IMAGINING THE NATION: IDENTITY, NATION BUILDING AND FOREIGN POLICY IN KAZAKHSTAN

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The notion of nation-branding has become a permanent feature of the state discourse in Kazakhstan. Since becoming familiar with the idea of the "brand state,"[2] Kazakhstan has deployed a full panoply of branding strategies to cultivate a positive international image, including wide media exposure,[3] "spectacular urbanization,"[4] and aggressive pursuit of image-building projects (known as *imidzhdik zhobalar* in Kazakh and *imidzhevye proekty* in Russian).

Branding a nation is said to be such a crucial factor for "the economic, political and cultural flourishing of the state"[5] that no amount of public funds is considered too much to for it. The regular outflow of government funds and resources for image-building projects is the quintessential example of this practice in Kazakhstan. The country arguably spends about

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[2] Peter van Ham, "The Rise Of The Brand State," *Foreign Affairs*, 80, no.5 (2001), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2001-09-01/rise-brand-state.
[3] Jami Fullerton, Alice Kendrick, Courtney Wallis, "Brand Borat? Americans' reaction to a Kazakhstani place branding campaign," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (2008): 159-168, doi:10.1057/pb.2008.6.
[4] Natalie Koch N. and Anar Valiyev, "Urban Boosterism In Closed Contexts: Spectacular Urbanization And Second-Tier Mega-Events In Three Caspian Capitals," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 5 (2015): 575-598, doi:10.1080/15387216.2016.1146621.
[5] Somogy Varga, "The politics of Nation-branding: Collective identity and public sphere in the neoliberal state," *Philosophy and Social* Criticism 39, no. 8 (2013): 828.

US$50 million annually on various public relations (PR) campaigns. These include the dissemination of information about Kazakhstan's economic and political achievements through international mass media outlets such as CNN and the BBC , special newspaper editions such as *The New York Times* and *The Economist*, and the distribution of other information materials such as brochures and posters.[6] The major expenditures incurred on image-building—mostly through the National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna—are estimated as follows: $3 billion for the EXPO-2017, $1.65 billion for the 2011 Asian Winter Games, and $47 million the Winter Universiade 2017, to name just a few.[7] In its branding enthusiasm, in 2007 the government even established a special Department of International Information (now known as the Committee of International Information) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was entrusted with the responsibility to build and maintain Kazakhstan's international image.[8]

Kazakhstan has mounted such a vigorous image-building campaign that at times its efforts are being interpreted as manipulative and propagandistic. The heavy investments in image-building projects, lavish spending on social media and advertising campaigns, and intense cooperation with select branding consultancies that are known for excelling in employing image-building techniques have earned Kazakhstan the reputation of "a PR state."[9] Despite this, Kazakhstan continues to devote considerable energy to presenting and promoting the country in a positive light by allocating funds to branding activities, maintaining maximum visibility in various international organizations, and developing a remarkably proactive stance in its foreign policy.[10]

Nation-Branding for Tourism, FDI and Image-Making?

How can we explain Kazakhstan's continuous engagement in nation-branding exercises? Many commentators point out that a positive international image spurs economic development by promoting tourism, facilitating international trade, and attracting foreign investments.[11] From this perspective, the subsequent main goal of these fund allocations and unceasing efforts to practice nation-branding is ultimately wealth accumulation.

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[6] "Kazakhstan v god tratit po $50 mln na 'stranovoi piar'," *Kursiv*, December 11, 2014, http://www.kursiv.kz/news/obshestvo/kazakhstan_v_god_tratit_po_50_mln_na_stranovoy_piar/.
[7] "2017 zhylgy oysqy universiadanyn byudzhety 17 mlrd tengeni quraidy," November 23, 2015. http://almaty2017.com/kk/byudzhet-universiady-2017-v-almaty-sostavi/; Gulnoz Mukanova, "Kazakhstan potratit na EKSPO $3 milliarda," *LS*, July 8, 2014, http://lsm.kz/kazakhstan-potratit-na-e-kspo-3-mlrd/; Adil Urmanov, "Stoimost' provedeniya aziady sostavila $1.65 milliarda," *KAZTAG*, February 7, 2011, http://www.nomad.su/?a=4-201102080031.
[8] Dina Ermaganbetova, "Pri MID RK sozdan komitet mezhdunarodnoi informatsii," *Zakon*, February 12, 2007, http://www.zakon.kz/82457-pri-mid-rk-sozdan-komitet.html.
[9] Adrian Fauve, "Global Astana: Nation-branding as a Legitimization Tool for Authoritarian Regimes" Central Asian Survey 34, no.1 (2015): 110-124.
[10] See for instance Engvall, J. and Cornell, S. (2015). Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations. Silk Road Paper; and Marat, E. (2009). Nation-branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation. Europe-Asia Studies, 61(7), pp.1123-1136.
[11] Fiona Gilmore, "A Country — Can It Be Repositioned? Spain — The Success Story of Country Branding," Journal of Brand Management 9, no. 4 (2002): 281-293; Anette Therkelsen, "Imagining Places: Image Formation of Tourists And Its Consequences For Destination Promotion," *Scandinavian Journal Of Hospitality And Tourism* 3, no. 2 (2003): 134-150; Nigel Morgan, Annette Pritchard, Roger Pride, *Destination-branding: Creating the unique destination proposition* (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004); Michael Gould and Heather Skinner, "Branding On Ambiguity? Place Branding Without a National Identity: Marketing Northern Ireland as a Post-Conflict Society in the USA," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 3, no. 1 (2007): 100-113; David Gertner, "Place Branding: Dilemma or Reconciliation Between Political Ideology and Economic Pragmatism?" *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 3, no. 1 (2007): 3-7.

