Rising Civic Awareness through Local Instagram: Young Kazakhstani Russians and Their Belongingness to Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine conflict raised fears that Kazakhstani Russians outside of Russia could be mobilized by the idea of the *Russkiĭ mir* (Russian world), which has been actively spread on the Russian-speaking segment of social media. Although Russian-speaking social media are popular in Kazakhstan, the example of young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrates that social media usage strengthens the connection to Kazakhstan rather than to the historical "home" country. Being surrounded by visual and textual information related to Kazakhstani urban centers, local Russian youth begin to envisage and create their version of Kazakhstan based upon personal social media feeds. As a result, their civic awareness and sense of belonging to Kazakhstan raise and allow these young people to navigate and portray their national identity in a positive way.

Keywords

Russian diaspora – civic awareness – social media – Kazakhstan – Instagram

1 Introduction

Numerous studies have demonstrated the critical role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the cohesion of national communities (Eriksen 2007; Castells 2011; Szulc 2017). Despite some initial expectations (Perritt 1997; Sassen 1997), the internet has not erased national boundaries but may have even reinforced the spread of (ethno)nationalism beyond national

frontiers (Kneidinger-Müller 2016; Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021). For diaspora members, ICTs have allowed the continuation of a connection to their homeland, prompting the reconsideration of their existing identities and belongingness (Nedelcu 2018; Yadlin-Segal 2021).

Being easily accessible to the general public, the internet has also proven to be an essential tool for (1) grassroots consolidation and (2) state control. On the one hand, in an authoritarian context, social media provide access to an alternative political agenda and improve participation in political life among ordinary people. In line with the Arab Spring, examples from the post-Soviet space have demonstrated the integral role of social media in mobilizing particular population groups against the government (Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013; Onuch 2015; Navumau 2019). According to Lonkila et al. (2021: 149), even local everyday matters discussed online might become a foundation for a "non-contentious online activism," which is able to mobilize populations despite the strong internet control.

On the other hand, the political elite has actively used social media to spread government-sponsored information and realize state politics (Gunitsky 2015). For example, the state-sponsored concept *Russkiĭ mir* (Russian world) was institutionalized in the federal agency *Rossotrudnichestvo* (Russia's Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), and the state-founded *Russkiĭ mir* Foundation has been actively promoted, particularly online (Suslov 2016). Providing a strategic foundation for the Russian diaspora policy and including a set of external politics, the concept *Russkiĭ mir* has aimed to activate ethnonational belongingness and unity around the historical "home" country among so-called *sootechestvenniki* (compatriots), that is, Russian-speaking minorities and ethnic Russians outside of Russia (Pieper 2018). As an opposition to the Western culture, the *Russkiĭ mir* has attempted to create a basis for mobilizing the Russian diaspora in the post-Soviet states, and, as in case of Crimea, it has become an "instrument for territorial revisionism" (Pieper 2018: 17). Thus, while remaining to serve as a space for online activism in the post-Soviet region, the internet contributes to the political empowerment of the Russian Federation.

Kazakhstan is a particularly productive case to study the dynamics of identity and belongingness among non-titular Russians for several reasons. First, approximately 19 percent of the whole population identify themselves as (ethnic) Russians (Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics 2019). Although the Russian population in Kazakhstan has been decreasing in the last 30 years, it is crucial to observe how the young generation of Kazakhstani Russians, who were born and grew up in independent Kazakhstan, perceive

themselves in terms of their national affiliation. Being a target of the Russian government's diaspora policy, these young people live in a country with a growing Kazakh-speaking population and provide a valuable case for studying the diverse Kazakhstani society.

Moreover, rapid technological developments have led to the widespread use of the internet and mobile devices, especially among young people (Digital 2020 Global Report). The number of social media users regularly increases, making social media an essential part of people's everyday routine. The necessity of studying ICTs in the context of social transformations becomes apparent today. For instance, in the last several years, socially relevant events in Kazakhstan have been actively discussed online, stimulating the population's involvement in the domestic political processes (Rickleton 2019). Despite substantial internet control, social media platforms have become a space for the spread of oppositional voices and the consolidation of Kazakhstani regime-critical youth (Kosnazarov 2019). In this regard, studying social media practices from the perspective of Kazakhstani Russians might offer an additional view on local trends existing in Kazakhstani society and shed light on the role of technologies in the imagining of national belonging.

While some of the current studies have considered the national attachment of ethnically diverse groups of the Kazakhstani population (e.g., Sharipova et al. 2017), a detailed analysis of a specific ethnic group has remained rare. Kazakhstani Russians have been mostly analyzed through the prism of their attachment to Russia (Morozov 2015; Laruelle 2018; Laruelle et al. 2019). However, this tendency has started to change in the last few years. For instance, Blackburn (2019) has explored the national identity of Russian-speaking young people from Kazakhstan's big cities, providing new insights into their integration into Kazakhstani society.

The current article provides an in-depth investigation of civic awareness among young Kazakhstani Russians, focusing on their social media usage. By civic awareness, I refer specifically to a *subjective sense* of being a part of Kazakhstani society and public affairs related to the country. Using interview data obtained in Kazakhstan's two biggest cities, I will reveal how specific social media activities of young Kazakhstani Russians relate to their self-recognition as part of an urban Kazakhstani community. I argue that social media usage supports young Kazakhstani Russians in constructing their version of Kazakhstan and, hence, that it can boost their civic awareness. In this article, I introduce a bottom-up perspective on the construction of the nation, and, following some scholars (Isaacs and Polese 2015; Sharipova et al. 2017), I aim at complementing current studies of state-associated, top-down nation-building in Central Asia.

