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Socioeconomic frames of Russia's post-2022 migration to Kazakhstan: A four-language news comparison

Myrzantay Zhakyp[1]

Abstract

This article examines how Kazakh-, Russian-, Turkish-, and English-language news media framed migration from Russia to Kazakhstan after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Russia's September 2022 mobilization. A qualitative comparative framing analysis of 26 news texts published from September 2022 to February 2026 identifies five linked frames: urban economic pressure; entrepreneurial and labor opportunity; legal-economic incorporation; social stratification; and adaptation, settlement, or return. The analysis situates these representations within Kazakhstan's long border and dense political, economic, and linguistic ties with Russia, while distinguishing border entries from durable settlement. It finds that apparently neutral socioeconomic reporting can both register local resentment and depoliticize it: migrants become conditionally legitimate when represented as skilled, solvent, documented, and incorporable, yet disruptive when associated with housing inflation and unequal access. The study shows how multilingual news publics construct divergent hierarchies of burden, usefulness, and belonging around the same migration episode.

Keywords

Post-2022 migration, news framing, multilingual media, Kazakhstan, socioeconomic legitimacy, xenophobia

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[1]Department of Journalism and Social Sciences, Manash Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University, Petropavlovsk, Republic of Kazakhstan

Corresponding author:
Myrzantay Zhakyp, Department of Journalism and Social Sciences, Manash Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University, 86 Pushkin Street, Petropavlovsk 150000, Republic of Kazakhstan. Email: mkzhakyp@ku.edu.kz

Introduction

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the resulting outflow of Russian citizens has reconfigured migration dynamics across Eurasia, with Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region emerging as important destinations of wartime mobility. Yet, this movement has not been mediated simply as a refugee crisis or as a conventional labor migration flow. Rather, Russian wartime migration has frequently appeared in public discourse through a more ambiguous socioeconomic vocabulary involving rent inflation, housing scarcity, labor-market incorporation, entrepreneurial relocation, bureaucratic formalization, and the transformation of everyday urban life. This makes the case significant not only for migration studies but also for communication research, because it reveals how media systems classify and hierarchize mobility through socioeconomic meaning rather than through humanitarian or security categories alone (Eberl et al., 2018; Lawlor, 2015; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

A substantial body of scholarship has shown that media do not merely describe migration but actively construct the interpretive conditions under which migrants become publicly legible, morally evaluated, and politically intelligible (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Fuller, 2024; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). Across different national and geopolitical contexts, migration has often been framed through recurring binaries such as vulnerability versus threat, protection versus control, and deservingness versus exclusion (Berry et al., 2016; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). These framings shape not only how migrants are perceived, but also how their presence is linked to broader narratives of social order, national belonging, welfare conditionality, and public legitimacy (Esses et al., 2013; Hall et al., 1978; van Oorschot, 2000; Wodak, 2015). However, much of this literature has concentrated on Western European and North American contexts and has predominantly examined humanitarianized, securitized, or politicized portrayals of refugees and migrants (Collyer and King, 2016; Crawley et al., 2016; De Coninck, 2023). As a result, we know considerably less about how migration is represented when the central public question is not simply who migrants are, but what kinds of economic and social actors they appear to be within everyday regional and urban life.

Russian wartime migration to Central Asia presents a particularly revealing case in this regard. Many of those arriving in Kazakhstan were not represented as conventionally vulnerable refugee subjects, nor as culturally distant outsiders. Instead, they frequently appeared in media discourse as mobile, educated, urban, and often professionally or economically resourceful actors whose presence was narrated through rent increases, changing consumption patterns, labor-market competition, digital work, business relocation, residence formalization, and longer-term incorporation. In this sense, Russian wartime migrants occupied an analytically unstable position between forced displacement, selective mobility, and middle-class relocation (Carling, 2002; Czaika and de Haas, 2014; de Haas, 2021). That instability is theoretically important because it reveals a form of migration that is not easily captured by dominant binaries of victimhood and threat. Rather, it exposes how migrant

legitimacy may be constructed through economic legibility, classed mobility, and capacity for incorporation into local social and urban systems.

This article argues that Russian wartime migration should be understood as a multilingual mediated socioeconomic event. The event itself is not reducible to a demographic flow; rather, its public meaning is continuously assembled across different linguistic media environments, each with its own audience expectations, political sensibilities, regional imaginaries, and evaluative logics (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). From this perspective, migration is not a singular social fact that media simply report. It is a mediated object whose meaning is produced unevenly across communicative spaces. Kazakh-language media tend to foreground host-society pressure, local discomfort, and everyday social consequences; Russian-language coverage more often emphasizes practical adaptation, legality, and migrant-facing experience; Turkish-language reporting situates the phenomenon within broader regional economic repositioning; and English-language media more frequently frame it in terms of structural transformation, labor mobility, and international visibility. The same migration episode therefore circulates not as one coherent public narrative, but as a set of overlapping and partially competing mediated realities.

This multilingual variation matters theoretically because it shows that migration is not only differentially experienced, but also differentially made meaningful. Existing migration-framing scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that media shape public understandings of who migrants are and what they represent (Eberl et al., 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Héricourt and Spielvogel, 2014). Yet, it has paid less attention to the possibility that media may also differentiate migrants through socioeconomic coding: by constructing them as burdens on housing and infrastructure, as desirable labor and entrepreneurial capital, as administratively incorporable subjects, or as classed actors whose legitimacy depends on their perceived usefulness. In this respect, Russian wartime migration offers an analytically productive case for extending migration-framing research beyond the humanitarian–security binary toward a more differentiated account of how mobility is socially valued, economically translated, and communicatively stratified.

