“Between Europe and Asia”: Geography and Identity in Post-Soviet Nation-building Narratives

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Abstract

Formulations of “between Europe and Asia” or “a bridge between East and West” are common in nation-building narratives in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. They appear prominently in both political speech and school textbooks. A close examination of this geographical rhetoric reveals its political and geopolitical subtext. In both countries this discourse tends to value “Western” economic ties while emphasizing the traditional, “Eastern” form of dictatorial rule and the need for national harmony. It also reminds both domestic and international audiences of the geopolitical importance and sensitivity of the countries’ positions.

Keywords

Azerbaijan – Kazakhstan – geography – nation-building – identity

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan prominently use a geographical discourse in their nation-building narratives, calling themselves “a bridge between East and West” or “the heart of Eurasia.” The details of their position on the globe are a regular motif in the respective stories these two countries tell about who they are, how they came to be that way, and what that means for how they should be governed and interact with the rest of the world.

This in-between identity is manifested in various ways: Kazakhstan has hosted the Asian Winter Games, but is part of the European UEFA soccer federation. It invested vast diplomatic resources into attaining the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 2010, but its

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president has taken as a model Singaporean President Lee Kwan Yew and his notion of "Asian values." Azerbaijan has similarly sought to balance its Europe- an identity with a Muslim one: Baku hosted the Eurovision song contest in 2012 and was a "capital of Islamic culture" in 2009. It hosted the inaugural European Games in 2015, and the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017.

Elites in these countries deliberately chose to make geography a foundation of national identity, elevating it above other options, including ethnicity, ancient history, and ideology. Given the flexibility of the concepts of "East" and "West," nearly any country in the post-Soviet space could choose to locate themselves between those two poles. But Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, more than any other states, have aggressively chosen to do so. In both countries this has been a largely top-down process, led by political elites with academics and educators following suit. This discourse is then popularized via political rhetoric, official histories, and school textbooks.

While "a bridge between East and West" or "heart of Eurasia" can seem like simple country-branding slogans, they contain many layers of rich meaning. By explicitly placing themselves within the framework of East and West, Europe and Asia,[1] these countries have entered into a conversation that has been going on for millennia about what is the nature of the world and how it should be divided up. While this dichotomy is usually expressed in geographical, historical, and cultural terms, it usually carries a powerful political and geopolitical subtext.

The border between Europe and Asia was first defined by the ancient Greeks, but for them it had no political or cultural meaning—the names "Europe" and "Asia" most likely come from Phoenician words referring to the sunset and sun- rise. While the ancient Greeks who first defined the border may have meant nothing more by it than "to this side of Greece" and "to that side of Greece," in the intervening millennia it has taken on nesting layers of significance. In the Middle Ages, the bifurcation assumed an essential, religious cast, separating Christians from heathens. The Enlightenment brought a distinction between reason and superstition, which also was supposed to be divided between the two continents or, more generally, East and West. A political component to the divide also emerged, with the West being known for enlightened rule and the East for despotism. In the nineteenth century it gained a racial element, with the idea that the Western world, via European colonization, was fated to rule over the benighted East. This transitioned into a geopolitical/political

1 Outside of their purely geographic referents, "Europe" and "the West" are generally synonymous, as are "Asia" and "the East." See: Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (University of California Press, 1997), 6.

divide during the Cold War, where the "West" came to mean democracy and the "East" tyranny, connotations that persist today in the promotion of human rights—that is, "Western values"—around the world.2

This discussion is still not finished. Today, there is far more skepticism about the prospects and desirability of the West, and more of a sense that the future lies in the East, than there was at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse. Russia and Turkey—regional powers that have a claim to Europeanness—under Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have put forward new, anti-Western but still modern visions of how to run a country. It is in this context that Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have positioned themselves as neither West nor East, but part of both. This article focuses on those two countries because no other states in the post-Soviet Caucasus or Central Asia have adopted this sort of geographical imagery to such an extent (with the possible exception of Georgia, which shifted from a "between East and West" identity in the 1990s to a "European" one since then).

This article asks, What does it mean today for a state to adopt an identity focused on its position between Europe and Asia? What can these states tell us about the meaning of "European" or "Asian" today? What does a state seek to gain by adopting this sort of geographical discourse?

To answer these questions, I use a discourse analysis focusing on two sources: school textbooks and official rhetoric. The latter includes presidential ad- dresses, foreign policy statements, statements by other senior government officials, and scholarship produced under the imprimatur of the state (for ex- ample, official think tank reports or writings by state university professors).

The focus on official discourse reveals how the state tells the story of its identity. Critical geopolitics takes the examination of texts as its foundation. "Critical geopolitics hinges on the assumption that we can read global politics off textual evidence. More than that, it argues that texts are not mimetic but productive of the political world: texts construct geopolitics."3 This article uses an interpretive-explanatory framework, attempting to decode the tacit meanings within these texts, seeing geopolitical discourse as "sets of socio-cultural

2 Steven Erlanger, "Are Western Values Losing Their Sway?," *New York Times*, September 12, 2015; "Applying European Values to Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* (November/December 2005): 4; Anders Rasmussen, "The Dual Threats to Western Values," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2014; Anne Applebaum, *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe* (Pantheon Books, 1994); Michael J. Totten, *Where the West Ends: Stories from the Middle East, the Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus* (CreateSpace, 2012).

3 Martin Müller, "Text, Discourse, Affect and Things," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics,* ed. Klaus Dodds, Merje Kuus, and Joanne P. Sharp (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 49.

resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities."[4]

Both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have a unified set of textbooks for their countries' public school systems, published in both the national language (i.e., Azerbaijani or Kazakh) and in Russian. All students in the public school system read these textbooks, providing the state an unparalleled means of presenting the story they want to tell. I read the textbooks either at public libraries in Almaty and Baku or acquired copies at local bookstores. All were read in Russian; some particularly important passages were checked against the national language version but no discrepancies were found.

