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## **State-building, Identity and Nationalism in Kazakhstan: Some Preliminary Thoughts**

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# State-building, identity and nationalism in Kazakhstan: Some Preliminary Thoughts<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

The poster of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, dressed in a business suit but standing in a field of colorful poppies on the steppe nicely illustrates on-going tensions inherent in governing Kazakhstan. Reifying the steppe, such images represent a return to nature and its 'poetic spaces' (Smith 1991); yet the president stands not in the traditional garb of a Kazakh elder, but instead strides forth in the uniform of post-Soviet technocratic elites – a well tailored business suit and clean shaven visage.

At the heart of every nationalism lies a profound dualism – a tension between civic and ethnic elements (Smith 1991). Understood as ideal types (Kumar 2003), a civic model of a nation state comprises a historic territory, legal-political community, equality of members and a common civic culture and ideology. The central concept is the equality of a sovereign citizen-people with the state, regardless of language spoken, distinct cultural practices, racial characteristics or other potential cleavages (Hobsbawn 1992). An ethnic state model emphasizes a community of birth and native culture, associated with a form of biological / genealogical determinism. A nation, under this conception, is a community of common descent (Smith 1991; Kohn 1969) - a community which existed prior to nationalist mobilization and distinguished itself in some way from foreigners (Hobsbawn 1992).

Where and to what extent a state constitutes itself and is constituted by others relative to these ideal types is a matter for empirical enquiry and is largely emergent as much from the daily practices of the state system, their representatives and indeed, the general public (Billig 1995) as it is occasionally crystallized (and sometimes in the process renegotiated) by symbolic events, such as public ceremonies and commemorations (Spillman 1997). It is something that is emergent from the institutions and policies of the state apparatus, in social practices that create and sustain imagined communities (Anderson 2002) and in behaviors, ideas and boundary creating notions of 'us' and 'them' that concatenate through social networks. The level of purchase which the state has in these matters is in part determined by the social reach and penetration of the state apparatus into society, not least through the education system. Not all states have the same capacity and social reach in this respect.

As both civic and ethnic nationalism are ideal types, the challenge is therefore not to seek to pin down a fixed point and declare definitely that either a civic or ethno-nationalist label defines the nature of nationalism in any given state, but rather to identify, as best as possible, divergent tendencies inherent in governing processes tending towards characteristics each type. It is the tension inherent in these divergent trajectories that is of interest rather than any particular end state. Brubaker's concept of 'nationalizing nationalism' (Brubaker 1996) is potentially misleading, in this respect. While the concept is useful in emphasizing on-going processes of nationalization and the fluidity of national identity construction and maintenance, the manner in which it emphasizes a uni-directional ethno-national trajectory of nationalization potentially downplays its relational aspects where a state's promotion of, and a population's reproduction and maintenance of a notion of 'nation-ness' can exhibit both civic and ethnic elements.

As we shall see, Kazakhstan is a particularly suitable candidate of such an examination because of the very ambiguity of its state building project; a process that has resulted in a rather more public mediation of these tensions than is perhaps common in many other states.

## **Introducing Kazakhstan**

Oil rich and politically stable, multi-ethnic and home to scores of nationalities, Kazakhstan is a Muslim majority secular state with a significant Slavic Orthodox Christian minority. The ninth largest country in the world, its borders, stretching from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Tien Shan Mountains, which it shares with north-western China, are the product of Stalin's nationalities policies during the Soviet era. Kazakhstan occupies an ecological zone historically the domain of

steppe nomads, the most recent of which were the Kazakhs. Divided into three distinct hordes (*zhuz* in Kazakh); the Great Horde in the south, the Middle Horde in the center and northeast, and the Little Horde in the west, Kazakhs trace a common ethno-genesis with other Turkic speaking peoples of Central Asia and beyond, and are typically classified in a common category with Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Azerbaijani and Turkish ethnic groups.

When Kazakhstan declared independence from the defunct USSR on 16 December 1991, ethnic Kazakhs constituted a minority in the new state, in large part due to the settlement of the country by Slavs for two centuries and the fact that Kazakhstan, home of the *gulag*, was a dumping ground for individual dissidents and entire peoples during the Soviet period. Despite this ethnic heterogeneity, Kazakhstan has, in stark contrast to its near neighbors, enjoyed relatively harmonious relationships between its many nationalities. This relative harmony is not inevitable – disturbances during the Soviet period (see below) carried with them an element of ethnic conflict, while the potential for secessionist tendencies amongst Kazakhstan’s substantial ethnic Russian population, particularly in the north of the country, has been an on-going concern since independence (Hale 2009). Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has managed to maintain relative stability and harmony while also engaging in a broad based state building project. This essay examines the strategic ambiguity between civic and ethnic nationalism inherent in these processes and considers the potential implications of this ambiguity for the state in the years to come.

### **Nationalism and internationalism during Soviet rule**

It is impossible to understand modern-day Kazakhstan without reference to its relationship with neighboring Russia, which controlled the region for the best part of two centuries. Domination was followed by colonization. Slavs of the Russian empire began to colonize the steppes populated by the Kazakh nomads in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russia’s rapid settlement policy between 1911 and 1913 saw the Slavic population climb to 1.5 million or 30% of the population. The first Soviet census of 1926 indicated that there were 1,279,979 Russians and 860,822 Ukrainians (19.68% and 13.23% respectively) (Sinnott 2003). Famine caused in part by forced collectivization in the early 1930s, which affected Kazakhs disproportionately, and an ambitious “Virgin Lands” campaign under Khrushchev in the post war period (that brought in hundreds of thousands of Russian volunteers) further undermined Kazakh numbers. This trend was reversed in the later Soviet period; results from the 1970, 1979, and 1989 censuses chart a continuous decline in the Slavic share of the population (despite increasing in absolute terms), which can be attributed to a rise in the Kazakh birth rate combined with a corresponding decline in the size of Russian families. The last Soviet census of 1989 estimated the Slav percentage of the population to be 44%, a figure that included 6,227,549 Russians (37.8% of total population) (Ó Beacháin 2007; Dave 2003).

