



ETHNIC RETURN MIGRATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: SHIFTING STATE DYNAMICS, CHANGING MEDIA DISCOURSES

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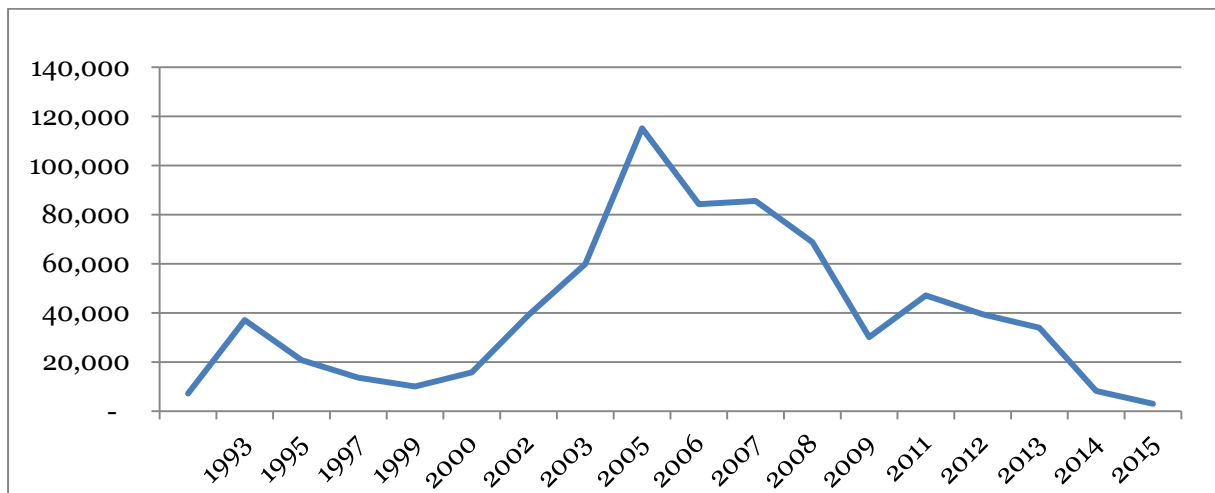
After the demise of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan launched an ethnic repatriation program for returning ethnic Kazakhs who had left the country during the years of Tsarist colonization and Soviet control. In the 23 years since it was launched, the ethnic repatriation program has brought into the country about 1 million ethnic returnees (in Kazakh: *Oralmandar*), who now constitute a sizeable 10 percent of the ethnic Kazakh population. The ethnic returnees have come mostly from Uzbekistan (61.6 percent), China (14.2 percent), Mongolia (6.8 percent), Turkmenistan (4.6 percent), and Russia (3.7 percent).² As seen in Figure 1 below, the flow of ethnic returnees was particularly buoyant in the period of Kazakhstan's first post-Soviet economic growth, especially from 1999 to 2004, increasing from 10,000 in 1999 to 115,000 in 2005.³

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² "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii na 1 oktiabria 2015 goda," Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/332244>, accessed December 18, 2016.

³ "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii," Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/330063>.

Figure 1. Ethnic returnees per year, 1992-2015⁴



Research about ethnic repatriation in Kazakhstan can be divided broadly into three main directions. The first scrutinizes the complex levels of ethnic returnees' integration into Kazakhstan,⁵ including adaptation to their new environment.⁶ Research has mainly concluded that difficulties in adaptation have led to the marginalization of ethnic returnees.⁷ A second group of researchers has worked on the topic of ethnic returnees from a transnational identity perspective and studied how ethnic returnees practice their multiple identities.⁸ The third group has researched ethnic return from a nation-building and public discourse perspective; they hypothesize that ethnic return has created a so far irreconcilable public debate between supporters of ethnic nation-building and those who favor a civic approach.⁹

One aspect that has been less studied is how the Kazakhstani state has shifted and changed its policy toward ethnic returnees in response to various events during the course of the past quarter-century. Since the topic of ethnic returnees has always been of high interest to the domestic audience, tracking coverage of the issue in Kazakhstani media allows us to better understand the shifts of public sentiment toward ethnic returnees. In this paper, I argue that the state's approach to the return of ethnic Kazakhs has changed significantly and can be divided into three broad stages of implementation, based on domestic developments. To complement my analysis of the state policy changes, I also examine how media discourses on

⁴ See Ibid.; "Oralmanov v Kazakhstan prebyvaiut vse menshe," *Azattyk.org*, <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-repatriants-statistics/25146818.html>; "Osnovnye tendentsii migratsionnykh protsessov v Kazakhstane na sovremennom etape," *Articlekz.com*, <http://articlekz.com/article/7395>, accessed December 18, 2016.