All these sources were read with an eye to discerning the story that these countries have chosen to tell about their geographic positions and what that means about their culture, politics, and international relations. In doing this reading, I was guided by the method that political scientist Ted Hopf used in his book *The Social Construction of International Relations*, which strives to ex- plain foreign policy choices of the Soviet Union in the 1950s and Russia in the 1990s by examining narratives of state identity. He described his method as interpretivist epistemology:

> The backbone of an interpretivist epistemology is phenomenology and induction. Phenomenology implies letting the subjects speak, in this case through their texts. Induction involves the recording of these identities as atheoretically as possible. With the exception of the Russian nation, for example, I did not look for any particular Soviet or Russian identities; they emerged from the texts themselves. The trick is to remain ontologically open for as long as possible before imposing an analytical theoretical order, or closure, on the numerous ambiguities and differences in thetexts.[5]

With this in mind, I collected as many examples of discourse involving geography and state identity as I could during my evidence-gathering trips to Almaty and Baku. While these texts obviously did not all entirely agree on every point, reading the collected texts afterward, a relatively consistent story emerged. The various texts do to a large degree cohere, thanks largely to the monopoly that both states have on discourse about national identity. Thus, it is easy to see close similarities in the narratives produced by presidents and

4 Müller, "Text, Discourse, Affect and Things," 57.

5 Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 23–24.

other government officials, school textbooks, and state-affiliated universities and think tanks.

In this process, some potentially significant wrinkles were smoothed out. For example, my observations suggest that narratives in both countries have shifted somewhat over the years: in the 1990s they appeared more likely to identify their countries with Western values, but as time passed they have been more willing to try to push back against the global hegemony of the West and to assert their Eastern, or Eurasian, values. In addition, particularly in the case of Azerbaijan, the narratives for internal consumption (such as textbooks) differed notably from those for external consumption (such as presidential speeches at international fora in the West). The latter were more likely to identify the country with Western values, while the former emphasize the traditional/Eastern/Eurasian essence of the national identity. There are also different interpretations: Azerbaijan tends to present its in-between position as a threat, and Kazakhstan as an opportunity. These variables could both be fruitful topics for future research, but for the purposes of this article they seemed like variations on a single narrative and are treated as such.

Both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan use the discourse to emphasize the strategic importance of their countries and thus the important role that their governments play on the world stage. This is useful both for an international audience (to woo potential geopolitical suitors) and for a domestic audience (to emphasize the international importance of the states and, by extension, their leaders' strength and sagacity). Both countries attempt to associate themselves with the economies and prestige of Europe, while evoking a more "traditional" Eastern value system involving communal, rather than individual, values and a respect for authority. That value system, in turn, is often used as a justification for authoritarian rule, under the assumption that Asian or Eastern peoples require and respect strong leaders.

Critical Geopolitics on the Europe–Asia Border

The nation building narratives of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan can be usefully considered in the context of critical geopolitics, which examines the construction of ideas about space in the production of power. "Geography is about pow- er. Although often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space."6 Thus,

6 Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

critical geopolitics differs from the classical notion of geopolitics as the study of the effect of geography on politics. Critical geopolitics sees classical geopolitics primarily as a discourse used in the service of politics. A related concept is that of "metageography," defined by Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen as "the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world: the often unconscious frameworks that organize studies of history, sociology, economics, political science, or even natural history."[7]

A discourse about a country's position vis-à-vis East and West is an example of "geopolitical vision," a concept in critical geopolitics that Gertjan Dijkink defined as: "any idea concerning the relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy."[8] Relatedly, political scientist John Gaddis has defined "geopolitical codes" as "assumptions about … interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses."[9] Adopted by geographers, geopolitical codes "evaluate places and are the spatial expressions of geopolitical efforts to transform a global space into fixed perspectival scenes."[10] This article examines the nation-building narratives of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan for the geopolitical visions that they contain, as well as how the political elites in these countries, via official nation-building discourse, create and use the geopolitical code of being "between East and West" or "in the heart of Eurasia."[11]

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7 Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), ix.

8 Gertjan Dijkink, *National Identity and Geopolitical Visions: Maps of Pride and Pain* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

9 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

10 Herod, Roberts, and Toal, *An Unruly World?*

11 Gertjan Dijkink, "Geopolitical Codes and Popular Representations," *GeoJournal* 46, no. 4 (1998): 293–299; Virginie Mamadouh and Gertjan Dijkink, "Geopolitics, International Relations, and Political Geography: The Politics of Geopolitical Discourse," *Geopolitics* 11, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 349–366; Pinar Bilgin, "'Only Strong States Can Survive in Turkey's Geography': The Uses of 'Geopolitical Truths' in Turkey," *Political Geography* 26, no. 7 (September 2007): 740–756; Martin Müller, "Doing discourse analysis in Critical Geopolitics," *L'Espace Politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique* 12 (February 11, 2011); Luca Anceschi, "Regime-Building, Identity-Making and Foreign Policy: Neo-Eurasianist Rhetoric in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 5 (2014): 733–749; Nick Megoran and Sevara Shamsiddinovna Sharapova, *Central Asia in International Relations: The Legacies of Halford Mackinder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Emre Erşen, "The Evolution of 'Eurasia' as a Geopolitical Concept in Post–Cold War Turkey," *Geopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2013): 24–44; Asteris Huliaras and Charalambos Tsardanidis, "(Mis)understanding the Balkans: Greek Geopolitical Codes of the Post-Communist Era,"

There is some objective justification for this "in-between" discourse: Both countries lie astride the conventional geographic border between Europe and Asia (or at least some versions of it), a point that the nation-building discourse emphasizes. But this appeal to geography can obscure a more profound political meaning behind the notion of being between East and West.

The East–West division is widely recognized as the deepest and most pervasive in global meta-geography, the "central geographical myth of the modern age."12 As an editor of a volume on "the East–West Discourse" put it, "[S]ymbolic geographies generally, and East–West discourses in particular, seek to promote a political agenda, implicit or explicit."13 One of the pioneers of critical geopolitics, John Agnew, argues that the East–west divide is the foundational historical division of the world:

> The one-world picture … is not a composition of equal and pacific elements but a hierarchy of places, from known to unknown, from most friendly to most dangerous. The best-known representation of this char- acter is that of a dichotomous global West and East, in which the former is seen as the total opposite and, hence, definitive standard for the latter. With roots in an ancient European past, this opposition serves as a geo- graphical template on to which more local differences can be mapped. They then become explicable only as elements in the bigger picture. Local differences are ascribed to worldwide distinctions rather than to local differences per se.14

Despite Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's relatively prominent use of that discourse, these two countries have been little discussed in the substantial literature devoted to the East–West divide. A closer examination will demonstrate how their narratives, while expressed in geographical, historical, and cultural terms, in fact have clear political and geopolitical meanings behind them.

