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REGIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL UNITY IN KAZAKHSTAN: OVERCOMING INCOME INEQUALITY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the influence of socio-economic inequality on the formation of regional identity in Kazakhstan and its relationship with national unity. The work analyzes theoretical approaches, including the «core-periphery» model of Immanuel Wallerstein, the concepts of «thick» and «thin» identities, as well as the theory of «invented traditions» by Eric Hobsbawm. Attention is paid to the issues of integrating local identities into the national discourse in the context of regional differences and globalization processes. The purpose of the study is to identify how socio-economic imbalances between regions, especially between large cities (Almaty, Astana, Shymkent) and rural areas, affect the identity of citizens. The empirical analysis uses statistical data on the gross regional product, standard of living, migration, access to education and health care. Content analysis of official reports and comparative analysis of regional differences are also used. The results of the study confirm that the economic dominance of the central regions increases socio-economic inequality, forming marginalization in the periphery. This contributes to the strengthening of local identity, which may conflict with the national one, especially in conditions of limited access to resources. However, cultural heritage and regional identity can become the basis for consolidation of society when implementing strategies for harmonizing local and national values. The findings of the article emphasize the need for public investment in the development of rural regions, the introduction of inclusive educational programs and the stimulation of cultural initiatives. This will transform regional identity from a barrier into a resource for strengthening national unity, which is especially important in the context of globalization and modernization.

Keywords: Regional identity; socio-economic inequality; national unity; core-periphery model; Kazakhstan; local and national values; marginalization; globalization.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ АЙМАҚТЫҚ БІРЕГЕЙЛІК ЖӘНЕ ҰЛТТЫҚ ТҮТАСТЫҚ: ТАБЫС ТЕҢСІЗДІГІН ЕҢСЕРУ ЖӘНЕ БОЛАШАҚ ДАМУ ПЕРСПЕКТИВАЛАРЫ

Аңдатпа

Мақала Қазақстандағы аймақтық бірегейліктің қалыптасуына әлеуметтік-экономикалық теңсіздіктің ықпалын және оның ұлттық бірегейлікпен байланысын зерттеуге арналған. Бұл мақалада теориялық тәсілдер талданады, соның ішінде Иммануэль Валлерстайнның ядро-перифериялық моделі, «қалың» (thick identities) және «жіңішке» (thin identities) бірегейлік тұжырымдамалары және Эрик Хобсбаумның «ойлап тапқан дәстүрлер» теориялары қарастырылады. Аймақтық айырмашылықтар мен жаһандану процестері жағдайында жергілікті бірегейліктерді ұлттық дискурсқа біріктіру мәселелеріне назар аударылады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – аймақтар арасындағы, әсіресе ірі қалалар (Алматы, Астана, Шымкент) және ауылдық жерлер арасындағы әлеуметтік-экономикалық теңгерімсіздік азаматтардың жеке басына қалай әсер ететінін анықтауға бағытталған. Эмпирикалық талдауда жалпы өңірлердегі өмір сүру деңгейі, көші-қон, білім мен денсаулық сақтаудың қолжетімділігі туралы статистикалық деректер пайдаланылды. Сондай-ақ маңызды деректерге мазмұндық талдау және аймақтық айырмашылықтардың салыстырмалы талдауы да қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері орталық аймақтардың экономикалық үстемдігі периферияда маргинализацияны тудыратын әлеуметтік-экономикалық теңсіздікті арттыратынын растайды. Бұл әсіресе ресурстарға шектеулі қолжетімділік жағдайында ұлттық бірегейлікке қайшы келуі мүмкін жергілікті бірегейлікті нығайтуға ықпал етеді. Алайда мәдени мұра мен аймақтық бірегейлік жергілікті және ұлттық құндылықтарды үйлестіру стратегияларын жүзеге асыру кезінде қоғамды топтастырудың негізі бола алады. Мақаланың қорытындылары ауылды және аймақтарды дамытуға, инклюзивті білім беру бағдарламаларын енгізуге және мәдени бастамаларды ынталандыруға мемлекеттік инвестициялардың қажеттілігін көрсетеді. Бұл аймақтық бірегейлікті тосқауылдан ұлттық бірлікті нығайту ресурсына айналдырады, бұл жаһандану мен жаңғырту жағдайында ерекше маңызды.

Түйін сөздер: Аймақтық бірегейлік; әлеуметтік-экономикалық теңсіздік; ұлттық бірегейлік; ядро-перифериялық модель; Қазақстан; жергілікті және ұлттық құндылықтар; маргинализация; жаһандану.

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РЕГИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ И НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЕ ЕДИНСТВО В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: ПРЕОДОЛЕНИЕ НЕРАВЕНСТВА ДОХОДОВ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ НА БУДУЩЕЕ

Аннотация

Статья посвящена изучению влияния социально-экономического неравенства на формирование региональной идентичности в Казахстане и её взаимосвязи с национальным единством. В работе анализируются теоретические подходы, включая модель «ядро-периферия» Иммануила Валлерстайна, концепции «толстых» (thick identities) и «тонких» (thin

identities) идентичностей, а также теорию «изобретённых традиций» Эрика Хобсбаума. Внимание уделено вопросам интеграции локальных идентичностей в национальный дискурс в условиях региональных различий и глобализационных процессов. Цель исследования – выявить, как социально-экономические дисбалансы между регионами, особенно между крупными городами (Алматы, Астана, Шымкент) и сельскими районами, влияют на идентичность граждан. В рамках эмпирического анализа использованы статистические данные о валовом региональном продукте, уровне жизни, миграции, доступе к образованию и здравоохранению. Также применён контент-анализ официальных отчётов и сравнительный анализ региональных различий. Результаты исследования подтверждают, что экономическое доминирование центральных регионов усиливает социально-экономическое неравенство, формируя маргинализацию на периферии. Это способствует укреплению локальной идентичности, которая может конфликтовать с национальной, особенно в условиях ограниченного доступа к ресурсам. Однако культурное наследие и региональная самобытность могут стать основой для консолидации общества при реализации стратегий гармонизации локальных и национальных ценностей. Выводы статьи подчёркивают необходимость государственных инвестиций в развитие сельских регионов, внедрение инклюзивных образовательных программ и стимулирование культурных инициатив. Это позволит превратить региональную идентичность из барьера в ресурс для укрепления национального единства, что особенно важно в условиях глобализации и модернизации.

Ключевые слова: Региональная идентичность; социально-экономическое неравенство; национальное единство; модель «ядро- периферия»; Казахстан; локальные и национальные ценности; маргинализация; глобализация.

MAIN PARTS

The formation of the national identity of any state is a complex socio-political phenomenon influenced by globalization processes that weaken the role of nation states. In the context of increasing globalization processes, national identity acts not only as an element of cultural stability, but also as a strategic resource for ensuring internal consolidation and long-term development of the state. In Kazakhstan, the formation of national identity is closely linked to the concepts of patriotism, national idea, civic solidarity and interethnic tolerance, which form the value basis for the integration of a multiethnic society. One of the key directions of state policy in this context is the institutional support of cultural diversity, the development of the national education system and the active promotion of the Kazakh language as a factor of cultural continuity and a symbol of identity. The preservation and adaptation of these components to modern challenges serve as tools for both national security and cultural modernization.

National identity is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that is formed under the influence of both internal and external factors. Globalization, accompanied by increasing interdependence between countries and decreasing influence of nation states, significantly transforms the processes of identification. In these conditions, national identity becomes not only an instrument of cultural and social unity, but also a key element of national security. Kazakhstan, as a post-Soviet country experiencing complex processes of social, economic and political modernization, faces special challenges in the formation of national identity, especially in the context of regional differences. The megacities of Kazakhstan – Astana, Almaty and Shymkent – act as economic and cultural «hubs» accumulating key resources and opportunities. These cities concentrate political power, major financial flows, as well as the country's intellectual and cultural potential. Their development is characterized by high rates of urbanization, significant growth in investment and innovation activity. However, this concentration of resources is accompanied by a lack of attention to rural areas and small towns, which remain on the periphery of socio-economic development.

INTRODUCTION

Regional inequality in rural areas is manifested in uneven access to basic services, such as education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment opportunities. For example, residents of rural areas often face limitations in obtaining a quality education, which reduces their competitiveness in the labor market. Healthcare in these rural areas in the regions is also at a lower level, which exacerbates social inequality. As a result, a feeling of marginalization arises, which affects the formation of identity and reinforces regional differences.

