Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno nationalist state-building

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Introduction

The poster of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, dressed in a business suit but standing in a field of colourful poppies on the Central Asian steppe nicely illustrates on-going tensions inherent in governing Kazakhstan. Reifying the steppe, such images represent a return to nature and its ‘poetic spaces’ (Smith 1991: 65); yet the president stands not in the traditional garb of a Kazakh elder, but instead strides forth in the uniform of post-Soviet technocratic elites – a well-tailored business suit and clean shaven visage.

Defining civic and ethnic nationalism

At the heart of every nationalism lies a profound dualism – a tension between civic and ethnic elements (Smith 1991: 13). Understood as ideal types (Kumar 2003: 20), a civic model of a nation state comprises a historic territory, legal-political community, equality of members and a common civic culture and ideology. The central concept is the equality of a sovereign citizen-people with the state, regardless of language spoken, distinct cultural practices, racial characteristics or other potential cleavages (Hobsbawn 1992: 22). An ethnic state model emphasizes a community of birth and native culture, associated with a form of biological / genealogical determinism. A nation, under this conception, is a community of common descent (Kohn 1969; Smith 1991) - a community which existed prior to nationalist mobilization and distinguished itself in some way from foreigners (Hobsbawn 1992: 22).

These concepts, often presented in dichotomous form, present an apparently either/or proposition. The reality is often more complicated. Drawing from Benedict Anderson’s (2002) work to apply a constructivist sensibility changes this dualist perspective. Civic nations, far from being essentially civic in nature, imagine themselves to be civically oriented. The reality may often fall short of such imaginings. Equally, states based on the idea of shared ethnicity imagine a community of common descent. Crucially, civic and ethnic-state imaginings are not necessarily mutually exclusive over time, as long as states and societies are sufficiently open to re-imaginings, including selective and collective
remembrance and amnesia. Short of global cosmopolitanism, however, both civic and ethnic imaginings are defined in part by their boundaries with some ‘other’.

As with any ideal type, definitions of civic and ethnic nationalism are, to quote Weber (1949: 92-93), ‘a synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.’ Such ideal-types cannot be found anywhere in reality. It falls to researchers to determine the applicability of an ideal type to any specific set of circumstances. Ideal types are a means rather than an end, serving as a limiting construct to be used for comparative purposes in a manner that facilitates the illustration of significant political processes.

**Handling the critics**

The analytical utility of civic and ethnic nationalism has been disputed. Rogers Brubaker (1999), in a sophisticated critique, argues that these categories cannot be considered mutually exclusive because of the manner in which definitions are under-specified. Recognizing that they may nonetheless be utilized for comparative purposes he remains critical, arguing that it is difficult to categorize particular policies as inherently civic or ethnic sui generis. He also highlights the manner in which normative considerations are frequently brought into play in comparing these two categories, with civic nationalism painted as liberal, voluntarist and inclusive. We agree with Brubaker that civic and ethnic nations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, we argue that distinct differences remain between the two when utilized as ideal types that are useful in analysing policies in their particular context. Context is important, because it determines the impact of policies, including whether, on balance, any given policy or initiative favours a civic or ethnic orientation in state practice and social imaginings of the nation or is indeterminate in its effects.
Understanding civic and ethnic tendencies

Where and to what extent a state constitutes itself and is constituted by others relative to these civic and ethnic ideal types is a matter for empirical enquiry. It is something that is emergent from the institutions and policies of the state apparatus, in social practices that create and sustain imagined communities (Anderson 2002), in the content of these imaginings, and in behaviours, ideas and boundary creating notions of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The level of purchase which the state has in these matters is in part determined by the presence of the state in society. Not all states have the same capacity and social reach in this respect.

As both civic and ethnic nationalisms are ideal types, the challenge is therefore not to seek to pin down a fixed point and declare definitely that either a civic or ethno-nationalist label defines the nature of nationalism in any given state, but rather to identify divergent tendencies inherent in governing processes tending towards characteristics each type. It is the tension inherent in these divergent trajectories that is of interest rather than any particular end state. Brubaker’s concept of ‘nationalizing nationalism’ (Brubaker 1996: 5) is potentially misleading in this respect. Nationalizing nationalism is defined to include claims by a core nation or nationality for remedial measures through the state apparatus to address perceived weaknesses in the situation of this group.² The core nation is conceived in ethno-cultural terms and is distinguished from the citizenry as a whole, and in the context of a case study such as Kazakhstan, is analogous to Smith’s ethnic nationalism.³ Brubaker’s nationalizing nationalism is useful in emphasizing on-going processes of nationalization. However, it emphasizes only a uni-directional ethno-national trajectory, precluding the possibility that states may exhibit both civic and ethnic elements simultaneously and indeed, seek to mediate between the two.⁴ As we shall see, Kazakhstan provides an interesting case of this very ambiguity.
Introducing Kazakhstan

Oil rich and politically stable and multi-ethnic, Kazakhstan is a Muslim majority secular state with a significant Slavic Orthodox Christian minority. The ninth largest country in the world, its borders are a product of Soviet nationality policies. The bulk of Kazakhstan occupies a zone historically the domain of steppe nomads, the most recent of which were Kazakhs. Kazakhs claim a common ethno-genesis with other Turkic speaking peoples of Central Asia including Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Azerbaijani and Turkish ethnic groups.

