

CHAPTER 3

Nationalities policy in Kazakhstan: Interviewing political and cultural elites

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Kazakhstan is a multiethnic state with a population of approximately 15 million. Despite having more than one hundred different nationalities, Kazakhstan is considered to be one of the most stable post-Soviet republics with respect to interethnic relations. On both the official and unofficial levels, people appear to be aware of the fact that different nationalities live together in Kazakhstan and they all are citizens of the republic.

They often have quite different views, however, as regards the government's nationalities policy. Many non-Kazakhs feel that they are discriminated against by the government and express their discontent and uneasiness about the future. Ethnic Kazakhs, however, do not necessarily think that they receive favorable treatment of any kind. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities, in contrast to Kazakhs and Russians, feel that their interests are neglected or not considered seriously. What matters here is not who is right but the fact itself that there are different — sometimes contradicting — perceptions among people. Objective or subjective, perception is what determines one's behavior.

This article focuses on different opinions on the nationalities policy of today's Kazakhstan. It is based on a survey of political and cultural elites who have some influence on public opinion and, to a lesser extent, on decision making within the government. How do they evaluate the government's policy on the nationalities question? How does their ethnic background affect their opinions? The article is divided into three sections: the first part gives background and explains the purpose and methods of the survey; the second part provides detailed analysis of the answers of interviewees, breaking them down into five groups. In the third and final section, I will discuss what we can learn from this empirical study.

Background

Nation-building in independent Kazakhstan

In December 2001, Kazakhstan celebrated its tenth anniversary of independence. Since the

collapse of the Soviet Union, efforts have been made to give attributes of a sovereign state to the borders it inherited from the former empire. Yet the process of national integration is still in an early stage. To designate people resident in the country, irrespective of nationality, “Kazakhstantsy” (Kazakhstanis) is the widely used Russian expression. But does it mean anything more than the people of Kazakhstan? Is there anything that integrates these people into a nation with a common identity?

The Concept for the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan, an official document prepared by the National Committee on State Politics under the President, says, “Kazakhstan is the ethnic center of Kazakhs. Nowhere else in the world do they possess a form of statehood that would demonstrate concern about the preservation and development of Kazakhs as an ethnic group, about their culture, way of life, language, and traditions. The definition of Kazakhstan as a national state [natsional’noe gosudarstvo (in Russian), ulttyq memleket (in Kazakh)] should identify it first of all in this capacity.” At the same time, the document presupposes that “the definition of Kazakhstan as a national state regards the strategic tendency in the development of a state identity to be the creation in the future of a nation-state [gosudarstvo natsii (in Russian), ult memleketi (in Kazakh)]. The citizens of such a state, regardless of ethnic affiliation, comprise a single people; their belonging to this state serves as their main identifying characteristic.”

The last part of this definition appears to correspond to the idea of civic nation-building. For all practical purposes, however, no concrete measures are being taken to build such a nation. The Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan,¹ which was founded to strengthen interethnic accord, is being used instead by the president to legitimize his power, as well as to control ethnic movements by accepting or refusing their membership to the Assembly. Nevertheless, the official announcement of a civic nation-building strategy itself sends an important message, in light of other countries’ neglect of minorities or acts of ethnic cleansing.

What is being done in Kazakhstan in the framework of nationalities policy is to realize the first idea: to make Kazakhstan an ethnic center for Kazakhs. The important areas in this respect are policies concerning history, migration, and languages. As we shall see later, these policies often have a declarative character, or they are conditioned by political goals and rarely succeed in achieving proposed aims. Yet they do have some impact on the feelings of the population, especially among non-Kazakhs. Meanwhile, unlike Malaysia’s New Economic Policy, no concrete measures are being taken to give real assistance to individual Kazakhs.²

¹ The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan was established by presidential decree on March 1, 1995, as a consultative organ under the president “in order to strengthen public stability and interethnic accord.” It is chaired by the president himself.

² There are no statistics of average income along ethnic lines. But Kazakhs are not the richest: Kazakhstan’s rural area is suffering severe economic difficulties, and the percentage of rural population is rather high among Kazakhs.

