

Russian-Ukrainian Conflict and the Rise of Qazaq Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolution and trajectory of nationalism in Qazaqstan subsequent to the Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Utilizing a postcolonial theoretical framework, this research examines the intersections of media narratives, governmental policies, and official discourses to uncover how nationalist sentiments in Kazakhstan have evolved post-conflict. To answer the research question, I have used content analysis of media, political discourse, and social media, alongside policy reviews. The findings of this article can contribute to the fields of political science, international relations, and postcolonial studies by providing insights into the effects of external conflicts on national identity formation in post-Soviet states.

Keywords: postcolonialism, nationalism, Qazaqstan, Russia, Ukraine, Russian-Ukrainian war, propaganda.

Introduction

The Russian President Vladimir Putin made an official announcement of the launch of "special military operation" in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022:

You and I have simply been left with no other opportunity to protect Russia, our people, except the one that we will have to use today. Circumstances require us to take decisive and immediate action. The People's Republics of Donbass have appealed to Russia for help.

In this regard, in accordance with Article 51 of Part 7 of the UN Charter, with the approval of the Federation Council of Russia and in pursuance of the treaties on friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22 this year, I decided to conduct a special military operation (Kremlin, 2022).

After several months following the launch of the "special military operation", in June 2022, Kazakhstan defined its official position regarding the conflict at the Petersburg International Economic Forum. During the forum, President Tokayev was posed a crucial question about the ongoing situation in Ukraine.

President Tokayev's response was as follows:

I will be straight out that we have different views regarding this issue. Our community is open and civil society is mature. I would like to point out that International Law is the United Nations Charter. And the main two principles of the charter are mutually contradicting to each other. They are territorial integrity of the nation and self-determination that most probably have not been taken into account during the creation of the document. Some argue that territorial

integrity of the state is something holy while others say that any ethnic group in one state has rights to their own government. But in reality if all those ethnic groups became independent, instead of 193 states there

would be 500-600 countries on the globe, which would create chaos. Considering this fact, we don't recognize states like Kosovo, South Ossetia, Taiwan etc. Similarly, this principle is applied to Donetsk and Lugansk (Atameken Business News, 2022).

The position of the Kazakh president regarding the recognition of ethnic groups could be influenced by the current situation in the northern part of Kazakhstan, which is dominated by ethnic Russians. This raises concerns, especially in light of Russian propaganda claiming that this region was a "gift" from Russia. This narrative gains traction considering statements made by Russian politician Vyacheslav Nikonov on the First Channel in Russia. Nikonov boldly claimed that Kazakhstan did not exist, and Northern Kazakhstan was uninhabited, suggesting that the territory was a generous contribution from Russia and the Soviet Union (Business Online, 2020). The immediate support from the late leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, for Nikonov's assertions adds to the complexity of the situation (Kamakin, 2020).

In Qazaqstan historians responded to the discourses of Russian politicians by evaluating this attitude as continuation of imperialistic approach. Ziyabek Kabuldinov, a Doctor of Historical Sciences and the Director of Institute of History and Ethnology, provided commentary on the Russian deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov's statement regarding Qazaqstan's borders: "The insult directed towards all Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis, including representatives of other nationalities living in harmony in our country, was deliberate. It occurred just before the celebration of our Independence Day on December 16th" (InformBuro, 2020).

Another provocative speech aimed at Qazaqstan and its citizens was delivered by Russian journalist Tigran Keosayan. He posted a video on Youtube criticizing the decision of Qazaq officials to cancel the Victory Day Parade and urged them to "take a close look at Ukraine" and "seriously think" about the potential consequences (Khabar News, 2022).

"Enough, guys. You've played enough with our free help. Helping you to keep power in Kazakhstan, to stop your chaos. And you are canceling the parade? Seriously?" -said Tigran Keosayan in his video appeal (Lada.kz, 2022).

A few months later, Dmitry Medvedev, a former Russian president, caused controversy by posting on Facebook that Kazakhstan is an "artificial state" and "historically Russian territory." Medvedev stated that prior to the dissolution of the USSR, 62.5% of North Kazakhstan's population was Slavic. Medvedev also mentioned that in recent years, the Kazakh government has launched resettlement programs targeting various ethnic groups, actions that have been criticized as constituting genocide against Russians. He suggested that such issues should be resolved by Russian intervention to restore order (Factcheck.kz, 2022). Although he later removed the post, attributing it to his account being hacked, commentators and experts expressed concerns that the content of the message could imply Moscow's potential invasion plans for its southern neighbor (Paul Goble, 2022).

