

NATION-BUILDING AND CULTURAL POLICY IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

Kazakhstan, the last emerging independent state from the former Soviet Union, inherited multiple challenges of having to build a new state and nation, while engaged in the painful economic and political transformation. Since independence was declared in 1991, diversity and tolerance have been officially at the heart of Kazakhstan's national identity. Nevertheless, building a single nation in the country of two large ethnic groups (Russians and Kazakhs), with the reversed proportion of the language proficiency – as there are more ethnic Kazakhs but more Russian-speakers in the country – has been an ambivalent and controversial process. Constructing a nation in a primordial sense in this multi-ethnic country might well prove to be a mission impossible. Another option is promotion of the idea of a civic nation based on carefully drafted and consciously adapted multicultural policies. The existence, implementation, and success of such policies are contingent on several factors, including historical, demographic, and social ones. Some are linked to expedient political and economic strategies, however, and their further development would entail democratization of the political system in Kazakhstan. It seems that in Kazakhstan, inter-ethnic tensions have been alleviated by the fact that two major ethnic groups have not been, by and large, in direct confrontation and are balancing each other in the managed tradeoffs. So far, the dynamically developing society might be able to accommodate the interests of major ethnic groups but all the proposed solutions are inconclusive. The focus of this paper is on the bi-lingual and multicultural constellation and cultural and language policy pathways in Kazakhstan, as analyzed through the lenses of several models available in the respective literature on post-communist nation-building. The paper's methodology explores systematic historical and cultural interpretations and comparative intercultural-institutional analysis.

Keywords: Nation-building, Kazakhstan, ethnic diversity, cultural and language policy, nationalizing state, democratization

Introduction

As in the other post-Soviet successor states, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had offered political elites in Kazakhstan and opportunity to link the historical ambitions and culture of the titular nation more closely to the existing and newly-built state structures and to increasingly secure equality, if not privileges, to the titular ethnos in society. From the very beginning, the process was characterized by the ambivalence in perceiving the meaning of the newly-gained independence in reorganization of spheres of influence among ethnic groups. It is noteworthy that Kazakhstan was the last of the Soviet republics to declare its independence, the hesitant act (which happened rather by default) of the country little prepared for state and nation-building tasks lying ahead (cf. Allison, 2004; Lloyd, 1997, p. 97).

Kazakhstan, geographically the largest country in Central Asia (as large as all of Western Europe), would be no exception to the notion of Central Asian “awkward states” as

defined by Field (2001) and Kavalski (2006), in a sense a combination of demobilized population and the relatively weak state.¹ By its ethnic composition, the country can be called truly multi-ethnic in nature, hosting numerous ethnic groups with a long history of migration and changing ethno-cultural spatial patterns. According to official statistics, more than 140 different ethnic groups live on the territory of Kazakhstan today. In 2009, 63.1 per cent of the population was Kazakh, 23.7 per cent was Russian, and some 10 per cent comprised Germans, Tatars, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, and Uyghurs. The remaining 3 per cent include members of dozens of other nationalities. In Kazakhstan, the majority group's (Kazakhs') share of the total population is in Kazakhstan the lowest of all post-communist states (with the exception of Latvia). Historically, the northern part of Kazakhstan tended to have a higher Russian population-ratio due to an extensive influx of Russians and Cossacks during the late 19th century, and during periods of Soviet agricultural development, especially from the 1960s. Kazakhs had traditionally been a nomadic nation losing its lifestyle relatively recently. During the 19th century, across this vast country perhaps a million Kazakhs died as the region was subjected to Russian, Cossack and Tartar immigration, and due to failed revolts, famine and oppression by the Russian army (Rashid 1994, p. 111). Some 250,000 Kazakhs also died in a failed revolt in 1916, with perhaps another million perishing during enforced collectivization of farms (Gardiner-Garden 1995b, p.36). After 1924, the Soviets sought to settle the nomadic Kazakh into a more static life-style around villages and later on collective farms, often hunting down those groups which refused to cooperate (Taheri 1989, p.102). During the WW2 the country was used by Stalin as a 'dumping ground for ethnic groups whose loyalties were in doubt' (Rashid 1994, p. 107). These groups included dozens of minorities, including Germans, Chechens, Meshket Turks, Uzbeks, Tartars, Armenians, Koreans and others.

In a sense, and partly utilizing a moderated version of Brubaker, we may look at Kazakhstan as a “nationalizing state” as one featuring the following characteristics: (1) the existence of a conceived core nation (here the Kazakh nation); (2) achieving the statehood in which the titular nation forms a majority; (3) but is not perceived as fully realized or is conceived; (4) perceptions and expectation that pushes the elite to take actions. Another Brubaker's point referring to the elites' actions as “often justified by previous discriminations” (cf. Brubaker, 1996) does not play a significant role here.

However, arguably, unlike its Central Asian counterparts, Kazakhstan has officially set out on the path of building a multiethnic civic nation. This path, especially if pursued more consistently than it has actually been so far, would set Kazakhstan apart from typical “nationalizing states” as theorized by Brubaker. Since the fall of the Soviet Union Kazakhstan has been building a new state in which the key role was played by the formerly sovietized (but mostly Kazakh) elite recycled from the Soviet times and which was increasingly dominated by its President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Gradually, Nazarbayev has granted himself ever-stronger authoritarian powers, allowing him to initiate and sponsor, if not absolutely control, all major projects in the country, including the process on building anew nation. Nazarbayev options for steering this projects were determined and limited mostly by three factors: the ethnic heterogeneity of the population, the widespread use of the Russian language among the population at large (including ethnic Kazakhs), the consideration of the power-balance, and perhaps also, geopolitical considerations. By him controlled Kazakhstan's ruling elite did not consider it reasonable to apply a purely ethnicity-based conception of nationhood to the newly independent Kazakhstan, as did not seem either prudent nor feasible.

