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TOPONYMIC LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ASPECT

This article explores the transformation of the urban toponymic landscape in Kazakhstan, focusing on the cultural-historical significance and linguistic preferences in the naming and renaming of streets and urban objects. Based on survey data, the study examines public attitudes toward toponymic changes, their practical implications, and their role in preserving cultural heritage. The findings highlight the complexity of urban toponymy as a reflection of historical narratives, identity, and language policy. The study concludes that further research is needed to encompass perspectives from various cities and to analyze the broader connections between language planning and toponymic policy. Additionally, the research underscores the importance of balancing historical continuity with modern urban development, as renaming practices often evoke strong societal reactions. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on language policy and national identity in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the need for inclusive decision-making processes that consider both historical legacy and contemporary linguistic realities.

Keywords: urban toponymy, renaming, language policy, cultural heritage, historical narratives, linguistic preferences, spatial identity, public perception.

Introduction

The connection between language and space is a central focus in linguocultural and sociolinguistic studies. Among these, toponymy—the study of

place names—holds particular significance, as it explores the meanings and cultural values embedded in proper names. Zharkynbekova highlights that toponyms, as historically, socially, and culturally significant geographical names, attract the attention of not only geographers, historians, and linguists but also sociologists, political scientists, cultural researchers, and ethnographers. This interdisciplinary interest has contributed to the development of toponymy as a distinct field of study. She emphasizes that geographical names are not only markers for spatial orientation but also key elements of a symbolic system that reflects historical and cultural processes [1, p. 140]. Urban toponymy, which encompasses the names of streets, parks, squares, and other city landmarks, plays a unique role in shaping the identity of urban spaces and reflecting their historical and cultural narratives. These toponyms are the symbols that convey the collective memory and identity of a city.

The study of toponymy in Kazakhstan is essential due to the country's complex historical and political transformations, which have shaped its urban naming landscape. According to G. B. Madieva, the onomastic space of Kazakhstan is currently distinguished by «innovations of social, psychological, and historical content: the geopolitical and linguistic situation in Kazakhstan has changed, as has the mentality of individuals. As a result, their attitude toward what to name and how to name it has also shifted. This has predetermined the emergence of a new concept of proper names, primarily driven by the idea of a national Renaissance and the manifestation of passionarity in Kazakhstani onomastics” [2, p. 15]. Street names in their turn function not only as practical markers but also as ideological tools that reflect political power, historical narratives, and national identity. It has been suggested by Dwyer & Alderman when employed as toponymic means of ideologising space with the symbols of power, icons of identity, and historical remembrances that legitimate the political regime, street names render space into politically loaded memorial landscapes [3, p. 166].

The urban toponymic landscape can be understood as a network of place names that connect physical spaces with cultural and symbolic meanings. As Golomidova states the specificity of the urban toponymic landscape lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it corresponds to the designation of places in the real physical space of the city, while on the other hand, through toponyms as linguistic signs, symbolic meanings are conveyed, shaped by human perception of locations and cultural context [4, p. 30]. This landscape reflects a city's history, cultural heritage, and societal values. While toponyms often capture the spirit of a specific historical period, they also evolve alongside the city, influenced by changing social and political dynamics. As a result, the naming and renaming of urban objects often raise questions about the balance between preserving historical significance and adapting to contemporary needs.

Landry and Bourhis [5] make a distinction between top-down signs provided by the government or agencies linked to the government, on the one hand, and bottom-up signs provided by commercial enterprises, on the other [6]. Traditionally, urban naming practices have been shaped by top-down decisions from authorities, which can sometimes overlook the perspectives and cultural associations of local communities. This creates a potential disconnect between the official names of urban spaces and the ways residents relate to them. Understanding residents' perceptions of urban toponymy is essential to address this gap, as it sheds light on whether the names of city landmarks truly reflect the cultural and historical identity of the area.

In Kazakhstan, state regional onomastic commissions and onomastic commissions of cities of republican significance, as well as the capital, have been established to study onomastics and the renaming of toponyms. These commissions work on restoring original names and approving new names within the territory of Kazakhstan [7].

