% in West Kazakhstan and 50% in Zhambyl (both heavily Kazakh regions). In most areas, the downward trend remained after reaching the economic nadir, not bottoming out until 1999 [19].

Becker and Seitenova (2005) [19] found that the nuptiality rates increased in the predominately Kazakh regions. Remarkably, the proportionate

recovery was the most significant in areas with the largest drop. The following pattern suggests that the marriage rate depends on other processes that hinge on a region's specific characteristics. The authors expected that demographic reactions to the economic prospects would vary by region. Areas with conservative and poorer populations are more likely to have more minor variations in marriage behavior over time. Therefore, two opposite tendencies were in Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics. In more traditional parts of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was a marriage recovery. Simultaneously, in some parts of the former Union, living arrangements tend toward the "Scandinavian" model. This model is characterized by a meager marriage rate, a high out-of-wedlock birth rate, and a total fertility rate below replacement.

### Marital behavior and ethnicity

Many former states of the Union were characterized by substantial ethnic diversity [8, 16]. However, during the 1990s, the population of ethnic Russians and other European ethnic groups decreased mainly due to out-migration [3].

Dommaraju and Agadjanian (2008) [5] stated that during the crises, sizeable nonindigenous and non-Islamic populations in Central Asia could have different experiences compared to titular groups. Other ethnic groups could undergo crises in different ways and degrees. Therefore, marital adjustments to the crises could have a more pronounced effect among more severely affected ethnic groups. In this regard, Kazakhstan represented the most exciting case since the country had the largest non-titular population that outnumbered Kazakh people. In the twenty's century, millions of European ethnic groups (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) settled in the northern parts of Kazakhstan. At the same time, the central and southern regions were kept populated by ethnic Kazakhs [3].

The census data of 1989 indicated a difference in marriage patterns for Russians and Kazakhs, where the former married earlier than the latter.

Nevertheless, this difference decreases with age and eventually fades away. This conclusion was supported by later analyses, which also detected substantial differences in fertility patterns and timing of Kazakhs, on the one hand, and Russians and other groups of European origin, on the other hand [4, 5, 29]. These findings contradicted the conventional demographic wisdom, which suggests that more 'modernized' Russians likely remain unmarried compared to Kazakhs [5]. This phenomenon could be explained by the continuity of Russian cultural practices and norms, similar to marriage patterns in Russia. In both countries, the nuptiality age was traditionally early and lowered during the second half of the twentieth century until an upward shift beginning in the mid-1990s [30]. Therefore, the Russian marriage pattern of early marriage and low fertility could be maintained because Russians and the Kazakhs had limited intermingling. However, it is noteworthy that neither ethnic group significantly altered their nuptiality [5]. A paper by Trevisani (2021) [31] explored how changing patterns of marriage, family, and carry out in gender-mixed, multi-ethnic settings among Kazakhstani steelworkers. He found that regardless of ethnicity (Kazakh, Russian), gender, and work status, workers adjust their marital behaviors differently and adopt different strategies.

Carlos and Griffis (2010) [32] investigated the difference in first-birth intervals between Russified Kazakhs and other Kazakhs and European women by combining marriage and first-birth timing. They found that European women compared to Russified Kazakhs and other Kazakhs, have longer first-birth intervals.

As Dommaraju and Agadjanian (2008) [5] suggested, there is no evidence that minority groups adjusted their marital behavior due to the crisis in Kazakhstan. However, the demographic behavior of these groups is linked to their social and political position. Therefore, marital decisions depend on how beneficial marriage is in a particular context. Thus, depending on the ongoing context, they may postpone marriage or marry early. In the case of Kazakhstan, for Kazakh

and Russian, the marriage did not provide any benefit or vice versa in crisis times. Agadjanian et al. (2013) [16] did not find a difference in declined probabilities of the first Union among all ethnic groups, titular and non-titular, and Asian and European-origin in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

### **Marriage in recent years**

As it was mentioned earlier, the contemporary demographic situation reflects the remaining impacts of two periods: Soviet and modernized times. The former represents socially assisting elements of traditional reproduction; the latter demonstrates the retreat from paternalistic expectations and approaching individualism [3]. Considering the current situation, we could suggest that this statement remains true for modern times. Furthermore, according to Alzhanova (2020) [33], Kazakhstan cannot escape the impact of worldwide trends determined by the second demographic transition. In the next decade, we will observe a steady increase in lifespan, a decrease in the birth rate amid family transformation, and a diversification of marriage types (increased civil and guest marriages, single-parent and childless families, and single-household families). The stability and functional sustainability of the nuclear family will be determined by gender relations models [33].

Besides, marriage has been experiencing extensive transformations due to religious processes and migration [39]. These changes have been affecting both males and females, influencing their decisions in building family life, making them more sensitive to the circumstances in which they live, and becoming parents. These changes demonstrate that a new form of family is appearing, the so-called post-family. This type of family implies a different approach to organizing marital and reproductive behavior based on a contract between partners, unlike a traditional family with a clear gender division. Within this type of Union, partners are equally oriented toward self-realization and, therefore, more broadly spread among residents of large and industrial cities whose population is ethnically mixed [1].

Globalization processes have been impacting and altering local cultures, traditional structures, norms, and beliefs across the globe. Globalization has brought new opportunities for males and females in Central Asia countries [34]. In the globalization context, we would also consider gender equality, which has been discussed in the social policy frame and among scholars. Kudaibergenova (2018) [35] conducted an ethnographic and contextualized study of the position, economic and social challenges of young married women, kelins, in contemporary Kazakhstan. She states that unintended consequences of Soviet modernization led to neo-traditionalism, which reflects current gender inequality and privileges men over women [35].

Another recent study revealed that more egalitarian gender ideology and equal division of domestic chores negatively connected or not at all with fertility intentions in Kazakhstan, which implies that an unequal labor division in the household may be taken for granted in the local culture [36].

As Becker and Seitenova (2005) [19] stated, the primary purpose of why Kazakhs set up families is for children. Having a first child immediately after marriage is still quite spread among newlyweds, indicating that this normative expectation is still as robust as it was in the 1990s [18]. The crude marriage is relatively high, 7.34, which shows the remaining intentions of Kazakhstan people to set up their own families. The survey revealed that the main reason for the family is for children to feel love and care [1].

However, as demographic wisdom imposes that societies where marriage and childbearing are closely related, the intention to delay childbirth is typically achieved by postponing marriage [37]. Entering into early marriage will probably show their higher reproductive orientation. People who get married at an earlier age tend to have a relatively high number of children. Respectively, weaker intention for a family life leads to delaying or refusing marriage and consequently giving birth to fewer children. Regardless of the number of children born out of wedlock, the primary setting for childbearing is still marriage, which stresses the importance of



studying young adults' marital and reproductive behavior [38]. Therefore, the upward trend in marriage age began in the twenty century and had been gradually increasing for both genders. This situation reflects the desire of the youth to obtain an education and become economically independent; also, compared to the previous generations, modern young people have more opportunities for self-realization [1].

### Conclusion

Studying literature on marital behavior in Kazakhstan, we concluded that the accumulated knowledge is not systematized. The following

paper could be considered among the first attempts to address this issue. Marital adjustment to structural transformation after the Soviet Union fall attracted considerable attention from scholars but not Central Asian states. Regardless that countries had a lot of common aspects in development, they took a different path toward the market economy, which, at some point, affected union formation behavior. Since the late twenty century in Kazakhstan, the marriage age has gradually increased, and there is no sign of the reverse process. On the contrary, this trend will be accelerated due to the increasing importance of tertiary education among young people and financial stability.

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