While the early Soviet period saw advances for native elites in governing new Central Asian political units within the recently constituted Soviet Union, the policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), while never abandoned, was diluted during the 1930s, through both policy change and purges that eliminated many of the first generation of Central Asia’s post revolution elite (Khalid 2007). At the beginning of 1934, Stalin formally announced the abandonment of the ‘Greater Danger’ principle by which Soviet ideology officially viewed Russian nationalism as ‘Great power chauvinism’ with the nationalism of smaller states viewed as positive anti-colonial resistance to same. By 1936 Russians had been exalted to ‘first among equals’ and were entrusted with the task of being the guiding force in the soviet ‘family’ of nations (Martin 2001). Alphabets in national languages were changed to Cyrillic to greater facilitate the learning of Russian during this period. After Stalin’s death in 1953, concerted efforts were made to make Russian the language of the new ‘Soviet People’. These efforts were consolidated and expanded by Leonid Brezhnev (Blitstein 2001; Kreindler 1989).

From 1936, when the country became a full republic within the Soviet Union, until the Soviet collapse in 1991, Kazakhstan boasted no less than a dozen Communist First Secretaries (including for a brief time Leonid Brezhnev who went on to lead the Soviet Union), the vast majority of whom were not ethnic Kazakh. Turnover at the top was high (between 1954 and 1964 the incumbent changed seven times) until the arrival of Dinmukhammad Kunaev who occupied the position for a quarter century. Kunaev enjoyed considerable popularity in Kazakhstan and is remembered with affection today. Not only was his tenure so long that it defined an era but he is identified with the stability and relative prosperity of the Brezhnev years. Most importantly however, as an ethnic Kazakh, Kunaev represented Kazakhs at the highest levels of Soviet government, rising to become a member of the Politburo, the only Kazakh to hold such a position during the Soviet era).<sup>3</sup>

Transcending territorial diversity and class differences through social uniformity was a key goal of communist ideology (White 1979). In the USSR, periodic mobilization of the population was carefully orchestrated to give the impression of socialist homogeneity, of a unified populace bound together by shared beliefs and values, working together to achieve common social, economic and political objectives (Busygina 2002). Those too enthusiastic about regional issues at the expense of the great Soviet enterprise were deemed to be “bourgeois deviationist”, “nationalist” or simply “localist” (*mestnichestvo*). Such policies were particularly successful in Kazakhstan so that ‘by the 1970s the Kazakhs were arguably the most thoroughly Sovietized of all Soviet citizens – and the overwhelming majority appeared to be proud of it’ (Akiner 1995).

### **Post independence Kazakhstan: A nationalizing state?**

Scholars interested in the trajectory of Kazakhstan’s post independence development have expressed concerns with respect to the nature of nationalism there since the early 1990s. Considered a delegative democracy,<sup>4</sup> possessing the trappings of a democratic system but in practice constituted as an authoritarian state (Kubicek 1998), the nature of ethnic relations and the impact that state formation has had on these relations remains a pressing concern to this day.

Svanberg (1994), writing soon after independence, highlighted an over emphasis by the Nazarbayev regime at that time on ethnic Kazakh identity over a more inclusive Kazakhstani identity. Sarsembayev (1999) announced the demise of Kazakhstani nationalism as early as 1999, principally because of the reluctance of the Russian minority to accept it, while Surucu (2002) highlighted the degree to which self-styled ‘cosmopolitans’ (who, depending on your political orientation could be described as those supporting a civic nationalist approach, or those with Russophile sensibilities) became increasingly associated with opposition parties. Fierman(2000), writing at the beginning of the new millennium, speculated that support for a Kazakh ethnic nationalism was likely to grow as rural to urban migration of unskilled and semiskilled youth increased. Commercio (2004), drawing from theoretical work developed by Brubaker (1996), later argued that Kazakhstan could be classified as a nationalizing state in the process of promoting an

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<sup>3</sup> Kunaev was first appointed 19 January 1960 until he was removed by Nikita Khrushchev on 26 December 1962. Khrushchev’s political demise in 1964 signalled Kunaev’s return and he held the position until controversially removed by Gorbachev on 16 December 1986. Information on the career of the Dinmukhammad Kunaev and politics in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period was kindly provided to one of the authors by the staff of the Kunaev museum in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

<sup>4</sup> Since gaining independence Kazakhstan has never enjoyed a free, fair election without serious irregularities. Like other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is as much neo-soviet as post soviet, and the shift from state socialism to national authoritarianism has not been so difficult for the ruling elites that presided over both. Whether as part of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or an independent state, the people of what is now Kazakhstan have never experienced a peaceful democratic transfer of power from one incumbent to another.

ethno-nationalist agenda, a position that has been consistently supported by a number of analysts (Oh 2006; Brill Olcott 2002; Cummings 2006; Peyrouse 2008; Karin and Chebotarev 2000).

These claims highlight an important political issue: that Kazakh claims to primordial autochthony in the national territory is a first principle of state policy in post independence Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan means, after all, the “Land of the Kazakhs.” Other ethnic groups are considered to be recipients of traditional Kazakh hospitality towards newcomers (Cummings 2006). This appropriation of the newly independent Land of the Kazakhs by ethnic Kazakhs is reflected in the new symbolism of post independence Kazakhstan. Independence ushered in a period of ‘Kazakhisation’ – including changes to street names, the erection of new statues, a new flag to be displayed, a new stirring anthem to be sung etc (Karin and Chebotarev 2000). Within Kazakhstan, organic intellectuals have worked to support this position through the publication of scholarly texts supporting primordialist Kazakh claims (for further discussion, see Diener (2002); for examples of such historiography in English see several contributions to Akhmetov (1998), particularly Baipakov (1998), Galiev (1998), Ismagulov (1998), Kadyrbaev (1998) and Kumekov (1998)).