The ex-president's loud statements sparked extensive analysis among Qazaq YouTubers about the motives behind such a claim with some expressing concerns about potential Russian invasion into Qazaq territories. One YouTube video titled *Otom kak Medvedev odnim postom "vzorval" Kazakhstan* (How Medvedev's single post 'exploded' Kazakhstan) attracted significant attention. The comments under this video predominantly express negative sentiment towards Russian officials for their attempts to provoke conflict. The most liked and replied-to comment reads:

Well, look, after everything that's happened, how is Kazakhstan expected to continue supporting Russia? Russians in Kazakhstan have spent years fostering peace between Russians and Kazakhs, a feat accomplished not by Russians from Russia, but by those who reside in Kazakhstan, whom I regard as the true representatives of the Slavic people. What now? I don't want to be pessimistic, but it seems all their hard work might be wasted, relationships could be severely damaged, and the worst part is that Russians will come, cause chaos, and then leave, leaving our Russians to deal with the aftermath. It's truly disheartening... I can't even begin to understand how people manage to live under such governance in the Russian Federation. User1 (All social media users are indicated as "user" to ensure anonymity).

Another comment on the video reads:

"I didn't believe until the last moment that Russia would attack Ukraine, but it turned out as it did. We need to stock up on everything necessary. Just in case" User 2.

The comments reflect fear and disbelief regarding Russia's actions, set against the backdrop of the Russian military operation in Ukraine. According to Putin's narratives in his official speeches, people in Ukraine were in need of protection by Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin during his speech at the

Valdai Discussion Club meeting declared that Ukraine is an artificial state: "Ukraine was indeed formed as an artificial state, especially after World War II. This is also a historical fact. Stalin took and transferred a number of Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian territories to Ukraine" (Vedomosti, 2022).

In the rhetoric of Russian officials towards Ukraine and Qazaqstan, both countries are commonly described as "artificial states." Artificial states are defined as nations where the established political boundaries do not correspond with the divisions of nationalities preferred by the local populations. Often, these states result from decisions made by former colonizers or through agreements among victorious nations after conflicts. Such decisions frequently lead to the creation of political entities in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups are either forcibly merged or divided, with little regard for the genuine desires and aspirations of the affected people (Easterly et al., 2006).

The aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought attention to claims that previously might have been overlooked. The invasion heightened concerns about potential territorial threats, as evidenced by the statements made by Medvedev. This shifting perception is reflected in the growing unease among people, fueled by media reports suggesting that Kremlin ambitions might extend beyond Ukraine alone (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

Qazaq politicians note that Russia's actions in Ukraine have accelerated processes of "decolonization" in Kazakhstan, contributing to unrest and a growing awareness of potential territorial dangers associated with Moscow's geopolitical ambitions (BBC, 2023).

Furthermore, political analyst Barbara von Ow-Freitag (2023) believes that Russia's assault on Ukraine has shocked post-Soviet nations and decreased their trust in Moscow. Decolonization movements in Qazaqstan are more pronounced among civil society activists who are vocal in their criticism of Russian imperialism.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to answer the question:

How (if at all) has the Russian invasion of Ukraine influenced the evolution and trajectory of nationalism in Kazakhstan?

Methodology: This study aims to explore the evolution and trajectory of Qazaq nationalism after the launch of the Russian "special military operation" to Ukraine, through a comprehensive research approach encompassing content analysis and policy analyses.

The dataset for content analysis in this research consists of political discourses, interviews, social media publications, posts and comments of influencers and social media users, conference recordings of the government officials, and academic literature. According to Nachmias (1976) this methodology serves as the foundation for making inferences and drawing conclusions about the framing and evolution of nationalist ideologies.

The analysis of nationalistic sentiments in Kazakhstan in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is drawn from various primary sources. Firstly, news portals on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and journal articles provide insights into public discourse and media coverage of the conflict and its impact on Qazaq nationalism.

Additionally, I attempt to analyze data from youth portals on social media operated by young activists in Kazakhstan. It offers a modern perspective on how younger generations perceive and engage with nationalism, regional geopolitics and identity in the country.

Furthermore, in this study, content analysis extends to academic research, opinion polls, and public statements from political leaders and policymakers in Kazakhstan. By examining scholarly articles, surveys, and official statements, I attempt to gain a comprehensive understanding of how nationalism is conceptualized and articulated at different levels of society and governance in Kazakhstan.