Socio-economic inequality has a significant impact on the self-identification of citizens. Residents of peripheral regions often feel excluded from the development processes taking place in the country. This is manifested in the tendency to associate themselves not with a national identity, but with local communities - villages, auls or small districts. The Kazakh concept of «my native land» illustrates a deep connection with the area where a person was born and raised. Such attachment, on the one hand, helps to preserve cultural traditions and strengthen local communities, but on the other hand, it can hinder the formation of a sense of belonging to the national community. Peripheral regions in the context of Kazakhstan can be called areas characterized by a low level of economic and social development, limited access to infrastructure, education and healthcare. Examples of such regions include the Turkestan, Zhambyl, North Kazakhstan and Almaty regions. Unlike the megacities of Astana, Almaty and Shymkent, which concentrate the main resources, investments and opportunities, these regions remain on the periphery of national development. Their peripheral status is due to economic specialization associated with low-productivity agriculture, insufficient access to modern technologies and investment, which reduces their competitiveness. Social infrastructure in such regions also remains limited: health care facilities are inadequately equipped, and schools offer significantly fewer educational opportunities, which hinders the development of human capital. Transport and economic isolation, especially in regions such as the North Kazakhstan region, exacerbates their backwardness, while migration processes directed to megacities deprive the periphery of an active and skilled population, which leads to depopulation and stagnation. In addition, historical and cultural factors associated with traditional social structures reinforce local identities, often formed in isolation from the national context, which gives rise to a sense of remoteness and marginalization.

The cities of Astana, Almaty and Shymkent, according to Immanuel Wallerstein's core-periphery model, act as the core of Kazakhstan's social and economic system. These megacities concentrate political power, financial resources and intellectual capital, making them hubs of innovation, transnational capital and global connections. Almaty, as a financial centre, provides up to 25% of tax revenues and concentrates high-level educational and medical services, while Astana plays the role of an administrative and investment hub actively developing infrastructure. Shymkent, being one of the largest economic centres in the south, connects peripheral regions with the core. The high degree of agglomeration in these cities provides advantages of scale, including access to markets, skilled labour and innovative technologies, which strengthens their economic dominance. However, such a concentration of resources creates inequality, increasing the gap between the center and the periphery, and requires a strategic approach to the redistribution of opportunities and the development of peripheral regions to create a more balanced national system.

If we look at this process through the prism of Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory, we can see that the periphery often becomes a zone where resources are exploited and access to opportunities is minimal. This creates a feeling of inferiority among residents of peripheral regions, which develops into social discontent and reduces the level of trust in state institutions. In the long term, this can weaken national unity and make it difficult to achieve the country's strategic goals.

One of the significant consequences of regional inequality is increased migration from peripheral regions to large cities. In the modern socio-economic context, internal migration is driven by the desire of the population to improve living conditions – to expand access to financial resources, receive quality education, opportunities for professional self-realization and ensure a stable future for the family. However, this process is not unambiguously positive: increased migration flows towards large

cities contribute to accelerated urbanization, while exacerbating socio-economic imbalances between the center and the periphery. Rural areas are losing a significant part of the demographically and economically active population, which leads to a decrease in labor potential, demographic degradation and stagnation of local economic systems. In addition, migration movements have a significant impact on the processes of identity transformation. Once in an urban environment, migrants face the need to adapt to other socio-cultural norms and institutional practices, often radically different from their usual environment. This creates a phenomenon of identification tension, in which traditional regional values and cultural codes are revised or displaced in the context of integration into a new urban space. This leads to the formation of a hybrid identity that combines elements of local culture and the urban environment. In some cases, this helps to strengthen national identity, but in others it increases alienation and a sense of a certain inferiority.

The division between the center and the periphery in Kazakhstan raises the question of how regional identity can coexist with national identity or enhance its significance. On the one hand, a strong regional identity can deepen social divides and strengthen separatist sentiments, especially if the periphery continues to feel excluded from national processes. On the other hand, if integrated into the national identity, regional identity can serve as a resource for promoting cultural diversity and social unity. The state plays a key role in creating a balance between regional and national identity. Investments in rural development in the regions, programs to promote local culture and history, as well as initiatives to improve the quality of life in peripheral regions can help reduce inequality and strengthen national unity. It is important to take into account that the formation of national identity is a process in which all citizens should participate, regardless of their place of residence and other characteristics. The national identity of Kazakhstan is formed in the context of a complex interaction of global processes, regional differences and social inequality. The division into the center and the periphery creates serious challenges, as well as new opportunities for the development of Kazakhstan. Overcoming regional disparities, the active involvement of local communities in national processes and the institutionalization of the principle of "unity in diversity" are key conditions for strengthening national identity in Kazakhstan. These measures not only contribute to the formation of a more balanced socio-economic structure, but also ensure the value and cultural integration of the population, creating a stable foundation for the long-term modernization and stable development of the country.

The formation of national identity in Kazakhstan is a complex, multi – layered process that unfolds at the intersection of global challenges, regional imbalances and socio-economic realities. The main vector in this process is the desire to integrate diverse local identities into a coherent national discourse, which is especially important in the context of growing inequality between the center and the periphery.

The «core-periphery» model proposed by I. Wallerstein and developed in the context of P. Krugman's spatial economy helps to comprehend the specifics of the Kazakh reality. The central cities of Astana, Almaty and Shymkent act as economic and cultural poles, concentrating resources, innovations and administrative power. At the same time, peripheral regions remain somewhat isolated both economically and culturally. This division is due not only to historical development, but also to modern agglomeration mechanisms that reinforce the asymmetry in access to opportunities.

Regional identity, which is being formed in conditions of social exclusion and limited access to basic services (education, healthcare, transport infrastructure), can become both a challenge and a resource. On the one hand, it captures a sense of marginality, generates distrust of state institutions and reduces the level of civic engagement. On the other hand, a regional identity based on a rich cultural heritage can serve as a platform for cultural self-realization and local initiative. In the context of a politically and economically active center, the state strategy should include peripheral voices in the national dialogue, which requires investments in education, support for local cultural programs and infrastructure development.

At the same time, it is worth paying attention to the social determinants that influence the formation of identity, including the reproductive attitudes of women in households with different

income levels. Women living in conditions of economic instability, especially in peripheral regions, face limited access to quality healthcare and educational services, which affects not only demographic behavior, but also their self-identification. Reproductive guidelines in households with limited material resources are shaped by both economic circumstances and the socio-cultural environment specific to a particular region. These attitudes act not only as an adaptive mechanism to the conditions of socio-economic vulnerability, but also as a factor that supports and reproduces local identity models rooted in traditional values and norms of communities. At the same time, women from more affluent segments of the population in megacities can integrate into more globalized forms of identity, shifting the focus from collective to individual values.

The processes of globalization have a dual impact. On the one hand, they promote the spread of a «thin» identity – flexible, mobile, focused on economic efficiency. On the other hand, they actualize the need to preserve a «thick» identity rooted in history, culture and tradition. Kazakhstan is faced with the need to develop a model in which these two types of identity do not conflict, but complement each other. This is possible through the development of inclusive strategies based on the principle of «unity in diversity», where each region is represented as a unique part of a common national whole.

Thus, the main part of the analysis emphasizes that the sustainable development of Kazakhstan is impossible without an integrated approach to regional development and identity. To be viable, national identity must be open to local variations, integrate them into a single symbolic system, and create conditions for equal participation of all regions in the nation-building process. This requires strategic planning, intersectoral engagement, and political will focused not only on economic growth, but also on cultural and social inclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern world is characterized by the intensification of globalization processes, which have a complex and multifaceted impact on national and regional identities. Kazakhstan, located at the crossroads of East and West, is a unique example of a country where national identity is formed in the context of significant regional differences and the influence of globalization. This process is complicated by economic inequality between regions, differences in the levels of social infrastructure and changes in cultural and historical practices. Regional identity is a significant socio-cultural construct in the context of Kazakh reality, where the structure of spatial development is determined by a pronounced "center- periphery" model. This structure has a complex impact on the formation of not only economic and social differences between regions, but also on the processes of symbolic self-determination of the population, reinforcing the importance of territorial affiliation in the perception of individual and collective identity. Central cities such as Almaty, Astana and Shymkent serve as engines of economic development, accumulating the main resources of the country. At the same time, peripheral regions face limitations in access to basic services, resources and opportunities, which increases the gap between the center and the regions. This gap not only affects economic development, but also shapes various forms of identity associated with local communities, cultural traditions and historical memory.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between regional identity, globalization and economic inequality in Kazakhstan. The focus is on theoretical approaches such as the center-periphery model, the concept of «invented traditions» and the theory of discourse analysis, which allow us to deepen our understanding of the complex processes of identity formation. A special place is occupied by the discussion of cultural and educational initiatives aimed at harmonizing local and national values, as well as the analysis of the role of digitalization and new technologies in the transformation of regional identities.