A brief political history of Kazakhs

During a military expansion in the sixteenth century Kazakh territories were divided into three hordes (*zhuz*), each of which was governed by a Khan. The Great Horde (*Uly zhuz*) spread through the southern territories, the Middle Horde (*Orta zhuz*) over the north-east parts

and the Small Horde (*Kishi zhuz*) over the western area, covering approximately the current territory of Kazakhstan (Gumpfenberg, 2002, p. 31). This division gave the new nation not only a strategic military advantage, “but was also contingent to the particular geography of the steppes since the three most important pasture lands were divided among the hordes” (Olcott, 1995, p. 11). Despite the administrative division of the vast territory, surprisingly, very few linguistic or cultural differences developed among the *zhuzes*. Rather, belonging to one of these hordes (which even today often plays a role in determining one’s ancestry) has been tied to the idea of having Kazakh ethnicity. In the Kazakh mythology, the three hordes are the key element of the legend of Kazakh unity, according to which the first Khans of the three hordes were the sons of the mythic founder of the Kazakh nation *Alash* (cf. Kesici, 2011). From 1825, the Kazakh territories of the Middle and Little Horde were incorporated into the growing Russian empire, partly as a result of the military standoff between the Hordes and the Dzhungar empire. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian empire had administrative and military control over all Kazakh territories and the Kazakh Khanate had been completely abolished (Otarbaeva, 1998, p. 426). In the big wave of Russian colonization, at least 1.5 million ethnic Russians moved to Kazakhstan between 1886 and 1916 (Davis et al., 1998, p.478). Because of clear Russian predominance in economic and military affairs, the situation of Kazaks had become increasingly precarious, and their political sovereignty was non-existent.

Kazakhstan has inherited From the Soviet times “a unique system for managing the needs of ethnic minorities” dating back to its Soviet past (Jones, 2010, 159). As in other Soviet republics, Kazakhstan was affected by an important aspect of the Soviet nation-building strategy: the institutionalization of the ethnic category (see Brubaker, 1998). In Lenin’s notion of how the nationality question was to be solved, the non-Russian peoples of the former Russian empire had to go through a process of identity emancipation in order to be fully integrated into a new socialist state. In making this argument, Lenin warned against the danger of the legacy of the colonial past accompanied by repression eventually leading to ‘reactive ethnicity’, which could endanger the solidarity of a workerist-peasant state. A process of revitalization and equalization of other ethnic nations and ethnic groups would be achieved by allowing the formerly colonized ethnics to retain and develop their own linguistic and cultural traditions and to gain a certain level of autonomy within a federal Soviet Union.

This was supposed to serve as a precondition for these groups to be able to accept the new civilizational objectives of the socialist revolution - and thus be able to draw closer together and, with the next step melting into one Soviet nation (Kaiser, 1994, pp. 98-100). Depending on its relative level of development a group was given the status of a ‘nation’ (*natsiya*), a ‘people’ (*narodnost*) or an ‘ethnic group’ (*etnicheskaya gruppa*) (see Benner, 1996, pp. 44-45). As the Kazaks fitted into Stalin’s definition used to determine whether an ethnic group was to be given the status of a ‘nation’, they were granted their (socialist) autonomous republic in which they became the ‘titular’ nation.³

In 1927-1928, in the framework of its policy of ‘indigenization’ (*korenizatsiya* in Russia) the Soviet Union began to promote the mandatory recruitment of members of the core nation to the administration, communist party and cultural establishments of the autonomous republic. The main objective of this strategy was to rally non-Russian populations around the common socialist ideology and the Bolshevik project in the hope that a Soviet socialist identity will be formed, as captured by Stalin’s terms of “national in form, socialist in content” (Jones, 164; cf. Beyrau, 2001, pp. 208-210). At the same time, as Kaiser (1994) notes, “The development of national forms, along with a rapid increase in literacy and educational attainment in the indigenous language, [were] the major achievements of this period of *korenizatsiya*” (p. 125). In the process, in addition to drawing national Kazakh cadres to the Communist Party and the republic’s administration, the promotion of the Kazakh language “further separated the national majority from minorities who were not part of the

core nation, thereby creating a distinct boundary between Kazakhs and non-Kazakh minorities” (Kesici, p. 41).

