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## REASONS FOR AND FACTORS IN EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION FROM KAZAKHSTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the article examines the causes of educational migration from Kazakhstan. It also determines the degree of influence of economic and socio-political factors affecting the choice of the country of study and educational institution.*

**Keywords:** educational migration, youth, socio-political factors, economic factors.

### Introduction

Trends in educational migration, the outflow of talented youth and uncompensated educational migration are pertinent issues for many countries.<sup>1</sup> For Kazakhstan, intellectual migration is an urgent problem in connection with the country's strategic task of creating a knowledge-based and innovative economy, strengthening the scientific and educational spheres, and improving the lives of its citizens. "Migration processes are of concern to both the expert community and the population. The outflow of the population carries negative consequences that affect the country's competitiveness and social stability, and the overall process of the country's development," researchers conclude.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the problem of "brain drain" and its economic, social and political consequences came into focus of studies conducted by Kazakhstani scientists.<sup>3</sup>

The volumes of migration of Kazakhstani applicants are growing year to year. Thus, according to various estimates, the annual outflow is about 20-30,000 students. According to official data, as many as 31,287 people left the country in the first 8 months of 2019 alone.<sup>4</sup>

In order to examine the causes and factors of educational migration, the following questions require answers. What criteria do young people use when choosing a foreign education and country of study? Do the quality and accessibility of Kazakhstani education affect educational migration from the country? Do such factors as reputation, quality of the teaching staff, and employment options determine the choice of a university? Do political factors influence the educational migration from



Kazakhstan?

## Research Methods

The study used the in-depth interview method and focus group discussions. A total of 70 in-depth interviews and 5 focus group discussions with undergraduate and graduate students studying abroad were conducted. 3 focus groups and 25 in-depth interviews were conducted in Russia, 2 focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews—in China. 10 interviews were conducted with students studying in the U.S., 13—with those studying in Europe, 7—in other countries.

The studies were conducted between September 2018 and December 2019. The guide's block of questions was aimed at identifying the main causes and factors that affect educational migration from Kazakhstan and the criteria that guide applicants in choosing a country of study. Each interview and focus group responses were encoded in a matrix based on the fuzzy sets (QCA) proposed by C. Ragin.<sup>5</sup> The method made it possible to establish patterns and compare the causes and factors that influenced the student's choice of the country of study.

## In Which Countries Does Kazakhstani Youth Study?

The following sources of data were used to determine the trajectory of educational migration from Kazakhstan and the number of Kazakhstani students studying in foreign countries: state statistics, the Institute of Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and information from foreign universities.

As of 2018, 120,000 people were studying abroad.<sup>6</sup> The geography of the principal flows of students is diverse and covers about 50 countries. According to the ministries of education of the Russian Federation and China for the 2016-2017 academic year, 70,000 people were studying in Russia (almost every fourth foreign student, both in-person and remote, is from Kazakhstan),<sup>7</sup> and approximately 14,000 study in China.<sup>8</sup>

It's important to note that statistics do not always provide complete and accurate information; there are discrepancies in the figures provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the ministries of education of the countries where Kazakhstani youth are studying. Nevertheless, based on the data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is possible to determine the geography of educational migration from Kazakhstan. According to the latest data, educational institutions in Russia, China, South Korea, the U.S., Canada, Germany, Czech Republic and Poland attract the most Kazakhstani students.<sup>9</sup>

## Reasons for Choosing to Study Abroad

The desire of young people to study abroad is linked to a range of domestic factors and reasons, which are intertwined with the reasons and factors in the country of study.<sup>10</sup> The analysis made it possible to identify common causes and distinctive features of motivation that guides the students in selecting a place to study.

