IDENTITY-BUILDING IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

As a young nation that came into existence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Kazakhstan undergoes a gradual transformation within its demographics. The issue of national identity within what was once an important and well-integrated part of the USSR continues to draw the involvement of its administrative apparatus that has to find the equilibrium between, on one hand, maintaining national integrity through various mechanisms and, on the other, managing the level of external and internal factors that may lead to the fate of its fellow Central-Asian republics.

Keywords: nationalism, populism, Central Asia, statehood, post-Soviet identity

Introduction

The question of Kazakhstan's core identity arose at the end of the Cold War, with the Soviet Union collapsing and a number of newly-independent states appearing in Central Asia. The Republic of Kazakhstan, inheriting a wide array of special traits and issues from its former soviet

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administration, found itself in need of policies that may steer it in a stable direction, a challenge for a young state with a massive surface and a small, heterogeneous population.

Kazakhstan had to devise ways on which it could establish itself as a stable statehood in the immediate years after gaining its independence, and on how to play "the long game" in assuring its economic and political viability and territorial integrity.

The issue of group identity in Kazakhstan has been, however, a troubling one, not only due to the heterogeneity of the ethno-linguistic horizons, but also due to the economic differences between an industrialized North and a rural, traditionalist South. Moreover, an administrative solution to this issue had to be taken under the auspices of an ever-evolving oil and gas market, to which Kazakhstan is inextricably linked.

In order to understand Kazakhstan's statehood and identity issues, one must first understand the traditional means of nation-building and to decide on whether or not the conventional models apply to it. Moreover, once the compatibility of models is established, we can determine the reasons that stand behind the similarities and the differences, eventually comprehending its evolutional pattern.

Given the fact that we analyse the topic of nation-building and group identity, it is worth reviewing the manifestation of nationalism in Kazakhstani society, determine the dimension of social friction and which role does the political element play in the evolution of this phenomenon.

An overview of traditional nation-building and identity groups

Nationalism and populism are flexible concepts that can manifest themselves differently, in accordance with the environment in which such phenomena appear. Oftentimes, they go hand-in-hand, particularly in the case of societies in which political stability may have certain degrees of volatility. They do not characterize a specific type of society, as the phenomena can manifest themselves in a multitude of environments, under the influence of a large array of factors. Within territories that have gained independence or have underwent regime changes, but face economic hardship and potential political instability, these phenomena are often encountered, and just as often exploited for one purpose or another.

Nationalism and populism are enabled by the manifestation of group identity.[1] Both concepts reflect the existence of an acknowledged conflict and the need of assuring an identity-oriented positive outcome can come out of it. Group identity's primary goal is that of surviving, with nationalistic societies being keen on securing their survival with a minimized disposition for compromise. Conservative in their nature and their purpose, nationalistic societies tend to display more orthodoxy to their cause, leaving little room for interpretation, least they might see the framework of their social construct bend and break.[2] Populism, just as the name implies, requires the participation of a larger portion of society, "the people"[3], in the political process, but does so outside the regulation imposed by political mechanisms, or those of statehood. Populism is often an agitative tactic of drawing an increased number of participants in the unfolding of a conflict, and can be employed for its capacity of stimulating nationalism.[4]

This reality can be easily explained through the analysis of basic human psychology, as society itself is a manifestation of the collective human psyche: we are social beings, exhibiting group mentalities which, in order to function, require specific behaviours. Affiliation, as part of human behaviour, is structural, and ranges from family ties, to greater group associations through a variety of means (language, culture, shared natural environment, mutual interests etc.). Thus, one of the first social traits we inherit is group affiliation, which can either expand or contract in accordance with events that transpire throughout our natural lives. And, just as the notion of affiliation is structural, so is that of society, as the direct result of the former. Social evolution, an aspect that today we are able stratify, represents the timeline of human development, ranging from the early forms of association as the hunter-gatherer pack, up to the current forms of association into supranational political entities that tend to dominate the socio-economic landscape, starting with the 20th century. All these aspects,

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[1] Sergiu Mișcoiu, "De la populism la neopopulism? Câteva repere empirice pentru o delimitare conceptuală", in Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu, Sorina Soare (eds.), *Populismul contemporan*: Iași: Institutul European, 2012, p. 28

[2] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 360

[3] Chantal Delsol, "Idiotul comun al populismului" in Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu, Sorina Soare (eds.), *op. cit*, pp. 55-56

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 147-149

ranging from the basic biological traits and going to the more complex social behaviours that enabled us to form cultures based on language, traditions, customs and interpretation of our existence, are fragments that, summed-up, construct our group identity.

Thus, we could state that, by putting socio-political entities under the magnifying glass, we can determine the catalyst that lead to the formation of their group identity, how it evolved and how it might continue to evolve. Group identity, as the fundamental binder of a society, took multiple forms throughout recorded human history, being essentially based on the relation between our need for natural resources and our capabilities of attaining them. Therefore, one could interpret that the root of societal evolution and conflict is, in a way, group identity itself. As the reality that rests behind every *casus beli* is the necessity of assuring the survival of one society or another, and, by association, of group identity, the sense of belonging has taken multiple forms, as the human population grew, evolved technologically and devised new ways of conducting its administrative affairs.[5] Out of the forms of association that became pillars of group identity, we will mention those that became milestones in our understanding of the concept, such as kinship (association based on area of origin and familial ties),[6] confession (association based on one's religious confession, that transcended kinship), nationality (determined by common languages, shared history and living space) and allegiance (vassal-like allegiance, transcending kinship, confession, and nationality).[7]

In our current times, we can observe that kinship and confession continue to maintain a certain amount influence, albeit on a significantly smaller scale when compared to the influence they've held in the past. At the same time, it is important to understand that, while we all share a common living space given the circumstances of the gradual and lengthy globalization process, from a regional point of view societies have not recorded their progress in a symmetric manner, a reason for which even today we can clearly talk about different levels of social development. The

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[5] David A. Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 10 - 15

[6] Pierre L. Van de Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*, Wesport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1987, pp. 15-22

[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28

traditional allegiance-based group identity has been rendered obsolete once hegemonic relations transformed in the wake of the rise of nation-states, with expansive empires collapsing under internal and external pressure. Indeed, we can interpret federative systems such as the USA or supranational bodies such as the EU as allegiance-based identity groups, as their constituents, while of diverse individual backgrounds, share sufficient common traits and objectives to acknowledge and accept various degrees of centralization and authority. Yet, as opposed to the traditional allegiance-born group identity, its modern counterpart is not reliant on responsibilities taken upon by means of spoken word (fealty), but rather by a clearly-defined array of rights and responsibilities, embodied in a legally-binding contract. Ultimately, it is still the concept of nation-state that continues to characterize most of the inhabited world and shape the general state of affairs.

