

# The Nazarbayev Generation

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# The Nazarbayev Generation

Youth in Kazakhstan

Edited by Marlene Laruelle

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# Contents

Introduction: The Nazarbayev Generation: A Sociological Portrait <i>Marlene Laruelle</i>	1
<b>PART I: KAZAKHSTANI YOUTH AND NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	23
1 Are Youth Different? The Nazarbayev Generation and Public Opinion <i>Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai</i>	25
2 Youth and National Identity: Then and Now <i>Aziz Burkhanov</i>	49
3 Youth and Civic National Identity <i>Dina Sharipova</i>	69
4 <i>Mankurts</i> , Kazakh “Russians,” and “Shala” Kazakhs: Language, National Identity, and Ethnicity Revisited <i>Diana T. Kudaibergenova</i>	89
<b>PART II: YOUTH VOICES ON MORAL CHANGES</b>	113
5 “We Love Our Country in Our Own Way”: Youth, Gender, and Nationalism <i>Ulan Bigozhin</i>	115
6 “Cognitive Unconscious,” “Modern Conservatism,” and “Core Liberal Values” in the Context of Youth’s National Identity <i>Galym Zhussipbek and Zhanar Nagayeva</i>	133

7	Contours of Ethnonational Landscapes in Three Cities: Youths' Perspectives on Ethnic and Social Integration <i>Reuel R. Hanks</i>	153
<b>PART III: GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL BLENDING</b>		165
8	Cultural Globalization and Youth Identity Construction <i>Nazgul Mingsheva</i>	167
9	Visions of Nationhood: Youth, Identity, and Kazakh Popular Music <i>Sabina Insebayeva</i>	177
10	Rascals, Misfits, Patriots: Youth in Kazakhstani Cinema <i>Peter Rollberg</i>	191
11	Return Migration from the United States: Exploring the Dynamics of Cultural Change <i>Doug Blum</i>	213
12	The Kazakhstan Now! Hybridity and Hipsters in Almaty: Negotiating Global and Local Lives <i>Rico Isaacs</i>	227
<b>PART IV: YOUTH ACTIVISM</b>		245
13	#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media, and Politics <i>Daniyar Kosnazarov</i>	247
14	Contemporary Art as a Public Forum <i>Alexandra Tsay</i>	269
15	Overcoming a Taboo: Normalizing Sexuality Education <i>Karlygash Kabatova</i>	289
	Bibliography	305
	Index	323
	About the Editor	329
	About the Contributors	331

# Introduction

## *The Nazarbayev Generation: A Sociological Portrait*

Marlene Laruelle

Nursultan Nazarbayev presided over the destiny of Kazakhstan for almost thirty years, from April 1990, one year and a half before the country's independence, up until March 2019. As such, he had joined a long list of non-royal leaders that are not the best company, such as Omar al-Bashir, Hafez al-Assad, or Hosni Mubarak, all of whom were or have been in power for around 30 years. Yet Kazakhstan does not belong to this list of dictatorships where a president has held on to power for too long through state violence and total isolation from the rest of the world, or by transforming his country into a Kafkaesque realm. Kazakhstan has been lucky: the lack of a presidential alternative has not hampered the country's integration into the international scene. The regime has remained what Edward Schatz describes as a "soft authoritarian" one, avoiding mass repression by taking targeted measures against a few key figures, co-opting citizens by offering economic prosperity and stability, and (insofar as possible) controlling the ideological agenda preemptively, not coercively.<sup>1</sup>

Nazarbayev will be celebrated for being among the few leaders to have held power for so long without either dying in office or leaving power in the face of mass street protests. The trick here is that leaving the presidency does not mean leaving power: Nazarbayev remains the head of the Security Council and of the presidential party, Nur Otan, and also leads the newly created "Office of the First President." He will continue to cast a long shadow over Kazakhstani politics, a reality reinforced by the strong administrative and financial positions occupied by his family members, especially his oldest daughter, Dariga. Nazarbayev thus managed to pull off a double feat: winning prestige and respect by leaving the presidency peacefully while securing his position—probably for life—thanks to his continued functions. The "denazarbayevification" of Kazakhstan will therefore be a long process.

Over almost thirty years of independence, the country has achieved a lot. It has signed border treaties with its five neighbors to avoid any territorial contestations; it has denuclearized peacefully and become an important actor in the anti-nuclear and anti-proliferation crusade, taking advantage of its decades-long experience as a Soviet atomic testing ground;<sup>2</sup> and it has joined tens of regional and international bodies and is the most diplomatically active post-Soviet country after Russia. The risk of the Russian-speaking northern regions seceding seems now a fear of the past; even Russia's annexation of Crimea did not produce any kind of domino effect.<sup>3</sup> Economically, Kazakhstan has grown since the terrible years of the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet system saw its GDP cut in half, and now belongs to the group of states with an upper-middle income; its GDP per capita has risen sixfold since 2002, while the incidence of poverty has fallen sharply.<sup>4</sup>

But not everything is rosy. The political regime has been unable to reform itself to give rise to a more pluralistic scene: dissident voices are limited, opposition quasi-nonexistent, and freedom of the press constrained.<sup>5</sup> Endemic corruption pervades the entire public administration, as well as the education system.<sup>6</sup> Socioeconomic gaps between regions and the rural/urban divide remain immense.<sup>7</sup> The "fat" years of the 2000s, when money from oil rents flooded the country, are gone; the government now has to learn how to respond to popular expectations of rising standards of living and continued prosperity with fewer shiny strategies and more intensive transformations. Last but not least, the new president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev will have to deal with a political transition that has been quite mismanaged. Nazarbayev's well-choreographed strategy has not unfolded smoothly so far. Tokayev's snap election came against a backdrop of serious protests, which seem to have given birth to an unprecedented civic movement, mostly animated by young generations.

