

# A note on ethnic return migration policy in Kazakhstan : changing priorities and a growing dilemma

著者	Oka Natsuko
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**A Note on Ethnic Return Migration Policy in Kazakhstan: Changing Priorities and a Growing Dilemma**

Natsuko OKA\*

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**Abstract** This paper offers a brief analysis of the legal aspects of the ethnic return migration policy of Kazakhstan, a post-Soviet Central Asian state that has been active in seeking ties with its diaspora since independence. This paper examines the definition of *oralman* (repatriates) and the establishment of a quota on the number of Kazakh immigrants who are eligible for government funds to show how the rationale and preferences in repatriation policy have changed over the years. By focusing on changes in migration-related legislation in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the paper notes that two key goals of Kazakhstan's migration policy are not necessarily consistent with each other: the promotion of an ethnically based nation-building project by encouraging the "return" of co-ethnics living abroad, and building a workforce that is best suited for the development of the state's economy.

**Keywords:** ethnic return migration, migration law, quota system, Kazakhstan

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\* Area Studies Center, IDE (Natsuko\_Oka@ide.go.jp)

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**INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES (IDE), JETRO**  
**3-2-2, WAKABA, MIHAMA-KU, CHIBA-SHI**  
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The end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union brought both the reunion and division of ethnic communities residing within and beyond the borders of the Soviet state. On the one hand, ethnic groups within the Soviet territory came into long-awaited contact with their co-ethnics abroad, from whom they had been separated for decades. On the other, the borders between nominally sovereign Soviet republics turned into international borders, and persons who were not living in “their own” ethno-national republic suddenly found themselves on the “wrong” side of the border.

Kazakhstan is one of a few post-Soviet republics that have been keen to seek contact with its diaspora. Since the last years of the Soviet era when “repatriation” of ethnic Kazakhs began, according to official statistics, more than 860,000 Kazakhs have moved to Kazakhstan, mostly from neighboring states such as Uzbekistan, Mongolia, China, and Turkmenistan.<sup>1</sup> With a total population of 16 million and 10.1 million Kazakhs in Kazakhstan (the 2009 national census), these “repatriates” (*oralman*) form an essential part of contemporary Kazakhstani society and the Kazakh community in particular.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan’s political elites sought to build a state truly of and for the titular ethnicity by urging Kazakhs abroad to “come back home” and granting them full citizenship of the newly independent state. The aim of this policy was to overcome negative legacies created under the Soviet regime, namely: the minority status of the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and the linguistic as well as cultural russification (though in some aspects, it may be more precise to say sovietization) among the Kazakhs themselves. The “homecoming” of Kazakhs from abroad was expected to contribute to the growth of the Kazakh population, which had declined sharply in the 1930s because of death and out-migration caused by forced sedentarization, mass collectivization, and famine. It was also hoped that the *oralman* would promote a revival of the Kazakh language and culture, as the Kazakhs in the diaspora, in particular those in the “far abroad,” were not affected by the strong trend toward russification and thus were in a relatively better position to maintain their ethno-cultural characteristics.

In independent Kazakhstan, the relevancy of the migration policy encouraging the return of Kazakhs to their ethnic homeland has rarely been questioned. The inclusion of foreign or stateless ethnic Kazakhs into Kazakhstani society was placed as part and

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<sup>1</sup> According to a report by the Commission on Human Rights under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2012), 860,400 Kazakh individuals, or 221,300 households, immigrated to Kazakhstan from 1991 until October 1, 2011. Of this amount, 127,700 households (57.7% of total) were provided assistance under the quota.

parcel of the state's nation-building project, and thus was politically justified. Also, unlike in the cases of other states that have promoted the homecoming of the diaspora, repatriating Kazakhs from abroad are not necessarily viewed as having lost their ethnic purity. Indeed, it is the local Kazakhs, many of whom are linguistically and culturally russified to varying degrees, who are considered by repatriates as having lost contact with their ethnic and cultural past.