Since independence, the Nazarbayev regime has also sought to reverse Soviet-era language practices, which promoted Russian, in favor of Kazakh. Russian was the language of government and prestige in Soviet Kazakhstan. Education through the medium of Russian was a *sine qua non* for social advancement and students considered less promising were often dispatched to local language institutions. In the post-Soviet political environment those educated through Kazakh generally support the strict application of pro-Kazakh language policies in order to open up job opportunities previously the exclusive reserve of Russian speakers.<sup>5</sup>

This tilt towards an ethnic conception of the nation was accompanied by a related vote of no confidence in the state by nationalities with European connections. During the early 1990s hundreds of thousands of Slavs and Germans, uncertain of their status in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, voted with their feet. Between 1993 and 1999, an estimated 1,123,960 Slavs left Kazakhstan (almost 300,000 in 1994 alone) and they were followed by almost half a million ethnic Germans. In the decade that followed the last Soviet census of 1989, the Russian population fell from 37.8% to just 29.96% while the combined European population (Russian, Ukrainian, German, Polish, Belarusian, and Greek) declined from 49.8% to 39%. During the same period, the number of ethnic Kazakhs grew by 1.5 million pushing their numbers above the critical 50% mark (rocketing from 39.7% to 53.4%). Kazakhs who had been forced to leave during the Stalin years together with their descendents and other ethnic Kazakhs in neighbouring states were encouraged to migrate into Kazakhstan, an offer that more than one hundred thousand accepted (Sinnott 2003). These trends continued during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2009 census recorded the Kazakh population surpassing the ten million mark for the first time (63.1%) while the combined numbers of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians constituted a bare quarter of Kazakhstan’s inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

The shift towards Kazakhization has also been reflected in legal and constitutional changes. While the current constitution, enacted in 1995, forbids discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of ‘origins, social position, property status, sex, race, nationality, language, faith, political and religious convictions, place of residence or any other circumstances’ (Article 14) it also makes it

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<sup>5</sup> A point repeatedly emphasized to the authors in informal conversations during their time spent living in Kazakhstan over a five year period.

<sup>6</sup> 2009 census statistics derived from the Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan.  
[http://www.stat.kz/p\\_perepis/Pages/n\\_04\\_02\\_10.aspx](http://www.stat.kz/p_perepis/Pages/n_04_02_10.aspx)

compulsory that the President of the Republic be able to speak Kazakh (Article 41 of 1995 Constitution, Article 114 of 1993 Constitution).<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent laws have reinforced these constitutional provisions. One regulation, adopted in July 1997, declared that ‘it is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language’ (Law on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Article 4). Broadcasts on TV and radio channels in Kazakh must also be given equal time to all other languages. In practice, Russian is the only language concerned.<sup>8</sup>

### **Nationalizing in form, civic in substance?**

Nonetheless, to argue that Kazakhstan’s national state building process has been a totally one sided process in favor of the titular group would be to overstate things substantially. With respect to the preceding broadcast initiatives, for example, this measure was taken neither with the consultation of the bodies involved (which have displayed a lack of interest in producing high quality productions in Kazakh) nor has it been supported with the financial resources necessary to make it a success. A 1998 Presidential decree mandating the use of Kazakh in all government paperwork followed a similar pattern.<sup>9</sup> Originally, it was anticipated that this policy would be implemented immediately after the adoption of the Constitution but a lack of competent staff and adequate provisions for language instruction has meant that the deadline has been continually extended.

These examples reflect an important reality. While a myriad of laws have been promulgated and decreed, much less effort has been created to enable these laws to take effect (Fierman 2009b). This has often left non-Kazakh speakers facing notional barriers that could potentially affect their situation, but which in practice only rarely intrude into their day to day lives. Russian remains the language spoken by the greatest number of people living in Kazakhstan. Almost all Russians do not speak Kazakh whereas the vast majority of Kazakhs speak Russian and many ethnic Kazakhs (approximately one third) do not speak Kazakh. In the last census, conducted in 1999, 99.4% of Kazakhs claimed that Kazakh was their native language (Dave 2003) but this figure is inflated, representing more a demonstration of patriotic fervor than an accurate reflection of linguistic competence.

A proposal to change the alphabet of the state language from Cyrillic to the Latin form, reflecting the long established use of the Latin script in Turkey, and a policy already implemented in post-Soviet Moldova and for the three Turkic state languages of Azeri, Turkmen and Uzbek, provides another useful example of the limits of state policy in this respect. While bringing Kazakh more closely into line with other Turkic speaking countries, including Turkey, such a move would also make Kazakh more difficult to master for non-speakers educated in Russian or other minority languages which use a Cyrillic script, including those ethnic Kazakhs who speak Russian as their first language. Following a call from President Nazarbayev to consider the matter, the Ministry of Education conducted a feasibility study during the summer of 2007 that recommended a change to the Latin script over a 12-15 year period. The report made clear that this recommendation was being made with a view to reversing Russification and building a strong Kazakh national identity (see, for example, Bartlett (2007)). This question of language highlights an important limitation to the

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<sup>7</sup> This requirement is the norm in post-Soviet Central Asia. Article 90 of the Uzbek Constitution, Article 43 of the Kyrgyz Constitution, and Article 65 of the Tajik Constitution contain similar requirements for the office of the President. There is no such constitutional requirement for the Turkmen president though there has been intensive discrimination against Russian speakers in Turkmenistan.

<sup>8</sup> Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, July 11 1997, No. 151-1, On Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Chapter III, Article 18.

<sup>9</sup> Presidential Decree, Republic of Kazakhstan, 5 October 1998, No. 4106, On the State Programme for the Functioning and Development of Languages.

effective implementation of a nationalizing nationalism by the government of Kazakhstan; the ambivalence of many Russified Kazakhs to embrace a narrow ethno-linguistic definition of Kazakhness that focuses on everyday use of the language as opposed to rhetorical support for its importance.

### **The nature of Kazakh ethnic identification**

The waters of nationalism in Kazakhstan can be said to be somewhat muddied; while certain aspects of the state-building project certainly give the appearance of nationalizing tendencies, these can be counter balanced by other examples of a more civic variety. One reason posited for these tensions relates to internal dynamics within the Kazakh imagined community itself. The social and political cohesiveness of the collectivity imaged as “Kazakh” has been questioned by some analysts – Masanov (2000), for example, questions what urbanized Russo phone ethnic Kazakhs actually have in common with their rural, Kazakh speaking counter parts. The state seems aware of these tensions – in addition to slow implementation of language policies, for example, its careful phraseology in the last census questionnaire sought to reinforce presumed links between nationality and language without actually enquiring into how and to what extent people actually use different languages in their daily lives (Dave 2004).