The article therefore addresses two interrelated gaps in the literature. First, there remains limited research on socioeconomic framing as a distinct mode of migration representation, especially in contexts where migrants are neither straightforwardly humanitarianized nor fully securitized. Second, existing studies rarely examine how the same migration episode is constructed across multiple linguistic media publics in ways that produce different hierarchies of usefulness, burden, belonging, and legitimacy. These gaps are especially significant in the Central Asian context, where post-Soviet historical entanglements, regional mobility infrastructures, and uneven urban transformation shape the meanings attached to migration, yet remain underexamined in international communication scholarship.

To address these gaps, this article examines how Russian wartime migration to Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region has been represented through socioeconomic narratives in Kazakh-, Russian-, Turkish-, and English-language news media. Drawing on a qualitative comparative framing analysis of a multilingual corpus, the study asks three questions:

- How do multilingual media construct the socioeconomic legitimacy of Russian wartime migrants?
- Which socioeconomic frames dominate across linguistic media publics, and how do they differ?
- What do these differences reveal about unequal hierarchies of belonging, usefulness, and incorporation in media discourse?

The article advances three related contributions. First, it extends migration-framing research by showing that media representations of migration may be organized not only through humanitarian and security logics, but also through socioeconomic coding. Second, it demonstrates that migrant legitimacy in media discourse may be structured through class position, economic usefulness, and perceived incorporability rather than vulnerability alone. Third, it introduces a multilingual comparative perspective that conceptualizes migration as a mediated socioeconomic event produced across interconnected but nonidentical linguistic publics. In doing so, the article positions Central Asia not as a peripheral receiving space, but as a theoretically important site for understanding how media construct migration, value, and social legitimacy under conditions of geopolitical rupture and uneven regional transformation.

More specifically, the article treats journalism not merely as a channel of migration visibility, but as a key institution through which socioeconomic legitimacy is narratively organized and publicly negotiated. In this sense, the study contributes to journalism studies by showing how multilingual news discourse does not simply report migration, but actively classifies migrant presence through frames of burden, utility, legality, and social incorporation.

Historical, geopolitical, and demographic context

The post-2022 movement occurred within an unusually dense bilateral setting. Kazakhstan and Russia share a 7591-km land border, participate in the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and retain deeply interconnected transport, trade, energy, and media infrastructures. Kazakhstan's oil exports have also depended heavily on routes crossing Russian territory. These institutional ties coexist with a postcolonial politics of sovereignty, language, and territorial sensitivity, especially in northern Kazakhstan. The migration wave therefore entered neither a culturally distant destination nor a politically neutral labor market; it entered a multilingual society in which proximity to Russia is simultaneously ordinary, economically consequential, and geopolitically sensitive.

The 2021 national census recorded 2.9 million ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, about 15.5% of the population, rather than 18%; Russian also remains widely used across public and media life (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). This established Russian-speaking population complicates any inference that Russian-language reporting represents newcomers alone. It also helps explain why cultural familiarity, bilingual communication, and existing kinship or professional networks could facilitate reception, while the same historical proximity could intensify anxieties about sovereignty and demographic balance.

Scale must likewise be specified cautiously. Administrative border crossings measure movements, not unique migrants or permanent settlement. In early October 2022, the Kazakh government reported that more than 200,000 Russian citizens had entered since the September 21 mobilization announcement, while about 147,000 had already departed; approximately 77,000 had obtained an individual identification number needed for formal work or banking (Auyezov and Gordeyeva, 2022). These figures indicate a large but highly mobile population rather than a single settled cohort. Later reporting in the corpus records substantial onward and return movement. Available official statistics do not provide a complete gender, family status, citizenship-history, or motive profile for this short-term inflow. Contemporary accounts nevertheless consistently describe a strong presence of working-age men avoiding mobilization alongside professionals, remote workers, entrepreneurs, partners, and families. The article therefore uses "post-2022 migrants from Russia" as a situational media category, not as a claim that all entrants were ethnic Russians, economic migrants, refugees, or conscientious objectors.

Materials and methods

This article employs a qualitative comparative framing analysis to examine how Russian wartime migration to Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region was represented through socioeconomic narratives in multilingual news media. Rather than approaching migration as a purely demographic or policy issue, the study treats media discourse as a site where the social and economic meaning of migrant presence is actively constructed, interpreted, and publicly stabilized. In this sense, the analysis is concerned not only with what was said about Russian wartime migrants, but with how journalistic discourse transformed migration into a socially intelligible issue of housing, labor, legality, adaptation, and urban change. In line with framing-oriented communication research, the study therefore focuses on how media texts define problems, assign consequences, evaluate actors, and organize public meaning around migration-related developments (Eberl et al., 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Lawlor, 2015; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

The empirical material consists of a multilingual corpus of 26 journalistic texts published between September 2022 and February 2026, covering the period from the announcement of Russia's partial mobilization to the longer-term normalization, adaptation, and partial return dynamics of Russian wartime migrants in Kazakhstan. The corpus includes 13 Kazakh-language texts, 4 Russian-language texts, 4 Turkish-language texts, and 5 English-language texts. These materials were selected from national, regional, and international media outlets in order to capture how the same migration episode was narratively organized across different linguistic media publics (Aden, 2026; Boribai, 2025; Ermashev, 2023; Orshybekova, 2022; Weiskopf, 2022). Because the study is concerned specifically with journalistic mediation, the corpus was limited to professionally produced news and analytical journalism rather than social media content, policy documents, or user-generated discourse. The corpus was not intended to produce statistical representativeness; rather, it was designed to provide analytical contrast across four distinct communicative environments, each of which framed the socioeconomic implications of

migration through different narrative priorities, public concerns, and geopolitical orientations.

