

## **The Dilemma in the Nation-Building Process: The Kazakh or Kazakhstani Nation?**

Özgecan Kesici\*

This article analyses the nation-building strategy that Kazakhstan's government has implemented since independence. It examines why the nation builders have taken the decision to create two nations, the ethnic Kazakh nation and the civic Kazakhstani nation in a multiethnic society. In its analysis the article adopts a constructivist approach.

**Key words:** Kazakhstan, nation building, nationalism theories, Central Asia.

The fall of the Soviet Union led to the creation of new nation states in post-Soviet Central Asia. Where the Communist ideology had legitimized the Communist regime, new ideologies were put forward to legitimize the ex-Communist leaders who stayed in power after independence. The institutional establishment of nation states naturally led to the creation of national ideologies. However, given the ethno-demographic situation in the wake of independence—where ethnic Kazakhs constituted about 40.1% in the population (Dave, 2004: 442)—and the ethnic heterogeneity of the population, Kazakhstan's ruling elite felt unable to apply a purely ethnicity-based conception of nationhood to the members of the newly independent Kazakhstan.

This article analyses the process by which Kazakhstan's government came to declare itself as the leader, not only of one titular nation, namely the Kazakh nation, but simultaneously attempted to create a Kazakhstani nation, which encapsulated all ethnic groups within its territory. In its first section, the article studies the foundations

---

\* I would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewer of this article. Özgecan Kesici is a graduate of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany. Email: [ozgecan@live.de](mailto:ozgecan@live.de).

of the Kazakh nation and, in particular, the points of reference that are of particular importance to ethnic Kazakhs, such as genealogy, in differentiating themselves from other groups. The second section will then briefly examine the Soviet Nationality Policy, which encouraged categorization of ethnic groupings in all the Autonomous Republics, and its impact on post-Soviet nation building.

The post-Soviet nation building process in Kazakhstan will be examined by focusing on the boundary making process between groups, in accordance with Andreas Wimmer's Multilevel Process Theory, which states that nation building occurs through inclusion or exclusion of national certain groups. The boundaries can either be made by the ethnic groups themselves or by the government. The focus of this article is on the boundaries the Kazakh state has created to include or exclude groups from the nation.

In the wake of independence, the government of Kazakhstan endeavoured to legitimize the sovereignty of the nation state by taking measures to increase the ethnic Kazakh population above a 50% threshold, rewriting Kazakh history and emphasizing the continuity of Kazakh rule in indigenous lands. In this sense, Kazakhstan's nation-building process brought about a 'Kazakhification' of the state, which included Kazakh ethnicity and excluded other ethnic groups. These other minorities were expected either to leave, or at least to become numerically insignificant following the influx of ethnic Kazakhs from other countries that was expected to result from the repatriation policy of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev (known as the 'Oralman programme'). However, with time it became clear that these other groups would continue to make up a significant percentage of Kazakhstan's population, and the government needed to define their

role within the country. This led to an expansion of the national boundaries to include non-Kazakh ethnic groups as part of the newly created Kazakhstani nation.

### **The nation state and the Multilevel Process Theory**

From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards, the nation state became the most widespread form of government among modern societies and the most commonly accepted political unit in the international system. Ideally the nation state should represent a core nation, as it was the need to represent a particular nation that led to the establishment of nation states in Western Europe two centuries ago.

This leads to the question of who or what the nation is. The German sociologist Max Weber points to the difficulty of defining the nation, stating that even if it were possible to pinpoint what constitutes a nation this would necessarily require identifying nations' empirically observable common qualities. He finds that the common quality of nations is the fact that groups of people are expected to have a specific feeling of solidarity for one another (Weber, 1925: 627). In this sense, Weber also defines the nation state as the worldly, concrete, power organization of nations as opposed to the abstract idea of nation (Weber, 1895: 16), i.e., the territorial congruence of the ethnonation and polity.

Weber's definition raises the question of how these specific feelings of solidarity manifest themselves. The main theories on nationalism suggest that they are contingent on ethnic groupings, regardless of whether these groups can be reified or whether they are social constructs.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, within the study of nationalism, there are two contradictory trends, the first of which is represented by the 'modernists' who argue that nations are modern phenomena and for whom ethnic groupings have no particular importance in the creation of nations, and the second of

which comprises a group of theorists who regard “nations as specialized developments of ethnic ties and ethnicity”, and who claim as a result “that we cannot hope to comprehend the powerful appeal of the nation without addressing its relationship with ethnic ties and sentiments”. (Smith, 2006: 169).

For the purposes of this paper, Fredrik Barth’s constructivist approach to ethnic groups will be of importance, as it lays the foundation for Andreas Wimmer’s Multilevel Process Theory (Wimmer, 2008). In his essay, Wimmer uses Fredrik Barth’s concept of ethnic groups to describe divisions between them. Barth shows how these groups are the results of social processes, and argues that they cannot be ascribed to a certain culture since cultures are not static but are prone to evolve and change over the years. As such, it is much more important to observe the boundaries which ethnic groups set to differentiate themselves from other groups. The continuity of the ethnic group is thus linked to boundary maintenance: the cultural characteristics of a group that signalize certain boundaries can change, but if the boundary to other groups is maintained the ethnic group continues to exist. Furthermore, the affiliation to a certain group implies consent to be judged according to this group: “[If] they say they are A, in contrast to another cognate category B, they are willing to be treated and let their own behaviour be interpreted and judged as A’s and not as B’s; in other words, they declare their allegiance to the shared culture of A’s” (Barth, 1998: 15).