Within the framework of this discussion, special attention is paid to theoretical and practical aspects, such as the dynamics of interaction between the center and the periphery, the impact of globalization on cultural heritage, and the role of civil initiatives in the formation of sustainable identity models. Against this background, the discussion of the presented data allows us not only to analyze current challenges, but also to propose strategies for integrating local values into national and

global contexts, contributing to the consolidation of society in the face of social and economic disparities.

Globalization and its impact on regional identities

Globalization, as one of the key processes of our time, has a profound impact on regional identities, changing their content and forms. In the era of neoliberal globalization, traditional «thick» identities based on historical and cultural roots are giving way to «thin» identities aimed at economic competitiveness and global mobility (Paasi, 2002) [1]. «Thick» identity is understood as a deep and rooted connection with historical, cultural and social traditions that determine the collective perception of one's place in the world. These are identities that are formed on the basis of centuries-old history, cultural heritage and a strong commitment to traditions. In contrast, «thin» identity is characterized by greater flexibility and adaptability. It is created in the context of globalization and is aimed at economic efficiency, mobility and integration into global networks. «Thin» identities are less connected to cultural and historical roots and are often instrumental in nature, focusing on practical aspects such as regional competitiveness or attractiveness to investors. This shift is particularly noticeable in semi-peripheral countries, where regional identities are used as a tool to attract investment and improve competitiveness in the global arena. Globalization simultaneously promotes unification and stimulates the development of unique forms of identity. It creates new contexts for the interaction of local cultures with global processes, including the repositioning of regions in the international system (Rizman, 2008) [2]. As Stewart Hall (2003) [3] notes, local characteristics do not disappear under the influence of globalization, but adapt, becoming an element of a new transformed identity. This is especially relevant for countries seeking to emerge from the semi-periphery status, where the unique cultural and social resources of regions can become an important competitive advantage. The example of the Amsterdam metropolitan area illustrates how regions can become «engines» of national economic growth by integrating a «thin» identity focused on innovation and mobility with elements of a traditional «thick» identity [4]. This demonstrates the possibility of harmoniously combining economic efficiency with the preservation of cultural heritage (Paasi, 2002) [1].

Integration of Regional Identities into National Discourse

One of the key aspects of successful interaction between regional and national identities is their integration into a common discourse. European regionalization serves as a vivid example, where educational and cultural standards contribute to the formation of «regional supranational identities» (Hall, 1996) [3]. In Kazakhstan, this approach can be adapted to strengthen ties between regions and the national center, where cultural heritage and historical traditions serve as the basis for the consolidation of society (Erlan Karin, 2023) [5]. Cultural heritage plays a key role in the formation of identity, providing a link between the past and the present. For Kazakhstan, which has a rich history, the harmonization of regional and national values will be an effective tool for strengthening national unity. Particular attention should be paid to the role of local traditions and cultural initiatives in the formation of a sustainable identity that takes into account both local and global challenges.

Methodological approaches to the study of identity

One of the most effective methods for analyzing the transformation of identities is discourse analysis. This method allows us to explore how social and political realities are constructed through rhetoric and communication strategies (Fairclough, 2013) [6]. In the context of globalization, discourses become a tool through which regional identities adapted to new conditions are formed and strengthened. For example, the use of mass media and digital technologies allows regional elites to broadcast key symbolic foundations, facilitating the integration of local characteristics into the global context (Van Houtum & Lagendijk, 2001) [7]. Bourdieu (2001) emphasizes the need for a critical approach to the study of identities, especially in the context of depoliticization caused by globalization [8]. In this regard, it is important to consider how macropoliticians shape regional identities, while simultaneously strengthening their uniqueness and integration into national processes.

For Kazakhstan, where regions and rural areas within regions have significant cultural and social differences, the integration of local and national identities represents both an important challenge and

a broad opportunity. The example of the Amsterdam metropolis and European regionalization processes highlights the need for strategic work aimed at combining «thin» and «thick» identities. This requires the creation of inclusive discourses that reflect the diversity of regions, but at the same time promote national consolidation.

The cultural heritage of Kazakhstan, including the traditions of the Great Turkic Khaganate, the Kazakh Khanate and the Golden Horde, can become the basis for the formation of a unique image of the country in the global system. At the same time, an important element remains the development of educational and cultural programs that focus on regional characteristics, but promote the creation of a single national identity. Successful integration of regional identities into the national discourse requires taking into account global processes, the strategic use of cultural heritage and the application of modern methodological approaches. Kazakhstan, with its unique resources, has the opportunity to create a model that not only preserves local characteristics, but also promotes their active participation in the global system.

Core-Periphery Concept

The core-periphery model is one of the key theories for analyzing regional economic disparities. It focuses on the uneven distribution of economic and social resources between central (core) and peripheral regions. This concept, proposed by Krugman (1991) [9] and developed by other scholars (Scott & Storper, 2007; Batur, 2014) [10], explains why central regions dominate economic development, while peripheral regions face growth constraints. In the modern context of globalization and rapid urbanization, such disparities are becoming especially noticeable.

Central regions are characterized by high economic activity, dense infrastructure, and access to skilled labor. These regions and rural areas within them serve as hubs for innovation, transnational capital, and global production networks (Davidsson et al., 1994) [11]. Peripheral regions, in contrast, face constraints related to a lack of infrastructure, low levels of entrepreneurial activity, and limited access to resources (Storey, 1994 [12]; Bennet, 2010 [13]). This imbalance creates the so-called «siphon effect,” in which resources and talent flow from the periphery to the core, exacerbating overall and economic inequality.

Agglomeration processes play a central role in strengthening the position of central regions. Agglomeration promotes the concentration of economic activity in the core due to advantages of scale, market proximity and the availability of highly qualified specialists (Nyström, 2007) [14]. However, excessive concentration can lead to diseconomies such as rising land costs, overloaded infrastructure and deterioration of the environmental situation.

In peripheral regions, on the contrary, agglomeration effects are less frequent due to insufficient demand and a weak infrastructure base. This creates a vicious circle in which the lack of resources and opportunities limits the development of the periphery, which, in turn, strengthens the economic dominance of the center (Krugman, 1991) [9].

One of the key aspects of the core-periphery model is the consideration of the effects of «concentration» and «spread» (Li, J.; Elahi, E., 2023) [15]. The concentration effect amplifies disparities as resources, capital and innovation are concentrated in central regions. The spillover effect, on the other hand, suggests that peripheral regions can benefit from interactions with the center, for example through technology transfer, knowledge transfer or improved transport accessibility.

Research shows that the balance between these effects depends on the quality of infrastructure, the level of regional integration and regional development strategies. For example, the development of transport infrastructure such as high-speed rail will help to mitigate the concentration effect by creating new economic opportunities for peripheral regions (Li, J.; Elahi, E., 2023) [15].

Instruments for the Development of Peripheral Regions

To reduce the gap between the center and the periphery, it is important to implement strategic measures aimed at developing infrastructure and supporting innovation. Transport infrastructure is one of the key instruments that facilitate the integration of the periphery into the national economy. The development of roads, railway networks and airports improves the accessibility of resources and markets for peripheral regions (Li, J.; Elahi, E., 2023) [15].

In addition, investments in innovative technologies play an important role in the development of the periphery. The use of digital technologies, the development of educational programs and support for small and medium-sized businesses can become the basis for increasing the competitiveness of peripheral regions (Caballero & Hammour, 2000) [16]. Such measures can stimulate local entrepreneurship, strengthening the economy of peripheral cities and reducing their dependence on the central regions. In the context of Kazakhstan, the core-periphery model is particularly relevant due to the significant differences between major cities such as Almaty and Astana, Shymkent and rural areas in the regions. Central cities serve as economic and administrative hubs, while peripheral regions face limitations in access to resources and opportunities.

The example of high-speed rail in China and Japan shows that such projects can improve connections between the core and periphery, stimulating the development of remote regions and increasing the level of population in the regions. For Kazakhstan, this may mean not only the construction of transport infrastructure, but also the introduction of innovative policies aimed at supporting local economies. The core-periphery model and related agglomeration processes are key concepts for reducing regional disparities. Eliminating the gaps between the core and periphery requires a comprehensive approach, including infrastructure development, support for innovation, and the introduction of strategies aimed at balancing the effects of concentration and diffusion. In the context of Kazakhstan, the successful integration of peripheral regions into the national economy will be an important step towards achieving sustainable growth and social equality.