The application of policy analysis in this study focuses on examining governmental responses and legislative changes within Kazakhstan following the Russian invasion. This analysis aims to elucidate the state's proactive or reactive measures in response to regional disputes and their discernible impact on the proliferation or alteration of nationalist sentiments within the Kazakh population.

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Influence of Russian propaganda on Russian minorities in Qazaqstan & Legislative Reactions

Qazaqstan

According to the first quarter of 2023 year, Kazakhstan registered 23 offenses on social media under the article "Incitement of social, national, clan, racial, class, or religious discord," which is 43.8% more than the previous year (ranking.kz, 2023).

The majority of such offenses on social media are related to separatist ideas in Kazakhstan, justifying the military operation of Putin in Ukraine, and advocating for the restoration of the Soviet Union with Russia as the leader, despite the possibility of invading Kazakhstan.

An example of such a case occurred on Video Chat Roulette, a platform used daily by over half a million users from Russia and the CIS countries, making it the most popular Russian-speaking chat roulette platform. An ethnically Russian woman from Karaganda, Kazakhstan, was conversing with a man. She claimed that Karaganda is a Russian city and spoke unfavorably about Kazakhstan. The Kazakh individuals, using offensive language. She claimed that "in Kazakhstan, people are becoming as nationalistic as Ukrainians." Their discussion revolved around the war in Ukraine and the possibility of a "referendum" for the annexation of Kazakhstan to Russia, similar to the situation with Ukrainian Crimea. The woman was punished under the Article 174 of the Kazakh Criminal Code which penalizes public actions intended to incite discord on social, national, tribal, racial, class, or religious grounds, or actions that insult the national honor and dignity or religious sentiments of citizens (Vot Tak.tv, 2023). Another similar case was registered under Article 180 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, covering Separatist Activity. In this instance, a man highlighted the need to restore the Soviet Union, despite the potential for war, if necessary (Vot Tak.tv, 2023).

In addition to that, Newtimes.kz (2023) reported an incident that occurred during a chat-roulette conversation involving a resident of Uralsk, a city in northern Kazakhstan, and a blogger. The man claimed that Uralsk is historically a Russian city and derogatorily referred to Kazakhs as "mambets." The (Kazakh: Мәмбет) is a derogatory nickname for Kazakhs originating from rural areas, villages and denotes a rude, uneducated, and uncultured person (Caravan.kz, 2017). He also stated that he would support Russia in the event of an attack on Kazakhstan. After being detained, the man apologized to the people of Kazakhstan, explaining that he was drunk during the conversation with the blogger.

In all three cases mentioned above, individuals are from the northern part of Kazakhstan—a region often boldly claimed by several Russian politicians as inherently Russian. These individuals are ethnically Russian and predominantly from the older generation. They claim that the territory belongs to Russia, drawing parallels between Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

These narratives align with broader claims made on Russia's state-run First Channel, where officials have provocatively described northern Kazakhstan as historically Russian territory. Just before Kazakhstan's Independence Day, these remarks not only stirred controversy but also aimed to reinforce Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. On the program "Big Game," Vyacheslav Nikonov, a Russian politician, claimed that Kazakhstan was essentially a part of Russia and the Soviet Union, which generously gifted its territory (Azzatyq.kz, 2020).

The official response of Qazaqstan included a protest note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. The note addressed the frequent provocative statements by some Russian politicians against Kazakhstan, highlighting the serious damage these statements have inflicted on the alliance between the two countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan stated that it expects the Russians to properly assess such statements and calls for measures to prevent such remarks from government officials of the Russian Federation in the future (Azzatyq.kz, 2020).

The first reaction to the note did not come from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs but from another Russian deputy, Evgeny Fedorov, a member of the State Duma from "United Russia." He publicly asserted Russia's "legitimate" right to reclaim territories that were "transferred" to Kazakhstan during its declaration of independence. He stated, "If Kazakhstan believes that it did not receive a 'gift,' then the discussion should be different." He mentioned that Russian deputies are raising issues about the "return of territories" and the annulment of "illegal decisions of 1991," referring to the law governing the procedures related to the secession of a union republic from the USSR (Azzatyq.kz, 2020).

Another Russian official, the Deputy Speaker of the State Duma, Pyotr Tolstoy, on "Komsomolskaya Pravda" Radio, also expressed territorial claims that the city of Almaty was initially called "Vernyi" and was built by Russians and raised concerns on the growing Qazaq nationalism (CurrentTime.tv, 2024).