Nevertheless, social integration of Kazakh immigrants is indeed a serious challenge for Kazakhstan. While some managed to adapt to the local community and successfully started new careers, a majority of them have faced serious problems in areas such as housing, employment, and education of children. Despite publicly expressed—and politically correct—support for the solidarity of the Kazakh nation, local people do not necessarily welcome their co-ethnics at any cost. A recent analysis of public discourse on the issue of Kazakh return migration shows that the open-arm welcome and initial excitement toward returning Kazakhs have been replaced by warnings that repatriates should not expect too much from the state. Increasingly, Kazakh elites now emphasize that repatriates should contribute to the homeland instead of becoming a burden (Bonnenfant 2012).

This paper is a brief analysis of the legal aspects of the repatriation policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In particular, it examines the definition of *oralman* (repatriates) and the establishment of quotas on the number of Kazakh immigrants who are eligible for government funds to show how the rationale and preferences in return migration policy have changed over the years. By focusing on changes in migration related legislation in the late 2000s and the early 2010s, the paper notes the dilemma of pursuing purposes that are not necessarily consistent with each other: promotion of an ethnically based nation-building project that encourages the return of co-ethnics living abroad and building a workforce that is best suited for the development of state's economy.

### **Who are to be invited to “home”?**

According to Tsuda (2009), more than 20 countries sponsor ethnic return migration in the world, with the specific reasons and purposes behind such policy differing by region. Broadly speaking, ethnic preferences in immigration policy and citizenship law in European countries and Israel are based on the idea that state has responsibility for or obligation to their co-ethnics abroad, who are considered as an integral part of the de-territorialized ethnic nation. As such, members of diaspora are essentially granted the right to return to their homeland. In contrast, in East and Southeast Asian

countries (including Japan) members of the diaspora are expected, first and foremost, to make an economic contribution to their homeland by providing labor, professional skills, or investment. This difference is reflected in the legal status of immigrants: while most European states and Israel grant co-ethnic immigrants citizenship upon return, or allow them to recover the citizenship of ethnic homeland and become dual nationals, Asian states usually limit the mode of immigration to preferential visas for the ethnic brethren.

Kazakhstan's migration and citizenship policies are based on its self-definition as the one and only ethnic center for Kazakhs in the world. The policies also seek to restore historical justice for those who were forced to leave homeland under "colonial" rule and their descendants. Kazakhstan's state-sponsored repatriation program most resembles the prototypical ethnic return migration policies of Israel. Both Kazakhstan and Israel accept co-ethnics solely on the basis of ethnicity without setting other conditions such as language proficiency or country of residence. As stated below, however, in recent years more emphasis has begun to be placed on the possible economic contribution by Kazakh immigrants to homeland rather than the state's obligation toward them.

Next we outline the changes in the definition of the target of ethnic return migration in the official documents.<sup>2</sup> The 1993 Constitution, the first adopted in independent Kazakhstan, allowed "all citizens of the republic who were forced to leave its territory, and all Kazakhs residing in other countries" to obtain Kazakhstan's citizenship without relinquishing one's current passport (Article 4). The 1995 Constitution, however, denied dual citizenship without exception. Meanwhile, the 1992 Migration Law conferred the rights of return to all "compatriots" (*sootchestvenniki*) residing abroad (Article 1). In this context, the term "compatriots" appears to apply to all of former citizens of Kazakhstan, including persons of non-Kazakh ethnicities.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the formal bestowal of rights to repatriation on former citizens of Kazakhstan irrespective of ethnicity, these policies seem to have had little impact on non-Kazakhs. With massive out-migration from Kazakhstan in the 1990s, primarily of ethnic Russians and Germans, it was generally presumed that those who would return to Kazakhstan were Kazakhs. Thus, it is no surprise that the law was soon amended to specify that the ethnic background of returning immigrants must be Kazakh. Article 1

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of documents related to Kazakhstan's ethnic return migration policy, see Oka (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Article 17.3 of the 1992 Migration Law defines "refugees-repatriates" (*bezhestsy-repatrianty*) as compatriots *and* (emphasis is mine) "persons of native nationality" (*litsa korennoi natsional'nosti*, i.e. Kazakhs) who left Kazakhstan because of mass repressions and other reasons, and come back to their homeland. This wording suggests that "compatriots" here includes both Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs.