In a related vein, others argue that, beyond profit gain, nation-branding is essential for enhancement of national competitiveness in today's "world of images and influences."[12] This view is premised on the assumption that a country's international image determines its relative positioning in the international community.[13] With this in mind, Kazakhstan uses "the tools of branding,"[14] seeking to change its image in a positive way and "raise its prestige primarily among international businesses and the global community."[15]

However, nation-branding is not only an outward-looking endeavor. It also serves a legitimizing function for the rule of those in power; it enhances national pride and generates social cohesion. In the case of Kazakhstan, this reasoning is justified by the fact that the vast majority of the citizenry stand in support of the country's multivector foreign policy approach, its ability to project a positive image in the international arena, and its achievement in gaining recognition and status through various international initiatives.[16]

All of these explanations are plausible. However, to a certain extent they lose their explanatory power under more detailed scrutiny of the Kazakhstani case.

First, tourism promotion is said to be one of the rationales for Kazakhstan's nation-branding. This kind of reasoning is certainly logically valid, yet it is not backed up by statistical evidence. At first glance, statistics show a positive tendency of inbound tourism to Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, a large portion of these trips are attributable to foreigners traveling on business or visiting their family and friends, while the number of people traveling to Kazakhstan for holidays, leisure, and recreation remains quite insignificant as a share of the total.[17] The picture looks even less convincing when considering that most of these visitors come from neighboring countries.[18] In this respect, it is also worth noting that, while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan spend much less than Kazakhstan on branding projects, both countries have seen a constant increase in tourists.[19]

Second, it has been argued that a country's image and reputation management have become hugely important with advances in new communication technologies, combined with an increase in competition between countries.[20] Indeed, Kazakhstan has attracted significant flows of foreign investment into the national economy since its independence and, until recently, demonstrated an upward trend in its trading activity. This was possible, however, "due to the

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[12] Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State."
[13] Eytan Gilboa, "Diplomacy in the Media Age: Three Models Of Uses And Effects". Diplomacy & Statecraft 12, no. 2 (2001): 1-28.
[14] Hlynur Gudjonsson, "Nation-branding," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 1, no. 3 (2005): 283-298.
[15] Erica Marat, "Nation-branding In Central Asia: A New Campaign To Present Ideas About The State And The Nation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1123-1136.
[16] i.e Kazakhstan's commitment to multilateralism, regional cooperation, and its leadership in nuclear non-proliferation.
[17] 56,333 tourist visitors out of 6,332 734 in 2014. See: Tatyana Trubacheva, "Pochemu v Kazakhstane plokho prodvigaetsya vnutrennii turizm. *Forbes*, March 31, 2016, http://forbes.kz/finances/markets/zavernite_pojaluysta_1.
[18] Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China.
[19] Andrei Zubov, "Smeshnye tsyfry v'ezdnogo turizma v Kazakhstan," *365Info*, August 3, 2016, http://365info.kz/2016/08/smeshnye-tsifry-vezdnogo-turizma-v-kazahstane/.
[20] Mark Leonard, "Diplomacy by Other Means," *Foreign Policy*, no. 132 (2002): 48; Ying Fan, "Branding The Nation: Towards A Better Understanding," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 2 (2010): 97-103.

country's massive oil reserves rather than any nation-branding efforts."[21] Recent studies, for instance, reveal that aggregate foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to authoritarian countries continues to increase.[22] This suggests that the political regime of a particular country does not play a decisive role for investors who are interested in primary commodities; the investors are more concerned that their return on investment is secured. Some studies go so far as to argue that international economic actors—and foreign investors in particular—will maintain an interest in "supporting the regime" as long as "the political authority guarantees stability, subsidies and access to resources."[23] Thus, one cannot help but notice that the energy and mineral sectors continue to account for the largest share of FDI and exports still largely consist of primary commodities. Therefore, if the purpose of nation-branding is simply "to stimulate inward investments and boost exports,"[24] then the results achieved raise certain doubts about the feasibility and effectiveness of the chosen strategy.