Half of Kazakhstan's population was born after Nazarbayev took power three decades ago: those aged under 29 comprise 9 million Kazakhstani citizens, or 51 percent of the population.<sup>8</sup> They have no direct memory of the Soviet regime, only family recollections, though many of them do recall their parents' struggles in the difficult first decade of the country's independence. Since the early 2000s, they have lived in a world of political stability and relative material affluence, developing a strong consumerist culture. Even with growing government restrictions on media, religion, and formal public expression, they have been raised in a comparatively free country. Who are they? What do they think and wish? What are their social and cultural practices and behaviors? How do they see the world and Kazakhstan's place in it?



## RESEARCH ON KAZAKHSTANI SOCIETY

Research on Kazakhstan has focused primarily on state construction and elite-level discourses, foreign policy, security issues, and economic strategies. Studies of social and societal transformations have long remained in the minority: there once was no tradition of sociological surveys—except those commissioned by state institutions, which are classified, of often mediocre quality, and deploy doubtful methodologies—and few cultural anthropologists looking at the micro-level. Things have changed in the past decade: we now have a whole generation of scholars, both Kazakhstani and foreign, who have been collecting sociological data and conducting interviews to gather local voices, offering both quantitative and qualitative insights into Kazakhstan’s evolutions.

Youth—the most rapidly changing and receptive segment of Kazakhstani society—has been one of the main objects of this new wave of research that is transforming our knowledge of the country and helping us move beyond the usual clichés about “Nazarbayev-stan.” It is not that the natural change of generations was ignored by scholars and the policy community: the expectation of a presidential transition has always been accompanied by discourses about the long-awaited arrival to power of new generations. But the view of these generations was oversimplified, focusing on their political orientations almost to the exclusion of their social and cultural practices. A black-and-white narrative contrasted the Bolashak generation—those trained abroad under the Kazakhstani state program, who supposedly represented liberal, Western-oriented youth—with desperate provincial youth motivated by jihadism and going to volunteer in the Syrian war theater.

This book offers the first collective study of the “Nazarbayev Generation.” It aims to move away from these clichés, illuminating the diversity of the country’s younger generations and the genuine transformations of social and cultural norms that have taken place over the course of three decades. The book also moves away from state-centric, top-down perspectives to give the floor to grassroots realities and bottom-up dynamics and better integrate sociological data into our knowledge. It was born as part of a joint research project between GW’s Central Asia Program (CAP), the National Analytical Center, and Nazarbayev University, complemented by research done by several CAP fellows from Kazakhstan.

We have at our disposal several categories of surveys. Among the biggest data sets comparing several tens of countries, Kazakhstan has been surveyed by Asia Barometer in 2005,<sup>9</sup> World Values Survey in 2011,<sup>10</sup> Life in Transition in 2006 and 2010,<sup>11</sup> the Pew Research Center in 2012 and 2013,<sup>12</sup> and

Gallup every year since 2006.<sup>13</sup> Several UN institutions have included Kazakhstan in their surveys, among them the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Some foreign organizations have likewise conducted public opinion polls in Kazakhstan: the International Republican Institute between 2008 and 2011<sup>14</sup> and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung survey on youth in four Central Asian countries in 2015.<sup>15</sup> At the regional level, several institutions have carried out surveys, often but not always on questions relating to regional integration. Examples include Eurasia Monitor since 2012<sup>16</sup> and the Eurasian Development Bank.<sup>17</sup> In 2015, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and Gallup published a series of surveys conducted across the whole post-Soviet region looking at Russian media influence.<sup>18</sup> In 2007 and 2012, Azamat and Barbara Junisbai conducted, with the Kazakhstan-based BRIF Research Group, two large surveys of between 2,000 and 3,000 interviewees funded by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) comparing Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

To this should be added a long list of smaller nationwide surveys conducted by teams of local and/or foreign researchers. The government-funded research center Molodezh' (Youth) publishes a national report every year.<sup>19</sup> In 2010, Kazakhstan's Department for Youth Policy and the Center for Analysis and Prognosis conducted a survey designed to gauge "patriotism" among young people. Data was collected in all 14 oblasts, as well as the two cities of Almaty and Astana.<sup>20</sup> In 2016, the Center for Social and Political Research (CSPR) conducted a 1,600-respondent survey.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, the Institute of World Economy and Politics (IWEP), one of Kazakhstan's main think tanks, conducted a survey offering rare insight into Kazakhstani citizens' perceptions of media.<sup>22</sup> The "Strategiia" Center for Social and Political Research has implemented several surveys and polls commissioned by different institutions on topics ranging from youth to the media market.<sup>23</sup>