One goal of *korenizatsiia* was to make it difficult for Soviet citizens to identify themselves with traditional categories of religion, locality, or kin and, instead of depending on such identifications, the non-Russian population were expected to identify themselves as members of officially designated ethnic nations, drawn under the control of the officially institutionalized ideology. Thus, as Jones (2010) argued, “*korenizatsiia* helped to eliminate potential oppositions to state-sponsored identities making the officially sponsored forms of identification” (p. 163). However, the policy, took by the end of 1930s another turn when the Soviet leaders started a campaign of “normative inversion” (cf. Simon, 1986, p.172). The ethnic Russians were declared ‘first among equals’ and especially from 1937 enjoyed a position of the culturally superior group tasked with the mission to help more backwards peoples in their modernization efforts (cf. *ibid*). This new strategy led to a policy of russification, i.e. of including the ‘backwards’ groups in the Soviet nation through an increased influence of ethnic Russians and Russian language. Many Kazakh national institutions were closed and the requirement that Russian officials in non-Russian republics speak the indigenous languages (which was a prerequisite for employment during the *korenizatsiia*) was removed (see Dave, 2007, p. 65). The Russification of the education system was progressing systematically; as a result, for instance, “by the late Soviet period only two Kazakh-language schools were left in Almaty, the most populous city of Kazakhstan” (Fierman, 2005, p. 406). This process of “russification of the masses” was perhaps more successful in Kazakhstan than in any other soviet national republic. According to Jones (2010), the effects of *korenizatsiia* and its reversal before WW2 have cast its long shadow on the perception of national identity in the independent Kazakhstan in the “reduced ethnic nationalism to the level of form through the usage of ethnic languages and the performance of cultural traditions, while Soviet citizens practiced “civic nationalism” through a socialist “content” (p. 164).

Similarly, J. Wheeler (2010) succinctly captured the ambivalence resulting from the Soviet policies:

“[The] Soviet nationalities policy meant that, even as the culture and way of life of the Kazakh steppes were being destroyed, a primordial sense of ethnicity became valorised as the most important marker of identity; and the Kazakh SSR, in which Kazakhs were a minority, was deemed the homeland of the newly defined Kazakh nation. The result is that modern Kazakh identity is marked by a deep sense of insecurity: while there is an awareness on the part of the Kazakhs that their position in modernity is shaped by the Russians, who both bullied and helped them into it, there is nevertheless a sense that they must be distinct from Russians, that the nationality inscribed in their papers should carry some meaning.”

Institutionalization of “kazakhization” after 1991

The issue of nation-building, particularly in a sense of determining the question of who and in whose interest will be able to appropriate or access the resources of the state, is inevitably linked, (and to a large degree) to the issue of consolidation of the state. After Kazakhstan gained independence, it granted citizenship to all its population, regardless of their ethnic background;⁴ at the same time, however, some elements of nationalization’ of Kazakhstan (to use Brubaker’s ‘ terms) have been introduced. This was done mostly through another “normative inversion”, this time as enhancing the position of Kazakhs within the ethnic hierarchy (cf. Kesici, p. 38). Increased emphasis on the Kazakh ethnic content of the nation is evident in comparing the first two constitutions of Kazakhstan, of 1993 and 1995.⁵ Whatever exact reason for the change were, it is clear that a new emphasis on the ethnicity-based concept of territoriality was effectively introduced. Thus in principle, as Kesici puts it, “the constitution lays the foundation of the concept of Kazakhstan as the homeland of ethnic

Kazakhs” (Kesici, p.45). Significant as this might be, the preamble of the Constitution keeps the idea of Kazakhstan as a country of unified people(s) without assigning privileges to any of them. This moderate nationalist idea was elaborated in Nazarbayev’s *Order On the Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (in May 1996). The order starts with the assumption that “every state emerges on the basis of an ethnic community, and that every ethnic group needs its own state to provide for the material and spiritual needs of this ethnic group” (as cited in Kesici, p. 45). In the Order, Nazarbayev argues that Kazakhstan is the ethnic centre of the Kazakhs and that the multinationalism of Kazakhstan society was the result of emigration by non-Kazakh groups into Kazakh territories. What logically follows from this is that Kazakhs should have special status in Kazakhstan and that any nation building has to take this fact into account. (*Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the RK*, 1996). This very assumption that the Kazakh group is the ‘state-forming nation’, existing somehow parallel to the Kazakhstani nation which comprises the ‘people of Kazakhstan’, has been repeated many times by Nazarbayev (cf. Lillis, 2010).

At the onset of independence, new state symbols were introduced to further highlight the Kazakh origins of the country. The three main state symbols of Kazakhstan, the national flag, the national emblem and the national anthem, have almost exclusive national Kazakh connotations and refer to the Kazakh traditional values, images, and symbols. Unlike the national flags of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the flag of Kazakhstan has no religious symbols (there are no half-crescents or stars). Thus, unlike the neighboring states, Kazakhstan did not attempt to “instrumentalize religion in creating a national ideology” (cf. Hilger, 2009). The country’s national emblem features another traditional Kazakh symbols: the housetop (*shanyraq*) of the traditional Kazakh *yurt* depicted in its middle. As for the Kazakhstan’s national anthem, its latest version adopted in 2006 reflects, akin to the Constitution, the evolving nation-building strategy of Kazakhstan. Kazakhs, as the original successors to the nationhood, are portrayed as natural epical heroes of the state creation, in which, however, their ethnic and civic belongings to Kazakhstan complement each other. Concurrently, the anthem can be interpreted as linking all traditional non-Kazakh ethnic groups to the territory of the state by their birth, citizenship and common historical fate, granting them special civic status in Kazakhstan.⁶

One of the sources of Nazarbayev’s rather conciliatory approach to the national question has very likely been a weak level of national identity self-perception among the citizenry. There has been little research done, both in the country and elsewhere, on issue of subjective feeling of one’s ethical or national identity and its strength. There are some indications, however, that intensity of national identity or nationalism is rather low for most of the Kazakhstan’s ethnic group, including the Kazakhs (cf. Jones, 2010).⁷ Most observers agree that Kazakh national identity and nationalism are “relatively weak due to the fuzzy boundaries between Kazakh and Russian culture, and the ‘negative identity’ of many Kazakh elites at the time of independence (Cummings, 2005, p. 78; see also Schatz, 2004; Dave, 2007).

