

The background of the cover is a photograph of a subway station. Two escalators lead up from a dark tunnel towards a bright, arched opening at the top. The escalators are flanked by rows of glowing spherical lights on poles. The overall atmosphere is warm and modern.

ZOIS

Zentrum für Osteuropa-
und internationale Studien
*Centre for East European
and International Studies*

No. 4/2020 · September 2020

ZOIS REPORT

**KAZAKH AND/OR KAZAKHSTANI?
THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF
THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN
AND ITS CITIZENS**

Beate Eschment in collaboration with Taissiya Sutormina

Content

02	Summary
03	Introduction
04	Kazakh and Kazakhstani?—A chronological review
07	Diverse assessments of an ambiguous concept
11	Almaty residents’ identities—survey findings
14	Kazakhs and other Kazakhstanis
17	Conclusion
17	Imprint

Summary

In the early 1990s, the leadership of the new Republic of Kazakhstan responded to the challenges posed by the state’s multiethnicity by adopting a dual approach, promoted from the top down, of ethnic Kazakh identity for the Kazakh population and, simultaneously, a civic Kazakhstani identity for all citizens irrespective of ethnicity.

- This approach, which is strongly associated with the country’s First President, Nursultan Nazarbaev, is hailed by officialdom as a great success, with a unified nation of Kazakhstanis deemed to have been achieved in 2015. However, some more critical observers and academics point to an ongoing relationship of tension between the two forms of identity and between Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs in the real world.
- The results of a ZOiS survey conducted among Almaty’s multiethnic population in autumn 2019 show a strong predominance of ethnic self-identification among respondents for the first time; however, civic Kazakhstani identity also resonates so strongly that it is appropriate to refer to the population’s “multiple identity”.
- However, several social and political factors indicate that there are multiple interpretations of the term “Kazakhstani” as well, with considerable differences between Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs here. For the Kazakh majority, the terms “Kazakh” and “Kazakhstani” are largely synonymous; as they see it, there is no (longer a) special role for their non-Kazakh fellow citizens. It

is precisely for this reason that non-Kazakhs attach importance to their Kazakhstani identity as a form of protection against assimilation or exclusion.

- First President Nursultan Nazarbaev’s legacy to his successor Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, then, is not a united nation of Kazakhstanis but a Kazakh-dominated country in which many small ethnic groups fear for their survival. It remains to be seen which course Tokaev will pursue in relation to nationalities policy.

Introduction

“A Kazakh or Kazakhstani nation? This has been an unresolved dilemma for the past 25 years.”¹ Underlying this observation by a Kazakh political scientist is a further question: does the multiethnic Republic of Kazakhstan view itself in ethnic terms as the state of the Kazakh people, and/or in civic terms as a state of all citizens irrespective of ethnicity—or both simultaneously, as Nursultan Nazarbaev’s government decreed in the early 1990s? And was this dual approach successful? The answer to this latter question continues to be significant for predicting Kazakhstan’s internal stability. Above all, it is a benchmark for assessing the success of the nationalities policy pursued by the First President until he stepped down on 19 March 2019. The conceptual development and implementation of this dual approach coincide with his time in office and reflect his own strong and active commitment to this ideal, particularly in the 1990s.

For Kazakhstan’s officialdom, the success of Nazarbaev’s policy is beyond question: the multiethnic population’s achievement of unity as a single nation of Kazakhstanis was proclaimed in 2015. However, critical voices in Kazakhstan, as well as international human rights experts and academics, have been warning for some time about the Kazakhisation of the country or dispute the popular acceptance of a dual identity that was imposed from the top down.

A ZOiS survey conducted from 26 September to 26 October 2019 by *Obshchestvennoe Mnenie* (‘Public Opinion’ Research Institute) among 1,500 residents (Kazakhs, Russians and members of five smaller ethnic groups) of Almaty shows that contrary to previous assertions, the large majority of respondents have a very strong sense of ethnic identity but also self-identify to a high degree in civic terms, i.e. they have a multiple national identity.

1 Talgat Ismagambetov, *Natsstroitel'stvo v Kazakhstane: mezhdru kazakhstanskim narodom i natsiei*, CA-portal.ru, 14.6.2018, <http://www.ca-portal.ru/article:43289>. All Internet sources accessed 17.6.2020.

This finding appears to confirm the success of the government's dual approach. However, if it is analysed in relation to its domestic and social context, the conclusion to be drawn is that there are considerable differences between Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs as regards their interpretation of the term "Kazakhstani". For Kazakhs, it is obviously synonymous with "Kazakh". The non-Kazakh population, by contrast, has embraced the notion of "Kazakhstani" precisely because it appears to offer some protection against burgeoning Kazakhisation. Unity thus exists in name alone; the reality suggests that there is reason to be concerned about growing Kazakhisation.