of the 1997 Migration Law stated that a repatriate (*repatriant* in Russian, *oralman* in Kazakh) is “a person of native ethnicity (*litso korennoi natsional'nosti*) who was expelled from the historic homeland, deprived of citizenship due to the acts of mass political repressions, unlawful requisition, forced collectivization, and other inhumane acts, and voluntarily moves to the Republic of Kazakhstan for permanent residency, and his descendants.”

The Migration Law Amendment of March 27, 2002, redefined the term *oralman*<sup>4</sup> as “foreign or stateless citizens of Kazakh ethnicity, who permanently resided outside of the Republic of Kazakhstan when it obtained sovereignty, and have arrived in Kazakhstan for permanent residency.” Thus, the amended definition does not take into account whether an immigrant had lived in Kazakhstan in the past. We should note, however, that the change in the definition of *oralman* in the 2002 amendment did not affect migration trends, as the amendment did not so much change the migration policy itself as conform the law to actual practices. Even before 2002, Kazakh “repatriates” immigrating to Kazakhstan were not asked whether they or their ancestors had been deported from Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup>

Not all ethnic Kazakhs currently residing beyond the borders of the contemporary territory of Kazakhstan are former refugees (or their descendants) who fled homeland to avoid political turmoil, repression, and famine under the Tsarist or Soviet regime. There are also Kazakhs who had lived on their land outside of the current borders of Kazakhstan for generations, long before Soviet times. If the government had limited the right to “return” to only those who had had lived in Kazakhstan (if technically possible at all), a substantial number of ethnic Kazakhs abroad would have been denied such opportunity.

The 2011 Migration Law stipulates that the ethnic affiliation of a claimant for the status of *oralman* is determined by the information in the person’s identification

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<sup>4</sup> *Oralman* means a repatriate in Kazakh. By this amendment, *repatriant* (repatriate in Russian) was replaced by *oralman* in the Russian text of the law.

The 2011 Migration Law made the definition of *oralman* more rigorous. Article 1.13 stipulates that an *oralman* is an ethnic Kazakh who permanently resided outside of the Republic of Kazakhstan when it obtained sovereignty as well as his children of Kazakh ethnicity who were born after the acquisition of the sovereignty by the republic, have moved to Kazakhstan for permanent residency, and obtained the status of *oralman* by the procedures established by law. “Ethnic Kazakhs” is defined by Article 1.28 as foreign or stateless citizens of Kazakh ethnicity permanently residing abroad.

<sup>5</sup> Commenting on this point, Bolat Tatibekov, an expert on migration issues in Kazakhstan, explained that it was practically impossible to check whether an immigrant (or his/her ancestors) had been forced to leave Kazakhstan in the past (interview, March 8, 2009).

document (Article 20.2 and Article 21.2). Judging from this provision alone, in order to become an *oralman*, a candidate must present an official document that certifies that the person is Kazakh.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Israel, a well-known example of ethnic return migration, one is entitled to citizenship of the ancestral homeland if one of the grandparents is Jewish. This principle contributed to the diversification of the ethnic background of repatriates, which, in turn, raised the question in the local population, “Are they really our co-ethnics?” In Kazakhstan, there are reports that some non-Kazakh immigrants procured a certificate of *oralman* by presenting fabricated or illegally obtained documents. These unlawful cases aside, the “authenticity” of the ethnic background of Kazakh immigrants is rarely questioned.

### **The quota system**

Kazakhstan in principle receives all Kazakhs who wish to move to their historical homeland, without setting a limit of the maximum number of acceptable immigrants. The government should, according to migration law and other related legal documents, provide citizenship and a variety of assistance to all Kazakh repatriates. In addition, a quota is set each year on the number of households entitled to financial benefits such as compensation for travel costs, financial assistance for obtaining housing, and one-time cash assistance.