Third, while in theory Kazakhstan carries out image-building projects that are designed to highlight positive cultural aspects and recent achievements in order to build an image of a successful state both at home and abroad, in reality these initiatives come at a price. Not only do Western journalists and analysts tend to frame the country in negative color, they also bring to light the hidden side of the soft authoritarian coin.[25] For example, Natalie Koch observes that the capital city Astana—whose urban development is one of Kazakhstan's main brands—is consistently depicted by Western observers as "Nowheresville," "Tomorrowland," or a "Potemkin village."[26] Analogous comments can be made with regard to Kazakhstan's EXPO 2017, which is being described by Western media as the country's main "corruption show." Arguably, very few decision-makers in Kazakhstan can be unaware of this trend.

Along this line, skeptical attitudes toward "image-building projects" are becoming increasingly noticeable among the general population. In times of economic downturn, some see it as an unnecessary luxury, while others regard it merely as a blatant waste of money and resources and yet another example of *raspiliada* (embezzlement of public funds as a result of hosting mega-events). A telling example is Kazakhstan's bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. At the end of 2014, an initiative group of Almaty residents gathered together to sign a petition that requested the government to withdraw its bid for hosting the Games due to serious concerns over financial costs and environmental issues. However, while other contenders (including Germany, Sweden, Poland, and Norway) withdrew their 2022 proposals one after another due to lack of public support, no concerns raised at home could stop Kazakhstan from staying in the competition.[27] To the great relief of many in Kazakhstan, China ultimately won the right to host

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[21] Gyorgy Szondi, "Public Diplomacy and Nation-branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences," *Clingendael*, January 2008.

[22] Ida Bastiaens, "The Politics of Foreign Direct Investment in Authoritarian Regimes," *International Interactions* 42, no. 1 (2015): 140-171.

[23] Assel Rustemova, "Rent Seeking and Authoritarian Consolidation in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," in *International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence: Lessons From Post-Soviet States, 1st ed*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 74.

[24] Keith Dinnie, *Nation-branding*, (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008).

[25] For instance, the preparation processes for such big events as the Asian Games 2011 and Expo 2017 were accompanied by a series of major corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials.

[26] Natalie Koch, "Urban 'Utopias': The Disney Stigma and Discourses of 'False Modernity'," *Environmental Planning*, 44, no. 10 (2012.): 2445-2462.

[27] Norway, in particular, explained its decision to drop out of the contest by two arguments. First, it was the financial part - "most Olympic budgets end up being much more expensive". Second, it was "the very strange demands from the IOC." Even though Norway is a rich country, "Norwegian culture is really down to earth; when you get these IOC demands that are quite snobby, Norwegian people cannot be satisfied," said Ole Berget, a deputy minister in the Finance Minister. For more details see: Mark Lewis,

the Games. Aside from ignoring the public's outcry, it is still hard to imagine that the government has the resources to fund international image-building projects that reap mockery and criticism in the midst of financial crisis, devaluation of the national currency, and falling prices for natural resources.

Thus, considering the previously discussed rationalist approaches to nation-branding as offering insufficient explanations for Kazakhstan's continuous engagement in nation-branding exercises, this paper joins the flow of studies that advocate for the importance of non-material factors such as culture and identity in the analysis of nation-branding. This paper argues, above all, that Kazakhstan's branding initiatives should be understood not only as the presentation of a positive image at the international level, but also as part of the government's nation-building process at home.

To support this argument, the next section addresses the question of how national identity is connected to the concept of nation-branding and the study of Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

Negotiating post-Soviet National Identity in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan was confronted with the challenges of redefining its national identity in the wake of its independence and the Soviet Union's demise in 1991. The Marxist-Leninist discourse[28] that had shaped and sustained the Soviet national identity project over several decades eventually crumbled,[29] leaving space for a "re-imagining" of the national identity[30] through alternative discourses that existed in the wider discursive field of Kazakhstan. The struggle between these coexisting yet "competing and contradictory discourses with varying degrees of power"[31] made the process of national identity reconstruction an inherently challenging endeavor for post-Soviet Kazakhstan, where ethnic diversity issues, the language policy dilemma, and intra-Kazakh cleavages were compounded by political uncertainty, severe economic problems, and social tensions.