History is being mobilized to support the idea that only Kazakhs have rights to claim the status of an indigenous people in Kazakhstan. According to the Concept for the Formation of State Identity, mentioned above, “Historically, the state [Kazakh Khanate that was formed in the fifteenth century] defended the interests of Kazakhs exclusively, as at that time there were no other ethnic groups in this territory.” Although it admits that Kazakhstan’s current borders were formed under Soviet rule, it maintains that they “correspond completely to the historically formed area of habitation of the Kazakh people.” These views are reflected in the official interpretation of the history of Kazakhstan and in the curricula of schools and universities. The preamble to the present Constitution also contains a phrase stating that the people of Kazakhstan build their statehood “on ancient Kazakh land.”

As a part of a project to reinforce this theory, Soviet and Russian names of cities, villages, streets, schools, universities, and various organizations are being changed to Kazakh names. In Almaty, for example, Karl Marx Street is now called Kunaev Street, after the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan; Mir (“peace” in Russian) Street has become Zheltoksan (“December” in Kazakh) Street.

In migration policy, the government encourages ethnic Kazakhs living abroad (from elsewhere in the CIS as well as from other foreign countries) to come to Kazakhstan. Repatriates are called *oralmans* in Kazakh, which means “people who came back.” This is because many, if not all, *oralmans* are descendants of those Kazakhs who fled Kazakhstan during forceful collectivization in the 1930s. But it is the number of those who left Kazakhstan after the independence, not repatriated Kazakhs, that has greatly changed the national composition in recent years.

Because of Slavic immigration that began under the tsarist regime and continued during Soviet times, forceful sedentarization of Kazakh nomads, starvation, and purges in the 1930s that claimed lives of nearly 40 percent of Kazakhs at that time, as well as deportations of peoples to the territory of Kazakhstan in the 1930s and 40s, Kazakhs became a minority in their own homeland. In recent years, however, the overall ethnic composition has been shifting in their favor. This change is largely the result of the huge emigration of “Europeans,” the majority of whom are Russians and Germans. Why are they leaving? This is a debatable question. Some explain their departure as a result of Kazakhstan’s poor economic conditions as well as a desire to live in their “historical homeland.” Others blame the government’s discriminatory policy against nontitular nationalities. Another factor contributing to the increase of the Kazakh population in the republic is its relatively higher growth rate.

The language policy defines Kazakh as the only language of the republic. According to the 1995 Constitution, Kazakh is the state language (Article 7[1]): “In state organizations and organs of local self-government the Russian language is officially used on an equal basis with Kazakh” (Article 7[2]). Thus Russian, which is spoken by almost the entire population to a greater or lesser degree, has acquired de facto official status, although

the Constitution carefully avoids declaring it an official language. According to the language law adopted in July 1997, “The state language is the language of state administration, legislation, and legal proceedings, functioning in all spheres of public relations throughout the entire territory of the state” (Article 4). Article 4 also states that “[i]t is the duty of each citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language.”

In reality, the Kazakh language is far from operative in all spheres of public relations. Russian still prevails in society, in particular among the urban population. What really matters is not the elimination of the Russian language itself but the possible manipulation of language. According to the language law, “[the] list of professions, specialties and posts for which knowledge of the state language is necessary... is determined according to the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan” (Article 23). Here it should be noted that Russian-speakers include a significant proportion of urban Kazakhs. Theoretically, a person who does not speak the state language faces difficulty in pursuing a career irrespective of nationality. But in reality it appears that those Kazakhs who are not fluent in Kazakh are not necessarily barred from the state apparatus.