This article has the following structure. First, I will introduce theories regarding ethnic Russians in the near abroad, followed by the description of data collection and methods of my empirical research. Next, I will present the study's results, addressing active/communicating and passive/consuming social media usage patterns of young Kazakhstani Russians, following the three national paradigms formulated by Laruelle (2014). Finally, the role of social media in the national imaginary of the local Russians of Kazakhstan will be discussed.

2 Competing Theories of National Belonging of Russians in Kazakhstan and the Near Abroad

This section presents the academic debate on the prospects for integration and inclusion of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet space. Specifically, I will discuss the dominant typology for nation-building projects in Kazakhstan and the role of the internet for the activation of ethnic and civic awareness among non-titular Russians.

Existing research has provided contrasting views on national identity among Russians in the near abroad. For instance, Brubaker (1996) has emphasized the vital role of the "external national homeland" for the sense of belonging among ethnic Russians in the near abroad. Similarly, Laitin (1998) has suggested that Russophones in Central Asia will not be able to assimilate and will maintain a strong connection to Russia. During the Russia–Ukraine conflict, a hypothesis regarding homeland rapprochement was again actively discussed. Since Russian-language social media has become a space where a discursive ethnonational division into "us" and "them" occurs (Gaufman 2015; Tkach 2017; Suslov 2014), some authors expected a long-distance mobilizing effect and an activated sense of belonging to Russia among non-titular Russians in Kazakhstan (Diener 2015; Stronski 2018).

In particular, the Russian language is seen as an important marker for Russians in Kazakhstan to uphold close ties with Russia; the zero-sum nature of this argument suggests that the fast-growing Kazakh-speaking population inherently puts Kazakhstani Russians in a disadvantaged position (Laruelle 2018). Kazakh language and culture have spread not only in rural regions but – thanks to intensive urbanization – also in traditionally Russian-speaking cities. The resettlement of the Kazakh-speaking population from the south to the north has also contributed to the spread of the titular language in the Russian-dominated north (Kovaleva 2018). However, Kazakh language skills among Kazakhstani Russians are still limited (Ivanov 2019), and in line with

other minorities, Kazakhstani Russians continue to be underrepresented in public service and state administration positions (Sharipova et al. 2017). According to Laruelle (2014), these social and political features give us good reason to believe that the dominance of the Kazakh ethnic culture and its promotion by the state through the discursive paradigm of *Kazakhness* will remain relevant over time.

Other studies find that Kazakhstani Russians do not show any special rapprochement with Russia, even after the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Barrington et al. 2002; Morozov 2015; Laruell et al. 2019). Although Russian social media platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki remain popular in Kazakhstan, they have not activated a sense of Russian separatism among (ethnic) Russians in Kazakhstan (Laruelle 2018). Senggirbay (2019) has found a restrained attitude toward Russia among Kazakhstani Russians. That could be due to material comfort, as many Kazakhstani Russians, especially in big cities, enjoy a high socioeconomic status due to their employment in such fields as business and IT (Sharipova et al. 2017). Furthermore, besides the Kazakh ethnic culture, Kazakhstan has bolstered ethnocultural pluralism in the country. The orientation towards Eurasianism (the *Kazakhstanness* paradigm of state identity) has emphasized the status of Kazakhstani Russians as equal citizens of the republic (Laruelle 2014).

While many non-titular people decided to emigrate in the 1990s, the young generation of Kazakhstani Russians was born and raised in families who decided to stay in Kazakhstan. As a result, they have been socialized in the Nazarbayev era, which has been marked by distinct paradigms of national belonging. According to Blackburn (2019), Russian-speaking youth still identify Russianness with cultural superiority above Kazakhs from rural areas. These young people show no interest in country-related politics and "deny any agency for the individual or the community in politics" (Blackburn 2019: 231). Similarly, Junisbai and Junisbai (2019) have suggested that the so-called Nazarbayev generation has limited engagement in the politics that corresponds with the existing regime's practices.

Besides the discursive paradigms of *Kazakhness* and *Kazakhstanness*, Kazakhstan's orientation towards transnational cooperation has been actively stimulated by the government through the paradigm of *transnationalism* (Laruelle 2014). Promoting Kazakhstan's national brand worldwide, the transnationalism paradigm has also reinforced the spread of global culture and Western lifestyles in the country (Akynova et al. 2014). Constituting the scripts of Kazakhstan's domestic politics, these three discursive paradigms coexist in political authorities' and grassroots actors' rhetoric and might impact the national imagination among different population groups. Yet how, exactly,

particular population groups adopt and reproduce these paradigms is not always obvious.

Other scholarship has considered the role of the internet in shaping belonging among ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet space. Some have argued that Russians outside of Russia are beyond any national categories. For instance, analyzing Russians in the near abroad, Saunders (2006: 43) called them "denationalized digerati," emphasizing that internet usage contributes to their global orientation and weakens nation-related identities. Being well informed about life in the Russian Federation due to active internet usage, Kazakhstani Russians do not consider Russia a "homeland" anymore. Instead, the global online network of Kazakhstani Russians has reinforced their transnational identities, and their individual aspirations have replaced national solidarity (Saunders 2006).

Along with the studies mentioned above, current research (Bello 2014; Son 2015) has also demonstrated that the Internet can improve the integration of ethnic minorities into the host society. Moreover, ICTs and social media may support internal social unity and the sense of community (Mesch and Talmud 2010). The Arab Spring example confirms that social media can provide a powerful tool for grassroots political activities even in an authoritarian context. Despite massive internet control, social media remain a hotspot for public discussions and local networking for various social groups, contributing to the emergence of alternative imaginings of national belonging (Navumau 2019).