This language issue highlights potential challenges to intra group cohesion amongst ethnic Kazakhs. While the political institutions of the state promote self-identification as Kazakh, largely based on ethnic categories and categorization process inherited from the Soviet period, the inability of almost 40% of ethnic Kazakhs to speak the Kazakh language has undoubtedly operated as a break on the linguistic components of the nationalizing process, with urban based Russian speaking ethnic Kazakhs standing to lose the most in any widespread shift in favor of Kazakh (Sarsembayev 1999; Kolstø 2003). Amongst those elite Kazakhs who speak Kazakh well / as their mother tongue, Russian remains important - more so than English. Two anecdotal examples illustrate this point; Miras, an elite private primary and secondary school in Almaty, offers two language streams for children – either Kazakh combined with Russian or Russian combined with English. It does not offer a combined Kazakh and English only stream; as a second example, both authors taught for a number of years in a leading English language university in Almaty – while students steadily mastered English over the course of their educational experience there, they all typically already spoke Russian comfortably, regardless of ethnic background. The same could not be said for Kazakh.<sup>10</sup> Despite gains made by the Kazakh language since independence, particularly in cities where increasing numbers of rural Kazakhs have settled, Russian remains the de facto language of elite education and communication and an important gateway language, particularly in technical areas where the Soviet Union was strong educationally (e.g. the hard sciences, engineering, military studies etc) and in business in the wider former Soviet space.<sup>11</sup> It also acts as the language of inter ethnic communication throughout Kazakhstan.

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<sup>10</sup> Although the symbolic importance of Kazakh and the state’s role in supporting public manifestations of the language were also highlighted during their time there: Bilingual English and Russian signage on professorial doors were replaced by signs in English and Kazakh, for example. The change coincided with a re-accreditation process of the institute with government authorities and was implemented to conform with government requirements on the matter. It is also mandatory to take two 2 credit classes in the Kazakh language as part of the general education requirements for undergraduate students.

<sup>11</sup> One of the authors recalls a conversation with US Peace Corps volunteer in 2003, who had learned Kazakh in western Mongolia (and did not speak Russian) recounting the surprise and in some cases, suspicion, he encountered in visiting schools in Almaty where Kazakh was the language of instruction. The expectation was that as a foreigner, he would have learned Russian before Kazakh.

Kazakhification of the state has also been accompanied by a degree of intra-elite competition between ethnic Kazakhs. Nazarbayev's regime has been criticized for the potentially disruptive impact such intra-ethnic competition through the system of so-called clan politics loosely based on the politics of patronage and/or genealogical sub-divisions within Kazakh *zhuq* (Collins 2002, 2003, 2004; Schatz 2000). However, at least to date, *zhuq* rivalry has not threatened the cohesion of ethnic Kazakhs as a group, nor has it threatened the ability of the Nazarbayev regime to govern. It may be that the social and political importance of the *zhuq* in Kazakhstan has been overstated, and indeed, has served to orientalize the study of the region's politics rather than to enlighten it. Anthropological research, for example, points to the more contingent use of genealogical remembering and claim making, particularly in the urban context (Yessenova 2003), while at the national level, clan politics need not necessarily result in intra-group fission, and has sometimes led to alliance building between Kazak sub-groups (Schatz 2005).

### **Between civic and ethnic nationalism**

Rather than a straightforward case of nationalizing nationalism then, Kazakhstan's national trajectory has from its origins been defined by seemingly contradictory aims. Kazakhstan's approach to state building based on the ethnic solidarity of the titular group has been relatively muted compared to close neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Fierman 2009a). Equally, the President continues to promote civic as well as ethnic notions of the nation: as recently as 2009 Nazarbayev again reaffirmed the importance of the civic state building project, strengthening the legislative position of the Assembly of Peoples,<sup>12</sup> a body tasked with the preservation and promotion of Kazakhstan's diverse cultural heritage (Jones 2010). Officials have sometimes attempted to square this circle by arguing that Kazakh culture and language can ultimately become the consolidating factor amongst all Kazakhstanis, while preserving and respecting other languages and cultures present within Kazakhstan (Jones 2010).

These tensions are reflected in some recent scholarship, albeit in a way that sidelines civic aspects. Sally Cummings (2006), for example, argues that the mainly Kazakh elites of newly independent Kazakhstan set out three state-building goals post independence – to nurture a civic, all Kazakhstani identity, to enable different ethnic groups to discover their own cultural identities and to reserve a special place in this new state for the cultural reawakening of the titular Kazakh ethnic group.<sup>13</sup> Cummings, however, argues that civic forms have largely been discarded in recent years, while also recognizing a significant dilution of Kazakh ethno-nationalism by a technocratic form of managerial governance.

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<sup>12</sup> The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan was established by Nazarbayev's presidential decree of 1 March 1995 with the stated aims of promoting inter-ethnic and inter-faith harmony, societal stability and a political culture based on 'civilized and democratic norms'. It was envisaged as an advisory and consultative body and its chairman-for-life is first President of Kazakhstan (i.e. Nazarbayev). As a result of Nazarbayev-led changes to the constitutional framework, from 2007 the lower house of parliament (*Mazhilis*) the People of Kazakhstan's Assembly contributes nine members to the 107 member legislature. (For aims, objectives and organisational structure see Presidential Decree on People Assembly of Kazakhstan, 26 April 2002 No 856.). Significantly, the name of the body was later changed from Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan.

<sup>13</sup> Street naming provide some interesting examples of how these dynamics have played out in practice. *Ulitza Dostyk* in Almaty provides one example; meaning 'friendship' in Kazakh, the street had its name changed post independence. The name change encapsulates divergent tendencies perfectly – towards Kazakhification, through the use of a Kazakh word to rename the street, while attempting to avoid alienation of non-Kazakhs. It also illustrates how social practices can lag behind official policy. In practice, the Soviet era name, *Ulitza Lenina*, is still commonly used in Almaty, even today.

We argue, by contrast, that the notion of civic nationalism and of the tensions between civic and ethnic tendencies continues to provide important reference points in understanding contemporary Kazakhstan. The state's language policies provide one good example of these dynamics. Since 1995 Russian has been recognized as an official language 'on a par' with Kazakh – a somewhat ambiguous position that provides official recognition, if not the symbolic importance attached to Kazakh, where previously it was simply recognized as the language of inter-ethnic communication (Smagulova 2006; Fierman 1998). Other symbolically sensitive moves related to Kazakh have also been deferred – as illustrated by the delays in instituting a Kazakh language entrance examination into all Kazakh universities (Fierman 2009a). The state also continues to offer prestigious *Bolashak* scholarships for overseas study to students, regardless of Kazakh language ability.