⁵ Alexander C. Diener "Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 6 (2005): 465-78.

⁶ Baurzhan Bokayev, "Language, Ethnic Identity, and Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *European Scientific Journal* 6 (2013), <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1525998931?accountid=11243>.

⁷ Alexander Diener, "Kazakhstan Kin-State Diaspora: Settlement Planning and the Oralman Dilemma," *Europe Asia Studies* 57, no 2 (2005): 327-48.

⁸ Saltanat Akhmetova, "At Home among Strangers: The Integration and Transnational Practices of Chinese-Born Kazakh Returnees in Kazakhstan" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Essex, United Kingdom, 2016), <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1827872520?accountid=11243>, accessed December 13, 2016.

⁹ Isik Kuşçu, "Ethnic Return Migration and Public Debate: The Case of Kazakhstan," *International Migration* 52 (2014): 178-97.

the ethnic returnees question have evolved by looking at four nationwide state and private newspapers, both in Kazakh and in Russian, from 1992 to October 2016. One of my main findings is that the shifting dynamics of state priorities and changing media discourses have influenced the ethnic returnees' image from positive to negative and then to that of an excluded group.

Zigzagging State Policies toward Ethnic Repatriation

First Stage (1991-1999): From Legitimizing Kazakhness to a Civic Nation-State

The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted the newly independent countries to promote their titular ethnicity in order to consolidate the acquired statehood and dissociate themselves from the Russian and Soviet past. Kazakhstan joined this trend in promoting ethnic Kazakhs as the core of the new nation-building project. In 1991 ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan represented only 40 percent of the population.¹⁰ In the name of a "restoration of historical justice,"¹¹ the Kazakh authorities quickly decided to call back ethnic Kazakhs who had emigrated, mostly in the 1930s. The regulations for ethnic repatriation were set by the "Law on Immigration" adopted by Supreme Council (Parliament) on June 26, 1992. According to it, the state would set quotas for repatriation as well as the amount of a financial allowance for adaptation and resettlement of ethnic returnees in the regions of Kazakhstan.

With this move, the government was promoting an image of the young Kazakh state as the ethnic homeland of all the Kazakhs in the world.¹² For some ethnic kinsmen abroad, this call back to the ethnic homeland was attractive and many decided to come back.¹³ The first wave of returnees who responded to the state repatriation program was cheered by officials who saw in their return a chance for revival of the Kazakh language, culture, and traditions and a break from the Russian and Soviet past. The returnees thus served partly to legitimize the independent country and were instrumentalized by the authorities to win over part of the Kazakh electorate by promoting ethnic identity.¹⁴

The first wave of ethnic repatriates asserted allegiance to Kazakhstan despite the difficulties of repatriation in terms of socio-economic integration and adaptation into the new society and its then weak economy.¹⁵ Ethnic repatriates readily explained that they were thankful to have come back to Kazakhstan. As one said, "We were happy to come back to our homeland. We would like to thank all supporters for that, first of all ethnic Kazakhs who accepted us in Kazakhstan."¹⁶

However, in the mid-1990s, the state authorities decided to reduce the ethnic focus of Kazakhstan's nation-building project and instead promote multiethnic diversity in support of a civic nation-state construction. At this phase, the repatriation program became the subject of an intense public debate between supporters of ethnic and civic nation-building.¹⁷ The supporters of civic nation-building argued for a kind of Soviet-style nationalities policy in

¹⁰ "15 novykh nezavisimyykh gosudarstv. Chislennost' naseleniia na nachalo goda, 1950-2016, tysiach chelovek," *Demoscope*, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_pop.php.

¹¹ "Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva ot 16.09.1998 N 900, "O kontseptsii repatriatsii etnicheskikh kazakhov na istoricheskuiu rodinu," *Kazakhstancity.info*, http://kazakhstan.news-city.info/docs/sistemsb/dok_oeqhvo.htm.

¹² "Rech' Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbaeva na torzhestvennom zasedanii Vsemirnogo kurultaia kazakhov," *Zakon.kz*, http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30006956.

¹³ Diener, "Kazakhstan Kin-State Diaspora."

¹⁴ Kuşçu, "Ethnic Return Migration and Public Debate."

¹⁵ Results of author's fieldwork in Qoyandi, June-August 2016.

