The collapse of the Soviet Union led to profound changes in ethnicity and identity policies and practices in the newly independent countries, including Kazakhstan. The ethnically diverse population of Kazakhstan presented a particularly unique challenge for the new regime and its approaches to the identity-building policies. This paper focuses on the ethnic and identity-building policies of Kazakhstan and offers an overview of the legal framework regulating language use, education, media, citizenship, and official identity policy. The paper also focuses on the de-facto implementation of the officially stated policies and explores reasons behind inconsistencies and discrepancies between the declared policies and situation on the ground. Finally, this paper also looks at the societal reactions towards the official identity and language policies, expressed in the country’s public and media discourse. This paper argues that the post-independence Kazakhstan’s and identity-building process is affected by several important implications, including legacy of the Soviet nationality policy, significant amount of continuity with late-Soviet policies and practices, search for a new identity and the regime’s aim to prevent political confrontation along ethnic lines by assuring Kazakh hegemony while allowing nominal minority representation.

Introduction

Studies of the national identity issues in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet Central Asian countries expanded considerably with activation of the nation-building processes in these countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The scholarship explored in details several important areas, such as the growing ‘revenge’ of the nationalizing Kazakhization process, the relationship between Kazakhs and other ethnic groups living in the country, notably Russians, the role of intra-Kazakh cleavages and continuity between Soviet policies and independent Kazakhstan’s approaches to the language situation. Scholars have addressed an increasingly nationalist (and nationalizing) domestic
policies agenda and statements, never explicitly sanctioned but de facto encouraged including changes in interpretation of historical events and manipulations of census statistics in order to create a more ‘politically desirable’ version of linguistic and political realities. Some scholars also explored reasons for growing Kazakh ethnic nationalism and emphasized migrations of ethnic Kazakh youth from predominantly Kazakh depressed rural areas of the country into the cities and the general preference of the Kazakhstan’s regime for prioritizing policies aimed at building ethnic Kazakh identity rather than developing more inclusive and modern civic-national Kazakhstani identity. Some studies have also addressed how the intellectual and academic polemics in Kazakhstan shifted to endorse this position through the semi-officially approved publication of scholarly historical texts supporting Kazakh claims and legitimacies, emphasizing the importance of local narratives and records of tribal affiliations and genealogies. In contrast, other scholars argued that the more explicit stage of the Kazakh nationalism happened in the early to mid-1990s, whereas later the Russian minority was capable of mobilizing politically – although, only to a certain extent. Still others claim that Kazakh nationalists have been rather unhappy with the government’s policies, which declare moderate support for nationalist claims while at the same time taking few or no practical measures to enforce stricter language and nationalist policies.


A sub-theme here is the relationship between Kazakhs and other ethnic groups living in the country, notably Russians, and their role and status in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Pål Kolstø analyzes historic cleavages between Kazakhs and Russians, while Chinn and Kaiser explore identity issues among Russians living outside of Russia after the fall of the U.S.S.R. and point out that in the Soviet era Russians living in the national republics usually lived in their own somewhat isolated communities, consumed Russian entertainment and media products and had a hard time adjusting to changes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other works also emphasize antagonism between Kazakhs and other ethnic groups (non-Russians), since Central Asia lacked strong nationalist (i.e. anti-Russian) movements in the late Soviet period as compared to other regions of the U.S.S.R. Therefore, the outbursts of national feelings that took the form of ethnic riots were more confined to antagonism between the indigenous Central Asian groups and groups from Caucasus, but they were almost never directed against Russians. Henry Hale points out that despite expectations of major nationalist attacks, Kazakhstan remained largely pro-Russian and pro-Commonwealth of Independent States and Kazakh leadership tried to decrease the outflow of Russians from Kazakhstan by its activism in the C.I.S. and good relations with Russia. The scholarship also examines issues with developing civic-nation Kazakhstani identity, and some scholars emphasize that these rather sporadic debates assumed that Kazakh language and culture would ultimately become a consolidating factor for all Kazakhstanis. Ó Beachain and Kevlihan argue that despite limited developments in this domain, the notion of a civic nation and relationships between civic and ethnic visions of identity in the country continue to provide important reference points in understanding contemporary Kazakhstan.