Moreover, social media platforms support new and diverse forms of mobilization among young people (Bennett 2012). Using Instagram and Facebook opens additional opportunities for new definitions of citizenship and agency-centered Do-It-Yourself (DIY) politics (Bennett 2012: 29). For example, Lonkila et al. (2021: 146) have demonstrated that besides some organized forms of technoactivism, "non-contentious forms of online activism" have become widespread on the Russian internet in the last few years. Unlike usual forms of online activism, these forms "do not directly challenge state power but are rather targeted at resolving social, cultural, or local problems," but they still can politicize and mobilize the population (Lonkila et al. 2021: 146).

Considering the competing explanations of how Russians outside of Russia identify themselves in ethnic, civic, or non-national terms, it becomes clear that their national attachment is complex. Despite the efforts of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the primordialist logic of the Russian state can hardly resonate with globally oriented Kazakhstani Russian youth. Instead, more flexible models of national attachment offered by their country of birth and current residence (Kazakhstan) can support their civic awareness. Besides the usual formal identities, less obvious and non-formal categories of national

belonging, which appear due to ICT s, can contribute to that. Thus, analyzing social media usage might open an additional perspective on the current social status of Kazakhstani Russians and their national imaginary.

Today social media is one of the main information sources for young people (Global Web Index 2020). Social media might become a space for keeping abreast of current affairs and facing particular agendas, which correspond to personal interests and activities (Spohr 2017). Instagram and VKontakte can also be employed for gratifying the need for orientation, which has been growing in importance in the present era of heightened uncertainty (Wei and Zhao 2017). Social media applications also provide a wide range of tools for collective identity construction and community building. Self-presentation in public and private social media spaces, e.g., through publishing textual and visual personal information, sharing existing content, or commenting, allows social media users to explore their "social selves" and create new networked interactions (Papacharissi 2010). Emphasizing favorable aspects of their profiles online and comparing themselves with less successful "Others," social media users get a chance to develop positive social identity and increase their self-esteem (Chan 2014). In other words, the social media sphere has become a space for self-categorization, defined by Turner et al. (1987) as recognizing one's membership in a social (in particular, national) group.

In this way, social media content can spread banal and everyday manifestations of nationhood, such as national symbols, deixis (*we*, *us*, *the nation*), and even taken-for-granted everyday routines (Szulc 2017). Just as Billig theorized that newspaper readers are taking in notions of nationhood through print media, social media users are "unmindfully reminded of their national identity" (Billig 1995: 154). However, despite the massive top-down agenda presented in social media, these platforms are not the same as newspapers. Today, social media can also provide space for the bottom-up construction of identity (Chen et al. 2019). Providing an opportunity for their users to create and spread textual and visual content, social media platforms become a space where not only official state-promoted accounts, but also so-called *influencers* – social media users with a large number of followers – can set their nation-related agendas (Chen et al. 2019). In particular, popular culture, architecture, and city landmarks, along with certain rituals and consumption behaviors, can support the reproduction of national identity by ordinary people (Fox and Ginderachter 2018). As Fox and Ginderachter (2018: 547) wrote, today, belonging to the nation "is actively appropriated, manipulated, and enacted as a category of social practice by varied social actors in varied social contexts." Unlike traditional media, the network-associated social media based upon self-presentation and social relationships often include some aspects of national

imagination and support fragmented versions of national belonging (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021).

Since social media are actively participating in the identity building and belonging, analyzing them can be beneficial in studying post-Soviet nationalism. As Kudaibergenova (2019: 376) has noticed, Instagram is an "ever-accessible social network that reinforces different views" and helps challenging rigid concepts, providing new understandings of taken-for-granted phenomena. The rest of the paper draws on the case of young Kazakhstani Russians to illustrate how social media and national belonging are interconnected.

3 Data Collection and Methods

The constantly evolving social media interfaces and fast-changing usage trends present a challenge for empirical research (McCrow-Young 2020). While social media statistics (Digital 2020) provide general numbers of social media users in Kazakhstan, information regarding usage preferences by ethnic groups has not been available. Aiming at an in-depth understanding of social media from a bottom-up perspective, I adopted a qualitative methodological approach, which was based upon semi-structured individual interviews.

I conducted 22 individual interviews in Russian with young Kazakhstani Russians in spring 2017 in two cities of Kazakhstan: Almaty and Nur-Sultan (until 2019, Astana). They are the most economically advanced and globalized cities in Kazakhstan (Blum 2016; Laruelle 2018). Unlike northern regions, where the Kazakhstani Russian population prevails (see Chart 1), the two selected cities are populated mostly by ethnic Kazakhs, who might emphasize the minority status of non-titular groups; such a social environment is especially interesting for studying non-titular groups. Finally, in large cities such as Almaty and Nur-Sultan, protests, demonstrations, and civic actions regularly occur, which might speak to a higher civic awareness among the inhabitants of these cities.