When the quota for Kazakh immigrants was introduced in 1993, 10,000 households were allocated funds for adaptation by the young state, which was struggling with severe economic crisis itself at that time. However, such a level of assistance could not be sustained and the government began to decrease the number of households eligible for assistance within the framework of the quota system to as low as 500 households in 1999 and 2000. Afterward, likely because of the remarkable economic development of Kazakhstan, the quota was raised and has varied between 10,000 and 20,000 since 2004 (Diener 2009: 227).

If the quantity of the quota has continuously fluctuated since its introduction, a qualitative transformation was brought by the amendment to the Migration Law as of July 6, 2007, which stipulated that inclusion of Kazakh families into the quota system

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<sup>6</sup> In migration laws prior to 2011, no description was included that specified the procedures to determine ethnic background of repatriates. In my interviews with migration committee officials in Almaty (in October 2008) and Pavlodar and Shymkent (in December 2007), they testified that the ethnic affiliation of immigrants from the former Soviet republics and China was determined using the record of ethnicity in the identification documents issued by these countries. In other cases, the Embassy of Kazakhstan in each country checked ethnicity using a birth certificate or other documents.



was to be decided by “taking into account criteria” (*s uchetom kriteriev*) (Article 14.2). The 2007 amendment, however, did not specify the content of these criteria. Since 2008 preferences in the quota system have been given to those with higher education and families having many children.

Furthermore, in December 2008 the government adopted the *Nurly Kosh* (Bright Move) Program with the aim of properly situating immigrants (as well as internal migrants) in Kazakhstan and to address their problems in the spheres of employment and housing. It is worth pointing out that the program was targeted at not only ethnic Kazakhs but also former citizens of Kazakhstan, irrespective of ethnicity, who had left the country in the past and returned for the purpose of “carrying out working activities” (Section 1). These former citizens, together with Kazakh immigrants, are entitled to Kazakhstani citizenship (Section 5.3.2). By implementing this program, it was expected that the highly skilled workers who had previously left Kazakhstan would be encouraged to come back (Section 1). Also, all participants in the program were required to meet certain educational, qualification, and work criteria (Section 5.4).

The trend toward placing greater importance on the skills of immigrants is clearly revealed in the Migration Law enacted in July 2011. This new migration law stipulates that the following categories of people are to be given preference in the quota for financial assistance for Kazakh immigrants (in descending order): (1) those with proper education, qualifications and experiences in a certain area of expertise; (2) families with many children; (3) adult youth who are able to study in institutions of higher education; and (4) immigrants from countries under unstable political, social, and economic conditions (Article 20.4). While categories of (2) and (4) are based on humanitarian grounds, the emphasis on professional skills (and the potential to learn such skills) suggest that 2011 Migration Law as a whole follows recent trends that attach more importance to the economic value of immigrants than to their ethnicity.

The factors behind these changes are the diminished significance of the struggle for ethno-demographic superiority of Kazakhs and the growing demand for workers in Kazakhstan’s thriving economy. At the time of independence, the reestablishment of majority status of the core ethnicity was an important political agenda. However, large-scale out-migration of non-Kazakhs, primarily Russians and Germans, in the 1990s brought victory for Kazakhs in the demographic competition by default. Also, the higher birthrate among Kazakhs than among Slavic communities means that demographic superiority of the former is almost guaranteed. Now, economic factors are more relevant than political ones in Kazakhstan’s migration policy: the government emphasizes the necessity of attracting highly skilled workers who are suited for its

