

Nation-building and identity in Kazakhstan: conflicts and challenges

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1. Introduction

Nation-building is a crucial process in developing a strong and cohesive national identity within a country, and is an important task of governments around the world. As Benedict Anderson argues, nation states are “imagined communities”, in other words, they are actively constructed. State-building as a process is never complete, and issues related to identity recur in the post-Soviet region.

Kazakhstan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, with a population of 19 million and one of the lowest population densities in the world. Ethnic Kazakhs constitute around 70%, a majority of the population, and ethnic Russians form a significant minority. Kazakhstan is officially secular with Islam being the largest religion, whilst having a sizable Christian community formed by ethnic Russians. Additionally, Kazakhstan is officially a bilingual country, Kazakh is named the “state language” whilst Russian is also routinely spoken by most Kazakhs.

In this research, I delve into how the Kazakh government is constructing national identity in the post-Soviet era. Kazakhstan, with its strategic location (bordering Russia and China), vast landmass (9th largest landmass in the world), and significant energy resources (oil supplies), has the potential to become a major player on the international stage. This research aims to shed light on the government's efforts to overcome challenges to effective nation-building and understand the perceptions of the Kazakh people regarding such efforts, as well as their interpretations and understandings of national identity.

2. Literature review

Anderson argues that nations are "imagined communities" because members do not personally know or interact with most of their fellow citizens. Nevertheless, they share a sense of belonging and common identity based on a shared imagined connection. Anderson (1983) also views nationalism as a modern concept that emerged with the rise of printing, capitalism, and the decline of traditional religious and hierarchical orders. It gained momentum through the spread of vernacular languages and the development of mass media, which facilitated the formation of shared narratives and symbols. Importantly, Anderson emphasises the role of language in nation-building by fostering a sense of shared identity.

To extrapolate this to the case of Kazakhstan, I attempt to investigate whether the Kazakh language and media channels such as news and social media have successfully facilitated the formation of a cohesive national identity in Kazakhstan.

Existing literature suggests that nation-building in Kazakhstan faces some significant obstacles. As Aitymbetov et al. (2015) recognise, every post-Soviet state underwent a complex process of self-identification of the people, but in Kazakhstan this phenomenon was accompanied by major controversies. After the country received independence there appeared a world view conflict between the two major nations – Kazakhstan and Russia, such as in terms of language policy.

Moreover, research shows that the government has implemented a number of policies aimed at promoting national unity among Kazakhstan's citizens. For instance, increasing the use of the Kazakh language has been an important way of influencing the nation-building of Kazakh peoples. As Aitymbetov et al. (2015) argue, an important role is given to the Kazakh language claiming the status of the main attribute of ethnic cultural symbolism of Kazakhstan. Kazakhization is interpreted as the introduction of Kazakh language in spheres where there is dominance of Russian and thus elimination or significant reduction in the application of the Russian language. As Davenel and Yim (2016) show, nation-building is also promoted unofficially through discrimination towards non-Kazakhs on the basis of Kazakh language proficiency in everyday practices.

Through speaking to the people of Kazakhstan, I hope to understand in which areas such government efforts regarding language as well as other top down measures have been effective or ineffective.

According to Burkhanov (2017), the diverse population of Kazakhstan poses a significant obstacle for the new government in terms of formulating policies to shape national identity. The laws and regulations governing language usage, education, media, citizenship, and official identity policies thus play a crucial role in this regard. He argues that the process of constructing Kazakhstan's national identity after gaining independence was influenced by the historical impact of Soviet nationality policy. There were noticeable similarities between the current policies and those implemented in the later years of the Soviet era. The government aimed to avoid political conflicts based on ethnic divisions by ensuring the dominance of Kazakh identity while still providing nominal representation for minority groups.

Thus, through my research, I hope to contribute to filling gaps in the investigation of this topic on views of the Kazakh population on their national identity and current nation-building policies.

