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Kazakhstan's National Identity-Building Policy: Soviet Legacy, State Efforts, and Societal Reactions

Aziz Burkhanov†

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to profound changes in ethnicity and identity policies and practices in the newly independent countries, including Kazakhstan. The multiethnic population of Kazakhstan presented an immense challenge for the new regime and its approaches to the identity-building policies. This Article focuses on the identity-building policies of Kazakhstan and offers an overview of the legal framework regulating language use, education, media, citizenship, and official identity policy. This Article also focuses on the implementation of the officially stated policies and explores reasons behind inconsistencies and discrepancies between the declared policies and the de facto situation on the ground. Finally, this Article looks at the societal reactions towards the official identity and language policies expressed in the country's public and media discourse. This Article argues that Kazakhstan's post-independence identity-building process is affected by several important implications, including the legacy of Soviet nationality policy, significant continuity with late-Soviet policies and practices, the search for a new identity, and the regime's aim to prevent political confrontation along ethnic lines by assuring Kazakh hegemony while allowing nominal minority representation.

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Introduction

Studies of the national identity issues in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet Central Asian countries expanded considerably with reactivation of the nation-building processes in these countries after the collapse of the

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Soviet Union. The scholarship mainly concentrated on several important areas, such as “revengeful” and nationalist Kazakhization processes; uneasy relations between Kazakhs and other ethnic groups, especially Russians living in Kazakhstan; the role of intra-Kazakh cleavages, mostly between rural and urban areas; and continuity between Soviet policies and independent Kazakhstan’s approaches to its language situation.¹ In particular, the scholarship covered progressively nationalist domestic policy discourse and statements, which were never explicitly authorized but silently supported.² This new public discourse included new interpretations of historical narratives about the Soviet past and Russian colonial administration,³ as well as manipulations of Kazakhstan’s population census survey data in order to create an image of a more Kazakh-populated version of Kazakhstan than the linguistic and ethnic composition realities would suggest.⁴ The literature also emphasized massive and rapid urbanization of post-independence Kazakhstan which caused significant internal migration flows of young

1. SHIRIN AKINER, *THE FORMATION OF KAZAKH IDENTITY: FROM TRIBE TO NATION-STATE* 80–81 (1995); ROGERS BRUBAKER, *NATIONALISM REFRAMED, NATIONHOOD AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE NEW EUROPE* 47 (1996); PAULINE JONES LUONG, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF CENTRAL ASIA: STATES AND SOCIETIES FROM SOVIET RULE TO INDEPENDENCE* 12 (2003); MARTHA BRILL OLCOTT, *KAZAKHSTAN: UNFULFILLED PROMISE?* 51 (2010); Michele E. Commercio, *The “Pugachev Rebellion” in the Context of Post-Soviet Kazakh Nationalization*, 32 *NATIONALITIES PAPERS* 87, 87–88, 94 (2004); Sally Cummings, *Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan*, 12 *NATIONALISM & ETHNIC POL.* 177, 177, 182 (2006); Bhavna Dave, *Entitlement Through Numbers: Nationality and Language Categories in the First Post-Soviet Census in Kazakhstan*, 10 *NATIONS & NATIONALISM* 439, 439–40 (2004); Saulesh Esenova, *Soviet Nationality, Identity, and Ethnicity in Central Asia: Historic Narratives and Kazakh Ethnic Identity*, 22 *J. MUSLIM MINORITY AFF.* 11, 14 (2002); William Fierman, *Changing Urban Demography and the Prospects of Nationalism in Kazakhstan*, 27 *CANADIAN REV. STUD. NATIONALISM* 7, 7 (2000); Nathan Paul Jones, *“Assembling” A Civic Nation in Kazakhstan: The Nation Building Role of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan*, 4 *CAUCASIAN REV. INT’L AFF.* 159, 165 (2010); Erlan Karin & Andrei Chebotarev, *The Policy of Kazakhization in State and Government Institutions in Kazakhstan*, 51 *MIDDLE E. STUD. SERIES* *1, *1 (2002); Pål Kolstø, *Bipolar Societies?*, in *NATION-BUILDING AND ETHNIC INTEGRATION IN POST-SOVIET SOCIETIES* 15, 30, 39 (Pål Kolstø ed., 1999); Chong Jin Oh, *Diaspora Nationalism: The Case of Ethnic Korean Minority in Kazakhstan and Its Lessons from the Crimean Tatars in Turkey*, 34 *NATIONALITIES PAPERS* 111, 113, 116, 122–23 (2006); Natsuko Oka, *Nationalities Policy in Kazakhstan: Interviewing Political and Cultural Elites*, 51 *MIDDLE E. STUD. SERIES* *1, *2 (2002); Sébastien Peyrouse, *The “Imperial Minority”: An Interpretive Framework of the Russians in Kazakhstan in the 1990s*, 36 *NATIONALITIES PAPERS* 105, 109–10 (2008); Azamat Sarsembayev, *Imagined Communities: Kazakh Nationalism and Kazakification in the 1990s*, 18 *CENT. ASIAN SURV.* 319, 319 (1999); Cengiz Surucu, *Modernity, Nationalism, Resistance: Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan*, 21 *CENT. ASIAN SURV.* 385, 385 (2002); Ingvar Svanberg, *In Search of a Kazakhstani Identity*, 4 *J. AREA STUD.* 113, 120–21 (1994); Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Rob Kevlihan, *State-building, Identity and Nationalism in Kazakhstan: Some Preliminary Thoughts* 3–7 (Ctr. for Int’l Studies, Dublin City Univ. Working Paper in Int’l Studies No. 1, 2011).