We face a plethora of problems. Everyone is just waiting to see how the Ukraine issue will resolve. They are watching. And if we don't close the chapter on Ukraine, we will face problems with Armenia and Kazakhstan. Look at what is happening in Kazakhstan today in terms of building a specific Kazakh state. There is a flourishing national mythology regarding independence and the transition to the Latin alphabet (CurrentTime.tv, 2024).

The statements of Russian political figures are perceived as part of a broader Russian nationalist and expansionist rhetoric that views post-Soviet states as spheres of its interests. It's important to note that such remarks act as a trigger for intensifying nationalist sentiments in Qazaqstan. It can be observed in social media discourses. There are several example analyses from comments on YouTube:

1. *"This is not provocation; it is preparation and signaling to the Russian population whom they should start hating! We in Ukraine have already seen and felt this 'brotherly' love!"* User 4 The comment reflects that statements by Russian politicians are part of a systematic approach to influence public opinion in Russia and encourage hostility. It states that what is promoted as 'brotherly' love by Russia has actually led to negative outcomes for Ukraine.

2. *"It has come to us now, they also want to create turmoil here, the main thing is not to fall for it! Otherwise, as always, only the people will suffer, while for politicians it's all just a game. Now they will understand that they can't divide us, and hopefully they will back off."* User 5

The comment suggests the speaker's concern that external forces (Russian propaganda) are attempting to stir up conflict in Kazakhstan's community. The user warns against being manipulated by these efforts, noting that it is the common people who suffer from such disruptions, while politicians treat the situation lightly.

3. *"Don't be surprised if your northern neighbor comes to northern Kazakhstan with their Russian world, as has already happened with Ukraine. Kazakhs—protect your country, or you'll lose it like the Ukrainians!"*—User 6 wrote.

The comment expresses a warning and concern, suggesting that Qazaqstan can face a situation similar to Ukraine's due to Russian expansionist policies. The use of "your northern neighbor" likely refers to Russia, and the mention of the "Russian world" hints at geopolitical strategies aimed at asserting Russian influence in neighboring regions. The advice to "protect your country" highlights a sense of urgency and fear that Kazakhstan might lose its sovereignty or territorial integrity if not vigilant. The comparison with Ukraine, which has experienced significant conflict and territorial disputes with Russia, serves as a stark warning, using Ukraine's struggles as a cautionary example for Qazaqstan.

Qazaq politician Bulat Abilov argues that Qazaq society is heavily influenced by Russian propaganda, given that the majority of TV channels in Kazakhstan are Russian-owned. These channels significantly impact the perception of the population regarding the legitimacy of Russia's operations in Ukraine against what are labeled "nationalists," with Russian narratives often framing President Putin as liberating Ukraine from Nazis and fascists (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

According to the Bureau of Express Monitoring of Public Opinion, Demoscope, approximately one-third of Kazakhstanis are notably influenced by narratives broadcasted primarily through Russian TV channels. The demographic most affected includes individuals aged 60 and older, predominantly Russian speakers. Conversely, younger demographics who primarily speak Kazakh are less impacted by these narratives. This discrepancy manifests in differing levels of viewership of Russian TV channels and varying degrees of support for Russia. As public responses are analyzed further, it is clear that factors related to language and age are crucial in influencing public opinion (Demoscope, 2022).

The legislative response of the Kazakh government to the Russian influence on the population in Qazaqstan has been increasing the presence of the Kazakh language in media content, thereby promoting local content and perspectives over foreign broadcasts. In 2024, the lower house of the Parliament of Kazakhstan adopted the "Mass Media Law," aimed at changing the language and content policies in the country's television and radio broadcasting. This law mandates an increase in the proportion of programs in the Kazakh language from the current 50% to 60% by 2027, while reducing the share of rebroadcast foreign television programs and radio broadcasts from 20% to 10% in the weekly broadcast schedule (Komarova, 2024).

In light of this policy, it is evident that the Qazaq government is actively working to reinforce national identity and enhance the prominence of the Qazaq language within the realm of mass media. This shift aligns with postcolonial pursuits of breaking away from the informational and cultural dominance of a former colonizer, in this case Russia, aiming to strengthen national consciousness and reduce external influences (Anderson, 1991).

Russian Propaganda and the Rise of Nationalism in Kazakhstan

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev raised concerns in the XXXII session of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan regarding the rise of misinformation and disruptive content within the public domain, particularly content that is foreign in origin and appears to target the stability of Kazakhstan: "We see how the number of various forgeries, fakes, and destructive publications has noticeably increased in the public domain. The vast majority of their authors have nothing in common with Kazakhstan, trying to sow seeds of discord in our society, while acting from abroad. Their rhetoric and actions are aimed at creating an atmosphere of mistrust, inciting strife among people, and undermining state security" (zakon.kz, 2023).