Geopolitics 11, no. 3 (September 2006): 465–483; Sally N. Cummings, "Eurasian Bridge or Murky Waters between East and West? Ideas, Identity and Output in Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (2003): 139–155; Anita Sengupta, *Heartlands of Eurasia: The Geopolitics of Political Space* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2009).

12 Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, 7.

13 Alexander Maxwell, "Bridges and Bulwarks: A Historiographic Overview of East–west Discourses," in *The East–west Discourse: Symbolic Geography and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 31.

14 John A. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Kazakhstan, the Heart of Eurasia

The story that Kazakhstan has chosen to tell about its place on the earth is that it is located at the center of Eurasia. For centuries it has been the link between the East and West, taking the best from each and acting as a bridge bringing Europe and Asia closer together. The Russian imperial and Soviet eras enriched Kazakhstan's ties with Europe, but shut off Kazakhstan from its natural ties with the East, including both the Muslim world and China. Now, with the end of the Cold War, barriers between East and West have been removed, and Kazakhstan, under the wise leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, is again taking its rightful place at the center of Eurasia. Kazakhstan's positioning itself at the center of Eurasia strengthens both Kazakhstan as well as relations between East and West, Europe and Asia. This position as a bridge between East and West determines the country's so-called multi-vector diplomacy and means that its political system will combine Western ideals of free markets and democracy with Eastern respect for authority and stability.

Geography

In the Kazakhstani discourse, the country is most often placed at the center of the Eurasian continent. "The republic of Kazakhstan is a country located in the very center of the continent called Eurasia," a children's encyclopedia states.15 The first words of a university textbook on geopolitics are: "The Republic of Kazakhstan, located in the center of the Eurasian continent, is a sovereign state."16

While the focus is usually on Eurasia, Kazakhstan's place at the junction of Europe and Asia also is frequently emphasized. "The western regions of Kazakhstan abut [*primykaiut k*] Europe, the border between Europe and Asia goes along the Ural River, which in ancient times was called Zhayk in Kazakh, but the north, east, and south of our country are in Asia," the children's encyclopedia cited above continues. Similarly, the geopolitics textbook begins in its chapter on "Geographical Conditions of Kazakhstan" as follows: "Kazakhstan is a vast landlocked country located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The main part of the republic is located in Central Asia and only the Western

15 Orynbay Zhanaydarov, *Moya strana Kazakhstan: entsiklopediya dlya detey* (Almaty: Balausa, 2002).

16 Jen-kun Fu, *Geopolitika Kazakhstana: mezhdu proshlym i budushchim* (Almaty: Zhetī Zharghy, 1999), 1.

regions are located in Europe."17 Most Kazakhstani youth first study geopolitics in the ninth grade. Their textbook lists six key factors of the country's geopolitical position, most of which emphasize its position between various other partsof the world:

1. Its landlocked nature.
2. Its "position at the crossroads of various cultures—Islamic, Orthodox,and Confucian (China)."
3. The "position between Europe and Asia."
4. The position between China and Russia.
5. "Hot spots" near Kazakhstan's borders, namely Afghanistan but also "complex circumstances that at times develop in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan."
6. The border with the Caspian Sea.18

This message is not always consistent. When Kazakhstan's textbooks discuss race, for example, they do so in terms closely connected with geography (as well as language), and posit a racial essentialism that does not fit neatly with the notion that Kazakhstan occupies a sort of intermediate position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The seventh-grade geography textbook teaches:

> Representatives of all races of the globe live in Eurasia … the most widespread is the Europeoid [*Evropeodnyi*] population. It is subdivided into northern Europeoids—their representatives are light-skinned, light-haired, blue-eyed—and southern Europeoids—dark-skinned, dark-haired, brown-eyed, sometimes black-eyed. People of the Mongoloid race, to which belong Chinese, Mongols, and Japanese, live in the Asian part. All Turkic speaking peoples belong to this racial group.19

This would appear to be a modification of Soviet theories on race,20 but how this interpretation of the relationship among the races, continents, and the Kazakh people came to be is beyond the scope of this article.

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17 Fu, *Geopolitika Kazakhstana*, 158.

18 V.V. Usikov, *Ekonomicheskaya i sotsial'naya geografiya Kazakhstana* (Almaty: Atamura, 2013), 407.

19 A.S. Beysenova, *Geografiya: materiki i okeany*, 2nd ed. (Almaty: Atamura, 2007), 95.

20 Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, ny: Cornell University Press, 2005).

History

Kazakhstan's central position between East and West, Europe and Asia, is presented as the product of millennia of history. "Kazakhstan from antiquity has absorbed the values of both the cultures of the East and the West."[21] Frequently invoked are images of the Silk Road and the nomadic proto-Kazakh Turkic peoples who traded and communicated with both Europe and Asia. According to President Nazarbayev,

> In the history of the Great Steppe the principal settlements and cities of all the Turkic tribes were located on what is now the territory of Kazakhstan. These were not simply obscure urban settlements but ancient towns whose cultures reached their highest points in the Middle Ages or extended back into still earlier times, when they were renowned not only in the Asian regions of Eurasia but were scarcely less well known in Europe as well. They are still recognized there as vital transport links in the trade that went on between Europe and Asia.[22]

Over and over, Kazakhstan's geographical position between East and West is presented as something inherent to Kazakhstan's identity and a source of strength. Not only has Kazakhstan been enriched by its intermediate position, but that position has allowed it to enrich the cultures of both East and West, Nazarbayev argued in his 2010 book, *In the Stream of History*:

> Our distant ancestors brought new technologies and knowledge into other countries, and these later became sources of global innovation. … There is no need to exaggerate the historical legacy of our forebears. It is so huge and impressive that it requires no mythologizing. The range of our ancestors' cultural and political influences is great—from Egypt to India, from Europe to China—and multi-faceted. This has been so well researched and documented that it does not leave a shadow of doubt about the falsity of the stereotype of the "centuries-old backwardness ofthe Steppe."[23]

This somewhat gauzily imagined past ended with the Russian Empire's con- quest of Kazakhstan, and later the Soviet Union. Here, the official narrative

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21 Nursultan Nazarbaev, *Strategiya transformatsii obshchestva i vozrozhdeniya evraziyskoy tsivilizatsii* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2010), 345.

22 Nursultan Nazarbayev, *The Heart of Eurasia* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: Baspalar Uyi, 2010), 55.

23 Nursultan Nazarbayev and Caroline Walton, *In the Stream of History* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: Baspalar Uyi, 2010), 55.

walks a thin line: it argues that while Kazakhstan was enriched by its ties to Russia (from which much of its "Europeanness" derives), rule from St. Petersburg and Moscow cut off the Kazakhs' ties with other natural partners in East Asia or the Islamic world.