Interaction between different identity groups resulted in a relation dictated by dominance and absorption. Political realism considers that the first and foremost objective of an identity group is that of maintaining its existence – in other words, to survive. This necessity prompts dominating identity groups to exert influence over those with which contact leads to conflict, whose complexity increases proportionally to the complexity of the involved social groups (mainly dictated by societal needs and technological capabilities). Conflict, either dictated by rules or devoid of them, generates various degrees of entropy throughout the social environment, a condition that cannot perpetuate by itself. Therefore, the rational outcome of conflict is the formation of order, which upon completion marks the assertion of hegemonic influence. In itself, the extension of a hegemonic force induces a process of social evolution, which can take effect over the political, economic and social life on an identity group. As a rule, hegemons will seek transformation within dominated entities for the sake of administrative efficiency and control over potential risk factors. There is no universal model over how the relation between a hegemon and a dominated identity group transpires, as oftentimes throughout history we have observed how hegemonic powers have managed to bring areas into submission, only to find itself gradually absorbed due to a lack of cultural or linguistic dominance. A good example of the before-mentioned situation can be observed during the

migration of the nomadic Turks (Pechenegs, Cumans, Seljuks etc.) or during the fragmentation of the Mongol Empire.[8]

Post-imperial forms of hegemony, however, tend to be characterized by a much more effective approach to territorial domination, as it employs the use of increasingly efficient means of conducting social engineering. This is, to a large extent, owed to the changes that occurred in societal structure throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, changes which have crippled the administrative capabilities of the traditional empires and lead to their eventual collapse.

The modern notion of the nation-state had been gradually built initially throughout Europe, as traditional social binders began to erode and social clustering suffered transformations brought about by technological and administrative progress.[9] Ethnicity and common cultural values remained at the core of the rise of nationalism throughout Europe, but so did the valid need for different methods of centralization and standardization, particularly so in areas where populations have been traditionally structured in multi-ethnic horizons.[10]

The Peace of Westphalia marked one of the most important steps in the evolution of what we regard today as group identity, having managed to underline the importance of balance of power between the empires of Europe and the sectarian violence that characterized the troubling events of the 30 Years War (1618 – 1648). The decline of confession-based allegiance within western Christianity reshaped the way in which territoriality and group identity functioned, leading to an evolution and an increased concentration in matters of social cohesion. The trials and tribulations that nation-states faced in the face of social progress gradually shaped the manner in which the nation-state maintained viable forms of existence. The two world wars heralded the fall of the conventional hegemony and imperialistic methods of the Old World, with colonialism coming to a more or less abrupt end. This wasn't, per se, the sole manifestation of independent

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[8] Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central* Asia, (N. Walford, Trans.), New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970, pp. 321-323.

[9] Sergiu Mișcoiu, *Formarea Națiunii în Europa: O teorie socio-constructivistă*, Cluj-Napocoa: EFES, 2006, p. 26

[10] Alexander Wendt, *op. cit*, p. 210

statehood at the core of the decolonizing struggle, but a collection of factors that gradually lead to the way in which today's nations present themselves.[11]

The dramatic societal changes experienced throughout what is generally known as the Western World can be interpreted as a result of its technological progress, gaining the upper hand in overall development when compared to the other regions of the globe.[12] The newly-founded balance of power enabled the major European actors to enable more proper levels of centralization, with conflict being mostly limited to their peripheral territories. Centralization increased the overall effectiveness of administration, which gave central authorities the tools of conducting social engineering and standardization throughout their areas of jurisdiction.[13]

Moreover, as education became a basic human right, it hastened the process of social cohesion, creating environments in which theoretical notions could materialize. Education, as a tool of social engineering, has the benefit of shaping local mentalities, its stand-alone purpose being that o broadening the knowledge and the skills of its beneficiaries, with one of its long term effects being that of increasing social cohesion through standardization, even in matters of linguistics. Prior to the implementation of compulsory education in multicultural societies, a *lingua franca* was generally adopted by the broader society by means of spoken word and direct social interaction, but it had the downside of being a generally lengthy and uneven process. Education, however, became an important social binder as it was made compulsory and basic human right, having the ability of overcoming societal barriers and boosting interaction between communities.[14]

As previously-stated, decolonization was, at its core, the struggle to overthrow the hegemonic power that certain political entities held over foreign territories, imposing their rule over fundamentally-different identity groups and funnelling important resources into their own economies. Decolonization, at the same time, was the result of a major disturbance in the balance of power that conventional hegemons have held, with the destructive potential of the 20th century's warfare far exceeding the capabilities

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[11] Henry Kissinger, *Ordinea Mondială*, București: RAO, 2015, pp. 27-35

[12] Sergiu Mișcoiu, *op. cit*, p. 58

[13] Alexander Wendt, *op. cit*, pp. 8-10

[14] *Ibidem*, pp. 209-210

of social sustenance. World War I represented the first large conflict in which the evolution of armaments rendered conventional fighting obsolete, the results of which were disastrous. Moreover, it underlined the inability of the traditional westphalian-styled sovereignty to maintain the balance of power between industrialized nations, particularly so in Europe. Lastly, decolonization was a direct manifestation of the large-scale evolution of group identity.

Populism, a phenomenon that became increasingly common in industrialized societies, focused on the general state of inequality that capitalistic practices have rendered within communities. Inequality, however, was not a novelty in human society, as it represented one of the main moving forces behind the formation of nation-states. Yet as traditional power waned and as an array of social binders became obsolete, the issue of group identity was subjected to reformation under different lines. While linguistic arguments and historic investigation continued to strengthen the base of national identity, it could not be estranged form the economic challenges that industrialized societies have experienced. As traditional social binders degraded, the reformation of identity was carried largely on ideological lines, albeit initially in localized, concentrated environments. In itself, *ideology* is defined as a system of ideas and ideals with influence over the economic and political spheres. *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes ideology as a system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it.[15] Industrialization brought with it a population boom, increasing productivity and agricultural output and clustering what continued to be a more or less scattered population. The availability of industrial jobs created a working class which, due to the lack of regulation in matters of living and working standards, faced appalling life standards. The ideologies put into theory in the 19th century proposed potential solutions to the problems that industrialized societies were facing, each with its unique touches that were to adapt them to the specific needs of a specific area. Spread initially in higher society through the academic circles of the time, the idea of forming a society based on ideological allegiances became increasingly popular. Left-leaning ideologies favoured the elimination of traditional ways of asserting identity, instead uniting the

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[15] see Maurice Cranston, "Ideology", as defined in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at https://www.britannica.com/

working class under the banner of socialism, especially relevant in an era in which the importance of social protection and of social services was often disregarded by those in power. At the opposite spectrum, right-leaning ideologies favoured identity politics, engulfing traditional social binders (religion, language, ethnicity) and implementing them in national policy. Populism played an essential role in the popularization and propagation of political ideologies, offering the great mass of people the option of causing bottom-up changes in societies in which the leadership failed to address and solve certain issues.