In January 2024, for instance, a Russian television host Tina Kandelaki claimed that the Russian language is oppressed in Kazakhstan. This assertion was linked to the decision to rename several stations from Russian to Kazakh names. She also referenced the Baltic states, where she claimed Russian schools are shut down and the Russian language is prohibited. Additionally, she argued that Kazakhstan is gradually marginalizing the Russian language, using historical justifications as a cover. She also expressed skepticism about the decision of Kazakh officials to rename the railway stations (Factcheck.kz, 2024).

The statement from Tina Kandelaki was addressed by Kazakh journalist Dinara Satzhan, who posted the following statement on Instagram:

First of all, we are an independent sovereign state. There's a good Russian saying: 'Don't bring your own rules into someone else's monastery!' Let us decide for ourselves how to name our railway stations. Secondly, Kazakhstan has been gradually restoring its native language, which was lost during the years of Soviet rule. Thirdly, the Russian language is officially used in our country alongside Kazakh, which is the state language. This is enshrined in our Constitution, Article 7. The railway stations were not renamed as you claim; these are their correct territorial names in the Kazakh language. What does this have to do with displacing Russian? In our country, we speak not only in the state language but also in Russian and English. That is our strength!

The post strongly affirms Kazakhstan's right to self-determination, especially concerning cultural and linguistic issues. Additionally, the changes in names of stations have no connection with the discrimination of Russian language. This type of response is typical in post-colonial settings where countries aim to assert their independence in the face of perceived foreign influences or criticisms (Ahmad Dar and Manzoor, 2014).

There is another response from the social media user:

Can we handle the 'oppression' of the Russian language in Kazakhstan on our own within our country? Please, take care of your own country. We live in Kazakhstan, where Kazakh is the official language. Nobody finds it strange when things are renamed in Kazakh here; it's normal, this is Kazakhstan, and the state language is Kazakh. That's why the promotion of the Kazakh language is finally developing.

(...) About us, the Russians speak. We are not Kazakhs, but we consider ourselves part of the Kazakh community, and we will figure out ourselves whether we are being oppressed or not. Please! 'Don't bring your own rules into someone else's monastery.' User 7. The user comments on Tina Kandelaki's post stating that Kazakhstan as a sovereign state is

managing the internal affairs of the country and external interference is not welcomed. The speaker also acknowledged the presence and role of ethnically Russians within Kazakhstan, pointing out that even though they are not ethnic Kazakhs, they identify with and integrate into the Kazakh community.

The official response of the Kazakh government to the claims of Russian propagandists suggests including them in the list of people who are restricted to enter the territory of Kazakhstan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan declared the official decision regarding the post of Russian television host Tina Kandelaki. At a briefing on January 22, 2024, Aibek Smadiyarov, the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, stated that the state never forgives such things. Accordingly, she will not come to Kazakhstan, and if she does come, she will not be allowed in (Azattyk.kz, 2024).

Back in 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that they are updating a list of individuals barred from entering Kazakhstan. This list includes Russian propagandists such as Tigran Keosayan, who

made unfavorable comments about Kazakhstan in response to the country's decision to cancel the May 9th celebrations (Azzatyq.kz, 2022).

Tigran Keosayan criticized the Kazakh government's decision to cancel the Victory Day Parade. In his video appeal, he suggested to "take a close look at Ukraine" and said, "Do you think that Russia is going to disappear?" He also asked, "Do you think that you can afford to continue this way?" (Melnichuk, 2022).

Keosayan's statement is full of emotions and rhetorical appeals, and it contains a number of specific assertions and accusations. According to his remarks, Kazakhstan is allegedly "playing" at diplomacy at the expense of Russia and he calls for a clear stance in the conflict with Ukraine. His statement aims to strengthen Russia's geopolitical influence in post-Soviet space.

Kazakhstan last conducted a military parade in 2019. The events planned for 2020 and 2021 were canceled due to public health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in 2021, Berik Uali, the press secretary of the president, mentioned that although they respect the veterans' memory, they will cancel mass celebrations. In 2022, there was no military parade either, however, the Ministry of Defense indicated that they would conduct "military-patriotic activities." By 2023, the Kazakh authorities decided to forgo the parade to save budgetary resources (Ulysmmedia, 2024).