Language policy in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is another important issue illustrating dynamics of the national identity situation in the country. Here, the scholarship touches upon the role, usage and legal status of the Russian language, which remains an important indicator of developments in the identity politics. Other important implications are gradual, although more sporadic than systematic, enforcement of stricter Kazakh language proficiency requirements in the government’s office work, in the educational sphere and everyday life, and the role of the language in reestablishing Kazakh groupness and addressing concerns of ethnic minorities with no knowledge of Kazakh. The scholarship also highlights continuity between Soviet policies and independent

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Kazakhstan’s approaches to the language situation and the attempts to replace Russian with Kazakh as the ‘core’ language.  

I. Kazakhstan’s Official Identity and Language Policies

Identity Policy

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ethnically diverse population of Kazakhstan presented a great challenge for the new regime’s ethnic and identity-building policies. Officially, the government of Kazakhstan demonstrated internationalist rhetoric and declared commitment to increase friendship of the peoples living in the country. For instance, the country’s 1995 Constitution emphasizes willingness of the state to develop national cultures and traditions of all ethnic groups living in the country. Within the framework of this policy, each of the officially recognized minority groups had a so-called ‘national-cultural center’, which was usually granted some funding from the state and overseen by an umbrella agency called the ‘Assembly of the People(s) of Kazakhstan’. From a legal point of view, the Assembly has the status of a consultative body to mediate potential conflicts among different ethnic groups. However, despite the fact that constitutional amendments of 2007 saw nine members of the lower house of Parliament elected by the Assembly, the overall political importance and powers of the Assembly and national-cultural centers remain limited; in most cases, these centers are no more than just nominal bodies created in order to demonstrate normal coexistence of diverse ethnic groups.

According to the current Constitution of Kazakhstan, human rights are guaranteed by the state and discrimination is strictly forbidden on the basis of “origin, social, official, and property status, as well as gender, race, nationality, language, religion, creed, and place of residence.” At the same time, violations of the “citizen’s rights on the basis of ethnic origin, race, language, and religious affiliation” are explicitly mentioned in the Kazakhstan’s Criminal Code and are considered major crimes. However, the Constitution also explicitly prohibits creating political parties on an ethnic basis, and the Government is usually rather suspicious of any kind of organized political activity of minorities. In terms of inclusive identity policies, Kazakhstan did not elaborate a clear and cohesive strategy, and it largely relies on the Soviet approaches. Just like in the Soviet Union, an individual’s ethnic background is still recorded and is written on the domestically-used ID cards. It is usually picked on the basis of parents’ ethnicity or, in case of mixed ethnicity, is picked by a child at a certain age. It is also legally possible to change the recorded ethnicity, and there are rumored cases when some minorities, especially Turkic people like Uyghurs, change their recorded ethnicity to Kazakh in order to gain career-related benefits.

The Assembly of People(s) of Kazakhstan (APK) is a rather distinctive feature of Kazakhstan’s national identity policies. It was created as an umbrella agency overseeing national-cultural centers, to which most of the ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan are entitled and which are granted some state-funding. Technically, these centers are aimed at preserving the language and traditions of particular groups; additionally, they are also in charge of participating in festivals during major national holidays. However, the importance and powers of these centers remains


\[22\] Constitution, 1995, Article 5.

\[23\] Created as Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan, renamed Assembly of People in 2007.


limited; in most cases these centers are just nominal bodies created to demonstrate peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups. The Assembly has the status of a consultative body to mediate potential conflicts among different ethnic groups and for a long time had very limited powers. However, things changed quite a bit with constitutional amendments in May 2007, according to which nine members of the Mazhilis, the lower house of the Parliament, became elected by the APK (usually representing ethnic minorities).

The current nationalities policy of Kazakhstan authorities clearly demonstrates some of its concerns about the complex ethnic situation in the country. The laws related to ethnic issues appear rather tolerant in comparison with those in some other post-Soviet states. For instance, laws of Estonia and Latvia, for a long time, required language proficiency tests for non-Estonians and non-Latvians, and they also imposed restrictions for obtaining citizenship rights for those who arrived and settled during the Soviet time. As a result, many ethnic Russians living in those countries were denied citizenship and were issued ‘alien’s passports’ instead.