Ideology and institutions

Nazarbayev has often emphasized that Kazakhstan is a multi-cultural country that has been able to maintain a high degree of inter-ethnic harmony (Lillis, 2010). Apart for the slowly forwarding of the language policy (*see next*), President Nazarbayev, designed another instrument intended to institutionalize inter-ethnic relations, *Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan* (APK), a unique consultative body established by the Constitution’s Article 44 and designed to represent interests of all ethnic groups in the country.⁸ Established in 1995, the APK brings together more than 800 ethnic and cultural associations. (It meets in full session at least annually to discuss new ideas and the Assembly’s operating strategy.) In 2007,

the Assembly became a constitutionally-recognized body which sends nine members to the national Parliament. The constitutional-legal basis for the Assembly was provided in October 2008 with the *Law On the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan*. According to the Law, “the Assembly contributes to the realization of the government’s policies regarding nationalities ... [and] to guaranteeing interethnic harmony in Kazakhstan within the process of forming a Kazakhstan state identity and nation ... in relation to the consolidating role of the Kazakh people.” (Nazarbayev, 2008) The law states that a primary assignment of the Assembly is to promote the preservation, revitalization, and the development of the ethnic cultures, languages, and traditions of the peoples of Kazakhstan, “on the basis of principles of equality”. (Ibid)⁹ At the APK session in 2008, five main principles were formulated in order to facilitate a Kazakhstan’s model of interethnic and inter-confessional tolerance: 1) people’s unity; 2) national values- tolerance and responsibility; 3) consolidating role of the title ethnicity; 4) ethnic, confessional, cultural and language diversity as main wealth; and 5) the state creates conditions for languages’ cultural development. Arguably, the Assembly is to serve as resource of support the promotion of cultural preservation and revitalization among Kazakhstan’s ethnic nations, as a forum for discussing issues related to inter-ethnic coexistence and keep the country on the track of civic nation building in Kazakhstan. However, as some note, the APK might be seen as a “grouping of presidential loyalists representing the country’s ethnic groups” (Lillis, 2009).

In 2009, President Nazarbayev initiated the so-called Doctrine of National Unity (further doctrine) which was to provide a blueprint for strengthening the inter-ethnic harmony for years to come. Implementation of the doctrine should ensure maintaining the multicultural character of the Kazakh society and its consolidation around common values, such as patriotism, tolerance, appreciation of common history. Three key principles are singled out in the doctrine: 1. “one country, one destiny”, 2, “various origins, equal opportunities”, and 3. “development of a national spirit” (cf. Mostafa, 2011).¹⁰ The doctrine explicitly prohibits any forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, language or religion and provides specific recommendations for state institutions, education system, and mass media.¹¹

The doctrine has not been uncontested in Kazakhstan, namely because in it Nazarbayev envisaged Kazakhstan to become a kind of multicultural melting pot in which every citizen was first and foremost a "Kazakhstani."¹² This notion of new ethnicity-neutral citizenship, where the civic boundaries of the nation have been expanded to include all ethnic groups (Kesici, p. 53)¹³ attracted criticism from Kazakh “nationalists”. In response to Nazarbayev’s doctrine, a group identifying itself as “the National Patriots” (further Patriots) has, for instance, argued that the Kazakh language is losing out to Russian and should receive even more prominence in the state than Kazakhstan’s official policies permit. With the input of the Kazakh ethnonational groups, changes were made to the final version of the doctrine, which had to take into consideration their objections and demands of and was introduced in May 2010 (Lillis, 2010). Thus, as Lillis noted, the process of promoting national unity may have become more protracted than originally anticipated, but it also showed that political dialogue (albeit limited) can produce positive results in Kazakhstan (Lillis, 2010).

Language policy in Kazakhstan

The process of nation-building in the post-Soviet space inevitably brought to the forefront the status of native languages across the respective republics. The native language issue has been addressed by the former Soviet republics in different ways, depending on states’ historical retrospective, local component/population, political, cultural and socio-economic content, etc. However, in the Republic of Kazakhstan after twenty years of independence the discourse and empirical manifestation of the implementation of Kazakh language (the language of the titular nation), and the status of Russian as the language of

inter-ethnic communication has evolved in a quite specific, if not unique, manner. This evolution, on one hand at the level of intensiveness of learning, usage and cultural perception of the Kazakh language within the multi-ethnic society of the state, and on the other hand the escalation of political debates on the matter of the language importance in the context of nation-building and civic identity among the various types of Kazakhstani elites, activists and institutions, has been complex and contentious. This paper aims to contextualize the uniqueness of this particular titular language case, and will analyze the current policies, tendencies and perspectives around the language issue in Kazakhstan over the course of its independence.

Language official status and policies (brief overview)

According to article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995), the Kazakh language is officially recognized as the state language. Added later were Constitutional modifications (1997) and interpretations of the Constitutional Council of KZ (2001, 2007) which kept the official status of the Kazakh language and strengthened its priority, while the Russian language, earlier in 1989 was defined as the “language of interethnic communication,” as well as entitled in 1995 to be “equally used with Kazakh language in state institutions” (Constitution of 1995, art. 7; Law on Languages, art. 5).