It is worth noting the research conducted by the Akhmet Baitursynov Institute of Linguistics under the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which focuses on the study of onomastics in the country: *“Etymology of Kazakhstan’s Toponyms. Creation of Toponymic Dictionaries”* (2000–2002); *“Study of the Cognitive Foundations of Kazakh National Toponymy”* (2006–2008); *“Reflection of the National Idea in the Kazakh Onomastic System”* (2007–2009); *“Study of the Cultural-Historical and Linguistic Foundations of Kazakh Onomastics in the General Turkic Context”* (2012–2014); *“Defining the Scientific and Theoretical Principles of National and International Standardization of Onomastic Names in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Geographical Names)”* (2017–2020); *“Development of a Parallel Directory of Names of Administrative-Territorial Units of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Cyrillic and Latin Script”* (2019); and *“Compilation of Two Anthroponymic Dictionaries and a Short General Toponymic (Mixed) Dictionary of the Republic of Kazakhstan”* (2019). These initiatives contribute to enhancing the understanding and application of onomastics in society while also supporting the development and preservation of Kazakhstan’s cultural heritage [8].

Nevertheless, a sociolinguistic approach to researching urban toponymy in Kazakhstan is crucial because it allows to go beyond simply identifying the origins and meanings of names. It helps understand how people actually use and perceive those names in their daily lives and how those perceptions are influenced by social factors like ethnicity, age, and social class [9]. This is particularly important in a multilingual and multicultural society like Kazakhstan, where different groups may have varying interpretations and attachments to certain place names.

By studying public opinion on urban toponyms, we can gain insights into the social and cultural dynamics at play in the naming and renaming processes. This can help understand how people relate to their city, its history, and its diverse communities. It can also reveal potential tensions and conflicts related to identity politics and historical memory.

Furthermore, a sociolinguistic approach can help assess the effectiveness of toponymic policies and practices. By understanding how people perceive and use place names, policymakers can make more informed decisions about naming and renaming that are more inclusive and representative of the community's values and aspirations. As Tan suggests, centralised policy «can have unintended outcomes because groups and individuals, who function as micro- and meso-level language policy and planning agents, can respond in a variety of ways» [10, p. 80].

The purpose of this study is to explore how residents perceive the cultural and historical significance of urban toponyms and their connection to local identity. By analyzing the opinions of residents, this study seeks to highlight the role of toponymy in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a deeper connection between people and their urban environment.

Materials and Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey-based approach to examine public perceptions of urban toponymy in Kazakhstan, specifically regarding the naming and renaming of urban spaces. 188 respondents participated in the survey.

The primary data source is a structured questionnaire, designed to measure residents' attitudes toward the cultural and historical significance of urban place names. The questionnaire consisted of 37 Likert-scale questions, allowing respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements related to urban toponymy. Additionally, demographic variables such as city of residence (Table 1), length of residence (Table 2), age (Table 3), gender (Table 4), native language (Table 5), education level (Table 6) are included to analyze potential differences in perception across different social groups.

Data were collected through online distribution via Microsoft Teams platform to ensure broad participation. The sampling method combined convenience and snowball sampling, targeting a diverse pool of respondents. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including mean comparisons to identify patterns in public opinion.

Table 1 – City of residence

City	Count	Percentage (%)
Almaty	18	9,6
Astana	151	80,3
Other cities	19	10,1

Table 2 – Length of residence in the city

Length	Count	Percentage (%)
From 1 to 5 years	41	21,8
Less than 1 year	18	9,6
More than 10 years	102	54,2
From 6 to 10 years	27	14,4

Table 3 – Age

Age	Count	Percentage (%)
18 - 30 years old	81	43
31 - 45 years old	56	29,8
46 - 60 years old	46	24,5
60+ years old	5	2,7

Table 4 – Gender

Gender	Count	Percentage (%)
Male	32	17
Female	156	83

Table 5 – Native language

Native language	Count	Percentage (%)
Kazakh	148	78,7
Russian	39	20,8
Other	1	0,5

Table 6 – Level of education

Level of education	Count	Percentage (%)
Higher	171	91
Secondary specialized	9	4,8
Secondary	5	2,7
Other	3	1,5

Nevertheless, the study represents the initial phase of research, focusing on the cultural-historical significance of toponymic transformations and it does not yet account for individual linguistic preferences in naming urban objects. Additionally,

the study primarily reflects the views of respondents from Astana, with limited representation from other regions. Future research will address these aspects by analyzing linguistic preferences in urban naming, offering a more comprehensive perspective on the interplay between historical memory and linguistic choices.