When Kazakhstan declared independence from the defunct USSR on 16 December 1991, ethnic Kazakhs constituted a minority in the new state, in large part due to the settlement of the country by Slavs for two centuries and because Kazakhstan was a dumping ground for individual dissidents and entire peoples during the Soviet period (Brill Olcott 1987; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2004). Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has enjoyed relative harmony between its many nationalities. Such harmony was not inevitable – disturbances during the Soviet period carried with them an element of ethnic conflict, while the potential for secessionist tendencies amongst Kazakhstan’s substantial ethnic Russian population has been an on-going concern since independence (Brubaker 1996; Hale 2009; Laruelle 2006; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2004). Kazakhstan has managed to maintain relative stability and harmony while also engaging in a broad based state building project. Arguing against the common wisdom that state-building processes in Kazakhstan have been built around an ethno-national focus on ethnic Kazakhs, this essay examines the strategic ambiguity between civic and ethnic nationalism inherent in these processes since independence and considers the potential implications of this for the state in the future.

Nationalism and internationalism during Soviet rule

It is impossible to understand modern-day Kazakhstan without reference to Russia. Slavs of the Russian empire began to colonize the Kazakh populated steppes in the latter part of the 19th century. Russia’s
rapid settlement policy between 1911 and 1913 saw the Slavic population climb to 1.5 million or 30 per cent of the population. The first Soviet census of 1926 indicated that there were 1,279,979 Russians and 860,822 Ukrainians (19.68 per cent and 13.23 per cent respectively) (Sinnott 2003: 105-8). Famine caused in part by forced collectivization in the early 1930s affected Kazakhs disproportionately. This, together with an ambitious “Virgin Lands” campaign under Khrushchev that brought in hundreds of thousands of Russian volunteers, further undermined Kazakh numbers. This trend was reversed in the later Soviet period; results from the 1970, 1979, and 1989 censuses chart a continuous decline in the Slavic share of the population. The last Soviet census of 1989 estimated the Slav percentage of the population to be 44 per cent, a figure that included 6,227,549 Russians (37 per cent of total population) (Dave 2003: 2-4; Ó Beacháin 2007).

Table 1: Ethnic analysis of Kazakhstan’s population 1987-2009

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<td>Kazakh</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>58.54</td>
<td>42.55</td>
<td>37.84</td>
<td>28.99</td>
<td>32.55</td>
<td>36.02</td>
<td>39.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘European’²⁶</td>
<td>12.94</td>
<td>35.28</td>
<td>49.71</td>
<td>52.17</td>
<td>58.01</td>
<td>56.23</td>
<td>53.04</td>
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<td>37.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other²⁷</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>7.74</td>
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Figures adapted from Sinnott (2003) and Smailov (2011).

While the early Soviet period saw advances for native elites in governing new Central Asian political units within the recently constituted union, the policy of korenizatsia (indigenization), was diluted during the 1930s through both policy change and purges that eliminated many of the first generation of Central Asia’s post revolution elite (Khalid 2007). By 1936 Russians had been exalted to ‘first among equals’ and were entrusted with the task of being the guiding force in the Soviet ‘family’ of nations (Martin 2001: 81). Alphabets in national languages were changed to Cyrillic to greater facilitate the
learning of Russian during this period. After Stalin’s death in 1953 concerted efforts were made to make Russian the language of the new ‘Soviet People’. These efforts were consolidated and expanded by Leonid Brezhnev (Blitstein 2001; Kreindler 1989). Transcending territorial diversity and class differences through social uniformity was a key goal of communist ideology (White 1979: 193-4). In the USSR, periodic mobilization of the population was carefully orchestrated to give the impression of socialist homogeneity, of a unified populace bound together by shared beliefs and values, working together to achieve common social, economic and political objectives (Busygina 2002: 298). Those too enthusiastic about regional issues at the expense of the great Soviet enterprise were deemed to be “bourgeois deviationist”, “nationalist” or simply “localist” (mestnichestvo). Such policies were particularly successful in Kazakhstan so that ‘by the 1970s the Kazakhs were arguably the most thoroughly Sovietized of all Soviet citizens – and the overwhelming majority appeared to be proud of it’ (Akiner 1995: 51), a reality reinforced by the minority status of the Kazakhs within the Kazakh SSR.

Post independence Kazakhstan: A nationalizing state?

Scholars interested in the trajectory of Kazakhstan’s post independence development have expressed concerns with respect to the nature of nationalism there since the early 1990s. Considered a delegative democracy, possessing the trappings of a democratic system but in practice constituted as an authoritarian state (Kubicek 1998), the nature of ethnic relations and the impact that state formation has had on these relations remains a pressing concern to this day.