¹⁶ Isik Kuscu, "Kazakhstan Oralman Project: A Remedy for Ambiguous Identity?" (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, USA, 2008), 252, <http://gradworks.umi.com/33/44/3344583.html>, accessed September 15, 2016.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

order to promote a non-ethnically based Kazakhstani identity, more friendly to Russian-speaking minorities.¹⁸

Supporters of a civic identity believed that ethnic repatriation was an initiative destined to fail. They questioned the government's financial capacity to provide social benefits to repatriates and the economic sustainability of the program. Ethnic nation-state supporters favored the repatriation program, viewing it as a measure of historical justice in response to the forced emigration of ethnic Kazakhs in the past, and raised alarms about the risks of national erosion and assimilation to the Russian world. They called for the recognition of ethnic Kazakhs as victims of the Soviet Union's policies of famine and collectivization and the targeted limitations imposed on the use of the Kazakh language.¹⁹

Meanwhile, ethnic returnees were getting over their euphoria about returning to their ethnic homeland and were becoming increasingly outspoken about their difficult socio-economic conditions. Repatriates' discontent and protests increased.²⁰ The shifting narrative in the homeland from the ethnic to the civic approach was one of the reasons for their dissatisfaction: they felt their privileged status was no longer valid while socio-economic issues were making them more vulnerable.²¹

Second Stage (2000-2011): Repatriates as a Source of Labor to Repatriates as "Otherness"

As nation-building took a basically civic path, the authorities were less inclined to offer special privileges to ethnic returnees. Increasingly, they saw them not as a symbol of a revived Kazakhness but as a cheap and easy source of labor. This shift in state perception coincided with the dynamism of the Kazakhstani economy in the 2000s, based on rising oil and minerals prices and the growing need for a cheap workforce.

A new program for regional and rural development and industrialization of the country, called "Nurly Kosh" (The bright migration), decided at the end of the 2000s, embodied this view of ethnic repatriation as fulfilling the needs of the country's economic and industrial development.²² The program aimed to move ethnic repatriates, along with labor migrants from abroad as well as internal migrants, to labor-scarce territories in the North, East, and West of the country. It envisaged that 2 billion tenge (approximately \$1.3 billion) would be spent over three years, from 2009 to 2011. The program aimed to develop small, integrated hubs of cities with some economic specialization and a common labor market. In order to implement the envisaged 45 innovation projects, 39,000 workers were required; they would receive support from the state, including a housing allowance.²³ To provide housing, the government built special compact settlements, funded through budget loans provided from the central budget to local executive bodies. The government planned to provide housing for 3,269 returnee families.²⁴ These special settlements for the ethnic returnees segregated them from other citizens, limited communication with the local population, and complicated their adaptation and integration.

According to the presidential decree, the quota for ethnic returnees eligible to receive social benefits was 20,000 families per year from 2009 to 2011. In comparison to previous decrees

¹⁸ Kuseu "Kazakhstan," 216.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See protests at: Shanirak village, Almaty oblast in 2006; Baiterek village, the North Kazakhstan oblast in 2011; micro district Duman 1, Almaty, in 2011; Akyn sara village, Almaty oblast in 2012; Shigis village in 2013, in "Oralmany," *Esquire*, <http://m.esquire.kz/content/1149-oralmanyi>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Programma 'Nurly Kosh,'" *Online.zakon.kz*, http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30365313#pos=33;-292.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

from 2005-2007, the quota had been doubled.²⁵ However, it was not met, and the program reached only 36 percent of its goal. Potential ethnic returnees weighed the opportunity to move to poorer regions of Kazakhstan against better economic conditions in their countries of origin or in some other regions of Kazakhstan where they already had some relatives. Difficulties of integration experienced in the previous years also explain the failure to meet the repatriation quotas. At the end, an inspection by the Accounting Committee revealed the fragmented character of the program's implementation, and it was stopped.²⁶

In late 2011, a protest by oil workers in the small city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan dramatically impacted the issue of ethnic repatriates. This region was one of the main destinations for Oralman from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The conflict and its repression had multiple causes, but the authorities preferred to look for scapegoats and found them in the ethnic returnees. As the official discourse of stability and effective government began to be scrutinized by civil society, protest groups, and independent media, the government had to make efforts to legitimize its actions in Zhanaozen. It framed the state's behavior as having been compelled by the necessity of providing security rather than as an act of force. The government's narrative thus contributed to accentuating the "otherness" of Oralmans by dissociating them from the national "we" of Kazakhs who support the stability of the country. It presented them as being the source of the riots, in the hope of avoiding addressing the deep socio-economic roots of the conflict.²⁷