What is most obvious (and the most worrisome for non-Kazakhs) is something that is apparently not included in the government’s nationalities policy: the monopolization of all branches of power and public offices by Kazakhs. We do not know to what extent this phenomenon is caused by a deliberate policy. At least there has not been any kind of official statement or regulations on ethnic aspects of personnel affairs. There are different explanations for this: Russians (and some Kazakhs, too) tend to blame the government’s deliberate yet secret policy, as well as nepotism among Kazakhs; others deny such intentions and explain Kazakhs’ predominance by the increase of Kazakhs’ share among the whole population as well as Russians’ preference for the private over the public sector.¹

Is Kazakhstan going to build an ethnic Kazakh state or a civic nation-state, the members of which will feel themselves to be equal citizens of the republic, or will it build something in between? Has its government been successful in integrating people with different ethnic backgrounds, or has it failed? Is there risk of ethnic tension in the future? There are a variety of opinions on these issues in Kazakhstan, which is quite natural in a multiethnic state. The following survey was conducted to give a detailed description of the different views on the nationalities policy of Kazakhstan.

About the survey

This survey is not an opinion poll. The questionnaire was used simply to ask questions

¹ It should be noted that out-migration of Slavs and increasing monopolization of power by Kazakhs already had started in Soviet times. It is, however, after the independence that those processes have become even more conspicuous.

related to Kazakhstan's nationalities policies systematically. We did not survey a sufficient number of people to draw any statistically reliable conclusions. Nor did we aim to gather a sample of respondents representative of the ethnic, gender, or other backgrounds of the whole population in Kazakhstan. Thus, the analysis should be regarded not as statistical but as descriptive.

The survey was conducted between October 2000 and February 2001 (most intensively in November and December). We interviewed forty-five people: leaders of political parties and public movements, activists of ethnic cultural centers, members of parliament, scholars (political scientists and historians), journalists, and government employees. Most of the interviewees live in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, but a couple of them reside in the new capital, Astana. This geographical focus is primarily due to logistical reasons, but it also can be justified somewhat: Almaty still is an intellectual and political center, especially for the opposition.

Respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire (see the attached sample on page), which was collected immediately after the interview or a couple of days later. As a few people preferred to give oral answers, an interviewer wrote them down on their behalf. The author herself and three Russian males worked together in distributing, collecting, and sometimes filling out questionnaires. We asked respondents for permission to write their names in the questionnaires. Almost all of them (except four) agreed (see the list on page). Some of those who identified themselves nevertheless asked to keep details of their answers anonymous.

The author made a draft, which was revised with the help of the local Russian-speaking scholars. If an interviewee did not agree with the suggested answers or had additional comments, we asked that s/he write down his/her own opinions. We tried to use neutral terms to avoid giving the impression that we supported/opposed the government or a particular ethnic group. In the process of conducting the survey, some of the prepared answers proved inappropriate (for details, see below). There were a few cases in which interviewees forgot to fill out a couple of pages. When we expected multiple answers, we asked respondents to mark all answers with which they agreed. It turned out that a couple of questions from which we expected to get a single answer received multiple answers.

For some questions, respondents were asked to explain why they answered yes or no. For example, if the answer for question 3 was yes, the respondent was supposed to proceed to 3(a), not 3(b). Yet respondents quite often filled out each subquestions regardless of how they answered the main question. In the following discussion, all answers for subquestions, irrespective of the answers for the main questions, were used for the analysis. Thus, in some cases the number of those who answered a subquestion exceeds those who answered yes or no to a main question.

Interviewees were asked to indicate their nationality. All respondents agreed to do so, and a few of them gave more than a single response (for example, "I am Russian but my mother is Kazakh"). For the sake of convenience, however, only what they indicated as

their nationality is used for the grouping of respondents.

In the following analysis, five categories are used: Kazakh nationalists, Russian nationalists, Kazakh intellectuals, Russian intellectuals, and intellectuals of ethnic minorities. This does not mean, of course, that nationalists are not intellectuals. Nationalists here include those who head movements that claim to fight for Kazakhs' or Russians' rights. Our intention is not to label or criticize nationalists. Rather, it is to enable an analysis of the patterns of their thoughts so we can compare them with other respondents. As discussed below, the views expressed by nationalists and others do not necessarily differ greatly. A single category such as "ethnic minorities" may not be entirely appropriate, as each ethnic group has different historic, political, social, and cultural backgrounds. But there must be common interests for minorities, too. Our primary interest is to compare their opinions with those of Russians in order to determine whether there is a common front among non-Kazakhs.

For each group, first we give a summary of their general opinions, then details of their answers.