Left-leaning and right-leaning ideologies have sprouted long before the outbreak of World War I, a process to which a large array of works and personalities from different backgrounds and different lines of thinking have contributed. The events of the war, however, allowed ideologies to gain ground, underlining the obsolete nature of antiquated administration and ways of balancing power.[16] World War I did not solve the issue of power balance, as the collapse of already-established European empires gave rise to a number of states, often with conflicting interests. National interest, in most cases, proved detrimental to maintaining a viable form of peace between nation-states to which the viability of their own statehood took priority. At the same time, within the losing end of the conflicting camps of World War I, irredentism took root, creating a volatile environment in which the aggressiveness of both the winners, as well as the defeated, began to smoulder.

Embodied in the events of World War II, these smouldering issues have violently manifested themselves, rendering efforts of maintaining the status-quo through legal conventions effectively-useless. The inflicted devastation, loss of human life and the eventual liberation and occupation of what were once nations at war represented a decisive blow to identity politics throughout much of the world, with fascist ideologies plummeting in popularity, facing criminalization and their promoters - persecution.

Ideologically-motivated group identity, however, did not fade in intensity or popularity in the post-war world. The political bipolarization of the world that followed the conclusion of World War II was a continuation of conflicting territorial and economic interests fought on the grounds of

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[16] David A. Welch, *op. cit*, pp. 96-97

ideology, with the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) and the United States of America engaged in a struggle for dominance in which would be coined the Cold War (1947-1991). Marking a major transition of power, the Cold War signalled an accelerated change in hegemonic influence. Both the USA, as well as Russia (embodied in the form of the USSR), have not distinguished themselves as traditional global hegemonic powers, in spite of their economic, social and military potential manifested throughout history. The end of World War II, however, brought about the erosion of traditional Western-European hegemony (The United Kingdom, France), and the rise of the American and Russian spheres of influence.[17] The Cold War strengthened the notion of identity created along ideological lines, a notion that, to this day, continues to define much of the developed world and is believed to maintain its relevance, at least for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the struggle between the liberal West and the socialist East has managed to create broad stability through the military potential of symmetrical aggression, with both sides being locked into an uneasy stalemate due to the risk of mutually-assured destruction (abbreviated M.A.D.) through the employment of nuclear arsenals.[18]

Based on this brief overview of how group identity evolved throughout ages in the European and western sphere, we will conduct the analysis of Kazakhstan's evolution in matters of identity and politics, influenced by both internal, as well as external factors.

Kazakhstan's classic culture and identity and their formation

What we know today as the Republic of Kazakhstan is the political entity that occupies a large part of a geographical area known as the Western Steppe. In itself, the Western Steppe is part of the Eurasian Steppe biome, which expands over a large swath of land that ranges from the Danubian lowlands in the West, and stretches in the East, to the historical province of Manchuria. Given the historical connection of the nomadic Kazakh people to the natural environment, the Western Steppe also goes under the name of the Kazakh Steppe.

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[17] Daniel Biro, *Relațiile Internaționale Contemporane*, Iași: Polirom, 2013, p. 20
[18] David A. Welch, *op. cit*, pp. 33-34

Generally-speaking, the steppe environment is rather poor in biodiversity, being deprived, for most of the year, of the necessary quantities of water. Moreover, being geographically located deep within continental surfaces, steppes experience a large degree of thermal discomfort, with temperature differences between summer and winter being one of the defining traits of its excessive continental climate. Throughout the territory of Kazakhstan, the steppe is either bordered or interrupted by cold deserts, particularly in the South and in the East, with the North exhibiting more a lusher climate. Summed-up, the natural environmental conditions are rather inhospitable, and the patterns of cultural evolution throughout this region of the world prove how a lack of essential natural resources can slow down social development.

The steppe, however, in spite of its harsh nature, was never devoid of life, and adapting to a life on the great plains of Eurasia has led to the formation of some of the more unique cultures of the world. Most cultures have established themselves and thrived in conjunction with the practice of agriculture, raising crops and livestock and developing increasingly effective methods of improving social sustenance by manipulating and repurposing natural resources. This also caused visible cultural changes amidst traditionally-agricultural societies, a large role being played by early industrialization and the equilibrium of power between competing imperial structures.

Steppe-inhabiting cultures had been economically-reliant on the process of pastoral nomadism, with the main source of sustenance and livelihood being the semi-interfering exploitation of animal herds, out of which the reliance on horses gave a distinguishing character to these cultural groups. Steppe-inhabiting cultures saw the early domestication of the horse, which in turn granted nomadic tribes a high level of mobility that allowed them to instil control over large areas of grassland that was to be employed for animal grazing. Their reliance on horses has also shaped Central-Asian nomads into a respected and feared armed force, famed for its ability of conducting swift military maneuvers on the battlefield, their reputation being passed through generations and remaining alive in the collective psyche of their former adversaries. But, while their combat prowess had been recognized and respected, the human development within nomadic groups has always been rather lacklustre, given the critical

lack of resources and their frequent infighting over control of the land. Another major aspect that strained development throughout Central Asia was the lack of urbanism and of social cohesion, with permanent settlements being reduced to areas in which microclimatic factors have allowed the establishment of agriculture by means of irrigation, which allowed them to host a sufficiently-large manpower that might repel the raids of the roving nomadic clans.

Nomadic culture is a culture of continuity, its essential economic practices remaining unchanged for a much longer period of time, when compared to their agricultural correspondents. The Turkic migration into Central Asia, a phenomenon that continues to be subjected to heavy debate, commenced sometime around the 5th century, at least by most accounts. A heterogeneous group, the Turkic tribes moved from the Siberian regions of what today is the Russian Federation, following a southern migration pathway, gradually occupying land once dominated by Iranian nomadic populations (Scythians, Sakas), triggering significant in the ethno-linguistic horizons of the region. Culture, however, remained dictated by the predominant economic activity (pastoral nomadism), with Turkic settlers causing little change in the way society provided its livelihood. A major limitation to development was imposed by the lack of domestically-generated technological evolution, Central-Asian societies never experiencing a self-generated phenomenon of industrialization and rarely being able to form a sustainable balance of power between their polities. Identity among the nomadic clans maintained its more primal aspects, with social organization relying heavily on familial ties between the various clans. Social stability often relied on the ability of the leader (known as *khan*) to negotiate and to devise peaceful ways in which its subordinated clans could effectively separate grassland, so as to avoid confrontation and over-competitiveness. Strategic domination over the land was assured by uniting under loose confederations, under the higher authority of a *khagan/gurkhan* (a Great-Khan).[19] For this reason, the general identity of the Turkic tribes of Eurasia was limited, much like in Antiquity, to the nomenclature employed by their neighbouring cultures to describe them.