Svanberg (1994: 122), writing soon after independence, highlighted an over emphasis by the Nazarbayev regime at that time on ethnic Kazakh identity over a more inclusive Kazakhstani identity. Sarsembayev (1999) announced the demise of Kazakhstani nationalism as early as 1999, while Surucu (2002) highlighted the degree to which self-styled ‘cosmopolitans’ became increasingly associated with opposition parties. Fierman (2000), writing at the beginning of the new millennium, speculated that
support for a Kazakh ethnic nationalism was likely to grow as rural to urban migration of unskilled and semiskilled youth increased. Commercio (2004), drawing from theoretical work developed by Brubaker (1996), later argued that Kazakhstan could be classified as a nationalizing state, a position that has been consistently supported by a number of other scholars (Brill Olcott 2002; Cummings 2006; Karin and Chebotarev 2000; Oh 2006; Peyrouse 2008).

These claims highlight an important political issue: that Kazakh claims to primordial autochthony in the national territory is a first principle of state policy in post independence Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan means, after all, the “Land of the Kazakhs.” Other ethnic groups are considered to be recipients of traditional Kazakh hospitality towards newcomers (Cummings 2006). ‘Kazakhisation’ post-independence included changes to street names, the erection of new statues, the creation of a new flag and a stirring new anthem (Karin and Chebotarev 2000). The state apparatus, already a primary domain for ethnic Kazakhs in the Kazakh SSR, drifted towards further Kazakhification, while formally state owned companies – particularly heavy industries and mining, traditionally the domain of Russians and other non-Kazakh nationalities – suffered from economic adjustment and privatization (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2004). Within Kazakhstan, organic intellectuals have worked to support justificatory narratives of Kazakh centrality to the state through the publication of scholarly texts supporting primordialist Kazakh claims.\(^8\)

Since independence the Nazarbayev regime has also sought to reverse Soviet-era language practices promoting Russian in favour of Kazakh. Russian was the language of government and prestige in Soviet Kazakhstan. Education through the medium of Russian was a *sine qua non* for social advancement. In the post-Soviet period those educated through Kazakh generally support the strict application of pro-Kazakh language policies in order to open up job opportunities previously the exclusive reserve of Russian speakers.

This tilt towards an ethnic conception of the nation was accompanied by a related vote of no confidence in the state by nationalities with European connections. During the early 1990s hundreds of
thousands of Slavs and Germans, uncertain of their status in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, voted with their feet. Between 1993 and 1999, 1,123,960 Slavs left Kazakhstan (almost 300,000 in 1994 alone) and they were followed by almost half a million ethnic Germans. In the decade that followed the last Soviet census of 1989, the Russian population fell from 37.8 per cent to just 29.96 per cent while the combined European population (Russian, Ukrainian, German, Polish, Belarusian, and Greek) declined from 49.8 per cent to 39 per cent. During the same period, the number of ethnic Kazakhs grew by 1.5 million (moving from 39.7 per cent to 53.4 per cent of the population). Kazakhs who had been forced to leave during the Stalin years together with their descendants and other ethnic Kazakhs in neighbouring states were encouraged to ‘return’, an offer that more than one hundred thousand accepted (Sinnott 2003). These trends continued during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The 2009 census recorded the Kazakh population surpassing the ten million mark for the first time (63.1 per cent) while the combined numbers of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians constituted a bare quarter of the population.9

The shift towards Kazakhization has also been reflected in legal and constitutional changes. While the current constitution, enacted in 1995, forbids discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of ‘origins, social position, property status, sex, race, nationality, language, faith, political and religious convictions, place of residence or any other circumstances’ (Article 14) it also makes it compulsory that the President of the Republic be able to speak Kazakh (Article 41 of 1995 Constitution, Article 114 of 1993 Constitution). Subsequent laws have reinforced these constitutional provisions. One regulation, adopted in July 1997, declared that ‘it is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language’ (Law on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Article 4). Broadcasts on TV and radio channels in Kazakh must also be given equal time to all other languages. In practice, Russian is the only language concerned (Republic of Kazakhstan 1997).

Nationalizing in form, civic in substance?
Nonetheless, to argue that Kazakhstan’s national state building process has been a one sided process in favour of Kazakhs would be to overstate things substantially. With respect to the preceding broadcast initiatives, for example, this measure was taken neither with the consultation of the bodies involved nor has it been supported with the financial resources necessary to make it a success. A 1998 presidential decree mandating the use of Kazakh in all government paperwork followed a similar pattern.\textsuperscript{10} Originally, it was anticipated that this policy would be implemented immediately after the adoption of the constitution but a lack of competent staff and adequate provisions for language instruction has meant that the deadline has been continually extended.

These examples reflect an important reality. While a myriad of laws have being promulgated and decreed, much less effort has been created to enable these laws to take effect (Fierman 2009b). This has often left non-Kazakh speakers facing notional barriers that could potentially affect their situation, but which in practice only rarely intrude into their day to day lives. Russian remains the language spoken by the greatest number of people living in Kazakhstan. Almost all Russians do not speak Kazakh whereas the vast majority of Kazakhs speak Russian and many ethnic Kazakhs do not speak Kazakh (Dave 1996: 217-32; 2007: 50-71). In the 1999 census 99.4 per cent of Kazakhs claimed that Kazakh was their native language. This figure is inflated, representing more a demonstration of patriotic fervour than an accurate reflection of linguistic competence (Dave 2003; 2007:52).