Russian and Soviet domination is consistently presented as distorting Kazakhstan's natural geopolitical position, by orienting its economy solely toward Moscow. In a 1998 interview with the Russian newspaper *Trud*, Nazarbayev said:

> It's common to now talk about the favorable geopolitical position of Kazakhstan. And it really is. However, during the existence of the USSR the center isolated the republic from transit pipelines, nearly neutralizing our geoeconomic advantage. Oil extracted in western Kazakhstan was not processed there, but in Russia, and also gas, in Orenburg … Kazakhstan and Russia have been partners since time immemorial, we traded with one another via the Great Silk Road. And an old friend is better than two new ones. But since then life has become much more multidimensional, so responsible decisions have to take into account many ways forward.24

The Post-independence Era

Followingthecountry'sgeographyandhistory, Kazakhstan'spost-independence period is framed as a process of the country reembracing its Eurasian heritage and its intermediate position between East and West. Ties with Russia are not to be cast off, but rather are to be supplemented with renewed contacts with other countries. This recent period of Kazakhstan's history is heavily personalized, with Nazarbayev playing the leading role in restoring Kazakhstan to its natural geopolitical position.

> Kazakhstan's future is both in Asia and Europe, in East and West. By pursuing exactly this policy we will be able to avert any manifestations of threats to Kazakhstan's security. We will be able to strengthen favorable external conditions by economic and political transformations in our country.25

The ninth-grade textbook that identified the six characteristics of Kazakhstan's geopolitical position, subsequently presents those characteristics as being the foundations for policies adopted by the government. The fact that Kazakhstan

24 Burkitbai Ayagan et al., *The History of Sovereign Kazakhstan: 20 Years of Independence, Historical and Documentary Survey* (Almaty: Rarity, 2011), 205.

25 B.K. Sultanov, ed., *Kazakhstan Today* (Almaty: Kisi, 2010), 127–128.

is landlocked, for example, necessitates cooperation with neighboring countries and participation in international transport corridors. "These must go in every direction—through Russia, China, Central, Southwest (Iran, Turkey) and South (Pakistan) Asia." This "position at the crossroads of various cultures" requires management to avoid conflict, a relatively rare presentation of this intermediate position as a potential vulnerability: "American and European geopoliticians claim that the future of humanity will be affected by a clash of cultures. Our country's government is ensuring peace in our home, enabling the mutual enrichment of cultures." But the position between Europe and Asia is also optimistically framed as an opportunity for Kazakhstan to be a trade hub and for the rest of the world to protect Kazakhstan. "Large flows of goods of foreign countries through Kazakhstan increases their interest in the security of the country." The textbook concludes:

> The geopolitical position of Kazakhstan combines favorable and unfavorable characteristics. Over the years our independent state has entered into the most important international organizations. This allows the international community to be informed about the positions held by Kazakhstan, to stand up for it, to develop cooperation and to strengthenits security.26

Socially and politically, this geographical distinction somewhat predictably means that the West is democratic, and the East authoritarian. "Today the entire world talks about the phenomenon of Nazarbayev that occurred at the junction point of Eastern and Western parts of the world, two civilizations of East and West, and two political systems of totalitarianism and democracy," said Kasym Zhomart-Tokaev, the chair of Kazakhstan's Senate, in a 2007 interview with the newspaper *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*. "It was the president of Kazakhstan who managed to synthesize in his policy both European reformism, pragmatism and adherence to democratic procedures, and Asian traditionalism based on strong connections with the foundations of society."27

The National Analytical Center at Nazarbayev University conducted a focus group of students at the school about their vision for the country in 2050. What the students actually said is unclear, but the story the students told, the necessarily pro-government center determined, was this:

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26 Usikov, *Ekonomicheskaya i sotsial'naya geografiya Kazakhstana*, 407.

27 Mukhamedzhanov, *Kazakh People About the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev*, 148.

> We want to find the best synthesis of European and Asian traditions, cultures, and values incorporated in our lives. From Asian values we want to draw a strong commitment to society with a focus on collective approach and on pursuing long-term interests with diligence. From European values we want to draw a sense of self-realization, creativity, individual initiative, and leadership. But we also want to keep our own values, such as flexibility, adaptability, and openness to new changes.28

Economically, Europe and the West are consistently depicted as embodying a high standard of living, developed economy, and mature technology, but a place whose best days have passed. Asia, on the other hand, is presented as dynamic, growing, and oriented toward the future. Implementation of the country's 2050 development program, the National Analytical Center wrote, will

> determine whether Kazakhstan will be able to take advantage of its geographic location and harvest the best of the two continents to which the country belongs. Kazakhstan could be both a part of the fastest growing region in the world, as Asia drives to make the 21st century its own, and also create for its citizens the quality of life enjoyed by Europe.29

In the foreign policy arena, Kazakhstan's intermediate identity has very obvious implications for foreign policy, and it is used to justify what Nazarbayev has called a "multi-vectored" diplomacy.

> Our country, situated as it is between Europe and Asia, lies between several influential geopolitical blocs: China, Russia and the Muslim world, in which I also include the countries within the Central Asian union.30 This has greatly determined the content of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, and will continue to do so.31

Occasionally, Nazarbayev strays from the discourse emphasizing Kazakhstan's place in between Europe and Asia. At times he has identified more closely with

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28 Aktoky Aitzhanova, *KAZAKHSTAN 2050: Toward a Modern Society for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 66.

29 Ibid., 10.

30 The Central Asian Union was one of Nazarbayev's early, ultimately abandoned, regional integration schemes.

31 Nursultan Nazarbayev and Peter Conradi, *My Life, My Times, and the Future* (Northamptonshire: Pilkington Press, 1999), 177.