Wimmer differentiates between different types of ethnic boundary making. The first of these is *expansion*: actors expand boundaries to include more members within an ethnic group. By contrast the second type of boundary making is *contraction*, where actors contract the scope of the boundary to exclude certain members from the group. *Normative inversion* is a type of boundary making which ranks certain groups as hierarchically superior or inferior. Examples of this type are

groups which are initially regarded as inferior and condescended to and which later, of their own accord, claim to be physically and culturally superior to the dominating group. The fourth type of boundary making is *repositioning*, which characterizes a situation where the hierarchy between ethnic groups is generally accepted, but a certain group tries to overcome its position. The main strategy of repositioning involves assimilation and crossing boundaries, so that individuals can 'shift sides' and escape a minority stigma. The last type of boundary making described by Wimmer is *blurred boundaries*. Here the actors try to overcome ethnic boundaries for more encompassing boundaries, such as religious or anti-nationalist ones, such as the Communist International. These are the different strategies that actors may pursue to develop boundaries that include or exclude certain members (Wimmer, 2008: 986-988).

However, Wimmer argues that actors are not free in their choice of strategy, since they are constrained by the structures of their social surroundings. The most important structures which constrain actors are institutions, power and networks. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the institution of the nation state, which is obviously the most important for nation building. Power is also important for boundary making, since "[First,] an actor will prefer that level of ethnic differentiation that is perceived to further her interests, given her endowment with economic, political, and symbolic resources. [...] Second, the endowment with power resources not only determines which strategy of ethnic boundary making an individual will pursue but also how consequential this will be for others" (Wimmer, 2008: 993-994). Hence, the leaders of Kazakhstan are expected to choose a policy with a level of ethnic differentiation that will further their interests, provided they have the necessary resources. Furthermore, if the executive branch of the state is strong, that is to say, the

government has the economic, political, and symbolic resources to implement the boundaries which will further its interests, its strategy making will be the most consequential one for the population.

To determine the lines along which the boundaries are made, political networks and coalitions need to be observed. Wimmer says: “The political alliances of state elites in the early periods of nation state formation are most consequential for the location of the boundary between nation and minority [...]” (Wimmer, 2008: 996). That is to say that the more members of the minority are represented in the political alliances of state elites, the more likely it will be that the boundary-making process will be inclusive of members of those minority groups. Depending on actor constellations within the social arena, different actors will pursue different boundary-making strategies. This means that in the course of the boundary-making process, state elites will have to enter into negotiations with other interest groups that have power or capacity. As a result of these negotiations, specific boundaries will be constructed with specific characteristics relating to the political saliency, its closure and its cultural differentiation (Wimmer, 2008: 1001-1002).

### **Kazakh ethnic boundary making before the nation state**

There is a general consensus that the Kazakhs were established as a distinct ethnic group over the course of the fifteenth century. The group encompassed Turkic-speaking nomads who felt a sense of solidarity for one another on the basis of a common language, culture, way of life and social structure. The Kazakh nation was thus delimited from other groups in 1465 when the first Khanate of the Kazakhs was established with the Qasym Khanate (see Olcott, 1995: 3-5). Through spatial and military expansion Kazakh territories were divided into three hordes (*zhuz*) in the

sixteenth century, each of which was governed by one Khan by the eighteenth century. The Great Horde (*Uly zhuz*) ranged through the southern territories, the Middle Horde (*Orta zhuz*) over the north-east parts and the Small Horde (*Kishi zhuz*) over the western area, roughly covering the current territory of Kazakhstan (see Gumpfenberg, 2002: 31). This division was not only strategically important for military reasons, but was also contingent to the particular geography of the steppes since the three most important pasture lands were divided among the hordes (Olcott, 1995: 11).

Despite this administrative division however, no linguistic or cultural changes became apparent. On the contrary, belonging to one of these hordes—which to this day is of a major importance in determining one’s ancestry—is tied to the idea of having Kazakh ethnicity. The three hordes are representative of the legend of Kazakh unity, according to which the first Khans of the three hordes were the sons of the mythic founder of the Kazakh nation, called *Alash*.<sup>2</sup> Each horde had its own distinct tribal mark for branding cattle and property (*tamga*) and its own war cry (*uran*), named after a heroic ancestor (Otarbaeva, 1998: 423). However, all three hordes called ‘Alash!’ when they unified to protect Kazakh territory in battles against common enemies.

According to a Kazakh proverb, each horde has its own function in protecting the Kazakh nation: the *Uly zhuz* is expected to raise livestock, *Orta zhuz* to write and be judges, and *Kishi zhuz* to be warriors and fight enemies (Otarbaeva, 1998: 424). In this sense, long before a nation state had been established for the Kazakh ‘core nation’, the horde system was established to differentiate ethnic Kazakhs from other groups. Belonging to one of the three hordes is tied to a commonly accepted idea of genealogy. This is exemplified by the Kazakh custom that an ethnic Kazakh should

not only to be able to name his or her tribe and the *zhuz* to which they belong, but should be able to recite the names of his or her ancestors up to the seventh generation. In order to be included in the Kazakh ethnic group, one has to be Kazakh 'by blood'. This is the main criterion of Kazakh boundary making, next to common language, Kazakh traditions and customs, and a common history.

### ***The first Kazakh nation state***

From 1825 onwards, the first Kazakh territories of the Middle and Little Horde were incorporated into the Russian empire as a result of military deadlocks between the Little and Middle Hordes and the Dzhungar empire. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian empire had administrative and military control over all Kazakh territories and the Kazakh Khanate had been completely abolished (Otarbaeva, 1998: 426). As a result of Russian colonization, more than 1.5 million ethnic Russians moved to Kazakhstan between 1886 and 1916 (Davis *et al.*, 1998: 478). The first attempts to define Kazakh national interests within the Russian empire, in terms of creating a nation state, were made by leaders of Alash, a Kazakh national movement striving for autonomy, in the early twentieth century. This group of literate and well-educated Kazakhs was the first to attempt to reposition the Kazakh ethnic group, from a colonized group within the Russian empire to a group that was hierarchically equal to the colonizers, by demanding territorial integrity and an autonomous nation state for the Kazakh nation. The extent to which this is a normative inversion, in Wimmer's terms, is questionable since Alash leaders did not make the claim that Kazakhs were culturally superior. However, they did encourage Kazakhs to embrace their 'Kazakhness' (*qazaqtyq*) and to nurture their history, literature and traditions. This could imply that while the aim was greater appreciation of *qazaqtyq* it did not entail a

sense of superiority towards other groups, but rather equality with other European cultures (see Kendirbaeva, 1999: 22).

