

Kazakhstan in the Making

Contemporary Central Asia: Societies, Politics, and Cultures

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Kazakhstan in the Making

Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes

Edited by
Marlene Laruelle

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Introduction

Marlene Laruelle

In less than two decades, Kazakhstan has become one of the best-known success stories of Central Asia, perhaps even of the entire Eurasian space. The country's burgeoning economy had an impressive growth rate of about 7 percent a year—until the 2014 economic slowdown. Kazakhstan alone produces about two-thirds of the gross domestic product of all Central Asia and positions itself not far behind Russia in terms of GDP per inhabitant. The country has adopted a so-called multivector foreign policy, which includes a strategic alliance with Russia, a growing partnership with China, and good relations with the United States and Europe. It has become a world leader in debates on denuclearization and presents itself as a bridge linking the Western, Muslim, and Asian worlds, with several sophisticated branding strategies such as new the Western-style university, and hosting the world expo Astana-2017.

However, the domestic picture looks more contrasted. The Kazakhstani authorities have been slow to avoid Dutch disease and to move away from an excessive specialization in raw materials exports, especially oil. The institutionalization of state structures and political parties remains weak, unable to compete with the ultra-personification of power around the “father of the nation,” President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Neopatrimonial practices and endemic corruption undermine the justice system and the state administration, as well as the education system. Residents of the hinterlands and provincial cities did not benefit from the rising living standards of the 2000s, and they made their dissatisfaction known during the Zhanaozen event of December 2011 and the land reform protests of spring 2016. Since 2014, the economic crisis has hit Kazakhstani standards of living hard, especially the poor and middle classes, and partly undermined popular support for Nazarbayev and his “stability and prosperity” discourse.

Kazakhstan's emergence as the economic driver of the Central Asian region and a strategic power in Eurasia has led to many policy-driven publications. These works came from U.S. think tanks (Martha Brill Olcott's *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002, or Ariel Cohen, *Kazakhstan: The Road to Independence Energy Policy and the Birth of a Nation*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, 2008), or from international financial institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank, with leading research done, for example, by Richard Pomfret on Kazakhstan's agricultural reforms and resource nationalism and Johannes Linn on Kazakhstan's role in regional integration.

While Kazakhstan has often been in the policy spotlight, scholarly knowledge of Kazakhstani society is much more modest. The reasons for that are multiple. In the 1990s the academic community working on Central Asia mostly focused on Uzbekistan, then seen as the main regional power, and on Tajikistan, then in the middle of a bloody civil war. In the 2000s, the massive opening of Kyrgyzstan to Western, especially United States, interests contributed to a growing literature on Kyrgyz society, while the end of the civil war in Tajikistan attracted scholars looking at post-civil war reconstruction processes. Paradoxically, Kazakhstan was partly passed over, not considered a typical "Central Asian" society by scholars with an Oriental studies background, and neglected by those focusing on Russia and the transformation of "Sovietness" in the whole region. This situation is even more surprising because historians working on the Kazakh steppes under Tsarist domination and during the first decades of the Soviet power were particularly visible in the history field.

Several well-received monographs shaped the scholarly landscape on contemporary Kazakhstan. Edward Schatz's *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan and Beyond* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004) looked at Kazakhstan as a case study for exploring the role of genealogical affiliations in building political networks. Sally Cumming's *Kazakhstan: Power and the Elite* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005) offered a sociological approach to the country's elites, their processes of co-optation, and the interaction between that individual level and the broader post-Soviet institutional construction. Bhavna Dave's *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language, and Power* (London: Routledge, 2007) explored the role of language in building new legitimacies, both for the regime itself and for the state's national identity. Some works took account of the fact that Kazakhstan is the only state in Central Asia with statistically important minorities (accounting for half of the population in the 1990s), for instance, Alexander Diener's *Homeland Conceptions and Ethnic Integration among Kazakhstan's Germans and Koreans* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), and Marlene

Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse's, *Russians in Kazakhstan. National identities and New States in the Post-Soviet Space* (in French and Russian, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose/IFEAC, 2004).