3. Methodology

Research question 1: What are the channels of information which shape perceptions of national identity in Kazakhstan?

Detailed analysis of existing literature (research papers on Kazakhstan's national identity) as well as general discourses on factors affecting national identity such as language, media, music was conducted.

Research question 2: How do Kazakhs themselves feel about the effectiveness of government nation-building efforts? What are the main challenges and tensions in creating a cohesive national identity in Kazakhstan?

Interviews with Kazakh nationals were conducted in Zoom, and transcripts were generated. Recognising the potential ethical risks in speaking out in a somewhat authoritarian country, interviews conducted mostly focused on perceptions of identity and nationhood rather than the political system of the country. Strict anonymity with regards to the identities of individuals interviewed was also observed. Focusing on the themes such as ethnic or language challenges recurrent in the literature review, analysis of common subjects between respondents was conducted to address the main research questions, with some quotations being used to illustrate points vividly.

To summarise, the main focal points of the interviews addressed the multifaceted nature of national identity in Kazakhstan, examining its formation through various channels, linguistic and cultural dimensions, governance strategies, inter-ethnic dynamics, and the role of media and culture in shaping perceptions.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that a limitation of this research is that the majority of informants are English-speaking Kazakh middle class. Whilst not all findings are generalisable to the entire population, this project can still be of value by shedding light upon a sample of informed opinions on nation-building and the challenges encountered and provide a basis for further research and analysis.

4. Findings

Factors shaping national identity

Analysis of qualitative interviews indicates that the people of Kazakh develop their sense of national identity through varied ways. Most respondents agreed that more formal/traditional channels such as news outlets were less important, as there is a general distrust in news and media channels about their agendas and propaganda. Instead, many look towards social media as influences on their sense of nationhood, such as key opinion leaders on Instagram and Telegram, including scholars and bloggers. Significantly, most interviewees agreed that music was important in affecting their sense of identity. Broadly dividing music into Kazakh pop (Q pop) and traditional folk music, some participants mentioned “Qui” traditional music played on a dombra (the national instrument) as a way of evoking their national pride and attachment. One respondent described herself “feeling emotions like riding on a horse, or wind blowing in my hair” when listening to such music whilst another stated that he would “put on the music whilst reading a Kazakh story book which put him in the right mood.” Some also expressed that family was a critical element, such as one respondent being brought up by her grandmother thus being told stories about the nation and history and another mentioning that her mother educated her to do something great for their country.

On government policies

Most interviewees saw the promotion of Kazakh language in public spheres and the introduction of language ratios as a necessary policy and positive step towards nation-building, although the majority believe there is room for progress. Many respondents felt that this was a needed push away from the Russo-Soviet identity. One also asserted that this was also positive for inclusion and cohesiveness of different regions, to bridge the gap between the Kazakh speaking people in rural areas and the Russian speaking population in the urban areas.

Nevertheless, it was suggested that no matter how much money or effort the government spends, Kazakh channels on TV still remain the domain of those who already know Kazakh. There are limited impacts on those who barely speak Kazakh or are more interested in Russian satellite TV as they still will not tune in to the Kazakh channels, rendering ineffectiveness to an extent.

Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that government sponsored efforts or top down policies are necessary with some effectiveness in certain areas, and such initiatives may need to be complemented with use of social media, blogs and the people's own civic awareness and efforts.

Effects of ethnic composition

General themes present amongst all interviewees was the idea that there may be tensions between ethnic identity and national identity. Most respondents stated that wordings about multi-ethnic national unity and friendship between peoples living in Kazakhstan was a Soviet legacy, which prescribed one to a specific position in society. Some mentioned that this might be outdated and that more fluid understandings of ethnicity might be useful whilst, others stated the idea of various ethnicities living in coexistence might be less significant ever since Kazakhstan has become an independent nation and the majority of the population is ethnically Kazakh, especially as more people returned to the land they originally belong to (eg. Chechens going back to Chechnya, Ukrainians going back to Ukraine).