Yermuhamed Yertysbayev, then an aide to the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, stated: "What happened in Zhanaozen was not typical for the Kazakh mentality. Kazakhs have never opposed the central government. The main organizers in Zhanaozen are people who recently received Kazakhstani citizenship; they came from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; they have not fully fit into the Kazakh mentality."²⁸ Timur Kulibayev, the president's son-in-law and former chairman of the board of the National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna, declared even more plainly that "the leaders of the protesting oil workers in Zhanaozen are returnees."²⁹ Umirzhak Shukeev, former vice prime minister, suggested not accepting any more ethnic returnees in Mangystau oblast, and proposed that returnees who already lived there should be settled in other regions.³⁰ Some state-affiliated experts "confirmed" that the Zhanaozen events were organized by Oralmans from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan who were more prone to social protests than local Kazakhs.³¹

The state-led discourse of "Other" built on the Zhanaozen incident allowed the government to divert attention from the actual failed results of the "Nurly Kosh" program. After the program was shut down, the government stopped monitoring its implementation and only local administrative bodies were responsible for it.³²

²⁵ "O kvote immigratsii oralmanov na 2009-2011 gody," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/prezident_respubliki_kazahstan/konstitutsionnyiy_stroy_i_osnovyi_gosudarstvennogo_upravleniya/id-Uo80000690/.

²⁶ "Vystuplenie Predsedatelia Schetnogo komiteta," Accounting Committee for Control of Implementation of the State Budget of Kazakhstan, <http://esep.kz/rus/showin/article/577>.

²⁷ David Lewis "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3: 421-38.

²⁸ "Oralmany," *Esquire*.

²⁹ "Kulibaev: Liderami bastuiushchikh v Zhanaozene neftianikov iavliaiutsia pereselentsy," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kulibaev-liderami-bastuyuschih-janaozene-neftyanikov-197979/.

³⁰ "V Kazakhstane vnov' ozabotilis' sud'boi oralmanov," *Titus*, <http://titus.kz/index.php?previd=40880&start=30>.

³¹ Sultan Akimbekov, "Kazakhstan posle Zhanaozena i vyborov," *TsentrAzii*, <http://www.asiakz.com/node/117>.

³² "Schetnyi komitet otmechaet neeffektivnuiu realizatsiiu Programmy 'Nurly kosh' na 2009-2011 gody," *Nomad.su*, <http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201205160028>.

Third Stage (2014- currently): The Ukrainian Crisis Catharsis

The Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 caused the Kazakhstani authorities great concern. The claims that some Russian nationalists made on the northern Kazakhstan territories,³³ and occasional separatist appeals in the Russian-based social network VKontakte by residents of the northern Kazakhstan oblasts, set off alarms for the authorities.³⁴ The government tightened up the law against secessionism and its supporters,³⁵ and decided to relaunch a more voluntarist policy for changing the demographic balance in the country's northern oblasts.³⁶

The authorities adopted a new decree on repatriates' resettlement in seven oblasts of Kazakhstan on March 20, 2014, just a few days after the Crimea annexation. According to the text, repatriates should be resettled in six out of the seven oblasts in northern Kazakhstan.³⁷ On June 8, 2014, the government expanded the number of oblasts to 14 – that is, the whole of the country, excluding the two capital cities of Almaty and Astana. But the envisaged social benefits – namely, a housing allowance, travel payment, job opportunities, and bank credits – were guaranteed only for those returnees who settle in the northern oblasts.³⁸

This policy complements an already existing program for resettlement of people from the populous southern oblasts to the less densely populated northern part of Kazakhstan.³⁹ But as Serik Jaxylykov shows in no *CAP papers* no. 184, "The Northern Region and the Southern People: Migration Policies and Patterns in Kazakhstan," the majority of ethnic returnees, especially those from Uzbekistan, have settled in the southern oblasts (23.2 percent in South Kazakhstan oblast, 20.2 percent in Almaty oblast, and 7.4 percent in Zhambyl oblast) in the previous stages of implementation of ethnic repatriation program.⁴⁰

Although the government claimed that the northern oblasts were short of labor supply, in reality most of the ethnic returnees had no professional education and thus could not replace the departing Russian and Slavic population in their industrial or agricultural jobs. Clearly, the goal was to change the demographic balance in favor of ethnic Kazakhs. Moreover, the government reduced the timeframe for the processing of new Kazakhstan citizenship applications from 5-7 years to 1 year and removed solvency conditions for repatriates.⁴¹ The acceleration of citizenship processing also meant that the government would be able to cut its expenses for the social benefits that earlier had to be provided during the five years before Oralmanov could attain citizenship status, a discrete way to reduce public spending at a time of limited state budgets.⁴² In 2016, state-affiliated experts in the ethnic repatriation program

³³ "Reaktsiia na zaiavleniia Limonova i Zhirinovskogo kak pokazatel' provintsializma MID RK," *Radiotochka*, <https://radiotochka.kz/1814-.html>.