The February Revolution of 1917 turned out to be an opportunity for implementing this. Once the provisional government was in place Alash took up the role of political party, with the goal of freeing the Kazakh people from colonialism. The provisional government consented to the establishment of an autonomous state, named Alash Orda, within the federal Russian republic. One month after the October Revolution, the leaders of Alash called a Kazakh congress (*Quriltai*) between the 5 and 13 December 1917 in Orenburg, the capital of the Alash Orda. Members of the congress proclaimed independence for the Kazakh population and the territory was split into two administrative districts. However, the lifespan of Alash Orda was not very long; once the Bolsheviks established Soviet power, they secured support from Alash and “were able to co-opt the latter’s incipient anti-colonial agenda within their framework and present themselves as the champions of the oppressed or subaltern peoples and classes” (Dave, 2007: 48). By the end of the Russian Civil War in 1920, and the formation of the Khirgiz (Kazakh, ÖK) Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (ASSR), the Alash Orda had ceased to exist.

***Soviet legacies: the Kazakh nation (natsiya) and Soviet nationality (natsional’nost)***

An important aspect of the Soviet nation-building strategy has left a mark on post-Soviet nation building in Kazakhstan: the institutionalization of the ethnic category (see Brubaker, 1998). Lenin believed that the non-Russian peoples of the former Russian empire had to go through a process of equalization in order to be fully integrated into an international socialist state. He argued that the legacy of the colonial past and the associated repression would eventually lead to ‘reactive

ethnicity', which could endanger the solidarity of a socialist state. A process of equalization would allow for revitalization of other ethnic groups, and would be achieved by allowing the formerly repressed groups to live according to their own linguistic and cultural traditions and to gain some autonomy within a federal Soviet Union. In a second step, the ethnic groups would approach one another and draw closer. In the last step, all groups would melt into one Soviet nation (Kaiser, 1994: 98-100).

Depending on the relative development of a group, it was given the status of a 'nation' (*natsiya*), a 'people' (*narodnost*) or an 'ethnic group' (*etnicheskaya gruppy*) (see Benner, 1996: 44-45). Stalin's definition was used to determine whether an ethnic group was to be given the status of a 'nation': they had to be a historically evolved community that shared a common language, territory, economic way of life and a psychological mindset which could be traced back to a common culture (Stalin, 1950: 315). The Kazakhs fulfilled the criteria and were thus granted a socialist autonomous republic of which the Kazakh ethnic group was the 'titular' or, as Wimmer calls it, 'core' nation (Wimmer, 2006); other minority groups were excluded from this core nation. By 1936, all Socialist republics had been territorially delineated and had a distinct core nation (Geiß, 1995: 82; Farrant, 2006). On 5 December 1936, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR) was incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

From 1927/1928 onwards the policy of 'indigenization', known as '*korenizatsiya*', also promoted the forced recruitment of members of the core nation to the administration, party and educational establishments in order to rally non-Russian populations around the party and the Bolshevik project (Beyrau, 2001: 208-210). Kaiser states that: "The development of national forms, along with a rapid

increase in literacy and educational attainment in the indigenous language, [were] the major achievements of this period of *korenizatsiya*” (Kaiser, 1994: 125). Thus, in addition to creating national Kazakh cadres for the Communist Party, the promotion of the indigenous language (in this case Kazakh) further separated the national majority from minorities who were not part of the core nation, thereby creating a distinct boundary between Kazakhs and non-Kazakh minorities. However, by the end of the *korenizatsiya* phase in the late 1930s, rather than all ethnic groups melting into one through the *blurring* of boundaries into a single, all-encompassing Soviet nation, the Soviet leaders initiated a campaign of normative inversion. The ethnic Russians were declared ‘first among equals’ and from 1937 onwards they were held up as the culturally superior group, assisting other, more backwards groups in their cultural and economic development (Simon, 1986: 172). Consequently, these ‘backwards’ groups were to be included within the Soviet nation not by blurring into one another, but through an expansion of the ethnic Russian group—‘Russification’ of the masses. This started with the closing down of national institutions and the removal of the requirement that Russian officials in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union speak the indigenous languages, a prerequisite for employment during the *korenizatsiya* phase (see Dave, 2007: 65). The Russification of the education system was so thorough that by the late Soviet period only two Kazakh-language schools were left in Almaty, the most populous city of Kazakhstan (Fierman, 2005: 406).

### **Building the ‘Kazakh nation’**

As mentioned above, Wimmer’s theory states that there are three characteristics of a given social field that constrain the strategies chosen by the boundary makers: institutions, power and political networks. In this paper, it is the nation state that is the

key institution channelling the government's boundary-making strategy for the creation of the Kazakhstan nation. Wimmer argues that changing an empire into a nation state provides decision makers with new incentives to pursue ethnic boundary making strategies, instead of other types of boundaries, such as religious ones for example. These incentives include, on the one hand, the principle of ensuring governmental legitimacy through ethnonational representativeness and, on the other, an ethnicity-based definition of the territorial boundaries of the nation state (Wimmer, 2008: 990-991). Thus, when Kazakhstan declared independence on 16 December 1991, the last of all post-Soviet states, its state elite had an incentive to try and homogenize non-Kazakh groups into a single titular Kazakh nation, or to exclude them completely from the nation and treat them as national minorities where assimilation is not an option (see Wimmer, 2006: 337).