industrial development policy.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned above, Kazakhstan's migration policy resembles that of Israel as both states set a criterion for repatriates only on the basis of their ethnic background without linguistic or geographic conditions. In the early years of independence, Kazakhstan, as Israel did and continues to do so, sought to make use of its co-ethnics abroad as a demographic tool to increase the share of the core ethnicity. For Israel, constitutionally defined as a Jewish state, but with a growing Arab minority and surrounded by hostile Arab states, the maintenance and increase of the Jewish population is a critical security issue. Israel's policies have not changed after the Cold War, even when religiously and culturally diverse immigrants of Jewish decent came en masse and calls for the revision of migration policy mounted.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, the importance of demographic politics continues to diminish in Kazakhstan. The share of Kazakhs as a percentage of the total population of the republic (63.1% according to the 2009 national census) still falls below that of the Jewish population in Israel (75.6% according to the 2008 national census).<sup>9</sup> However, Kazakhstan has managed to co-exist with neighboring states in peace, if not without conflict. With minority elites in Kazakhstan having been suppressed or put under control, there is little risk that they would serve foreign states as a "fifth column." Thus, for Kazakhstan it is no longer necessary to give highest priority to the repatriation of co-ethnics as in the case of Israel.

### **Revision of ethnic return migration policy after the Zhanaozen incident**

In April 2012, the Kazakhstan government decided to suspend the allocation of the quota for 2012 "until further order of the government."<sup>10</sup> Although this does not necessarily mean the complete abolition of the quota system, there has been no move to resume the allocation of the quota as of the end of 2012. Commenting on the necessity of a new program targeted at Kazakh immigrants, Internal Affairs Minister Kalmukhanbet Kasymov stated that the government had lost track of immigrants

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<sup>7</sup> Low-skilled and unskilled jobs are increasingly fulfilled by migrant workers from neighboring Central Asian states, a majority of whom often work illegally in Kazakhstan because the procedure for obtaining a work permit is too complex, and also there are many ways to stay and work informally, evading the strict legal provisions (Dave: forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the migration policy of Israel, see, for example, Joppke and Rosenhek (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Israel Central Bureau of Statistics [<http://www1.cbs.gov.il/census/>].

<sup>10</sup> "V Kazakhstane priostanovlena kvota na immigratsiiu oralmanov," [<http://tengrinews.kz>], April 23, 2012.

under the current scheme and implied that controls on them must be strengthened.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, cases of misuse of privileges intended for Kazakh immigrants who seek permanent residency in Kazakhstan have been reported. A typical pattern is that an immigrant acquires a Kazakhstani passport, receives government funds, and then returns to a previous country of residence. This problem, however, had been pointed out long before 2012.

The decision to suspend the quota in 2012 appears to be related to a different factor—the tragic incident in Zhanaozen, a small city in the Mangistau oblast in oil-rich western Kazakhstan. On December 16, 2011, Kazakhstan’s Independence Day, clashes broke out between striking oil workers, police, and possibly others in the central square of the city, where official ceremonies were organized to commemorate Kazakhstan’s 20 years of independence. Official reports state that civilians were fired on by local police and outside security personnel: 12 people were killed, with dozens more wounded, and three other people died in related violence. For several months prior to the tragedy, thousands of workers employed in oil and gas sector demanded higher wages and improved working conditions in three separate labor strikes against their employers. Without trying to resolve the disputes effectively, the oil companies dismissed hundreds of their employees who participated in the strikes, which only aggravated the grievances of the workers (Human Rights Watch 2012).

The alleged relationship between this incident and Kazakh immigrants was most explicitly indicated by Timur Kulibaev, then the Chairman of the Board of the National Welfare Fund Samruk Kazyna which is the sole owner of the state oil and gas company KazMunaiGas, an important shareholder of two of the three companies affected by labor disputes. In September 2011, Kulibaev publicly stated that these strikes were plotted by *oralman* from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The oil workers who participated in the strikes in turn accused Kulibaev of defaming their dignity, while Kazakh nationalists attacked him for *oralman*-phobia.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that there were some immigrants among the strikers, but Kulibaev’s statement was a clear exaggeration of their role in the labor disputes. However, Kulibaev was perhaps not completely wrong in saying that the government should limit immigration to Zhanaozen as the social infrastructure of the town was not suited to accept a large number of people. Indeed, the influx of immigrants appears to have been a serious burden for the local authorities. According to official statistics, every fifth resident of Mangistau oblast