At a more individual level, Ro'i and Wainer conducted 700 interviews on religious identity in 2006;<sup>24</sup> Al-Farabi Kazakh National University surveyed young people on the "Formation of Civic and Patriotic Education among Youth in Kazakhstan;"<sup>25</sup> and the private Narxoz University, which teaches primarily economics to 8,000 millennials and post-millennials, surveyed 1,500 schoolchildren in the 9th–11th grades from Atyrau, Pavlodar, Shymkent, Kyzylorda, and Semey in 2017. In this volume, Nazgul Mingisheva conducted a survey with 94 students at Karaganda State Medical University in 2015–2017 and Galym Zhussipbek and Zhanar Nagayeva distributed questionnaires of about 30 questions to students of the private Suleyman Demirel atindagi Universitet (SDU) in Almaty and the State Medical University in

Semey, as well as to working youth in Almaty and Atyrau. Needless to say, surveys geared toward generalizability may overlook context-specific understandings and local interpretations of terminology. Yet when taken together and complemented with cultural anthropological studies based on qualitative interviews, they shed light on the new directions taken by this Nazarbayev Generation.

## VALUES REALM OF A CONFORMIST GENERATION

Based on all that data, what can we say about the Nazarbayev Generation? First, that “generation” should probably be plural: there are in fact already two generations, Gen Y (also known as millennials; born in the late 1980s and the 1990s, they are in their twenties and early thirties today) and Gen Z (born in the 2000s). In many ways, Kazakhstani members of Generations Y and Z are not so different from youth elsewhere in the world, and are in fact far more similar across the globe than their counterparts in previous generations were. They are, for instance, all “digital natives,” living in a visual culture where one communicates with images rather than with text;<sup>27</sup> they are obsessed with immediacy and community feedback; and they do not like planning for the future.<sup>28</sup> They are environmentally aware, think globally, favor blending cultures, embrace DIY (do-it-yourself), and are politically indifferent but believe in co-creative mechanisms.

The Nazarbayev Generation is quite conformist in its life goals: it believes in family values, marriage, having children, healthy living, and material comfort. Young Kazakhstanis are not attracted to a quest for knowledge and see higher education only as a tool for getting a good job; they trust that having the right social connections will help them build their lives and careers.<sup>29</sup> They are far from a revolutionary generation: they do not challenge their parents’ values and ways of life, trust family more than any other institution, and overwhelmingly (more than 90 percent) view their relationships with their parents positively.<sup>30</sup>

They still differ from older cohorts in some respects: they are more individualistic and believe in their uniqueness; they are better disposed toward elements of a market economy, such as a private sector, entrepreneurship, and a banking system; they display greater respect for individual success; and they are less troubled by social inequality and less supportive of the state addressing this inequality.<sup>31</sup> They are thus the children of the economic liberalism that has shaped independent Kazakhstan. Consequently, the feeling of being affected by a class divide is mentioned by only one-third of ethnic Kazakhs—with the Atyrau region showing the highest levels; it is also a very

serious concern for some ethnic minorities, such as Ukrainians and Chechens, but not for Russians.<sup>32</sup>

Kazakhstani youths' support for economic liberalism does not translate into them being specifically favorable toward a democratic regime or liberal values. The 2011 World Values Survey found that all generations broadly supported the vague principles of a "democratic system" (while also desiring a "strong leader"), but that 18 to 29-year-olds were, if anything, somewhat less supportive (84 percent compared to 90 percent among over-50s, for example).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, research conducted by Barbara Junisbai, Azamat Junisbai, and Christopher Whitsel demonstrates that 18 to 29-year-old Kazakhstanis are significantly *less* likely to express support for democracy than previous generations—or even their generational counterparts in Kyrgyzstan. Less than a quarter of them believe that "citizens should be more active in questioning the actions of leaders," compared to 87 percent for the population as a whole.<sup>34</sup> While two-thirds of youth declare that they are occasionally interested in politics, less than 10 percent of them discuss politics with family and friends or participate in any form of civic activism.<sup>35</sup> As Junisbai, Junisbai, and Whitsel conclude, "In Kazakhstan, young people appear to be socialized in accordance with both aspects of the political context under consideration [. . .]: presidential authoritarianism, which in Kazakhstan has a distinctly paternalistic flavor, and patronage politics."<sup>36</sup> The 2015 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung survey confirms how low altruism and participation in citizens' initiatives fall on youths' lists of priorities. They are quite happy with society as it is: women, ethnic minorities, and religious people are considered to have sufficient rights.<sup>37</sup>