Another major point of the Kazakhstan government officials’ statements related to national identity policies is the constant emphasis on the fact that representatives of more than 130 (sometimes the number varies between 120 and 140) ethnic groups live in peace in Kazakhstan and that the country has avoided major conflicts on an ethnic basis. The Kazakh-language press, however, expressed criticism, though initially limited, of this idea, saying that due to the demographic composition of the country, there are only three or four big ethnic groups living in the country, while others are represented by very small numbers and cannot really be considered as separate “nations”, as the government refers to them. On the one hand, this discourse seems to apply to those representatives of various ethnic groups living only in Kazakhstan and not taken together with ‘bigger’ nation living elsewhere (for example, they refer to the number of Armenians living in Kazakhstan and not to the number of Armenians living in the world); on the other hand, this clearly demonstrates that in the eyes of the critics there is an idea of some sort of a threshold number that an ethnic group needs to reach in order to be counted as ‘nation’. This can perhaps be explained by the dramatic experiences of the Soviet past, when Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan were at certain point outnumbered by the outsiders and became minority in their own land; hence, following Hobsbawm’s discussion of the “first phase” of nationalism, the idea of “bigness” is a rather important factor for shaping the Kazakh nationalism in Kazakhstan.

Language Policy

The language issue has been one of the most sensitive domestic policy factors in post-independence Kazakhstan. On the one hand, over the course of the Soviet era and especially in the early stages, the Soviet regime established a significant number of Kazakh-language schools where none had existed before; on the other hand, in the later stages of Soviet rule, the number of schools teaching in Kazakh language decreased dramatically. Soviet era Russian-language schools of Kazakhstan offered Kazakh language lessons, but most students did not take this requirement very seriously and Russians usually graduated from schools with no or very minimal knowledge of Kazakh and felt no need to improve it. Furthermore, during Soviet time, Russian was also the only language necessary to secure a successful career; therefore, most urban Kazakhs were trained in Russian schools, kindergartens and universities and came to use Russian as the principal means of communication. According to the 1989 census, over 80 percent of Kazakhstan’s population were either native speakers of Russian or fluent in it, while only about 40 percent claimed to be fluent in Kazakh; since 40 percent of the population was ethnically Kazakh, this confirms that outside of
Kazakhs almost no one knew the Kazakh language. The Language (Languages) Law of 1989 in Kazakhstan, like in other republics, was an important symbolic marker, although very limited efforts in terms of its implementation were actually made.

After independence, the 1993 Constitution of Kazakhstan confirmed the status of Kazakh as the state language and Russian as a language of interethnic communication. In 1995, however, the new Constitution amended this situation and, while continuing to grant Kazakh language the status of only state language, it also allowed Russian to be used officially on an equal basis in the state agencies and self-governing local bodies. The language status is further clarified in the Language Law adopted in July 1997, which also states that “it is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language.” The law also eliminated Russian’s status as a language of interethnic communication but allowed it to be used on an equal basis with the state language in state organizations and organs of local self-government. A quota for Kazakh-language broadcasts has been established in the electronic media. According to a law adopted in 1997, radio and TV channels in Kazakh should be not less than the total amount of broadcast time in other languages. A quota for Kazakh-language broadcasts was established in the media, and TV broadcasts and radio channels in Kazakh were not to have less than the total amount of broadcast time in other languages.

However, the de-facto situation is that Russian is still widely used everywhere despite Government efforts aimed at promoting the Kazakh language. Starting in 1992, the Government adopted several concept papers, resolutions and programs aimed at stricter introduction of Kazakh, according to which usage of Kazakh would become more widely required, and a complete switchover of office paperwork into Kazakh was mandated several times, but it has consistently been postponed due to the lack of resources and inefficient policies. Often, measures aimed at enhancing usage of the Kazakh language have been used as a justification for silencing oppositional media, mainly Russophone.