The temporal boundary begins in September 2022 because Russia's partial mobilization on September 21 triggered the sharpest and most visible arrival episode in Kazakhstan, changing both the scale of movement and the themes of coverage. February 2026 is the end point of data collection and permits comparison between the emergency-arrival phase and later reporting on formalization, selective settlement, onward movement, and return. The period does not imply that the war began in September 2022: Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and launched its full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022.

The four language groups are deliberately unequal (13 Kazakh, 4 Russian, 4 Turkish, and 5 English texts). They constitute purposive analytical strata rather than statistically comparable samples. Searches combined equivalents of "Russian migrants/relocants," "mobilization," "Kazakhstan," "rent/housing," "work/business," "IIN/residence," and "return" in each language; items were then screened against the stated inclusion criteria. The analysis compares how frames function within each language-public, but it does not infer the prevalence of frames in the entire media systems from 26 texts.

This focus creates an important boundary. Because inclusion required a developed socioeconomic dimension, the corpus may underrepresent coverage devoted primarily to nationalism, security, antiwar politics, or explicit xenophobia. Absence from the sample is therefore treated as a finding about this selected discursive field, not proof that hostility was absent from Kazakhstani public debate. To test rather than conceal this limitation, the analysis coded explicit hostility, security concern, distancing labels, local-displacement claims, and apparently neutral administrative language as possible registers of boundary-making.

The multilingual structure of the corpus is analytically central to the study. Kazakh-language media were included in order to capture host-society perspectives and locally grounded narratives of housing pressure, public discomfort, bureaucratic accommodation, and everyday urban change. Russian-language texts were used to trace migrant-facing and Russian-speaking regional interpretations, particularly those centered on legality, adaptation, professional continuity, and practical incorporation. Turkish-language coverage was included because it offered a regionally proximate but externally positioned Eurasian perspective, often framing Russian migration through the language of economic repositioning, mobility regulation, and regional opportunity. English-language reporting made it possible to examine how international and transnational media narrated Kazakhstan and Central Asia as sites of wartime relocation, economic transformation, and selective migrant incorporation. Taken together, these four language groups make it possible to examine not only differences in media tone, but also deeper variation in how migration was rendered socioeconomically meaningful across overlapping yet nonidentical media publics.

Texts were included in the corpus if they met four analytical conditions. First, they had to address Russian migration related directly or indirectly to the war in Ukraine after 2022. Second, they had to contain a clearly identifiable social or economic dimension, rather than focusing solely on military or geopolitical developments. Third, each text

had to engage at least one of the substantive themes that became central to the study: housing and rent inflation, prices and urban pressure, employment and labor-market effects, business relocation and entrepreneurship, documentation and legal-economic incorporation, social reception and everyday adaptation, or longer-term settlement and return migration. Fourth, only journalistic materials with a sufficiently developed narrative or interpretive structure were included, such as news reports, analytical features, and extended explanatory articles. This selection logic ensured that the dataset was appropriate for frame-oriented qualitative analysis, rather than simple event tracking or topical classification.

The corpus was assembled through purposive comparative sampling. The objective was not to maximize the number of texts, but to achieve analytical saturation across the four linguistic media environments. In practice, this meant selecting materials until the same socioeconomic interpretive patterns began to recur with sufficient consistency across languages and outlets. The resulting corpus is therefore intentionally compact but analytically dense: it is designed to reveal how migration was framed, valued, and hierarchized in media discourse, rather than to measure the volume of coverage or the frequency of isolated lexical items. This approach is especially appropriate for a study whose central concern is the comparative structure of mediated meaning rather than media frequency as such.

The analysis proceeded through iterative close reading and frame-based coding. In the first stage, all texts were read in full and manually organized according to recurring socioeconomic problem definitions, narrative emphases, and actor positioning. Particular attention was paid to whether Russian wartime migrants were represented primarily as burdens on housing and urban infrastructure, as economically useful arrivals, as administratively incorporable subjects, as socially stratified actors, or as temporary and unstable movers. In the second stage, these recurring narrative patterns were systematically compared across the corpus and consolidated into broader framing categories. This process resulted in five analytically central socioeconomic frames: urban economic pressure; entrepreneurial and labor opportunity; legal-economic incorporation; social stratification and unequal incorporation; and adaptation, settlement, and return. These categories were not imposed as fixed variables in advance, but emerged through repeated cross-linguistic comparison and thematic stabilization across the dataset.

Particular methodological attention was given to the problem of cross-linguistic comparability. Because the study works across Kazakh, Russian, Turkish, and English media, the analysis did not rely on literal lexical equivalence alone. Instead, frames were identified through their discursive function within each text: how migration was problematized, which actors were centered or backgrounded, what forms of socioeconomic value or disruption were emphasized, and what kinds of future trajectories were made visible. This made it possible to identify functionally similar frames across different linguistic contexts even where vocabulary, tone, or journalistic style differed. Such an approach is essential for multilingual comparative media analysis, since the same migration episode may be narrated through distinct semantic registers while still reproducing comparable underlying evaluative structures.