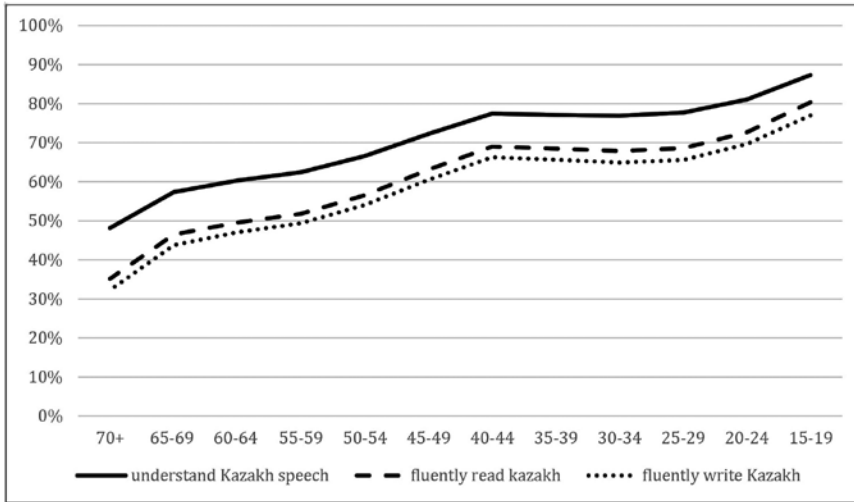
Just as they are not actively pro-democracy, youth are not especially attracted to so-called "Western values." A 2014 survey of young Kazakhstanis commissioned by the Council for Youth Policy Under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan found that only 5 percent considered the US a good model for development and just 13 percent considered Europe to be, while 22 percent preferred the Russian model and 43 percent favored a unique path for Kazakhstan.<sup>38</sup> A similar survey conducted in 2015 by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung found that 47 percent of youth identified Russia as the country to which Kazakhstan "should look for its development," while only 19 percent felt that Europe should be the foremost model, 10 percent China, and 8 percent the US.<sup>39</sup> However, there are several definitions of liberal values. A more refined perception helps dissociate the rejection of liberalism in the sense of ultraliberalism or identity politics—*laissez-faire* capitalism and the promotion of individual sexual and ethnic differences—from the backing of a more traditional liberalism, a responsible social democracy that provides good public services and protects basic individual rights.<sup>40</sup>

## CHANGING BENCHMARKS IN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

In terms of national identity, youth displays a complex combination of both civic and ethnic identities. This reflects well on Kazakhstan's ambivalent nationhood, which balances between the promotion of an inclusive Kazakhstani identity focused on prosperity and a Kazakh-centric identity that celebrates Kazakhstan as the homeland of ethnic Kazakhs. Raised with this ambivalence, youth echo its main features: ethnic identity continues to be most authoritative, but references to Kazakhstani identity are on the rise too. Even if youth do not spontaneously identify as Kazakhstani, they show strong patriotism, believing in the country, seeing their future in it, and supporting an inclusive definition of the nation based on territorial identity.<sup>41</sup> Yet this Kazakhstani identity does not take form as the kind of Kazakh-Russian/Slavic compromise expressed by the Eurasianist state identity. The non-ethnic identity that emerges is more a result of globalization and cosmopolitanism than of allocating a specific position in Kazakhstani nationhood to Russia. The symbolic identity battle is between a closed, isolationist Kazakh identity and an open, globalized Kazakh identity—with the median Russian/Slavic/Eurasian level now only one of many elements of a globalized Kazakh identity.

This identity shift is supported by profound demographic evolutions. The Russian minority continues to decline: it went from 37 percent (6.2 million) in 1989 to 20 percent (3.5 million) in 2018.<sup>42</sup> This decline has dramatically impacted the average age of each group. In 2013, the average age of Kazakhs was 28.9 (26 for the Uzbek minority), compared with 38.5 for Russians and 43 for Ukrainians.<sup>43</sup> This gap of about a decade means that the aging of Russian minorities will accelerate; the majority of them will soon be past reproductive age. Among youth, ethnic Kazakhs' dominance is now secured: in 2013, ethnic Kazakhs represented 66 percent of the 25–29-year-old cohort and 71–73 percent of every younger age group.<sup>44</sup> The demographic rebalancing in favor of Kazakhs has been reinforced by the government's repatriation policy, through which more than one million ethnic Kazakh Oralman have "returned" since the country became independent.<sup>45</sup> While it is difficult to collect detailed demographic data on them, it seems that more than half of them are of working age and 40 percent are children,<sup>46</sup> meaning that Oralman youth represent at least half a million people, further tipping Kazakhstan's younger cohorts in the direction of Kazakh ethnicity.

The dominance of ethnic Kazakhs among younger age cohorts does not automatically translate into a decrease in knowledge of Russian. On the contrary, this knowledge has been growing in Kazakhstan over the years. At the last Soviet census in 1989, 64% of Kazakhstan's ethnic Kazakhs reported



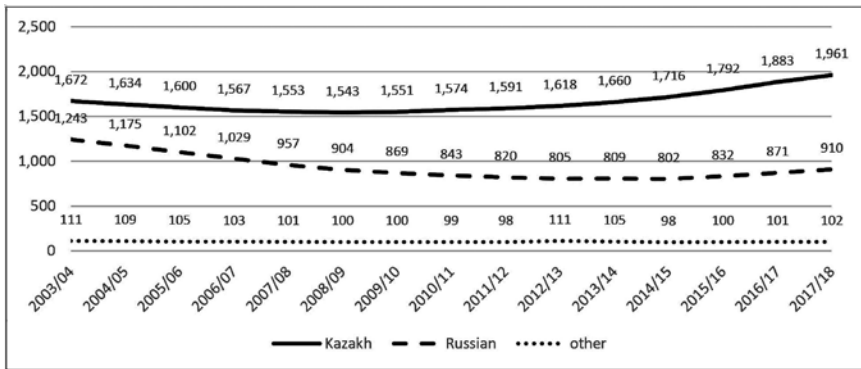
**Figure I.1. Proportion of Kazakhstan's Age Groups with Different Levels of Command of Kazakh, 2009**

Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Natsional'nyi sostav, veroispovedanie i vladeniia iazykami v Respublike Kazakhstan—Itogi Natsional'noi perepisi naseleniia 2009 goda v Respublike Kazakhstan," Astana, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180809112751/http://stat.gov.kz/getImage?id=WC16200032705>.

command of Russian as their first or second language, while in 1999, this number rose to 75 percent.<sup>47</sup> By 2009, the numbers had grown to 79 percent reporting the ability to fluently write Russian, 84 percent fluently reading it, and 92 percent understanding spoken Russian.<sup>48</sup> Kazakhstan's next census, to be conducted in 2019, will provide an indication of whether this trend is reversing.

But if Russian is enduring or maybe even expanding, it is not at the expense of Kazakh. On the contrary, it currently appears that both Kazakh *and* Russian are strengthening (or, at the very least, maintaining) their positions, meaning that the government's ambition to make virtually its entire population fluent in both languages is not unrealistic.<sup>49</sup> As shown in Figure I.1, the share of Kazakhstanis who fluently write, read, and understand Kazakh rises sharply with the younger generations. In 2009, at least 80 percent of those under the age of 29 understand some Kazakh, meaning that Kazakh is gradually gaining legitimacy as a national language. Its knowledge is unavoidable even for non-Kazakhs: 55 percent of young ethnic Russians agreed that every citizen of Kazakhstan should know the Kazakh language.<sup>50</sup>

The authorities hoped to transition to Kazakh far more rapidly than turned out to be possible and passed laws upon laws to make Kazakh an influential



**Figure I.2. Grade School Students in Kazakhstan by Language of Study, as a Proportion of the Total, 2003–2018**

Statistics Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Chislennost’ uchashchikhsia obshcheobrazovatel’nykh shkol po iazykam obucheniia, tys. chelovek,” <http://stat.gov.kz/getIimg?id=ESTAT094527>.

language in the public space. Where voluntarist policy failed, demographics succeeded: members of new generations arriving at school and university more often speak Kazakh than Russian. Language use in schools is thus progressively shifting. As seen in Figure I.2, 55 percent of Kazakhstani students were studying in Kazakh and 41 percent in Russian in 2003.<sup>52</sup> Fifteen years later, in 2017–2018, 66 percent were studying in Kazakh and just 31 percent in Russian. This 10 percent decrease in Russian language study reflects ongoing demographic change: in 2013, 73 percent of schoolchildren were Kazakh, while only 16 percent were Russian. Yet as Figure 2 shows, the number of pupils studying in Russian has been gradually increasing since 2015—which, given that the number of ethnic Russians continues to decline, means that ethnic Kazakhs and some minorities continue to choose a Russian-language education.

The broad rebalancing of the language of education in favor of Kazakh supports the policy of promoting Kazakh at the official level and in the media and cultural realm. This is complemented by the trilingual policy, which promotes English as the third language of education. Mentioned by Nursultan Nazarbayev in his address to the nation in 2007 and then codified in several official documents,<sup>54</sup> this trilingual policy has been piloted in a network of 33 schools for gifted children as well as in the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, with the hope of reaching 40 percent of schools by 2020.<sup>55</sup> This roadmap is unrealistic in terms of time—and dramatically weakens an already low-quality education—but demonstrates how the Kazakhstani regime aims to artificially decrease the role of the Russian language by promoting English.

## NORMS AND BEHAVIORS: A POLARIZED GENERATION

More than previous age cohorts, the Nazarbayev Generation is polarized in many of its norms, behaviors, and values. This polarization is especially pronounced on issues related to so-called “national traditions,” especially gender, which has become one of the fastest-changing realms of identity worldwide. The relationship between the genders is a central question for youth, not only because they are at an age when gender identity takes a more “definitive” form—in sexual orientation, marriage strategies, and professional opportunities for women—but also because of the need to navigate contradictory cultural pressures. On the one hand, Kazakhstan has been retraditionalizing gender roles; on the other hand, young people have become accustomed to cultural products from abroad in which traditional gender identities are challenged or transgressed. Young people are expected to fulfill the roles traditionally associated with their genders and engage in “proper” behavior for their cultural and social group, which is for some a painful process.<sup>56</sup>

The value codes espoused by youths depend on whether they are urban or rural, whether or not they are accustomed to traveling abroad and being in contact with foreigners, and the regional contexts from which they come. Indeed, regional differences are strong in today’s Kazakhstan, with the Western and Southern regions remaining more traditional. Youth in Shymkent, for instance, are more conservative in terms of ethnicity—interethnic marriages, relationship to friends from different ethnic groups, etc.—and prefer ethnic Kazakhs or Uzbeks over Russians, while youth in Astana and Almaty appear more cosmopolitan and more open to Russianness.<sup>57</sup> However, their everyday interactions with ethnic Russians or Slavs in the urban environment make young Kazakh urbanites more likely to insist on their ethnic identity than their rural counterparts.<sup>58</sup>