Before any further discussion, several issues need to be considered, for the sake of clarity. First, although the scope of discussion on nation-building processes in Kazakhstan is often restricted to a binary, ethnic versus civic discourse, the country's discursive field offers a stock of diverse narratives on national identity that are continuously vying for supremacy.[32] Second, power relations among these discourses has been evolving; some attain dominance while others become marginalized and subjugated.[33] While references to the Soviet nationalities policy dominated the public space during Soviet rule, by the mid-1980s, a competing nationalistic Kazakh discourse took shape after decades of silence and became a noticeable factor in the domestic politics of Soviet Kazakhstan. The rising prominence of this ethnic nationalist discourse, however, would not have been possible without a number of socioeconomic and

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"International Olympic Committee Blames Media For Misreporting 'Crazy Demands' After Oslo Drops Bid To Host 2022 Winter Games," *National Post, 2014.*

[28] Paul Dragoș Aligică and Anthony John Evans, *The Neoliberal Revolution in Eastern Europe*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2009); John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[29] Alfred B. Evans, *Soviet Marxism-Leninism*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1993).

[30] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983), 15.

[31] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1987), 35.

[32] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1977), first published in French as *Surveiller et punir*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

[33] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 35.

cultural evolutions, such as demographic change in favor of Kazakhs,[34] an increase in their education attainment, and rapid urbanization.[35]

Although the origins of this discourse are rooted at least as far back as the early 1920s,[36] it was the December riots of 1986 that demonstrated the power potential of these counter-hegemonic ways of thinking. Already in 1989, in response to pressure from below and as in all other Soviet republics, Kazakhstan adopted the Language Law, making Kazakh the state language; in 1990, the Declaration of Sovereignty unambiguously emphasized the special role of the indigenous nation, the Kazakhs.[37] The policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) introduced in 1985 by Moscow supported greater freedom of speech, freedom of media, and freedom of assembly.[38] This inevitably fueled the rise of alternative discourses and greater contestation of the hegemonic communist discourse informed by the Marxist-Leninist framework.

Since it is impossible to cover all potential alternative discourses, I mention here only the main competing narratives of national identity promoted by diverse actors in the early years of Kazakhstan's statehood.[39]

The Islamic nationalists (Pan-Turkists/Pan-Islamists), such as the Alash party, articulated their discourse through a triad of signifiers: "Islam-Turkism-Democracy."[40] For them, the construction of national identity was to be based on the principles of pan-Turkism (unity of all Turkic-origin peoples) and pan-Islamism (solidarity of all Muslims). They envisioned the creation of a united "Greater Turkestan" encompassing of all the Turkic-speaking peoples and a national revival of Kazakhstan as its historical core. Islam, as a state religion, should become a consolidating force in the nation-building process. Thus, being Muslim should be one of the main criteria in determining identity membership. Hence, Islamic nationalists urged the expulsion of Slavs from Kazakhstani territory, which was expressed through the slogan "Russians get out."[41] The distinctive features of their proposed foreign policy orientation were

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[34] For instance, in 1959 ethnic Kazakhs constituted 30% of the population (Russians 42.7%); by 1989, this number increased to 39.7%, making Kazakhs the largest ethnic group in the Republic (Russians 37.8%). See Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 60.

[35] The share of urban population in Kazakhstan grew from 43.7% in 1959 to 53.5% in 1979 and 57.1% in 1989. See: *Urbanization in Central Asia: Challenges, Issues and Prospects* (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: Tashkent, 2013), 3, http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Urbanization%20in%20Central%20Asia_ENG_0.pdf.

[36] It is worth noting that at that earlier time, the Kazakh nationalist discourse had developed specifically in opposition to tsarist Russia.

[37] *The declaration of state sovereignty of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic from October 25, 1990*, Supreme Court of KazSSR, №44, 1990, 408.

[38] Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost: The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika*, (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1999); Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Neil Robinson, *Ideology and the Collapse of the Soviet System*, (Aldershot, Hants, England: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1995).

[39] Due to limited space, I do not discuss several discourses articulated by other actors, including Communists, Socialists, and Democrats. Communists held true to the idea of a "laboratory of friendship of people" and reiterated their commitment to the ideological dogmas of Marxism-Leninism. In terms of foreign affairs, they favored preserving the Soviet Union as a Slavic union. Later on, they advocated for the restoration and development of a unified economic space within the boundaries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

[40] Ludmila Polonskaia and Alexei Malashenko, "Islam in Central Asia," in *Central Asian Security: The New International Context, 1st ed.*, (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1994).