Citizenship Policy

Issue of citizenship has been widely discussed in the early years of independence; today it has much lesser importance. The Citizenship Law adopted on March 1, 1992 granted the right for Kazakhstani citizenship to every individual living in the country at the moment of independence without any additional conditions, as it had been the case in other areas of the Soviet Union, in particular, the Baltic states. On the other hand, the Constitution of Kazakhstan prohibits dual citizenship in the country. This decision had more importance for numerous ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan, who still preserved ties with Russia, since they had to choose between Kazakhstani and Russian citizenship. Many Russians eventually picked Kazakhstani citizenship, but according to many records, for most of them this was rather a forced move and they would gladly have kept both citizenships. After obtaining citizenship of Kazakhstan, Russians became foreigners in Russia, their “historical homeland”, but the adoption of Russian citizenship would have made them aliens in the

27 There is an interesting dichotomy in the name of Language Laws of Kazakhstan of both 1989 and 1997: in Kazakh they are officially referred as Til turaly (Language Law, in singular), whereas in Russian they are called Zakon o iazykakh (Languages Law, in plural).
country in which they live and work. Therefore, the requirement of dual citizenship is mentioned in almost all documents of the Russian political groups and organizations and is often named as the main reason for dissatisfaction of Russians living in Kazakhstan. As Surucu points out, the citizenship issue actually is tied to all the various problems of Russians in Kazakhstan, such as fear for their future in the new non-Russian state, the uncertainty associated with their own identity, desire to secure their ties with historic and imaginary homeland, and a certain disappointment by the unwillingness of Russia to actively assist ethnic Russians living in the post-Soviet space.

II. De Facto Situation and Societal Reactions: (Un)intentional Kazakh Revenge

Many observers argue that despite the internationalist rhetoric of the country’s government, an unofficially approved Kazakhization campaign is going on. They emphasize the ethnic shift in the governmental agencies and argue that almost all key positions in the Government, regional administrations, law enforcement agencies, banking and finance sectors are taken by ethnic Kazakhs. Such interpretation fits to Brubaker’s “nationalizing nationalism” argument, according to which Kazakhs consider themselves as legitimate “owners” of the new state because of their previously weak positions in terms of language, culture and economy. Therefore, the new nationalizing state uses the nation’s previously weak positions to justify new policies aimed at promoting Kazakhs’ interests, such as migration of Kazakhs into Slav-dominated territories from other areas, close monitoring of the Russian opposition, and tight control over the Russian media. There is also a version that transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana has been aimed at balancing ethnic groups in the Northern part of Kazakhstan. Emigration of Russians combined with immigration of Kazakhs and their relatively higher birth rates have shifted the demographic and power balance throughout the country and especially in the north. Ethnic Kazakhs argue that such programs are necessary to rectify the legacies of 200 years of discrimination and forced Russification campaigns.

Inconsistent Practical Implementation of Official Language and Identity Policies

Russian is still widely used despite government efforts aimed at promoting the Kazakh language. Beginning in 1992, the government adopted several concepts, resolutions and programs aimed at stricter implementation of Kazakh, according to which usage of Kazakh would become required to a larger extent and a complete switchover of the office paperwork to Kazakh has been scheduled several times, but it had been repeatedly postponed. On the other hand, there had been a gradual shift towards wider usage of Kazakh happening in the country over the last five to seven years; however, to the degree to which it is happening because of these policies is unclear. This progress seems to have more to do with natural and migrational causes, such as the significant emigration of Russians and other minorities and a massive influx of ethnic Kazakhs from rural areas into cities. It can be inferred that Kazakh language is developing, but not because of the governmental policies.

In practice, implementation of stricter Kazakh language policies has faced a number of problems, mainly due to lack of resources and inefficient policies. Often, measures aimed at enhancing usage of Kazakh language have been used as a justification for silencing oppositional media, mainly printed in Russian, and, in other cases, media only formally comply with these requirements. For example, the Law of 1997 requires all TV and radio stations to broadcast in two languages on an equal basis and violation of this requirement has resulted in closing down independent TV stations associated with the opposition. In other cases, TV channels put Kazakh-language broadcasts late in the night, to which some observers sarcastically commented that Kazakh will eventually become a nation of “late night TV watchers.” State-funded programs of Kazakh-language training have also reached limited success. Most of the print media and television programs are available in Russian. Many urban Kazakhs themselves still mostly communicate in Russian, not only in public life, but also at home. Just as before, Russian is still the dominant language of business, science, the media and politics, although with growing migration of Kazakhs from rural areas to the cities, the usage of Kazakh language will probably expand in the years to come.