³⁴ "Kazakhstan: piat' let tiur'my za separatistskii opros 'VKontakte'," *Sputniknews*, <http://sputnikpogrom.com/news/47006/19-november-2015-1/#.V-6hyvDhDFg>.

³⁵ "Nakazanie za separatizm uzhestochat v Kazakhstane," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nakazanie-za-separatizm-ujestochat-v-kazahstane-253259/.

³⁶ Joanna Lilis, "Kazakhstan: Astana Entices Kazakhs from Abroad Amid Ukraine Crisis," *Eurasianet*, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69006>.

³⁷ "Ob opredelenii regionov dlia rasseleniia oralmanov i pereselentsev," *Egov.kz*, <https://egov.kz/cms/ru/law/list/P1600000083>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Ob utverzhenii Dorozhnoi karty zaniatosti 2020," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/pravitelstvo_respubliki_kazahstan_premier_ministr_rk/trud/id-P1300000636/.

⁴⁰ "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii."

⁴¹ "V Kazakhstane uprostili protseduru polucheniia grazhdanstva dlia oralmanov," *Zona.kz*, <https://zonakz.net/view-v-kazahstane-uprostili-proceduru-poluchenija-grazhdanstva-dlja-oralmanov.html>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

proposed to prioritize young ethnic returnees who would in theory more easily adapt, obtain higher education in Kazakhstan, and become an integral part of the society.⁴³ This proposal is likely to be supported by state officials, as it would reduce the financial costs associated with the return of whole families.

Changing Media Discourses on Ethnic Repatriates

After television, newspapers play an important role in shaping public opinion. The print media constitute 90 percent of the total registered media outlets in Kazakhstan.⁴⁴ For this study, I selected two main state-owned newspapers, the Kazakh-language *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Sovereign Kazakhstan, 170,000-copy circulation) and the Russian-language *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* (Truth of Kazakhstan, 100,000-copy circulation).⁴⁵ Both newspapers reproduce the state ideology, and their subscribers are mostly people who are funded from the state budget, such as civil servants, teachers, and doctors.⁴⁶ Both newspapers are deemed to be a major source of printed information in the different regions and in rural areas of Kazakhstan because of the limited access to other types of newspapers or the Internet.⁴⁷ I have also selected two privately owned newspapers, *Zhas Alash* (Young Alash) in Kazakh and *Vremia* (Time) in Russian, with circulations of 50,000 and 180,000 copies, respectively. *Zhas Alash* and *Vremia* are semi-independent newspapers and therefore to some degree express a balanced critical view. The readers of *Zhas Alash* are representatives of the ethnic Kazakh intelligentsia, followers and sympathizers of Kazakh nationalism, while *Vremia*'s subscribers are mostly from the urban areas and people who tend to seek alternative views on various issues.⁴⁸

Egemen Qazaqstan maintains an online presence in the Latin-derived Turkish script and the Arabic-derived *tote zhazu* script in order to be readable by Kazakhs in Turkey and Xinjiang.⁴⁹ This reflects the desire of the state to influence ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad and promote Kazakhstan as a successfully developed nation in which repatriates have played a key role, especially those from Xinjiang. Contributors to *Zhas Alash* include ethnic returnees who write in a rich Kazakh language and with an independent critical approach. Articles by journalists who are ethnic returnees have become influential because of their bold language and original views, especially when they show no attachment to the Soviet Union. This allows ethnic returnee journalists to discuss the issues of ethnic repatriation using full strength of the Kazakh language. It is noteworthy that the state's nationwide newspapers refused to hire journalists from among the ethnic returnees, who have found an outlet in the semi-independent Kazakh newspapers.⁵⁰

Ethnic returnees have also created web platforms in order to advance their own perspectives and voices. Currently, the most popular websites in Kazakh are *abai.kz*, created with the participation of ethnic returnees, and *qamshy.kz* (Whip) and *dalanews.kz* (the Steppe

⁴³ "Etnicheskaiia migratsiia: pora meniat' podkhody," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/etnicheskaya-migratsiya-pora-menyat-podhodi1/>.

⁴⁴ "Istoriia stanovleniia informatsionnogo rynka v Kazakhstane," *Medialaw*, <http://medialaw.asia/node/9139>.

⁴⁵ "Gazet-tarikhy," *Egemen Qazaqstan*, <https://egemen.kz/gazet-tarikhy>.