Results and discussion

The analysis of survey responses provides valuable insights into public perceptions of urban toponymy and the processes of naming and renaming urban objects in Kazakhstan. The findings highlight key trends in how residents interpret the cultural and historical significance of urban toponymy, and their attitudes toward renaming practices.

Cultural and historical significance of naming

Survey responses reflect a strong recognition of the cultural and historical importance of urban toponyms. A significant majority (76.6 %) agree that place names hold essential cultural-historical value (Diagram 1), while 62.2 % believe renaming efforts contribute to preserving national identity (Diagram 2). Additionally, 75 % of respondents feel that using historical names strengthens the connection to the past. However, concerns are raised by 53.7 % who argue that modern street names often neglect the region's cultural heritage. This highlights the need for a more heritage-conscious approach to naming policies.

Diagram 1 – Public opinion on cultural and historical significance of urban object names

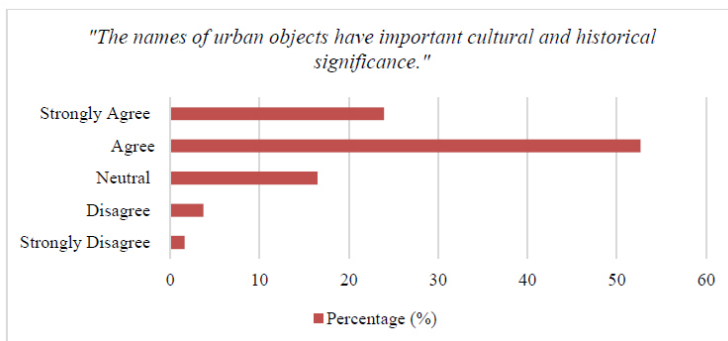
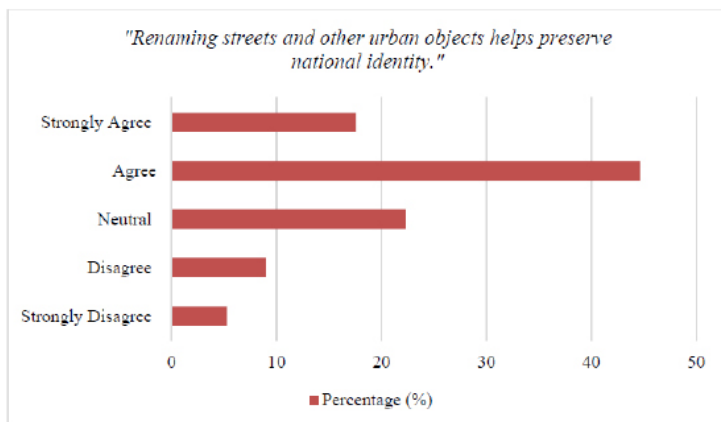


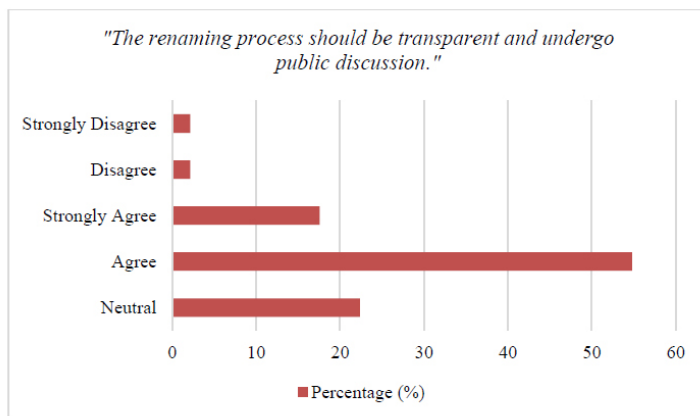
Diagram 2 – Attitudes Toward Renaming Streets and Parks for National Identity Preservation



Public participation and transparency in renaming

A recurring theme in the survey responses is the importance of involving local residents in renaming decisions. 78.2 % of respondents emphasize that renaming initiatives should consider public opinion. Furthermore, transparency remains a key concern, with 72.3 % expressing the need for a more open and publicly discussed renaming process (Diagram 3). These responses indicate a demand for inclusive decision-making mechanisms in urban naming policies.