Identity politics and cultural initiatives: a theoretical overview

The construction of national identity is often associated with the use of «invented traditions», a concept proposed by Hobsbawm (2012) [17]. These traditions are typically practices aimed at creating the illusion of historical continuity and stability. An example is the construction of symbols, rituals and narratives that reinforce the idea of a single nation. Renan (2018) [18] emphasized that the nation is a «daily plebiscite» that is maintained by shared memories and collective amnesia about dividing moments.

An important component of this strategy is historical memory, which, according to Assmann (2020) [19], serves two functions: preserving cultural values and creating a sense of belonging. In post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, turning to historical heritage, for example, the era of the Golden Horde or the Kazakh Khanate, has become an important instrument for consolidating the nation (Erlan Karin, 2023) [5].

Education and Culture as Instruments of Identity Politics

Educational programs play a central role in shaping national consciousness. Nussbaum (2010) [20] argues that education should not only impart knowledge, but also foster a cosmopolitan consciousness, respect for different cultures, and shared responsibility for global challenges.

In Kazakhstan, as in many other countries, educational initiatives aim to harmonize regional and national identities. For example, mandatory study of the history of Kazakhstan, visits to museums and cultural monuments are part of the strategy to develop a sense of pride for the country not only among young people but also among the entire population (Erlan Karin, 2023) [5]. These measures promote the integration of local values, strengthening national unity. Cultural initiatives also play an important role. They allow integrating local values into the national context while preserving cultural diversity. The promotion of Kazakh culture through cinema, literature, and art is an example of such initiatives. Supporting local cultural and creative traditions, such as folk festivals, crafts, dances, music and others, helps preserve the cultural heritage of regions and strengthen identity.

Harmonization of Multicultural Identity

Modern societies face challenges in harmonizing multicultural identity. Kazakhstan, as a country with more than 130 ethnic groups, provides a unique example of the need to strengthen tolerance and solidarity through local and national programs. Etzioni (1997) [21] argues that a sense of belonging is strengthened through collective historical roots and shared values, which must be reinforced by institutional support. The difficulty lies in the balance between local identity and cosmopolitan aspirations. Caney (2010) [22] suggests that these two approaches are not necessarily in conflict, but

can complement each other. Cosmopolitanism helps to develop global thinking and respect for differences, while local identity preserves cultural roots and provides a sense of stability.

Conflict between cosmopolitanism and local identity

One of the main challenges for modern states is the balance between preserving local identity and adapting to globalization processes. As Rizman (2008) [2] notes, globalization can simultaneously weaken local identities and strengthen them through the contrast with global values. For example, in Kazakhstan, urbanized centers can adopt elements of cosmopolitanism, while rural regions retain traditional ways of life.

In Kazakhstan, cultural and educational initiatives play a key role in strengthening national identity. Cultural heritage preservation programs, such as the inclusion of monuments in the UNESCO list, contribute to both internal consolidation and international recognition. This is especially important for strengthening unity in a multicultural society. Another important step is the harmonization of local values with the national development strategy. For example, significant initiatives to develop rural schools and educational programs in remote regions can help reduce the gap between cities and villages, strengthening the unity of the country.

Identity policy and cultural initiatives are a powerful tool for creating and strengthening national identity. The most important aspects are the use of historical memory, the development of educational and cultural programs, and the balance between local and global identity. Kazakhstan's experience demonstrates that successful integration of these approaches can contribute to both internal consolidation and international competitiveness.

Theoretical reviews devoted to the issues of the «center-periphery» model, economic agglomeration, identity policy and cultural initiatives, as well as their relationship with globalization, demonstrate the complexity and multi-layered nature of these processes. A common unifying factor of all the areas considered is their importance in ensuring the harmonious development of both individual regions and national states in the context of global transformations.

1. The «center-periphery» model and economic agglomeration highlight key economic and social differences between central and peripheral regions. These differences are determined by agglomeration effects, access to resources and transport infrastructure. Despite the advantages of the central regions, there is a risk of increasing disproportions, which requires strategic management of the diffusion of resources and technologies for the development of the peripheries.

2. Identity politics and cultural initiatives reveal the importance of preserving cultural heritage and historical memory as tools for consolidating the nation. The use of «invented traditions» and the development of educational programs allows not only to strengthen national identity, but also to adapt local values to the global context. Harmonization of multicultural identities through tolerance and solidarity also plays an important role in preventing internal conflicts.

3. The influence of globalization is manifested in both economic and cultural aspects. Globalization can enhance the competitiveness of regions and create new forms of identity, but at the same time it requires maintaining a balance between local values and cosmopolitan tendencies. The Kazakh example demonstrates the possibility of successfully integrating local, regional and national identities into a single development strategy.

Combining these aspects, it can be argued that the development of regions, including rural areas in these regions, the formation of identities and cultural strategies should be based on an integrated approach that takes into account not only economic indicators, but also socio-cultural factors. The Kazakhstan model, which is in the context of intensive globalization processes, provides a unique opportunity to analyze and develop new strategies that can strengthen national unity and increase international competitiveness. This approach can become an example for other countries seeking to balance regional and national development in the context of global challenges.

To analyze the topic related to the «center-periphery» model, economic agglomeration, identity politics and cultural initiatives, we can rely on several key sociological theories and paradigms. Among them is the theory of world systems by Immanuel Wallerstein [23, 24, 25], which considers the global division into the center, semi-periphery and periphery, explaining the structural inequalities

between regions. Paul Krugman's theory of spatial economics reveals the mechanisms of economic agglomeration and its impact on regional development [26, 27, 28]. An important place is occupied by the discursive approach of Norman Fairclough [29], which allows us to analyze how the identity of regions and nations is constructed through language and symbolic practices [30, 31]. It is also worth noting Eric Hobsbawm's concept of «invented traditions», which emphasizes the role of symbolic elements in the formation of national and regional identity [32]. Finally, the theory of glocalization, described by Roland Robertson, suggests seeing the local and the global as complementary phenomena, which is especially relevant for the analysis of the integration of local values into the global context.

Sociological understanding: Regional identity and social inequality in Kazakhstan

Modern studies of regional dynamics in Kazakhstan increasingly clearly indicate the need for an integrated approach to the study of regional identity. This concept has long gone beyond cultural self-identification - today it is closely linked to a sense of social justice, economic dignity and participation in national life.

Sociologists, including Rodríguez-Pose et al. (2024) [33], show that the increasing economic inequality between regions not only creates a gap in living standards, but also contributes to the formation of local identities that are closed and isolated from the national discourse. This development threatens the processes of national integration, as residents of socially and infrastructurally backward regions begin to perceive themselves as «second-class citizens».

The events in Zhanaozen (2011, and especially January 2022) became not only a political signal, but also a social indicator of deep alienation. Research by Sermagambet et al. (2022) highlights that discontent in these regions is based not only on economic performance [34], but also on a sense of exclusion, lack of representation, and injustice. This reinforces the «local identity of resentment», which is opposed to the general Kazakh identity.

This phenomenon confirms the thesis that territorial inequality directly affects identification processes. In such circumstances, «national unity» becomes a rhetorical category divorced from the real experience of a significant part of the population.

On the other hand, research data from Dnishev et al. (2022) and Zheng et al. (2021) show that investments in digital infrastructure and access to online services in some suburban areas of the Almaty region have not only improved economic mobility, but also increased the sense of «belonging to the nation» [35; 36]. Residents began to participate more actively in educational and professional projects, and they began to feel included in the national agenda.

This shows that equalizing socio-economic conditions based on accessible and inclusive technologies can be an effective tool for strengthening identity and national unity. This confirms the thesis of Zheng et al. (2021) on the need for a geographically sensitive policy that takes into account the characteristics and needs of specific regions [36].

Thus, regional identity in Kazakhstan is formed not only on the basis of cultural and historical differences, but also as a reaction to socio-economic reality. Deep territorial polarization, as shown by Klebanova et al. (2021) [37], leads to the emergence of «alternative» forms of identity, which often conflict with official rhetoric about unity.

Modern sociology requires considering identity as a result of structural factors – income, access to resources, and participation in politics. In Kazakhstan, this means that national unity cannot be built solely through cultural slogans, without real economic alignment and recognition of regional differences.