Kazakh and Kazakhstani? — A chronological review

When it gained its independence in December 1991, Kazakhstan was a multinational state inhabited by approximately 130 ethnic groups—and so it has remained, despite significant quantitative shifts in the meantime. In addition to the eponymous Kazakhs, Kazakhstan was (and is) home to a substantial Russian population—the second largest group—as well as other ethnic groups which migrated to Kazakhstan during the Tsarist or Soviet era, such as Tatars and Ukrainians, or which were deported to Kazakhstan by Stalin (Germans, Poles, Koreans and others). There is considerable variation in the urban-rural and countrywide distribution and population concentration of these groups, as well as striking differences in their socioeconomic status.

Due to this configuration, the leadership of the newly independent state—whose members were all Soviet-era politicians, ethnically Kazakh but mainly Russian-speaking—under President Nursultan Nazarbaev faced particular challenges in relation to nation-building, and associated with it, the preservation of internal stability and legitimation of their own rule. What status should be conferred on Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs in the young republic? There was a broad spectrum of opinion at first; on the one hand, there were calls from Kazakh nationalists for a Kazakh-speaking state of the Kazakhs in which non-Kazakhs would at best be granted citizenship and otherwise merely be tolerated; on the other, there was the concept of a multinational state in which Kazakhs and all other nationalities would live together on the basis of equality.

The leadership in the mid-1990s opted for a dual approach with a profoundly Soviet imprint. Even the terminology used—Kazakh/Kazakhstani—originated in the Soviet era; above all, the notion of ethnicity as a stable, objective factor was a component of Soviet ideology. The Republic of Kazakhstan was to be the homeland of Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis alike—in other words, of all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity. This dual approach to identity was enshrined in numerous documents over the past 30 years or so, as well as in speeches by Kazakhstani politicians, on posters and of course in practical policy measures. However, there was never any clear definition or demarcation of the two concepts. In speeches, government programmes and documents, Kazakh or Kazakhstani identity was emphasised, downplayed or modified as the need arose, depending on the language, audience and context. This makes the task of concisely summarising the two concepts

more challenging. Looking back over almost 30 years, however, an overall trend can be discerned.

Kazakh identity is understood as monoethnic, primordial: the Republic of Kazakhstan was formed on indigenous Kazakh soil² and for that reason, it is the ethnic heartland of the Kazakh people, who have no other country anywhere in the world. After decades of humiliation in the Soviet era, the Kazakhs' own history and nomadic culture were to be rediscovered and enhanced in status. The Kazakh language became the state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Constitution, Art. 7,1), even though it was only spoken by a minority of the population in 1991.

In parallel, a multiethnic civic, i.e. Kazakhstani identity was established, which was extended to all citizens, granting them equal constitutional rights and protecting them from discrimination (Constitution, Art. 14). The key phrase in the 1990s was: “Kazakhstan – our common home”. Indeed, multiethnicity was actively promoted, for like the Kazakhs, all other ethnic groups were meant to devote themselves, in (overtly non-political) local organisations to the rediscovery of their own history, culture and language within the framework of the common home. Their common language was Russian, which was granted special status under the Constitution (Art. 7,2). In order to promote the development and implementation of interethnic relations and also as a symbol of the “Kazakhstani” concept, the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan (*Assambleya Narodov Kazakhstana* = ANK) was founded in 1995, consisting of representatives of all the country's ethnic associations (EKO)s³ (1995: 28; 2020: 394) and with advisory rather than legislative powers.

Until the early 2000s, the nationality issue played a major role in official policy and was closely connected with the person of Nazarbaev, who positioned himself as the guarantor of interethnic stability. In particular, the institutions associated with Kazakhstani identity (ANK and EKO)s are described as having been “an apple of the President's eye”.⁴ With some justification, non-Kazakhs still regard the First President—even after his resignation in 2019—as their protector.

Non-Kazakhs still regard the First President as their protector.

In 2002, it was then determined that the national cultures had reached a sufficiently advanced stage in their revival that it was no longer necessary to promote the rebirth of the individual ethnic groups. The focus shifted to the development of a shared Kazakhstani identity and Kazakhstani patriotism as the primary purpose of the ANK, with the Kazakh language and culture now assigned a central and unifying role for all the country's citizens.⁵

Just five years later, as part of the 2007 constitutional reform, the ANK was granted constitutional status and the right to send nine of its elected

2 The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty 1995, Preamble, https://www.akorda.kz/en/official_documents/constitution.