Beyond these foundational works, the scholarly literature on contemporary Kazakhstan has been enriched by many articles that can be grouped into three main categories. First, a large body of research deals with the “nature” of the Kazakhstani political regime, particularly the close intertwining of political networks and business circles, making Kazakhstan a fruitful case for the study of neopatrimonialism or patronage politics (Barbara Junisbai, Edward Schatz, Assel Tutumlu, Pauline Jones Luong, Sally Cummings). A second group of work is devoted to the nationhood process, looking at the official policy of promoting a Kazakhstani ideology and the tensions between different identity repertoires, at the ethnic repatriation programs, and the narrative on Islam (Anatoli Khazanov, Diana T. Kudaibergenova, Yves-Marie Davenel, Alexander Diener, Gaelle Lacaze, Marlene Laruelle, Maria Omelicheva). A third body of literature, more original and specific to Kazakhstan, emerged thanks to political geographers and anthropologists who explored the construction of the new capital, Astana, and its meaning for the population (Nathalie Koch, Mateusz Laszczkowski, Alexander Diener, Adrien Fauve). The rural world, changing social conditions, important labor migration flows, the disappearance of the industrial fabric, and—paradoxically—Islam remain the poor stepchildren of our research. Things are changing, however, with renewed interest from scholars on these understudied aspects of Kazakhstan (Alima Bissenova, Wendell Schwab, Ulan Bigozhin, Tommaso Trevisani, Bhavna Dave, etc.), and several new monographs are on their way. Many important names have not been mentioned in this schematic list, and I apologize in advance for those not included here.

This edited volume offers a new perspective on the current research on Kazakhstan and the new trends in the social sciences that structure this research. It hopes to partly fill the gap by proposing new interpretative frameworks to study the current evolution of Kazakhstan around three main issues: the state, the nation, and the society. It is based on a conference organized in June 2014 by The George Washington University's Central Asia Program and the Uppsala Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies (UCRS) and funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ).

The first section of the volume addresses “the state” in Kazakhstan and offers four different approaches to comprehend how the Kazakhstani regime functions and legitimizes itself. Kazakhstan has been defined by Edward Schatz as an example of “soft authoritarianism” —compared to the “harder” regimes of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and, now Tajikistan. “The cement of soft authoritarian rule is an elite's ability to frame political debate, thereby defining the political agenda and channeling political outcomes. Soft

authoritarianism relies more centrally on the means of persuasion than on the means of coercion, although coercion remains a part of the ruling elite's arsenal."¹ For Schatz, the regime functions thanks to the existence of a committed core of Nazarbayev supporters among the elites, the ability to mobilize the broader population thanks to enticements (a perceptible rise in living standards) and blackmail (the risk of losing the acquired wealth and stability), the occasional harassing and selective coercion of opposition groups, and managing information flows by preempting the emergence of competitive narratives. This section's chapters offer new explorations of these soft authoritarianism tools.

Assel Tutumlu offers a compelling analytical framework of authoritarian stability by analyzing how the Kazakhstani regime manages its rent revenues and balances predatory activities of the elites and the redistribution of social welfare benefits to the broader population. Specifically, she looks at how private pension funds were restructured into a single pension fund under state control in 2013. In the case of pension reform, the Kazakhstani authorities found solutions to the regime's three main dilemmas: balancing property rights and investment opportunities; financial credibility and debt repayment; and administrative discipline and information transparency. President Nazarbayev's decision-making process on pension reform shows that he had to take into consideration these three dilemmas and to walk a fine line between satisfying the population and accommodating the elites in order to keep them loyal to the regime.

The second chapter in this section, by Sebastien Peyrouse, analyzes the intra-elite level and investigates the regime's ability to master a subtle balance among three main interest groups: members of the presidential family, oligarchs, and technocrats. President Nazarbayev acts as the arbiter of the "game" among these groups, avoiding one to dominate the others, but also distributing incentives and punishments. Over the decades, this equilibrium has been re-adjusted several times, with some family members repressed, some oligarchs dispossessed of their business empires, and technocrats promoted or obstructed in their career. As in Russia, the country faced, in the 2000s, a recentralization process under the Samruk-Kazyna sovereign fund, but it has now been forced to initiate a new wave of privatization and neoliberal measures in order to cope with the current economic crisis. The system established by the authorities seems fairly insulated from the country's economic ups and downs in terms of regulating the intra-elite competition, but this does not mean that it can manage easily the growing distrust of society on some specific issues such as land reform, the benefits of Eurasian Economic Union membership, and protecting the population from the current economic decline.