A proposal to change the alphabet of the state language from Cyrillic to the Latin form, reflecting the long established use of the Latin script in Turkey, and a policy already implemented in post-Soviet Moldova and for the three Turkic state languages of Azeri, Turkmen and Uzbek, provides another useful example of the limits of state policy. While bringing Kazakh more closely into line with other Turkic speaking countries, including Turkey, such a move would also make Kazakh more difficult to master for non-speakers educated in Russian or other minority languages which use a Cyrillic script, including those ethnic Kazakhs who speak Russian as their first language. Following a call from President
Nazarbayev to consider the matter, the Ministry of Education conducted a feasibility study during the summer of 2007 that recommended a change to the Latin script over a twelve to fifteen year period. The report made clear that this recommendation was being made with a view to reversing Russification and building a strong Kazakh national identity (Bartlett 2007). Nonetheless, at time of writing (late 2012), some five years after the formal launch of the policy, little has been done to make this transition a reality. Given the enormity of the task at hand, this is suggestive of weak government commitment and nicely illustrates the practical limits of nationalizing government policies.

The language question highlights the ambivalence of many Russian-speaking Kazakhs in embracing a narrow ethno-linguistic definition of Kazakhness that focuses on everyday use of the language as opposed to rhetorical support for its importance. The social and political cohesiveness of the collectivity imagined as “Kazakh” has been questioned by some analysts. Masanov (2000), for example, questions what urbanized Russophone ethnic Kazakhs actually have in common with their rural, Kazakh speaking counter parts. The state seems aware of these tensions: in addition to the slow implementation of language policies, for example, its careful phraseology in the last census questionnaire sought to reinforce presumed links between nationality and language without actually enquiring into how and to what extent people actually use different languages in their daily lives (Dave 2004). The inability of almost 40 per cent of ethnic Kazakhs to speak the Kazakh language has undoubtedly operated as a break on the linguistic components of the nationalizing process, with urban based Russian speaking ethnic Kazakhs standing to lose the most in any widespread shift is favour of Kazakh (Sarsembayev 1999; Kolstø 2003). Amongst those elite Kazakhs who speak Kazakh well and/or as their mother tongue, Russian remains important, more so than English. Two anecdotal examples illustrate this point: Miras, an elite private primary and secondary school in Almaty, offers two language streams for children – either Kazakh combined with Russian or Russian combined with English. It does not offer a combined Kazakh and English stream. As a second example both authors taught for a number...
of years in Almaty at Kazakhstan’s leading university. While students steadily mastered English over the course of their educational experience there, they all typically already spoke Russian comfortably, regardless of ethnic background. The same could not be said for Kazakh. Despite gains made by the Kazakh language since independence, particularly in cities where increasing numbers of rural Kazakhs have settled, Russian remains the *de facto* language of elite education and communication and an important gateway language, particularly in the hard sciences, engineering, and military studies and in doing business in the wider former Soviet space. It also acts as the language of inter ethnic communication throughout Kazakhstan.

When we raised this dichotomy with one former government minister, an ethnic Ukrainian who had migrated to Kazakhstan in his youth, he maintained that it had existed since the foundation of the state and expressed the hope that enthusiasm for promoting Kazakh could be matched by the provision of the means for learning it. He praised Nazarbayev’s policies on language and explained that he had been subjected to competing pressures when devising policy in the post-independence period:

> President Nazarbayev has a long term and clear perspective in this regard [language policy]. I was a witness to when the constitution was being adopted; the president’s task was like walking on a tight rope, with national-patriots arguing to have only Kazakh, and Russians arguing for their language. If the president leaned more to one side than the other, he would cause problems. When I talked to the president I touched upon this issue of balance. There were moments when you could feel the president was in a very difficult situation. He said to us that all the people of the republic were listening and urged us to think reasonably, arguing that prioritizing one or the other language would not bring us to a state of balance.

**Between civic and ethnic nationalism**
Rather than a straightforward case of nationalizing nationalism then, Kazakhstan’s trajectory has from its origins been defined by seemingly contradictory aims. Kazakhstan’s approach to state building based on the ethnic solidarity of the titular group has been relatively muted compared to close neighbours Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Fierman 2009). Equally, the president continues to promote civic as well as ethnic notions of the nation. As recently as 2009 Nazarbayev again reaffirmed the importance of the civic state building project, strengthening the legislative position of the Assembly of Peoples, a body tasked with the preservation and promotion of Kazakhstan’s diverse cultural heritage (Jones 2010). Officials have sometimes attempted to square this circle by arguing that Kazakh culture and language can ultimately become the consolidating factor amongst all Kazakhstanis, while preserving and respecting other languages and cultures present within Kazakhstan (Jones 2010). Other observers argue that the Nazarbayev regime has been equally harsh in repressing nationalist opposition from both Russian and Kazakh groups in order to secure its position in power against potential threats to the territorial integrity of the country (from ethnic Russians, particularly in the north) and from threats to its position of dominance amongst ethnic Kazakhs (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2004).