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[19] Ahmad-Hassan Dani, Vadim Mikhailovich Masson, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia (vol. V) – Development in Contrast: from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century*, Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2003, pp. 91-92

Internally, the looseness of social cohesion and the lack of proper channels of centralization prompted the inhabitants of the steppes to disregard social binders, such as linguistics or cultural similarities, and favour localized allegiances based on blood ties and fealty to local warlords. As it was typical for clannish societies, the social fabric, that in its entirety forms a broad group identity, prioritized the survival of its smallest units (the clans themselves), given the material limitations they've faced. Stability was more characteristic to the southern portion of Central Asia, where, due to its greater economic potential, proximity to the lucrative Silk Road and influence of the much more centralized Persian Empire, sedentary societies could be established and could thrive (such as in the case of the city-states of the Fergana Valley). An exception to the rule came in the form of the Mongol Empire, where the Mongol hegemony and its enforcement of an early form of rule of law brought temporary stability within the occupied regions, only for it to collapse and resume its traditional form in the aftermath of its ensuing civil war and fragmentation.

Group identity build on the framework of religious confession had found disproportionate success throughout Central Asia, having a greater impact in its southern half where central administration was much more commonplace and was already accustomed to institutionalized religion and religious organization. Within northern half of Central Asia, in which nomadism dominated, Islam was gradually adopted, but did not have its dogma properly implemented given the lack of centralization and the uncertainty of jurisdiction over land that seemed to fall under frequent territorial claims. Thus, while Islam may have added to the cause of identity-building in the Western Steppe, it did not reach the point where a code of rules based on Sharia-law could be established, and much of its dogma was eventually amalgamated with the ancestral folk religion (which had been previously amalgamated with Zoroastrian beliefs).[20]

To conclude our analysis over the factors that have prevented nation-building in the Kazakh Steppe, we will enumerate:

- Prioritization of the survival of the clan vs. the survival of the larger identity group. Given the limited access to resources, claims over territory could not be prevented by the establishment of a long-

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[20] *Ibidem*, p. 108

lasting *de jure* administration. Without proper technological advancement and enforcement of a common law, the land would continue to be disputed in localized conflicts;

- The lack of institutionalized religion prevented the formation of a strong confession-based social binder, maintaining the heterogeneous character of the Turkic clans in the northern part of Central Asia;
- Scarce essential resources prevented the formation of fully-fledged permanent settlements, which would enact as hubs of progress and advancement, promote trade and act as administrative seats that would enforce law over its areas of jurisdiction;
- The absence of any consecrated means of social engineering (institutionalized religion, rule of law, education, and centralized rule) prevented peaceful ways of establishing a stable reign over the land. Turkic clans often found themselves at odds with Mongolian-speaking Oirat tribes, a situation that would only be solved through Russian intervention in the affairs of Central Asia.

Absorbed by Russia

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the independent Republic of Kazakhstan emerged, its territory making it the 9th largest state on the surface of the terrestrial globe. While the history and the culture of the Kazakh people carried incontestable weight in the issue of group identity, Kazakhstan inherited a series of traits from its former Soviet administration that raised fears in regards to the legitimacy of Kazakh statehood, as technically, nowhere else in history did Kazakhstan exist as a sovereign nation. Moreover, Kazakhstan's interaction with its northern neighbour did not raise deep concerns over potential interethnic tension following the period of destalinization, with identity-based conflicts being sparse and never gaining sufficient tension so as to degenerate into truly aggravated problems (such as it did in the Caucasus).[21]

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[21] Alexander J. Motyl *et. al*, *Encyclopedia of Nationalism: Leaders, Movements, and Concepts (VOL II)*, London: Academic Press, 2001, p. 80

The population of the Western Steppe has had a long history of friction with the Eastern Slavs, with a long period of Turko-Mongolic hegemony over the Russian and Ukrainian homelands during the time which is remembered as the Tatar-Mongol Yolk (1237-1480). Following the overthrow of Mongol hegemony over the Russian principalities and their unification under the Russian Tsardom, Russia commenced its expansion east of the Ural Mountains, conquering the Khanates of Kazan and of Astrakhan and reaching the borders of the Kazakh Khanate by the 17th century. With relations already soured by the sporadic Kazakh slave-raids conducted in Russian territory, the three Kazakh traditional hordes (the three *zhuz*: Lesser, Middle and Great) have fallen to Russian occupation, with the Great Horde losing its independence in 1820. Russia took deep interest in the agricultural potential of these territories, commencing a process of colonization and carrying significant efforts of settling the nomadic native population. By bringing an end to widespread nomadism, the traditional identity of the Kazakh people suffered radical changes. By having its defining trait disrupted, Central Asian nomadic culture was eventually engulfed in the newly built cultural melting pot, with a significant number of Kazakhs gradually adopting the ways of the colonists and becoming part of Russia's citizenry. The end of nomadism, however, caused famine and discontent among a large portion of the native population, before tensions erupted into turmoil and loss of life at the precipice of World War I. The short-lived Alash Autonomy (1917-1920) represented a brief attempt at gaining independence from Russia and initiating a domestically-generated process of nation-building, but would eventually be supressed by Bolshevik forces and reincorporated into Russian administration.[22]

Soviet authority over the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (KASSR) caused dramatic changes over the land, with the process of colonization continuing, while agricultural collectivization and seizure of graze land caused severe famine and loss of life. At this point, a portion of the population took to fleeing beyond the borders or into more remote areas of Central Asia, with some settling in the mountainous regions of southern Central Asia while others crossed the border to Mongolia and

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[22] Chahryar Adle, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia (Vol. VI): Towards the Contemporary Period*: Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2005, pp. 250-255

China. Under Stalin, the Kazakh Steppe became one of the main destinations for deportees, with entire ethnic populations being moved into labour camps or forced to settle into depopulated regions of the KASSR or of other republics of Central Asia. It is estimated that, prior to World War II, an approximate 1 million Kazakh and Kyrgyz perished as result of early Soviet reforms. The situation would only worsen in the aftermath of World War II, as many deportees and prisoners of war were sentenced to forced labour in the infamous Soviet Gulag system. The settlement of non-native population, combined with the availability of a large pool of labourers saw a period of urban development throughout the resource-rich areas of the KASSR. The republic developed its extraction sector, providing hydrocarbon fuels, uranium and rare earths to the Soviet economy.[23]