Some experts and politicians mention that this rather pragmatic approach would allow a reconciliation of the historical context of the ethnically diverse Kazakhstani population, its geographic distribution (affecting the usage of Kazakh or Russian in different parts of the country), and simultaneously retaining inter-ethnic stability, possibly minimizing the emigration of Russian-speaking population from the state, which could be observed in some post-Soviet territories, and sometimes had an overwhelming character and negative economic impact for the last two decades (Matuszkiewicz, 2010). The unquestioned significance and impact of the Russian language in cultural, socio-economic and political arena of Kazakhstan becomes clear with the overwhelming number of higher educational institutions, schools (Fierman, 2006), media space conversant in Russian language. Its importance has been articulated by the President of Kazakhstan repeatedly, as has state policy towards the respect and value of the languages of other ethnicities of the country, followed by establishment (and representation in the Parliament) of the institution of the Assembly of the Kazakhstani Nation. Moreover, Kazakhstani authorities in 2007 attempted to enlarge the multi-language framework by a so-called “Trinity of the Languages” cultural project, including Kazakh, Russian and English into the category of the prior languages, as well as announcing 2007 as the “Year of the Russian Language” (State Program of the Functioning and Development of Languages, 1998). The latter, however, was not fulfilled or vastly supported neither by institutions, nor by local intelligentsia or large community due to various reasons, amongst which the slow progress of learning/usage and extremely low demand of the state language at the level of socio-economic sphere was a main argument.

The range of official (governmental) steps undertaken to enforce the implementation of the Kazakh language included the following: issuing of the State Program on the steady transition of the documentation proceedings into Kazakh language in the state institutions 2001- 2010 (Decree of the President of RK, 2000), increase of the Kazakh language subject portions in the curricula of educational programs (in Russian-speaking educational institutions), introduction of the state TV channel “Kazakhstan” entirely broadcasting in Kazakh language (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on TV and Radio Broadcasting, 1997), a required knowledge of state language while being employed into governmental structures, etc. This wide instrumental assortment accompanied by other measures taken (for example, repatriation of the ethnic Kazakhs (oralmans) from other territories), aiming to revitalize and enforce the national values, language and unity finally frames into the process of “kazakhization”, which is highly discussed today and represents a complicated, often

controversial socio-political process, naturally affecting the overall scenario of national self-identification, civil unification and nation-building in the state.

Certain examples depicting the outcomes of language policies implementation provide significant room for further discussions about linguistics at the top political level. Recent appeals by the Head of the Board of the “Khabar Agency” A. Ukibayev, who proposed to the Senate representatives to require all foreign TV channels broadcasting in Kazakhstan to follow a language balance of not less than 50% conducted in Kazakh language, received a positive response from some Senate deputies (<http://news.nur.kz/kk/266412.html>). At the same time, the Head of the working committee on Assistance to Voluntary Migration to Russia in the Embassy of Russian Federation, M. Pusteko, mentioned in an interview that a sharp rise (doubling in 2011) in potential migrants was explained in many cases as the result of “fear that the young generation may lose Russian culture and language” and limited economic opportunities for Russians due to the lack of Kazakh language skills (<http://www.km.ru>). Although the official reaction of leading authorities to extreme nationalistic policies still demonstrates a pragmatic and careful approach towards state language promotion and status, and, as a result of this policy, often refers to the stable Kazakhstani inter-ethnic situation, there are ongoing debates among political elites as to the efficiency of a soft policy towards the Russian language on the one hand, and a concurrent intensification of kazakhization of society at all levels on the other (Zhuravlev, 2011).

The arguments surrounding the language issue

The supporters of intensification of the linguistic kazakhization, using various channels of influence – from open letters to the President and mass media statements to political parties representations and state officials – insists on a quick transition to the Kazakh language in all spheres of life, emphasizing the unity, if not inseparability between language, civic, and national consciousness, independence, sovereignty and statehood. Their appeal reflects on a gamut of issues and complaints, encountering the previous historical colonial injustices towards the Kazakhs and their language during the Russian-Soviet periods, intensive cultural russification and sovietization, linguistically unbeneficial replacements of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin and then Cyrillic styles, lack of Kazakh knowledge among many ethnic Kazakhs or state-officials, extremely low socio-economic need of Kazakh language in urban zones, etc., and even fears of a possible vanishing of Kazakh language in the future. (Mashayev, 2012).

Their opponents, mostly coalescing around President Nazarbayev, point out the inevitability of a steady transformation of the Kazakhstani society, an evolving reality of social modernization and unification and consolidation around the idea of a multi-ethnic nation. Those more liberal among them would even argue that narrowly perceived politico-cultural kazakhization contradicts introduction of “liberal reforms, and democratization” (cf. Nurekeyev, 2013).

New tendencies

The proposal on transformation of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin by 2025 became yet another contentious tangent to the language issue. It created broad disputes of pros and cons of such a linguistic shift inside all social and political groups, regardless of their position towards the language status and its political implications. Again, the issue created two main flows of disputers, encountering philologists, political scientists, sociologists, and other representatives of intelligencia.