These tensions are reflected in some recent scholarship, albeit in a way that sideline civic aspects. Sally Cummings (2006: 177), for example, argues that the mainly Kazakh elites of newly independent Kazakhstan set out three state-building goals post independence: to nurture a civic, all-Kazakhstani identity, to enable different ethnic groups to discover their own cultural identities and to reserve a special place in this new state for the cultural reawakening of the titular Kazakh ethnic group. Cummings, however, argues that civic forms have largely been discarded in recent years, while also recognizing a significant dilution of Kazakh ethno-nationalism by a technocratic form of managerial governance.

We argue, by contrast, that the notion of civic nationalism and tensions between civic and ethnic tendencies provide important reference points in understanding contemporary Kazakhstan. The
state’s language policies provide one good example of these dynamics. Since 1995 Russian has been recognized as an official language ‘on a par’ with Kazakh – a somewhat ambiguous position that provides official recognition, if not the symbolic importance attached to Kazakh, where previously it was simply recognized as the language of inter-ethnic communication (Fierman 1998; Smagulova 2006). Other symbolically sensitive moves related to Kazakh have also been deferred as illustrated by the delays in instituting a Kazakh language entrance examination into all Kazakh universities (Fierman 2009).

The Nazarbayev regime has also been astute in maintaining a careful public balancing act on particularly sensitive issues, as with the establishment of a quasi non-governmental body to manage government relations with ethnic Kazakhs in neighbouring countries (Diener 2005: 330), and the country’s partial implementation of Kazakh language policies. This balancing between strong declarative support while taking few practical measures has reportedly been a source of dissatisfaction for Kazakh nationalists (Oka 2000), highlighting the social constraints under which the regime operates. Policy changes affecting nationalization processes have tended to be incremental and balanced between divergent tendencies; changes to the history syllabus in schools, for example, have been stop-start, after an initial period of de-Russification in the immediate post independence (Kissane 2005). Historical legacies and economic conditions have assisted the government in these efforts. Ethnic Kazakhs, for example, have dominated government structures from Soviet times. The transition from Kazakh SSR to the newly independent republic did not bring with it such as sharp break in state appointment processes when compared to other historical eras.

A growing economy has also provided economic opportunities and niches for all nationalities, despite ethnic Kazakh dominance of senior executive leadership positions in many formal enterprises. Western enterprises at least have provided opportunities based on merit and qualifications rather than ethnicity. Government statistical agencies do not provide data on the ethnic composition of the workforce or their role in particular sectors of the economy. However, income levels have been
consistently higher in urban centres (where ethnic minorities are concentrated) and in areas with a high concentration of Russians like Eastern Kazakhstan, Karaganda and Pavlodar (Daly 2008: 28). Most of the wealth associated with the hydro-carbon industry has also found its way into the cities, where most ethnic minorities reside. This trend has left the Kazakh-dominated countryside relatively untouched while providing employment for ethnic minorities in a number of areas across different skill sets – from construction related work to employment in emerging financial sectors. While it is true that Kazakhs dominate the country’s political system, a fact in part inherited from the Soviet-era (Dave 2007: 153), there is evidence that other ethnic groups play substantial roles in the economic activity of the state.

**Threading the needle**

Why then has Kazakhstan maintained this level of ambiguity? While lack of state capacity can explain some shortcomings in implementation of nationalizing processes, it cannot be considered determinative, in the way it might in other, less well endowed regions of the world. Despite a dip in living conditions during the 1990s, Kazakhstan has successfully built upon its Soviet legacy and significant oil reserves. It is a relatively strong state, solidly ranked 68th in the world on the UNDP’s 2012 Human Development Index. Shortcomings in capacity, while they do exist, also do not explain ambiguities at the policy level.

International conditions have undoubtedly played a role. Brubaker’s model of nationalizing states, homeland nationalism and minority nationalism (Brubaker 1996) describes a series of cross border interactions that have not been set in motion in Kazakhstan’s relations with Russia. Kazakhstan’s relatively weak geo-strategic position, and the importance of maintaining friendly relations with Russia have had important influences on domestic policy (Cummings 2003). The presence of a large Russian minority within Kazakhstan, much of it resident in regions adjacent to Mother Russia and the potential for intervention by the Russian state in defense of this minority places an effective break on Kazakh
ethnic nationalism. Russia, for its part, has not actively promoted nationalistic sentiment among Kazakhstan’s Russian minority, nor has it expressed irredentist claims over parts of northern and western Kazakhstan (Laruelle 2007). This has meant that the dynamics described by Brubaker have not been set in motion, providing greater room for the current via media.

However three other important (and related) domestic factors have also played an important part in the creation and realization of Kazakhstan’s ambiguous national identity – the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy, the role of the Nazarbayev regime in continuing as the vehicle through which this legacy has been realized and the development of a political system that has actively impeded political mobilization around alternative ethnic or religious bases.