The Ministry of Defense explained the cancellation of the Victory Day parade for the fifth time by stating that the priority task is to maintain the required level of combat readiness and mobility of the Armed Forces units (Ulysmmedia, 2024).

Another example of nationalism in Kazakhstan, influenced by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, is the cancellation of concerts by Russian artists. In 2023, according to Kursiv Media, about 30% of Russian artists' concerts in Kazakhstan, totaling 100 shows, were canceled. Many of these cancellations were due to issues related to the conflict in Ukraine. For example, the performances of the Russian KVN team "Kamyzyaki" were called off after public backlash regarding their visit to the unrecognized by Kazakhstan Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). The decision to cancel their entire tour came after intense negative reactions from the public, especially following their involvement in a concert marking the 80th anniversary of the "liberation of Donbass" in DPR. This event even led to a petition being initiated against their performances in Kazakhstan (Kursivmedia, 2023).

This is not the only case of concert cancellations of Russian artists. In June 2023, a concert by singer Grigory Leps was canceled in Kazakhstan due to public dissatisfaction with his support of the war in Ukraine. After that, Leps' concerts were also canceled in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Back in November 2022, the Russian artist Polina Gagarina concert was canceled due to the fact that the artist supports the military operation in Ukraine (Kursivmedia, 2023).

The Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan has stated the official stance regarding the cancellation of concerts. According to the ministry, attention will be given to the content of concerts and shows, and those aimed at dividing the community or promoting political propaganda will be restricted. Additionally, it was emphasized that concerts should promote art and not political propaganda (Sputnik.kz, 2023).

Titova (2023) connects the selective reception of Russian artists in Kazakhstan with the identity-related factors and emphasis on decoloniality. For many years, Kazakhs uncritically absorbed Russian media, but the conflict in Ukraine has illustrated the importance of establishing clear boundaries. The Ukrainian struggle has become a symbol of independence and democracy for many in the CIS, influencing Kazakhstan as well. This has awakened a strong sense of civic identity among Kazakhstan's diverse population, prompting them to seek their own representation in modern culture. As a result, some foreign artists, previously perceived through stereotypical lenses, are now facing resistance.

Among social media users, negative comments about Russian artists reflect the level of perception of artists who propagate Russian military operations in Ukraine. Here is one example from social media:

Kazakhstanis did not appreciate the notion that they were effectively being asked to participate in the Special Military Operation on the side of Russia, as the money they paid to enjoy listening to a Russian patriotic singer would go towards funding bonuses for destroying tanks considered enemies by Russia. User 8

Another user comments:

Shame on you! You are complicit in the murder of Ukrainians. Grigory Leps openly supports the war in Ukraine. I urge everyone to demand the cancellation of this Z-artist's concert. Not a single tenge from our pockets should go towards the destruction of Ukraine. If we remain silent today, tomorrow they will start collecting money for bullets against us. User 9 (Azzatyq.kz, 2023).

The letters "Z" and "V," used by Russian military forces in the Ukraine conflict, have become widely used in propaganda. In Russia, these symbols are often seen as expressions of support for what is referred to as

the "special military operation" of Putin (Sever.real, 2022).

The user expresses concern that attending concerts of "Z-artists" who openly support Putin's actions in Ukraine may lead people to overlook the potential future impact that could challenge the security of Qazaqstan.

The decolonization perspective views the reactions of the local population to external threats as an affirmation of sovereignty (Collins, 2015). In the case of Qazaqstan, the public's active engagement in discussions about national identity and sovereignty, especially in response to Russian provocations, indicates a heightened national consciousness. This is particularly observed in social media activism supporting national identity and opposing Russian interference that reflects a broader assertion of national and cultural identity.

National Identity: Policies on National "Modernization" in Kazakhstan

In June, 2022, Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev issued a decree on the organization of the National Assembly (Kurultai). It's described as an advisory body to the President, indicating that its primary function is to provide advice and consultation on matters of national importance. The main goal of the National Assembly's activities is stated as the development of ideas and steps for furthering

the development of public consolidation (Akorda.kz, 2022).

Kazakh lawyer Nurbol Zhetibaev and the editor of the opposition newspaper "DAT — Public Position" Ermurat Bapic consider holding an assembly in Kazakhstan as a measure to address the internal situation in the context of the current geopolitical environment. Given the geopolitical situation in Ukraine, which can create instability and cause concern in the Eurasian region, it underscores the need to take steps to improve the internal situation. The Kurultai, as a consultative body, can serve as a platform for dialogue between various social groups and political forces, which can help resolve tensions and make decisions in the interests of the country. Especially, as politicians suggest that Kazakhstan, being located near "authoritarian imperial countries," needs mechanisms to stabilize the internal situation (Sputnik, 2022).