Conventional political science, which looks at institutions, elites, and explicit ideologies, is often excessively focused on a top-down logic and therefore misses a central aspect of the legitimacy question, that is, the interaction between the state and its citizens. Anthropology and cultural studies complement this missing layer of our analysis by focusing on the micro-level, on the informal, the implicit, the unsaid, and by looking at bottom-up phenomena.

In this framework, Mateusz Laszczkowski investigates how the erection of Astana as a fairy-tale city, marked by a futuristic urban landscape built from scratch and saturated with symbolism, creates a new space for state-society interaction in which citizens not only consent to domination, but internalize the symbols of domination. Defining this phenomenon as “magical authoritarianism,” Laszczkowski addresses the quasi-religious charisma attributed to the figure of Nursultan Nazarbayev, often given almost supranatural powers, and the multiple implicit and non-textual registers that speak to the population. He thus demonstrates the level of sophistication that the authorities had to master in building legitimacy tools, probably a critical element to explain not only the durability, but also the popularity of Nazarbayev’s regime and its personification of the nation.

Wendell Schwab and Ulan Bigozhin explore another aspect of the state construction in Kazakhstan, moving the cursor from the overstudied urban world to understudied rural regions. At the local level, legitimacy mechanisms are embedded in in-situ hierarchies of notables and share with the national level a relatively similar neopatrimonial logic, shaped by patron-client relationships. However, contrary to the national level, legitimacy at the local level does not rely on the futuristic fairy-tale narrative symbolized by Astana, but on more traditional codes often linked to Islam. Based on the case of the creation of a new shrine in a small city of southern Kazakhstan, Schwab and Bigozhin demonstrate how much the secular everyday space and the religious one are intimately articulated: as citizens use connections to find a patron—in that case to acquire the land where the supposed grave of a holy man is located—the same way God is to be addressed through a holy patron. The holiness of the shrine is validated not in the name of any kind of scripturalist reading of Islam but by the experiences of the shrine’s “clients,” who confirm that the holy man is a good patron for the community. The ability of state structures and civil servants to navigate the parallel interpretations of patronage, both political and religious, embeds state legitimacy into the social fabric.

Part two of this volume is devoted to the “nation” as an imagined community to be built by a mutually reinforcing process between the state and the elite on one side, and society on the other. Here also, dynamics are both top-down and bottom-up.

Diana T. Kudaibergenova offers a comparative study of Kazakhstan and Latvia, the two post-Soviet countries, aside from Russia, with the highest share of ethnic Russians in the population. She analyzes their two largely diverging trajectories in nation-building: while Latvia offers a more democratic political framework than Kazakhstan, Kazakhstani elites remain more flexible in shaping the national identity of the new state. By defining Latvian elites as nationalist elites, for whom ideology matters, and Kazakhstani elites as nationalizing ones, Kudaibergenova fruitfully demonstrates how nation-building is context-dependent and used by decision-makers as a tool to consolidate power, marginalize competitive elites, and get popular support. In the Kazakhstani case, the fact that the elites display inconsistent nationalization policies can be explained by the relationship to Russia and the need to pacify the Russian minority, but also by neopatrimonial mechanisms and the role of the informal in “making” politics.

Alexander Diener continues this discussion by examining the Kazakhstani narrative elaborated by the state since the early days of independence. Even if this Kazakhstani identity competes with the Kazakh one, and the authorities use both narratives depending on their audience, the Kazakhstani story has been the dominant scheme offered to the country’s ethnic minorities and to the international community. This willingness to promote a civic-based patriotism has been constructed on several elements: obviously economic success and a developmental ideology, but also a patriotism based on the Soviet legacy of the “friendship of peoples,” attachment to place and to the “small motherland” (*malaia rodina*), and the embodiment of the state by the president—Nazarbayev as father of the nation and protector of interethnic concord. However, difficulties in maintaining an easy and fast economic prosperity and the ongoing preparation for a post-Nazarbayev era could potentially jeopardize this Kazakhstani identity and the ethnic minorities’ identification with it, and open the door to a shift into the state’s identity narrative.