Soviet Legacy

While Kazakh culture and social structure pre-date the Soviet period, Kazakh identity benefitted from the protection and encouragement, and indeed constitutive processes of the Soviet system in the cultural sphere. Kazakh language, literature, music and traditional meals, costumes and dance were all promoted, and to some extent ‘invented’ during the Soviet period. Such promotion was largely custodial in nature, however. The path to modernization was through Russian, a path embraced by ambitious ethnic Kazakhs. Perhaps as a consequence Kazakhstan did not experience the kinds of cultural mobilization common in other Soviet republics in the late Soviet period.

This lack of a pre-independence trajectory of cultural nationalism influenced post independence nationalizing processes. Economically dependent on the centre during the Soviet period, Kazakhstan’s overriding priorities were economic as the Soviet Union collapsed. The Nazarbayev regime consistently sought to improve its situation within common governance arrangements through support for the continuation of the USSR and later by advocating for strong institutional mechanisms within the CIS (Hale 2009). Kazakhstan was not in the vanguard of nations striving for independence. Its post
independence government was not a revolutionary movement driving out a foreign presence, but a somewhat surprised, Soviet trained and largely ethnic Kazakh elite who found themselves governing a sovereign nation at short notice. As a consequence there was no nationalizing trajectory whose momentum would continue to drive state policies during the post-independence period. Instead, the direction taken by Nazarbayev’s regime has followed patterns laid down in the Soviet period. As a consequence, while the government of Kazakhstan made a clean break with the ideology and symbolic apparatus of communism, policy towards nationalities has shown continuity with the Soviet period.

To sum up, the Soviet legacy has been important to nationalist politics in Kazakhstan a number of reasons: Russian became the lingua franca for the state to a degree not matched in other Soviet states. This continued importance of Russian, together with the on-going maintenance of notions of cultural plurality and the absence of a significant pre-independence cultural mobilization have all been important contributors to the trajectory of post-independence Kazakhstan.

Nazarbayev’s Regime: continuity and moderation

This consistency between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet periods has been facilitated by continuity in leadership from the Soviet period. Throughout the ups and downs of post-independence governance in Kazakhstan the leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev has remained constant. A protégé of Kazakh SSR leader Dinmukhamed Kunaev, Nazarbayev began to distance himself from his mentor during the glasnost period. His moves proved ineffective, however, when Gorbachev chose an outsider as leader. Gennady Kolbin was authorized to root out incompetence and corruption in the republic. A Slav from outside the Kazakh SSR, Kolbin’s outsider status threatened patronage networks and was portrayed as a national insult. Demonstrations in opposition to the change were held in Almaty (the then capital) on the 16 December 1986 but were suppressed by government forces. Depending on which report one believes, between one and two hundred people were killed. While the motives of these demonstrators
have been the subject to some dispute (Stefany 2004), there is little doubt that at least a sizable minority were inspired by nationalist sentiment: “Every people deserves their own leader” was one banner held up by demonstrators, for example.\textsuperscript{19} Whether through good fortune or otherwise, Nazarbayev ultimately benefitted from this ethnic tilt, and was appointed as Kolbin’s replacement by Gorbachev after the latter stepped down in 1989. He has remained in power ever since. This bending to ethnic demands prior to independence effectively ended any incipient ethnic Kazakh politico-cultural mobilization that might have occurred in the Kazakh SSR.

Since taking over the reins of power Nazarbayev has successfully painted himself as a moderating figure, albeit somewhat less credibly in recent years as his unwillingness to cede power has become ever more apparent. This has been accompanied by a growing focus on the ‘great man’ aspects of his legacy without concomitant attention to the practical question of who will succeed him and whether the political institutions of the state are robust enough to survive without him at the helm. Post independence Nazarbayev produced a number of written works which have been promoted in an effort to establish a national ideology. While this ideology is liberal, secular, progressive, and inclusive it also reinforces the link between President and State. The best-known document attributed to the President is “Kazakhstan 2030”, a long-term development plan in which the President appeals to the people of Kazakhstan ‘to share my vision of the future of our society and the mission of our state’. National security, material well-being, political stability, consolidation of the state, foreign investment and the development of infrastructure are all afforded consideration. The document contains no plan for democratization (Nazarbayev 1997). “Kazakhstan 2030” is heavily advertised throughout Kazakhstan with the words emblazoned on innumerable banners, posters, billboards and more permanent fixtures.

To sum up, continuity under the Nazarbayev regime has been an important contributor to the manner in which nationalist politics has been manifested. The extent to which Nazarbayev himself is
responsible for these policies is an open question, although the centrality of the Presidency to governance makes it likely to have been significant.

The nature of the political system

The final domestic factor that has influenced state-building and nationalist tendencies is the nature of the political system that has developed since independence. Institutionalists and scholars of social movements have made compelling arguments highlighting how political processes, including the manner in which people can be mobilized for elections, can heighten the political salience of ethnic or geographic cleavages within societies. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, we have already noted how political strategies of the Nazarbayev regime have successfully undercut both Russian and Kazakh nationalists. The ongoing strategic ambiguity between civic and ethnic nationalism remains a core plank in such strategies. This includes the manner in which the regime has controlled the country’s political process, where the design and operation of the political system, including the practice of elections, has prevented mobilization against the regime based on ethno-national solidarity.