The Nazarbayev regime has also been quite astute upon occasion, in maintaining a careful public balancing act as with the establishment of a quasi-nongovernmental body to manage government relations with ethnic Kazakhs in neighboring countries, for example (Diener 2005), and the maintenance of a delicate balance between policies designed to promote the Kazakh language and concerns of non Kazakh speakers (Fierman 2005). Indeed, this government balancing between strong declarative support while taking few practical measures has reportedly been a source of dissatisfaction for Kazakh nationalist elites (Oka 2000). This highlights the social constraints under which the regime operates and the manner in which it exercises agency in the maintenance of this balance between civic and ethnic tendencies. Policy changes affecting nationalization processes have tended to be incremental and to some extent balanced between divergent tendencies; changes to the history syllabus in schools, for example, have been stop-start, after an initial period of de-Russification in the immediate post independence (Kissane 2005).

### **Threading the needle**

Why then has Kazakhstan maintained this level of ambiguity? While lack of state capacity can explain some short comings in the implementation of nationalizing processes, they cannot be considered determinative, in the way they might in other, less well endowed regions of the world (see, for example, Kevlihan (2007) on the relevance of state capacity to nationalism in a situation of weak state capacity). Despite a dip in living conditions during the 1990s, Kazakhstan has successfully built upon its Soviet legacy and the more recent large scale development of significant oil reserves. Kazakhstan is now a relatively strong state – it is solidly ranked 82<sup>nd</sup> on the world on the UNDP's 2009 Human Development Index (based on statistics from 2007), while it's adult literacy rate is 10<sup>th</sup> highest in the world.<sup>14</sup> State capacity short comings, while they continue to exist, also do not explain ambiguities at the policy level.

International conditions and Kazakhstan's place in the order of things have undoubtedly played a role. Kazakhstan's relatively weak geo-strategic position, and the importance of maintaining friendly relations with Russia have had important influences on domestic policy (Cummings 2003), as has the heterogeneity of Kazakhstan's population (Diener 2002). The presence of a large ethnic Russian minority within Kazakhstan, much of it resident in regions adjacent to Mother Russia and the potential for intervention by the Russian state in defense of this minority places an effective break on the extent to which ethnic nationalism can be promoted. Kazakhstan's caution in this respect has extended even to foreign policy initiatives that are relatively ethno-centric. The case of 'return' migration of ethnic Kazakhs – known as *Oralmandar* – is a case in point. Tens of thousands were encouraged by the government of Kazakhstan to migrate to Kazakhstan, beginning in the

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<sup>14</sup> Source: Selected statistics from the UNDP 2009 Human Development Report, available on line at [http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_KAZ.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_KAZ.html) [Accessed 28th August 2010].

1990s; however, the resettlement process itself was plagued by poor oversight and overly bureaucratic implementation, while those who migrated were effectively denied citizenship rights in Kazakhstan through the 1990s (Diener 2005).

However three other important (and related) domestic factors have also played an important part in the creation and realization of Kazakhstan's ambiguous national identity – the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy, the role of the Nazarbayev regime in continuing to be the vehicle through which this legacy has been realized and the development of a political system that has actively impeded political mobilization around alternative ethnic or religious bases.

### **Soviet Legacy**

Kazakhstan's Soviet legacy has been influential in creating and perpetuating the on-going tension between civic and ethno-nationalism in the country. Kazakh identity benefitted from the protection and encouragement, and indeed constitutive / creative processes of the Soviet system in the cultural sphere – Kazakh language, literature, music and traditional meals, costumes and dancing were all promoted, and to some extent, to use Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1996) by now classic formulation, 'invented' during the Soviet period.<sup>15</sup> All had their place in the Soviet system; however this place was a secondary and largely custodial one. The path to modernization lay through the language of the Russian 'elder brother' and the knowledge to be gained through that language. Kazakhstan, perhaps because of the extent of its integration into the Soviet system, did not experience the kinds of cultural mobilization common in other Soviet republics in the late Soviet period.

It is this lack of a pre-independence trajectory of cultural nationalism; or more precisely, perhaps, the absence of any significant politicization of cultural factors in support of state secession and state building, that has influenced the manner in which post independence nationalizing processes have played themselves out. Economically dependent on the center during the Soviet period, Kazakhstan's overriding priorities were economic in nature as the Soviet Union collapsed. The Nazarbayev regime consistently sought to improve its situation within common governance arrangements through support for the continuation of the USSR and later by advocating for strong institutional mechanisms within the CIS (Hale 2009) and as a consequence was not in the vanguard of nations striving for independence from the Soviet Union. This regime remained unchanged post independence; it was not a revolutionary movement driving out a foreign presence, but rather a somewhat surprised, Soviet trained and largely ethnic Kazakh elite who found themselves governing a sovereign nation at short notice. Kazakhstan exhibited neither of Smith's ideal typical nationalisms pre-independence, and as a consequence there was no nationalizing trajectory to speak of whose momentum would have continued to drive state policies into the post-independence period. Instead, the direction taken by Nazarbayev's regime has followed patterns laid down in the Soviet period. Fierman (2005), for example, highlights the continuities between Soviet nationality policy and discourse and Kazakhstan's efforts, the major change being the assumption that Kazakh should replace Russian as 'core' language.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, while the government of Kazakhstan made a clean break with the ideology and symbolic apparatus of communism, policy towards nationalities has shown considerable continuity with the Soviet period.

### **The role of Nazarbayev's Regime – continuity and moderation**

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to argue that the Kazakh language and other cultural practices were fabricated; rather that the Soviet system encouraged a particular crystallization of language and culture and labeled it "Kazakh", distinguishing it from its neighbors as part of a deliberate policy towards nationalities.

<sup>16</sup> Although use of term 'nation' instead of 'people' (*narod*) for the new overarching Kazakhstani identity is new.