My sample included young people between 18 and 23 years of age who identify themselves as Russian, were born in Kazakhstan, and currently live in Nur-Sultan or Almaty. Combining recruitment strategies (gatekeeper, snowball sampling, and social media recruiting) made it possible for me to interview different representatives of Kazakhstani Russians. Most of my respondents studied at public and private Kazakhstani universities following different majors, such as foreign languages, agriculture, radio, electrical engineering, and communication. Nonetheless, uneducated, financially vulnerable, and socially marginalized groups stayed beyond my sample. As a result, my research

Chart 1 The population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups at the beginning of 2019

Regions of Kazakhstan	Ethnic groups in %		
	Ethnic Russians	Ethnic Kazakhs	Others
North-Kazakhstan region	49,53	35,03	15,45
Kostanay region	40,97	40,76	18,27
East Kazakhstan region	36,02	60,56	3,42
Karaganda region	35,47	51,80	12,73
Pavlodar region	35,44	52,35	12,21
Akmola region	32,86	51,36	15,78
Almaty	25,24	60,42	14,35
West-Kazakhstan region	19,26	76,35	4,40
Almaty region	13,33	72,07	14,59
Nur-Sultan	12,85	79,01	8,15
Aktobe region	11,34	82,84	5,82
Zhambyl region	9,78	72,73	17,50
Shymkent	9,18	67,07	23,76
Mangistau region	5,42	90,99	3,59
Atyrau region	5,27	92,59	2,14
Kyzylorda region	1,84	96,26	1,90
Turkestan region	1,79	76,02	22,19
Kazakhstan total	19,32	67,98	12,70

Source: Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics 2019

focused on young city dwellers, mostly from socially and economically advantaged households. Social media usage on an everyday basis was an additional prerequisite for participating in the research interview. The gender distribution within the sample was 12 women and 10 men.

Reflecting upon the researcher role, the fact that I was born and lived in Kazakhstan, as well as the fact that I studied in Germany, had a certain effect on the recruiting and interview process. Being a native Russian speaker who knows the general cultural context and was able to share common memories with respondents positively impacted their willingness to have an open and honest discussion. At the same time, many interviewees reacted with interest and sympathy to my being a PhD candidate in a German university, although this fact could potentially alienate anti-Western respondents or impact their

answers. In general, my cross-border experience contributed to the atmosphere of confidence during interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software. I conducted a qualitative content analysis, which allowed me to focus on a specific aspect of social media usage while also staying flexible and open toward unexpected findings. The categories included two main dimensions – civic self-description and social media usage patterns – as well as ten subcategories with at least five relevant interview segments each. To provide an adequate level of research validity, since I was the only coder, I coded the interviews twice with a break of one month in between.

4 Manifesting the Locality through Communicating and Posting on Social Media

Below, I present analyses of interview data from two perspectives. First, I will focus on how Kazakhstani Russians produce communication through content creation and engaging with social media "friends"; second, I will explore how Kazakhstani Russians consume information through building a personalized social media feed and following local and global news.

I found young Kazakhstani Russians' social media usage to be highly personalized and rather diverse. While some of my respondents use social media as a news source, others restrict their usage only to entertainment purposes. Although there is a general prevalence of passive social media usage, such as reading and watching content in personalized feeds, some aspects of active usage deserve particular attention. Noteworthy are communication through photos and short videos, posts about everyday life on Instagram – one of the most popular social media platforms reported by the young Kazakhstani Russians I interviewed. My observations are in line with previous research that found Instagram to be "the fastest-growing mobile app" (Kudaibergenova 2019: 366) and the most popular social media platform in Kazakshtan (Dall'Agnola and Wood 2022, introduction in this issue).

The ability to stay connected with friends was one of the most important motivations for my target population's activity on social media. For most of my respondents, social media "friends" simply included members of their local social networks, such as classmates, relatives, and acquaintances. While some of their social media "friends" live abroad, most of them reside in Kazakhstan and even in the same city. On Instagram, Kazakhstani Russians center their communication with "friends" around local contacts, and such communication takes place in private messages as well as by following "friends'" profile

updates. That is about "Respect. If you communicate with a person, it is polite to start following him or her on Instagram" (AV8, male, aged 20, Almaty). The social media platform choice also depends on the presence of existing contacts: "[Here, in Kazakhstan] we all [use] VKontakte and Instagram, so I'm there because there's no point in a social media where there's nobody I know" (CA16, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan).

As a result, social media has become an additional virtual place to meet with friends, who are a part of my respondents' offline, everyday life. Discussing city events, university life, and following their "friends" social media activities, young Kazakhstani Russians find themselves surrounded by everyday taken-for-granted activities, which are almost always associated with the local landscape. In particular, recurring and memorable events are often captured on social media through discussions or posts. For example, my respondents mentioned "gatherings with [local] friends," usually in the city center, near popular sights; "diploma awarding ceremony" (CD12, male, aged 21, Nur-Sultan), entailing the use of state symbols; or national museum visit (CN13, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan). These activities happen offline and presented online, can increase respondents' belonging to a concrete city and the country as a whole. Similarly, since social ties co-create a home feeling and a sense of belonging to a certain place (Antonsich, 2010), having intensive contact with the local social network in real life and on social media can intensify the connection to Kazakhstan: "I feel comfortable in Kazakhstan at the moment. I have my family, I have my friends here" (AA1, female, aged 18, Almaty).