At the II session of the National Assembly in Turkestan, in Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated that the practice of assigning names of figures from the Soviet period to various objects, whose biographies are deliberately mythologized to serve someone's personal interests and preferences, should be stopped. The President instructed to bring order to the field of onomastics and regulate all procedures taking into account both regional specifics and national priorities (Sputnik.kz, 2022).

After several days of the National Assembly, Sputnik.kz reported on the policies regarding the renaming of 69 streets and 18 educational institutions in regions such as Kokshetau, Koshshy, Stepnogorsk (Akmola region), Arys (Turkestan region), and Taldykorgan.

Additionally, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister, Altai Kulginov, stated that the country plans to rename three thousand settlements and streets by the year 2025, as part of the initiative of a roadmap covering 2022 to 2025, which has already led to the renaming of 68 settlements and 572 other entities (Kursiv, 2023).

The new names of streets and educational institutions will be given in honor of significant historical figures and cultural personalities of Kazakhstan, such as the founders of the Kazakh Khanate, Kerey and Zhanibek, famous artists, and heroes. For example, in the Stepnogorsk region, Parkovaya and Stepnaya streets will be renamed in honor of the legendary wrestler Kazhymukan and the Hero of the Soviet Union Mametova, respectively (Sputnik.kz, 2022).

Recently, Zakon.kz reported that a draft joint resolution of the Akimat and the decision of the Maslikhat of Almaty on renaming and assigning names to the streets of Almaty has been developed. According to the project, a section of Yuri Gagarin Avenue in the Bostandyk district will be renamed to Yermek Serkebaev Avenue; Jubilee Street in the Auezov district will be renamed to Vladimir Tolokonnikov Street (2024).

The renaming of streets is planned predominantly in major administrative cities like Astana and Almaty. The regional language development administration emphasized that the streets and residential areas subject to renaming are those whose names have become "ideologically outdated" (Informburo.kz, 2022). Most of the street names are in Russian and are planned to be either translated into Kazakh or changed to the names of notable Kazakh historical and cultural figures.

For example, "Pervomayskaya" will be renamed to "Iztay Mambetov Street", "Lenin Street" will become "Baubek Bulkyshiev Street", "Moscow Street" will be renamed to "Sayim Balmukhanov Street", "Komsomolskaya Street" will change to "Bayan Batyr Street", "Novorossiyskaya Street" will be

renamed to "Segizbay Kalybekuly Street," in honor of the Kazakh historical figure, among others (Informburo.kz, 2022).

When it comes to some streets that carry names in Russian, they were translated into Kazakh. For example, the street "Pobeda" in Russian is replaced with "Jenis," the equivalent word in Kazakh, and "Studentcheskaya" is changed to "Studentter."

Medet Iskakov, the head of the regional language development administration, highlighted that streets and residential areas with names considered "ideologically outdated" will be renamed. He also stressed that as a sovereign nation, Kazakhstan is actively working to reorganize its repository of place names to ensure that national names are more prominently used across the country (Informburo.kz, 2022).

Here is the statement of Medet Iskakov:

Our society is now facing the task of spiritual modernization. This involves preserving our national identity, core, and culture, including the names of streets with historical significance. Names that convey the sacred and symbolic essence of the national character, Kazakh toponyms, are a part of the cultural heritage of the people. Therefore, the names of khans and heroes, poets and judges, figures from the Alash exile movement who have left a mark on the history of the Kazakh people, fighting for the integrity and liberation of our land, will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the national ideology (Informburo.kz, 2022).

The modernization in this context considers not just technological or economic development but involves a deep commitment to preserving and revitalizing Kazakhstan's national identity through cultural elements. His speech reflects a strong nationalistic tone aimed at strengthening and redefining national ideology by reconnecting the population with its historical and cultural roots.

As Anderson (1991) suggests, in the theory of post colonization the formation of a national identity is based on forgetting as much as on remembering. The concept of modernization in Kazakhstan, particularly through the renaming of public spaces and enhancing the visibility of national figures, ties into postcolonial theories concerning the rewriting of history and space to reflect national narratives rather than colonial impositions.