This consistency in policy has been facilitated by continuity in leadership from the Soviet period. Throughout the ups and downs of post independence governance in Kazakhstan, one thing has remained constant – the leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev. During the 1970s and 1980s, Nazarbayev was one of the bright young stars of the Kazakhstan communist elite and enjoyed a steady rise through the party ranks. By 1984, he was Chairman of the Council of Ministers in Kazakhstan thanks to the patronage of Kunaev. When Gorbachev came to power in Moscow, Nazarbayev began to distance himself from Kunaev. With an audacity and opportunism that have become defining political traits, Nazarbayev, employing the new language of *perestroika*, made a speech highly critical of his erstwhile patron. These moves proved ineffective, however, when Gorbachev chose as leader an outsider from Russia, Genadi Kolbin, who was authorized to root out incompetence and corruption in the republic. Being devoid of any connections to local clans or cliques, Kolbin seemed ideally suited for such a mission. However, his outsider status (and to a lesser extent the fact that he was a Slav - a Kazakhstani Slav might have been more acceptable) threatened patronage networks and was portrayed as a national insult. Demonstrations in opposition to the change were held in Almaty (the then capital of the autonomous republic) on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1986 but were suppressed by government forces. Depending on which report one believes, between one and two hundred people were killed in what was the first of many nationalist demonstrations that Gorbachev would be confronted with during his time as Communist First Secretary of the USSR. While the motives of these demonstrators have been the subject to some dispute (Stefany 2004), there is little doubt that at least a sizable minority were inspired by nationalist sentiment – “Every people deserves their own leader” was one banner held up by demonstrators, for example.<sup>17 18</sup> Whether through good fortune or otherwise, Nazarbayev ultimately benefitted from this ethnic tilt, and was appointed as Kolbin’s replacement by Gorbachev after the latter stepped down in 1989. He has remained in power in Kazakhstan since.

Since then, however, Nazarbayev has been quite successful in painting himself as a moderate and moderating figure, albeit perhaps somewhat less credibly in more recent years as his unwillingness to cede power has become ever more apparent. This has been accompanied by a growing focus on the ‘great man’ aspects of his legacy without concomitant attention to the practical question of who will actually succeed him and whether the political institutions of the state are robust enough to survive without him at the helm. In the post independence period Nazarbayev has produced a number of written works which have been promoted in an effort to establish a national ideology. While this ideology is liberal, secular, progressive, and inclusive in the main it has reinforced the link between President and State. The best-known document attributed to the President is “Kazakhstan 2030”, a long-term development plan in which Nazarbayev appeals to the people of Kazakhstan ‘to share my vision of the future of our society and the mission of our state’. Natural security, material well-being, political stability, consolidation of the state, foreign investment, and the development of infrastructure, are all afforded consideration. The document contains no plan for the democratization of society. Eyeing the experience of Asian Tigers like Singapore and Malaysia, Nazarbayev states his wish that Kazakhstan become a ‘Central Asian snow leopard’(Nazarbayev 1997) . Rather than being an obscure development blueprint gathering dust on

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<sup>17</sup> Per author’s recollection of a visit to Kunaev museum in Almaty, 2005. The ethnic dimension to these riots was also recalled by an ethnic Russian colleague of one of the authors, who recounted the fear felt among Russians after apparently random killings of ethnic Russians in the city at this time.

<sup>18</sup> Although the involvement of disgruntled Soviet elites cannot be discounted. One former militiaman present as part of the riot police response to the 1986 disturbances, in conversation with one of the authors, for example, remembered alcohol and rudimentary weapons (iron bars etc) being distributed in an organized fashion to some young demonstrators, while also being surprised when police firearms were withdrawn after the first day’s protests.

the desks of officialdom, “Kazakhstan 2030” is heavily advertised throughout Kazakhstan with the words emblazoned on innumerable banners, posters, billboards and more permanent fixtures.

### **Opposition parties and ethnic mobilization**

Political parties in Kazakhstan can be divided into three major types: those that support the President, those that are formed by disaffected members of the elite, and those that are estranged from the political system. Of the former, the Nazarbayev’s *Nur Otan* is by far the most significant and is the only party represented in parliament. A highly restrictive “Law on Political Parties” prohibits ethnic and religious parties thus preventing the mobilization of two potentially powerful sources of opposition; Russian based parties which might seek to challenge Nazarbayev’s nation-building efforts or may even be a focus for secessionism, and Islamist parties which might seek to reverse Kazakhstan’s secular tradition and outflank the President by playing the religious card. An even greater hurdle is the requirement that requires parties have not less than 50,000 members representing all fourteen regions and the major cities of Kazakhstan (a minimum quota of 700 members in each region and major city is established), ruling out the possibility of regional parties which might act as a vehicle for ethnic interests. Election campaigning is also restricted by an Election Law that disbars candidates who ‘[discredit] the honor and dignity’ of another candidate or political party.<sup>19</sup>

Despite restrictions on forming an Islamically oriented political party, Islam remains a potential focal point for anti-Nazarbayev opposition. As with all other Central Asian leaders - politically educated and promoted during the Soviet era - Nazarbayev has been careful to distinguish between Islam as a private religion and a political force. The collapse of communism left an ideological vacuum that many western observers feared might be filled by Islamic fundamentalism. Given the Soviet regime’s active discouragement of religion it has been unsurprising that independence brought with it some increase in open religious observance. Overall, however, the revival of orthodox Islamic practices has been muted. The late introduction of Islam to Kazakhs and 70 years of communism have made the Kazakhs suspicious of religious fervor. Islam in Kazakhstan has for many years been less a religion than a collection of traditions passed on from generation to generation with little or no state support.<sup>20</sup> Government moves in support of Islam have been confined to state support for a handful of prominent mosques in large cities, often with the support of other moderate Islamic regimes (such as Turkey and Egypt).

However, such state sponsored initiatives face some competition in recent years. The new millennium has seen the rise of an alternative underground opposition, Hizb Ut Tahrir. The group / network is committed to the (re)establishment of the Islamic caliphate through peaceful means (International Crisis Group 2003). Its pan-Islamic mobilization offers an alternative imagining that could potentially unite both ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kazakhs (amongst others), particularly in the south of the country (Karagiannis 2006; 2009). While it has been unable to mobilize sufficient support to seriously threaten the governing regime, it remains a potential training ground for opposition of an Islamic orientation, and has not been broken by government crackdowns. Indeed it may even have been strengthened to some degree through its recent successes in taking a measure of control within the Kazakhstan state prison system (International Crisis Group 2009).

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<sup>19</sup> Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan: ‘On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan’. Article 50 (2) and (4).

<sup>20</sup> In Central Asia Islamic beliefs were initially much more popular among the sedentary people who lived in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, than amongst nomadic groups in what is now Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Islam began to make an impact but it has never been practiced with the same fervor or orthodoxy as among the settled peoples of the more fertile south (Akiner 1994: 7-9).