2. AKINER, *supra* note 1, at 80; *see* OLCOTT, *supra* note 1, at 58–61; Commercio, *supra* note 1, at 87–88; Cummings, *supra* note 1, at 182–84; Karin & Chebotarev, *supra* note 1, at *1, *2–*3; Oh, *supra* note 1, at 113; Peyrouse, *supra* note 1, at 105, 109–12.

3. Carolyn Kissane, *History Education in Transit: Where to for Kazakhstan?*, 41 *COMP. EDUC.* 45, 51–57 (2005).

4. Dave, *supra* note 1, at 440–43.

ethnic Kazakhs from predominantly Kazakh rural areas into the more diverse and wealthy cities as a primary reason for expanding radical Kazakh nationalism.⁵ Similarly, scholars mentioned that Kazakhstan's government was inclined towards supporting ethnic Kazakh identity instead of trying to develop a more inclusive multicultural civic nationhood of Kazakhstan.⁶ Furthermore, some studies specified that the intellectual and academic polemics in Kazakhstan followed the state discourse and policies and started supporting ethnic Kazakh nationalism through the officially approved school history narratives.⁷ These were oftentimes based on Kazakh intra-ethnic tribal affiliations and genealogies.⁸ In terms of timeline, the scholarship distinguishes stages of more explicit Kazakh nationalism in the early to mid-1990s, with a gradual political mobilization, albeit limited, of the ethnic Russians.⁹ Others claim that, in contrast, Kazakh nationalist groups have criticized the government's policies because in their view they are inconsistent and not nationalist enough.¹⁰

Language policy in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is another important issue illustrating the dynamics of the national identity situation in the country. Here, the scholarship touches upon the usage and legal status of the Russian language and its role as an important communication tool in Kazakhstan.¹¹ Another important implication is a gradual, although more sporadic than systematic, enforcement of stricter Kazakh language proficiency requirements in the government's office work, in the educational sphere, and in everyday life,¹² and the role of the Kazakh language in reestablishing the sense of Kazakh groupness.¹³

I. Kazakhstan's Official Identity and Language Policies

A. Identity Policy

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the government of Kazakhstan demonstrated its commitment to internationalist rhetoric and friendship of the peoples living in the country. For instance, both of Kazakhstan's post-independence constitutions, adopted in 1993 and 1995 respectively,¹⁴ emphasized the commitment of the state to develop the

5. See, e.g., Fierman, *supra* note 1, at 14–17.

6. See, e.g., Svanberg, *supra* note 1, at 120.

7. Alexander C. Diener, *National Territory and the Reconstruction of History in Kazakhstan*, 43 EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY & ECON. 632, 639–42 (2002).

8. See Esenova, *supra* note 1, at 21–24.

9. See, e.g., Sarsembayev, *supra* note 1, at 332, 334–37.

10. Oka, *supra* note 1, at *1, *7–*9.

11. William Fierman, *Language and Identity in Kazakhstan: Formulations in Policy Documents 1987–1997*, 31 COMMUNIST & POST-COMMUNIST STUD. 171, 171 (1998).

12. William Fierman, *Identity, Symbolism and the Politics of Identity in Central Asia*, 61 EUR.-ASIA STUD. 1207, 1218 (2009) [hereinafter Fierman, *Identity*].

13. William Fierman, *Kazakh Language and Prospects for Its Role in Kazakh "Groupness"*, 2 AB IMPERIO 393, 395–98 (2005).

14. KONSTITUTSIYA RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 5 § 1 (1995) (Kaz.); *id.* art. 1.

national cultures and traditions of all ethnic groups living in the country.¹⁵ Within this framework, each of the officially recognized ethnic minority groups possesses a “national-cultural center,” which is usually granted some funding from the state and is overseen by an umbrella agency called the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (“the Assembly”).¹⁶ From a legal point of view, the Assembly has the status of a consultative body in charge of ensuring interethnic harmony “in the process of forming a civic Kazakhstani identity . . . under the consolidating role of the Kazakh people.”¹⁷ After the constitutional amendments of 2007, the political role of the Assembly has increased as nine members of the *Mazhilis*, the lower house of Parliament, are elected by the Assembly.¹⁸ Critics say, however, that the overall political importance and powers of the Assembly and national-cultural centers remain limited.¹⁹ In most cases, these centers are just nominal bodies created to imitate a normal coexistence of diverse ethnic groups rather than actually resolving tensions.²⁰

The Constitution of Kazakhstan declares that human rights are protected by the state and any discrimination on the basis of “origin, social, official, and property status, as well as gender, race, nationality, language, religion, creed, and place of residence” is strictly forbidden.²¹ Discrimination and other violations of human rights on the basis of ethnicity, race, language, and religion are prohibited in both post-1991 versions of Kazakhstan’s Criminal Code, adopted in 1997²² and 2014²³ respectively, and are punishable under the current Code by a fine of up to approximately \$2,000 or a jail term up to seventy-five days.²⁴ On the other hand, the legislation also expressly

15. KONSTITUTSIĀ RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 5 § 1 (1995) (Kaz.); *id.* art. 1.

16. Yves-Marie Davenel, *Cultural Mobilization in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Views from the State and from Non-Titular Nationalities Compared*, 31 CENT. ASIAN SURV. 17, 17, 19–21 (2012). On the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, see generally Akimat of Pavlodar Region, *About Assembly*, PAVLODAR REGION ADMINISTRATION, http://www.pavlodar.gov.kz/page.php?page_id=167&lang=3 [<https://perma.cc/YWF9-2EK5>] (last visited Feb. 5, 2017).

17. Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan ob Assamblee Naroda Kazakhstana [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan] art. 3 (Kaz.).

18. KONSTITUTSIĀ RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 5 § 1 (1995) (Kaz.).

19. Edward A.D. Schatz, *Framing Strategies and Non-Conflict in Multi-Ethnic Kazakhstan*, 6 NATIONALISM & ETHNIC POL. 71, 77–78 (2000); Renat Bytes, *Ekzotika gosudarstvennogo upravleniia ili Kto ofitsial'no postavliaet tabak dlia trubki mira* [Exotic Public Administration Who Officially Delivers Tobacco for “Peace Pipe”], INFORMATSIONNO-ANALITICHESKII TSENTR [INFO. & ANALYTICAL CTR.] (July 17, 2009), <http://ia-centr.ru/expert/5266/> [<https://perma.cc/5NEJ-V7LP>].

20. Schatz, *supra* note 19, at 80, 81; Bytes, *supra* note 19.

21. KONSTITUTSIĀ RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 14 § 2 (1995) (Kaz.).

22. UGOLOVNYI KODEKS RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [UK RK] [Criminal Code] art. 141 (1997) (Kaz.).

23. *Id.* art. 145 § 1.

24. *Id.*

prohibits creating political parties on an ethnic basis.²⁵ In terms of inclusive identity policies, Kazakhstan did not elaborate a clear and cohesive strategy, and it largely relies on Soviet approaches. In accordance with Soviet practices, an individual's ethnic background is still recorded and written on the domestically used national ID cards.²⁶ This institutionalized ethnic identity is usually based on a child's parents' ethnicity or, in the case of mixed marriages, chosen by the child at the age of sixteen.²⁷

B. Language Policy

The language issue remains one of the most sensitive domestic policy issues in Kazakhstan's post-independence administration. Over the course of the Soviet era, especially during the early stages of the era, the Soviet regime established a significant number of Kazakh-medium schools in locations where few previously existed.²⁸ In contrast, during the later stages of Soviet rule the number of schools teaching in Kazakh decreased dramatically.²⁹ Amount and quality of Kazakh language teaching in the Russian schools of Kazakhstan was limited and most students (both Russians and urban Kazakhs) usually graduated with no or very minimal knowledge of Kazakh.³⁰ Furthermore, during the Soviet time, Russian became the language necessary to secure a future successful career;³¹ therefore, most urban Kazakhs were trained in Russian kindergartens, schools, and universities and used Russian as their primary communication tool.³²

The first constitution of Kazakhstan, adopted in 1993, confirmed the state status of Kazakh and established Russian as a language of "interethnic communication."³³ The constitutional treatment of Russian was a clear continuation of the Soviet framework often challenged by the Kazakh nationalists who argued that Kazakh could actually be used as an interethnic

25. *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Politicheskikh Partiiakh* [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Political Parties] art. 5 § 8 (2015) (Kaz.).

26. *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Dokumentakh, Udostoverayushchikh Lichnost* [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Personal Identity Documents] art. 7 § 4 (2014) (Kaz.).

27. *SEMEINYI KODEKS RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN* [SK RK] [Family Code] art. 65 (2011) (Kaz.).

28. See, e.g., GERHARD SIMON, NATIONALISM AND POLICY TOWARD THE NATIONALITIES IN THE SOVIET UNION 81–82 (1991); Juldyz Smagulova, *Language Policies of Kazakhization and Their Influence on Language Attitudes and Use*, 11 INT'L. J. BILINGUAL EDUC. & BILINGUALISM 440, 443 (2008) ("The major outcomes of this period were . . . development of Kazakh as a standard national language to be used in political and educational institutions. Mass education and the policy of nativization played a fundamental role.").

29. Fierman, *Identity*, *supra* note 13, at 406 (2005).

30. William Fierman, *Language and Education in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakh-Medium Instruction in Urban Schools*, 65 RUSS. REV. 98, 105 (2006) [hereinafter Fierman, *Language and Education*].

31. Renata Matuszkiewicz, *The Language Issue in Kazakhstan—Institutionalizing New Ethnic Relations After Independence*, 10 ECON. & ENVTL. STUD. 211, 214 (2010).