⁴⁶ Aziz Burkhanov and Yu-Wen Chen, "Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 no. 12 (2016): 2129-2148.

⁴⁷ "Internet v kazakhstanskikh selakh v 30 raz medlennee, chem v gorodakh," *Informburo*, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/internet-v-kazahstanskikh-syolah-v-30-raz-medlennee-chem-v-gorodah-.html>, accessed November 22, 2016.

⁴⁸ Burkhanov and Chen, "Kazakh Perspective on China."

⁴⁹ See the website of *Egemen Qazaqstan*: www.egemen.kz.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with the deputy to the editor-in-chief of a state-owned newspaper, in Astana, May 27, 2016.

News), entirely owned by ethnic returnees.⁵¹ According to the ratings, *qamshy.kz* took fortieth place, with about 200,000 visitors per month, among Kazakhstan's 7,420 registered websites.⁵² Online platforms like these are becoming tools for popularizing the Kazakh nationalist discourse among the Kazakh-speaking population. Each website offers specific viewpoints and focus; for instance, *qamshy.kz* often expresses anti-Chinese sentiments while *abai.kz* focuses on criticizing the Soviet policy toward Kazakhs.

These web platforms are offering high-quality content in Kazakh at a time when online media in Kazakh generally still struggle to find a readership niche. They easily attract readers from among those who crave analytical information in the Kazakh language. As key to their success, these websites raise particular social, political, economic, identity, and foreign policy issues as seen from a Kazakh ethnic perspective and even from the perspective of what they call "Kazakh national consciousness." Undoubtedly, these web platforms promote Kazakh nationalism and respond to the demands of a Kazakh-speaking population. They have an impact on the development of Kazakh nationalist discourse and the growth of conservative ideology among young ethnic Kazakhs.⁵³

Diverging Coverage of Ethnic Repatriation by Kazakh- and Russian-language Newspapers

Articles about ethnic returnees mostly appear in the Kazakh-language newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash*. The Russian-language *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* and *Vremia* have published few articles on this topic, considered less relevant to the Russian-speaking part of the population; they mostly promote the civic nation-building perspective.

In the first stage of the repatriation process, both Kazakh-language and Russian-language newspapers took a similar approach to the issue, presenting ethnic returnees as part of Kazakhstan's nation-building vision as an ethnic homeland. *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash* highlighted the reunification of the ethnic returnees and the Sovietized Kazakh population in one homeland as the symbol of Kazakhstan's new nationhood. In contrast, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* and *Vremia* presented a more complex picture, insisting on the contradictions and unknowns of the new nationhood and the potential contribution of ethnic returnees to the national economy, as well as the issues of resettling and providing for the basic needs of the ethnic returnees. In particular, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* questioned the sustainability of the return:

Saying goodbye, I asked Amantay (an ethnic returnee from Mongolia), can it happen that you will return to Mongolia after the end of contract (all of them have Mongolian passports). Amantay remained silent and then pondered a reply: "No, we will stay." But if he, even passionately loving his homeland, does not find what he looked and aspired for – that is another matter.⁵⁴

There were major differences emerging between the two information spaces. Kazakh-language newspapers described ethnic return in terms of a primordial notion of "self," using terms such as *qandas* (kinsmen), *bauir* (brother), *again jurt* (relatives).⁵⁵ By contrast, Russian-language media described ethnic returnees, based on a Soviet notion of nationality

⁵¹ Berikbol Dukeyev, Letter, Yesengul Kapkyzy, professor at Suleiman Demirel University, November 4, 2016.

⁵² "Ratings of the websites," Zero.kz, <http://zero.kz/?c=&sr=kz&pd=2592000>.

⁵³ "Content analysis of web sites," The Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the "Strategy" Fund, Almaty, 2013.

⁵⁴ "Is Kazakhstan becoming a motherland for ethnic returnees from Mongolia?" *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, September 26, 1992.

⁵⁵ See articles in *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash* from 1992 to 1997.