Key gaps in existing research and the significance of the present study

Despite the extensive coverage of the topic, there are aspects that have not been studied in sufficient depth. In particular, little attention has been paid to the dynamics of interaction between local and national elites in the process of identity formation. The social consequences of agglomeration processes for peripheral communities, such as cultural marginalization or loss of local identities, have also been poorly studied. How digitalization and new technologies transform the mechanisms of identity formation and integration of regions has not been fully disclosed. In addition,

the role of civil society and local initiatives, which can act as an alternative to top-down strategies for identity formation, has been limited. These gaps open up prospects for further research that can deepen the understanding of the complex processes of interaction between the global and the local within the framework of modern sociology, but also reveal new resources for development.

Despite the growing interest in issues of regional development and socio-economic inequality, the study of the relationship between regional identity and income inequality remains insufficiently developed, especially in the Kazakh context. Most of the existing work focuses on the macroeconomic aspects of regional inequality, overlooking the cultural, identification, and sociological consequences of such disparities.

First, there is a significant lack of empirical data in Kazakhstani scientific research on the perception of regional identity by residents of various regions of the country, especially in the context of increasing socio-economic stratification. Secondly, there is a limited number of interdisciplinary studies combining the approaches of economic geography, sociology, cultural studies and political science for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of regional identity in conditions of inequality.

In addition, in the international literature, regional identity is often considered either in isolation from economic indicators, or within the framework of developed countries with stable institutions. Kazakhstan, with its complex post-Soviet transformation trajectory and pronounced regional heterogeneity, provides an illustrative case for studying the mechanisms of constructing national unity in the context of internal socio-economic imbalance. The present study contributes to this analytical discourse by offering a comprehensive understanding of how unequal income distribution and differences in socio-economic status between regions affect the identification strategies of the population, a sense of social justice, the level of institutional trust and willingness to participate in national solidarity practices. The article introduces Kazakhstani empirical material into scientific circulation, which is especially valuable for comparative regional studies and the formation of effective public policy. Thus, the work represents a contribution to the development of not only the Kazakh, but also the global research agenda, emphasizing that strengthening national unity is impossible without understanding and taking into account regional diversity and socio-economic realities.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to study the processes of formation of regional identity in Kazakhstan in the context of socio-economic inequality and globalization. The work is aimed at identifying the relationships between regional and rural district differences, global transformations and national identity, as well as analyzing the mechanisms of integration of local characteristics into the general national discourse.

Particular attention is paid to the study of:

1. The influence of the «core-periphery» model on the development of regional identity and social inequality;
2. Transformations of identities under the influence of globalization processes, including the transition from «thick» to «thin» forms of identity;
3. The role of cultural heritage and «invented traditions» in strengthening national unity;
4. The importance of cultural, educational and digital initiatives for the harmonization of local and national values;
5. Possibilities of strategic use of regional identity as a resource for social and economic development.

This study aims to develop strategic recommendations aimed at reducing inter-regional disparities and consolidating national identity through inclusive approaches that take into account local specifics, cultural diversity and global challenges. The key objectives of the article are the analysis of socio-economic inequality between different regions of Kazakhstan and the assessment of its impact on the processes of formation of regional affiliation and individual self-identification of

the population. Particular attention is paid to the study of the transformations of regional identities under the influence of globalization processes, including the transition from traditional «thick» identities based on cultural and historical roots to «thin» forms aimed at economic competitiveness and mobility. The role of cultural heritage and historical memory in strengthening national unity is also considered, including the use of «invented traditions» to create a common national discourse. An important task is to study educational, cultural and digital initiatives aimed at harmonizing local and national values, as well as their importance in strengthening multicultural identity. In addition, the task is to formulate recommendations for reducing regional inequality, strengthening national identity and effectively integrating local characteristics into the overall national context. The theoretical analysis of the interaction of local, national and global processes is carried out using key concepts such as world systems theory, the «center-periphery» model, the concept of globalization and discourse analysis, which allows for a deeper understanding of the complex mechanisms of identity formation in modern conditions.

Research Questions

1. How do socio-economic inequalities between the regions of Kazakhstan influence the formation of regional identity and its interaction with national identity?

This question is central to understanding how economic and infrastructural differences can increase feelings of alienation among residents of certain regions. Since identity is formed in the context of access to resources and opportunities, it is important to examine how these inequalities affect the perception of belonging to a single nation. For example, if some regions feel «abandoned» compared to economically active centers, this may weaken their connection to the national identity.

2. What strategies can be applied to integrate regional identities into the national discourse, promoting the formation of unity in the context of socio-economic inequality?

The formation of national identity requires the active inclusion of all regions in the general discourse. The question focuses on finding solutions, since strengthening national unity depends on this. Here, the key aspects are cultural initiatives, educational programs and infrastructure development that could harmonize the interests of the center and the periphery. Kazakhstan, as a multinational state, needs approaches that take into account the unique characteristics of each region, revealing their subtleties and integrating them into the national context.

Hypothesis. The main hypothesis of the article is that regional identity in Kazakhstan is formed under the significant influence of socio-economic inequality, which reinforces the differences between the center and the periphery, complicating the active integration of regions into a single national space. Socio-economic inequality, manifested in asymmetric access to education, medical services, and infrastructural resources, reinforces the processes of local identification, which in some cases may enter into strained relations with national identity. At the same time, if there is a consistent state strategy aimed at the balanced development of territories, support for cultural diversity and the formation of an inclusive discourse of nationality, regional identity can transform from a factor of separation into a constructive element contributing to the strengthening of national solidarity and sustainability. This hypothesis suggests that the harmonization of regional characteristics with national identity requires a strategic approach that takes into account both the cultural and economic aspects of regional differences.

Theoretical review. The theoretical part of the study is based on the analysis of classical and modern sociological theories that examine the problems of social and economic inequality. Attention is paid to the concepts of the center and the periphery, which explain the uneven development of regions through their economic specialization and access to resources. The theories of economic agglomeration, emphasizing the role of large cities as growth drivers, and the concepts of social equalization, offering mechanisms for reducing regional imbalances, are also analyzed. Key indicators such as gross regional product (GRP), the Gini index, and social infrastructure indicators are used to analyze the differences. Empirical research.

The empirical part is based on the analysis of official statistics, secondary data, and reports. Data on GRP, population income, employment levels, the level of indebtedness, and other issues were used. An analysis of the ratings of Kazakhstan's regions, compiled based on financial and economic

indicators, standard of living, and business development, was conducted [38]. Particular attention is paid to the index of regional well-being (IndRn), which made it possible to identify the dynamics of regional development for the period from 2007 to 2014. The analysis covers both interregional differences and intraregional disparities, including differences between urban and rural areas [38].

Research methods

The following methods were used to achieve the goals and objectives of the study:

- Index method, which allows integrating heterogeneous indicators into a single composite index reflecting the level of well-being of regions.
- Statistical methods, including trend analysis and comparative analysis of regions to identify long-term patterns and differences.
- Content analysis aimed at studying text data from official reports, ratings and statistics.
- Comparative analysis of leading and outsider regions in order to determine the factors influencing their economic and social development.

The results of the study confirmed a significant differentiation of the regions of Kazakhstan by economic and social indicators. The leaders in terms of well-being were the cities of Almaty and Astana, Shymkent, which is due to their economic specialization, high level of investment and developed infrastructure. Outsider regions such as Turkestan, Zhambyl and Almaty regions are characterized by low GRP, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and insufficient social infrastructure.

The research methodology, based on theoretical analysis and empirical data, allows for a comprehensive examination of the problem of regional inequality and the proposal of effective measures to address it.

Substantiation of research methodology and design

The choice of research methods is determined by the purpose of analyzing the relationship between regional identity and socio-economic inequality in Kazakhstan. The use of the index method made it possible to integrate various indicators of regional well-being into a single composite index reflecting the level of socio-economic development. Statistical methods, including trend analysis and comparative analysis, have revealed long-term patterns and differences between regions. The content analysis of official reports and statistical data contributed to the in-depth interpretation of the results. A comparative analysis of the leading and outsider regions allowed us to identify the key factors influencing economic and social development.

Sample size and inclusion criteria

The study used data from the official statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period from 2007 to 2014, covering all 14 regions and 3 cities of national significance. The criteria for inclusion in the analysis included the availability of data on gross regional product (GRP), household income, employment, debt, and other socio-economic indicators. Thus, the sample covers the entire territory of Kazakhstan, ensuring the representativeness and completeness of the analysis.