3 The abbreviation “EKO” (Etno-kul'turnye Ob"edineniya, i.e. ethno-cultural associations) is used throughout this paper. Initially, however, the associations were termed “Natsional'no-kul'turnye tsentry” (national culture centres).

4 Jorn Holm-Hansen, Territorial and ethno-cultural self-government in nation-building Kazakhstan, NIBR Report 1997:7, p. 64.

5 O Strategii Assamblei naroda Kazakhstana i Polozhenii ob Assamblee naroda Kazakhstana, Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, 1.5.2002.

In the Doctrine of National Unity, the role of the Kazakhs is central.

representatives directly to Parliament; it was also renamed the Assembly of **People** of Kazakhstan (not “peoples” as before) in an oblique reference to the unity of the population.

However, the public—or at least those elements with an interest in politics—remained divided, evident in 2009 during the unveiling of the Doctrine of National Unity, whose development Nazarbaev had entrusted to the ANK. This draft was a profoundly Kazakhstani document which, while emphasising the special role of the Kazakh language, otherwise focused on the development of all the ethnic groups on the basis of equality. However, in 2010, following vocal protests by Kazakh nationalists, a document was adopted which no longer bore any resemblance to the draft; even the term “Kazakhstani” had disappeared. Instead, the role of the Kazakhs in the state was described as central, with the other ethnic groups to be clustered around the Kazakhs.⁶

In summer 2015, Nazarbaev then announced the end point, as it were, of the development. The country’s population, he said, no longer consisted of representatives of individual ethnic groups; now, a unified nation of Kazakhstanis with equal rights and a sense of identification with their state had emerged.⁷ Typical slogans in circulation since then are: “One people—one nation” and “Unity in diversity”.

In previous years too, economic aspects (e.g. economic performance and competitiveness) rather than national issues in the narrower sense had increasingly been declared to be unifying factors for the Kazakhstani nation. Nationalities policy per se played an ever more subordinate role for Kazakhstan’s officialdom. Various programmes to promote unity and patriotism, such as *Mangilik El* (2016),⁸ emphasise the common history, culture and language of all people living in Kazakhstan and state that the cultural diversity of the people of Kazakhstan should be preserved. Yet at the same time, the message is one of a “unified nation” and the content is strongly Kazakh in orientation. Reports of events with potential to shake up the image of a unified Kazakhstani people, such as local interethnic conflicts, were suppressed—albeit with decreasing success in the age of the Internet and social media; likewise, “the term ‘Kazakhstani nation’ has been gradually downsized in the public discourse.”⁹

6 Doktrina natsional'nogo edinstva Kazakhstana, Proekt, Astana 2009, <https://www.zakon.kz/152641-doktrina-nacionalnogo-edinstva.html>; Doktrina natsional'nogo edinstva, (2010) https://assembly.kz/ank/Доктрина_национального_единства.pdf.

7 Prezident zayavil o tom, chto v strane sformirovalas' kazakhstanskaya natsiya, <https://kapital.kz/gosudarstvo/43192/prezident-zayavil-o-tom-chto-v-strane-sformirovalas-kazakhstanskaya-natsiya.html>.

8 Patrioticheskij akt Mangilik El, Pol'nyi tekst, Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, 26.4.2016, <https://www.kazpravda.kz/news/politika/patrioticheskij-akt-mangilik-el-polnii-tekst>

9 Aziz Burkhanov, Multiculturalism and Nation-Building in Kazakhstan: Trends in Media Discourse, State Policy, and Popular Perceptions, *The Muslim World* 110(2019)1, pp. 24–39, here p. 33.

PICTURE 1

Monument to the Kazakh Victims of the Dzhut in Nur-Sultan

Source: Beate Eschment

PICTURE 2

Monument of the Oppressed Ethnic Groups' Gratitude to the Kazakh People in Nur-Sultan