Fluency in Kazakh language among Russians and other ethnic groups also remains very limited. As some observers argue, for the Russians, the psychological factor is probably the most significant barrier for studying Kazakh language. During the Soviet time, most Russians perceived Russian language to be superior to Kazakh and now they are not pleased by the prospect of learning the language that they and their parents have long considered inferior. They perceive state promotion of the Kazakh language as unfair towards the Russian language and Russian-speakers, and some of them appeal for granting Russian the status of the second state language. Russian cultural organizations, such as LAD, claim that one does not need to learn Kazakh in order to live in Kazakhstan because all the information and services are available in Russian and all Kazakhs speak Russian fluently; furthermore, one of the prominent leaders of LAD, Mikhail Sytnik published several works explaining how Kazakh language cannot serve as a language of modern politics, science and education, since, according to him, historically, Kazakh never was the language of higher culture and civilization; rather, it was just the language of nomadic folklore poetry and epics. Those Russians, who claim to be willing to learn Kazakh, immediately complain that the government does not provide good teachers and teaching materials. On the other hand, Kazakh radical nationalist groups criticize the government for not being persistent enough in making Kazakh the real de facto state language and see it as another manifestation of colonial mentality and disrespect for Kazakh culture. In their demand for the wider use of the Kazakh language, Kazakh nationalists appeal to the nationalist citizenship tradition in Europe, where one is often required to know the language in order to become a citizen.

According to the latest population census of 2009, the total population of Kazakhstan was 16.0 million people. Kazakhs, at 10.098 million, comprised a clear majority with 63.1 percent of the total; Russians, with 3.797 million, comprised 23.7 percent. Official census data demonstrate that 95.4 percent of Kazakhs claim they ‘can read freely’ in Kazakh, with 94.7 percent among urban Kazakhs and 96.2 percent among rural Kazakhs. Among Russians, only 8.8 percent claimed they are able to read Kazakh, whereas among other ethnic groups, the ability to read in Kazakh fluctuated between 91.7 percent.

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34 Russian civil rights movement advocating state status for the Russian language and a Russian autonomy in Kazakhstan.
35 Sytnik, Mikhail, Russkii vopros v Kazakhstane (Russian Issue in Kazakhstan).
between 74.2 percent among Uzbeks and 70.5 among Uyghurs down to 7.2 percent among Ukrainians and 10.5 percent among Koreans. As for the ability to read freely in Russian, the fluency level was 83.5 percent among Kazakhs, including 89.7 percent among urban Kazakhs and 77.4 percent among Kazakhs living in rural areas. Among other ethnic groups, excluding Kazakhs and Russians, the reading fluency in Russian scored high numbers across all ethnic groups, including 98.0 percent among Ukrainians, 97.8 percent among Germans, and 96.9 percent among Koreans, with the lowest recorded value being 77.2 percent among Kyrgyz.

Another visible area for revengeful policies was the toponymics of Kazakhstan. Previously, in the Soviet Union, rivers, towns, mountains, and other geographical localities were usually named in the Russian manner, which included either Russianized modification of the previously existing Kazakh name of a place (for example, Russianized Borovoe instead of Kazakh Burabay), or just naming objects with an ideologically charged name (for example, Lenin's patronymic. Name of Astana in 1961 (National Compisition, Religious Affiliation and Linguistic Fluency in the Republic of Kazakhstan). Statistics Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010. http://www.stat.kz/p_perepis/Pages/default.aspx.)