The analytical goal of the study was therefore not to count how often particular migration-related terms appeared, but to reconstruct how Russian wartime migration

was made socioeconomically legible across media discourse. More specifically, the analysis examines how journalistic texts transformed migration into a set of intelligible public questions: whether migrants represented economic pressure or opportunity, whether they could be incorporated into local legal and institutional systems, whether their presence was perceived as socially legitimate, and whether migration itself was narrated as temporary, transitional, or potentially durable. In this way, the methodological strategy is directly aligned with the article's broader theoretical argument: that Russian wartime migration was constituted in media discourse not simply as a demographic development, but as a multilingual mediated socioeconomic event whose meaning varied across different communicative environments.

The study has four limitations. First, purposive sampling supports analytical comparison but not frequency estimates for whole language media systems. Second, the unequal language strata reflect source availability and the host-society focus; claims concern patterned emphases, not population-level differences. Third, media texts cannot establish migrants' actual demographic composition, motives, economic effects, or attitudes, and official entry data cannot be equated with unique or settled migrants. Fourth, a socioeconomic inclusion rule may undercapture explicitly nationalist, xenophobic, or security-centered reporting. The findings therefore concern how a bounded corpus made migration legible, while broader political and audience effects remain questions for further research.

The study is based exclusively on publicly available journalistic materials and does not involve human participants or personal data. All sources are cited and referenced in accordance with academic standards.

Results

Across the corpus, these socioeconomic frames did not operate simply as thematic labels, but as journalistic interpretive devices through which migration was made publicly understandable, evaluable, and narratively consequential.

Migration as urban economic pressure

Across the multilingual corpus, one of the most consistent findings was the representation of Russian wartime migration as a source of urban economic pressure, especially in relation to housing, rent inflation, public services, and the everyday affordability of city life. This frame appeared most explicitly in Kazakh- and English-language coverage, but it was also present in Turkish and Russian reporting.

Kazakh-language media frequently framed the postmobilization influx through domestic strain and unequal access. Abai.kz's headline asked why officials were "showing so much care for the fugitives," while Qazaq Adebieti called the newcomers "involuntary migrants" amid domestic controversy (Abai.kz, 2022; Suleimen, 2022). These labels do not amount to a uniform xenophobic discourse, but they make moral distance and resentment visible rather than absent.

English-language reporting supplied more concrete human and economic stakes. Reuters reported that accommodation was full and rents had "skyrocketed"; one

Almaty lecturer described being forced to move after a 42% rent increase (Auyezov and Gordeyeva, 2022). The report also quoted the Kazakh concern that the newcomers might become an economic burden or security risk. Thus, housing pressure was simultaneously a market story and a boundary-making story.

Turkish-language media also registered this pressure, although usually in a more regional and policy-oriented tone. Anadolu Ajansı directly connected the arrival of Russian citizens to sharp increases in rental prices and emphasized that obtaining identification numbers, opening bank accounts, and securing housing had become central issues for new arrivals (Kussainova, 2022). Euronews Türkçe similarly linked the scale of Russian arrivals to inflation and public concern, presenting Kazakhstan's later tightening of stay rules as partly a response to these pressures (Euronews, 2023).

Russian-language materials framed the same phenomenon in a somewhat more pragmatic way. Rather than centering local resentment, they more often described rising costs, legal complications, and reduced comfort as practical obstacles for migrants themselves. For example, Russian-language reporting discussed the increase in real estate prices, the tightening of migration rules, and the growing difficulty of maintaining long-term residence without formal documentation (Fontanka.ru, 2024). Taken together, these findings show that the multilingual corpus consistently constructed Russian wartime migration as a process that materially transformed urban life, even though the tone of this transformation varied by linguistic and media context.

Migration as an entrepreneurial and labor opportunity

A second major pattern in the corpus was the representation of Russian wartime migration not as a burden alone, but as a form of economic opportunity, particularly through narratives of entrepreneurship, skilled labor, business relocation, and consumer demand. This frame was especially visible in English- and Turkish-language materials, but it also appeared in Kazakh and Russian reporting.

English-language coverage most clearly articulated this opportunity frame. Deutsche Welle discussed Kazakhstan's attempt to position itself as a regional destination for foreign firms and mobile capital after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, highlighting claims that companies leaving Russia had relocated offices or production to Kazakhstan (Sorokin, 2023). The Times of Central Asia later expanded this narrative by describing the arrival of Russian migrants as contributing to the recovery of small and medium-sized businesses, the growth of service industries, and the expansion of information technology (IT) and startup ecosystems, particularly through Astana Hub and relocated professionals working in technology, consulting, and digital services (Klevtsov, 2025). The same source also linked Russian relocants to increased domestic demand, consumer spending, and the strengthening of Kazakhstan's urban service economy (Klevtsov, 2025).

Turkish-language media presented a closely related but somewhat broader regional version of this narrative. Euronews Türkçe framed the movement of Russian capital and professionals into Central Asia as part of a wider pattern of postwar regional economic growth, emphasizing rising consumption, business formation, and the role of Russian migration in reshaping urban economies (Askew and Baniya, 2023). In

this framing, Kazakhstan appeared less as a site of social tension and more as a regional beneficiary of economic redirection. Turkish reporting thus often narrated migration through the language of economic dynamism, market adjustment, and new opportunity structures.