However, this does not mean that my respondents only communicate with people living in Kazakhstan. Some of my respondents use social media to communicate with "acquaintances from America, Canada, Germany" (CK15, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan) and establish contacts to improve their English skills. Communicating with foreigners, respondents find themselves in a situation where they should represent "their" country, and this again can motivate them to reflect upon their belonging to Kazakhstan:

> I find people there [on social media], I talk to them, they think all the time – if I am Russian, it means that I live in Russia, if I live in Kazakhstan–it means that I am Kazakh. And everytime I try to explain to them that nationality and ethnicity are not the same. […] Many [people]are curious – how come that a Russian is in Kazakhstan
>
> CN13, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan

While Saunders (2006) has identified the denationalizing effect of transnational online networks, it seems that today, having international contact on

social media can, among other things, improve a sense of national belonging to Kazakhstan. Along with their global openness and sympathy toward transnational cooperation, young Kazakhstani Russians' attachment to their country, Kazakhstan, is reinforced by their online communication with non-Kazakhstanis. Being open to different cultures, young Kazakhstani Russians practice cross-border connectivity on social media platforms. They emphasize the advantages of "their" country and, despite "some problems," try to avoid "washing one's dirty linen in public and making it [the state] lower in the eyes of foreigners" (CA18, female, aged 20, Nur-Sultan). Presenting Kazakhstan in an intergroup context motivated my respondents to locate and highlight positive aspects of their belongingness to their country. Being a formal part of Kazakhstan, young Kazakhstani Russians create an ideal image of their country not only for foreigners, but also for themselves – to maintain their positive self-esteem, according to self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987: 42–55). However, this does not mean that Kazakhstani Russians completely stop noticing the negative aspects of life in Kazakhstan. Facilitating contact with people from all over the world, social media provide an additional opportunity for these young people to cope with elements of Kazakhstani reality which do not satisfy them.

This logic is also reflected at the individual level. According to interviewees, the goal of Instagram is to "present yourself as good and beautiful" (AN11, female, aged 19, Almaty), and their everyday routine, including local surroundings, is also presented in a more favorable light. Respondents described posting selfies in a nice interior of a metropolitan café or broadcasting Instagram "stories" from popular local events, while avoiding that "sometimes it's uncomfortable, when people speak Kazakh nearby" (AM5, female, aged 20, Almaty) or that they live in a place "where everyone is selfish, where no one helps anyone" (AE10, female, aged 22, Almaty).

"Beautiful" selfies can have different meanings and purposes, but they almost always include elements of everyday life. Such *Instagrammable* content might support a certain perception of Kazakhstan which is limited mostly to the constructed positive facade of the country while avoiding problematic issues. Imagining such a fragmented version of the country can intensify citizens' sentiments of attachment to Kazakhstan, because it increases their personal satisfaction in being a part of this particular country.

It is essential to highlight that respondents' social media posts did not feature any political messages or content. The young non-titular Russians interviewed seem to intentionally avoid the socio-political issues connected to ethnonational conflicts, religion, and the political elite in Kazakhstan. For them, discussing politics online is often associated with "cases when someone was fined for a post on Facebook or somewhere else" (AE10, female, aged

22, Almaty) or with incarceration. In accordance with existing studies (e.g., Blackburn 2019, Junisbai and Junisbai 2019), respondents voiced their unwillingness to engage with official political issues. Politicians, according to them, "spread such dirt." That respondent continued, "They [people] argue with each other; they [politicians] promise a lot to people. And in fact, they probably implement only 20 percent of that" (AA7, male, aged 19, Almaty).

Nonetheless, even though respondents did not have sympathy for politicians and avoided government-related politics, this does not automatically mean that young Kazakhstani Russians are completely indifferent and politically apathetic. In accordance with Blackburn (2019), these respondents seem to support the political course of the first president of Kazakhstan, and some of them even expressed their interest in local political related issues. Moreover, some respondents shared their ideas about how the dialog between people and the state should develop:

> I believe that when people realize that they have problems and that they can reach out to the state, this is how it supposed to be (…) I would still like to see a pluralism of opinions [in Kazakhstan]. That each side could speak out and, in principle, help the country.
>
> AA1, female, aged 18, Almaty

In this context, social media has become a useful tool for respondents to voice their solidarity with their local urban community, even though they do not define their posts as a political act. Practically, posting about and commenting on local and Kazakhstan-related news allows young Kazakhstani Russians to participate in the local public life. Using social media, and in particular, Instagram, they are able to locate and identify in-group members with similar views on what Kazakhstan is and how it should develop. Imagining Kazakhstan as a country with ethno-social groups that are diverse and live peacefully together, young Kazakhstani Russians try to promote this idea, co-creating some aspects of the paradigm of *Kazakhstanness* online. Considering Kazakhstan from a local perspective, they use social media to demonstrate their belonginess to a local network based upon common Kazakhstan-related issues:

> [I would comment on] something related definitely to our [Kazakhstani] problems, definitely to my city. If it will be something heartbreaking and it will be in America, I won't write anything about it. If something happens here [in Kazakhstan] or if a person shares personal story on her account, asking for help or support, this will touch me and I will reply to her post – yes, we will help you and make sure you are well.
>
> AA2, female, aged 19, Almaty

> For example, there was flooding in the West of Kazakhstan. It turns out that the Red Cross [International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement] began to collect donations to help and so on. (…) And yes, it turns out that we need to express our opinion. At once, you try to write something about that.
>
> AE4, male, aged 20, Almaty

It is important to note that the online posts made by young Kazakhstani Russians participating in this study were only expressed in the Russian language. Most of them admitted that they were not planning to improve their Kazakh skills, because the Kazakh language is "not really close [to them]," "rough, it has so many words and endings" (AV9, female, aged 20, Almaty), and is used only "in the bazaar or on the bus" (AE10, female, aged 22, Almaty). Referring to the state-sponsored trilingualism, these young Kazakhstani Russians felt comfortable using the Russian language on an everyday basis, which is why they preferred the same language in cyberspace. Nonetheless, they also recognize the benefits of knowing how to speak Kazakh in professional and everyday life: "[if] you want big fame and a political career, you have to learn [the Kazakh language]" (AA8, male, aged 20, Almaty), or: "When I catch a cab and I say certain price in Kazakh, they [Kazakh-speaking drivers] accept it. And if I say same price in Russian, it turns out that the price gets higher" (AE4, male, aged 20, Almaty).