Implementation of stricter Kazakh language policies is a complicated matter for Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan became by far the most Russified republic of the USSR and by 1989 almost the entire population spoke Russian. In the Soviet time, Russian was also the only language of securing a successful career; therefore, many urban Kazakhs were trained in Russian schools, kindergartens and universities. The Kazakhstan’s Communist party nomenclature in the Soviet times spoke almost exclusively in Russian and had to learn its own language after independence. In contrast, the

37 Name of Astana in 1961-1992; Russian for ‘Virgin Land City’, referring to Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands campaign.
38 Lenin’s patronymic.
39 Abylai Khan (1711-1781) was a ruler of the Kazakh Khanate; in modern Kazakhstan considered as a talented organizer and prominent military commander.
40 Tole Bi (1663-1756) was a Kazakh legist, considered as one of the authors of Kazakh traditional legal system.
41 Rayimbek Batyr (1705-1785) was a Kazakh warrior and military commander; played a major role in liberating the Kazakhs from the Dzungar invasion of 18th century.
absolute majority of Russians had no fluency in Kazakh and kept their hopes that Russian language will be granted a second state language status in the independent Kazakhstan. The late Soviet Law on Languages adopted in 1989 in Kazakhstan was by many accounts the most liberal of all similar laws adopted across the Soviet Union since it stated a very limited number of jobs requiring fluency in Kazakh. According to this law, Kazakh language has been granted the status of a state language and Russian received the status of “the language of interethnic communication” and was practically allowed to be used together with the state language.

Other policies include a complete nation-wide switch of the office paperwork in the governmental services into Kazakh. Several deadlines have been established and none of them was met. State-funded programs of Kazakh-language training have also reached limited success. Russian language is still widely used in the country, especially comparing for example, with the Baltic States or with neighboring Uzbekistan. Most of the print media and television programs are available in Russian. Many urban Kazakhs themselves mostly communicate in Russian, not only in public life, but also at home. Just as before, the Russian is still the dominant language of business, science, the media and politics.

On the other hand, Kazakh radical nationalist groups criticize the government for not being enough persistent in making Kazakh the real de facto state language and see it as another manifestation of colonial mentality and disrespect for Kazakh culture. In their demand for the wider use of the Kazakh language, Kazakh nationalists appeal to the nationalist citizenship tradition in Europe, where one is often required to know the language to become a citizen.

Another dimension of the language problem in Kazakhstan is that it may cause further conflict not between Russians and Kazakhs but between the two generations of the Kazakhs themselves. The older generation, including the ruling group had already acquainted with the knowledge of Kazakh, but gives preference to Russian. But the younger generation of Kazakhs gradually coming on the heels of seniors, on the other hand, prefers the native language. Thus, the conflict gradually transforms into the conflict between two different generations of Kazakhs, as well as a manifestation of a barrier between town and country.

The public discourse regarding the identity policies reveals several different understandings and perceptions. In general, Kazakh-language newspapers tend to emphasize the exclusive “Kazakhness” of the state; they consider Kazakhs as exclusive legitimate owners of the state since Kazakhstan is the only place where Kazakhs can build a state, and, unlike other ethnic groups living in the country, they do not have any other place they could claim as their homeland. In contrast, Russian-language newspapers tend to talk about a “shared” notion of the state and its diverse and polyethnic character. Later, however, another important nuance gradually appeared in the official Russian language discourse: Kazakhs started to be considered as bearing responsibility for the state and for all other ethnic groups; though little has been done to elaborate as to what this responsibility means beyond that. Two other important elements of the discourse are ‘the Russian question’ and debates between Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking Kazakhs. Kazakh-language newspapers have gradually described their vision of a “good” or of “our” Russian: usually these are Russians who live in Kazakhstan but do not demonstrate any political ambitions, accept Kazakh political dominance, and do not question the status of Russian language; furthermore, they speak the Kazakh language and know or study Kazakh traditions and history. In the same vein, it is fair to say that Russian-language newspapers have also developed a certain stereotypical, though much less elaborate, depiction of Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs as coming from remote rural areas, unfamiliar with modern technologies, lacking knowledge about global culture and history, and only concerned with praising glorious Kazakh heroes of the past.