[41] Y. Ro'i, "Islam in the FSU - An Inevitable Impediment to Democracy," in Y. Ro'i, *Democracy and Pluralism in Muslim Eurasia, 1st ed.*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 105.

maintenance of a nuclear arsenal, close cooperation with the Turkic-Islamic world, and struggle against s0-called Russian and Western neo-colonialism.

Ethnic nationalists, which included members of the National Democratic Party, the Azat Civil Movement, and the Zheltoksan National Democratic Party, advocated for the exclusivist nature of the national-identity project, i.e. identity is to be based on ethnicity. Within this discourse of exclusivist ethnic nationalism, Kazakhstan was imagined as a sovereign, one-nation (Kazakh), state. Although minorities were supposed to enjoy guaranteed basic human and civil rights, they would be regarded as representatives of diaspora nations.

Republic nationalists—well represented in the Republican Party of Kazakhstan—insisted on a more inclusive national identity, but proposed that members consider themselves to be Kazakh, respect Kazakh culture and traditions, speak the Kazakh language, and contribute to the further development of Kazakhstan. For them identity was closely linked to territory.[42] Therefore, they campaign against land privatization and advocate for the defense of absolute territorial integrity. According to this national identity project, Kazakhstan would become a non-aligned state that accepts principles of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Largely in opposition to Islamic, ethnic, and republican nationalists, a *Slavist* discourse, advanced by the LAD movement and the Russian Community (*Russkaia obshchina*), opposed the institutionalization of privileges granted on criteria of ethnicity and advanced claims in favor of granting Russian the status of a second state language, protecting Russian culture, and concluding agreements on dual citizenship with Russia.[43]

A small group of *liberals* advocated for the creation of a democratic civic identity based on democratic and liberal principles that would allow for diversity and equality among all Kazakhstan's citizens.[44] Liberals insisted that democratic rights should be extended to all members of Kazakhstani society, and that languages and cultures of all ethnicities should be supported and protected by institutions. Growing interaction with the international community provided an understanding of what constituted a legitimate international identity: a peace-loving state that adheres to the principles of "respect for rule of law, democracy and guarantees for minority, ethnic and national rights."[45]

These different strands developed distinctive views on national identity and foreign policy issues. But they all share the notion that democracy was the political future of Kazakhstan.[46] This can be explained by the widespread "end of history"[47] thinking and the hegemonic global discourse of liberal democracy. None of these discourses, however, gained state-level dominance in the 1990s.

The only discourse that stood out sharply was that of the *statists***,** which was built around ideas of a strong independent state, stability, development, and technocratic rationality. Statists

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[42] Abdelhamid El Ouali, *Territorial Integrity in A Globalizing World*, (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2012), 291.
[43] Natsuko Oka, "The 'Triadic Nexus' in Kazakhstan: A Comparative Study of Russians, Uighurs, and Koreans," in Ieda, Osamu et al. eds., *Beyond Sovereignty: From Status Law to Transnational Citizenship?* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2006): 359-380.
[44] Social Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, Socialist Party of Kazakhstan.
[45] "United Kingdom Materials on International Law," *British Yearbook of International Law* 62, no. 1 (1991): 561.
[46] "Democracy" was not necessarily interpreted in the Western liberal tradition.
[47] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992); Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, Vol. 16 (Summer 1989).

proposed to create a common "Kazakhstani nation" shaped on the matrix of civic nationalism. This discourse was guided by the understanding that the Kazakhstani nation should be constructed with due regard to ethnic differences, but with the ultimate goal of overcoming these differences through the creation of a common Kazakhstani identity. A primary role in the construction of this civic, albeit authoritarian, national identity was assigned to the state and to the ruling elites.

Imagining the Nation and the State

The statist discourse achieved a dominant status by the mid-1990s, and, for several reasons, it continues to maintain that position to this day.

First, statists were able to win the consent of masses by integrating various social and identity demands, in contrast to major alternative discourses. The latter all contain elements of opposition and differentiation (homogenization/assimilation, marginalization, exclusion) and constructed "in-groups" along ethnic, cultural, or religious lines. As a result, they all "ironed out" the variety of beliefs, practices, and ways of thinking"[48] that existed in Kazakhstan's society.