Similarly, Kazakhstani Russians have embedded many ethnocultural Kazakh traditions in their lives which find reflections in their Instagram accounts: "this year we even made *beshbarmak* [Kazakh traditional dish] for the new year's eve" (CD12, male, aged 21, Nur-Sultan). "Traditional costumes [and] *baursaki* [Kazakh traditional pastry]" are "something dear" (AM5, female, aged 20, Almaty) to them, are posted on Instagram, and evoke positive emotions among Kazakhstani Russians. In those posts they seem to support the paradigm of *Kazakhness* to a certain extent.

5 Consuming Media Information through a Local Lens

Besides communication features, social media seem to be one of the primary information and news sources for young Kazakhstani Russians. Respondents consider VKontakte and Instagram as spaces where multiple news reports from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Western countries are accessible. Surprisingly, VKontakte, widely considered a "Russian" social media platform, was mainly used by my respondents to read "translations from English-speaking [social] networks" (AE6, male, aged 20, Almaty).

My respondents mentioned that they are exposed to various political perspectives (visual or textual) on current international and local events in their social media feeds, even if most of them claimed that they were not interested in political affairs. It seems that young Kazakhstani Russians draw a line between the top-down politics of the Kazakhstani government and bottom-up political issues. Often, social networks provide young Kazakhstani Russians with relevant news, because they "always read the information [their social media "friends"] are posting [or] reposting" (CA14, female, aged 20, Nur-Sultan). Also, respondents selected particular accounts and, through them, created a space for "miscellaneous impressions" (AM5, female, aged 20, Almaty), where Russian-speaking state-controlled content coexists with critical blogger accounts.

My respondents subscribed to classic news outlets on social media, which replace traditional media, such as television or newspapers. Following *Russia Today* on Instagram or watching videos by the *Pervyĭ kanal* (Channel One, a state TV channel of Russia), young Kazakhstani Russians encounter pro-Russian content produced by media channels based in Russia. During the interviews, respondents revealed themselves to be well informed about recent key events in Russia, including Russia's foreign and domestic issues. Nevertheless, exposure to Russian news outlets on social media does not necessarily produce an emotional attachment to mother Russia among these young Kazakhstani Russians. For instance, news items related to the "return" of Crimea are often considered a purely Russian matter, which does not affect them in any way:

> Why is Kazakhstan so happy about this ["return" of Crimea]? After all, we are citizens of Kazakhstan, what does Crimea have to do with us? I even ask my grandmother [who support the Crimea's "return"] – just [think] logically, Crimea is definitely not ours.
>
> AN11, female, aged 19, Almaty

At the same time, comparing Crimea with Kazakhstan's northern regions, which are considered by some Russian politicians as "Russian ancestral lands" (Kubekov 2017), the majority of my respondents opposed a possible annexation of northern Kazakhstan by Russia, "because I don't think Russia can do anything more than Kazakhstan" (AE6, male, aged 20, Almaty). In other words, respondents did not consider any benefits of being part of Russia. It is also noticeable that encountering the content about the territorial expansion of Russia might cause a rapprochement with the majority population and emphasize a civic connection with the country of their birth and current residence: "Well, we (interruption) Kazakhs have another opinion. Omsk is also historically Kazakh, so we could take it away from them too, purely theoretically, but

our president is smart – he does not raise these questions" (CN13, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan).

Therefore, in light of the Russo–Ukrainian war, the multifaced foreign policy of Kazakhstan – promoting successful cooperation with both Russian and Western partners (*transnationalism*), peaceful coexistence of various ethnic groups inside of the country, and a lack of open conflict (*Kazakhstanness*) – was seen as something positive by the young Kazakhstani Russians interviewed:

> The Kazakhstan's domestic policy is not so cruel [as in Russia]…. I also judge by those who write on the Internet, Russians [from Russia] who position themselves as *such* Russians. All the time they say that we should burn America or something like that.
>
> AV3, male, aged 20, Almaty

> While sanctions have been introduced [against Russia], we still have Georgian wine, [Spanish] jamon, and it will continue to be so. We have a completely different relationship [with the West]. We do not seek war.
>
> AA8, male, aged 20, Almaty

> But when they [Russians from Russia] see a person of Asian or Afro-American descent or any different ethnic background, they display hatred. This kind of nationalism is just so fierce and extreme. It does not exist here [in Kazakhstan] … this is why I am proud to be a citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
>
> CN19, male, aged 22, Nur-Sultan

The quoted excerpts from individual interviews in Almaty and Nur-Sultan demonstrate that young Kazakhstani Russians' exposure to Russian news coverage on political events on social media platforms does not automatically reinforce their ties to their historical "home" country, Russia. Instead, exposure to Russian news propaganda seems to increase my respondents' attachment to Kazakhstan – and their awareness of their Kazakhstani identity. In their daily Instagram feed, they look at international issues through a local lens. For some of them, Western countries are a role model for Kazakhstan in its social and political development, and most of them displayed "great confidence in Europe" (CN19, male, aged 22, Nur-Sultan). Others compare the future development of Kazakhstan with the Soviet-style regional collaboration, which was "such a strict system, but still, people lived all in peace, shoulder to shoulder, different nations, different worldviews" (CA17, male, aged 20, Nur-Sultan). Although both cases might look different in the conventional sense, they are

united by the fact that Kazakhstani Russians prefer to see Kazakhstan as a country striving for peace, cooperation, and diversity, since "we have friendly relationships [with all countries]" (CN13, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan) and are "a more or less peaceful society" (AA7, male, aged 19, Almaty). These particular elements of Kazakhstan's national image, which the government has actively promoted through paradigms of *Kazakhstanness* and *transnationalism*, find support among interviewees.