Europe. "Kazakhs are Europeans, not Asians," he said in a 2006 interview with the bbc. "We are essentially Europeans. We are raised that way. We have a 100 percent educated population, which you can't say about many other states. … We are a reading and thinking people."32

More often, however, he argues against the notion that Europe is the standard for the entire world, in particular for Kazakhstan. "I have taken dozens of trips abroad in the past five years and that striking diversity of ethnoses, histories, cultures, traditions, models of social organization, values, all of that colorful kaleidoscope of countries and continents has allowed me to make one prosaic conclusion: the 'advance of modernity' does not mean 'westernization' or the universal victory of liberalism."33

Nazarbayev has often cited as a model Singapore's longtime president, Lee Kwan Yew, who has advocated for "Asian values," which Lee argues privilege respect for authority and tradition over individual liberties. And he has repeatedly emphasized that Western values are the result of specific historical processes that took place in Europe, and so are not necessarily applicable to the rest of the world. Nazarbayev explicitly identified Kazakhstan with Asian modernizers in an interview with the Austrian television network ort:

> Democracy in Europe developed over 200-plus years, created a culture of democracy. But in its foundations lie Christian-Protestant values. How can you attach these to an Asian person, who has completely different traditions, understandings, history? So I, having studied the lives and deeds of many Asian figures, and as you know I'm partial to Lee Kwan Yew from Singapore, Makhatiro [Malaysia], Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and others, have come to the conclusion that these people took up very ambitious goals and, unifying the nation around their realization, solved those problems. So I've done what I consider necessary for Kazakhs, for Kazakhstanis and for my country.

In the same interview, he drew a further contrast between Kazakhstan and Europe:

> I look at several European cities, especially in northern Europe, and there aren't any people there. And I go to the vaunted Switzerland, visit the

32 "Nazarbaev: Kazakhi—evropeytsy, a ne aziaty," *BBC*, September 28, 2006 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/international/newsid_5386000/5386272.stm).

33 Nazarbaev, *Strategiya transformatsii obshchestva i vozrozhdeniya evraziyskoy tsivilizatsii*, 413.

> towns—no people. Here life is bubbling, there are cranes, construction is going on, people are studying, they go to the gym. Restaurants are full night and day, that is, there is what is necessary. The nation is young, looking forward, and lives a full, dynamic life.34

Azerbaijan: Bridge between East and West

Like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan consistently presents its geographical position as an intermediate one. While this in-betweenness is most often presented as being between East and West, the narrative about Azerbaijan's geography also emphasizes the North–South axis, usually in terms of its history of being divided by Russia and Iran. While Kazakhstan's narrative about its geography emphasizes the ancient, inherent fusion of East and West, Azerbaijan is much more often presented as an essentially "Eastern" country that is trying to become to some degree "Western," which is presented as synonymous with modern. Azerbaijan's position at the "crossroads of civilizations" is often depicted as a source of strength, as it is in Kazakhstan, but even more often as a vulnerability because larger powers have throughout history sought to control Azerbaijan's strategic territory. While this position between East and West is portrayed as a weakness, Azerbaijan's position at the center of the Turkic world is, by contrast, considered a source of strength. This has implications for the country's current politics and geopolitics, as the leadership is called to maintain Azerbaijan's national identity against Western cultural and geopolitical expansion. Emphasizing Azerbaijan's vulnerable position allows Baku to argue that a strong central hand is needed to steer the ship of state through these treacherous waters.

Geography

Azerbaijan tells a less consistent story about its place on the globe than Kazakhstan does. Again looking at ninth grade geography textbooks, the 2007 edition presented Azerbaijan as being in Europe, but the 2010 and 2012 editions described it as part of Asia, specifically southwest Asia. This latter region, as is frequent in the Azerbaijani narrative, has three characteristics: its position astride transcontinental trade routes, the presence of oil and gas, andspirituality.

34 Ayagan et al., *The History of Sovereign Kazakhstan*, 557.

> The region is located at the intersection of transportation routes between Europe and Asia. It is one of the most ancient centers of world culture. The three most widespread religions of the world emerged here— Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The presence of rich reserves of oil and gas have increased the role of the region in the political and economic life of the world.

Azerbaijan is in this region, the later books argue, "but for the goal of widening economic-political ties with the countries of Europe Azerbaijan participates in various European organizations."35

This book's 2007 claim that Azerbaijan is in Europe is the exception. Most often—following the conventional border along the Kuma-Manych depression—it (along with all of the Caucasus) is portrayed as being in Asia. "Our republic along with its historical neighbors, Georgia and Armenia, is located in the Caspian region of Southwest Asia. The countries located on this small territory of the South Caucasus, strongly differ from one another by their nature, national characteristics and economic way of life," the country's seventh-grade geography textbook writes (without elaborating on those "strong differences").36 "Southwest Asia is one of the centers of the ancient civilized world. … The most important natural resources [*bogatstvy*] of the region are oil and gas. … Southwest Asia is a multinational region. This region is the birthplace of three great world religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Located here are centers of holy religion—Mecca, Medina, Karbala, Najaf, Meshhed, Jerusalem, Hebron, etc."37

Nevertheless, in spite of the consensus that the country is in Asia, it also is regularly presented as being "between," "at the junction of," or "at the cross-roads of" Europe and Asia. For example, the 11th grade geography textbook notes:

> Azerbaijan occupies an extremely favorable geopolitical position on the junction of West and East, between Europe and Asia …. For a long time Azerbaijan was Russia's window to the East. Possessing sufficient reserves of oil, Azerbaijan at the same time is located next to the countries of the Near East and Central Asia, distinguished by their rich oil and gas resources. This fact even further strengthens the interest of Western Europe and the United States in Azerbaijan in order to control the entire

35 Tofik Geraizade, *Geografiya (ekonomicheskaya i sotsial'naya geografiya mira)* (Baku: Aspoliqraf, 2012), 95.

36 Ogtay Alkhasov, *Fizicheskaya geografiya materikov i okeanov* (Baku: Tahsil, 2009), 137.

37 Ibid.

> Eurasian space. Azerbaijan is located on the most important routes linking Turkey to the rest of the Turkic world.38

As in the Kazakhstan case, Azerbaijan's supposed racial identity contradicts its geographical identity. Azerbaijan's textbooks follow the same Soviet racial theory as do Kazakhstan's, dividing Eurasia into Europeoids and Mongoloids. But Azerbaijanis, despite their position in Asia, are portrayed as Europeoids. A university textbook on population geography writes:

> In the cis [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries the majority of the population (86 percent) belongs to the Europeoid race, representing all three of its groups but with a marked predominance of the intermediate [*perekhodnoi*] forms. To the northern group belong peoples of the Baltics and northwestern groups of Russians, the southern group includes the majority of people in the Caucasus.39

The 11th grade geography textbook, on the geography of the Turkic world, writes under the heading "Racial makeup of the population":