32. Fierman, *Language and Education*, *supra* note 30, at 101.

33. *KONSTITUTSIYA RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN* [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] preamble 8 (1993) (Kaz.).

language.³⁴ In 1995, the newly adopted Constitution of Kazakhstan altered this situation and allowed Russian to be used “[i]n state institutions and local self-administrative bodies . . . on equal grounds along with the Kazakh language,” but continued to establish Kazakh as the only state language.³⁵ Such status was further clarified in the Language Law adopted in July 1997, declaring that “[i]t is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language.”³⁶ The Language Law also eliminated the status of Russian as a language of interethnic communication but confirmed the Constitution’s provision allowing it to be used on an equal basis with the state language in state agencies and local self-government organizations.³⁷ The Law established a quota for Kazakh-language broadcasts, commonly referred to as a “50:50” system, according to which Kazakh-language radio and television broadcasts should constitute no less than half the total amount of broadcasted content.³⁸ In practice, however, this new system met resistance from private cable networks, which, while formally complying with these legal requirements, put Russian-language broadcasts on prime time while Kazakh-language broadcasts were usually scheduled late in the night or early morning.³⁹ The enforcement of this rule was also sporadic, and some critics mentioned that the government used this legal framework to silence the opposition media, which operated mostly in the Russian language.⁴⁰

Russian remains in use despite government efforts aimed at promoting the Kazakh language.⁴¹ After independence, the government adopted several concept papers, resolutions, and programs aimed at stricter introduction of Kazakh. These would make the use of Kazakh more widely required. A complete switchover of office paperwork into Kazakh was mandated several times, but it has consistently been postponed.⁴²

C. Citizenship Policy

The current Kazakhstan’s identity policy demonstrates some of the government’s concerns about the complex ethnic situation in the country. The regulations related to ethnic issues appear rather tolerant in comparison

34. See Janbolat Mamay, *Ziily Kauym Bar Eken [There Are Intelligent People]*, ZHAS ALASH (Dec. 22, 2009), <http://www.zhasalash.kz/sayasat/652.html> [https://perma.cc/CVL8-MH8R].

35. KONSTITUTSIYA RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 7 (1995) (Kaz.).

36. Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Iazykah v Respublike Kazakhstan [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages], 1997, art. 4 (Kaz.).

37. *Id.* art. 5.

38. *Id.* art. 18.

39. Matuszkiewicz, *supra* note 31, at 221.

40. Alima Bissenova, *Language Debate in Kazakhstan Reflects Russian-Kazakh Tensions*, CENT. ASIA–CAUCASUS ANALYST: ANALYTICAL ARTICLES (Apr. 7, 2004), <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/8894-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2004-4-7-art-8894.html> [https://perma.cc/2BTH-XN5E].

41. Karin & Chebotarev, *supra* note 1, at *16.

42. *Id.* at *17.

with those in some other post-Soviet states.⁴³ For instance, Kazakhstani citizenship was granted to anyone who lived in the republic at the moment of its independence regardless of ethnicity or language proficiency.⁴⁴ In contrast, laws in Estonia and Latvia imposed restrictions for obtaining citizenship rights on those who arrived and settled in those countries during the Soviet period. For a long time, they required language proficiency and history tests for non-ethnic Estonians and Latvians in order to receive citizenship.⁴⁵ As a result, those countries denied citizenship to many ethnic Russians living there and issued them “alien’s passports” instead.⁴⁶

Kazakhstan did, however, ban dual citizenship.⁴⁷ Russians living in Kazakhstan were forced to choose between Russia and Kazakhstan.⁴⁸ If they chose Kazakhstani citizenship, ethnic Russian–Kazakhstani became foreigners in Russia—their “historical homeland”—but choosing Russian citizenship would have made them aliens in the country in which they lived and worked.⁴⁹ Consequently, almost all documents published by Russian political groups and organizations demand the reinstatement of dual citizenship status. This is often named as the main reason for dissatisfaction among ethnic Russian–Kazakhstani.⁵⁰ The citizenship issue is tied to all the various problems of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, such as fear for their future in the new non-Russian state, the uncertainty associated with their own identity, their desire to secure ties with their “historic homeland,” and a certain disappointment over Russia’s unwillingness to actively assist ethnic Russians living in the post-Soviet states.⁵¹

II. De Facto Situation and Societal Reactions: (Un)intentional Kazakh Revenge

Despite the government’s internationalist rhetoric, some observers argue that an unofficially sanctioned retaliatory nationalist Kazakhization campaign

43. See, e.g., MICHELE E. COMMERCIO, *RUSSIAN MINORITY POLITICS IN POST-SOVIET LATVIA AND KYRGYZSTAN* 56–57 (2010).

44. *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Grazdanstve Respublike Kazakhstan* [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Citizenship] art. 3 (1991) (Kaz.).

45. Citizenship Act of Estonia, art. 6 §§ 3, 4, 6, RT I 1995, 12, 122 (1995); Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Latvia, art. 12 §§ 2, 4 (1994).

46. Aziz Burkhanov & Dina Sharipova, *Kazakhstan’s Civic-National Identity, in NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN CENTRAL ASIA* 24, 25 (Mariya Y. Omelicheva ed., 2014).

47. KONSTITUTSIĀ RESPUBLIKI KAZAKHSTAN [KONST. RK] [CONSTITUTION] art. 10 § 3 (1995) (Kaz.).

48. See *Kazakh Russians Say Citizenship Deal Is “Discrimination”*: Part 1: Former USSR, BBC SUMMARY OF WORLD BROADCASTS, Feb. 25, 1995 (on file with author).

49. Natsuko Oka, *The “Triadic Nexus” in Kazakhstan: A Comparative Study of Russians, Uighurs, and Koreans, in BEYOND SOVEREIGNTY: FROM STATUS LAW TO TRANSNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP?* 359, 365–66 (2006).

