Introduction: Ethnic, Civic, or Both? The Ethnicities of Kazakhstan in Search of an Identity and Homeland

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Thirty years after its independence by-fait-accompli, Kazakhstan, both as a polity and as a society, is still trying to manage the formation of its national and civic identity. Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region in general have somehow always been subject to clichés involving a 'hotbed of ethnic tensions.' During the period between 1985–1995, it was often assumed that the ethnic hyper-diversity that characterized the Kazakh Soviet republic and the deep societal crises caused by the decline and demise of the Soviet Union would inevitably result in open ethnic conflict, if not in the breakup of the country. Despite a series of local incidents, such a scenario did not materialize. This suggests the existence of a viable level of both state legitimacy and societal cohesion. The tragic events in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, and Tajikistan in the 1990s might also have dissuaded Kazakhstan from large-scale unrest.

To this day, however, the definition and practice of an identity—offered by the state and state-affiliated civil society—which all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, are able to identify with is crucial, not only for the country's aspired international reputation, but also for internal cohesion and stability. The official statements about the success thus far of the multi-ethnic civic model of Kazakhstan, developed under its first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, are open for interpretation. However, the contributions in this article cluster suggest that the majority of the population somehow assesses this development as positive, or at least agrees that things could have been worse.

There is no doubt that society and the state have become ethnically 'more Kazakh' in the years since independence. This is demonstrated by the composition of its population and the share of the titular Kazakh population, going from 40% in 1989 (a minority in their own titular republic) to 68.5% in 2020. This shift is also noticeable at the local level. Kazakhs now form majorities in cities and provinces that had clear non-Kazakh majorities or ethnically diverse populations dating back to 1989, the year of the last Soviet census. For example, if ethnic Kazakhs formed less than one-quarter of Almaty's population in 1989 (when it was still Alma-Ata, the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic), their share is now likely closer to two-thirds. In Atyrau on

the Caspian, ethnic Kazakhs now form close to 90% of the city's population, compared to 59% in 1989 (when the city was still called Guryev).

The share and composition of the non-Kazakh population has also changed dramatically since 1989–1991 due to the mass emigration of minorities, differences in natural population growth between Kazakhs and Slavic groups, rural—urban migration, the merging of provinces in 1997, and the immigration of ethnic Kazakhs from Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan. Russians have maintained their place in the population statistics, but their relative share—from 38% (1989) to 19% (2020)—has halved. The shares of ethnic Germans—5.8% (1989), less than 1% (2020)—and Ukrainians—5.4% (1989), 1.4% (2020), who were once the third and fourth largest communities in the country, particularly in the north and Karaganda, declined even more dramatically.

Even if the Kazakh majority is all but homogenous due to the existence of many regional and genealogical-social subgroups and identities, the abovementioned shifts bring up the question whether there is a process of 'de-diversification,' if not 're-homogenisation,' going on in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, the numbers of some of the non-Kazakh and non-Russian ethnic groups in Kazakhstan show an upward trend, as is the case with the Uzbeks—2% (1989), 3.5% (2020)—and Uyghurs—1% (1989), 1.5%, though this may be higher, (2020). Koreans remain stable at 0.6% in 1989 and 2020.[1] Other ethnic groups (e.g., Jews, Chuvash, Baltic, and Finnish ethnicities), whose residual numbers are (very) small, may vanish as distinct categories in the mid- or long-term through emigration or assimilation into Kazakhstan's wider Russian-speaking or Russified population segment.

Nowadays, Kazakhstan's 'third population share,' which refers to the non-Kazakh and non-Russian populations, includes every tenth inhabitant of the country. It differs not only in its quantitative development, but also in the history, religion, culture, language, and socio-economic situation of its components. The cumulative consideration of all the 'other' ethnic groups obscures the view not only of these differences, but also, possibly, of those willing to identify with Kazakhstan. This is one of the reasons why more qualitative studies of individual ethnic groups are needed. The study of individual ethnic groups and how they fare in Kazakhstan is politically relevant and an important topic of research. This study relates to research surrounding nationalism

1 For a detailed overview of the changes in the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan's population between 1989 and 2020 see Beate Eschment and Taissiya Sutormina's, "Kazakh and/or Kazakhstani? The National Identity of Kazakhstan and its Citizens", Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, Berlin—ZOiS Report, no. 4 (2020) (accessible via https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_4_2020.pdf).

and identity formation, transnationalism and diaspora, comparative linguistics, and social anthropology.