2.3 Language Policy

In May 2022, a message circulated among WhatsApp users claiming that the authorities in Qazaqstan planned to strip the Russian language of its official status in the country. The mass spread of the message necessitated a response from the government. However, it was later identified as fake information. (YK-news.kz, 2022). In Qazaqstan, the Russian language still has official status, and the state does not intend to deprive it of this status. On the contrary, as the country's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev himself has stated, it is unacceptable to oppress people who do not speak Qazaq language.

In addition to that, the president Kassym Jomart Tokayev in the National Assembly mentioned that the Russian language carries a certain level of significance in Qazaqstan along with Qazaq language. He stated that the essence of government policy is to consistently strengthen the role of the Qazaq language in everyday life without coercing anyone and mere discussions (provocation) about the state language are futile; what matters are concrete actions (Tengrinews.kz, 2024). Before that, the president has mentioned that Qazaqstan will focus on the policy of "*strengthening the status of the Qazaq language*", although Russian will continue to be used (RBC.ru, 2023).

However, there are concerns from deputies that not all civil servants speak the official language, and there is a need to increase the presence of the Qazaq language in governance. For example, Deputy Isa Kazbek states, "Although the Kazakh language has the status of the state language according to the Constitution, there is no law that effectively regulates this status and ensures its implementation. There is a problem in government agencies where civil servants do not always speak Kazakh, resulting in citizens who address the government in the state language not receiving adequate responses" (stopfake.kz, 2022).

Although this narrative doesn't represent the entire official position in the country regarding the language, it remarks noticeable difficulties in the language dynamics. Furthermore, the deputy's discourse raises questions about the implementation of legislative and administrative measures to fully establish Qazaq as the official language.

In 2023, Qazaqstan adopted a concept for the development of the state language for the period from 2023 to 2029. According to this document, which was signed by the Prime Minister, Alikhan Smailov, it is planned to increase the role of the Qazaq language in public service and the daily life of the population (RBC.ru, 2023). The concept also indicates that the Qazaq language will become the

main language of work in the public service, which involves the development of requirements for proficiency in this language for civil servants.

The Qazaq government planned that by 2029, 50% of civil servants will have a B2 level of proficiency in Qazaq according to the "KazTest" system, which is an increase compared to 35% in 2023. It is planned to increase the proportion of document turnover in the Qazaq language in government bodies and national companies to 94% by 2029, which is also an increase from 91% in 2023. The state also aims to increase the proficiency rate of the Qazaq language from 81% in 2023 to 84% in 2029 (RBC.ru, 2023).

This concept emphasizes the promotion of the Qazaq language as a means of strengthening Qazaqstan's national identity and self-determination within its multi-ethnic composition. The approach to language policy is part of a broader strategy for decolonization and strengthening the country's sovereignty in light of current geopolitical realities (Lin, 2005).

Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to conduct content and policy analyses to investigate how (if at all) the Russian military operation in Ukraine has influenced the evolution and trajectory of nationalism in Qazaqstan. Through the analysis of content on social media, news portals, and within the legislative policies of Qazaqstan, I have identified the rise of Qazaq nationalism against the backdrop of the conflict in Ukraine in several key areas.

To begin with, the Qazaq government's efforts to promote the national language in documentation and the public sector emphasize the drive toward reinforcing national identity and reducing reliance on Russian, which has dominated public and official communications in Qazaqstan (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Additionally, the government has started implementing the Qazaq language in mass media, which highlights the shift toward reducing the presence of Russian media in the country (RBC.ru, 2023). These moves can be seen as part of a larger effort to strengthen national coherence and ensure that cultural and linguistic policies reflect the country's independence and identity.

Other nationalistic policies are evident in the renaming of streets after Qazaq historical figures, replacing names from the Soviet era that do not align with Qazaq identity, as stated by the president (Sputnik.kz, 2022). This change signifies a commitment to reasserting Qazaqstan's historical narratives and figures, distancing itself from its Soviet-associated past.

Moreover, the legislative and policy responses to Russian propaganda and the discourse surrounding the protection of territorial integrity of Qazaqstan highlights nationalistic sentiments. The proactive measures to limit Russian media influence and the public backlash against Russian "Z" artists demonstrate a protective stance towards national sovereignty.

To conclude, the rise of Qazaq nationalism is a complex response to external geopolitical pressure imposed by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and a reflection of a deeper societal shift towards asserting national identity. This shift is prominently visible in linguistic policies, cultural reclamation, and the strategic counteraction of foreign influence, indicating a significant transformation in national consciousness and policy orientation of Qazaqstan.

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