Kazakh-language materials were more ambivalent. Some articles acknowledged the positive economic effects of migration, especially in relation to capital inflow and spending. For example, one article argued that Russians fleeing mobilization had brought significant financial resources into neighboring countries (Ädilbekuly, 2022), while another presented expert commentary suggesting that the mass arrival of Russians could produce certain benefits for Kazakhstan (Stan.kz, 2022). Yet, these opportunity narratives were usually tempered by concern about uneven distribution and local strain. In other words, Kazakh-language media rarely presented economic gain as an uncomplicated public good.

Russian-language materials also reflected this frame, particularly in relation to relocation and professional continuity. Coverage referred to the transfer of companies, the ability of Russian professionals to continue working remotely or within relocated firms, and the practical use of Kazakhstan as a platform for economic survival and adaptation (Current Time, 2022; Weiskopf, 2022). Across the corpus, then, migration was repeatedly represented not only as a humanitarian or demographic phenomenon, but as a source of human capital, business mobility, and urban economic restructuring.

Migration as legal-economic incorporation

A third major finding concerned the framing of migration through the lens of documentation, legal status, institutional access, and formal incorporation into everyday economic life. Across all four language groups, media texts repeatedly emphasized that Russian wartime migrants could not become economically legible or socially stable without first passing through administrative systems such as individual identification number (IIN) registration, work legalization, residence permits, banking access, and citizenship pathways.

This frame was especially prominent in Kazakh- and Turkish-language media. Several Kazakh articles emphasized the practical and symbolic significance of obtaining an IIN (Kazakh: жеке сәйкестендіру нөмірі, JSN), describing it as a gateway to formal participation in Kazakhstani social and economic life (Baqyt, 2022). Other Kazakh sources focused on longer-term legal incorporation through temporary residence, citizenship acquisition, and migration regularization, particularly in relation to Russian relocants who had moved beyond emergency entry and toward institutional settlement (Juniskhan, 2023; Ostemir, 2024). In these texts, legal-economic incorporation was not treated as a bureaucratic side issue, but as a central part of how migrants became visible, countable, and governable.

Turkish-language coverage presented this process in similarly concrete terms. Anadolu Ajansı reported on Russian citizens waiting in long lines in Kazakhstan to obtain identification numbers and described these numbers as necessary for opening bank accounts, renting housing, and navigating everyday life (Kussainova, 2022). Euronews

Türkçe and CNN Türk later highlighted Kazakhstan's abolition of the so-called "visa run" regime, framing the tightening of stay regulations as a shift from ad hoc reception to more formal migration governance (CNN Türk, 2023; Euronews, 2023). In these texts, legal regulation was represented not simply as border control, but as an effort to manage the economic and social consequences of prolonged Russian presence.

Russian-language materials also gave substantial attention to this dimension. Reporting in Russian repeatedly returned to the practical realities of registration, staying legally, finding employment, and adapting to a migration regime that had become more formalized over time (Weiskopf, 2022; Fontanka.ru, 2024). English-language sources later confirmed this pattern, especially in retrospective analyses that described how the closure of legal loopholes had pushed many relocants to formalize their status through work contracts, residence permits, or business registration (Haidar, 2025; Klevtsov, 2025).

What emerges across the corpus is a consistent narrative in which legal incorporation functions as a form of economic translation: migrants become socially legible not only by being present, but by entering systems of taxation, employment, documentation, housing, and formal residence. In this sense, the media did not represent legal status as a purely juridical issue, but as a central socioeconomic condition of migrant presence.

Migration as social stratification and unequal incorporation

A fourth major pattern in the corpus was the representation of Russian wartime migrants through a lens of social hierarchy, class visibility, and unequal incorporation. Although not always expressed through explicit sociological language, many texts across the four language groups implicitly or directly framed Russian migrants as a socially differentiated population—not simply as displaced people, but as people with particular levels of mobility, education, purchasing power, and urban cultural capital.

This frame was especially developed in English-language analytical reporting. The Times of Central Asia described many relocants as belonging to the urban middle or upper-middle class and connected their arrival to increased demand for higher-end housing, consumer services, coworking spaces, and cosmopolitan urban amenities (Haidar, 2025; Klevtsov, 2025). One article described this transformation through what it called the "cappuccino effect," linking the arrival of solvent, mobile, urban professionals to changing service standards, intensified market competition, and new forms of gentrified consumption (Klevtsov, 2025). These texts positioned Russian wartime migrants not as universally vulnerable, but as a population whose class profile shaped how their presence was interpreted.

Kazakh-language media reflected this same differentiation more ambivalently. On the one hand, some texts presented Russian arrivals as financially capable, professionally mobile, or institutionally privileged, especially in relation to their ability to quickly obtain documents, secure housing, and access services (Ädilbekuly, 2022; Baqyt, 2022). On the other hand, this visibility also generated local concern. Critical and commentary-style Kazakh materials sometimes implied that Russians were being accommodated faster than local citizens or were exerting disproportionate pressure on already unequal urban

systems (Abai.kz, 2022; Suleimen, 2022). In this framing, migration was not simply about newcomers arriving, but about who was perceived to gain access, space, and institutional flexibility.