Marlene Laruelle’s chapter complements the two previous ones by shedding light on the existence of a Kazakh ethno-nationalist landscape that, largely unsuccessful against Nazarbayev’s ability to co-opt the narrative of nationhood and personify it, is nonetheless growing among younger generations. New networks of young activists, using social media platforms and navigating a rising Kazakh-speaking information space, has been able to alter the broader atmosphere in Kazakhstan. They scored successes with the Ukrainian crisis and Kazakhstan’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and can rely on the social anxieties related to land reform and the fear of agricultural “colonization” by China. Their re-emergence after almost two decades of marginalization exemplifies the cultural and social transformations ongoing in the country in terms of language, relationship to the Soviet

past, generational change, and the rural–urban divide. In the near future, Kazakhstan’s “Kazakhness” will probably be the most dynamic identity trend to be incorporated, in one way or another, into state policies and could potentially challenge the political status quo.

In the last chapter of this section, Natalie R. Koch and Kristopher D. White help us deconstruct the essentialist framework of a Kazakh society shaped by “clan” divisions. Instead, they offer the notion of a specific regional identity, that of Southern Kazakhstan, as a sociocultural divide and a geographical imaginary. Through focus groups they decipher the process of “internal othering” and the structuring of culturally coded clichés—mostly stigmatizing, even if they may also display some positive criteria—about Shymkent, often described as Kazakhstan’s “Texas.”

The book’s third section investigates the deep social and cultural changes ongoing in Kazakhstan. Largely open to the world, thirsty for international recognition and signs of success in globalization, but also shaped by profound re-configurations of both the urban and the rural social fabric, Kazakhstani society has been evolving over the last two decades, more so than the regime’s apparent stability allows us to see. It formed a specific brand that combines cultural borrowings from abroad and calls for preserving national authenticity, an ongoing quest for modernity *and* for ancient-ness, for secularity *and* for religiosity.

Alima Bissenova addresses the subtle interplay between secular and religious authorities in finding shared interests and narratives that allow each to complement the other and avoid ideological competition or even distrust. By studying daily life, Friday prayers, and sermons at the Khaziret Sultan mosque, the main mosque of Astana, she explores the birth of a “bourgeois Islam,” adapted to the emerging middle classes, that presents itself as the “good” Islam, inculcating values that both the secular and the religious authorities validate. This Khaziret Sultan brand can be defined as a successful combination of traditional Islamic orthodoxy, recognition by the world’s *Ummah*, national traditions that shape “Kazakhness,” and the state’s efforts to modernize and advance the individual.

In her chapter, Megan Rancier delves into another aspect of the Kazakhstani society’s will to merge symbols of traditions and modernity, the “Spirit of Tengri” music festival. The festival offers a unique insight into multiple ongoing processes of hybridization: reviving supposed traditional music and instruments, globalizing them into the trend of world ethnic music, making the final products marketable, etc. The “Spirit of Tengri” embodies the ability of some segments of Kazakhstani society to reap the benefits of the country’s openness and to promote a new cosmopolitanism in tune with the quest for national identity. Indeed, the “Spirit of Tengri” offers a fascinating combination of local and global—glocalism—thanks to its reference to Turkicness:

this regional level, symbolized by the bands coming from across the Turkic world and by the reference to Tengri, the sky, a symbol of the pre-Islamic religion of the Turkic-Mongolian populations, allows participants to refer to the nation-state and at the same time to bypass it.

Last, but not least, Doug Blum concludes this book by exploring how the young generation of Kazakhstani citizens who has been trained abroad, specifically in the United States, manages the cultural changes that accompany a stay far from home. Their repertoire of normalcy, both in terms of values and social practices, relates to gender issues, body language, family and community ties, had to face important shifts. Each individual offers a unique combination of what he/she considers as attractive and offensive in the foreign culture, and what can be brought back home and adapted to local norms and values. This negotiation is a permanent one, sometimes successful, in terms of individual empowerment, but sometimes failing when people believe cultural borrowings will be rejected by their native environment. Blum's cultural anthropology approach allows us to move forward into the discussion about the so-called Bolashak generation—the thousands of young Kazakhs trained abroad thanks to the state-sponsored Bolashak scholarship program—and to move the cursor from the macro level—what will be the influence of this generation once they get the reins of power—to the micro one, showing the need for long and sometimes painful adjustments of cultural values and norms in Kazakhstan's fast-changing society.

NOTE

1. Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (2009): 203.