Detailing data analysis methods

The following statistical methods were used to assess correlations between regional identity and socio-economic indicators:

- Pearson correlation coefficient for determining the degree of linear dependence between variables.
- Principal Component analysis (PCA) to reduce the size of data and identify the main factors influencing the formation of regional identity.
- Multiple regression analysis to assess the influence of several independent variables on the dependent variable – the level of regional identity

The use of these methods ensured the reliability and reliability of the results obtained, and also allowed us to identify significant relationships between the studied variables.

The presented research methods, the rationale for their selection, the sample size and inclusion criteria, as well as detailed data analysis methods meet the requirements of scientific rigor and ensure the reliability of the results. This allows us to draw reasonable conclusions about the impact of socio-economic inequality on the formation of regional identity in Kazakhstan.

RESULTS

The results of the study revealed a significant impact of socio-economic inequality on the formation of regional identity and its interaction with national identity in Kazakhstan. Regional differences due to economic specialization, infrastructural limitations and imbalances in access to basic services create different conditions for self-identification of citizens in the center and on the periphery. These differences reinforce local identities that may conflict with the national identity, especially in outsider regions, where the feeling of marginalization is most acute.

However, the data also point to potential resources for integrating regional identities into a single national space. This is possible through the development of cultural and educational programs aimed at reducing inequality, and the implementation of strategies that take into account the unique characteristics of each region. Particular attention should be paid to strengthening the connection between the center and the periphery, which can be achieved through the harmonization of interests and the creation of an inclusive national discourse. The subsequent discussion focuses on the interpretation of the findings from the perspective of theoretical concepts such as the core-periphery model, the concept of thick and thin identities, and the use of «invented traditions» to build sustainable national unity. Key mechanisms that can transform regional identity from a challenge into a resource for strengthening national identity and the socio-economic stability of the country are analyzed.

1. Economic specialization of regions is a key factor in the differentiation of income and living standards

The heterogeneity of regional development in Kazakhstan is largely determined by the specifics of the economic specialization of individual territories, which is one of the leading factors forming spatial imbalances. This specialization affects the level of employment, income structure, and investment attractiveness of regions, laying the foundations for socio-economic inequality between them. Data analysis shows that regions with a developed extractive industry, such as the Atyrau and Mangistau regions, provide high levels of gross regional product (GRP) and significant tax revenues to the state budget. Thus, in 2017, the Atyrau region contributed 1.05 trillion tenge to the country's budget, demonstrating a 28.4% increase compared to the previous year [39]. This is due to the favorable dynamics of world oil prices and an increase in production volumes. At the same time, regions with a predominantly agricultural focus, such as the Turkestan, Zhambyl and Almaty regions, lag significantly in terms of GRP. Their economic structure is based on a low-productivity agricultural sector, limited access to investment and a weak infrastructure base. This situation exacerbates the dire state of households in these regions, where a significant portion of income is spent on basic needs, including food. Large cities of national significance, Almaty and Astana, Shymkent occupy a special position. Almaty, as the financial center of the country, generates 25% of tax revenues to the budget. The high concentration of business, financial institutions and access to education and health care make this region a leader in terms of living standards. The capital center - Astana, thanks to investments in infrastructure and the construction sector, also maintains a stable position, ensuring a high level of GRP per capita [39].

1.1. The impact of interregional and intraregional differentiation on access to social services, employment and infrastructure

Interregional differentiation in Kazakhstan is especially noticeable in the context of access to social services, infrastructure and employment. The leading regions (Astana and Almaty) have a significantly more developed social and economic infrastructure compared to other regions. In 2017, the GRP per capita in the Atyrau region was 6.27 million tenge, which is several times higher than the indicators of less developed regions [39].

On the other hand, intraregional differentiation between urban and rural areas increases social inequality. Cities (regional centers) have a high level of employment and access to quality social services, while rural areas suffer from a lack of quality health care, educational institutions and transport infrastructure. For example, in the Turkestan region, despite the high natural population growth, social services remain limited, which reduces the overall level of well-being of the region.

Migration flows from rural areas to large cities exacerbate the problems of host regions. For example, Almaty and Astana experience a significant burden on the housing stock, medical and educational institutions, which creates additional internal social problems. However, internal migration contributes to the redistribution of labor resources, mitigating imbalances in less developed regions but increasing them in rural areas.

1.2. Indicators of differences: gross regional product, access to education and healthcare, employment rates, migration flows

Analysis of the main indicators of regional differences, such as GRP, access to education and healthcare, and employment, shows pronounced disparities between regions. For example, the IndRn welfare index, which combines various indicators, showed in 2014 that Almaty occupies a leading position with an index of 125, while the Almaty region has a minimum value of 54. This indicates significant inequality in access to basic goods and services [39].

Social infrastructure is also unevenly distributed. In highly developed regions, such as the Almaty region (at the level of rural areas), the provision of doctors and medical beds significantly exceeds similar indicators in remote regions. In rural areas, there is a low provision of both medical personnel and educational institutions. This limits the opportunities for the development of human capital and increases social inequality. Internal migration flows play an important role in the redistribution of population and labor force. The largest cities of Almaty and Astana attract internal migrants not only from less developed regions, but also from all rural areas within the framework of intraregional migration. This leads to population growth in large cities, where in 2017 the increase was 50.41 thousand people in Almaty and 59.78 thousand people in Astana [39]. Such redistribution increases competition for jobs and resources in the receiving cities, creating new challenges for social policy and urban development. The analysis of empirical data suggests that regional differentiation in Kazakhstan is due to multiple factors, among which the features of economic specialization, the level of infrastructure development and the nature of migration flows are of particular importance. Megacities such as Almaty and Astana are centers of high economic concentration due to their institutional importance, investment attractiveness, and well-developed social and transport infrastructure. At the same time, a significant part of peripheral territories – especially agrarily oriented and geographically remote areas – shows signs of structural backwardness, which is reflected in limited access to resources, a high degree of dependence on government subsidies and limited opportunities for sustainable growth.

Reducing regional imbalances requires an integrated approach, including targeted investments in infrastructure projects, modernization of the education and healthcare systems as elements of human capital, as well as the development of a balanced internal migration policy that promotes the redistribution of labor and intellectual resources between regions. These measures will not only reduce socio-economic imbalances, but also create conditions for the sustainable development of all regions of the country.

2. Social Infrastructure and Human Capital in Kazakhstan

2.1. Regional Provision of Social Infrastructure: Education, Healthcare, Cultural and Sports Facilities

Regional differences in access to social infrastructure play a key role in shaping socio-economic inequality in Kazakhstan. The analysis shows that regions with a developed economic base, such as the cities of Almaty and Astana, are provided with better quality and more accessible infrastructure than remote or rural areas in the regions. Almaty and Astana have a high concentration of medical facilities, qualified specialists and educational institutions. In particular, Almaty leads the country in the number of universities, providing a wide range of educational opportunities. Rural areas in regions with low economic activity, such as the Zhambyl and Turkestan regions, suffer from a lack of hospitals, schools and cultural facilities. In rural areas, medical facilities are often overcrowded and their equipment does not meet modern standards. This negatively affects the quality of service, especially in remote areas, where access to qualified care remains limited. Cultural and sports infrastructure is more concentrated in large cities. Megacities offer a wide range of cultural events

and modern sports facilities, while rural areas in the regions are practically deprived of such opportunities. This distribution increases migration flows from rural areas to cities, exacerbating the burden on urban infrastructure. Kazakhstan is moving towards increased urbanization, which will bring new problems for the entire country.

2.2. Housing provision, condition of the housing stock and availability of quality housing

Housing provision is an important factor determining the quality of life of the population and social equality. The average housing provision in Kazakhstan is 15 square meters per person, which is a relatively acceptable indicator [38]. However, the quality of housing varies significantly by region. In megacities (Almaty and Astana), there is a high demand for rental housing, which increases the financial burden on households. More than 50% of renters spend a significant part of their income on housing, which reduces their purchasing power.

Most of the housing stock in rural areas was built before 1991 and has not undergone major repairs. The current situation has a negative impact on the quality of housing conditions, especially during periods of seasonal temperature drop. Limited funding for housing modernization programs in rural settlements reinforces the structural gap between urban and rural areas. In particular, in Atyrau region, despite the high level of gross regional incomes, there remains an acute problem of housing provision for the population, which indicates a discrepancy between the economic indicators of the region and the real level of well-being of its residents. The rapid growth of the extractive industry has led to a sharp increase in the population, which has created a shortage of quality housing on the market in this region. A similar situation is observed in other oil-producing regions, where a high influx of labor increases the imbalance in housing provision.