On the other hand, as noted above, power distribution has two factors. First, the main political actor chooses the ethnic differentiation that will secure his own interests, depending on the economic, political and symbolic resources this actor wields (Wimmer, 2008: 993). The incumbent President Nazarbayev was First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR and then President of the Kazakh SSR, prior to the collapse of the USSR (see Gumpfenberg, 2002: 79). On 1 December 1991, Nazarbayev was re-elected with 98% of the votes and has held office since then. In the late 1990s, Rolf Peters made the assertion that the president was consolidating his power by appealing to the "national question" and referring to dangerous scenarios of ethnopolitical conflict which would be destructive for Kazakhstan society, thereby positioning himself up as the sole guarantor of interethnic peace and order in Kazakhstan (Peters, 1999: 49). In this sense, it is in the interests of the president to maintain 'interethnic peace' through a balancing act: he must not

appear to be privileging any particular group in order to avoid international and domestic criticism for discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, but must also appear to be complying with the demands of all ethnopolitical actors in the country, who could potentially mobilize the population on ethnonational grounds. Although Kazakhstan has not experienced any national liberation movement by the Soviet Union, the potential for ethnonational mobilization was evident in the December 1986 riots, when ethnic Kazakhs demonstrated against Moscow's decision to replace the incumbent Kazakh First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakh SSR (CPK), Dinmukhamed Kunayev, with the Russian Gennady Kolbin. These initially peaceful demonstrations began on 17 December, and were violently repressed by the party leadership on the night of 18-19 December. They hold a special place in the collective memory of Kazakhs and have strong symbolic meaning, especially among Kazakh ethnonational actors.<sup>3</sup>

The second important factor in boundary making—power—pertains to the effectiveness of the boundary drawn. The weight of the president of Kazakhstan in the political decision-making spectrum implies that he has the necessary resources to execute through his strategy. However, Wimmer also emphasizes the importance of consensus over the boundary among the population and other ethnopolitical actors (Wimmer, 2008: 997-1001). These actors are part of the political network in Kazakhstan and, as a result of their ability to mobilize the masses, have an effect on the decision-making process of the ruling elite.

The political network also encompasses foreign relations. In other words, the connections that are important in understanding Kazakhstan's boundary-making strategy are also linked to Kazakhstan's diplomatic ties to the homelands of its non-Kazakh ethnic groups, of which Russia is the most important (ethnic Russians

constitute the second-largest ethnicity in Kazakhstan). Moreover since independence Kazakhstan's state elite has set its sights on becoming the regional leader in Central Asia. The country's international reputation is thus of great importance to them, and their goal of international recognition is exemplified by Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship in 2010. In order to maintain a good reputation within the international community, Kazakhstan is also keen to preserve the image of interethnic and interreligious peace within its state boundaries.

### *Nationalizing Kazakhstan*

As noted above, the creation of the independent nation state of Kazakhstan after the fall of an empire required that its governing elite exhibit ethnonational representativeness, in order to legitimize its authority. As Wimmer has stated, this has become de rigueur for any independent nation state (Wimmer, 2006: 337).

Essentially, there are two fundamental ways of bringing about this ethnonational representativeness: either by homogenizing the population to accept ethnic Kazakhs as the superior and dominant group, and forcing non-Kazakhs to melt into this group by expanding its boundaries; or by excluding non-Kazakhs fully from the national boundary and declaring them to be national minorities. However, Kazakhstan's state elite adopted neither of these approaches, and instead defined two nations—the Kazakh nation and the Kazakhstani nation.

          Redefining the Kazakh nation would bring about the ethnic 'nationalization' of Kazakhstan (see Brubaker, 1995). Kazakhstan did this primarily through a normative inversion, revising the position of ethnic Kazakhs within the group hierarchy and according them a special status. Where they were hierarchically inferior and 'backwards' within the Soviet framework—in which ethnic Russians were the

dominant ruling group—they suddenly became the dominant majority in Kazakhstan. The loss of ethnic Russians’ privileged position was particularly striking, since “[u]nder the Soviet regime, the public status, linguistic privilege, and cultural facilities enjoyed by Russians throughout the Soviet Union meant that Russians throughout the Soviet Union tended to think of the entire Union rather than only the Russian Republic as ‘their’ national territory” (Brubaker, 1994: 68).

This was especially manifest in the two Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) constitutions of 1995 and 1993. When the 1993 constitution was replaced by the 1995 constitution the preamble also changed. The new preamble emphasized the ethnic Kazakh nation: “We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on the indigenous Kazak land [...]” (Constitution of the RK, 1995: 127). Here, the “people of Kazakhstan”, which includes all ethnic groups and national minorities, is kept. However, the ethnicity-based concept of territoriality is introduced, whereas the preamble of the 1993 constitution had a more civic tone: “We, the people of Kazakhstan, as an inseparable part of the world community, take the unshakeable *Kazakh statehood* into our consciousness [...].”<sup>4</sup> Here, Kazakh statehood is merely referred to as an abstract idea and there is no mention of Kazakh indigenous territories.

This change in the preamble of the constitution lays the foundation of the concept of Kazakhstan as the homeland of ethnic Kazakhs. The concept was further developed in the Order of On the Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan which was issued by President Nazarbayev in May 1996. The order argues that every state emerges on the basis of an ethnic community, and that every ethnic group needs its own state to provide for the material and spiritual needs of this ethnic group. The order further states that Kazakhstan is the ethnic centre of

the Kazakhs, and that no other state would be concerned with their preservation and development as an ethnic group. It declares that the multinationalism of Kazakhstan society was the result of emigration by non-Kazakh groups into Kazakh territories, and that these groups have homelands elsewhere which could address their concerns. Consequently, Kazakhs should have special status in Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstan nation state should evolve from this starting point (Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the RK, 1996). This idea—that the Kazakh group is the ‘state-forming nation’, next to the Kazakhstani nation which comprises the ‘people of Kazakhstan’—has been repeated many times by President Nazarbayev (see Lillis, 2010).