Source: Beate Eschment

Diverse assessments of an ambiguous concept

Increasingly, “Kazakhstani” has undoubtedly come to mean “Kazakh” over the years. Naturally, this shift was not only expressed in words. There are practical examples as well. In the 1990s, the narrative of the shared experience of suffering during the Soviet era (without any anti-Russian rhetoric in Kazakhstan) became a constituent element of civic identity, unifying almost all the country’s citizens. Kazakhs suffered terribly as a result of forced settlement and collectivisation (known as *Dzhut* in Kazakh). In addition, large numbers of non-Kazakhs from various ethnic groups were deported to Kazakhstan as victims of Stalinist oppression. These latter groups would tell, often unprompted, how Kazakhs—despite facing starvation themselves—had helped the new arrivals survive in the steppes in winter. Over the next 20 years, this evolved into a form of state-ordered gratitude. 2016 saw the introduction, at Nazarbayev’s initiative, of the Day of Gratitude, when non-Kazakhs “are supposed to praise Kazakh hospitality towards their ethnic groups”¹⁰. Nowadays, official representatives of the small ethnic groups take every opportunity to express their gratitude for the official nationalities policy as well. In 2018, a “Monument of the Oppressed Ethnic Groups’ Gratitude to the Kazakh People” (*Qazaq eline myn algys*) was erected in a new district of Astana. A new memorial to the Kazakh victims of the *Dzhut* is located several kilometres away in the old city centre. In other words, what was once the shared fate of Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs is nowadays commemorated separately in both thematic and visual terms.

► PICTURES 1 + 2

10 Ibid.

Demographic changes shifted the centre of gravity in favour of the Kazakhs.

Human rights campaigners and journalists have long been critical of Nazarbaev's policy of Kazakhisation. In some cases, however, their criticism has focused on aspects which can be observed in other post-Soviet states as well and which are not overtly nationalist, such as the renaming of towns and streets, often a form of de-sovietisation.¹¹ Kazakhstan has also become more Kazakh in terms of the composition of its population in recent years. As a result of emigration, not only of Russians but also of Germans and various other ethnic groups, the proportion of non-Kazakhs steadily declined in the 1990s, while the number of Kazakhs increased in absolute terms due to their higher birth rate and the state-sponsored "return" of the Kazakh diaspora. (To date, around one million *oralman*, i. e. returnees, have resettled in Kazakhstan.) These demographic changes were enough to shift the centre of gravity in favour of the Kazakhs. What's more, as the returnees did not speak Russian, they were vocal in their demands for a stronger role for the Kazakh language. There is no doubt that in the last three decades, a form of state-sponsored Kazakhisation has occurred in relation to the use of the Kazakh language (and associated with it, employee recruitment, etc.). The majority of non-Kazakhs have presumably come to terms with the advance of Kazakh at the expense of Russian, and even the Russians are said to be showing more willingness to learn Kazakh.¹² Kazakhisation in the sense of discrimination is perhaps most apparent in public service (government and administration, ministries, security forces) and politics, but is not statistically proven.¹³ However, many non-Kazakhs have found their niche in business; to the extent that some are visibly more affluent than Kazakhs, this sometimes even has the potential to trigger conflicts. ► [TABLE 1](#)

Aside from apologist tributes from Kazakhstani academics close to the government, assessments of the dual approach to Kazakh/Kazakhstani identity (and, indeed, Nursultan Nazarbaev's nationalities policy as a whole) are surprisingly diverse and do not fit into a "Western criticism/plaudits from the post-Soviet world" schematic. Some Western academics, for example, underline the difficulties faced by the leadership in the early days and view the ambiguity of the two identities positively on the grounds that it placates Kazakh and Russian nationalists and ultimately preserves a balance of interests.¹⁴ However, like the author cited at the start of this paper, most academic studies of the development of national identity among Kazakhstan's citizens posit a negative relationship of tension between the Kazakh and the

11 See, for example, Mehmet Volkan Kasikci, The Soviet and the Post-Soviet: Street Names and National Discourse in Almaty, *Europe-Asia-Studies* 71(2019)8, pp. 1345 – 1366.

12 Yves-Marie Davenel, Eunsil Yim, Minority Assimilation and Nation-Building in Kazakhstan, *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches*, Rico Isaacs, Abel Polese (eds.), London NY 2016, pp. 48 – 64, here p. 49; Dina Sharipova, Aziz Burkhanov, Alma Alpeissova, The Determinants of Civic and Ethnic Nationalisms in Kazakhstan: Evidence from the Grass-Roots Level, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 23(2017)2, pp. 203 – 226, here pp. 214; 220.

13 Assertions of this kind are invariably based on empirical observations, as the nationality of ministers, MPs, etc. is not stated openly and recruitment processes are of course not public. In a non-democratic, paternalistic system such as today's Kazakhstan, many Kazakhs are also disadvantaged. See Beate Eschment, Elitenrekrutierung in Kasachstan. Nationalität, Klan, Region, Generation, *Osteuropa* 57(2007)8 – 9, pp. 175 – 194.

14 For example, Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Rob Kevlihan, Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno-nationalist state-building, *Nations and Nationalism* 19(2013)2, pp. 337–356, here 350 f.; Alexander C. Diener, Imagining Kazakhstani-istan: Negotiations of Homeland and Titular Nationality, *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, Marlene Laruelle (ed.), Lanham 2016, pp. 131 – 154, here p. 132.