## Quality of Education

The leading factor in choosing a foreign university for Kazakh students, particularly for aspiring master's degree students, is the quality of education. This may be due to the fact that the students entering master's degree programs are more conscious and selective in their choice because of their age and an already obtained higher education degree. Future graduate students, who have usually studied theory in a bachelor's degree program in Kazakhstan, seek an opportunity to gain more in-depth and applied knowledge. Despite the fact that similar educational programs are available in Kazakhstani universities, applicants consciously make a choice in favor of foreign programs, due to the subjectively perceived low quality of education in Kazakhstan. *"I knew that there are programs in my specialty in Kazakhstan. But still, I chose to study abroad, because our country does not provide a good education"* (graduate student from Nanyang Technological University, China).

In comparing Kazakh and foreign education, students conclude that the former is inferior to the latter in many respects. In their opinion, education in Kazakhstan is dissociated from reality and based on outdated teaching methods.

The choice of foreign universities is also determined by the desire to engage in scientific work, which is not at a satisfactory level in Kazakhstan, according to some respondents. Bureaucratized administration of science, a poor material and technical base, and the absence of modern laboratories have become the factors that stimulate educational migration. *"Friends said that it is impossible to conduct serious scientific work in Kazakhstan, and I decided to study in the U.S. The laboratories are new, all conditions for work are in place"* (graduate student from the University of Illinois, U.S.).

The reputation and image of the university also play an important role in choosing a future profession. The vast majority of students often rely on international ratings and heed attention to the quality of the teaching staff. *"This university is one of the*



top 100 in the world,” “This university is one of the leading British research universities,” students noted during the interview. Typically, students pay attention to the quality of the teaching staff, i.e.: “I chose this university because there are numerous famous professors with an international reputation,” “Before choosing a university and a program, I studied university websites and their instructors for a long time.”

## Economic Factors and Personal Financial Means

Research demonstrated that the unstable economic situation, lack of competition in the business sphere, and low wages in Kazakhstan are the factors that stimulate educational migration. Kazakhstani researchers believe that factors of geographical proximity and close economic cooperation play an important role in choosing a foreign education.<sup>11</sup> Our interviews and focus group discussions demonstrated that the joint economic projects of Kazakhstan with China and Russia and border proximity affect the choice of the country of study. Interviews with students studying in Russia showed that common history and close economic ties between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation play a role in the selection process. Young people hope that, for example, “there will be an opportunity in the future to find a high-paying job in the EAEU labor market.”

In the absence of financial means, applicants focus on scholarship and grant programs. This is especially true for students studying in China and Russia, who mentioned the problems related to their parents’ financial means more often than other students. They note that the main reason for choosing these countries was free tuition, or its low cost in comparison with Western European universities. In their opinion, universities in China and Russia are more likely to provide a study grant than those in Kazakhstan. These sentiments are expressed by the following comment: “I did not receive a grant for the master’s program. When Russian universities began to offer quotas for foreign students, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity.”

The study also revealed that the majority of respondents associated foreign education with a “good start” of their career, a step up in their social status, and an indicator of success. They are confident that in the future they will be more competitive in the international and domestic labor market than Kazakhstan graduates.

“A foreign diploma is valued. In Kazakhstan, everyone graduated with honors and then goes without work, or works for 100 thousand tenge. If you can graduate abroad, you can work anywhere, in any country, and when you return to Kazakhstan, then all the doors are open for you...” (student of University College London (UCL), specialty management).

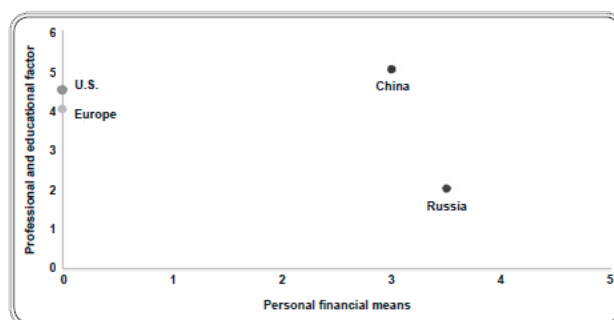
They consider the knowledge of a foreign language, independence and ability to adapt in any conditions as their main advantages. “I think that I am much more competitive than my peers who graduated from Kazakhstani universities. They have not seen the world, they were always next to their parents and under their protection. A foreign diploma and knowledge of the English language are required by employers,” says a student from an American university. The desire to travel, to partake of a different culture, to be independent, unwillingness to live with parents are also named among the reasons for studying abroad.