Russian-language materials often normalized this classed mobility rather than explicitly problematizing it. Coverage tended to foreground educated, mobile, urban professionals seeking continuity, legality, and stability rather than social marginality (Current Time, 2022; Weiskopf, 2022). Turkish-language media also frequently implied selective incorporation by emphasizing Russian professionals, business actors, and economically active movers rather than precarious or impoverished migrant populations (Askew and Baniya, 2023).

Across the corpus, then, Russian wartime migration was repeatedly narrated through uneven social positioning. Migrants were not represented as a homogeneous group, and the media often implicitly distinguished between those who could convert mobility into opportunity and those for whom movement remained unstable or temporary. This finding is especially important because it shows that socioeconomic narratives in the media were deeply structured by assumptions about class, usefulness, and urban belonging.

Migration as adaptation, settlement, and return

The fifth pattern concerned whether mobility was temporary, transitional, or durable. "Return" was not a nonissue: it was difficult to measure because border entries, formal registration, onward movement, and permanent residence captured different populations. The October 2022 comparison of more than 200,000 entries with roughly 147,000 departures already showed rapid circulation rather than straightforward settlement (Auyezov and Gordeyeva, 2022). Later, corpus items shifted from emergency reception to asking who remained, formalized status, moved onward, or returned.

In the earliest wave of coverage, especially in Kazakh-, Russian-, and English-language texts from late 2022, migration was largely represented as an urgent and uncertain movement triggered by mobilization. Media attention centered on border crossings, immediate shelter, short-term safety, and emergency reception (Weiskopf, 2022; Qalenova, 2022; Reuters, 2022). However, later texts increasingly asked a different question: not simply why people had arrived, but who was staying, who was leaving, and what kind of life was becoming possible in Kazakhstan.

English-language reporting provided the clearest articulation of this shift. Haidar (2025) described how many migrants had initially treated Kazakhstan as a temporary refuge, only for some to later return to Russia while others sought employment, documentation, and more stable forms of residence. Klevtsov (2025) similarly argued that by 2024–2025 the spontaneous shock of migration had given way to a process of filtering and stabilization, in which those who remained were more likely to have formalized their status, integrated economically, and begun to establish longer-term urban routines. These texts also linked permanence to measurable indicators such as residence permits, business registration, mortgages, school enrollment, and labor integration.

Kazakh-language materials similarly reflected a transition from emergency inflow to questions of citizenship, demographic continuity, and settlement (Oribai, 2024;

Ostemir, 2024; Ulysmedia, 2024). Russian-language reporting also tracked the decline in the number of those who remained and framed return migration as a meaningful part of the broader story (Fontanka.ru, 2024). Turkish-language coverage, meanwhile, tended to represent the same process through policy change, especially through tightened stay regulations and the closure of temporary legal loopholes (CNN Türk, 2023; Euronews, 2023).

Across the corpus, migration was therefore not narrated as a single static event. Instead, it was represented as a dynamic socioeconomic trajectory involving movement, pause, formalization, selective integration, and possible return. This temporal dimension is important because it reveals that the media did not simply construct Russian wartime migration as a crisis of arrival, but increasingly as a question of what kinds of urban, economic, and social futures these migrants might inhabit—or fail to inhabit—within Kazakhstan and the wider region.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Russian wartime migration to Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region was not represented in multilingual media as a uniform humanitarian episode, but rather as a socioeconomically differentiated and unequally legitimized process. Across the corpus, migration was repeatedly framed through overlapping narratives of housing pressure, labor-market utility, legal incorporation, classed mobility, and temporal instability. What emerges from these patterns is not simply a set of competing media descriptions, but a broader discursive structure through which migrant presence was made socially intelligible and publicly evaluable. In this sense, the article argues that Russian wartime migration was constituted in media discourse as a multilingual mediated socioeconomic event: a phenomenon whose meaning was not given in advance, but assembled through different linguistic media publics that assigned distinct forms of value, burden, legitimacy, and future possibility to the same movement of people.

From a journalism studies perspective, these findings suggest that news discourse does not merely reflect socioeconomic tensions around migration, but actively organizes them into publicly intelligible categories. Journalism, in this case, worked as a classificatory institution: it translated migrant presence into recognizable narratives of pressure, opportunity, legality, usefulness, and adaptation.

Beyond the humanitarian–security binary: migration as socioeconomic coding

One of the clearest implications of the findings is that Russian wartime migration was only partially framed through the dominant humanitarian and security logics that structure much of the migration literature. Although the earliest moments of coverage occasionally invoked emergency, forced movement, or refuge, these vocabularies did not remain analytically central for long. Instead, across all four language groups, migration was rapidly translated into questions of rent inflation, labor-market participation, business relocation, legal registration, urban strain, and social adjustment. This shift matters

because it reveals that migration in media discourse may be rendered publicly meaningful not only through moralized narratives of suffering or securitized narratives of danger, but also through socioeconomic coding that organizes migrants as actors within systems of value, exchange, and urban transformation.

This finding extends existing research showing that media often frame migration through competing binaries of vulnerability and threat (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Eberl et al., 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). In the present case, however, Russian wartime migrants were frequently represented neither as paradigmatic victims nor as straightforward outsiders. Rather, they appeared as economically legible subjects whose significance was narrated through their effects on housing markets, service economies, administrative systems, and urban infrastructures. Migration was therefore made meaningful not simply through who migrants were, but through what they were perceived to do economically and socially. This suggests that media framing scholarship benefits from moving beyond the humanitarian–security binary toward a broader understanding of how migration is publicly organized through socioeconomic evaluation.