50. See, e.g., Robert Kaiser, *Nationalizing the Work Force: Ethnic Restructification in the Newly Independent States*, 36 POST-SOVIET GEOGRAPHY 87, 93–97 (1995).

51. Cengiz Surucu, *Western in Form, Eastern in Content: Negotiating Time and Space in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* *4 (unpublished manuscript) (on file with the Oxford Society for the Caspian and Central Asia).

has been under way since independence.⁵² They emphasize a shift in the ethnic composition of the bureaucracy and argue that ethnic Kazakhs held almost all key positions in the national government, regional administrations, law enforcement agencies, and other public sectors.⁵³ Such an interpretation fits well with Brubaker's "nationalizing nationalism" argument, according to which Kazakhs would consider themselves the legitimate "owners" of the new state specifically because of their weak position in terms of language, culture, and economy during the Soviet period.⁵⁴ Under this framework, the new state uses the titular nation's weak position to justify a new set of policies aimed at promoting ethnic Kazakhs' interests, such as encouraging the migration of ethnic Kazakhs into the Slav-dominated northern regions of Kazakhstan and introducing Kazakh language requirements into public service jobs.⁵⁵ Emigration of Russians and Russian-Kazakhstainis from Kazakhstan combined with internal migration of ethnic Kazakhs, and the Kazakhs higher birth rate has shifted the demographic and power balance throughout the country and especially in the north.⁵⁶ Kazakh nationalist groups argue that such programs are necessary to rectify the damages sustained through past discrimination and forced Russification.⁵⁷

III. Inconsistent Practical Implementation of Official Language and Identity Policies

Since its independence, the government of Kazakhstan has approved several programs and initiatives aimed at expanding Kazakh language use.⁵⁸ These measurements include a stricter enforcement of language policy and a complete switch of its official language to Kazakh, which has been scheduled several times, because of its failure of enforcement.⁵⁹ Accordingly, there has been a gradual progress towards wider usage of Kazakh in the country over the last five to seven years.⁶⁰ This progress, however, is mainly caused by natural and migrational factors, such as the significant emigration of Russians

52. Karin & Chebotarev, *supra* note 1, at *1.

53. *Id.* at *13.

54. See ROGERS BRUBAKER, NATIONALISM REFRAMED, NATIONHOOD AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE NEW EUROPE 4–5 (1996); Surucu, *supra* note 51, at *2.

55. Surucu, *supra* note 51, at *2.

56. See CTR. FOR INT'L DEV. & CONFLICT MGMT., ASSESSMENT FOR RUSSIANS IN KAZAKHSTAN (2006), <http://www.mar.umd.edu/assessment.asp?groupId=70501> [<https://perma.cc/QFK8-LNS4>].

57. *Id.*

58. See, e.g., Assem Aksholakova & Nurgul Ismailova, *The Language Policy of Kazakhstan and the State Language in Government Service*, 93 *PROCEDIA SOC. BEHAV. SCI.* 1580, 1581 (2013).

59. Matuszkiewicz, *supra* note 31, at 220, 222.

60. See Ainur Kulzhanova, Language Policy of Kazakhstan: An Analysis 19–20 (2012) (unpublished M.A. thesis, Central European University), www.etd.ceu.hu/2012/kulzhanova_ainur.pdf [<https://perma.cc/AP2F-4Z24>]; *Absolutnoe Vladenie Kazahskim Iazykom ne Iavliaetsja Vhodnym Biletom v "Kazahskij Mir"* [*Absolute Kazakh Language is not an Admission Ticket to the "World of the Kazakh"*], MATRITCA (Nov. 28, 2015), <http://www.matritca.kz/news/27807-absolyutnoe-vladienie-kazahskim-yazykom-ne-yavlyaetsya-vhodnym-biletom-v-kazahskiy-mir.html> [<https://perma.cc/5PW4-YZBC>].

and other minorities and a massive influx of ethnic Kazakhs from rural areas into cities.⁶¹ It can be inferred that although the usage of the Kazakh language is expanding, it is not the result of the governmental policies.

Fluency in the Kazakh language among ethnic Russians and other ethnic groups also remains rather limited.⁶² It can be implied that for the ethnic Russians, the psychological factor is probably one of the most significant barriers to studying Kazakh. They perceive the state promotion of the Kazakh language as unfair treatment to the Russian language and Russian-speakers. Some have even appealed to the government to grant Russian the status of the second state language.⁶³ Several Russian cultural organizations, such as LAD,⁶⁴ claim that one does not need to learn Kazakh in order to live in Kazakhstan because all the information and services are available in Russian and all Kazakhs speak Russian fluently. The LAD leaders, furthermore, argued that Kazakh cannot serve as a language of modern politics, science, and education, since Kazakh, historically, never was the language of higher culture and civilization; rather, it was just the language of nomadic folklore poetry and epics.⁶⁵ On the other hand, radical Kazakh nationalist groups criticize the government for not being persistent enough in making Kazakh the de facto state language and see it as another manifestation of colonial mentality and disrespect for Kazakh culture.⁶⁶ Kazakh nationalists demand the wider use of the Kazakh language and appeal to the European nationalist citizenship tradition, which requires one to know the language to become a citizen.⁶⁷