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<sup>11</sup> “Novuii programmu po pereseleniiu oralmanov razrabatyvaet MVD Kazakhstana – Kasymov,” [http://www.zakon.kz], April 25, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> “Timur Kulibaev nazval zabastovku neftianikov proiskami repatriantov,” [http://rus.azattyq.org], September 30, 2011.

is a Kazakh immigrant, which is the highest share of all regions in the republic.<sup>13</sup>

On December 20, 2011, First Vice Prime Minister Umirzak Shukeev, who headed a government commission on the investigation of the incident, declared that no more immigrants would be settled in Zhanaozen, and referred to the possibility of moving those who had lived in the town to other areas of the republic.<sup>14</sup> The subsequent reduction in the quota also appears to have been affected by the unrest in Zhanaozen: a resolution of December 22, 2011, cut the quota in half to 10,000 households for 2012; whereas from 2009 to 2011 the quota had previously been set at 20,000.<sup>15</sup> As stated above, the allocation of the quota was completely suspended four months later.

The measures taken by the government of Kazakhstan after the Zhanaozen tragedy revealed that it failed to create an effective scheme for utilizing labor and satisfying the needs of Kazakh immigrants, who were officially invited to come to their homeland. Needless to say, it is not only immigrants in Kazakhstan who face a variety of social and economic difficulties such as unemployment. In addition, the problems confronted by immigrants vary, depending on their professional skills, educational background, knowledge of the Russian or Kazakh language, kinship network, personal connections, the time of arrival, and other factors. In general, however, it is perhaps fair to say that, compared with the local population, immigrants generally encounter more difficulties.

Kazakhstan has been promoting repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs under the slogan that it is the obligation of the state to grant its co-ethnics the right to return to their historical homeland. Yet at the same time, by failing to provide enough support for immigrants and making them feel abandoned by their homeland, the Kazakh government in fact continues to create people who are not necessarily loyal but rather disappointed with and critical of the government. On the other hand, the complete abandonment of the long-standing ethnic return migration policy would put the ruling elites in a difficult position, as such a change would mean that the state had moved away from its self-definition as an ethnic center for Kazakhs, which, in turn, would inevitably invite severe criticism from Kazakh nationalists and immigrants.

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<sup>13</sup> Mangistau oblast is now home to the third largest population of Kazakh immigrants after South Kazakhstan oblast and Almaty oblast. If we assume that all of the immigrants (107,500 persons) have settled in Mangistau oblast, their share amounts to 20.1% out of the whole oblast population. See Commission on Human Rights under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2012).

<sup>14</sup> “Programmu po rasseleniiu oralmanov v Zhanaozen sleduet ostanovit, schitaet Shukeev,” [http://www.zonakz.net], December 20, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> “V Kazakhstane priostanovlena kvota na immigratsiiu oralmanov,” [http://tengrinews.kz], April 23, 2012. This article says that the quota set in December 2012 was meant for the years 2011-14, but it appears that it was for 2012-14.

### **A dilemma of ethnic migration policy**

Immigrants of Kazakh descent were expected to become politically and culturally ideal citizens of their ancestral homeland following Soviet rule. In practice, however, integration of Kazakh immigrants into the local community has not been easy, and their repatriation has created new divisions and exacerbated social problems in Kazakhstani society.

Migration policy that encourages the return of co-ethnics, in particular, policies that provides citizenship and financial assistance to make repatriates a full-fledged member of the state (the Europe-Israel model noted above), typically encounter the following challenges from the receiving community. First, the local population often considers these immigrants as the “other” and “not authentic” co-ethnics, as those who have lived under the influence of different cultures for generations naturally adopt the dominant language and culture of the receiving community. Second, local residents tend to complain that they are treated unfairly in relation to immigrants, as the latter are allocated government funds for their needs. In the eyes of the locals, immigrants enjoy too many privileges that are not available to local taxpayers, and this feeling of unfairness is further strengthened by the belief that immigrants share ethnicity in name only. The third criticism comes from the point of view of minorities, non-co-ethnic immigrants, and civil liberty advocates who argue that the state should guarantee equal rights to all people irrespective of ethnicity, and thus should not privilege co-ethnic immigrants at the expense of others.<sup>16</sup>