Following the death of Stalin, the process of destalinization returned many of the deportees to their original homeland, but did not hinder the multi-ethnic character that the KASSR gained under Soviet administration. At the same time, Kazakhstan's disproportionate development became evident when comparing its northern to its southern half, with a heavily industrialized and urbanized north and a rural, underdeveloped south, save for its capital and largest city of Alma-Ata. Northern Kazakhstan, by being the recipient of the greatest part of the migratory influx, played an increased role in the economy of the Soviet Union. This would only increase under Khrushchev, with even more non-natives settling in the northern areas as part of the Virgin Land Campaign to exploit Kazakhstan's agricultural potential. Compulsory education and its requirement in places of employment made Russian the dominant language, even amongst the natives of the land, many Kazakhs being slowly absorbed into the technocratic working class. Moreover, as education became a basic human right, it hastened the process of social cohesion, creating environments in which theoretical notions could materialize. Education, as a tool of social engineering, has the benefit of shaping local mentalities, its stand-alone purpose being that o broadening the knowledge and the skills of its beneficiaries, with one of its long term effects being that of increasing social cohesion through standardization, even in matters of linguistics. Prior to the implementation of compulsory

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[23] Yelena Petrenko, Elena Vechkinzova, Viktor Antonov, *Transition from the industrial clusters to the smart specialization: a case study*, Lyon: HAL Archives-ouvertes, 2019, pp. 118-120

education in multicultural societies, a *lingua franca* was generally adopted by the broader society by means of spoken word and direct social interaction, but it had the downside of being a generally lengthy and uneven process. Education, however, became an important social binder as it was made compulsory and basic human right, having the ability of overcoming societal barriers and boosting interaction between communities. Thus, if at the beginning of the 20th century, Kazakhs still maintained most aspects of their traditional lifestyle, the new generation, born under the Soviet administration, would retain few distinguishable traits from the general identity created under Moscow's authority.

The southern region, however, had been disregarded given its weaker economic potential, being the target of little investment and never experiencing the social pressure to which the north had been subjected. The lower living standards of the south put it in stark contrast to the northern half, most of its inhabitants living in rural environments and practicing agriculture as their main source of livelihood. Naturally, such communities tended to maintain a much more conservative attitude, Kazakh being widely spoken, as opposed to Russian, religion continuing to play an important role in the behaviour of the community and, given the nature of their economic activity and of the role played by traditional beliefs and societal pressure, families being more numerous.

The final years of the Soviet administration did not spare the KASSR from the general economic strains experienced throughout the USSR. In 1986, First Secretary of the KASSR, Dinmukhamed Kunayev was ousted from his position of power, being succeeded by Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian from outside the KASSR. This triggered the first ethnic tension within Kazakhstan under the Soviet administration in the events known as the Jeltoqsan Riots. What started as outrage over the decision of Moscow soon became a general protest over the poor economic conditions that the population faced in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, events that ended up in tragedy, with around 200 protesters killed and many injured. These events, however, allowed Nursultan Nazarbayev to come to power in 1989, first as leader of the local Communist Party, and eventually as President, his election occurring on the 24th of April 1990.

Under Nazarbayev's administration

Nazarbayev spent most of his political career climbing the hierarchical ladder within the structure of the Communist Party of the KASSR, being deeply acquainted with the mechanisms of power. Born in southern Kazakhstan to a poor family, he had proven to be ambitious from an early age, learning Russian and spending his early adulthood in Central Kazakhstan, working in metallurgy. He joined the Komsomol in 1962, and soon after found employment within the Communist Party. By the early `70s, he was one of the main figures of the Communist Party in the Karaganda region, KASSR`s most industrialized area. Having a good relation with then-leader Kunayev, Nursultan Nazarbayev becomes Prime Minister of the republic in 1984, falling out of Kunvayev`s grace soon after, with a conflict sparking between the two. His voice carried much weight in the ousting of Kunayev.

In 1990, Kazakhstan declares its sovereignty, attaining independence on the 16th of December, 1991. Prior to its declaration of independence, however, Kazakhstan, under the rule of Nursultan Nazarbayev, used its position as a possible precursor to the Soviet Union as leverage in its negotiations with what was soon to become the Russian Federation, a key objective being that of limiting a potential control of Moscow over the rich natural resources of the territory. At the same time, the issue of national identity within Kazakhstan, especially in the northern half, posed a risk of separatism, Nazarbayev fearing that the borders of independent Kazakhstan would not coincide with those of the KASSR. Thus, as negotiations concluded, Kazakhstan would be the last Soviet republic to declare its independence, marking the incontestable dissolution of the USSR.[24]

The question of group identity in Kazakhstan remained an issue for Kazakhstan's new administration. A conclusion that we could draw from our previous statements is that, in spite of the obvious differences between the natives and the "newcomers", the Kazakh people integrated in the grand Soviet project with a rather high level of success, the country exhibiting obvious signs of Russification. The northern areas, in particular, tended to be numerically-dominated by Slavs, with high concentrations of

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[24] Alexander J. Motyl, *op. cit*, pp. 364-365

Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians found in the Karaganda, Pavlodar and Semipalatinsk regions, as well as in more localized settings all throughout the North, North-West and North-East. The authorities deemed it necessary to balance the issue of ethnicity in a sensible manner, so as to avoid criticism by Russia or by any other political entity that might feel threatened by such actions.

Nazarbayev`s political survival, however, required of him to quickly strengthen his position in the state. The early `90s represented a period of instability throughout the former Soviet Union, but also one of newly-found freedom. Glasnost accustomed the population with higher levels of freedom of speech and a more lively interest in the political process. As a result, various elements of private media emerged, with most of them being critical of Nazarbayev's presidency. Moreover, as Kazakhstan`s constitution allowed political pluralism (as stipulated in the 1993 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan), Nazarbayev found himself tasked with directing a flawed state in which ethnic tensions could lead to separatism, while simultaneously having to devise ways in which he could overcome political opposition. As a result, Narazbayev's early presidency was marked by populism, a fact made evident by his frequent attacks over the forms of political opposition. By analysing Nazarbayev's populist behaviour from the perspective of Hawkins` concepts, it is clear that he aimed at bipolarizing the political arena, creating a binary dimension to political conflicts. His discourse painted the opposition as decrepit remnants of a former age, that in spite of he himself hailing from the same political environment prior to 1990. At the same time, he made certain to present his envisioned ways as the only option for any improvement, as a gateway to democracy and to the long-coveted high living standards that the voters were expecting. This trend saw the transformation of Nazarbayev into a patriotic nationalist, a move that gained favour with a large number of voters. As a result, he was re-elected as President of Kazakhstan in December 1991, with 98,7% of the votes, with participation being that of 80%.