> In ancient Chinese, Latin and Greek sources, Turks were considered part of the Mongoloid race. However the overwhelming majority of Turkic peoples differ from Mongoloids in their external appearance. Many contemporary researchers put Turks in the southern branch of the Europeoid race. Another group of anthropologists calls the Turkic peoples Turanoids, considering them part of an intermediate race.40

History

Azerbaijan's geographical position is consistently represented as making the country vulnerable to the machinations of outside powers. A university textbook on the history of the Caucasus wrote in its introduction:

> There was never an age when the people of the Caucasus were not required to stand up for their ideals. The Caucasus has never had peace either internally or externally. Because of its rich natural gifts it was for

38 Museib Museibov, Vusat Efendiev, and Narmina Seyfullaeva, *Geografiya tyurkskogo mira* (Baku: Aspoliqraf, 2011), 46.

39 V.A. Efendiev and S.K. Nagiev, *Geografiya naseleniya* (Baku: Izdatel'stvo bgu, 2005), 127–128.

40 Museibov, Efendiev, and Seyfullayeva, *Geografiya tyurkskogo mira*, 30.

> many centuries an attractive region for conquering invaders. In this textbook the long struggle of the people of the Caucasus against the aggressive actions of neighboring countries will be examined.41

The role of Russia in Azerbaijan's geopolitical history is treated somewhat similarly as it is in Kazakhstan—a mixture of positive and negative influences. Azerbaijan is said to have gotten its exposure to Western culture and ideas through its contact with Russia, but Russia (and the Soviet Union) also artificially cut Azerbaijan off from its Eastern partners. Yet, there is a noticeable difference in emphasis; in Kazakhstan the relationship with Russia is viewed as one chapter in the long history of its Eurasian identity, while in Azerbaijan, Russia's role is more artificial and decisive. Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father as the country's president in 2003, writing in *I Believe In My Azerbaijan*:

> According to the present information, nearly 30 million Azerbaijanis live in Iran. But they are citizens of Iran. Naturally there is a difference between the Azerbaijanis living in Iran and Azerbaijan. Our language, religion, customs, and traditions, even the meals are the same. Many things are identical. But the difference which I told you is that we have been in the compound with Russia for 200 years and approached the European culture. Azerbaijan mastered all European values as the European and civil country. But the Azerbaijanis in Iran live with the values of Iran's sphere.42

This narrative about how Azerbaijan's geographic position influenced its historical development is presented in a 2006 book, *Azerbaijan: Short History of Statehood*, written by the director of the Institute of History at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Yagub Mahmudov. While Azerbaijan had ties both to the East and West, those with the East were "traditional" while those with the West had to be cultivated.

> During the rule of Uzun Hasan,43 the credence of Azerbaijan in the relations between the Eastern and Western world had also augmented. In addition to the Eastern countries with which Azerbaijan had close relationship traditionally, vast diplomatic ties were established with the

41 Irada Huseynova, *Istoriya naroda Kavkaza* (Baku: Tahsil, 2006), 9.

42 İlham Aliev and Mikhail Vital'evich Ozerov, *Il'kham Aliev: ya veryu v moy Azerbaydzhan* (Moscow: Boslen, 2007), 86.

43 A Turkic king who ruled lands including present-day Azerbaijan in the fifteenth century.

> European states as well. During the reign of Uzun Hasan the Azerbaijani envoys had held several diplomatic meetings and negotiations at the palaces of the rulers of many neighboring Eastern countries as well as different European countries such as Republic of Venice, Papacy, Kingdom of Naples, Albania, Hungary, Poland, Germany, Kingdom of Burgundy, Cyprus, Rodeos, Trabzon Empire, and Great Russian Kingdom. The mother of Uzun Hasan, Sara Khatun, the first lady diplomat in the Eastern world, played an important role in the meetings conducted with the foreign countries. There was a permanent embassy of the Republic of Venice in Tabriz at the palace of Uzun Hasan. Azerbaijan was converted into the country of high influence in resolution of the international is- sues concerning both the East and the West.44

But the position of Azerbaijan between Europe and Asia has historically, as today, been a vulnerability:

> The fact that Azerbaijan plays the intermediator role of Golden Bridge between Europe and Asia as well as Middle East and Russia is a cause of great perturbation and uneasiness for the enemies of the Azerbaijani people who cannot tolerate the sovereignty and ever-increasing strength of Azerbaijan as an independent and self-determining state. That's why, as a country possessing rich natural resources and reserves, Azerbaijan inevitable encounters ceaseless political, military, spiritual pressures and immeasurable economic constraints. Due to the strategic importance of Azerbaijan both in terms of its growing geopolitical significance and vast natural resources, such an interference on the part of the intrusive antagonists of the Azerbaijani people will remain as unavoidable and inescapable in future as it has always been during the past years.45

The Post-independence Era

Given the current version of the history of Azerbaijan as presented in official discourse, it is not surprising that much of the narrative about Azerbaijan's present-day geopolitics closely resembles that of its historical geopolitics. Azerbaijan and its neighborhood are again repeatedly described in terms of being the site of competition between bigger powers. There is an emphasis on the need for strong leadership to manage this position, as in Kazakhstan, but in Azerbaijan the emphasis is more defensive, on protecting the country from

44 Yaqub Mahmudov, *Azerbaijan: Short History of Statehood* (Baku: Tahsil, 2006), 35.45 Ibid., 122–123.

threats, and less on what the country can offer the rest of the world. There is a persistent motif of threats coming from the West, framed both in terms of national identity and geopolitics. As in the narrative about history, Azerbaijan is presented as a country capable of building ties with Europe and the West, but with an essentially Eastern identity.

Azerbaijan's vulnerable geopolitical position is framed primarily in terms of a global competition for resources, a game whose players are geopolitical or civilizational blocs. According to Ilham Aliyev,

> Speaking in sports terminology, I will name two fundamental hurdles in our "race" [*zabeg*]. The first is the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno Karabakh conflict … The second is the vulnerable geopolitical and geoeconomic position of Azerbaijan. It's the only country bordering Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the only focus of competition between great regional powers and other extraregional powers (primarily Western), interested in access to the Caspian energy resources.46

Later in the book, he mentions Zbigniew Brzezinski's analysis of Azerbaijan as the geopolitical "stopper in the bottle" of the Caspian region's access to the West,47 and that the competition for those resources between the West and other powers will lead to conflict:

> It [the region] is, understandably, very alluring, not only because of the presence of huge reserves of oil and gas on the bottom of the Caspian and the real prospect of turning it into the "world gas station" of the 21st century. The region has a key position in the political balance of competing world powers. A gradual shift of conflict from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caspian is occurring.48

The difference between the internal and external Azerbaijani narratives is of- ten large. (This is true in the Kazakh case, as well, but to a much lesser degree.) In his remarks to Western audiences, the two Aliyevs, father and son, emphasize the desire to become part of Western structures, but even in these cases tend not to justify this as a natural result of Azerbaijan's Western or European identity, but rather frame it in terms of a process that the country has to carry

46 ~~Aliev~~ and Ozerov, *Il'kham Aliev*, 230.