This ethnic understanding of the nation is also expressed in the semi-official brochure, “On the Establishment of the Sovereignty of Kazakhstan”, in which the authors speak of the national nature of the state. In answer to the question ‘why was Kazakhstan established on this specific territory’, they state that this is tied to the specific *ethnopolitical genesis* of the Kazakh nation, which was formed over generations of historic occasions:

In legal terms, the territorial independence of present-day Kazakhstan flows naturally from the ethnopolitical genesis of the Kazakhs. This very nation, which is legitimised by its historical destiny, constitutes, and will always constitute, the ethnopolitical basis for state independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and for this reason should be recognized as such by all Kazakhstanians and by the world community without being suspected of nationalism. After all, what is a tree without roots, and what is the present without the past? (Baikhmanov *et al.*, 1994: 72, cited in Holm-Hansen, 1999: 168).

Here, the term “Kazakhstanian” means the civic nation, which includes all groups inherent within Kazakhstan’s territory. The authors justify the ethnopolitical foundations of Kazakhstan, while at the same time asserting that this should not be interpreted as nationalism but rather as a social reality. This type of statement is

typical of an ethnic group whose foundations lie within a conscious ethnogenesis and genealogy, and consequently ethnic Kazakhs claims to these territories persist.

New state symbols were introduced to further ‘nationalize’ Kazakhstan, at least symbolically. The symbolic foundation of post-imperialist countries is very much linked to the ritual presentation of its new state symbols. The state symbols in Kazakhstan are representative of the Kazakh ethnopolitical basis of the state. As such, a statue of Lenin in Almaty’s centre was replaced with a statue of the Golden Warrior, a mythical figure that roots Kazakhs identity as far back as the third century B.C. (Aydingün, 2008: 140). Furthermore topographic names—mostly Soviet street and town names—were replaced with Kazakh names, which symbolically nationalized the state by bringing its Kazakh ethnopolitical to the fore.

The three state symbols of Kazakhstan—the national flag, the national emblem and the national anthem— were created upon independence. The national flag is turquoise, representing the Turkic Khanate which was present in Kazakh territories (Olcott, 2010: 59). An eagle is depicted in the middle of the flag under a sun with sunrays, and the left side is decorated with traditional Kazakh ornaments. The eagle represents the life of ethnic Kazakhs in the steppes, where falconry is a traditional and highly respected sport. Contrary to the national flags of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the flag of Kazakhstan has no religious symbols (for example, a half crescent and stars).

The national emblem also depicts traditional Kazakh symbols: the housetop (*shanyraq*) of the traditional Kazakh *yurt* is reproduced in the middle of the emblem. The first national anthem, adopted in 1992, kept the music of the anthem of the Kazakh SSR but adjusted the lyrics to a postcolonial context. As illustrated in the

third verse, these revised lyrics were reminiscent of the difficulties experienced by Kazakh ancestors and the importance of the Kazakh mother tongue:

We've overcome the hardships  
Let the past serve bitter lesson  
But ahead we face a radiant future.  
We bequeath our sacred legacy implying our mother tongue  
And sovereignty and valour and traditions  
So dearly cherished by our forefathers  
As true mandate to future generations. (Alimbayev *et al.*, 1992)

This version was replaced in 2006 with a completely new anthem which was less focused on the colonial past and lacked any mention of the Kazakh mother tongue. Based on a song by Zhumeken Nazhimedenov, the lyrics were edited by Nazarbayev himself. By referring to “My birth land / My Kazakhstan!” in the chorus, the national boundaries are expanded to include all ethnic groups who were born in Kazakhstan and accept Kazakhstan as their homeland. However, the second verse still speaks of the “Kazakh people” and their historical connection to the current statehood of Kazakhstan:

From antiquity  
Our heroic glory emerged,  
They did not give up their pride  
My Kazakh people are strong! (Nazhimedenov *et al.*, 2006)

The national anthem is typical of Kazakhstan's nation-building strategy: on the one hand the original inheritors of Kazakhstan nationhood are put forward as the state-forming nation, for whom ethnic belonging to the Kazakh ethnicity and civic belonging to Kazakhstan converge into one; on the other hand, non-Kazakh ethnic groups, who are connected to the state by birth, citizenship and especially common fate, are given special civic status in Kazakhstan. Thus, although the new national symbols can be interpreted as clearly ‘nationalizing’ in nature, the state elite is keen to emphasize that they are not only national Kazakh symbols but are also symbols of peace and friendship with other nationalities. For example, it is stated that the

*shanyraq* in the middle of the national emblem is symbolic of the motherly home of the Kazakhs, and that all nationalities of Kazakhstan are welcome under this roof and in this home.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Aydingün argues that in spite of the Kazakh ethnonational character of the state symbols, if one examines the ethnonational elements that were *not* chosen it is evident that the current symbols do aim to encompass all ethnicities (Aydingün, 2008: 142-150).

The emphasis on the ethnic foundation of the nation is furthered, not only by writing the history of the titular ethnic group on the given territory, but also through construction of a historic narrative as an innately linked with the land. In other words, the ethnic foundation of the nation is based on territory *and* the history of the ethnic group in this territory. According to Diener, this type of territorialization “refers to the process by which people (both as individuals and as communities) are linked, through identity, to particular places via networks of social relations” (Diener, 2002: 635). The search for a so-called ‘collective memory’ can also be described as root seeking or root generating (see Schatz, 2000: 87). In the Kazakh case, root seeking entailed a return to the Kazakh Khanate in the fifteenth century, which confirmed the existence of the Kazakhs as an independent political community, and the claim of continuity from this point to the modern-day statehood of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The continuity of Kazakh statehood was codified in the “Concept for the Establishment of a Historical Consciousness of the Republic of Kazakhstan” accepted by the Presidential National Council in June 1995. This document states that ethnic Kazakhs are indigenous to the Kazakh territories within the borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan: “The statehood of the Kazaks [...] is the continuation of the statehood of the major nomadic empires and individual khanates which have existed on the territory of Kazakhstan since antiquity” (Smith *et al.*, 1998: 146). The document also

makes a genealogical connection to khanates that existed before the fifteenth century; the Scythes and other tribes of the Bronze Age (Diener, 2002: 639-641).