Conditional legitimacy and the socioeconomic structure of deservingness

A second major contribution of the study lies in its demonstration that migrant legitimacy in this case was not distributed evenly, but was structured through a form of conditional socioeconomic legitimacy. Across the corpus, Russian wartime migrants were not represented as uniformly deserving or undeserving. Instead, their legitimacy was repeatedly mediated through assumptions about usefulness, productivity, class position, legal incorporability, and capacity for adaptation. In this respect, the findings resonate with scholarship on deservingness, which has shown that migrants are often evaluated through implicit hierarchies of moral worth, social contribution, and conditional solidarity (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; van Oorschot, 2000). Yet, the present case also pushes that literature further by showing that deservingness here was not primarily organized around vulnerability, persecution, or humanitarian need. It was organized around economic legibility.

Russian wartime migrants became publicly intelligible, and in some cases acceptable, insofar as they could be read as workers, entrepreneurs, consumers, taxpayers, tenants, document holders, or institutionally manageable residents. But the same socioeconomic characteristics that enabled this partial legitimacy also generated friction. Migrants represented as skilled, solvent, and mobile could simultaneously be framed as drivers of rent inflation, urban exclusion, or unequal access to resources. Their social legitimacy was therefore conditional rather than stable: they were acceptable not simply because they had moved under wartime conditions, but insofar as their presence could be translated into socially tolerable and economically governable forms. This is why the article argues that the key question in these media narratives was not only whether Russian migrants belonged, but under what socioeconomic conditions their presence could be made acceptable.

This point is theoretically important because it reveals a form of migration discourse that is neither fully humanitarianized nor fully exclusionary. Instead, it is structured by

what might be called a selective economy of incorporation, in which migrants are granted partial legitimacy through their perceived value, while remaining vulnerable to criticism precisely because that value is unevenly distributed and socially visible. Such a pattern complicates existing models of migration discourse by showing that legitimacy may depend not only on moral narratives of suffering or political narratives of threat, but on the more ambiguous terrain of economic usefulness and urban coexistence.

Classed mobility and unequal incorporation

The findings also demonstrate that class is not a secondary feature of this migration episode, but one of the central axes through which it was made meaningful in media discourse. Russian wartime migrants were frequently represented as educated, urban, professionally mobile, and relatively resourceful actors. This classed visibility mattered because it altered the terms through which migration was interpreted. Rather than being framed primarily through precarity, survival, or humanitarian deprivation, migrants were often narrated through their purchasing power, labor-market relevance, business activity, housing demand, and ability to navigate administrative systems. In this sense, the media repeatedly constructed Russian wartime migration not as undifferentiated displacement, but as a form of classed mobility.

This matters for migration and communication scholarship because it highlights a form of mobility that does not fit neatly within dominant representational models. Much migration research has rightly focused on populations rendered vulnerable through bordering, racialization, exclusion, or legal precarity. In contrast, the present case shows what happens when migration is mediated through relative privilege rather than absolute dispossession. Such migrants are not exempt from instability, but their movement is interpreted differently because it is associated with skills, solvency, and urban adaptability. This class profile does not eliminate exclusion; rather, it reorganizes it. The very characteristics that made Russian wartime migrants legible as economically valuable also made them legible as inflationary, disruptive, or spatially displacing. Media narratives therefore did not simply celebrate mobility capital; they also exposed its uneven consequences for urban life and local inequality.

For this reason, the article argues that Russian wartime migration was represented through a logic of unequal incorporation. Migrants were not excluded in a uniform way, nor were they seamlessly welcomed. Instead, they were differentially incorporated depending on the forms of value they were seen to embody and the forms of pressure they were seen to produce. This helps explain why narratives of opportunity and narratives of resentment were not contradictory but structurally linked: both emerged from the same classed visibility of migrant presence in urban economies. The study therefore contributes to migration-framing scholarship by showing that class is not simply a background variable in media discourse, but an active structuring principle through which migrant legitimacy, visibility, and social friction are organized.

Muted hostility, political sensitivity, and the limits of a socioeconomic corpus

The corpus does not support the claim that Kazakh-language media were free of animosity. Critical headlines, complaints about preferential accommodation, security concerns,

and narratives of local displacement encoded hostility indirectly through housing, legality, and fairness. Reuters' interviews also documented demands for tighter screening and fears about territorial integrity (Auyezov and Gordeyeva, 2022). At the same time, overt ethnic denunciation was not dominant in the selected texts. Cultural and linguistic familiarity, the large established ethnic-Russian population, official commitments to public order, and Kazakhstan's careful relationship with Moscow plausibly encouraged criticism to appear through economic and administrative vocabularies. This is an interpretation of the sampled discourse, not evidence that Russians were simply 'liked' or that xenophobia was absent from the wider public sphere.

This distinction sharpens the article's contribution. Socioeconomic framing can depoliticize conflict by translating geopolitical anxiety into apparently technical questions of rents, identification numbers, jobs, and residence rules. Yet, it can also repoliticize everyday markets by identifying whose mobility raises prices, receives institutional attention, or threatens local access. Neutrality is therefore not the opposite of boundary-making; it may be one of its forms.