Numerous factors are used to support the arguments of both sides, again ranging from the geo-historical to the political. The Turkic origins of the Kazakh language for some specialists and experts appears to be a strong argument for following the example and experience of Turkey and Azerbaijan in regard to alphabetical latinization. Moreover, a

radical group of latinization supporters proposes settling the issue by 2017, that is, by the beginning of the international exposition “Expo 2017” (Aleksperov, 2013). To accent the importance of such a linguistic transformation, they emphasize its necessity in terms of cultural integration and the political identity of the nation, overcoming the Russian influence, the pan-Turkic dimension, and the evolution of the language itself. The technological benefits from latinization for successful integration into the world informational space serves as another powerful argument for them (Kozyrev, 2012). To accelerate the process, a group of philologists at the Language Institute named after A. Baitursynov has already prepared a project for the Latin graphic alphabet, recently published in the state newspaper (Kazakhstanskaya Pravda).

Opponents charge that this change would discourage learning of Kazakh (the Cyrillic alphabet, they say, used for the Russian language looks and sounds more familiar to the Kazakhstani Russian-speaking groups, especially the elderly, while Latin letters would be completely associated with a foreign language cognation) (Umarov, 2012). Others warn of the possibility of a budgetary collapse, highlighting the enormous financial implications of the process, pointing out the unpreparedness of the educational system, the problems of communication across older and younger generations, issues of information and values “being lost in translation”, and the political risk involved in the project should it fail (cf. Kozyrev, 2012).

The alphabetical change would inevitably bring a revolutionary transformation in the educational, economic, cultural, social and political arenas, but the question, with which all the discussants struggle, remains: how and whether it would contribute to the process of national unification and formation of the strong nation, statehood and civic society in Kazakhstan?

Challenges of nation-building in Kazakhstan: Models and theories

As Wheeler (2010) points out, at the start of the country’s independence Kazakhstan’s leader were well aware of the challenge “posed by large numbers of ethnic Russians living in the north of the country, who previously had scarcely been aware of which side of the border they were living on.” According to Wheeler, the old Soviet internationalism could help to avoid secessionist claims from Russians in the northern part of the country but “internationalism was not enough to ensure state legitimacy. Kazakhstan was born into a world of nation-states.”¹⁴

The debate over the doctrine in the 2002 and the ongoing debate on the issues related to the promotion and reform of the Kazakh language cut directly through the dilemma of available models of arrangements between the state and ethnic groups (and their asymmetries). The original text of the Nazarbayev’s doctrine argued that “favoring a civic rather than an ethnic model of national community is the course upon which Kazakhstan’s leaders have chosen to establish interethnic stability in the society” (Jones, p. 166).

According to Kesici (2011), the dilemma between a civic Kazakhstani nation and ethnic Kazakh nation is from the historical perspective inevitable. On the one hand, “the civic notion of nation, which the state elite is trying to institutionalize, exists in parallel to the ethnic Kazakh nation, which legitimizes the existence of Kazakhstan as a nation state” (p. 54). On the other hand, the very Kazakh nation, “consolidated especially through the existence of the Kazakh Khanate and Alash Orda, and these entities claims of territory and statehood, cannot be undone; the Kazakh nation, rooted in the tradition of the hordes system, “cannot be swept aside” (ibid, p. 55).

Taking a more complex approach, constructivist and historical approaches emphasize that both national and international actors, through the historical, political, economic, and technological processes within the social context of modernity are the main forces in constructing the nation, rather than narrowly understood cultural and language factors.

Similarly, Brubaker general theory characterizing “nationalizing states” or “nationalizing nationalism” derives from the assumption that nation should not be viewed as a definitive group category but rather as political practices whereby nationalism is evoked to serve political objectives.

For instance, as Taras Kuzio (2001) in his criticism of Brubaker points out, (all) civic state may be seen as “nationalizing states”, and having “ethnocultural cores” and thus cannot be “wholly neutral when deciding such questions as [their own] historical myths, languages, ...symbols” (p. 136). The case of Kazakhstan in particular seems to confirm Kuzio’s main argument that the distinction between “nationalizing state” and nation-building makes little analytical sense. Brubaker’s framework assumes a dynamic inter-relation between the factors of “nationalizing”, among which the national state-elite plays a hegemonic role at the expense of minorities. This has not been the case in Kazakhstan where even the official rhetoric has been treading carefully as to not make any impression of exclusion of any minority from the common nation-building – except for the (rather natural) insistence on the growing role of the Kazakh language and identifying the state symbols from among the traditional Kazakh historical symbols.

Conclusion:

Hesitant nation-builders in Kazakhstan

Nation-building in Kazakhstan has faced, from its very start, an almost impossible dilemma of a titular *ethnicum* insecure in its identity, only half-conscious of its ambitions, not mastering in its majority its own language, and only slowly recovering from the social and ethnic stereotypes of the Soviet system. As Wheeler (2010) put it,

“[T]he USSR represented the bravest of efforts to [transcend ethnicity], but paradoxically its very internationalism ultimately institutionalised the nationalities it sought to transcend. The post-independence trajectory of Kazakhstan is haunted by this legacy.”