Despite the fact that the Alash Orda constituted the first Kazakh autonomous government from December 1917 until March 1920, Kazakhstan's state elite does not link its current statehood to that of the Alash government, but instead asserts that the independence of the Kazakh population resulted from the flow of world history, and that the break from Soviet power led to the political, judicial and economic sovereignty of Kazakhstan. *This* is the point where the transition from the nomadic way of life, that was colonially administered and not wholly sovereign, transitions to a statehood which is independent and understood as a nation state (Gumpfenberg, 2002: 113-114).

### **Building the 'Kazakhstani nation'**

When looking at the characteristics of the social sphere in Kazakhstan, it becomes clear that next to the 'Kazakhification' and nationalization of the state, the state elite has had to consolidate ties with its non-Kazakh population. Despite high rates of emigration among the non-Kazakh populace in the 1990s, the percentage of ethnic non-Kazakhs remains high.<sup>6</sup> According to the census of 2009, 63.1% of the population are ethnic Kazakhs and 23.7% are Russian (Agency of Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2010: 10). Rather than homogenizing the population and assimilating it within the Kazakh nation—as Wimmer predicted post-imperial nation states would do—Kazakhstan chose a different path. Wimmer suggests that where assimilation is not regarded as an option, an alternative is to draw boundaries between national minorities and national majorities: "In many cases, minorities are meant to remain permanently outside of the sphere of national imagination but inside the state's

territory” (Wimmer, 2006: 339). However, Kazakhstan does not pursue this path either. As illustrated below, national minorities *are* excluded from the origins of the statehood, the Kazakh nation, but are kept within the boundaries of a civic Kazakhstan.

In the wake of independence Kazakhstan granted citizenship to all its population, regardless of ethnic background. However, as in the Soviet Union, ethnic affiliation was highlighted in passports. In recent years, this requirement to specify ethnic affiliation has been dropped. However, boundaries between ethnic groups remain a salient concept within the civic nation of Kazakhstan, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan in 1995. De jure, it is a non-governmental organization, chaired by President Nazarbayev.<sup>7</sup> Over the years it has become representative of Kazakhstan’s national boundary-making strategy. The aim of the Assembly is “to work out proposals over the state policy, making for the development of friendly relations between peoples residing on the RK territory, to promote their cultural and spiritual revival and development on the basis of observance to principles of equality” (Dave, 2007: 131). The organization’s main activity is cooperation with the national cultural centres of officially recognized ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. In this way the state encourages the maintenance and, where necessary, the revitalization of ethnic cultural activities, such as language revival and the promotion of traditional singing or dancing. By institutionalizing the ethnic culture of non-Kazakh groups, the state includes them within the civic framework of Kazakhstan. This revitalization of ethnicity and the two-tiered notion of identity, which includes both ethnic and civic components, is strongly reminiscent of the Soviet Nationalities Policy, where ethnic identity was encouraged but within the framework of a Soviet civic nation.

During the first assembly, Nazarbayev talked about the common fate of the Kazakh and non-Kazhak people of Kazakhstan. Referring to the famine in the 1930s he says: “The population of Kazakhs was reduced by half, the Russians and other nations lost millions of good workers, well-educated men of enterprise. Many nations’ genetic resources were undermined due to mass repression, shooting and killing of the best representatives of the national culture, science, literature and social sciences, as well as mass deportation of the nations and liquidation of ethnic communities” (Nazarbayev, 2008). This quotation shows how the leadership had tried to form a historical link between non-Kazakh groups and the territory of Kazakhstan. The ‘Kazakhstani’ is therefore not only tied to Kazakhstan by citizenship, but also by their common fate and history during the Soviet years.

President Nazarbayev first introduced the term ‘Kazakhstani’ into his speech on the strategy programme for Kazakhstan in 1997 called “Kazakhstan – 2030”. Here, he asked who Kazakhstanis were: “Today it is not everybody that can answer the seemingly simple question: ‘Who are we – the Kazakhstanis?’ Settlement of the problem of self-identification will take a certain amount of time and require a certain level of historic development” (Nazarbayev, 1997). He recognizes that it is not possible to create a nation by decree in a short period of time; during the 70 years it existed the Soviet Union attempted to do and failed. According to Nazarbayev, the nation needs to develop through a natural historical process. As with the example of the destructive famine in Kazakhstan and its terrible consequences for *all* Kazakhstanis, he explicitly names the factors uniting all citizens of Kazakhstan:

Yet even today we can name a number of factors which unite us. It is our land in its borders, our parents who cultivated it, it is our common history in which we jointly suffered from bitter failures and shared the delight of our achievements. It is our children who are destined to jointly live and work this land. (Nazarbayev, 1997)

Once again, he is making a connection between the Kazakhstani population as a whole and the territories of Kazakhstan, through the common fate by all Kazakhstanis during the existence of the Soviet Union. Thus the civic boundaries of the nation have been expanded to include all ethnic groups.

President Nazarbayev explicitly announced this boundary expansion with the National Unity Doctrine, which was made public in May 2010. The first principle of the doctrine is ‘One land, one fate’, where Nazarbayev once again emphasized the common fate and history of all ethnic groups in the country:

Thanks to the unity, solidarity and the strength of our spirits, we have achieved and protected the sovereignty of our country and its territorial integrity, security, economic development and civic harmony. All of this is the result of our common work. [...] Independence and the development of statehood which has been established on the indigenous land of the Kazakhs, is our greatest capital. (Kazakhstan’s National Unity Doctrine, 2010)

The second principle of the doctrine is entitled ‘Different origins – equality of chances’, where the equality of all persons is highlighted once again, and ethnic affiliation is emphasized against the backdrop of common civic affiliation. The third principle, ‘Development of the national spirit’, considers the traditions of patriotism, competition and victory as the most important factors for the development of the national spirit (Kazakhstan’s National Unity Doctrine).