According to the latest population census of 2009, the total population of Kazakhstan was 16.0 million people.⁶⁸ Kazakhs, at 10.097 million, comprised a clear majority with 63.1% of the total population. Russians, with 3.794 million, represent 23.7%.⁶⁹ Official census data demonstrates that 95.4% of Kazakhs “can read freely” in Kazakh, including 94.7% of urban

61. Matuszkiewicz, *supra* note 31, at 216–17.

62. See Kenzhaly Esbergen, *Kazahizaciia Kazahstana Prodvigaetsia Medlenno, No Neotstupno* [Kazakhization Kazakhstan Is Moving Slowly But Relentlessly], AZATTYQ (Nov. 25, 2010), http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakh_language/2230285.html [<https://perma.cc/7B3P-4TDK>].

63. See Kaiser, *supra* note 50, at 97; see also *Kazahstanskoe Slavjanskoe Dvizhenie: Esli by v Kazahstane Vveli Dvoinoe Grazhdanstvo, Eto by Pridalo Mnogim Uverenosti* [Kazakhstan Slavic Movement: If Introduced Dual Citizenship in Kazakhstan, It Would Give a Lot of Confidence], FOR.KG (Oct. 31 2007), <http://for.kg/news-49339-ru.html> [<https://perma.cc/6BY3-CG57>].

64. Russian civil rights movement advocating state status for the Russian language and a Russian autonomy in Kazakhstan.

65. Matuszkiewicz, *supra* note 31, at 221.

66. Bissenova, *supra* note 40.

67. *Id.*

68. Natsionalnyi sostav, veroisповедание i vладение iazykami v Respublike Kazahstan: Itogi Natsionalnoi perepisi naseleniia 2009 goda [National Composition, Religious Affiliation and Language Proficiency in the Republic of Kazakhstan: Results of the National Population Census of 2009], AGENCY ON STATISTICS OF REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN (2010).

69. *Id.*

Kazakhs and 96.2% of rural Kazakhs.⁷⁰ Among Russians, only 8.8% claimed they are able to read Kazakh. The ability to read in Kazakh fluctuated between 74.2% among Uzbeks and 70.5% among Uyghurs downwards to 7.2% among Ukrainians and 10.5% among Koreans.⁷¹ The fluency level of reading Russian was 83.5% among Kazakhs, including 89.7% of urban Kazakhs and 77.4% Kazakhs living in rural areas.⁷² Among other ethnic groups, excluding Kazakhs and Russians, the reading fluency in Russian scored high numbers: 98.0% among Ukrainians, 97.8% among Germans, and 96.9% among Koreans, with the lowest recorded value being 77.2% among Kyrgyz.⁷³

Another visible and very sensitive area for revengeful policies was the toponymics of Kazakhstan. Previously, in the Soviet Union, towns, mountains, and other geographical localities were usually named in Russian manners, which included either Russianized modification of the previously existing Kazakh name of a place (for example, Russianized *Borovoe* instead of Kazakh *Burabay*), or just naming objects with an ideologically charged name (for example, *Leninsk*, *Tselinograd*,⁷⁴ *Il'ich*,⁷⁵ etc.). Sometimes, the ideologically charged name was Kazakh (for example, *Qyzyltu*, Kazakh for 'red flag'). After the independence, things went in diametrically opposite directions and resulted in numerous renamings. The changes followed the same, although inverse, logic: the imposition of a historical Kazakh names or assigning places a new "ideologically" charged name, referring either to the new, post-1991 Kazakhstan (for example, *Azattyq*, Kazakh for "freedom," or *Täuelsizdik*, Kazakh for "independence") or to the names of prominent historical and sometimes imaginary Kazakh figures of the past (for example, Abylai Khan,⁷⁶ Tole Bi,⁷⁷ Rayimbek Batyr,⁷⁸ etc.). Major objects, such as important cities, oblast centers, and mountains were usually renamed in accordance with the decisions made at the highest level of the political hierarchy of Kazakhstan (i.e. initiated or supported by President Nazarbayev

70. *Id.* at 258.

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.* at 259.

74. Name of Astana from 1961–1992 and Russian for "Virgin Land City," referring to Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign. Assel Akzhigitova & Sholpan Zharkynbekova, *Language Planning in Kazakhstan: The Case of Ergonyms as Another Scene of Linguistic Landscape of Astana*, 38 LANGUAGE PROBS. & LANGUAGE PLAN. 42, 44 (2014).

75. Lenin's patronymic. Ireneusz Szarycz & Kanada Waterloo, *The Spiritual, Cultural and Political in Mikhail Bulgakov's Tale Sobach'e Serdtse [Heart of a Dog]*, 61 SLAVIA ORIENTALIS 65, 70 (2012).

76. Abylai Khan (1711–1781) was a ruler of the Kazakh Khanate and was considered a talented organizer and prominent military commander in modern Kazakhstan. DIDAR KASSYMOVA ET AL., HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF KAZAKHSTAN 14 (2012).

77. Tole Bi (1663–1756) was a Kazakh legist, considered one of the authors of the Kazakh traditional legal system. KASSYMOVA, *supra* note 76.