47 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997).

48 Aliev and Ozerov, *Il'kham Aliev*, 300.

out. Speaking in 2000 at a NATO summit in the United States, then-President Heydar Aliyev said:

> The Republic of Azerbaijan, which possesses great natural and energy resources, which occupies a rare geographical and strategic position in the intersection of Europe and Asia, has taken the road of building a democratic country based on market economy and complete integration to the world economy.49

Similarly, at a 2001 speech at the Council of Europe upon being admitted tothat group, the elder Aliyev declared:

> Today the process of democratic development in Azerbaijan is irreversible, a firm guarantee of the rule of law has been created. The acceptance of Azerbaijan into the Council of Europe is not only a recognition of its independent, sovereign, democratic, secular government, but also be- gins a new stage in the development of Azerbaijan's government as a full member of the European family.50

Most often, integration with the West is presented in economic, not political terms. The authors of the country's ninth-grade geography textbook write:

> Our country is connected to the process of globalization as a "fuel-raw materials" country. This sector, closely tied with transnational companies and bringing stable income, will likely for a long time be the main driver of the economic development of our country. In addition, in the process of globalization our country is rationally using the advantages of its exceptional geographical position. The passage of highways, known as the "Eurasian corridor," through the territory of Azerbaijan will enable the integration of all types of transport in our republic into the world transportation system. For the transit of Caspian oil to world markets the only reliable route is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.51

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49 Secretariat of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *For Peace and Security: Visit of Heydar Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, to the United States of America in Connection with the 50 Year Anniversary of NATO: April 22–27, 1999* (Baku: Nurol Printing & Packaging Industry, 2000), 14.

50 Sona Gurbanova, *Geydar Aliev i vneshnepoliticheskiy kurs Azerbaydzhanskoy Respubliki* (Baku: Sarq-Qarb, 2010), 33.

51 Geraizade, *Geografiya (ekonomicheskaya i sotsial'naya geografiya mira)*, 54.

And as in the historical narrative, the Turkic world is presented as Azerbaijan's position of strength. "In the contemporary era the central region of Eurasia— the territory where Turkic peoples are settled—is the guarantee of securing peace in the entire world, the fusion of western and eastern civilizations," the authors of the country's 11th-grade geography textbook write.52

The role of Azerbaijan's government, in particular its presidents, in maintaining the delicate geopolitical balance between an Eastern identity and Western integration is emphasized in the university textbook on the history of the Caucasus:

> It's obvious that intensive socio-economic and political development in the Caucasus requires peace. Without attaining peace, it's impossible to talk about economic, socio-political and cultural integration between East and West. Today, a great contribution to the work of peace and strengthening of brotherly relations between the peoples of the Caucasus was made by national leader of the Azerbaijani people Heydar Aliyev.53

Azerbaijan's geographical vulnerability is usually presented in terms of a threat from the West, which uses its discourse about its values and their supposed superiority over Eastern values in the service of its geopolitical ambitions. Ali Hasanov, a senior adviser to Ilham Aliyev, wrote the country's university textbook on geopolitics. While that book barely mentions Azerbaijan (he has promised that a book solely on Azerbaijan's geopolitics is coming) he does allude to Brzezinski as a guide to us ambitions in the region: "In his work Brzez- inski uncovers the open and secret goals of American hegemony in the world. He openly states that the us is interested in maintaining geopolitical pluralismin the Eurasian space."54

Another senior official, Remiz Mehtiev, has written a series of books on Azerbaijan's geopolitics and foreign policy in which he puts forth a consistently anti-Western point of view. In one, *On the Road to Democracy*, he praises Japan, India, and even Pakistan as models to be emulated for being strong, active in the world, and yet maintaining their eastern identity. He criticizes the European Union as being a "Christian club" and praises the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a "new Asian axis" that is supplanting a decaying Europe:

> This shift is one of the drivers of an "identity crisis." In the current context it should be noted that the identity crisis is caused also by another aspect

52 Museibov, Efendiev, and Seyfullaeva, *Geografiya tyurkskogo mira*, 7.

53 Huseynova, *Istoriya naroda Kavkaza*, 19.

54 Ali Hasanov, *Geopolitika* (Baku: Zardaba ltd, 2012), 170.

> of 21st century world politics—the autarchic character of European foreign policy. To a great degree oriented toward solving its internal social and political problems, Europe is more and more turning into a closed space and has nearly fully lost its influence in Africa and the Near East.55

While still advocating for integration into Western structures, he warns Azerbaijan against "unthinking Westernization" and attempts to identify an "Azerbaijani credo" that needs to be maintained:

> [E]verything that contradicts Western norms and standards is represented as bad and a cause of stagnation. And everything taken from the West, by contrast, is unthinkingly considered progress and every deviation from it—reaction and repression. In this way, the people of an un- thinkingly Westernizing state gradually gets accustomed to despis[ing] everything indigenous and national, to their own traditions and customs, to their own identity and uniqueness in favor of Western values.
>
> The realities of the contemporary world and their underlying processes are changing Azerbaijani identity. But it should be noted that in contrast to the United States, which is an artificial state formation, the identity of the Azerbaijani state has a historical essence and was formed as a result of an ethnic core element, but also territorial-geographical, cultural, and religious elements. The people of Azerbaijan historically settled this territory.
>
> Azerbaijanis have forged their contemporary identity in the crucible of the struggle for survival and gaining state independence. Today it is becoming enriched further by a "political credo," which can be called the "Azerbaijani credo." Its components are national solidarity, equality, freedom of the individual, justice, high educational and cultural potential, democracy, a liberal economy, modernism and integration into the West.56

Thus, Azerbaijani identity is to be protected against an encroaching West. Here there is in fact strikingly little to connect Azerbaijan to Europe. But it remains consistent with the discourse of Azerbaijan being vulnerable to the large powers or civilizations surrounding it, and the need for internal cohesion and a strong national identity to counter that threat.