Whether the state elite will follow the principles of the doctrine, and whether equality among ethnic groups is really guaranteed in practice, is another question. The more important question for this paper, and in terms of Wimmer’s model, is whether people accept the boundaries that the state has attempted to draw or whether the state elite needs to enter into negotiations with ethnopolitical actors. For one, the announcement of the doctrine caused a stir among Kazakh ethnonational actors who were offended by the content of the first draft, which apparently suggested the melting

of all nationalities into one, and hence a blurring of the boundaries between the Kazakh and the Kazakhstani nation. Kazakh ethnonational actors—among them Mukhtar Shakhmanov, today the leader of the movement *Memlekettik Til* (State Language)—objected to the proposed doctrine, interpreting it as an attack on ethnic Kazakh identity, language and culture. Furthermore, the groups threatened to go on hunger strike if the proposal was adopted; as a result a new doctrine, which took into consideration the demands of the Kazakh ethnonational groups, was introduced in May 2010 (Lillis, 2010).

The only homogenizing factor proposed by the state elite which satisfied Kazakh ethnonational actors was knowledge of the state language, Kazakh. The doctrine says that knowledge of Kazakh, the state language, is to be pursued and that every good citizen should be aware of this (Kazakhstan's National Unity Doctrine).

## **Conclusion**

When taking Wimmer's Multilevel Process Theory into account, it becomes evident that Kazakhstan's leadership sees itself as forced not only to legitimize Kazakhstan as a nation state and as the homeland of ethnic Kazakhs, but also to expand its national boundaries to include all other ethnic groups and nationalities within a civic Kazakhstani nation. However this civic notion of nation, which the state elite is trying to institutionalize, exists in parallel to the ethnic Kazakh nation, which legitimizes the existence of Kazakhstan as a nation state. Looking back over the origins and characteristics of the ethnic Kazakh boundary-making process, it is clear that the state elite is pursuing a dual strategy because it is difficult to expand the boundaries of an ethnic group founded on genealogical ties. Furthermore the foundations of the ethnic Kazakh nation, which with the existence of the Kazakh Khanate and more recently the

Alash Orda, was established through claims of territory and statehood, cannot be undone; the Kazakh nation, rooted in the tradition of the hordes system, cannot be swept aside. This is the reason for the dilemma between a civic Kazakhstani nation and ethnic Kazakh nation.

### Notes

- 1 Rogers Brubaker discusses the fallacy of the assumption of ethnic groups as social realities and the dangers of reifying ethnic groups (see Brubaker, 2004).
- 2 However, members of the aristocracy and descendants of prophets were exempt from the hordes system, and constituted separate groups—the *aq suieq* (literally, ‘white bones’) and the *hojjas* (see Olcott, 1995: 14; Crowe, 1998: 398).
- 3 It should be noted that there is disagreement among scholars as to the nature of the uprisings. Moscow condemned them as anti-socialist and ethnonationalist. However, some scholars argue that the population was simply dissatisfied with the choice of Kolbin, as supposedly he had no substantial knowledge of Kazakhstan. Mukhtar Shakhnov, head of the commission established to clarify the December 1986 events, declared at the end of the 1980s that the riots were not nationalist, but the first attempt to enforce the rights of free expression of political and civil positions which were guaranteed by the constitution since Perestroika (Eschment, 1998: 19).
- 4 “*Biz, Qazaqstan khalqy, dunyeshuzilik koghamdastyqtyng azhyramas boligi bola otyryp, Qazaq memlekettiligining bulzhymastygyn negizge ala otirip [...]*” (Sapargalijew, 1994: 23). Emphasis by the author.
- 5 See Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the Federal Republic of Germany: Kazakhstan’s State Symbols: The National Emblem. Available at <http://www.botschaft-kasachstan.de/de/>.
- 6 Kazakhs constituted 40.1% and Russians 37.4% of the population in 1989. In the 1990s, many ethnic Russians and Germans emigrated from Kazakhstan (see Dave, 2004: 439-459; Peyrouse, 2007: 47-57).
- 7 See <http://www.eng.assembly.kz/main.html>.

### References

- Alimbayev, M., K. Myrzaliyev, T. Moldagaliyev and Z. Daribayeva. ‘National anthem of the Republic of Kazakhstan’. <http://www.nationalanthems.info/kz-06.htm> Retrieved 2011-05-31.
- Assembleya Naroda Kazakhstana (Assembly of People of Kazakhstan). *Doktrina Natsional’nogo Edinstva Kazakhstana* (Doctrine of Kazakhstan National Unity) Available at <http://www.assembly.kz/doktrina-nacziionalnogo-edinstva-kazakhstana/item/902-итоговый-вариант-доктрина-национального-единства-казахстана.html> Retrieved 2011-05-31.
- Aydingün, A. ‘State symbols and national identity construction in Kazakhstan’. In *The Past as a Resource in the Turkic Speaking World*, ed. I. Bellér-Hann, 139-158. Würzburg: Ergon-Verl, 2008.
- Baikhmanov, MT., LM. Vaisberg and AK Kotov. *Stanovleniya suvereniteta respubliki Kazakhstan*. Almaty: Natsional’naya Akademiya Nauk Respubliki Kazakhstan Institut Gosudarstva i Prava, 1994.