2.3. Gender Inequality in Income and Access to Opportunities

Gender inequality in Kazakhstan, which remains one of the key social problems, exacerbates existing imbalances in access to economic and social opportunities, especially in the context of regional differences. According to the report of the Halyk Finance Analytical Center «Economic Inequality of the Population in Kazakhstan» (January 2024) [40], women in Kazakhstan earn on average 25% less than men. This is due to the structural features of the labor market, where women are more often employed in low-paid sectors such as education and healthcare, and are less likely to occupy leadership positions. The analysis also reveals the relationship between gender and regional inequalities: in remote and rural areas of the regions, women face even greater limitations associated with limited access to quality education, healthcare, and professional opportunities. Such disparities exacerbate overall economic inequality, which, according to the report, is manifested not only in income levels but also in wealth accumulation: the top 10% of citizens own almost 60% of all assets [40]. To reduce gender and regional inequality, the report proposes comprehensive measures, including tax system reforms, improved access to social services and infrastructure development in the regions. These recommendations emphasize the importance of public policies aimed at the equal distribution of resources and opportunities, which is a key condition for the formation of national unity and sustainable development of Kazakhstan.

In addition, in rural areas of the region, women face even greater inequality. Limited access to educational and professional opportunities increases their vulnerability. This is reflected in women's participation in the economy and their ability to invest in the development of the human capital of their families. Gender differences are also manifested in access to social infrastructure. Women, especially in rural areas, are more likely to face a lack of health services, including access to reproductive and maternal health. Limited access to resources and support exacerbates their situation, which in the long term is reflected in the level of poverty.

The results of the Halyk Finance study show that regional differences in the provision of social infrastructure, the condition of the housing stock and the level of gender equality are significant factors in socio-economic inequality in Kazakhstan [39]. The largest cities (Almaty and Astana) remain the centers of concentration of resources and opportunities, while rural areas and remote areas or cities experience significant difficulties in accessing basic services. To reduce these disparities, it is necessary to develop and implement comprehensive measures, including investing in the

modernization of rural infrastructure, improving housing conditions and supporting women in the professional sphere. It is also important to increase data transparency and strengthen the monitoring of regional programs to more accurately understand and address existing problems.

3. Financial burden and indebtedness of the population: a sociological analysis

Socioeconomic inequality in Kazakhstan creates structural preconditions for deepening regional disunity. One of the key characteristics of this phenomenon is the concentration of resources and economic opportunities in large metropolitan areas such as Astana, Almaty and Shymkent, while rural and peripheral regions remain largely dependent on centralized financial flows. For example, according to data for 2024, about 60% of borrowers in Kazakhstan have debts of less than 1 million tenge, indicating their limited financial capabilities [39]. This clearly demonstrates that residents of remote regions most often apply for small loans, since their incomes do not allow them to count on large loans. In the context of such disparities, regional identity is formed as a response to socio-economic exclusion, strengthening local attachments and preventing the consolidation of national identity (Habermas, 2002 [41]; Hall, 2003 [42]).

However, regional identity can play not only a destructive, but also a constructive role. In the context of globalization and accelerated urbanization, regions with unique cultural and social characteristics can become not only objects of assistance, but also resources for national development. For example, the cultural heritage of the Turkestan region or the natural potential of the Almaty region can be integrated into the national discourse, emphasizing the uniqueness of each region (Halyk Finance, 2024) [39]. This requires not only infrastructure investments, but also changes in approaches to shaping the image of the region in national and international narratives. As examples from other countries show, the successful integration of local characteristics into the general discourse contributes not only to economic growth, but also to strengthening national unity.

For Kazakhstan, an important step will be to develop strategies that will transform regional inequality into a platform for growth. Programs are needed to equalize access to social and economic resources, including the development of transport infrastructure, stimulation of entrepreneurship and educational initiatives in rural areas. In addition, it is important to take into account the role of digital technologies, which can serve as a tool for eliminating barriers between the center and the periphery (Erlan Karin, 2023) [5]. The systemic integration of peripheral identities into the national space should be based on the principles of «unity in diversity», where regional differences are not suppressed, but supported as an important component of national wealth (Hobsbawm, 2012 [17]; Etzioni, 1997 [22]).

3.1. Growing indebtedness and its consequences

With the growing indebtedness of the population of Kazakhstan, its impact not only on economic stability, but also on the social behavior and identity of citizens is becoming increasingly obvious. As of October 2024, more than 8.6 million Kazakhstanis have loans, with a significant portion of them facing overdue payments exceeding 1.4 trillion tenge [43]. Such scale of debt is directly related to feelings of social anxiety, a decrease in the level of satisfaction with life, and the formation of local identity due to economic constraints. In the face of the need to repay loans or redistribute resources to service debts, many citizens begin to identify themselves through their economic status, which increases the feeling of vulnerability and alienation from the national discourse.

The problem of indebtedness also affects incentives for social mobility. Individuals who resort to credit loans in order to cover current needs or socially determined obligations - including wedding events, major housing repairs, or the purchase of necessary equipment – find themselves in a state of financial vulnerability that significantly narrows their prospects for sustainable economic development and limits long-term strategic planning. According to the State Credit Bureau, about 60% of borrowers take out small loans of up to 1 million tenge, which, on the one hand [43], confirms the availability of loans for a significant part of the population, but on the other hand, indicates their limited financial resources. This situation leads to increased dependence on short-term solutions, limiting the ability of citizens to invest in the development of education, entrepreneurship, or improving housing conditions. As a result, economic constraints shape behavior aimed at maintaining the current standard of living, rather than achieving higher goals.

A special aspect of indebtedness is its impact on consumer culture and traditional values. In Kazakhstan, the practice of holding large weddings (toi) with the use of credit funds is popular, which raises questions about the rationality of financial behavior. These social norms have a dual impact on citizens' identities: on the one hand, they strive to maintain cultural traditions and confirm their status in society, while on the other hand, they face the consequences of debt burden. In the long term, such practices reduce the development opportunities for regions and families, since a significant portion of resources is directed not to investing in the future, but to maintaining the current social status.

Indebtedness also affects migration processes and the formation of regional identity. Citizens experiencing financial difficulties are more often forced to migrate to large cities such as Almaty, Astana or Shymkent in search of higher-paying jobs and opportunities to pay off debts. This not only increases the burden on the infrastructure of megacities, but also deepens the sense of alienation among those who remain in peripheral regions, where access to credit and resources is limited. As a result, indebtedness increases the gap between the center and the periphery, affecting the integration of regions into the general national discourse and hindering the formation of a strong national identity.

In Kazakhstan, debt burden is becoming not only an economic but also a social problem, affecting citizens' self-determination, behavior, and strategic goals. To solve it, comprehensive measures are needed, including improving financial literacy, regulating lending conditions, and stimulating social trust. Removing debt barriers will be an important step toward creating a more cohesive society, where citizens' identities are based on unity and shared well-being, rather than economic constraints.

3.3. International Debt Burden Comparison

According to 2024 data, the ratio of household debt and loans to GDP in Kazakhstan is only 13.65%, which is significantly lower than in most developed countries, such as:

- Canada - 102%;
- Switzerland - 128.3%;
- USA - 74.44%;
- Great Britain - 83.2%.

Even in neighboring Russia, this figure is higher and is 21.1% [39]. This confirms that the level of debt burden of the population of Kazakhstan remains relatively low. At the same time, the growth of the debt burden in Kazakhstan is moderate, which reduces the risks of financial instability.

3.4. Problems and their impact on socio-economic development

Despite the low level of debt burden compared to other countries, there are serious social consequences for our country:

1. Growing social vulnerability. High levels of indebtedness among vulnerable groups of the population create additional pressure on their financial stability.
2. Insufficient housing affordability. There are 649 thousand people on the housing waiting list, which increases social inequality and reduces the standard of living.
3. Hidden unemployment. The real unemployment rate, according to independent experts, is about 12%, which is significantly higher than official data [44].
4. Limited access to financial resources. More than 70% of loan applications are rejected, especially unsecured ones, which limits opportunities for financial support for low-income citizens [46].

3.5. Recommendations

To reduce the negative consequences of indebtedness and increase the financial stability of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is necessary to:

1. Improve access to loans for low-income groups. Introduce subsidized lending programs to support low-income citizens.
2. Improve financial literacy. Organize ongoing educational campaigns to raise citizens' awareness of financial products and their consequences.
3. Reform the employment system. Create jobs and support entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas in regions with a high level of hidden unemployment.
4. Tighten regulation of the credit market. Limit maximum interest rates on loans and strengthen measures to protect the rights of borrowers.