The Constitution of 1993 allowed political pluralism, relatively independent juridical bodies, private media, NGOs, protected freedom of speech, of opposition and of criticism. While these rights painted Kazakhstan as a society on its path to a more liberal political and social environment, its results grew up to be a thorn in the side of Nazarbayev and of his political

allies, the president spending the better part of the `90s laying siege to any significant form of opposition. 1995 saw Kazakhstan hosting two referendums, both of which passed:

- The referendum of April 1995, which prolonged Nazarbayev's term to 2000, being justified by a need of economic development and of carefully-devised strategies;
- The referendum of August 1995, which modified the constitution and made Kazakhstan a presidential republic.

Nazarbayev thus gained the power of dissolving the parliament (including for failure to appoint the presidentially-nominated PM), limited the presidency to two terms of 7 years each (reduced to 5 years in 2015), limited the age-limiting threshold for the presidential candidates to 65 and imposed a perfect command of the state language for any potential candidate's eligibility. He would go to win the presidential elections of 1999 (81% of total votes, 87% participation), 2005 (91% of total votes, 76,8% participation), 2011 (95,5% of total votes, 90% participation) and 2015 (97,7% of total votes, 95% participation).[25] He would resign from his position as president on March 19th 2019,[26] allegedly out of health concerns, and would be succeeded by hand-picked Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a career politician that occupied various high posts (Deputy PM and Prime Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Secretary, Chair of the Senate of Kazakhstan).

With his position of power secured, Nazarbayev spent the following years attacking the right to freedom of speech and the independent media, with its most ardent critical media trusts and newspapers facing constant inspections of the Kazakh Anti-Fraud Department (institution lead by his son-in-law, Rakhat Aliev), and, incidentally, mafia-style attack on property and threats of violence.[27]

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[25] Qishloq Ovozi, "Kazakh 'Rerun': A Brief History Of Kazakhstan's Presidential Elections", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 09, 2015

[26] "Kazakh President Nazarbayev Abruptly Resigns, But Will Retain Key Roles", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 19, 2019

[27] Rokhila Madaminova, "Populist Discourse in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Tajikistan" (Master thesis, Central European Universtity, 2017), pp. 28-30

In 1999, his newly-formed party, Otan (Fatherland), over which he presided as chairman, controlled the political scene with impunity, becoming an important mechanism in the future prospects of the president.

By the early 2000, with opposition going underground, Nazarbayev's presidency was left unchallenged, and gradually began exhibiting an array of dictatorial traits. Populist discourse was no longer commonplace, instead turning to heavy patriotism and optimistic outcomes. Unopposed and not risking of being held accountable by legal means, Nazarbayev's policy towards Kazakhstan gradually started to materialize, having deep effect over internal social dynamics. His addresses to the Kazakhstani people became events of national importance, his discourse underlining the obvious shift towards nationalism and the consolidation of a group identity within the territory of Kazakhstan. Such changes were soon felt in every state-related domain, with a high importance being placed on a gradual shift from Russian language-based education and administration to ones in Kazakh, a shift which many in the northern half saw as detrimental to the quality of education and services provided in state institutions. The media and the political sphere was equally affected, as the shift towards Kazakh language left many feeling alienated in their native country, many of which are actual Kazakh ethnics. Moreover, the issue of territorial stability and ethnic horizons prompted the government to prioritize identity policies, incentivizing the northwards migration of poor, less-educated southerners for the sake of balancing the population ratio and of increasing the prevalence of spoken Kazakh throughout the northern regions, eroding the practice of meritocracy. A good example of identity politics in Kazakh state institutions is the promotion of Kazakh-speaking officials for the sake of them being able to speak Kazakh, not out of pragmatic concepts and interests. In matters of education, young adults hailing from the southern regions of Kazakhstan are being motivated to move to the Northern provinces so as to study in state educational institutions, in spite of their poor academic results - a situation made possible by lowering the educational standards of said institutions.

The fear of losing territory to its northern neighbour had also motivated Kazakhstan's administration to strategically move its capital from the largest city of Almaty to Astana (renamed Nur-Sultan in 2018), a move that

saw much of the country's budget being dumped into contemporary architecture and skyscrapers in what most consider to be a soulless city.

Internationally, Nazarbayev sought to promote the image of Kazakhstan by allocating important funds to the state's soft power potential. The government of Kazakhstan, whose economy is heavily dependent of the extraction and export of oil, gas, coal and uranium continues, to this day, to aggressively promote its main products, a successful strategy given the fact that it is among the top 10 petrol exporters in the world. More recently, however, as petrol prices recorded significant downturns, the state budget find itself at odds with the overall needs of its society, in spite of the fact that it extracts and exports more petrol than ever before. The production and service sectors of Kazakhstan are underdeveloped, with a number of enterprises failing to be privatized post-independence and, as the livelihoods of many depend on drawing a salary from working in such enterprises, they are being sustained by the state budget, creating unnecessary losses to a country that struggles to maintain economic balance. Kazakhstan is actively engaging potential foreign investors, and uses its national identity as a method of marketing, of attracting tourists, investment and as consolidating its position as a state. International recognition has made the object of policy for Nazarbayev as he often sought to mediate international conflicts and host talks over disputes. The precarious position of the nation, wedged between a totalitarian and often ruthless China and a competing, unpredictable Russia, did not allow the international openness that he envisioned, Kazakhstan being one of the most expensive countries to export to or to import from.[28] Nevertheless, efforts have been made to befriend western, liberal democracies by promoting some of the key elements of global liberalism. Nazarbayev portrays himself as one of the most outspoken leaders for the cause of non-proliferation and denuclearization of the world, a subject which continues to affect Kazakhstan's relation to Russia given the Soviet experimentation with nuclear weapons in the Semipalatinsk (Semey) polygon, located today on the territory of Kazakhstan.[29] In order to expand Kazakhstan's soft power, its capital hosted EXPO 2017, event dedicated to, among others, denuclearization. Its fulfilment required

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[28] Khushboo Sheth, "20 Most Expensive Countries To Ship Exports From", *WorldAtlas*, April 25, 2017

[29] Alexander J. Motyl, *op. cit*,

significant budgetary sacrifices, with allegations going as far as to the slashing of retirement pension funds, leaving many of Kazakhstan's retirees with less than $100/month for the duration of the project. Slashes in the wages of state employees were felt equally as much. While these allegations have been sporadically addressed in a more or less cryptic fashion, an official statement was never formulated as to deny, nor confirm the cuts in wages and/or monetary welfare.[30] The economic outcome of the grandiose project was, at most, lacklustre.