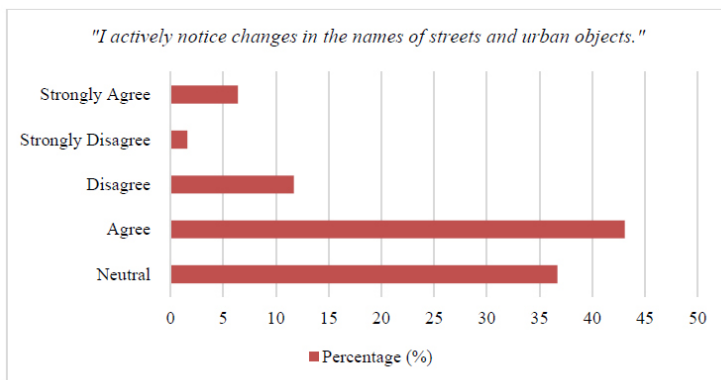
Diagram 3 – Opinions on Public Discussion and Transparency in Renaming



Awareness and emotional response to renaming

The extent to which individuals notice changes in toponymy varies, with 49.4 % actively observing renaming efforts in their cities, suggesting that renaming practices are quite visible to the public (Diagram 4). However, a significant portion (36.7 %) remained neutral, possibly indicating that while they are aware of renaming, they do not pay much attention to it.

Diagram 4 – Frequency of noticing changes in urban toponyms



At the same time, emotional reactions are mixed: while 39 % report positive emotions towards renaming, others show indifference or concern. The predominance of neutral responses suggests that renaming urban objects does not generate strong emotions for most individuals. A substantial portion of respondents views renaming positively, reinforcing the idea that name changes can be well-received when aligned with cultural, historical, or linguistic considerations. The smaller but notable percentage of disagreement highlights the need for further public engagement and awareness campaigns to address concerns and potential resistance. Notably, 69.1 % agree that renaming plays a role in shaping a new historical memory, supporting the notion that toponyms impact collective identity.

Preferences for naming policies

When it comes to naming preferences, respondents are divided. While 30.8 % favor neutral names that do not reflect historical events or figures (Diagram 5), 38.8 % support updating outdated place names to align with modern realities (Diagram 6).

Diagram 5 – Preference for neutral names without historical references

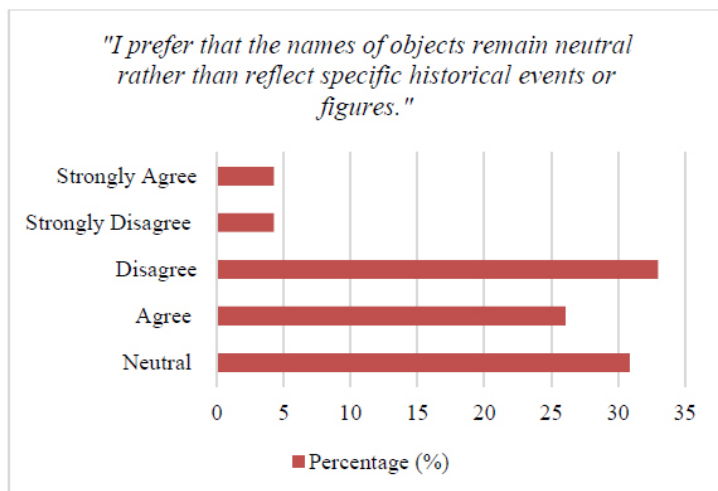
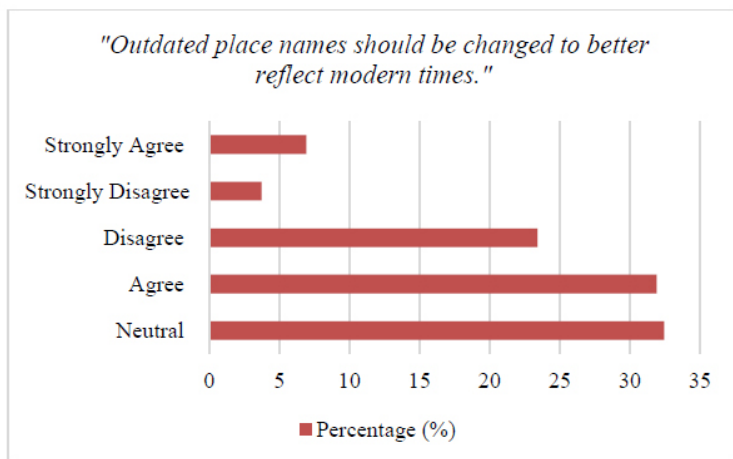