Various Kazakhstan’s government’s efforts to promote a new sense of identity have met different reaction in the media. The Turkic and Eurasian identity concepts, which the government
has embarked on at a certain point, met a fairly cold response from the audience and were practically abandoned later on. The third major attempt of the Kazakhstan’s government to develop a civic-based sense of identity, the ‘Kazakhstani Nation’ idea has met the most hostile reaction and is by no means certain to succeed in the future. Instead, both Kazakh- and Russian-language press of Kazakhstan operate with the recorded ethnic-based identity terms. While the Kazakh-language press emphasizes the ‘Kazakhness’ of the state, the Russian-language press tends to use a more inclusive term ‘Kazakhstanis’ (казахстанцы in Kazakh; казахстанцы in Russian) but understood as a community of all ethnic groups living in the country and used alongside with references to the Kazakhstan’s ethnic diversity. Such an approach is also used in country’s Russian-speaking domestic political discourse as a marker of civic identity and seems to get a large degree of acceptance among all ethnic groups. One implication here is that all these developments and debates around the ‘Kazakhstani Nation’ idea demonstrate how deep the Soviet nation-building policies and practices have been indoctrinated in the popular mind: attempts to build a civic identity on top of ethnic identification much resemble the (in)famous project of creating “the Soviet people”.

The Soviet legacy is also an important factor for the media portrayal of the ethnic relations, as, since the Soviet times, the country has avoided discussion of ethnic problems. Now, when the debates are tolerated, mass media of Kazakhstan has demonstrated that it lacks balanced coverage of interethnic relations, and it often demonstrates biased and stereotypical portrayals of the other ethnicities, due to both lack of professionalism and deliberate nationalist views. The analysis of the public discourse on the national identity in Kazakhstan clearly demonstrates antagonism between the ‘nationalizing’ “state of Kazakhs” and a “multiethnic state of Kazakhstan” vision of Kazakhstan. Kazakh-language newspapers tend to separate the society into Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs, while Russian-language audience remains disconnected from these debates and focuses on a multiethnic perception of the country. This antagonism remains one of Kazakhstan’s key identity debates and policies.

**Conclusion**

The Soviet-style notion of “one big family,” living in peace and friendship, in which the role of the ‘older brother’ is taken over by the Kazakhs, as opposed to Russians in the Soviet times, seems to be the eventual ‘safe choice’ that the government of Kazakhstan ended up relying on in the country’s identity politics. After having experimented with different approaches and models, including Eurasia, Turkic brotherhood and civic Kazakhstani nation, in order to overcome existing cleavages and polarizations along the ethnic lines that exist in modern Kazakhstan’s society, the regime preferred not to implement radical and abrupt changes and not to heat up further the potentially conflict-charged discussion. However, as this study has demonstrated, the public discourse on national identity issues in both Kazakh and Russian newspapers demonstrates different perceptions of the several key issues of national identity, such as the ‘state ownership’, and the role and place of non-Kazakh ethnic groups in modern Kazakhstan.

Broader implication is that all these iterations and social pushback to the Kazakhstan government’s efforts to create a new sense of identity have demonstrated an important consideration regarding constructivist national identity-building process: the governments, presumably the most powerful societal agents, may face constraints against their identity building policies. This paper has focused on the analysis of the media discussion around national identity issues in Kazakhstan and thus has demonstrated that the media can express and channel society’s reaction, positive or negative, to the government’s efforts to promote a new sense of identity.

Another part of the issue is the Soviet political and cultural legacy in Kazakhstan is a tendency to replace the actual policies and actions by imitations. In terms of nationalities policy, it leads to attempts to cover up the fact that the non-privileged nationalities, such as non-Russians in
the USSR and non-Kazakhs in independent Kazakhstan, are given equality in rhetoric but not in reality. In terms of identity-building, Kazakhstan has not developed a new indigenous identity policy and still relies on the Soviet approach. None of the policy projects actually suggests a new comprehensive identity-building instrumental and none of them mentions getting rid of ethnicity being recorded in ID documents. Attempts to build a civic identity on top of ethnic identification much resemble the (in)famous project of creating “the Soviet people”. As Simon states, “on the one hand, the concept of Soviet people obscures the contours of socialist nations, which are part of the Soviet people; on the other hand, the Soviet people cannot exist without socialist nations”. The Soviet nationalities policy was a controversial one, focused on the integration of a diverse multi-ethnic population into one solid supra-national group together with development of the local nationalities. Khrushchev and Brezhnev came up with the “Soviet People” concept, although they never stopped development of the local nationalities. The result was quite negative: the “Soviet People” has never really appeared and the local nationalities had their cultures and languages significantly traumatized and underdeveloped.

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