- Barth, F. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1998.
- Benner, K. *Der Vielvölkerstaat Kasachstan. Ethnische Heterogenität in friedlicher Koexistenz*. Hamburg: Lit (Osteuropa 11), 1996.
- Beyrau, D. *Petrograd, 25. Oktober 1917. Die russische Revolution und der Aufstieg des Kommunismus*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001.
- Brubaker, R. 'Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Eurasia. An institutionalist account'. *Theory and Society* 23(1) (1994), 47–78.
- Brubaker, R. 'National minorities, nationalizing states, and external homelands in the new Europe'. *Daedalus* 124(2) (1995), 107–132.
- Brubaker, R. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.
- Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Adopted by the all-nation referendum 30 August 1995. Almaty: Jeti Jargy, 1995.
- Crowe, DM. 'The Kazaks and Kazakstan. The struggle for ethnic identity and nationhood'. *Nationalities Papers* 26(3) (1998), 395–419.
- Dave, B. Entitlement through numbers: nationality and language categories in the first post-Soviet census of Kazakhstan'. *Nations and Nationalism* 10(4) (2004), 439–459.
- Dave, B. *Kazakhstan. Ethnicity, Language and Power*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Davis, S. and SO. Sabol. 'The importance of being ethnic: minorities in post-Soviet states. The case of Russians in Kazakstan'. *Nationalities Papers* 26(3) (1998), 473–491.
- Diener, AC. 'National territory and the reconstruction of history in Kazakhstan'. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 43(8) (2002), 632–635.
- Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the Federal Republic of Germany. 'Kazakhstan's state symbols: the national emblem. Available at <http://www.botschaft-kasachstan.de/de/>.
- Eschment, B. *Hat Kazachstan ein "russisches Problem"? Revision eines Katastrophenbildes*. Köln: Sonderveröffentlichung des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien (BIOst), 1998.
- Eschment, B. 'Elitenrekrutierung in Kasachstan. Nationalität, Klan, Region, Generation'. *Osteuropa* 57(8-9) (2007), 175–193.
- Farrant, A. Mission impossible: the politico-geographical engineering of Soviet Central Asia's republican boundaries. *Central Asian Survey* 25(1-2) (2006), 61–74.
- Fierman, W. 'Kazakh language and its prospects for its role in Kazakh "Groupness"'. *Ab Imperio* 2 (2005), 393–423.
- Geiß, PG. *Nationenwerdung in Mittelasien*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995.
- Gumpfenberg, M-C. von. *Staats- und Nationsbildung in Kazachstan*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2002.
- Holm-Hansen, J. 'Political integration in Kazakstan'. In *Nation-Building and Ethnic Integration in Post-Soviet Societies. An Investigation of Latvia and Kazakhstan*, ed. P. Kolstø, 153–226. Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1999.
- Kaiser, RJ. *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994.
- Kendirbaeva, G. "'We are children of Alash". The Kazakh intelligentsia at the beginning of the 20th century in search of national identity and prospects of

- the cultural survival of the Kazakh people'. *Central Asian Survey* 18(1) (1999), 5–36.
- Lillis, J. 'Astana follows thorny path toward national unity. *EurasiaNet.org*, 29 April 2010. Available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/60952> .
- Nazarbayev, N. Order On the Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan', 23 May 1996. Available at <http://www.osi.hu/fmp/laws/> Retrieved 2011-05-31.
- Nazarbayev, N. *Kazakhstan - 2030*. 'Prosperity, security and ever growing welfare of all the Kazakhstanis'. [10 October] 1997. Available at [http://akorda.kz/en/kazakhstan/kazakhstan2030/strategy\\_2030](http://akorda.kz/en/kazakhstan/kazakhstan2030/strategy_2030) Retrieved 2011-03-31.
- Nazarbayev, N. 'For peace and accord in our common home'. Speech of NA. Nazarbayev, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the first session of the Assembly of Nations of Kazakhstan. Almaty, 24 March 1995. In *The Policy of Peace and Consent*, ed. N. Nasarbajew. Astana: Elorda, 1995.
- Nazhimedonov, Zh., and N. Nazarbayev. National anthem of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2006. Available at <http://www.nationalanthems.info/kz.htm> .
- Olcott, MB. *The Kazakhs*. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1995.
- Olcott, MB. *Kazakhstan. Unfulfilled Promise?* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2nd edn.), 2010.
- Otarbaeva, B. 'A brief history of the Kazak people'. *Nationalities Papers* 26(3) (1998), 421–432.
- Peter, R. *Zwischen Konflikt und Kalkül. Die "nationale Frage" in Kasachstan*, 1999. Available at <http://www.uni-mannheim.de/fkks/fkks20.pdf> .
- Peyrouse, S. 'Les flux migratoires des Russes entre Asie centrale et Russie'. *Espaces, populations, sociétés* 1 (2007), 47–57.
- Qazaqstan Respublikasy Statistika Agentigi* (Agency of Statistics of Kazakhstan). 2009 *khalyq sanaghy* (2009 population census), 2010. Available at <http://www.kaz.stat.kz> .
- Sapargalijew, G. *Qazaqstan memleketi men chuqygynyng negizderi*. Almaty: Atamura, 1994.
- Schatz, EAD. 'Framing strategies and non-conflict in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan'. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6(2) (2000), 71–94.
- Simon, G. *Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik in der Sowjetunion. Von der totalitären Diktatur zur nachstalinischen Gesellschaft*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1986.
- Smith, AD. 'Ethnicity and nationalism'. In *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, eds. G. Delanty and K. Krishan, 169–181. London: Sage, 2006.
- Smith, G., V. Law, A. Wilson, A. Bohr, and E. Allworth. *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Stalin, IW. 'Marxismus und die nationale Frage'. In *Werke. 1907-1913*, ed. IW. Stalin. Berlin: Dietz, 1950.
- Weber, M. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*. III. Abteilung. Tübingen: Verl. v. J.C.B. Mohr, 1925.
- Weber, M. *Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik*. München, Ravensburg: Grinverlag, 1895.

- Wimmer, A. 'Ethnic exclusion in nationalizing states'. In *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, eds. G. Delanty & K. Krishan, 334–344. London: Sage Publishers, 2006.
- Wimmer, A. 'The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries. A Multilevel Process Theory'. *American Journal for Sociology* 113(4) (2008), 970–1022.