(*natsional'nost'*), as repatriates, *pereselentsy* (immigrants), and *litsa korennoi natsional'nosti* (people of the indigenous nationality).⁵⁶

Framing Oralman as an "Issue" for Kazakhstan

The term *Oralman*, often used by Kazakh and Russian newspapers to describe the ethnic returnees, acquired additional meanings, but in both languages it was mostly used to describe negative experiences. The state newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* conveyed the official discourse of resettlement to meet the needs of Kazakhstan's economic development in labor-scarce regions. In many of its publications, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* particularly stressed the socio-economic opportunities for ethnic returnees:

All Oralman are provided with access to medical services, education, and social care provision; they are targeted as one of the groups in respect of which we use measures to facilitate employment.⁵⁷

However, as an independent newspaper, *Zhas Alash* did not hesitate to criticize the implementation of the "Nurly Kosh" program and especially the limited capacities and responsibilities of local administrative bodies. For example, according to the program's pilot project, a special micro district was built for the needs of ethnic returnees in southern Kazakhstan oblasts. However, local administrative bodies distributed these houses only to ethnic returnees from Uzbekistan who belonged to one particular clan.⁵⁸

Interestingly, after the Zhanaozen riots in December 2011, the state newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* did not blame ethnic returnees for the riots; in other words, they did not reproduce politicians' mainstream narratives. Instead, the authorities focused on online media to spread a negative image of Oralman and called on popular bloggers to shape online opinion,⁵⁹ but they let the print press opt out of this blame game. Some state newspapers did join high-ranking officials in their labeling of Oralman as the embodiment of the "Other," but they soon focused on questioning the "Nurly Kosh" program's results, and relayed the critical view of the Accounting Committee of Kazakhstan concerning the fragmented implementation of the program. The housing for ethnic repatriates was not well built and was not distributed equally, and the optimistic goal of creating several thousands of new jobs was not met.⁶⁰

The Post-Crimean Image Restoration of Oralman

During the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the relaunching of the ethnic repatriation program, returnees were encouraged to settle in northern areas of Kazakhstan with assurances that they would be provided housing allowances and jobs. This evolution in the government's approach was reflected in state-owned newspapers. They portrayed the repatriation as *Uli kosh* (great migration) or *Kazakh koshi* (Kazakh migration), thus evoking the nomadic past of the country and the creation of the Kazakh khanate, the symbolic precursor of contemporary Kazakhstan, in the fifteenth century.

Egemen Qazaqstan commented positively on the state program's changes, especially the reductions of bureaucratic obstacles for repatriates to gain Kazakhstani citizenship. It promoted the state narrative about repatriates getting houses, land parcels, and bank credits for the development of greenhouses and gardening. It wrote cheerful articles to lure

⁵⁶ See articles in *Kazakhstanskaya pravda* from 1992 to 1997.

⁵⁷ "Nurly Kosh – programma deistvii," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, December 9, 2009.

⁵⁸ "Oralman discriminated against based on clan affiliation," *Zhas Alash* August 23, 2011.

⁵⁹ Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen".

⁶⁰ "Schetnyi komitet otmechaet neeffektivnuiu realizatsiyu Programmy 'Nurly kosh.'"

Oralmans to northern Kazakhstan.⁶¹ In particular, an article titled “Kazakhs, Move to the North” advanced the following message:

All Kazakhs are relatives to one another; not only the South but all parts of the country are warm; not only the weather but also the local government should be favorable. The land of the Kazakhs is a wide expanse common for all Kazakhstanis. Land, country, and, more important, interests, are common for all of us. The government is not advertising this project because the budget does not allow for increasing quotas, as the entire world is in a crisis. However, businessmen and the wealthy should be urged to help people who are willing to come to Kazakhstan with housing, jobs, and plots of land. In the end, the government will gain enduring credibility and the respect of the generations.⁶²

An identical narrative was presented in state-owned *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, which emphasized the returnees’ contribution to the country’s development:

Oralmans become the pride of our country; they are successfully developing the economy and culture, raising the status of the Kazakh language, and enriching traditions, strengthening our independence.⁶³

Kazakhstanskaia pravda also suddenly depicted ethnic returnees as hard-working persons who have become middle-class businessmen in their villages – successful people who have contributed to the development of the local economy. This excerpt is from an article emphasizing that ethnic returnees have contributed to the development of a village:

Give thanks to Oralmans. If it were not for them, the locals still would not have mastered a roadside trade; if it were not them, who would work in livestock, as shepherds, as manufacturers of saddles, harnesses, yurts, bows; if it were not for them, recreation areas would be left without [anyone to prepare] kumis, ayran, boursaks, or home cakes, [and gather] firewood and spring water; if not for them, it is hard to find “social activists” to clean the streets.⁶⁴

The semi-independent *Vremia* preferred to raise the unresolved issues of ethnic returnees, discussing problems associated with their registration by local administrative bodies, xenophobic attitudes toward them, difficulties for their villages to get access to electricity and the main state-sponsored public services, and so forth.⁶⁵ For example, ethnic returnees from China regularly complained about difficulties registering their surnames with the local administrative bodies in order to obtain state identification cards, as they did not have surnames living in China.⁶⁶

Zhas Alash shared the same, critical perspective, describing the issues of poor quality of houses constructed as part of the “Nurly Kosh” program; the tensions between Kazakh returnees from Iran, who do not speak Russian, and the Mangystau administrative bodies; ethnic returnees’ proposal to be represented as a specific group in the Parliament; and their

⁶¹ “Kosh kaita zhandana bastardy,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <https://pdf.egemen.kz/pdfs/2016/10/12102016-web.pdf>.