Factors that affect the choice of countries of study were clustered into four groups to identify their degree of importance: the professional and educational factor, personal financial means, the economic factor, and the socio-political factor.

Figure 1 shows the coordinate system where the X axis is the personal financial means of the respondents and their parents, and the Y axis is the professional and educational factors. Obviously, the financial factor plays a more important role for those studying in China and Russia than those obtaining an education in the U.S. and Europe.

Figure 1

### Correlation between the Financial and the Professional and Educational Factors in the Choice of Country of Study (N = 70)



## Socio-Political Factors

For the majority of respondents, the reluctance to study in Kazakhstan is dictated by political factors. For instance, they believe that corruption<sup>12</sup> is the main cause of educational migration.



*“The main problem is corruption. Unemployment, poverty and the lack of social lifts are all the result of corruption. Young people want to leave Kazakhstan in order to get an honest education,”* said a student at a Swiss university.

*“We all know that there is corruption in the education system. Is it a secret that students give a bribe for a good grade? There is a tradition of the writing theses by the research advisors themselves for a ‘fee.’ The Ministry [of Education] knows all about it, but does not want to fight it. Even a scientific grant can only be won through connections,”* said a student studying in the U.K.

They believe that corruption has become the norm in Kazakhstani reality. *“We only get dry figures about a decline in corruption. Even when corrupt officials are arrested, they are released a short time thereafter, or they simply hide abroad,”* students say. According to the students surveyed, anti-corruption measures are ineffective; rather, they are feigned or rooted in politics. Respondents believe that systemic methods of fighting corruption are required today. They should be linked with improving the socio-economic status of the people, the democratization of the political system, the efficiency of public administration, digitalization, and rational budget spending.

Another important political factor for the respondents is democratic values, which are implemented through the observance of human rights and freedom of speech. Such values are most characteristic of students who chose to study in the United States.

*“In the United States, there is no need to demonstrate your loyalty to the political system and state authorities. The main thing here is not to break the law. No one here is afraid to express their political views, there is no control over students. And in Kazakhstan, instructors control students even in the dorms. It is a violation of rights,”* say the students. In their opinion, political reforms, democratization of political institutions, and respect for human rights in Kazakhstan can stop the “brain drain” from the country.

Authoritarianism, according to most students who chose Western Europe and the United States, is also evident in the relations between teachers and students. Kazakhstani education lacks a democratic environment for scientific discussions.

*“In the U.S. there is no professional barrier between graduate students and professors. The professor and student are colleagues who are equally involved in a discussion. You feel confident in such an audience, you can express your opinion on any topic,”* said a graduate student from an American university.

The study showed the dependence of educational migration on the political situation in the country. This mainly concerns ethnic Russian students studying in Russia and determined to stay in the country after graduation. In their opinion, the conflicts that have arisen in recent years in Kazakhstan cause concern among parents, a sense of ambiguity about the future and force them to leave the country. *“My mother said that life in Kazakhstan used to be peaceful, but conflicts are now frequent. Now I am studying here, and my parents will move here in a year.”*

Note that the influence of parents is crucial in choosing to leave for Russia. *“Parents plan to move here permanently. My parents are doing well, they have jobs. But they are the ones who initiated the move, they worry about us,”* says a student at Lomonosov Moscow State University.

This category of respondents is also concerned about the possible decline in the status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan. This concerns the switch of the Kazakh language to the Latin script. An expert from the Institute of CIS Countries notes that “the switch of the Kazakh language from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet is perceived by many as another indirect step away from Russia. Following this announcement, the number of people wishing to move under the program has increased dramatically.”<sup>13</sup>

Other respondents noted that the lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language is an important factor pushing students towards obtaining an education in Russia. *“I lacked knowledge of the Kazakh language, so I did not get an augmented scholarship. And now Kazakhstan is switching to Latin alphabet,”* said a student at Tomsk State University.