Moral conservatism dominates Kazakhstani society. Homosexuality is understood as a deviance and disapproved of by 60 percent of young ethnic Kazakhs (45 percent for ethnic Russians), with one-third neutral and only 3.4 percent approving.<sup>59</sup> Two-thirds of youth oppose abortion and think it should be illegal or authorized only for medical reasons.<sup>60</sup> Preference is given to a traditional vision of family: women’s chastity is valued even if pre-marital sex is globally accepted, and many young ethnic Kazakhs would like three to five children (but without any preference for boys over girls).<sup>61</sup> About 20 percent of ethnic Kazakhs (less among ethnic Russians) favor polygamy. One-third of youth neither condemn nor accept bride kidnapping, often excusing it as a “traditional” norm. Young people are quite equally divided between those who consider men and women to have equal social roles and those who see the man as the breadwinner and head of the family. Globally,



ethnic Kazakhs are more conservative than ethnic Russians, and rural dwellers more than urbanites. Yet some segments of youth criticize the traditional patriarchal society, including parents' promotion of authoritarian behaviors at home, and challenge these conservative norms by listening to music such as Q-pop band Ninety One and hip-hop artist Scriptonite.

Religion is not directly associated with the retraditionalization of gender norms, even if the two are connected for those who link gender identity to Islamic norms. On that matter, too, the Nazarbayev Generation is more polarized than their elders, with some groups advancing clear secular values and others promoting more religious sensibilities. A sizable majority of young people (80 percent) consider themselves religious, would like to see religion play a bigger role in the country, and would welcome more religious education, but do not actively take part in any religious practices.<sup>62</sup> Among youth, one notes the rise of practices such as not drinking alcohol, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and performing *zakat* (giving alms to the poor and needy), but religious duties such as daily prayer are performed only by a tiny minority (6.5 percent maximum).<sup>63</sup>

Religious identity is growing faster than religious practice: halal food and Islamic fashion have become “trendy” for part of the youth.<sup>64</sup> These new urban codes are particularly widespread among the middle classes involved in the private sector, for whom a bourgeois Islam goes hand in hand with advancing Islamic business ethics and copycatting patterns inspired from globalized Emirati-style entrepreneurs.<sup>65</sup> As everywhere in the world, social tensions within Muslim communities and in their interactions with secular segments of society are dominated by debates about how women dress, since the topic embodies issues of purity, morality, self-respect, and the call for more control over a rapidly evolving society. References to Shari'a as religious orthodoxy, largely absent from Central Asian traditions, have emerged: the share of Kazakhstani who felt that it would be “very important” for good government to adopt laws in line with Shari'a more than doubled between 2007 (5.45 percent) and 2012 (13.04 percent),<sup>66</sup> independent of their age cohort.

Another factor accentuating this polarization has been the socioeconomic opportunities (or lack thereof) offered to young people. Officially, more than 96 percent of working-age youth work, but of these, 16 percent are self-employed, most of whom are from low-income families, from rural areas, or working in the informal sector, making them vulnerable in terms of their employment.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, about one-third of young Kazakhstanis of working age worked informally in 2017, without the protection of a labor contract, with lower wages, and often in poor working conditions. Meanwhile, about 350,000 Kazakhstani youth are neither employed nor enrolled in any educational institution and are thus classified as NEET (not in employment,

education, or training). This number has been growing since 2012, especially in Southern and Western regions, indicating that many young people face the challenge of a skills mismatch: they lack the competencies that would make them attractive to employers.<sup>68</sup> Globally, the rural/urban gap is even more pronounced for the Nazarbayev Generation than for older generations: rural exodus and migration to cities constitute one of the main social transformations since the country's independence, yet 43 percent of youth still live in rural regions with noticeably less socioeconomic opportunities.

Some regions of Kazakhstan now constitute poverty pockets in which prospects for youth are minimal. Petty crime thus presents itself as a path out of poverty for young males in search of a social role. As studied by Serik Beisembayev, cultural codes of masculinity and group solidarity among criminal networks and Islamic militants are quite similar, creating some capillarity between the two worlds.<sup>69</sup> Research done by Noah Tucker and his team on Rudnik, Satpayev, and Kengir, near Zhezkazgan, for instance, has shown how deteriorated local conditions have been a push factor for jihadist radicalization.<sup>70</sup>

On the other side of the spectrum, many young people from the upper and middle classes have had a chance to study abroad. In 2018, almost 90,000 Kazakhstani students studied abroad, mostly in Russia (69,000), followed by Kyrgyzstan (almost 5,000), and then Turkey, the US, the UK, and the Czech Republic, at between 1,500 and 1,900 apiece.<sup>71</sup> While in the minority, 13,000 were able to get Bolashak state scholarships for this study abroad, and these young people constitute the country's rising elite in the state administration and big public and private firms.<sup>72</sup> Wherever young people study abroad, a stay away from home often leads to a change in components of self-identification, obscuring some while reinforcing others. The repertoires of normalcy, in terms of both values and social practices related to gender issues, body language, and family and community ties, may undergo important shifts. This negotiation is sometimes successful, leading to individual empowerment, but sometimes fails when people believe cultural borrowings will be rejected by their native environment.<sup>73</sup>