Whilst few believing that the long-term hospitable nature of Kazakh people towards those who were deported from other countries (such as Germans/Koreans) feel that there is no tension between two different nation-building ideas of multiethnic inclusivity and Kazakh nation, others expressed that they see minor interethnic conflict on the news in some villages or even witness this in some public spheres such as on the bus. Some respondents particularly highlighted that this was exacerbated after the recent Russian invasion in Ukraine.

On language

Most informants believed that the introduction of more Kazakh in public spheres was positive, and influenced national identity in a positive way. However, many felt they could not imagine Kazakhstan being a monolingual country, as being bilingual (or even trilingual) and speaking Russian was an important feature of most Kazakhs. A few participants also highlighted that a major problem existed in the educational sphere, as the Kazakh language was not so popular compared to Russian or English in learning STEM, as exemplified by how companies do not require technical backgrounds in Kazakh language. Many interviewees also expressed that translations were often

conducted from Russian to Kazakh, ranging from textbooks to menus, which was not as convenient to understand. Hence, this caused people to continue relying on reading Russian texts.

Respondents mentioned that compared to neighbouring countries, such as Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, which moved to their own mother language soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 30 years onward Kazakhstan is still in a debate and the people hold very different perspectives on this. Most saw that this reflects the diversity in the country, but realised that it causes some difficulties in policy-making. Moreover, a common theme present on the topic of language is that people may be shifting away from watching TV or reading newspapers, and therefore focusing on promotion of Kazakh language in the entertainment sphere like podcasts in Kazakh might be more useful in the long run.

A key consensus amongst the Kazakh nationals interviewed indicated that there has been improvements over the past years. For instance, a cohort of translators able to translate directly from English to Kazakh have been developed, encouraging developments have been made yet the state cannot keep up with the level of demand and coverage is not wide enough yet. One respondent quoted figures from the Ministry of education in 2016, demonstrating that more than 60% of students in primary and secondary schools are predominantly studying in Kazakh language, which they felt was a satisfactory trend.

Other challenges towards nation-building

A majority agreed that civicness can develop under a regime yet this needs to be within this society, the regime cannot conceptualise a national identity for the people. Many people expressed that the top officials of the Kazakh government continue to think in Soviet frames without realising, which can pose challenges towards nation-building. It was agreed by most that with westernisation and globalisation, some people may no longer follow certain traditions. With the whole idea of the nation being challenged, the interconnectedness of the world might cause people to migrate and abandon their Kazakh identity. A common theme was the division between regions of Kazakhstan as well, with the North being more Russianised or internationalised, and the southern parts being more traditional and conservative. As such, differences might prevent the building up of a strong cohesive national identity.

5. Discussion

This discussion section will examine the key themes that emerged from the interviews in light of existing literature and theories on nation-building.

Role of Media and Language in Nation-Building

Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" resonates with the findings, as interviewees indicated a sense of shared identity that is shaped by various factors. Importantly, the study highlights the evolving role of media and language in this process.

Contrary to traditional media outlets, such as news and television, social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Telegram, emerged as influential channels in shaping national identity. Respondents expressed skepticism about the credibility and agenda of traditional media, reflecting a global trend of declining trust in established news sources. This underscores the importance of new media platforms in facilitating the formation of shared narratives and symbols, as posited by Anderson. It suggests that the modernisation of communication through social media plays a pivotal role in Kazakhstan's nation-building efforts.

Language Dynamics

The promotion of the Kazakh language in public spheres and the introduction of language ratios were seen as positive steps towards nation-building by most interviewees. This aligns with the assertion that language is a fundamental element in constructing national identity, as advocated by Anderson. However, the study also revealed complexities associated with language policies. Despite government efforts, there remained challenges in reaching those who predominantly speak Russian or prioritise other languages in their daily lives. This highlights the intricate balance between promoting the Kazakh language and respecting linguistic diversity.