Furthermore, many respondents are critical of official information posted by the government on social media platforms, which is "edited by 'them' [politicians]. 'They' decide what and how they share information with us" (CA18, female, aged 20, Nur-Sultan). In contrast to politicians, bloggers were described as ordinary people who present "the real life of real people" (CA14, female, aged 20, Nur-Sultan) that can be trusted by my respondents. Having access to information created by bloggers from all over the world allows my respondents to see an alternative interpretation of events, rather than only a regime-confirmed agenda. In comparison to the government's rhetoric, in which "everything is always perfect" (CA16, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan) and "all is shown very one-sided" (AA1, female, aged 18, Almaty), user-generated content represents everyday life topics that are encountered by Kazakhstani Russians on a regular basis. For example, for Almaty residents, the matter of ecology is an everyday issue: "We have Asi͡a Tulesova [@miroio], she is a social media activist. Since [Almaty] has high air pollution, she wanted to run tests to show people how polluted our air is" (AA2, female, aged 19, Almaty).

Also, more general topics such as corruption, the irreplaceability of the political elite, or civil rights, actively discussed in the Russian-speaking segment of Instagram, obviously attract Kazakhstani Russians' attention. Russia-based bloggers such as I͡Urij Dud' [@yurydud] or Ruslan Sololovskij [@mrsokolovsky], who present these topics in an entertaining manner familiar to them on Instagram and YouTube, encourage respondents to reflect upon their socio-political reality and to rethink their connection to their local communities. Kazakh online activists such as Asi͡a Tulesova [@miroio] or Sergeĭ Kuratov, chairman of the Kazakhstani Ecological Society "Green Salvation" [@green.salvation], were also named, although less frequently.

Respondents' interest in city-related socio-political situations also manifested itself in the fact that some of them follow the official social media accounts of Kazakhstani governmental institutions. The state-promoted digitalization and official social media presence1 allow respondents to monitor

1 See Maerz (2016) for more details about e-government development in post-Soviet autocracies.

governmental actions within an informational space familiar to them. For instance, the Instagram account of Nur-Sultan Akimat (city administration) [@akimat_nur_sultan] provides them with information about "some [local] events (…)" (CA17, male, aged 20, Nur-Sultan). Even though this type of content was often seen as questionable, because "any information is presented in a favorable light for 'them' [the government]" (CA16, female, aged 21, Nur-Sultan), official content still somewhat encourages young Russians to immerse themselves in their local community and come into contact with the national agenda of Kazakhstan.

Even if some Kazakhstani Russians do not actively engage with political news on social media, this does not mean that they are totally unaware of and shielded from current Kazakhstan-related affairs. I found that regardless of my interviewees' use preference or the geographical variety found in their social media news feeds, young Kazakhstani Russians are subscribed to local commercial Instagram accounts that report news on urban life and promote local events, such as @v_Astane_official, @almaty.today, @shodim (Almaty), @shodim.astana,[2] etc. Unlike official social media accounts, following urban Instagram accounts was a widespread activity among Kazakhstani Russians; one or more of these accounts were mentioned almost in every interview. These accounts are similar in what information they disseminate, i.e., they use informative and entertaining content, centered around my respondents' cities of residence. Often, the visual content on these urban Instagram accounts includes state symbols and iconic places (see Figure 1) or is connected with popular city events (see Figure 2). Although one can find links to Kazakhstani news outlets in these accounts and, as a result, some state-promoted ideas are present there, they also provide extensive user-generated content regarding local everyday issues, and they evoke user discussions in the comments (see Figure 3).

In line with my respondents' social media preferences, use, and consumption behavior described previously, the popularity of local commercial Instagram accounts among Kazakhstani Russians may indicate that being involved online in the everyday life of a Kazakhstani big city matters for them. Since "bottom-up emergence is energised by locales that interact and interpret national symbolism in distinct ways" (Kaufman 2017: 14), local commercial

2 Apart from @v_Astane_official, which does not provide detailed information about its official registration, @almaty.today, @shodim (Almaty), and @shodim.astana are part of the commercial media project of Davaĭ shodim! [Let's go out] LLP, according to the description provided on Instagram. I could not find any information which would establish their affiliation with the government.

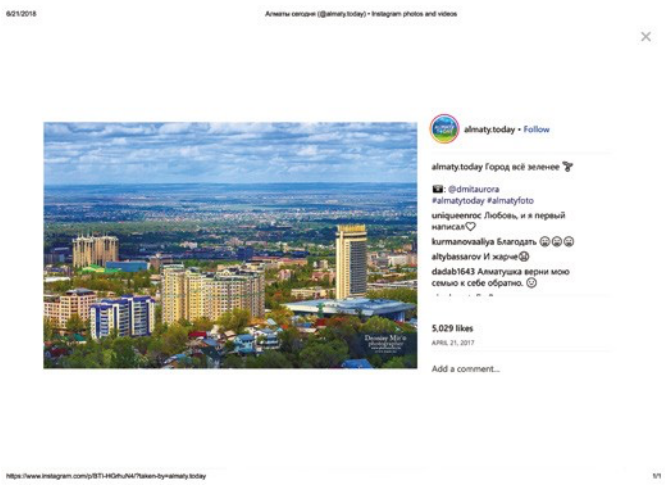

Figure 1 A post on the Instagram account @almaty.today depicts the city panorama with the hotel "Kazakhstan," one of the symbols of the city

Figure 2 A post on the Instagram account @shodim.astana depicts a local event announcement

Instagram accounts can support their national imaginary. In addition, following the logic of Lonkila et al. (2021), even non-political everyday issues, when posted online, can indicate policy failures and motivate young Kazakhstani Russians to think about the necessity for civic activities and their particular role in politics.