### What Next for Kazakhstan?

This essay has sought to explore the manner in which national identity in Kazakhstan has been realized through state actions that have promoted both civic and ethnic aspects, resulting in a *mélange* that is at times contradictory, and at times ineffective, but has been consistently ambiguous and, has, by and large, worked in supporting a stable and peaceful (if not democratic) state. This ambiguity has drawn heavily from Soviet legacies and relied on the commitment of the current regime to its maintenance. As the generation of leaders who came to the fore in Soviet Kazakhstan age, one must ask what the future holds for the people / peoples of Kazakhstan and what changes, if any, will occur in the manner in which the state manages the challenges it faces with respect to national identity.

Given the centralized nature of power in Kazakhstan, any consideration of future directions in this respect must consider the likely impact of Presidential succession. Nazarbayev has played an important role as a mediator between civic and ethnic tendencies in Kazakhstan. However, having celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010, he is not getting any younger. Sometime in the near to medium term he will depart the national stage.

Unfortunately, President Nazarbayev risks tainting what is in many respects a creditable legacy by maintaining his grip on power for too long. While eschewing the excesses of neighbouring Turkmenistan, Nazarbayev has demonstrated an ever-increasing obsession with consolidating his place in Kazakhstan's history as its "founding father" and first president.<sup>21</sup> After almost two decades at the helm, and having exhausted almost all other avenues of subverting constitutional limits on his time in office, Nazarbayev finally approved constitutional amendments that abolished term limits for the first president of Kazakhstan (i.e. him) in May 2007 (*Moscow Times* 2007). The political packaging of Nazarbayev as the founding father of the state has undoubtedly gained some acceptance in Kazakhstan.<sup>22</sup>

There is ample evidence to suggest that Nazarbayev is focusing on his legacy. In 2010, Nazarbayev was conferred with a new title and privileges by the *Mazhilis*. In what was most likely an orchestrated act of feigned modesty the President then vetoed this initiative, declaring that "you all know that I resolutely put a stop to all eulogies addressed to me, all proposals to particularly single

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<sup>21</sup> There is a widespread view that the major street in Almaty named after Bolshevik Commissar and Red Army officer Dmitry Furmanov, which has inexplicably escaped the notice of zealous officials eager to replace communist era luminaries with more acceptable Kazakh heroes, is being reserved for Nazarbayev to be re-named after his death. Some also suspect that the capital Astana (which unimaginatively means "capital" in Kazakh) will also be posthumously named after Kazakhstan's first president and "leader of the nation".

<sup>22</sup> Per interview with Dostym Satpaev. Energy Security Expert, the head of the regional Risk Assessment Group, Almaty, 12 June 2008. Satpaev went on to argue that this national ideology with Nazarbayev at the centre as the country's founding father and bulwark against Soviet domination demands a degree of "selective amnesia". History books, for example, shy away from attributing any negative actions or characteristics to the President despite his long and successful career in the Soviet Communist Party. This selective amnesia has also apparent in other public representations of the President. As an example, visitors to the National Museum of Repression in Almaty are greeted on entry with a quotation from Nazarbayev condemning Soviet tyranny. They are similarly invited to visit a special section of the museum devoted to the December 1986 protests, which are framed by Nazarbayev's commentary that these events were the first patriotic manifestations of anti-Soviet national sentiments in the USSR. The exhibit neglects to note that Nazarbayev's place during this tragedy was amongst the ranks of the communist party elite and not on the streets with the demonstrators (based on the observations of one of the authors during a visit to the museum in Almaty). History books similarly portray Nazarbayev not as the Kremlin's pliant instrument in Kazakhstan but as a fearless fighter for freedom leading to the inevitable enthronement of Kazakhstan among the states of the world (authors observation).

out the role of my personality... I have always tried to be above any vanity” (Lillis 2010). Kazakhstan’s one-party parliament had demonstrated rare courage in mustering the 80% of deputies necessary to override the presidential veto. Henceforth, official publications, when referring to Nazarbayev must describe him as the “First Kazakh President - Leader of Nation.”

Nazarbayev has also proven increasingly susceptible to the temptation of commissioning self-aggrandizing monuments in recent years. A large monument in Almaty’s Republic Square, ostensibly celebrating Kazakhstan’s independence from the USSR, contains a popular attraction frequented by newly-wed couples called *The Wishbook*. The centerpiece of the bronze memorial is Nazarbayev’s handprint. It is said that those who place their hands in the imprint will have their dreams fulfilled. A similar presidential handprint enjoys the place of prominence within Astana’s tallest building, *The Padishah’s Egg*, and is also said to be endowed with wish giving powers. Both the building and handprint grace every Kazakh currency note. In June 2010, a statue of Nazarbayev was erected in Ankara and visited by top Kazakhstani politicians, including the prime minister, while a few months later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, a five metre bronze statue of Nazarbayev, embedded in a much larger white obelisk, was unveiled in Astana. This new statue-mania was taken another step when local Shymkent NGO *Kazak Khandygy* (Kazakh Khanate) announced that a 12 metre bronze statue covered with gold leaf had been created with the support of anonymous private sponsors and would be unveiled in Shymkent in time for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence in December 2011 (Interfax Kazakhstan 2010). Complementary to the recent spate of statue building was the official opening of Nazarbayev University on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2010, an institution that aims to become Kazakhstan’s educational flagship with twenty thousand students (Bartlett 2010; Kucera 2010). Nazarbayev claimed that he had “agreed” to the university being named after him ‘so that no one would let me down’ (Bartlett 2010). The decision suggests an increasing willingness to jettison the president’s oft-stated reluctance to have monuments or institutions named after him during his lifetime.