Diagram 6 – Attitudes toward updating outdated place names

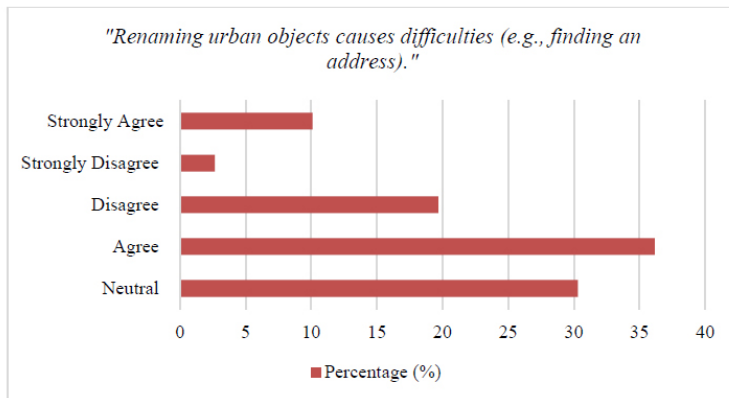


The use of local toponyms is seen as crucial for cultural preservation, with 74 % advocating their inclusion. Additionally, restoring historical names is widely supported, with 58 % backing such initiatives. These insights suggest a balance between historical continuity and contemporary representation in naming decisions.

Practical Challenges and Financial Considerations

Renaming efforts are not without their challenges. 46.3 % of respondents report difficulties in navigation and address identification due to renaming (Diagram 7).

Diagram 7 – Attitudes toward difficulties caused by renaming urban objects



Furthermore, the financial cost of renaming remains a debated issue: while 31.4 % believe that the cultural and historical significance justifies the expenses, a neutral stance was taken by 35.6 % of respondents, indicating a considerable level of hesitation regarding the financial feasibility of such changes. This suggests that while some respondents recognize the cultural and historical value of renaming, others remain skeptical about whether such costs are warranted.

Historical legacy and continuity

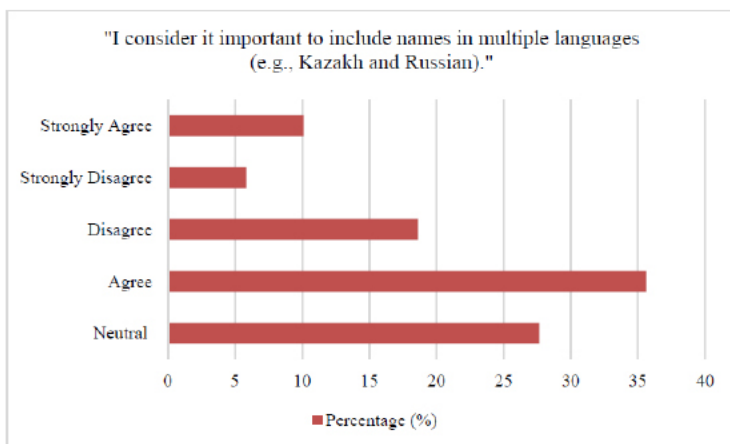
There is an ongoing debate about the relevance of older place names. 35.6 % of respondents believe that Soviet-era names still hold significance for the current generation with 6.9 % strongly supporting this idea, while others are either neutral or oppose it. At the same time, 57.4 % argue that preserving old names contributes to maintaining the city's multilayered history. This suggests that while Soviet-era names still hold some significance, their role in contemporary urban identity is not universally acknowledged. The divergence in opinions may be attributed to generational differences, personal historical perspectives, and the sociopolitical context surrounding national identity formation.

Broader Social and Multicultural Aspects of Naming

Respondents also acknowledge the wider social implications of urban toponymy. 72 % believe that street names influence tourists' perception of the

city, emphasizing the external image-building function of toponymic policies. Additionally, 53.2 % see renaming as a means of fostering intercultural respect and reconciliation. Language inclusivity is another significant aspect, with 45.7 % supporting the presence of multilingual place names (e.g., Kazakh and Russian) to reflect linguistic diversity and accessibility (Diagram 8).