## YOUTH CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS

Kazakhstani youth live in a highly connected world dominated by second-generation social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.<sup>74</sup> Internet penetration has been growing rapidly: as of 2018, 80 percent of the Kazakhstani population has access to the Internet, and the country leads in Central Asia

for the number of mobile Internet users (more than 6 million active users via notebooks and smartphones) and for access to 3G and 4G.<sup>75</sup> Of the approximately 125,000 Facebook users in 2016, 45 percent are aged 26–34 and 20 percent 18–24.<sup>76</sup> YouTube plays a key role in shaping youth Kazakhstani culture: its most popular channel is the private music channel Gakku, which has 1.4 million subscribers and 892 million views, followed by Seventh Channel, known for its Kazakh-speaking sitcoms, and Yuframe, which presents small video sketches, social videos, and pranks watched 141 million times, with over 635,000 subscribers.<sup>77</sup> But youth is also globalized through its cultural consumption: U.S. and European channels, movies, and bands dominate, but Turkish, Korean, and Indian productions have been growing in recent years, especially among female viewers.<sup>78</sup> Russian culture remains important, but it is no more than one of a plurality of both foreign and domestic products.

For the Nazarbayev Generation, finding the right balance between cultural authenticity and globalization is a central question. Indeed, youth finds itself quite divided on critical components of identity: the norms of “Kazakhness” are still in the process of being defined, and several contradictory trends create points of contention. We can observe this in the growing labelling of those who remain too close to Soviet/Russian references as *sovki*, in opposition to the *natspat*, or national-patriots, who push for a more ethnic nationalism. In addition, as Diana T. Kudaibergenova discusses in this volume, there is an even more pronounced division between *nagyz* and *shala* Kazakhs, the former claiming to be “authentic” Kazakhs who have mastery of their national language and are “aware” of their identity, while the latter are Russified Kazakhs who have allegedly lost contact with their origins and have become *mankurts*, enslaved humans unaware of their own identity.<sup>79</sup> Complementing this binary vision, young people have also developed an interest in genealogical identifications as a way to discuss cultural differences within the Kazakh nation. References to the *zhuz* have always been present in everyday discourse and social interactions, but youth are divided on their views of it: half of them think that it matters, while the other half do not.<sup>80</sup> Youth interest has been shifting more toward subethnic “clanic” identities (Naiman, Kipchak, Zhetyru, etc.) cultivated by growing folk literature and social media debates on “who is who” within the nation.

Youth cultural ecosystems are quite vibrant. A small but active segment of youth is devoted to creating a modern Kazakh culture that would be detached from Soviet legacies and Russian cultural influences, in tune with global trends, and connected to and inspired by Asia—be that South Korea, Japan, Singapore, or Malaysia. Music often acts as the main vector for these new voices.<sup>81</sup> Even Almaty’s small hipster community is delving into the creation of new original meanings for a globalized Kazakhness.<sup>82</sup> A whole range of

artists are now using art, especially street art and performing arts, to create a new public space for the discussion of topics usually considered too sensitive, from historical memory and identity to gender and corruption.<sup>83</sup> While social activism and volunteering remain valued only by a small minority of young people, changes are on their way. Young people are not interested in institutionalized politics, but may work “horizontally” with their peers: some young activists use social media to express political dissidence, criticize the everyday corruption of politicians and bureaucrats, promote urban activism and charitable activity, organize awareness campaigns about women’s rights or environmental issues, etc.<sup>84</sup> More classic in his vision of politics, Dosym Satpaev, one of the most famous voices in political analysis, in his early 40s, has more than 20,000 followers on Facebook.

In this youth ecosystem, nationalism occupies a larger space than for older generations. Symptomatically, part of the Nazarbayev Generation can also be described as the “Q-generation,” where Q stands for *Qazaqstan*, the Latinization of *Kazakhstan*. Through this highly symbolic change of letters, the Q-generation is making a strong statement in support of Kazakhstan moving away from Russia, turning toward Asia, and embracing its allegedly unique features. The country now counts several nationalist-minded bloggers, each with between 20,000 and 30,000 followers on social media. A large group of young “national-patriots” have taken over from the older generation of Kazakh nationalists in promoting ethnonationalism in its different manifestations. One of its main representatives, Zhanbolat Mamay, began his career as a popular journalist for the Kazakh-language *Zhas Alash* newspaper and is now the editor of *Tribuna/Ashyq Alan*, but also leads the *Rukh pen Til* (Spirit and Language) youth movement.<sup>85</sup> He has been particularly vocal in his opposition to the Eurasian Economic Union and Kazakhstan’s dependency on Russia. One of the main products of this new social media nationalist activism is the Facebook page *Qazaqskaia Orda* [Kazakh Horde], which has about 30,000 likes.<sup>86</sup>