An important factor that affects educational choices is Russia’s policy to attract educational migrants from Kazakhstan. For example, the implementation of the Russia’s federal project “Export of Education” is aimed at increasing the number of foreign students, primarily from post-Soviet states. This is evidenced by the speeches of the Russian leaders, which spell out the strategy of attracting foreign youth to study in Russia and creating attractive conditions and simplifying the procedure for acquiring Russian citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

A substantial argument in favor of Russian education is that Kazakhstani secondary school certificates are recognized without additional evaluation. Experts also note that the minimum exam score required for admission is often reduced for applicants from Kazakhstan. The stress of the Integrated National Testing, the competitive application process to receive a grant in a number of specialties (even with high scores) are among the reasons for studying abroad. In addition, most students at Russian universities do not consider themselves study migrants. Students from Kazakhstan adapt very successfully to Russia regardless of their ethnicity.<sup>15</sup>

Educational centers play a very significant role. For instance, career counseling meetings held by representatives of foreign



universities with high school students played a key part in choosing a place of study for many Kazakhstanis. Most of the respondents noted that they received information about the Russian university and the admission process when they were studying in high school.

This problem is already being raised at the state level. “One of the reasons for the outflow of our best students is the lack of proper effort on the part of Kazakhstani universities. They practically never conduct meetings at schools or meet with talented high school students, while representatives from foreign universities come to our country, conduct conversations and meetings with the top students and offer them preferential conditions for admission to universities in their countries. Of course, since there is no unambiguous statistics, it becomes impossible to bring back and hire specialists after their graduation from foreign universities. There have been negative trends in this sphere, as well. Unable to find a job in their homeland, they once again leave for the countries where they studied, and they are in demand there, since our compatriots are usually among the top students. And this, again, occurs against the background of the shortage of highly qualified specialists in our country,” say the politicians.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous high school students, as well as those wishing to enroll in master’s degree programs, resort to the services of educational centers that provide consulting services, assist in choosing a university and completing applications. There are approximately 1,000 private educational centers in large Kazakhstani cities.<sup>17</sup> More than a half of them are international educational organizations with extensive connections in the post-Soviet space, in European and Asian countries. They are essentially legal entities that operate within Kazakhstan’s legal framework (training centers are not licensed under the law)<sup>18</sup> and provide a constant flow of students to partner universities in foreign countries.

It is difficult to assess the degree of influence of such centers on the processes of educational migration from Kazakhstan, since there are no available data on the number of students using the services provided by educational centers, or conclusive data on actual departures. Data on students who have left to study abroad is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan who work directly with their foreign colleagues and provide visa support for Kazakhstani citizens.<sup>19</sup> However, this information is not publicly available.

**Figure 2**

**Correlation between the Financial and the Professional and Educational Factors in the Choice of Country of Study (N = 70)**

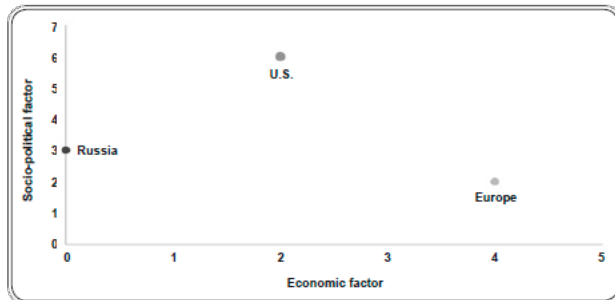


Figure 2 demonstrates that the socio-political factor is fundamental for the students studying in the U.S., while this factor is not a principal one for Kazakhstani students of European universities. For the latter, the economic factors in the country of study are paramount, i.e., the level of economic development, high living standards, decent wages, etc.