Diagram 8 – Attitudes toward including multilingual names for urban objects



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Conclusions

Overall, the findings indicate strong public support for renaming urban objects, particularly when historical and cultural considerations are involved. The highest levels of agreement were observed in relation to the role of renaming in reinforcing historical connection and regional identity, as well as the necessity of considering local opinions. The relatively high neutral responses in some categories suggest a need for more public engagement and awareness regarding the significance of toponymic changes. Additionally, the existence of a consistent, albeit small, proportion of disagreement highlights the presence of contrasting perspectives that should be addressed through inclusive policy discussions and public consultations.

While the survey provides valuable insights, further research is necessary to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of these issues. The current dataset

is primarily based on responses from Astana, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Expanding the sample to include diverse cities would enhance the representativeness of the results. Additionally, future studies should examine the evolving dynamics of language planning and policy in Kazakhstan and its connection to toponymic policies. Investigating the long-term effects of renaming on cultural integration, public sentiment, and tourism could provide deeper insights into the broader socio-political implications of these changes.

Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of a well-informed and inclusive approach to toponymic policy, ensuring that renaming practices reflect both historical continuity and contemporary societal values.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ТОПОНИМДІК ЛАНДШАФТТЫҢ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯСЫ: МӘДЕНИ-ТАРИХИ АСПЕКТ

Бұл мақалада Қазақстандағы қалалық топонимиялық кеңістіктің трансформациясы қарастырылады, атап айтқанда, көше мен қалалық нысандарды атау және қайта атаудың мәдени-тарихи маңызы мен тілдік қырлары талданады. Сауалнама деректеріне сүйене отырып, зерттеу қоғамның топонимиялық өзгерістерге деген көзқарасын, олардың практикалық әсерін және мәдени мұраны сақтаудағы ролін зерделейді. Нәтижелер қалалық топонимияның тарихи баяндаулардың, ұлттық бірегейліктің және тіл саясатының көрінісі ретіндегі күрделілігін көрсетеді. Зерттеу барысында әртүрлі қалалардағы көзқарастарды қамтитын кеңейтілген зерттеулер жүргізу қажеттілігі, сондай-ақ тілдік жоспарлау мен топонимиялық саясат арасындағы өзара байланыстарды тереңірек талдау қажеттілігі айқындалды. Сонымен қатар, мақалада тарихи

сабақтастық пен заманауи қалалық дамудың арасындағы тепе-теңдікті сақтау маңыздылығы көрсетіледі, өйткені қайта атау тәжірибесі қоғамда қызу пікірталастар туындатады. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы тіл саясаты мен ұлттық бірегейлік мәселелерін талқылауға өз үлесін қосып, шешім қабылдау үдерісінің жан-жақтылығын қамтамасыз етудің, тарихи мұра мен қазіргі тілдік жағдайды ескерудің маңыздылығын атап көрсетеді.

Кілтті сөздер: қалалық топонимия, қайта атау, тіл саясаты, мәдени мұра, тарихи нарративтер, тілдік преференциялар, кеңістіктік сәйкестік, қоғамдық қабылдау.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ ТОПОНИМИЧЕСКОГО ЛАНДШАФТА В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: КУЛЬТУРНО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ АСПЕКТ

В статье рассматривается трансформация урбанистического топонимического ландшафта Казахстана, с акцентом на культурно-историческую значимость и языковые предпочтения в наименовании и переименовании улиц и городских объектов. Основываясь на данных опроса, исследование анализирует общественное отношение к топонимическим изменениям, их практические последствия и роль в сохранении культурного наследия. Результаты подчеркивают сложность городской топонимии как отражения исторических нарративов, идентичности и языковой политики. В исследовании делается вывод о необходимости дальнейшего изучения, охватывающего взгляды жителей различных городов, а также анализа более широких связей между языковым планированием и топонимической политикой. Кроме того, работа подчеркивает важность баланса между исторической преемственностью и современным городским развитием, так как практика переименования нередко вызывает сильный общественный

резонанс. Исследование вносит вклад в продолжающуюся дискуссию о языковой политике и национальной идентичности в Казахстане, подчеркивая необходимость инклюзивных процессов принятия решений, учитывающих как историческое наследие, так и современные языковые реалии.

Ключевые слова: городская топонимия, переименование, языковая политика, культурное наследие, исторические нарративы, языковые предпочтения, пространственная идентичность, общественное восприятие.

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