The statist discourse, however, succeeded in interweaving ethno-cultural, civic, and multicultural threads together. On the one hand, it has built around idea of tolerance of difference,[49] with multinationalism, multi-religionism, multi-lingualism, and multiculturalism as its main pillars. By de-emphasizing the primacy of ethnic, religious, and linguistic criteria in the construction of national identity, statists were able to accommodate the demands of Slavs and other minorities. On the other hand, the statist national identity proposal emphasizes the need to pay special attention to the interests of the titular Kazakhs. Some scholars framed this national identity project as "internationalism with a Kazakh face."[50] By articulating the interests of the titular Kazakhs, the statists were thus able to neutralize alternative discourses and achieve a fragile, passive consensus among this group of the population. Similarly, in the sphere of language policy, the state promoted the gradual introduction of the Kazakh language in all domains of public life, while guaranteeing protection of minority languages and rejecting calls to ban the Russian language.

Second, the statists' discourse contained "an additional component,"[51] namely an outward-looking focus on imminent threats that eventually facilitated the suppression of alternative discourses. In the early years of Kazakhstan's statehood, liberals posed a significant threat to the statists, as the former could credibly compete for supremacy. Both liberals' and statists' discourses offered similar proposals with regard to a variety of issues (e.g., national identity projects, economic and social policies, and nuclear disarmament). A fundamental difference stood out, however. The liberals' discourse was largely inward-looking, focusing on the state's internal vulnerability, and the Soviet legacy of "totalitarianism". Liberals made democracy the cornerstone of their discursive framework, conceiving it as essential for preventing the abuse of power by the state and creating a society based on values of equality, justice, freedom, and solidarity. In line with this, they argued for the immediate "de-ideologization" of politics,

[48] Titus Hjelm, *Social Constructionisms. Approaches to the Study of the Human World*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 75.
[49] In 1992, the President proposed to create a new social institute, namely, the Kazakhstan Assembly of Interethnic Harmony and Unity, a non-political, non-governmental organization whose main objective was to strengthen the interethnic and inter-confessional peace and harmony in the state.
[50] Edward A. D. Schatz, "Framing Strategies and Non-Conflict in Multi-Ethnic Kazakhstan," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6, no. 2 (2000): 71-94.
[51] Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

insisting on the limitation of state power.

Statists, however, were predisposed toward preserving power, and their discourse was built around a security-globalization nexus. Within this outward-looking worldview, Kazakhstan is situated in a world system defined by globalization, which entails both challenges and opportunities for the country. On the one hand, asymmetrical interdependence between states poses a threat to developing countries that lack a comparative advantage. As asserted by President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his speech at Columbia University in 1994, in "analyzing the modern world, it is impossible to deny the existence of the hierarchy of relationships along three dimensions: individual, state, and global society."[52] Yet even though the Charter of the United Nations provides for the sovereign equality of states, "in reality these principles have often had to be defended" by the newly independent states, which are particularly vulnerable to a complex set of threats. Consequently, new security risks force the state to redefine its security agenda. It is worth noting that security here is interpreted by the Kazakhstani state not only in military terms, but also as having environmental, economic, political, and social dimensions. As these dimensions of security are inherently interconnected, a threat to one may affect another.[53]

Statists thus argued that democratization would weaken the state's capacity to ensure security and peace at both the domestic and the international level. Rapid diffusion of power "would lead to chaos" as society was not yet ready for it. As a necessary measure, it was thus rational for "the orchestra" to have "only one conductor," as Nazarbayev himself stated.[54] Hence, the demand for a strong state was justified on peace and security grounds.[55] Rhetorically, however, the establishment of democracy was not completely dismissed; rather, it was deferred until later. It was argued that "democracy is not an inoculation against totalitarianism,"[56] neither is it helpful in avoiding colonization and dependency. Therefore, it was accorded a back-seat role.

On the flipside, however, in portraying globalization as a natural and unavoidable phenomenon, the statist discourse posits that Kazakhstan should ensure its security by taking advantage of opportunities offered by global processes.

In this light, building a positive international image, "enhancement of political authority in international society," a multi-vector foreign policy, and economic development are seen as necessary to ensure the formation of a so-called "belt of good-neighborliness" around the country. The statists share the belief that multilateralism—membership in international organizations identified not only as symbols of internationally recognized statehood (e.g., the United States), but as security assurance (e.g., the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization)—will dilute, if not totally supplant, traditional security practices that involve the participation of a hegemonic actor. Therefore, the state should be involved in institution-building rather than a military race. Kazakhstan thus needed to adopt an

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[52] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Speech of The President Of The Republic Of Kazakhstan," (speech given at Columbia University, New York, February 16, 1994), http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30007143.

[53] Ole Wæver, *Identity, Migration, and The New Security Agenda in Europe*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[54] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Second Session of the Assembly of people of Kazakhstan," (Almaty, June 30 1995).