### CONCLUSION: THE NAZARBAYEV GENERATION, OR THE END OF “POST-SOVIETISM”

The Nazarbayev Generation displays genuine cultural pluralism. How can this translate into pluralism at the political and institutional level? The Kazakhstani state administration is quite young on average, with more than 22,000 civil servants under the age of 30 in 2014, but youth work on the administrative side, not the decision-making one.<sup>87</sup> That being said, the long-awaited rejuvenation of elites seems to have begun in the past few

years. Several new figures born in the 1970s have taken up ministerial and mayoral posts:<sup>88</sup> Bauyrzhan Baibek (1974) is now mayor of Almaty, the first Bolashak to reach such a high level; Baglan Mailybayev (1975) spent 6 years (2011–2017) as Vice-President of the Presidential Administration; Maulen Ashimbayev (1971), trained at Tufts University's Fletcher School, is first deputy of the presidential party Nur Otan; and former mayor of Astana Aset Issekeshov (1971) is head of the Presidential Administration. Minister of Information and Communication Dauren Abayev (1979) has become one of the most active government figures on social media. The state-controlled media sector has been reinvigorated with the arrival of a team of young, nationalist-minded figures, such as Erlan Karin (1976), who have dynamized media production, especially in Kazakh, and have reached out to the younger generation. A rapper, ZAQ, even won a seat in Zhas Otan, the youth wing of Nur Otan. To complement that trend, former Press Secretary of Nur Otan Aleksandr Aksyutits has been appointed head of a new state-funded social media holding, Salem Social Media.

Over the course of Nazarbayev's three-decade reign, Kazakhstan has evolved from a "post-Soviet" republic facing the dilemma of a late and sudden independence to a new paradigm where the legacy of the Soviet Union has gradually receded and made room for new realities. Kazakhstan is succeeding in its "Kazakhification": it is the country of Kazakhs, in which ethnic minorities represent a declining part of the population. The old divide between the Russified urban world and the Kazakh-speaking rural world has been transformed: rural dwellers have been moving to cities and confront old urbanites with different cultural habits; cities are progressively becoming a Kazakh-dominated realm, both ethnically and linguistically. The issue of the "Russianness" of Kazakhstani northern regions is likewise gradually losing its political acuity, being replaced by points of contention within the Kazakh nation itself. The 2016 land protests revealed that only the Kazakh-speaking segment of the population saw the authorities as betraying the nation's interests, while the Russian-speaking part of the population did not mobilize, silently supporting the government.

At stake for the Nazarbayev Generation will be not so much defining Kazakhness in opposition to the Soviet legacy or the Russianness expressed by Russian minorities as defining Kazakhness among Kazakhs. What will be the role of Oralman as a "yardstick" of a less Sovietized/Russified/cosmopolitan Kazakhness? How can a balance be found between Western and Southern Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and the rest of the country, on the other, given what seems to be a growing gap in values? What kind of legitimacy will Islam have in the public space? To what extent will mores and values be based on "reinvented traditions" and the search for cultural

authenticity, especially in gender relations, versus on more cosmopolitan worldviews and behaviors? Should Kazakhstan project itself as leading the Central Asian region or move toward the lonelier trajectory of Kazakh Eli—the “land of Kazakhs,” a name sometimes referred to by those who want to dissociate Kazakhstan from the other “stans”—looking to Mongolia, South Korea, or Singapore as its model? What political regime and political culture will this Nazarbayev Generation promote: a patronal regime with an improved, more efficient, technocratic culture or a more genuine plurality and institutional consolidation? The protests that followed Nazarbayev’s resignation and Tokayev’s election have showed the structuring of a new generation of civic activists, almost all belonging to this Nazarbayev Generation. This book seeks to provide a first step toward understanding better those who will shape Kazakhstan’s future.

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81. See Sabina Insebayeva in this volume.

82. See Rico Isaacs in this volume.

83. See Diana T. Kudaibergenova and Alexandra Tsay in this volume.

84. See Daniyar Kosnazarov and Karlygash Kabatova in this volume.

85. See, already in 2011, the very critical article by Elmira Sagatova, “Novaia politicheskaia zvezda Kazakhstana, ili Mal’chik dlia provokatsii Zhanbolat Mamay?” *CentrAsia*, June 19, 2011, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1308464520>.

86. See the Facebook page of Qazaqskaia Orda, <https://www.facebook.com/QazaqOrda>.

87. Z. Bukanova and B. Masatova, “Obshch’estvenno-politicheskoe uchastie kazakhstanskoi molodezhi v kontekste modernizatsii gosudarstvennoi molodezhnoi politiki,” *Research Center of Youth*, 2014, <http://youthpolicycenter.kz/ru/fundamentalnye-issledovaniya/obschestvenno-politicheskoe-uchastie-kazahstanskoymolodezhi-v-kontekste-modernizatsii-gosudarstvennoy-mol.html>, p. 155.

88. Gul’nara Bazhkenova, “Kazahstanskii ‘Semidesiatniki’ v Politike,” *Radio Azattyq*, August 13, 2015, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/semidesyatniki-blog-bazhkenovoy/27186368.html>.