78. Raiymbek Batyr (1705–1785) was a Kazakh warrior and military commander who played a major role in liberating the Kazakhs from the Dzhungar invasion of 18th century. KASSYMOVA, *supra* note 76, at 221.

or cabinet members).⁷⁹ Objects of somewhat lesser importance were usually renamed by the efforts of local “onomastic commissions,” usually existing at oblast or city levels of government and acting on a more or less independent basis.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that in the political framework of Kazakhstan, these commissions would honor any requests and wishes coming from higher levels of the power hierarchy. Obviously, for Russians and Russian-speaking Kazakhs, the massive renaming of geographical localities was a source of major discontent.⁸¹ Whereas Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs approved these renamings as a form of compensation for the imbalances and abuses of the Soviet times.⁸² These renamings demonstrate the compensatory and “vengeful” type of nation-building process in modern Kazakhstan. These seemingly small matters—such as language use and toponyms—can and certainly do impact citizens’ sense of belonging to (and vice versa, the sense of being alienated from) a state.

Another dimension of the language problem in Kazakhstan is that it may cause further conflicts between the two-generations of the Kazakhs themselves. The older generation, including the ruling group, is already acquainted with the knowledge of Kazakh, but gives preference to Russian.⁸³ The younger generation of Kazakhs, however, gradually coming on the heels of their seniors, prefers their native language.⁸⁴ Thus, the conflict gradually transforms into the conflict between two different generations of Kazakhs, as well as a manifestation of a barrier between town and country.

The public discourse regarding identity policies reveals several different understandings and perceptions. In general, Kazakh-language newspapers tend to emphasize the exclusive “Kazakhness” of the state.⁸⁵ They consider

79. See Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, *Perestroika—The Nazarbayev Way: Crisis and Reforms in Kazakhstan*, POINT OF VIEW, June 17, 2016, at 39–40 n.17, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2016-06-17/perestroika-nazarbayev-way-crisis-and-reforms-kazakhstan> [<https://perma.cc/DF6W-FRBD>].

80. See *Pravila po Vedeniju Porjadka Prisvoenija Naimenovanij i Pereimenovanija Sostavnyh Chastej Naseleennogo Punkta, Trebovanija k Prisvoeniju Porjadkovyh Nomerov Zemel'nyh Uchastkam, Zdanijam i Sooruzhenijam* [Rules for Management of the Order of Naming and Renaming of the Components of the Settlement, the Requirements for the Assignment of Serial Numbers of Parcels of Land, Buildings and Facilities], approved by Decree of the Akimat of Astana, May 15, 2013, No. 120-753 (Kaz.).

81. Akzhigitova & Zharkynbekova, *supra* note 74, at 53.

82. See, e.g., Markhabat Baigut, *Ontüstik onomastikasy: Qyzylorda, Ontüstik Qazaqstan, Zhambyl Oblystarynda Zhaǵdai Neshik?* [Southern Onomastics: How Is the Situation in Qyzylorda, Southern Kazakhstan, Zhambyl Oblasts?], EGEMEN KAZAKSTAN, July 25, 2008 (Kaz.); S. Yergali, *Kazaqstandaǵy Keibir Onomastikalıq Mäseleler* [Some Problems of Kazakhstan Onomastics], EGEMEN KAZAKSTAN, Nov. 11, 2005 (Kaz.); Gul'zat Nurmoldaqyzy, *Qyzylzhar Qashan Qazaqshalanady?* [When Will Qyzylzhar Be Kazakhified?], ZHAS ALASH, Sept. 26, 1998 (Kaz.).

83. K. Aminov et al., *Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia*, 2 CENT. ASIA REGIONAL DATA REV. 1, 3 (2010).

84. *Id.*

85. See Narek Mkrtchyan, *The Notion of “Kazakhness” Behind the Symbolic Nation-Building of Kazakhstan*, 9 CEU POL. SCI. J. 16, 21 (2014); Aziz Burkhanov, *Ethnic State Versus Civic-Nation State in Kazakhstan: National Identity Discourse in Kazakh and Russian Media of Kazakhstan* 160 (2013) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana

Kazakhs as exclusive legitimate owners of the state since Kazakhstan is the only place where Kazakhs can build a state; and, unlike other ethnic groups living in the country, they do not have any other place they could claim as their homeland. In contrast, Russian-language newspapers tend to talk about a “shared” notion of the state and its diverse and polyethnic character.⁸⁶ Later, however, another important nuance gradually appeared in the official Russian language discourse: Kazakhs started to be seen as bearing responsibility for the state and for all other ethnic groups,⁸⁷ though little has been done to elaborate what this responsibility means. Two other important elements of the discourse are: “the Russian question” and debates between Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking Kazakhs. Kazakh-language newspapers have gradually begun describing their vision of “good,” or “our,” Russians. Usually these are Russians who live in Kazakhstan but do not demonstrate any political ambitions, accept Kazakh political dominance, and do not question the non-state status of the Russian language. Furthermore, these Russians speak the Kazakh language and know or study Kazakh traditions and history.⁸⁸ In the same vein, it is fair to say that Russian-language newspapers have also developed a certain stereotypical, though much less elaborate, depiction of Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs. They portray them as coming from remote rural areas, unfamiliar with modern technologies, lacking knowledge about global culture and history, and only concerned with praising glorious Kazakh heroes of the past.⁸⁹