[55] Taking into account the developments in neighboring countries (Tajikistan and Afghanistan) as well as the amount of hardship the country was going through after gaining its independence, Kazakhstani elites adopted the discourse about the importance of protection of sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity, as well as maintenance of peace and security.

[56] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Speech at the Council on Foreign Relations," (New York, May 23, 1992).

active foreign policy approach, which involved obtaining membership in various international organizations and actively proposing initiatives to tackle global and regional issues.

Importantly, for a country engaged in world politics, a positive image by other states would serve as an indicator of the country's successful work to ensure its survival. This reading of the state sovereignty and security gave statists the grounds to claim legitimacy as "external recognition broadcast inward to domestic audiences."[57] "Attainment of an authoritative position in the world economy" was deemed impossible without trade liberalization and the transition to a market economy. In the context of a difficult political and socio-economic situation, it was stressed that exiting from the post-Soviet crisis would not be achieved through threats and strike actions, but through hard work, patience, discipline, and consolidation for the sake of growth. According to the statists, development would require temporary sacrifice, which people needed to be prepared for, and some failures would be an inevitable part of growth. Adjustment to new global realms would allow Kazakhstan to move from the "zone of backwardness and vulnerability" to the "zone of progress and prosperity."

The statists' discourse is thus by essence inherently reform-oriented and forward-looking. Statists hold that the "survival" and integrity of the state are impossible without interethnic stability and unity at the domestic level. Taking into account that the level of ethnic diversity in Kazakhstan impeded the national identity construction processes, they chose a new vision that focused on a common future as the development trajectory for the purpose of distancing the state from its communist past. According to this forward-looking gaze, Kazakhstanis, despite being of different ethnicities, are united by a common ambitious goal, which is to build an independent state that would become a strong international actor.[58] Official discourse holds that Kazakhstani people comprise "the nation of the unified future;" it should put "the new values of the whole nation, such as the supremacy of law, state traditions, and Kazakhstani values, above their own ethnic behavioral models."[59]

In short, the ability to articulate the demands of different groups, an outward-looking focus, and a future-oriented gaze allowed the statists to retain power and neutralize alternative discourses.

National Identity and Nation-branding

The statists' representation of the nation gained a sufficient degree of consent from the population in the early years of statehood, prevailing over alternative imaginaries of national identity by the mid-1990s. Having become an official discourse, however, does not mean it became everlasting. The dominant discourse is never fixed, and it continues to face challenges and resistance.[60] To maintain its status, it must be able to continue to silence or discredit alternative proposals on national identity.

Bearing this in mind, and given fierce political contestation with regard to national identity at the domestic level,[61] the domain of nation-branding provides a safe space within which the

[57] Edward Schatz, "Transnational Image Making and Soft Authoritarian Kazakhstan," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 1 (2008): 50, doi:10.2307/27652766.
[58] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "The Forum of People of Kazakhstan," (Astana, December 14, 1994).
[59] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Ult zhospary - qazaqstandyq armanga bastaityn zhol," (2016), http://www.akorda.kz/kz/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/memleket-basshysynyn-ult-zhospary-kazakstandyk-armanga-bastaityn-zhol-makalasy.
[60] Michelle M. Lazar, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
[61] Serik Beissembayev, "Fenomen kazakhskogo natsionalizma v kontekste segodnyashnei politiki: ot

national identity may be constructed and reconstructed by the ruling elite. In other words, nation-branding remains an elite project that helps "naturalize" the official discourse on national identity. The following examples illustrate the point.

First, the Kazakhstani national identity project portrays Kazakhstan as a unique model of interethnic and inter-confessional concord in which all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, enjoy equal rights and freedoms. In 1995, the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan was established to ensure national unity on the grounds of civil identity, patriotism, and spiritual and cultural solidarity. In 2003, Kazakhstan initiated the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This "Dialogue of Civilizations" initiative presented Kazakhstan as a responsible international actor that promotes inter-religious and intercultural dialogue on a global scale and, even more importantly, has the authority to do so, due to both its experience in peaceful global conflict resolution and its unique model of interfaith harmony at home. Projected inward, this further sustains the chosen narrative of peace and tolerance, represented by the Palace of Peace and Accord built in Astana in 2006. Furthermore, it portrays Kazakhstan as a meeting point of various cultures and civilizations, reinforcing its image of being "a bridge between the West and the East." This leads the discussion to another linchpin of the official discourse: Eurasianism.