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55 R.E. Mekhtiev, *Na puti k demokratii: razmyshleniya o nasledii* (Baku: Şărq-Qărb, 2007), 620.

56 Ibid., 603.

Conclusion

Although they tell different stories about their respective positions between East and West, Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan nevertheless have engaged this discourse far more than any other country in the former Soviet Union. And the respective stories have much in common. The fact of being "between Europe and Asia" or "East and West," is presented as having a geo- graphic or historical origin, with political and geopolitical implications today. Both countries emphasize the strategic importance of their place on the globe, they both argue for an ambiguous or multi-vector foreign policy orientation, and they both justify authoritarian rule.

Examining the East–West discourse as deployed in independent Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and comparing it with previous cases in history where the discourse has been prominently used—such as Peter the Great's "Window on the West," the Eurasianism of post-revolution and post-1991 Russia, and Ataturk's Turkey—several common themes emerge. There are three particular ways this discourse can position a country politically:

- Determining a particular geopolitical or strategic orientation, either "West- ern" or "Eastern";
- Claiming a particular geopolitical or strategic importance, either as a power or as a smaller country worthy of attention from or favors from larger powers; or
- Justifying a particular domestic political program, either authoritarianism or liberalism.

Russia under Peter the Great used the notion of being between Europe and Asia to stake its claim as being a part of Europe, albeit with Asian colonies. Later Eurasianists argued, to the contrary, that Russia as a "Eurasian" state was a fundamentally different civilization from, and destined to be opposed to, Eu- rope. Various actors in twentieth-century Turkey have used the notion of being between East and West to argue for different geopolitical stances, either as part of Europe or as a more "Eastern" power. The Eastern European states, after the end of the Cold War, have used the discourse in service of their aspirations to be part of Europe, albeit on the eastern edge of it. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, thus, are somewhat unique in using the notion of being "between East and West" to literally mean that, to try to justify ties both with the West and with the East, without committing to or rejecting either.

The discourse is used to justify a country's place in the world geopolitical scheme, but in ways that seem directly related to its size. For the Russians, it is

used in the service of claiming to be a great power; for Turkey, a regional power; and for the countries of Eastern Europe as well as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, minor powers but with a strategically vital position justifying additional attention from greater powers.

Russia under Peter the Great used the idea of being part Europe, part Asia, as part of his Europeanizing project, including liberal political reforms. The Eurasianists, however, used the notion of being a separate civilization from Europe to justify a different, more strict, political system. In Turkey, the notion of being "between East and West" is most often used in domestic political terms as a means of emphasizing the country's strategic vulnerability and thus the need for a strong government hand. In post-Cold War Eastern Europe, the discourse is used in the service of joining a Europe that has particular political requirements for membership, i.e., being democratic, though the discourse it- self doesn't seem to have much to say about domestic politics. In both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the discourse is used to explain why, though the countries both may want to associate themselves with Europe economically, politically they are different from Europe, and thus need an "Eastern" strong hand.

One potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be to look more closely at the differences in the stories that Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan tell about being located between East and West. In Kazakhstan's official discourse, the country's place at the crossroads of civilizations has allowed them to incorporate the best of both East and West, fusing the two into a unique Eurasian identity that offers valuable lessons for the rest of the world.

"Central Asia since ancient times has been considered the crossroads be- tween East and West, the place where Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, meet, where not only do the continents fuse but exchanges of cultural values, ideas, and goods take place," Nazarbayev said in an April 26, 2000, speech at the Eurasian Economic Summit in Almaty. "We can say that in an age of global integration, when traditional borders and barriers yield to a new reality— contemporary communications networks, advanced technology—our geopolitical position is our greatest treasure."57

To Azerbaijan, by contrast, this in-between position poses a threat. It has meant that across millennia, it has been situated in the borderlands of larger powers that have sought and conquered Azerbaijani territory. It also represents a conflict between the urban, "Westernized" elite and a rural, "Eastern" populace. In contrast to Kazakhstan's outward-looking Eurasian identity,

57 Cited in Nazarbayev, *Strategiya transformatsii obshchestva i vozrozhdeniya evraziyskoy tsivilizatsii*, 429.

Azerbaijan's in-between position is inward-looking, something to be managed with a strong hand. According to Yagub Mahmudov, director of the Institute of History at the Azerbaijani National Academy of Sciences,

> The fact that Azerbaijan plays the intermediator role of Golden Bridge between Europe and Asia as well as Middle East and Russia is a cause of great perturbation and uneasiness for the enemies of the Azerbaijani people who cannot tolerate the sovereignty and ever-increasing strength of Azerbaijan as an independent and self-determining state. That's why, as a country possessing rich natural resources and reserves, Azerbaijan inevitably encounters ceaseless political, military, spiritual pressures and immeasurable economic constraints. Due to the strategic importance of Azerbaijan both in terms of its growing geopolitical significance and vast natural resources, such an interference on the part of the intrusive antagonists of the Azerbaijani people will remain as unavoidable and inescapable in future as it has always been during the past years.58

While a full explanation of the differences between Azerbaijan's and Kazakhstan's respective stories about their geographic position is beyond the scope of this article, the respective narratives do dovetail well with the major crises that the young states faced in the early 1990s. Azerbaijan experienced a massive crisis in that period: the war with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan's loss in that war was blamed (with much justification) on the feckless leadership of the pre-Aliyev period (Heydar Aliyev became president in October 1993) as well as on assistance given to the Armenians by Russia and by the West.59 A narrative of threat and the need for internal cohesion suits this situation.

Kazakhstan faced a different set of challenges. With ethnic Kazakhs outnumbered by Russians and other European Slavs, Nazarbayev had to navigate the delicate path of creating a Kazakh state without alienating its European-origin residents. In this context, a "Eurasian" identity that acknowledges the contributions of both Kazakhs and Russians allowed the state to rhetorically

58 Mahmudov, *Azerbaijan: Short History of Statehood*.

59 Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

create a place in the country for Russians and to tamp down any nascent Kazakh ethnic nationalism.60

The notions of Europe and Asia and discourses of East and West may seem historical anachronisms unsuited for this globalizing era, as Europe and the West are giving up their previously dominant position in the world. But the experiences of post-independence Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan show us that this narrative still has some life, some meaning, and some role to play in Eurasia.

60 Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradoxical Legacy of Eurasianism in Contemporary Eurasia," in *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Series in Russian and East European Studies), ed. Mark Bassin, Sergeĭ Glebov, and Marlène Laruelle (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).