## Conclusion

The result of educational migration from Kazakhstan may be the outflow of talented youth. Once abroad, many will not return to Kazakhstan, deciding to stay in the country of study or to start looking for work in the international labor market. Based on the data obtained during in-depth interviews with a wide range of students from Kazakhstan studying in China, Russia, Europe and the U.S., the following emerged as the motivating factors in favor of studying abroad.

**Figure 3**

**Reasons for Choosing Education Abroad, By Country**



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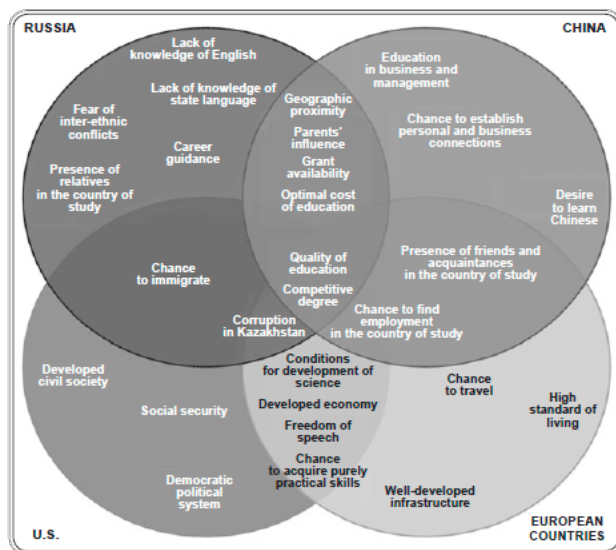


Figure 3 reveals both general reasons and the distinctive characteristics of the motivation of Kazakhstani youth in their choice of foreign universities.

Foreign education is preferred to Kazakhstani education because of the quality of the former and its high places in international ratings. It is believed that qualifications acquired in foreign universities significantly increase the chances of successful employment, both in Kazakhstan and abroad. The desire to avoid bureaucratic procedures and corruption are stimulating factors for educational migration. Economic factors and the family's financial means also play a significant role. Kazakhstanis are also attracted by the tuition discounts offered by certain foreign educational institutions.

Respondents studying in the United States are most characterized by democratic values, i.e., human rights and freedom of speech, which served as the main trigger for their student migration. Students in the U.S. and Western Europe note a freer atmosphere in the classroom.

Of particular interest are the factors that motivate ethnic Russians to obtain a higher education in Russia. Among them are the influence of family members, geographic proximity, the absence of barriers to obtaining Russian citizenship and a concern about a lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language. Career guidance campaigns conducted by foreign educational institutions, especially Russian ones, relieve applicants of the difficulties associated with the entrance exam process, since early admission options are available.

Although educational migration can be considered a natural phenomenon, the factors pointed out by students from Kazakhstan indicate the importance of solving problems in the Kazakhstani education system and forecasting the possible negative consequences of educational policy.

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<sup>1</sup> See: A. Lulle, L. Buzinska, "Between a 'Student Abroad' and 'Being from Latvia': Inequalities of Access, Prestige, and Foreign-Earned Cultural Capital," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 8, 2017, pp. 1362-1378; S. Beech, "International Student Mobility: A Critical Overview," *Laboring and Learning*, 2017, pp. 285-303; F.L. Collins, "Researching Mobility and Emplacement: Examining Transience and Transnationality in International Student Lives," *Area*, No. 44 (3), 2012, pp. 296-304; J. Tan, "Introduction," in: *The International Mobility of Students in Asia and the Pacific*, UNESCO, Paris, 2013, pp. 1-5; C. Yue, "International Student Mobility: China," in: *The International Mobility of Students in Asia and the Pacific*, pp. 18-28; R. Choudaha, "Three Waves of International Student Mobility (1999-2020)," *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 42, No. 5, 2017, pp. 825-832. [Back to text](#)