According to official discourse, Kazakhstan, which is situated in the "heart of Eurasia,"[62] is a "Eurasian country, which has its own history and its own future".[63] In line with this, "the unifying idea for all Kazakhstanis is the Eurasian idea, which synthesizes in the Kazakhstanis the best qualities of Asians and Europeans".[64] One example of nation-branding through which the Eurasian idea consolidated was the 2011 Astana-Almaty Winter Games. The official mascot of the Games was the snow leopard Irby, which embodied Kazakhstan's Eurasian spirit, while the motto of the event—"Unity of purpose—unity of spirit" (*Maqsaty birdin – ruhy bir* in Kazakh and *edinstvo tselei –edinstvo dukha* in Russian)—symbolized a common goal and the nation's striving to achieve unity and harmony. The snow leopard brand was used for the first time in 1997 when Kazakhstan announced the prioritization of economic achievements over political developments and its adherence to the promotion of so-called Asian values.

Another example is the OSCE chairmanship, which Kazakhstan obtained in 2010. The chairmanship not only symbolized an appreciation of Kazakhstan's achievements with regard to modernization and interethnic and interfaith accord on the part of the global community, but it also consolidated the vision of Kazakhstan as a bridge between Europe and Asia and its Eurasian identity.

The 2030 and 2050 Strategies, too, reflect these forward-looking and reform-oriented references. The goal of both strategies is to develop a welfare nation built on the basis of a strong

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otritsaniya k ponimaniyu," *Soros.kz*, 2015 http://ru.soros.kz/uploads/user_68/2015_23_09__03_46_44__219.pdf.

[62] Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Epitsentr mira*, (Almaty: Atamyra, 2003); Nursultan Nazarbayev, 2006. *Kazakhstanskii put'*, (Karaganda, 2006).

[63] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Prosperity, Security and Ever Growing Welfare Of All The Kazakhstanis. The Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan," (October 10, 1997), http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/page_address-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-nursultan-nazarbayev-to-the-people-of-kazakhstan-october-10-1997_1343986436.

[64] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "100 Steps for Five Institutional Reforms," (Astana, November 30, 2015), http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/state-of-the-nation-address-by-president-of-kazakhstan-nursultan-nazarbayev-november-30-2015.

state with a developed economy, and to join the top 30 developed countries of the world. Trilingual development of the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages is a pledge of consolidation of the society and improvement of its competitiveness. However, the success of achieving this new Kazakhstani dream is dependent on the unity of the nation: "Our path is the path of unity and consistent formation of the nation based on the civic identity."[65]

In May 2016, Nazarbayev called for the creation of a Ministry of Information and Communications to ensure the effective implementation of five institutional reforms that he proposed in 2015. The fourth of them specifically focuses on strengthening Kazakhstani identity. To implement the five reforms, the president introduced the "100 steps" initiative, a plan that includes various measures aimed at strengthening Kazakhstan's civic identity, namely: the development and implementation of the large-scale project of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan "Big Country—Big Family;" the national project "Menin Elim" (My Country); the promotion of the notion of the "Society of Common Labor;" and the national project "Nurly Bolashak" (Bright Future). The ministry of Information and Communications was thus created in part to provide information support to the development of "Kazakhstan's identity in mass media, the internet, new generation media, and social networks."[66]

In a similar vein, the international exposition EXPO 2017 is going to be held in Astana under the slogan "Future Energy". This slogan not only reflects the theme of the exposition (green energy technologies), but also symbolizes the spirit of Kazakhstan: future energy as Kazakhstan's striving for future progress and future energy as the potential of the Kazakhstani and the country itself.

Conclusion

As shown in this paper, the most widely accepted rationalist explanations for why a country would engage in nation-branding cannot be fully accepted in the Kazakhstani case. On the contrary, to a great extent, Kazakhstan's branding initiatives should be understood not only as the presentation of a positive image at the international level for the sake of tourism, investment attractions or political aspirations, but also as part of the government's nation-building process at the domestic level.

The Kazakhstani ruling elite continue to pursue the project of constructing an authoritarian civic national identity, based on the country's achievements over the years of independence, "imagined" shared values, and common nationality through nation-branding practices. These nation-branding efforts, however, simplify the national identity and disregard alternative discourses about national imagery that are inherently different from the official one. In light of the increasing salience and growing popularity of alternative discourses and the fragile passive consensus on civic national identity that were achieved in the 1990s and the 2000s, the dominant position of the official discourse may be challenged in coming years. It is at this critical juncture that the current regime will be tested for endurance.

[65] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Ult zhospary - qazaqstandyq armanga bastaityn zhol," (2016), http://www.akorda.kz/kz/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/memleket-basshysynyn-ult-zhospary-kazakstandyk-armanga-bastaityn-zhol-makalasy.
[66] Nursultan Nazarbayev, "100 Steps for Five Institutional Reforms."