Political parties in Kazakhstan can be divided into three major types: ‘pro-presidential, loyal opposition, and opposition’ (Isaacs 2008: 382). Of the former, Nazarbayev’s Nur Otan (‘Light of the Fatherland’) is by far the most significant. Between 2007 and 2012 it was the only party represented in parliament. Since then it has been joined by two minor parties, both of which are parties of the ‘loyal opposition’. The main opposition party, the Nationwide Social Democratic Party, saw its share of the vote plummet from 4.62 per cent to 1.68 per cent between the 2007 and 2012 elections, far short of the 7 per cent threshold required to secure seats in parliament.

A highly restrictive “Law on Political Parties” prohibits ethnic and religious parties, preventing the mobilization of potentially powerful sources of opposition, including parties drawing support from ethnic Russians and Kazakh nationalists. An even greater hurdle is the requirement that parties have not
less than 50,000 members representing all 14 regions and major cities of Kazakhstan (a minimum quota of 700 members in each region and major city is established), ruling out the possibility of regional parties which might act as a vehicle for ethnic interests. The Nazarbayev regime is assisted in its efforts to suppress any potentially threatening social movements by having a strong coercive apparatus at its disposal. It has proven quite effective at neutralizing perceived threats, either through administrative or more forceful means. Heavily financed by oil revenues, the regime has access to sufficient resources to protect itself, while also providing public goods to de-politicized populations who are not easily susceptible (at least as long as some financial largesse continues to trickle down) to political mobilization based on ethnic or other criteria.

To sum up, Kazakhstan’s political system has been configured to make it exceedingly difficult to mobilize at the national level based on ethnic or regional affiliations. This, combined with a strong coercive state capacity to repress mobilization efforts outside the political system has made it difficult for those of an ethno-nationalist disposition to effectively organize and pressure for change based on their political platforms.

**Concluding comments**

This article has explored the manner in which national identity in Kazakhstan has been realized through state actions that have promoted both civic and ethnic aspects. This ambiguity has drawn from Soviet legacies and relied on the commitment of the current regime for its maintenance. President Nazarbayev has played an important role in this. However, having celebrated his 70th birthday in 2010, his continued longevity in power must be in question. The absence of any clear succession plan is a cause of concern. Prioritizing state building over democratization may have been justifiable in the uncertain 1990s. It seems less so in the contemporary period. The relative absence of strong institutional mechanisms of political inclusion leaves open the possibility of ethno-national political mobilization by political
entrepreneurs working outside of the electoral framework. While the absence of a federal structure within Kazakhstan make the prospect of a post-Tito style Yugoslav style break-up unlikely, the Tajik civil war and the more recent violence in southern Kyrgyzstan provides examples of worse case scenarios. Any elite rivalry based on ethnic mobilization could be particularly problematic if it becomes linked to competition for continued control of the country’s natural resources. This all points to the potential fragility of Kazakhstan’s balancing act in the post-Nazarbayev period.

Suny (2001) correctly identified these tensions in Kazakhstan more than 10 years ago. This article reaffirms and updates this analysis, while highlighting the extent to which these tendencies have remained constant and on-going through Kazakhstan’s second decade of independence. Contrary to the vast bulk of existing literature on state-building and nationalism in Kazakhstan, this paper argues that strategic ambiguity between civic and ethno-nationalist tendencies has played an important role in political and social developments since independence. Twenty years constitutes more than a transition period. This ambiguity has been driven by a number of factors: internationally Kazakhstan has not faced homeland nationalism from its neighbours, particularly Russia. The possibility that homeland and minority nationalisms could be provoked by a nationalizing nationalism based on a core Kazakh nation has also placed a break on ethno-nationalist tendencies. However domestic factors, including the absence of mobilization based on cultural nationalism in the pre-independence period, deliberate policies of the Nazarbayev regime that favoured strategic ambiguity and the consolidation of a political system that makes mobilization based on ethnic or regional bases extremely difficult (and that successfully represses mobilization outside that system) have also been important drivers.

Maintaining this balance and the tensions therein represents a significant political success. Strategic ambiguity, simultaneous and multi-directional nationalizing and civic trajectories and weak implementation of policy can serve the interests of stability and state building. They have certainly done so in Kazakhstan. The challenge facing the country, its people and its current leadership is how best to
institutionalize such strategic ambiguities into a stable configuration that provides the opportunity for all to imagine a nation in which they can reside and can offer the prospect for continued improvement in the life chances of all.

Notes

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2 More formally, Brubaker (1996: 83-84) sets out seven characteristics of a nationalizing state, including the following elements (1) the “imagined” existence of a “core nation” or nationality, (2) the idea that the polity exists of and for the core nation, (3) the idea that the core nation is not flourishing (4) the idea that specific action is needed to promote the language, cultural flourishing, demographic predominance, economic welfare, or political hegemony of the core nation; (5) the conception and justification of such action as remedial; (6) mobilization on the basis of these ideas in a variety of settings and (7) the adoption by the state non-state organizations of formal and informal policies and practices informed by these ideas.