In Kazakhstan, the process on nation-building has been mostly directed from above and followed the vision of President Nazarbayev. Implementation of his vision, especially in its language-policy aspect, was, however, much inconclusive and inconsistent. The nationalizing context in KZ focuses on the language issue, at the expense of historical narratives used in different policies associated with nation-building and is characterized by the vacillation between ethnicity-informed and civic models. This irresolution is welcome by almost everybody, as long as the peace, stability, and the interests of the elites (in whatever order) in the country remain untouched.¹⁵ Jones (2010) rightly asserts, though in largely depoliticized terms:

“Rather than constructing a state-sponsored national identity based exclusively on ethnic Kazakh culture to assimilate the large non-Kazakh portion of the population, the leaders of Kazakhstan have opted for a multiethnic civic nation aiming to enfranchise all of its citizens completely, regardless of their cultural identities. This nation-building approach encourages the state’s ethnic minorities to preserve and revitalize their own ethnic cultures and languages while it simultaneously characterizes Kazakh culture and language as the instruments of national consolidation” (p.160).

There has been little formalized discourse and the lack of consensus regarding the process. Most of the people in Kazakhstan do not care much about the issue but otherwise seem they can live with Nazarbayev’s vision of Kazakhstani citizenship, if they can grasp it at all. Quite expectedly, the Russian minority would like to keep the language and other privileges that they inherited from the previous periods, while few vocal “nationalists call for stronger measures in support of Kazakh language and culture. Some Kazakh intellectuals (e.g. Belger) strongly (albeit often intuitively) oppose political manipulation of the language and ethnic issue support liberal multicultural coexistence of all ethnic groups. Some argue that almost every element in and the policy of nation-building as a whole is an exclusive design of

President Nazarbayev who imposes his articulate vision on the whole society but does not care much about feasibility of his projects as long as they suit power interests of his and his closest relatives and loyalists. In the same vein, Rolf Peters (1999) made the assertion that the president was using the “national question” to consolidate his power referring to dangerous scenarios of ethno-political conflict which would be destructive for Kazakhstan society, thereby positioning himself up as the sole guarantor of interethnic peace and order in Kazakhstan (p. 49). In this sense, it is in the interests of the president to maintain ‘interethnic peace’ through a balancing act: he must not appear to be privileging any particular group in order to avoid international and domestic criticism for discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, but must also appear to be complying with the demands of all ethno-political actors in the country, who could potentially mobilize the population on ethnonational grounds.”

One can argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to build a successful, viable civic nation in a country which can hardly be called liberal-democratic, i.e. one based on popular sovereignty which respects the rights of individuals, associations of civil society, and the free and independent media. The inevitable question occurs: What kind of nation is there to build, in a country with a mixture of Kazakh and Russian culture overlapping elements and multicultural reality where more people speak the Russian language than that of the titular nation? This almost fatal dilemma is inevitably reflected in the ambivalent goals of the relatively weak ‘nationalizing state’ and the zig-zag process of language policy implementation.

As mentioned, Kazakhstan can hardly be taken as a country fitting Brubaker’s notion on nationalizing state, as the process of realigning ethnicity and citizenship, as well as the role of the state in it has been quite fluid and ambivalent in Kazakhstan. While one can perhaps never know the outcome of the efforts of varying actors in such a process, the contemporary template might be discernible in the direction many of the post-communist countries might have taken. In the case of Kazakhstan, there is no clear feasible template discernible, only bits and pieces of orders and policies that consist of hardly reconcilable elements – which are often competing against each other. The competing claims and visions not always correspond to the reality. Is Kazakhstan heading to a civic nation unified by ethnic Kazakhs, or a civic nation of tri-lingual Kazakhstanis, or a multi-cultural mosaic of the nationalities of Kazakhstan, or a binational state?¹⁶

As yet there has been little pressure from society at large to address the identity and language issues, or the national question as such and the efforts by the elites to steer the issues of nation-building are met rather with confusion, if taken seriously at all. It seems that the further dynamic in dealing with the national issue in Kazakhstan will much depend on the regroupment of political forces after President Nazarbayev leaves his office and on the changing demographic (ethnic) composition of the country, namely the expected increase of the share of the ethnic-Kazakh population, especially those speaking Kazakh as their mother tongue, as well as on Kazakhstan’s position in the regional integration projects.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Such a state has usually difficulties in using its potential effectively in implementing its policies and /or maintaining its security.
- 2 Over the years, many nationalities and ethnic groups migrated to Kazakhstan and eventually turned the country into one of “the most multinational, multi-confessional, multiethnic countries in the world”. But not all nationalities came to Kazakhstan on their own will rather were driven by political repression and persecution. During the repressive regime of Stalin about 1.5 million of political prisoners from Russia and other regions were deported to Kazakhstan and about 1.3 million were deported during the WW2 as they were labelled as the “representatives of unreliable nations”. (Mostafa, 2011)
- 3 They had to be a historically evolved community that shared a common language, territory, economic way of life and a psychological mindset which could be traced back to a common culture (Stalin, 1950, p. 315)
- 4 However, as in the Soviet Union, ethnic affiliation was highlighted in passports. Interestingly, the requirement to specify ethnic affiliation has recently been dropped (cf. Kesici, 2011, p. 51)

5 While in its preamble the Constitution of 1993 speaks of the country using the wording “We, the people of Kazakhstan, as an inseparable part of the world community, take the unshakeable Kazakh statehood into our consciousness [...],” the Constitution of 1995 the corresponding lines changed to: “We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on the indigenous Kazakh land [...].” (Constitution of the RK, 1995).