Figure 3 A post on the Instagram accounts @v_Astane_official shows a local charitable campaign, which was organized through Instagram

6 Conclusions and Implications: A Kazakhstani Reality Imagined through the Instagram Use

My results demonstrate that social media platforms open various opportunities for non-titular groups to find their "social selves" and discover their national belonging. Starting with social media choice, I found that the social media use of young Kazakhstani Russians is closely linked with existing local trends and everyday life in the Kazakhstani cities of Nur-Sultan and Almaty. Communicating with their local social circle on social media, posting about their daily activities, and following bloggers and urban Instagram accounts allow young Kazakhstani Russians not only to confront state-promoted manifestations of the Kazakhstani nation but also to adjust their image of Kazakhstan to their social needs.

Their interest in and emotional bond with their local city makes it possible for young Kazakhstani Russians to be informed about local events and news. In particular, their use of Instagram enhances their attachment to their local community. Even those respondents who did not demonstrate a particular interest in political news are exposed to socio-political events because they actively follow urban Instagram accounts sharing city-related content. Using Instagram increases their awareness of political events and also influences young Kazakhstani Russians' attachment to their local community and to the country as a whole.

While social media can promote a state-led agenda, e.g., through official accounts and state-confirmed news on urban Instagram accounts such as @v_Astane_official and @almaty.today, they also can support the bottom-up imaginary. Instagram provides a chance for young Kazakhstani Russians to surround themselves online with information which is consistent with their personal worldview and might even strengthen their particular imagination of Kazakhstan. As a result, active and passive social media use makes it possible for young Kazakhstani Russians to create their version of Kazakhstan, which is concordant with some aspects of the *Kazakhstanness* and *transnationalism* paradigms. Although Kazakhstani Russians are practicing some ethnocultural Kazakh traditions and recognize the benefits of speaking the Kazakh language, their version of Kazakhstan opposes "[the symbolic] status, of Kazakhs being the first among equals" (Laruelle 2014: 2), typical for the paradigm of *Kazakhness*. In this context, the limitation of the top-down perspective on nation-building becomes obvious. The example of young Kazakhstani Russians from the two biggest cities demonstrates that ordinary people interpret and adjust these paradigms according to their personal needs. Through immersion in Kazakhstani urban life offline and online, Kazakhstani Russians co-create the nation, since "wide local variation in the content of national identity strengthens rather than weakens the nation's power to mobilise" (Kafmann 2017: 6).

Their version of Kazakhstan allows young Kazakhstani Russians to be part of a local urban community and aspire to further develop Kazakhstan as a successful state with prosperous cities populated by multicultural and globally oriented individuals. In accordance with Blackburn (2019), in these young people's version of the country, ethnocultural heterogeneity of Kazakhstani society is presented in idealistic terms of the Soviet *druzhba narodov* (Friendship of the Peoples). At the same time, it is associated with the cultural diversity so esteemed in Western countries. In both cases, though, Kazakhstani Russians are considered equal citizens, who are on par with other ethno-social groups and form an essential part of Kazakhstani society. My respondents' imagined version of Kazakhstan as a multicultural and interethnic country indirectly explains their weakening attachment to their historical "home" country, Russia. Despite Russia's efforts to unite its *sootechestvenniki* (compatriots) around the Russian state, I found that young Kazakhstani Russians do not display any special sympathy towards Russia. In light of the Crimean occupation, they support the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan instead.

In contrast to existing studies which have presented Kazakhstani youth as politically apathetic (e.g., Blackburn 2019; Junisbai and Junisbai 2019), I found that Kazakhstani Russians who are involved in local socio-political events on Instagram develop a stronger attachment to their local communities. While

some have argued that young Kazakhstani Russians have "no experience of participation in a civic, political community" (Blackburn 2019: 225), my research shows that Instagram can become a space where they start to collect this experience. Unlike distant official politics, the local everyday issues, such as garbage problem or air pollution happening in the city, become visible through social media usage. Regularly appearing in their social media feeds and supported by state symbols, these local issues are obviously able to activate their interest regarding informal civic activities and Kazakhstan's socio-political development. In accordance with Kosnazarov (2019), my findings suggest that there is – even if not always apparent at first glance – a certain raise in civic awareness, in particular among Kazakhstani Russians in Almaty and Nur-Sultan – even if it is not always apparent at first glance. My analysis takes a broader view of what constitutes civic engagement, representing a position of technological optimism.

While my research offers insights into how the social media usage of young Kazakhstani Russians influences their civic awareness from a bottom-up perspective, it also faces certain limitations. First, the present sample of respondents included students from the two largest cities of Kazakhstan: Almaty and Nur-Sultan. Although my study provides insights into the national identity of Russian city dwellers in Kazakhstan, the study's conclusions might not hold true for Kazakhstani Russians living in smaller towns and rural areas, especially in the north of the country where the ratio of Russians to Kazakhs is different from that in big cities. Studying less educated and financially vulnerable people could also open additional perspectives on the national imagination of Kazakhstani Russians.

Political protests happening online and offline in Kazakhstan, such as the campaign #YouCan'tRunFromTheTruth (Rickleton 2019), open new perspectives and raise additional questions regarding civic awareness. Identifying regional differences between the north, which is still significantly populated by Russians, and the Kazakh-dominated south could also be beneficial. Similarly, self-censorship and other reactions to existing internet regulation require additional research.

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