3 This is consistent with Brubaker’s (1996: 44) treatment of Kazakhstan in the same book.

4 Nonetheless, Brubaker’s triangular model, including as it does state structures and policies, the policies of adjacent “homeland” states and the situation of national minorities with relations to these homelands is valuable in understanding cross border and internal dynamics related to nationalism when nationalizing nationalism occurs in correspondence and interactively with the other types.

5 It is estimated that 1.3 to 1.5 million people died during the famine (Davies and Wheatcroft, 2004: 412). Official Soviet statistics suggest that between 1926 and 1937 the Kazakh population declined from 3,627,612 to 2,181,520
(a loss of almost 40 per cent) while the Russian population almost doubled from 1,275,055 to 2,458,687 between 1926 and 1939 (Tolts, 2006, Wheatcroft, 2004, Conquest, 1986, Brill Olcott, 1981). Panciola (2008: 103) estimates that the number of Kazakh deaths was about 1.45m (38 per cent of the total Kazakh population), which was the highest death toll in percentage terms of any nationality in the USSR.

6 'European' combines Russian, Ukrainian, and German populations from 1897 to 1979. For the 1989 and 1999 censuses Belarussian, Polish and Greek nationalities, which appear as separate groups, are also included to the ‘European’ category. Deportations of “unreliable” peoples from sensitive border areas resulted in 70,000 Poles and Germans being deported from Ukraine to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1936. See McLaughlin (2003) for further details.

7 The most significant groups in the “other” category are Uzbeks, Uighurs and (from 1939 onwards) Koreans. Deportations of Kurds and Iranians from Azerbaijan and Armenia began in July 1937; Korean deportations began in the early autumn of 1937 (see Gelb (1995).

8 For further discussion, see Diener (2002); for examples of such historiography in English see several contributions to Akhmetov (1998).

9 2009 census statistics derived from Smailov (2011)

10 Presidential Decree, Republic of Kazakhstan, 05 October 1998, No. 4106, On the State Programme for the Functioning and Development of Languages.

11 For a study of how students at this university interacted with challenges to Kazakhstan’s sense of identity see Ó Beacháin (2011).

12 The symbolic importance of Kazakh and the state’s role in supporting public manifestations of the language were highlighted during the authors’ time there: bilingual English and Russian signage on campus was replaced by signs in English and Kazakh, for example. The change coincided with a re-accreditation process of the institute with government authorities and was implemented to conform to government requirements on the matter. It is also mandatory to take two two-credit classes in the Kazakh language as part of the general education requirements for undergraduate students.
Interview with Petr Krepak, Almaty, 19 March 2004.

The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan was established by a Presidential Decree dated 1 March 1995 with the stated aims of promoting inter-ethnic and inter-faith harmony, societal stability and a political culture based on ‘civilized and democratic norms’. It was envisaged as an advisory and consultative body and its chairman-for-life is the first President of Kazakhstan (i.e. Nazarbayev). Changes to the constitutional framework provided that from 2007 onwards nine of the 107 lower house of parliament (Mazhilis) would be nominated by the People’s Assembly. Significantly, the name of the body was later changed from Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan.

Street naming provides some interesting examples of how these dynamics have played out in practice. Ulica Dostyk in Almaty provides one example: meaning ‘friendship’ in Kazakh, the street had its name changed post-independence. The name change encapsulates divergent tendencies perfectly – towards Kazakhification, through the use of a Kazakh word to rename the street, while attempting to avoid alienation of non-Kazaks. It also illustrates how social practices can lag behind official policy. In practice, the Soviet era name, Ulica Lenina, is still commonly used in Almaty, even today.

Implementation of the Bolashak scholarship scheme for study overseas also provides some interesting examples. Anecdotal evidence gathered from a number of graduates of the Bolashak scheme (both ethnic Kazakh and other nationalities) indicate variations related to the application of Kazakh language proficiency requirements. Early non-Kazakh applicants who received Bolashak support reported meeting Kazakh language requirements by having passed basic Kazakh language classes at university. Later graduates report having to take a relatively easy grammar test; only ethnic Kazakhs reported having interviews in Kazakh. This merits further more systematic examination, but does indicate variations in how formal government requirements that could discriminate against non-Kazakh students may have been moderated in practice.

This is not to argue that the Kazakh language and other cultural practices were fabricated; rather that the Soviet system encouraged a particular crystallization of language and culture and labelled it “Kazakh’, distinguishing it from its neighbours as part of a deliberate policy towards nationalities.

Per author’s recollection of a visit to Kunaev museum in Almaty, 2005. The ethnic dimension to these riots was also recalled by an ethnic Russian colleague of one of the authors, who recounted the fear felt among Russians after apparently random killings of ethnic Russians at this time. Despite the apparently spontaneous nature of these protests, the involvement of disgruntled Soviet elites cannot be discounted. One former militiaman present as part of the police response, in conversation with one of the authors, for example, remembered alcohol and rudimentary weapons (iron bars) being distributed in an organized fashion to some young demonstrators.

For a general discussion of political mobilization and nationalism, see McAdam et al. (2001). For a more specific study of how political competition can impact on regional and ethnic self-identification and mobilization, see Posner (2004).

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