The complexity of the issue of cultural assimilation in Kazakhstan lies in the fact that both the Kazakh diaspora in foreign lands and also Kazakhs in their homeland during the 70 years of Soviet rule experienced linguistic and cultural transformation. For some Kazakhs, primarily in urban areas, Russian became their first language as they received education almost exclusively in Russian. This shift led to a linguistic and cultural cleavage between Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs (Dave 2007).<sup>17</sup> For the former, co-ethnic immigrants, in particular those from outside of the former Soviet Union, are the cultural “other,” and it is not easy to accept them as “us” on

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<sup>16</sup> In their comparative analysis of the cases of Israel and Germany, Joppke and Rosenhek (2009) categorized the first and second arguments as a “restrictive challenge” and the third as a “liberal challenge.”

<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, the Kazakh population cannot simply be divided into Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking. Many Kazakhs speak both languages, and the difference of individual language proficiency is great. Also, language proficiency does not necessarily correlate with ethnic identity: a Russian-speaking Kazakh may be an eager advocate of the Kazakh language and culture.

the ground of the shared ancestry. However, in the eyes of immigrants, even the rural Kazakh-speaking brethren are quite russified as they still cherish classic Soviet values such as “the friendship of peoples” and the “approach to the civilized world through the Russian language” (Sancak 2007). After encounters with such co-ethnics in their ancestral homeland, immigrants often boast that it is they who managed to sustain “genuine” Kazakhness (Diener 2009: 272-286). Such self-identification by immigrants, in turn, serves as a factor that alienates repatriates from the locals.

In addition to the conflict over Kazakhness, the sense of unfairness in the local population as to the allocation of government funds for repatriation also draws antipathy toward Kazakh immigrants. With the backdrop of the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the opinion that the interests of locals should be given preference over those of immigrants may continue to grow in the future. The amount of financial assistance to repatriates in Kazakhstan is rather modest in comparison with those given by the governments of Germany and Israel. Nevertheless, many locals feel that it is not fair that those who just arrived enjoy privileges not available for the local population who, they argue, remained in Kazakhstan even in difficult times and have contributed to the motherland for generations.

Discontent with the state-sponsored ethnic return migration project notwithstanding, public protest against this policy has rarely occurred in Kazakhstan to date. This is because the invitation of co-ethnics from abroad was authorized within the framework of a decolonization project aimed at redressing the wrongs of the past and at reviving the Kazakh nation. Also, in the course of Kazakh-oriented state building process, non-Kazakh minorities in Kazakhstan rarely objected to the repatriation policy of the state. In the early 1990s there was strong criticism against the allowance of dual citizenship for Kazakh immigrants, but this criticism focused not on the return migration of Kazakhs per se, but on the fact that only ethnic Kazakhs were allowed to hold two passports (this dispute ended when the 1995 Constitution banned dual citizenship). Indeed, many minorities themselves left Kazakhstan for their ancestral homeland, if such opportunities were available.

The absence of political forces against repatriation provides the ideal condition for its continuation and promotion. However, the invitation of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad lost its priority in the political agenda after the majority status of the titular ethnicity in Kazakhstan was regained. In recent years, the assistance to immigrants has become a social and economic burden to the government. It is unlikely, however, that the Kazakhstan government will completely abandon its ethnic return migration policy. Having defined itself as the state for all Kazakhs of the world, Kazakhstan has entitled

co-ethnics with the right of return to their ancestral homeland to become full-fledged citizens. If the government declares that the state cannot accept ethnic brethren any more, such a decision will surely invite severe criticism from Kazakh nationalists as well as immigrants, who will readily cast the ruling elites as traitors to the Kazakh nation. On the other hand, instability in the society will only grow worse if new immigrants continue to arrive while the integration of those who already have settled barely proceeds, and their social problems remain unsolved. Kazakhstan finds itself caught in a dilemma: because of its ethnic roots and de-colonization agenda, Kazakh repatriation policy cannot be easily abandoned even if it creates more problems than benefits.

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