The search for international recognition has been, so far, a double-edged sword, the Kazakh government managing to build an oscillating reputation. On one hand, Kazakhstan has been the proponent for the creation of a number of international organizations, with the most eloquent example being spearheading the creation of the Eurasian Tradin Block (The Eurasian Union) with most former soviet republics joining it as members. Moreover, Kazakhstan has joined several organizations built on cultural and economic lines, such as the Turkic Council, underlining the increasing soft power of Turkey and the search for more lucrative exporting hubs outside of Central Asia.[31] On the other hand, this attitude drew criticism for a variety of reasons, Nazarbayev's policy coming under fire from a number of western states and organizations due to Kazakhstan's poor record in human rights and the dictatorial behaviour of the leader. Despite being the most prosperous of the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan did not stray too far from the dictatorial model that tends to apply for most former soviet republics, Nazarbayev cultivating a closeted cult of personality in the wake of his victory against internal political opponents and frequent attacks on societal freedoms. Nazarbayev adopted the title of *Elbasy* (Head of the People) and engaged in a campaign of systematic inclusion of personality-related memorabilia and imagery into society, such as renaming main boulevards and infrastructural hubs in his name (avenues, the country's main airport, train stations etc). Multiple institutions bear his name or make reference to it, such as the capital's *Nazarbayev University*, as well as the *Nazarbayev School* chain of private primary and secondary schools established

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[30] "Астана ЭКСПО-2017» опровергла информацию о привлечении средств ЕНПФ" (trans. *Expo-2017 Astana denies information on attracting UAPF funds*), Radio Azattyk (branch of RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty), August 10, 2016

[31] Rokhila Madaminova, *op. cit*, pp. 32-35

throughout the larger cities. Press agencies, as well as the dominant party, adopted *Nur* (meaning *light/brightness* in Kazakh, a loanword from Arabic) as a prefix or as full name, with examples such as Nur-Otan (political party) or Nur.kz (important news outlet). The capital, with much of it being built in accordance to his own preferences, changed its name from Astana to Nur-Sultan in March 2019, in a move that sparked controversy, both internally, as well as abroad, reminding people of the Bolshevik manner in which historically-established toponomastic elements were changed as homage to personalities or ideals of Russia's communists. The capital seeks to impress through the magnanimity of the project, being heavily charged with symbolism and glorifying reminders of the heroic past of Kazakhstan. Some consider Nur-Sultan to be a monument to megalomania, while others see it as Nazarbaye's solution of preventing a possible secession of its northern provinces.[32] Even today, Kazakhstan's main urban landmarks are bearing the "mark" of Nazarbayev's covert cult of personality.

External criticism has received mixed responses on behalf of the Kazakh government, as it tended to avoid the issue when engaging its western peers, yet reacting harshly when confronting its more traditional partners, particularly in the case of Russia. The Kremlin took concern with Nazarbayev's heavy focus on nationalism, signalling an increase in xenophobia and Russophobia within the more conservative Kazakh-speaking communities.[33] At the same time, in spite of the stable economic relation between the two, Russia and Kazakhstan have an on-going dispute over oil-rich areas of the Caspian Sea. The Russian political sphere has not been a stranger to putting Kazakhstan's statehood and claims in question, actions which drew strong responses from Nazarbayev.[34] From a realist's perspective, the sporadic squabbles between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation are tied to their natural competition that arose following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They both draw their main source of income from hydrocarbon reserves, which they extract and export to

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[32] Adrian Blomfield, "Boom time in the city that taste forgot", *The Telegraph*, December 06, 2005

[33] Arslan Sabyrbekov, "Russian and Kazakh Leaders Exchange Worrying Statements", *The Central-Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, September 14, 2014

[34] Anna Dolgov, "Kazakhs Worried After Putin Questions History of Country's Independence", *The Moscow Times*, September 01, 2014

foreign markets. Russia, however, has maintained the upper hand in this competition given Kazakhstan's geographical dependence on its Northern neighbour and on its system of pipelines. Kazakhstan's aims of gaining an increased independence in its trade with the western world have encountered the insurmountable obstacle of geopolitics, rendering it unable of exporting its resources via its southern neighbouring areas given the high level of political instability and the high costs of developing infrastructural projects. A potential solution would rest in the Chinese-lead Belt-and-Road Project which aims at, among other objectives, developing the infrastructure of the southern regions of Central Asia, which may allow Kazakhstan to ease its dependence on Russian pipeline. This however is highly speculative, and the Belt-and-Road initiative has yet to prove its viability. Given the fact that its oil-extracting industry is in its majority located on the Russian border, and the large shares that Russians companies hold in Kazakhstan's petrol market, trade continues and will continue to be done in conjunction with the Russian Federation, and, most likely, on its terms as well.[35]

And, to be fair, such criticism may have fair grounds on which its arguments were founded, as the Kazakh government has been deeply dedicated to the cause of strengthening its soft power. A relatively young nation with a vast history behind it, Kazakhstan displays group mentality, with individuals taking success, as well as shortcomings, as a personal issue. Individuals are actively encouraged to take pride in the achievements attributed to Kazakhstan. As a result, media has been noticed to artificially "Kazakhify" certain aspects of history, exacerbating the role that Turkic – and by association, Kazakh – identity played in the evolution of Kazakhstan. Some of these disservices to history may be forgiven, while others are blatant efforts of promoting an artificially-improved image of Kazakhstan by falsifying or exaggerating elements of local history.[36] A trivial example of this would be the products of Kazakh cinematography, notorious for their nationalistic and identity-related tone. The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with members of the Nazarbayev

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[35] Dina Zhuzbayeva, *Convenția Mării Caspice* (Master thesis, The University of Bucherest), 2019, pp. 56-58

[36] Brigit Brauer, "Rebranding Kazakhstan by Changing its Name", *The Jamestown Foundation: Global Research & Analysis*, Febryary 15, 2014

family as associates, has been deeply involved in the script and direction of its domestic cinematographic creations, at times being the sole source of funding in such ventures. Internationally these creations failed to gather any worthwhile success, but the fact that this practice continues in spite of their lack of popularity strengthens the argument that Kazakhstan's government is pursuing identity politics and is cultivating nationalism within its ethnically-Kazakh population. The main trait of such creations are the focus on ancestral heroism, the focus on Kazakh as the sole spoken language, the demonization of the Soviet Past, the exacerbation – to the verge of being pathetic – of Kazakhstan's traditional values and spiritual bind to the ancestral land.[37]

Nazarbayev has effectively built a masked totalitarian state, being internationally recognized as a soft dictatorship. He supressed dissent not only by modifying legislation in ways that favour those in power, but also by creating a state-system in which those employed require to be members of the dominant party (Nur-Otan) so as to maintain their positions. Vocal opposition may not lead to brutal repression, at least not if it is conducted outside of organized protests, but can be punished through the loss of your job, rendering society crippled in the face of what is obviously an abuse of power.[38] Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan, a project that continues to this day, is a deeply-flawed system in which the collapse of the oil market may lead to a general domino-effect. The issue of identity in Kazakhstan is dictated by the need of strengthening the legitimacy of the statehood, with Kazakhstan displaying a higher level of openness given its need for investment and diversification of the market.