Ethnic Identity and National Identity

The tension between ethnic identity and national identity emerged as a central theme in the interviews. Respondents pointed out that notions of multi-ethnic national unity and friendship,

rooted in the Soviet legacy, may no longer fully reflect the contemporary reality of Kazakhstan. The idea of a diverse, multi-ethnic society living in coexistence was challenged by some, particularly in the aftermath of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. These observations echo the complexities of constructing national identity in post-Soviet states, as described by Aitymbetov et al.

Challenges and Opportunities in Nation-Building

The study identifies several challenges and opportunities in Kazakhstan's nation-building process. It was noted that the top-down policies and initiatives of the government, while important, may need to be complemented by grassroots efforts and civic awareness. This echoes the argument that nation-building is not solely a government-driven process but requires active participation from civil society, as highlighted by Burkhanov.

Moreover, the regional disparities within Kazakhstan, with the North being more influenced by Russian culture and the South more traditional and conservative, pose challenges to achieving a cohesive national identity. These regional divisions underscore the need for nuanced and context-specific nation-building strategies. Kazakhstan's methods of balancing nation-building with inclusivity may be referenced and compared with other countries with diverse ethnic compositions, to find the effective methods suited to each country's political climate.

Future Directions and Recommendations

To further enhance the effectiveness of nation-building efforts, policymakers may consider the following recommendations:

- **Media Strategy:** Given the influence of social media on national identity, policymakers should harness these platforms to promote narratives that foster a sense of unity and inclusion.
- **Language Policies:** While promoting the Kazakh language is essential, policymakers should ensure that linguistic diversity is respected, and initiatives are inclusive of Russian-speaking populations.

- Regional Sensitivity: Acknowledging regional differences and tailoring nation-building approaches to address them can lead to more effective outcomes.
- Civic Engagement: Encouraging civic engagement and grassroots initiatives can complement top-down policies and enhance the sense of ownership among the population.
- Education Reform: Addressing language disparities in education, especially in STEM fields, can promote language diversity while maintaining competitiveness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has provided insights into the factors shaping national identity and nation-building in Kazakhstan. It underscores the need for adaptive and inclusive strategies that consider the evolving role of media, linguistic dynamics, and the complexities of multi-ethnic societies in post-Soviet states. By understanding the views of the Kazakh population, policymakers can better tailor their efforts to promote a cohesive national identity while respecting diversity.

During my research process, I continuously refined my questions, phrasing them in clearer ways and focusing on certain aspects slightly narrower from those I had originally intended. Thus, I may take this into account for improvements in future research projects to refine my focal points in my research questions earlier on. Moreover, due to time constraints, I was unable to conduct full digital ethnographies with qualitative and quantitative analysis of social media discussions of Kazakh people relating to national identity. Despite this, I have gained some insights into people's opinions through following a prominent Kazakh news channel on Instagram and analysing the comments, for example, the way Kazakhstani wrestlers were celebrated back home as Kazakh "heroes" or "brothers" and the way they were wearing traditional Kazakh costumes indicated to me sources of pride for Kazakh people. In the future, I may explore this data collection method further to supplement my research.

To sum up, the study of nation-building in post-Soviet states holds significance, particularly in light of recent geopolitical events. Understanding barriers and existing attitudes towards national identity can foster cohesion, social harmony, and economic growth in Kazakhstan. Given Kazakhstan's dominant position in Central Asia, with significant economic and political influence,

this research can have implications for regional geopolitics. Investigating the attitudes of the Kazakh people towards nation-building is essential in harnessing the potential of Kazakhstan and promoting stability in the region.

Avenues for future research might include comparative studies on the different nation-building strategies adopted by policymakers and the similarities and differences in challenges faced by post-Soviet states in national identity formation and consolidation. Through comparisons to other neighbouring nations such as Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, one might investigate good practices relevant to nation-building.

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