An analysis of the situation with indebtedness in Kazakhstan demonstrates its multifaceted nature. Despite the low level of debt burden by international standards, growing indebtedness among the economically active population is accompanied by a decrease in income, an increase in social vulnerability and limited access to credit products for low-income citizens. An integrated approach to solving the problem of indebtedness and its consequences is a key factor in the sustainable socio-economic development of Kazakhstan.

The results obtained fully allow us to assert that the main hypothesis of the study has found its empirical confirmation. Indeed, regional identity in Kazakhstan is being formed in conditions of pronounced socio-economic inequality, which reinforces the differences between the center and the periphery, making it difficult for the peripheral regions to be institutionally and symbolically integrated into a single national space.

First of all, it confirms the position that structural inequalities in access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities contribute to the entrenchment of local forms of self-identification, especially in rural areas and remote regions. According to data on GRP, migration flows, the level of social infrastructure and debt of the population, systemic underinvestment in regions with low economic activity creates a persistent sense of marginalization and territorial exclusion among the population. This, in turn, leads to the fact that regional identity begins to develop in isolation from the official national discourse, often contrasting itself with it. These studies are also consistent with the theoretical model of the center and the periphery (Wallerstein, 1979), where the center accumulates resources, knowledge and political influence, while the periphery turns out to be a source of cheap labor and migration resources. This spatial asymmetry in the national context leads to an imbalance in the level of life expectations, symbolic recognition and social rights. In this context, regional identity does not manifest itself as a local exoticism, but as a form of collective adaptation to structural vulnerability.

However, at the same time, as the analysis of secondary indicators and sociological trends has shown, regional identity has a serious potential for institutional integration, provided that an inclusive public policy is implemented. For example, cultural, natural, and historical features of various regions (Turkistan, Altai, and Western Kazakhstan) may become points of growth rather than markers of exclusion if they are institutionalized within the framework of cultural and educational policies. This perspective is consistent with the hypothesis that regional identity can become a resource of national unity if the state strategy takes into account regional specifics not as a threat, but as a value.

The results confirm the importance of the transition from a unitary model of identity to a model of «unity in diversity» (Etzioni, 1997; Hobsbawm, 2012), in which national identity is based not on erasing differences, but on their recognition and institutional support. This implies the need to review the principles of regional development, redistribute investments, develop mechanisms for regional participation in shaping the state agenda, and decentralize cultural policy.

Special attention should be paid to the factor of the growing debt of the population, which was identified in the course of the study as a marker not only of economic pressure, but also of social disintegration. Debt of the population, especially in rural areas, not only restricts the economic freedom of households, but also affects identification strategies: people begin to perceive their identity through the prism of vulnerability, alienation and distance from the «center», which reduces the effectiveness of any attempts to unify identity without taking into account the social context.

The proposed hypothesis has received multidimensional confirmation. Socio-economic inequality not only reproduces asymmetries in living conditions and opportunities, but also generates a fragmented identity map of the country, where different regions interpret their place in the nation through the prism of structural constraints. At the same time, these studies allow us to conclude that if there is a strategic approach including cultural policy, equalization of access to benefits and recognition of regional peculiarities regional identity can be integrated into a sustainable model of national unity.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that socio-economic inequality has a profound and multifaceted impact on the formation of regional identity in Kazakhstan, which, in turn, forms a broader framework of national identity. Regional differences caused by uneven distribution of resources, infrastructural imbalances and economic specialization pose serious problems for cohesion in a State characterized by sharp differences between urban and rural areas and the center and the periphery.

Empirical evidence confirms that regions such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent concentrate economic, human, and infrastructural capital, while rural and peripheral areas remain excluded from development priorities. These structural inequalities limit access to quality education, healthcare, employment, and public services, reinforcing feelings of marginalization and reinforcing local identity. Where socio-economic isolation is most acute, this local identity may conflict with the idea of a unified national identity, weakening trust in State institutions and increasing alienation from national discourse.

The results of the study are consistent with the core-periphery model, which illustrates how central regions act as centers of the extractive economy, while peripheral areas serve as sources of labor or resources with limited reinvestment. This dynamic leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of underdevelopment, external migration, and the depletion of local human capital. The outflow of skilled workers to urban centers - the phenomenon of “internal brain drain” - deepens regional differences and further destabilizes the formation of identity in rural areas.

At the same time, globalization acts as a double-edged force.: It increases access to global ideas and cultural norms, but also increases exposure to economic instability and cultural homogenization. For Kazakhstan, located at the intersection of regional and global trends, the preservation of national unity requires the strategic integration of various regional features into a common national vision.

Regional identity, if recognized and supported, can turn from a source of division into the basis of inclusive nation-building. Cultural diversity, historical depth and territorial extent of Kazakhstan are not obstacles, but an advantage. Strategic investments in underdeveloped regions, inclusive education and cultural initiatives, as well as participatory governance structures are necessary to unlock this potential.

International experience allows us to learn valuable lessons. The solidarity tax in Germany and regional equalization measures, asymmetric decentralization in Spain, and the Canadian model of cooperative federalism illustrate how recognition of regional diversity combined with targeted public investment can promote unity and inclusivity. For Kazakhstan, this practice points to the need for institutional reforms that empower regions, reduce inequality, and take regional interests into account when developing national policies.

Based on the comparative analysis, several universal principles have been formulated.:

1. Institutionalize regional diversity through policies that recognize and reflect local specificities.
2. Fair allocation of resources through the introduction of transparent mechanisms for financial equalization and investment in infrastructure.
3. Cultural and educational integration that supports both national values and local cultural expression.
4. Develop regional human capital by supporting local economies, creative industries, and decentralized innovation.

Returning to the Kazakh context, it is necessary to move from the outdated “center–subordinate periphery” paradigm to a more horizontal, partnership-based management model. In times of internal migration, rapid urbanization, and digital transformation, territorial inequality must be addressed not only economically, but also symbolically and politically.

Regional identity in Kazakhstan is not a fixed structure, it develops at the junction of economic realities, cultural heritage and institutional structures. The goal is not to homogenize identities, but to integrate them meaningfully within a pluralistic and inclusive national project. A truly modern nation-state is one that allows its regions to be co-authors of the national narrative.

In conclusion, regional identity should be considered not as a problem that needs to be overcome, but as a strategic resource that needs to be worked with. This study shows that national unity in Kazakhstan can be sustainably strengthened only through recognition, institutionalization, and investment in regional diversity. A thoughtful, multidimensional approach to managing regional differentiation will lay the foundation for the formation of a sustainable, fair and far-sighted national identity that corresponds to the unique geographical, cultural and socio-economic landscape of Kazakhstan in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The formation of Kazakhstan's national identity in the context of pronounced regional differences is a multidimensional and dynamic process driven by socio-economic inequality, income differentiation and the accelerating processes of globalization. These interrelated factors not only determine access to resources and opportunities, but also influence how people perceive themselves within a national framework.

Empirical evidence shows that regions such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent concentrate most of their economic power, infrastructure, and human capital, while rural and peripheral regions remain underdeveloped. This spatial disparity leads to unequal access to quality education, healthcare, employment, and digital infrastructure, exacerbating the income gap and creating a social divide between the center and the periphery.

As a result, social stratification reinforces local and regional identity, often to the detriment of a unified national identity. The sense of isolation experienced in rural areas weakens trust in government institutions and limits civic engagement. Moreover, internal migration from rural regions to urban centers, driven by the desire to improve living standards, often leads to social disorganization and cultural tension. Migrants often face obstacles to integration, which leads to the formation of a hybrid identity reflecting both local heritage and urban issues.

At the same time, globalization is having an increasing impact through digital media, transnational cultural flows and economic liberalization, changing the symbolic boundaries of identity. Although globalization opens up access to global ideas and values, it also creates risks of cultural homogenization and fragmentation of identity, especially in regions that are already experiencing socio-economic vulnerability.

In this context, regional identity is not inherently a threat to national unity; rather, it can serve as a valuable resource for inclusive nation-building if properly recognized and supported. This requires the intervention of the State, which promotes territorial equality, invests in peripheral development and ensures the cultural attractiveness of various regions in the national consciousness.

The conclusions of this article emphasize that overcoming regional inequality is not only an economic imperative, but also a socio-political necessity. Sustainable national unity in Kazakhstan depends on eliminating the structural causes of inequality, promoting inclusive development, and creating platforms for expressing regional views in national discourse. Ultimately, the “unity in diversity” model, in which regional and national identities coexist and reinforce each other, offers the most sustainable way forward in an era defined by both internal challenges and global pressures.

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