<sup>2</sup> See: B. Bokayev, A. Zholdybalina, "Migratsionnye trendy v Kazakhstane v kontekste razvitiia intellektualnogo potentsiala," *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, No. 2, 2019, p. 93. [Back to text](#)

<sup>3</sup> See: E. Sadovskaya, "Obrazovatelnaia migratsiia iz Kazakhstana v Kitay: operezhaiushchaia dinamika na fone drugikh vidov migratsiy," *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, No. 1, 2014, p. 14; S. Koshanova, B. Rakisheva, A. Mazhitova, G. Ashkenova, "Nekotoryye aspekty uchebnoy migratsii iz Respubliki Kazakhstan v Kitayskuiu Narodnuiu Respubliku," *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, No. 1 (75), 2016, pp. 63-82; B.I. Rakisheva, D.V. Poletaev, "Uchebnaia migratsiia iz Kazakhstana v Rossiiu kak odin iz aspektov strategicheskogo sotrudnichestva v ramkakh razvitiia Tamozhennogo soiuza," *Evraziiskaia ekonomicheskaiia integratsiia*, No. 3 (12), August 2011, pp. 84-101. [Back to text](#)

<sup>4</sup> Official Internet resource of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan [[Link](#)], 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>5</sup> See: *Ragin C.C. The Comparative Method. Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, L., 1987. [Back to text](#)



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<sup>6</sup> See: “Skolko kazakhstanskikh studentov uchitsia za granitsej,” Today.kz—round-the-clock information portal, 2018, available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>7</sup> See: “Eksport rossiyskikh obrazovatelnykh uslug,” Statistical collection, Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, Issue 6, Sotsiotsentr, Moscow, 2016, 408 pp. [Back to text](#)

<sup>8</sup> See: “Is China Both a Source and Hub for International Students?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016, available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>9</sup> See: “V kakiye strany kazakhstantsy uyezhaui uchitsia,” 26 October, 2019, *Wfin.kz*—a review and analytical online magazine about the impact of financial and economic factors and technologies on the development of the business environment and companies, 2019, available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>10</sup> See: *Vneshniaia molodezhnaia migratsiia v stranakh Tsentralnoy Azii: analiz riskov i minimizatsiia negativnykh posledstviy*, Astana, 2019, p. 70. [Back to text](#)

<sup>11</sup> See: M. Shibutov, “Politicheskiye faktory obrazovatelnoy migratsii iz Kazakhstana,” *History. OSTKRAFT*, No. 1 (13). M., 2020. C. 148. [Back to text](#)

<sup>12</sup> According to the results of the annual survey of the global anti-corruption movement Transparency International for 2019 in the ranking of corruption perceptions Kazakhstan ranked 113 out of 180 countries (see: [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020). [Back to text](#)

<sup>13</sup> See: “Obrazovanie priamo vliiaiet na migratsiiu—eksperty,” available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>14</sup> See: “Message from Russian President Vladimir Putin to the Federal Assembly in 2018,” Channel One is the largest television company in Russia, 2018, available in Russian at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>15</sup> See: A. Sadyrin, “Uchebnyy migrant iz Kazakhstana: pravda ili vymysel?” *Bulletin of the Tomsk State University. History*, No. 2 (40), 2016, p. 130. [Back to text](#)

<sup>16</sup> See: “Okolo 60 tys. vypusnikov kazakhstanskikh shkol ezhegodno uyezhaui uchitsia za rubezh,” *ZONA.kz—Sociopolitical Internet Newspaper*, 2019, available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>17</sup> See: “Uchebnye (obrazovatelnye) tsentry Kazakhstana,” *Edumart.kz*—web market of educational services, 2019, available at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>18</sup> See: Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 16 May, 2014 No. 202-V On Permits and Notifications (with amendments and additions as of 1 August, 2019), available in Russian at [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

<sup>19</sup> Official Internet resource of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan [\[Link\]](#), 20 March, 2020. [Back to text](#)

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