While recent moves to provide Nazarbayev with immunity after he leaves office (CA News 2010) held out hope of the beginnings of an orderly transition, more recent referendum and re-election initiatives appear to reconfirm his incumbent status. More worryingly, perhaps, the public discussion of possible life after Nazarbayev has not been accompanied by the anointing of an obvious successor. One of the few long lasting potential successors had been his eldest daughter (the President has no sons), Dariga Nazarbayeva, who established her own (pro-presidential) party, *Asar* (Together), in 2003 and was a member of parliament from 2003 to 2007. She also succeeded in amassing a media empire that included the popular *Khabbar* and KTK Television channels and numerous influential newspapers, only to see much of it re-integrated into government structures in recent years (Isaacs 2010).<sup>23</sup> The absorption of her party into *Nur Otan* and her abandonment of her parliamentary career (ostensibly to raise her children and grandchildren) leave her an unlikely successor, a view confirmed in interviews with both a prominent opposition figure and a local analyst familiar with these developments, both conducted by one of the authors in 2008 soon after her withdrawal.<sup>24</sup> While the precedent of dynastic succession in the former USSR has already been

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<sup>23</sup> Nazarbayeva’s husband, Rakhat Aliyev, also enjoyed a steady rise during the 1990s becoming First Deputy of Kazakhstan’s National Security Committee (formerly KGB). He was widely tipped to succeed Nazarbayev before being appointed Ambassador to Austria in 2001, which many considered a form of enforced exile. Aliyev’s appointment in July 2005 as First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs was thought to signal a return to the center, but was something of a false dawn. In February 2007, he was again dispatched to Austria; four months later a warrant for his arrest was issued in Astana and (apparently under duress from the President) Dariga Nazarbayeva divorced her husband.

<sup>24</sup>Per interviews conducted with Mr. Adil Nurmakov. Former Head of the External Relations Unit, *Nagyz Ak Zhol - Azat* Party and *For A Just Kazakhstan* (Coalition supporting presidential candidacy of ----- during 2005 election).

set in another oil rich secular Muslim majority state in the region (Azerbaijan),<sup>25</sup> Dariga Nazarbayeva's prospects appear dimmer now than heretofore. Other possible contenders exist; since January 2007, for example, former Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, on Nazarbayev's appointment, has served as Chairperson of the Senate making him first in line to succeed the President should he prove unable to fulfill his duties or die in office. According to the Constitution (Article 48), this successor would complete the remainder of the presidential term without an election, potentially providing ample time to create a new power base.

The absence of any clear successor and related absence of a reliably free and fair democratic system that might facilitate some predictability in methods of succession are both causes of concern. At least one analyst has flagged the potential for a power vacuum post Nazarbayev and the consequent intra-elite competition likely to result once Nazarbayev is no longer in place to mediate between rival business cliques (Junisbai 2010). The same author notes the gap that exists between politicians of all political persuasions and the general population. Nazarbayev's strategy of prioritization of state building over democratization may have been justifiable in the uncertain 1990s (Bremmer and Welt 1995); it seems less so in the contemporary period and leaves open the question of exactly what his legacy will be and what impact it will have on inter-ethnic relations and the balance he has maintained between civic and ethnic nationalism in the post independence period. The relative absence of strong institutional mechanisms of political inclusion leave open the possibility of ethno-national political mobilization by political entrepreneurs; while the absence of a federal structure within Kazakhstan make the prospect of a post-Tito style Yugoslav style break-up appear unlikely, the Tajik civil war and the more recent violence in southern Kyrgyzstan provides dramatic examples of worse case scenarios. Any elite rivalry based on ethnic mobilization could be particularly problematic if it becomes linked to competition between economic elites at the center for continued control of economic rents from the country's ample natural resources, although on the face of it, successfully securing control of these economic rents would provide any successor with access to sufficient resources to impose order, if necessary (a situation quite different from both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both resource poor states).

### **Concluding comments**

In 1995 Kazakhstan approved two referenda, both of which have served to create the political framework of the country and to ensure the dominance of its architect, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Despite the obvious lack of democratic practice – as opposed to the maintenance of impeccable democratic form – various rationalizations have been promoted by presidential supporters and objective observers alike as to why Kazakhstan, to paraphrase the President himself, is not ready for democracy. Strong leadership, it is said, has avoided Balkan-like fragmentation, something that could not have been ruled out in the early 1990s but seems a remote possibility today.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the shock therapy (administered with little anesthetic) of the 1990s may not have been possible had power been divided and more democratic. Painful though necessary changes may have been postponed or diluted thus weakening Kazakhstan's path to the relative prosperity it enjoys in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (with annual GNP growth – though heavily dependent on high oil prices – reaching an enviable 9-10%). Democracy could have led to social disruption and may even

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Almaty, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2008 and with Dostym Satpaev. Energy Security Expert, the head of the regional Risk Assessment Group, Almaty, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2008. Both interviews conducted by Donnacha Ó Beacháin.

<sup>25</sup> Where the illness and death of Heidar Aliev in 2003 resulted in the elevation of his son, Ilham, to the presidency.

<sup>26</sup> As the USSR disintegrated there were signs that political liberalization could have facilitated ethnic mobilization with Kazakh nationalists and Slavic secessionists competing with each other for votes, reducing politics to a zero-sum game.

have been a threat to the territorial integrity of the state. With Nazarbayev at the helm, the ship of state maneuvered through these stormy waters and, while there is much still to contend with, the worst is behind them. Less charitable observers conclude that Kazakhstan's prosperity was guaranteed due to its vast natural wealth and that Nazarbayev suppressed opposition – be it professional, religious, ethnic or nationalist – so as to consolidate his own political and economic position rather than to check real dangers to the state.

The truth may be somewhere between these two extremes. Certainly, despite official pretensions to the contrary, there was nothing inevitable about the rise of Nazarbayev. Bit by bit, the President eliminated all vestiges of opposition until he was able to present himself not as “the best of many” but as the leader without rivals. Kazakhstan finds itself, as a consequence, with a highly centralized Presidential state supported by a state ideology that supports an ambiguous national identity that is neither fish nor fowl, but exhibits aspects of both in an ambiguous fashion. The extent to which this balancing act relies on the presence and ability of the current President is the most important question facing Kazakhstan at present.

As to theories of nationalism and their application to Kazakhstan, this case study highlights the murkiness of social and political dynamics when compared to the relatively clean delineation provided by civic and ethnic ideal types. Suny (2001) correctly identified these tensions in Kazakhstan more than 10 years ago. This article reaffirms and updates this analysis, while also highlighting the extent to which these tendencies have remained constant and on-going through Kazakhstan's second decade of independence. Twenty years constitutes something more than a transitional period; given recent flare ups of ethnic violence (instigated by interested political factions) in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, and the risk of further such conflagration, maintaining this balance and the tensions therein represents a significant political success. Strategic ambiguity, opposing nationalizing and civic trajectories and weak implementation of policy can serve the interests of stability and state building. They have certainly done so in Kazakhstan.

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