⁶² “Kozgal Qazaq Soltustikke,” *Egemen Qazaqstan*, <https://egemen.kz/2016/09/08/60693>.

⁶³ “S liubov’u k rodine,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/fresh/view/s-lubovu-k-rodine3/>.

⁶⁴ “Will go to Akadyr,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/fresh/view/budu-ezdit-v-akadir/>.

⁶⁵ “Svet klinkom soshelsia,” *Vremia*, <http://www.time.kz/articles/risk/2015/04/11/svet-klinkom-soshelsja>.

⁶⁶ “Zvat’ tebia nikak,” *Vremia*, <http://www.time.kz/news/archive/2012/12/13/i-zvat-tebya-nikak>.

protests in the small village of Qoyandy.⁶⁷ *Zhas Alash* depicted the current perception of ethnic returnees by the population as follows:

The term *Oralman* is imagined to mean persons who are devoid of law, do not understand Russian, and are starving from hunger. This is not true. Kinsmen who came from abroad include persons with higher education, good knowledge of law, and who think more about giving to Kazakhstan rather than about taking from it.⁶⁸

The media coverage of the relaunching of the repatriation program after the Ukrainian crisis thus combined several of the previous narratives. On one hand, it is celebrated as part of the nation-building process in response to potential risks coming from Russia in the northern regions of the country, and as a positive step to rebalance demographic and ethnic distribution in favor of ethnic Kazakhs. On the other hand, the media continue to cover the main socio-economic aspects of the repatriates' integration process, including their constructive role in building private entrepreneurship and their difficulties in integrating successfully in the Kazakhstani society.

Conclusions

At the beginning, the state approach to ethnic repatriation was founded on a pure kin-state perception, as part of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet nation-building process. With time, it shifted to a more nuanced and less enthusiastic perspective, not only to fit into a broader civic nation-building process, but also to reflect the difficulties of the ethnic repatriates' integration into Kazakhstani society. The implementation of the different repatriation programs proved to be more challenging than expected, as ethnic returnees were often segregated in separate villages, faced difficulties in learning Russian (for those coming from outside of the Soviet world), and experienced tensions with local administrative bodies. So far, the primordialist perception of an ethnic, unified "self" between Kazakhstani Kazakhs and Kazakhs from abroad had failed, and ethnic returnees did not "naturally" integrate into Kazakhstani society on the basis of their shared ethnicity. This forced the government to adapt its own narrative and its programs to reflect more complex realities. Since then, Oralman tend to embody both the purity of Kazakhness for that part of Kazakhstani society that is sensitive to Kazakh nationalism, and "Otherness" for the rest of the society, who see in the ethnic returnees a problematic social group.

Even among Kazakhstani youth, which is usually considered to be less Sovietized and more responsive to issues related to "Kazakhness," ethnic returnees are surrounded with negative stereotypes. A survey conducted among 14-28 year-old Kazakhstani youth in 2014, based on the research design of the Shell Youth Study, showed that 14 percent of the respondents did not want to live near ethnic returnees. They appear as the second-least desirable neighbors after homosexuals (27.3 percent of youth are uncomfortable about living near a homosexual couple).⁶⁹ In a longer perspective, with gradual reduction of the Russian and Slavic minorities in Kazakhstan and the emergence a second generation of Oralman, the integration of ethnic returnees into the Kazakhstani social body will become a critical issue for the authorities and their nation-building project.

⁶⁷ "Irannan kelgen Qazaqtar kerı kaituda," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/kogam/16789.html?lang=kz>; "Oralmanga obal-audeitin pende tabilmai tur," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/eleumet/18231.html?lang=kz>; "Bir japirak nan bershi degen syakti goi," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/sayasat/16500.html?lang=kz>.

⁶⁸ "Uiade kaida, Tamara?" *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/eleumet/12483.html?lang=kz>.

⁶⁹ *Molodezh' Tsentral'noi Azii. Kazakhstan, na osnove sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia* (Astana, Fund Strategiya, 2016), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB37ubuN9nGEbbHBNNWw5b3BFdVk/view>.