6 Jones studied how substantial ethnic identifications are to people’s lives. He found that for the majority of his non-Kazakh respondents, possessing an ethnic identity was important to them. However, “only a small number actually participate in activities contributing to the preservation or revitalization of ethnic cultures, languages, or traditions. Most are unaware of the existence and activities of the Assembly [of Peoples] and express ambivalence about the consolidating role of Kazakh culture and language.” According to Jones, “if a large number of Kazakhstan’s citizens are unlikely to participate in activities to preserve their ethnic cultures, why does the state rely so heavily on ethnic cultural preservation as a primary tool to create a civic national identity?” (Jones, 167) Jones concludes that “the work of civic nation-building thus depends upon this general recognition that ethnic categories, as introduced during the Soviet times and preserved in independent Kazakhstan, exist, and something is officially being done about them, to raise the value of citizenship in Kazakhstan for non-Kazakhs.” (ibid, p.168)

7 It is also interesting to note that despite of the Kazakh ethnonational character of the state symbols, if one looks at them closely, one has to notice from the fact that many exclusively Kazakh symbols were not chosen, that evidently the current symbols are to a large degree encompassing and /or acceptable to all other country’s ethnic groups (Aydingün, 2008, pp.142-150). A statue of Lenin in Almaty’s centre was replaced with a statue of the Golden Warrior, a mythical figure that roots Kazakhs identity as far back as the third century B.C. (Aydingün, 2008, pp.140). Also, many former Soviet topographic names, particularly of towns and streets were replaced with Kazakh names. (For instance, the main street in Almaty, now the Dostyk [??] Street was formerly known as Lenin Street.)

8 The following ethnic groups are represented in the Assembly: German (49 members), Kazakh (40), Korean (36), Tatar (29), Slav (27), Chechen and Ingush (26), Azerbaijani (23), Uighur (21), Russian (20), Ukrainian (19), Jewish (18), Polish (16), Turkish (14), Greek (12), Armenian (11), Byelorussian (10), Dungan (10), Kurd (8), Uzbek (8), Cossack (6), with the Turkmen, Bulgarians and Dagestanian having four members each, the Kyrgyz and Tajik three members each, the Karachaev, Balkarian, Chinese, Chuvash and Karakalpak two members each, and the Assyrian, Czech, Baltic nations, Georgian, Osetin, Lezgin, Iranian, Buryat, Hungarian and Romanian one member each. (Inter-Ethnic Dialogue: The Kazakhstan Model of Peaceful Coexistence and Preservation of Inter-Ethnic Stability, The Embassy of Kazakhstan in New Delhi, India, <http://www.kazembassy.in/people.htm>.)

9 “Through a structure reaching from President [Nazarbayev] down to the members of the affiliated national cultural centers of the country’s smallest villages, the Assembly and its partners operate as a system of hierarchical councils.” In addition to the national Assembly each Oblast, as well as the cities Astana and Almaty, has its own “small” Assembly whose composition and operations mirror that of the national structure. The Oblast Assemblies may also maintain filial in the counties (*raioni*) under their jurisdiction– the structure of the *raion*-level institutions again resembles those on the Oblast and state levels.” (Jones, 164-5)]

10 Within the first principle of the doctrine, Nazarbayev once again emphasized the common fate and history of all ethnic groups in the country. The second principle focuses on the equality of all persons is highlighted once again, and ethnic affiliation is emphasized against the backdrop of common civic affiliation. The third principle considers the traditions of patriotism, competition and victory as the most important factors for the development of the national spirit (Ibid; as cited in Kesici).

11 Apart for measures strengthening the use of the Kazakh language in public life, the doctrine proposes the introduction of interethnic tolerance classes in school curricula, popularizing positive imaging of all ethnic groups in the country's mass media, strengthening legal norms securing equal rights of all citizens regardless of race, ethnicity and/or religion, improving mechanisms of early detection of social conflicts and contradictions, which pose a risk of acquiring ethnic character. (Ibid)

12 Nazarbayev first introduced the term 'Kazakhstani' into his speech on the strategy programme for Kazakhstan in 1997 called "Kazakhstan – 2030". Here, he asked who Kazakhstanis were: "Today it is not everybody that can answer the seemingly simple question: 'Who are we – the Kazakhstanis?' (52) Kesici, 2011) According to Article 19 of Kazakhstan's Constitution, every citizen has the right to indicate or to decline to indicate an ethnicity; however, Article 57 (On Families and Marriage) states that children must select the ethnicity of one of their parents. Therefore, technically anyone may refuse to select an ethnicity on applications for state identification cards and passports for international use. So far, "Kazakhstani" nationality is not an option.

13 The poll showed most people rejecting the idea of ethnic Kazakhs having a special role: 31 percent backed the concept, but 60 percent supported the idea that all citizens should thought of as "state-forming." Just one in five people supported changing the official name of the country. (Lillis, 2010)

14 The latter, however, was not quite successful, largely because of the low institutional and grass-root support.

15 Jones described some of the stakes as follows: "Kazakhstan's civic nation-building strategy's reliance on Kazakh language and culture stands little chance of provoking violent conflict, but as a unifying discourse it has even less of a chance of consolidating its non-Kazakh population into a Kazakhstani civic nation." (Jones, 168)

16 The further evolution of the genuine multi-culturalist option has not been elaborated on consistently in the current stakeholders' discourse and political directions and may have little chance in succeeding in the foreseeable future, but its elements emerge from time, at a subdued level, to time as significant contributions to the ongoing discourse and may gain even more prominence with the growing labour migration from neighbouring countries.