The Kazakhstan government’s various efforts to promote a new sense of identity have met different reactions from the media.⁹⁰ The Turkic and Eurasian identity concepts, which the government embarked upon at a certain point, met a fairly cold response from the public, leading to its abandonment.⁹¹ The third major attempt by Kazakhstan’s government to develop a civic-based sense of identity, the “Kazakhstani Nation” idea, has met the most hostile reaction and is unlikely to succeed in the future.⁹² Instead, both Kazakh- and Russian-language media in Kazakhstan operate with the recorded ethnic-based identity terms.⁹³ While the Kazakh-language press emphasizes the “Kazakhness” of the state, the Russian-language press tends to use a more inclusive term, “Kazakhstanis” (kazakstandyktar in Kazakh; kazahstancy in Russian), to accommodate Kazakhstan’s ethnic diversity.⁹⁴ The country’s Russian-speaking domestic political discourse also

University) (on file with author).

86. Burkhanov, *supra* note 85, at 159.

87. Edward Schatz, *The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan*, 52 EUR.-ASIA STUD. 489, 495 (2000).

88. Burkhanov, *supra* note 85, at 74.

89. *Id.* at 158.

90. *Id.* at 162.

91. *Id.*

92. Özgecan Kesici, *The Dilemma in the Nation-Building Process: The Kazakh or Kazakhstani Nation?*, 10 J. ETHNOPOLITICS & MINORITY ISSUES EUR. 31, 52–54 (2011).

93. Burkhanov, *supra* note 85, at 160.

94. See generally Jessica Hayden, *Dispatch from Kazakhstan: Who am I? Russian Identity in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan*, SLATE (July 20, 2004), <http://www.slate.com/articles/>

uses such approaches as a marker of civic identity, which all ethnic groups seem to accept to a greater degree.⁹⁵ The developments and debates around the “Kazakhstani Nation” idea demonstrate how deep the Soviet nation-building policies and practices have indoctrinated the public. Attempts to build a civic identity on top of ethnic identification much resemble the infamous project of creating “the Soviet people.”

Despite the active debate over ethnic problems, the mass media of Kazakhstan lacks balanced coverage of interethnic relations and it often demonstrates biased and stereotypical portrayals of other ethnicities.⁹⁶ This is due to both lack of professionalism and deliberate nationalist views.⁹⁷ The analysis of the public discourse on the national identity in Kazakhstan clearly demonstrates antagonism between visions of Kazakhstan as a “nationalizing state of Kazakhs” and a “multiethnic state of Kazakhstan.” Kazakh-language newspapers tend to separate society into Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs, while the Russian-language audience remains disconnected from these debates and focuses on a multiethnic perception of the country.⁹⁸ This disparity remains one of Kazakhstan’s key identity and policy debates.

Conclusion

The government of Kazakhstan seems to have chosen the Soviet notion of “one big family” living in peace and friendship as its “safe choice” for identity politics, where the Kazakhs take the role of the “older brother”—as the Russians did during the Soviet era. The government of Kazakhstan experimented with different approaches and models to overcome existing cleavages and polarizations along the ethnic lines that exist in modern Kazakhstan’s society, including Eurasia, Turkic brotherhood, and civic Kazakhstani nation. The regime, however, preferred not to implement radical changes or to aggravate the potentially conflict-charged discussion. As this study demonstrates, the public discourse on national identity issues in both Kazakh and Russian newspapers demonstrate different perceptions of several key issues of national identity, such as the “state ownership,” and the role and place of non-Kazakh ethnic groups in modern Kazakhstan.

The iterations and social pushback against the Kazakhstan government’s efforts to create a new sense of identity have demonstrated an important movement in constructivist national identity-building. The government, presumably the most powerful societal agent, may face constraints against its identity building policies. The media’s discussion of national identity issues in Kazakhstan can express and channel society’s reaction, positive or negative, to the government’s efforts to promote a new sense of identity.

Another issue is the (post-)Soviet’s tendency to pretend implementation

news_and_politics/dispatches/2004/07/dispatchfrom_kazakhstan.html [https://perma.cc/R8YW-KJBJ].

95. Burkhanov, *supra* note 85, at 164.

96. *Id.* at 160.

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.* at 159.

of actual political and cultural policies in Kazakhstan. In terms of nationality policy, the Soviets attempted to cover up the fact that the non-privileged nationalities, such as non-Russians in the USSR, did not have real equality by using inclusive rhetoric. In terms of identity-building, Kazakhstan has not developed a new identity policy and still relies on the Soviet approach. None of the policy projects actually suggest a new comprehensive identity-building process and none of them mention getting rid of ethnicity records in ID documents. Attempts to build a civic identity on top of ethnic identification resembles the infamous project of creating “the Soviet people.” As Simon states, “on the one hand, the concept of Soviet people obscures the contours of socialist nations, which are part of the Soviet people; on the other hand, the Soviet people cannot exist without socialist nations.”⁹⁹ The Soviet nationalities policy was a controversial one, focused on integrating a diverse multi-ethnic population into one solid supra-national group and developing local nationalities. Khrushchev and Brezhnev came up with the “Soviet People” concept, although they never stopped developing local nationalities. The result was quite negative: the “Soviet People” never came into being, and the concept significantly traumatized and prevented the development of culture and language in local nationalities.

99. SIMON, *supra* note 28, at 310.