The political effects identified here differ from the party-political mobilization associated with anti-immigration movements in parts of Europe, North America, and Australasia. Kazakhstan's corpus shows issue-specific pressures—calls for screening, sovereignty concerns, criticism of accommodation, and tighter residence rules—but it does not provide evidence of a consolidated electoral movement produced by this migration episode. Establishing such an effect would require party discourse, survey, social-media, and audience data beyond the present design.

Multilingual media and the production of divergent public realities

One of the strongest findings of the study is that the same migration episode was not simply described differently across languages, but was constituted as different kinds of socioeconomic reality depending on the media-linguistic environment in which it circulated. Kazakh-language media tended to foreground host-society strain, public discomfort, housing pressure, and everyday local consequences. Russian-language texts more often emphasized practical adaptation, legality, and migrant-facing experience. Turkish-language reporting frequently framed the migration through regional economic repositioning and strategic opportunity. English-language media, in turn, were more likely to narrate the phenomenon through structural transformation, labor-market reconfiguration, and long-term urban-economic change. These differences are not reducible to tone alone. They reflect distinct communicative environments that organize migration around different assumptions about relevance, audience, and public consequence.

This is where the article's concept of migration as a multilingual mediated socioeconomic event becomes especially useful. Drawing on the mediated-construction perspective (Couldry and Hepp, 2017), the findings suggest that migration does not simply move through media as a stable object awaiting description. Rather, it is constituted as publicly meaningful through overlapping but nonidentical processes of linguistic and discursive mediation. The same empirical developments—rising rents, business relocation, IIN registration, labor-market participation, and return migration—were not

simply translated from one language to another. They were reorganized into different public realities. This matters theoretically because it suggests that comparative media analysis should not be limited to comparing "coverage" across outlets, but should instead ask how different media systems produce different social ontologies of the same migration event.

In this respect, the article contributes to international communication scholarship by showing that multilingual comparison is not merely a descriptive extension of migration research, but a theoretical necessity for understanding how transnational mobility becomes publicly meaningful. What appears as social burden in one media environment may appear as economic opportunity in another; what is framed as administrative adaptation in one context may be narrated as geopolitical repositioning in another. The migration event itself is therefore communicatively stratified.

From crisis of arrival to trajectory of incorporation

The temporal dimension of the findings also deserves emphasis. Across the corpus, media representations evolved from a focus on sudden arrival and emergency accommodation toward a more differentiated concern with staying, formalizing, integrating, or returning. This shift is analytically important because it shows that Russian wartime migration was not narrated as a static crisis of entry, but as a socioeconomic trajectory whose meaning changed over time. Initial reporting often centered on border crossings, immediate shelter, and sudden visibility. Later reporting increasingly asked different questions: Who remained? Who left? Who formalized their status? Who entered labor markets, education systems, or housing markets in more durable ways?

This temporal transition helps clarify why legal-economic incorporation became such a central frame in the corpus. Over time, the media increasingly represented migrant presence not as a short-term exception, but as a condition requiring administrative and institutional translation. Registration, documentation, work legality, residence permits, and other bureaucratic mechanisms became crucial not simply because they regulated movement, but because they made longer-term socioeconomic presence governable and legible. In this sense, the findings align with broader migration scholarship that emphasizes mobility as a dynamic process rather than a single act of movement (de Haas, 2021). Yet, the article adds a specifically communicative dimension to this argument by showing how the temporal stabilization of migration is also a mediated process: media discourse participates in transforming migration from a moment of crisis into a question of incorporation, endurance, and future urban coexistence.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Russian wartime migration to Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region was represented in multilingual media not simply as a movement of displaced people, but as a socioeconomically mediated and communicatively stratified migration event. Across Kazakh-, Russian-, Turkish-, and English-language coverage, migration was repeatedly made meaningful through narratives of housing pressure, labor-

market utility, legal incorporation, classed mobility, and temporal uncertainty. What the multilingual corpus reveals, therefore, is not merely variation in tone or emphasis, but a deeper process through which migrant presence was translated into competing public evaluations of burden, usefulness, legitimacy, and belonging.

The findings show that Russian wartime migrants were not framed in a stable or uniform way. Rather, they appeared in media discourse as selectively legible and unequally incorporable actors whose social legitimacy depended less on humanitarian vulnerability than on their perceived economic usefulness, class position, legal governability, and capacity for adaptation. In this sense, the article demonstrates that migration discourse in this case was organized not only through the familiar humanitarian and security logics dominant in migration scholarship, but also through a more differentiated field of socioeconomic coding, in which migrants were evaluated according to how they could be absorbed, tolerated, or contested within local urban and institutional orders.

A central contribution of the study is to show that these socioeconomic meanings were not produced uniformly across media environments. Instead, the same migration episode generated divergent but interconnected public realities depending on linguistic context, outlet orientation, and communicative audience. Kazakh-language media more often foregrounded local strain and everyday social pressure; Russian-language coverage emphasized adaptation, legality, and practical continuity; Turkish-language reporting highlighted regional economic repositioning; and English-language media framed the phenomenon in terms of structural transformation and longer-term urban-economic change. This demonstrates that Russian wartime migration functioned not simply as a transnational mobility process, but as a multilingual mediated socioeconomic event whose meaning was continuously reassembled across overlapping media publics.

ORCID iD

Myrzantay Zhakyp https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2574-4412

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Author biography

Myrzantay Zhakyp is a professor in the Department of Journalism and Social Sciences at Manash Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University. His research focuses on journalism, media history, migration communication, and the multilingual mediation of social change in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.