The Kazakh government may find itself at odds with their creation, as the national identity of Kazakhstan and the desired direction in which it was taken is subjected to external hindrances. Russia, a country with which Kazakhstan has often revisited relations, remains the main soft-power exerting entity active in most aspects of Kazakh society. Despite the efforts

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[37] Rico Isaacs, *Film and Identity in Kazakhstan. Soviet and post-Soviet culture in Central Asia*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2018, pp. 11-19

[38] Susan Ariel Aaronson, *Repression, Civil Conflict and Leadership Tenure: A case study of Kazakhstan*, (research paper, as part of the U.S. Army Research Laboratory under grant W911NF-14-1- 0485), Washington D.C: Institute for International Economic Policy, 2017, pp. 15-19

to strengthen the Kazakh character of the country, Russian media remains largely consumed, particularly so by the younger generation. Moreover, it is regarded as a gate to the coveted western world, and, in itself, a destination to the on-going exodus of ethnic Russians and of what still comprises the technocratic class.[39] At the same time, religious identity can prove problematic and conflicting with the economic aspirations of the nation, the government finding itself compelled to intervene in the religious affairs of those that began exhibiting more radicalized versions of Islam. Religious dogmatism, once common mostly in disgruntled grandparents, is more prevalent nowadays, creating a conflicting environment in which the liberal youth finds itself under criticism and threat by its religiously-fundamentalist counterpart. State-seeded nationalism, combined with misguided religious dogmatism creates a volatile environment in which the more progressive, liberal individuals are labelled *mankurts*[40] by those believing themselves to be displaying the true Kazakh identity. The issue of religious dogmatism and fundamentalism prompted Nazarbayev, in one of his addresses to the people, to underline the fact that ultra-orthodox Islam is becoming a concern in Kazakhstan, and vowed to regulate the more problematic aspects of it.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan`s identity-building process, while peculiar, is a tale of artificial interference with the natural patterns along which group identity is being constructed. It proves that social engineering comes with its risks and its benefits. This analysis does not aim to disprove, belittle or to stain the image that Kazakh culture holds and that it tries to promote. It merely serves as an observation over how nation-building use of identity politics has shaped its social dynamics and administration.

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[39] Chachryar Adle, *op. cit*, pp. 598-599

[40] An element of Turkic mythology later popularized through Chinghiz Aitmatov's literary works. It designates those that lose their identity and become subservient to a master. Used post-independence as a pejorative term aimed against Russified, Russophonic and/or Russophile natives.

Kazakhstan's first and foremost interest in that of maintaining its statehood intact, a process that has yielded promising results given the fact that it has achieved a higher level of stability in a region struck with economic and social difficulties. Its proximity and ties to the Russian Federation and its domestic policy has kept the doors open to investment, shaping islands of fledgling liberalism throughout the country. This liberalism, however, is not the result of a direct process of liberalization and transit towards a western-fashioned democracy, but was rather born out of the economic policies that kept the state tied to foreign markets throughout the world. Kazakhstan needs a liberal image in order to gain goodwill from its peers, but by analysing its internal pressures one might see the cracks in the surface. It is rightfully considered a dictatorship, albeit one of the softest dictatorships encountered throughout the former Soviet Union.

A post-Narazbayev Kazakhstan may yet achieve its original goals of establishing a lasting stability through economic diversification and partial shift to a service-based source of income. However, the foreseeable future continues to present the country as a "gas-station nation" in which the welfare state encounters frequent oscillations due to the heavy dependence on the global oil market.

Regarding its identity-building process, it is clear that its history within the Soviet super state had seen the Kazakh Steppes burning through a number of stages that characterize the evolutional patterns of society, with the local economy being "uplifted" by an external hegemon prior to obtaining its independence. Kazakhstan is not considered a former colony in the same sense as the countries of the 3rd world were. The Soviet Union, despite acting in similar ways to imperialistic political entities, conducted lasting social-engineering processes throughout its territory, achieving a noticeable level of assimilation within its economically-significant zones, an aspect that continues to be visible in the more technocratic elements of society. A combination of soft power and employment-related requirements, the Russian language continues to maintain its importance in Kazakhstan, thus assuring that local identities will not evolve in the direction of complete cultural separation. In our opinion, a larger challenge is that of maintaining social equilibrium and harmony while undergoing the process of assimilation in the northern regions so as to avoid the estrangement of

minorities. At the same time, Kazakhstan needs to address its growing brain-drain, a concerning phenomenon that was born largely out of the feeling of estrangement and lack of opportunities. With more than half a million Russian speakers migrating to the Russian Federation in the '90s and their subsequent replacement with Kazakh speakers, the changing social environment and growing discontent among the youth have prompted those coming from higher income backgrounds or those of higher education to seek opportunities abroad, with the main target destination being the Russian Federation or the countries of the European Union.[41]

Future Kazakh governments might find themselves confronting a situation in which identity-building may backfire under the pressure of uncontained nationalism and its hybridization with a more violent, religiously-fundamentalist undertone that will drive the nation further from its western aspirations, simultaneously compromising social equilibrium between the dominant group and the large number of minorities. The same applies in the case of economic challenges and crippling corruption, which saw crime rates increasing and dwindling trust in the state's institutions and their ability of fixing the growing issues. It is clear that Central-Asia, with Kazakhstan as its "poster-child" will open new noteworthy perspectives with time, once the identity-building process will yield clearer results and outcomes. Its current direction leads to heavy centralization and focus on the dominant group, with Kazakhstan's soft power and international image being basically build around ethnocentric elements. It is early to draw conclusions on whether or not ethnocentrism will remain its centralized core identity policy. However, in its current form, Kazakhstan's social policies have promoted a group and disregarded many others, forming a "forgotten" generation of non-natives that does not feel properly represented, regards the paltry measures of representation as inefficient and feels increasingly compelled to seek a more fulfilling life outside the country's borders.

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[41] Madina Zhalil, "The Urgency of Brain Drain in Kazakhstan, *The Qazaq Times*, 15.11.2017

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