After initially concentrating on the Russians of Kazakhstan, scholarship has moved toward a more encompassing view of Kazakhstan's multiethnicity.[2] However, much can still be examined in this field. In early 2020, after riots between Kazakhs and Dungan in the southern province of Zhambyl, a workshop titled *Thirty Years of Kazakhstan's Nationalities Policy and Small Ethnic Groups: Current situation and Prospects* took place at the Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS, Centre for Eastern European and International Studies) in Berlin. Its aim was to exchange opinions and take a comparative, generalised look at individual ethnic groups in the overall context of the policy and situation in Kazakhstan. The workshop also aimed to encourage Kazakh academics, who dealt with the Kazakhstan's nationality politics theoretically and in practice, to meet with Western European researchers.

The participants at the ZOiS seminar agreed to publish the presentations at the workshop in a revised form. The practical opportunity to do so came up after *Central Asian Affairs* launched its call for special issue proposals and kindly accepted our submissions. We also approached several other colleagues who were not involved in the ZOiS seminar but agreed to contribute an article. Not long before the texts of this cluster were submitted, Bruno De Cordier participated in an online seminar at the Institut français d'études sur l'Asie centrale (IFÉAC, the French Institute for Central Asia Studies) on the impact of 'the pandemic' on research and teaching in our region of interest. One tangible example of these impacts is the downsizing of a special issue of this journal.

Originally, it was envisaged to contain more articles. Unfortunately, we lost several authors along the way because the pandemic rendered planned, crucial field research in 2020 and early 2021 impossible. Furthermore, some contributors could no longer meet their commitments because of changes in personal circumstances.[3] The remaining contributions approach the core topic through

2 For example, see Natsuko Oka, "Transnationalism as a Threat to State Security? Case Studies on Uighurs and Uzbeks in Kazakhstan", *Empire, Islam and Politics in Central Eurasia*, ed. Tomohiko Uyama (Sapporo: Hokkaido University, 2007): 351–368; Krystyna Iglicka, "Are They Fellow Countrymen or Not? The Migration of Ethnic Poles from Kazakhstan to Poland", The International Migration Review, 32, no. 4, (1998): 995–1014; Yves-Marie Davenel, "Cultural mobilization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: views from the state and from non-titular nationalities compared", Central Asian Survey, 31, no. 1 (2012): 17–30.

3 There have been some solutions so that efforts do not get lost. Bruno De Cordier, for example, was to contribute, together with a colleague from Tartu, an article on the place of official commemoration of the GULAG and the Stalinist repression in Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic national narrative. But because of the impossibility to conduct the planned field work in summer 2020 and in spring 2021, there was simply not enough substance for a fully-fledged research article for this issue. Instead, a short note on the topic based on observations during

case studies. These deal with three individual ethnic groups in Kazakhstan: Chechens, Kurds, and Uyghurs. Not planned but resulting from coincidences of the above-mentioned pandemic consequences, the contributions have a mutual connection. Chechens, Kurds, and Uyghurs not only lack a statehood of their own or have a disputed statehood, but they are also considered problematic by security authorities, as well as by the general population. Therefore, the chance arises to determine whether this has an impact on their commitment to Kazakhstan.

Based on the triangle model of diaspora research, Beate Eschment traces the positioning of the national representations of Chechens and Kurds to their historical as well as 'second homeland,' Kazakhstan. Eschment shows that both groups cultivated very independent relations to their historical homeland in the early years. Despite increasing political and legal restrictions, they currently give preference to their second homeland, Kazakhstan—not only because of its stability compared to the northern Caucasus and the Kurdish territories, but also due to the possibility of preserving some form of ethnic identity. Ablet Kamalov looks at the change in the identity of the Uyghurs between the Soviet era and independent Kazakhstan. Kamalov shows this through a 'complex mosaic' of various factors. He also concludes that nowadays, the Kazakhstani Uyghurs consider Kazakhstan their homeland and Xinjiang their historical homeland.

We are delighted to deliver this research and hope to provide our readership with new, relevant insights about Kazakhstan. We would also like to thank the editorial team of *Central Asian Affairs* for believing in our initiative and for accepting the substantially 'slimmed-down by *force majeur*' version of our initially more extensive special issue.

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a 2019 visit to Kazakhstan will be published, in French, in the *Notes de l'IFÉAC* series (accessible via https://ifeac.hypotheses.org/).