TABLE 1
Development of the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan's population

	1989		2009		2013		2020 (1.1.)	
	Absolute figure	%	Absolute figure	%	Absolute figure	%	Absolute figure	%
Total	16,222,324	100	16,009,597	100	16,909,776	100	18,631,779	100
Kazakhs	6,486,029	40.0	10,096,763	63.1	11,002,868	65.07	12,764,821	68.51
Russians	6,092,377	37.6	3,793,764	23.7	3,701,713	21.89	3,512,925	18.85
Uzbeks	330,417	2.0	456,997	2.9	507,509	3.0	605,137	3.25
Ukrainians	878,184	5.4	333,031	2.1	307,089	1.81	263,962	1.42
Uyghurs	181,155	1.1	224,713	1.4	242,119	1.43	274,509	1.47
Tatars	322,338	2.0	204,229	1.3	203,111	1.20	200,545	1.08
Germans	946,967	5.8	178,409	1.1	181,348	1.07	176,107	0.95
Koreans	101,336	0.6	100,385	0.6	104,406	0.62	108,551	0.58
Turks	49,219	0.3	97,015	0.6	103,049	0.61	113,421	0.61
Azerbaijanis	88,887	0.5	85,292	0.5	96,179	0.57	112,547	0.60
Belorussians	178,325	1.1	66,476	0.4	61,449	0.36	53,440	0.29
Dungans	29,785	0.2	51,944	0.3	59,898	0.35	74,409	0.40
Kurds	25,245	0.2	38,325	0.2	41,431	0.25	47,153	0.25
Tajiks	25,301	0.2	36,277	0.2	40,868	0.24	50,121	0.27
Poles	59,321	0.4	34,057	0.2	32,963	0.20	29,728	0.16
Chechens	49,007	0.3	31,431	0.2	31,974	0.19	33,507	0.18
Kyrgyzs	13,718	0.1	23,274	0.1	29,803	0.18	N / A	N / A
Bashkirs	41,060	0.3	17,263	0.1	17,006	0.10	16,674	0.09
Ingushs	19,523	0.1	15,120	0.1	15,607	0.10	N / A	N / A
Moldovans	32,352	0.2	14,245	0.1	14,083	0.08	N / A	N / A
Armenians	18,458	0.1	13,776	0.1	14,705	0.09	N / A	N / A
Others	253,320	1.3	96,811	0.8	100,598	0.59	194,222	1.04

Sources: *Natsional'nyi sostav, veroispovedanie i vladeniyazykamy v Respublike Kazakhstan. Itogi Natsional'noi perepisi naseleniya 2009 goda v Respublike Kazakhstan, Astana 2010, <https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=WC16200032705>; Etnodemograficheskii Ezhegodnik Kazakhstana. Astana 2013, <https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT098189>; Chislennost' naseleniya Respubliki Kazakhstan po otdelnym etnosam na nachalo 2020 g., <https://www.stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT355258>; author's own calculations.*

Kazakhstani approach. There is mention of “confrontation”¹⁵ between the two identities, which are described as contradicting¹⁶, incompatible¹⁷, controversial¹⁸ and irreconcilable¹⁹. Few academics ascribe to the view that the two identities exist in parallel or are complementary.²⁰ Moreover, it is often postulated that the populace refuses to accept the policy: the Kazakhs, it is claimed, deny the existence of a Kazakhstani nation, while non-Kazakhs reject it on the grounds that it is imposed by Kazakhs.²¹

The empirical basis for all these assertions is thin, as well as problematic. A recent ethnological research study on the Tatars of Kazakhstan concludes that they have utilised the opportunities afforded by the “Kazakhstani” concept to revitalise their own culture²² and even “to inhabit a space of autonomy”²³. A qualitative survey of members of various ethnic groups initiated by the KAS in 2017 concludes that the Kazakhstani model enjoys broad support, and that although these individuals identify a need for improvement in some areas, they have a positive attitude towards the work of the ANK and EKO.²⁴ In interviews conducted by the author of the present article in autumn 2018, representatives of various EKO emphasised that they saw themselves as Kazakhstanis. Alexander Diener notes as a caveat, however, that “many ‘non-titular’ peoples are relatively resigned to their ‘second among equals’ status”.²⁵

The results of initial, methodologically less refined quantitative surveys on the topic of national identity in the 1990s suggest that at that time, adjustment problems were still prevalent; many respondents are reported to have self-identified as Soviet citizens or even, by way of a substitute, with the CIS, while Russians additionally identified with Russia. Many subsequent surveys focused solely on Kazakhs and Russians; their questions allowed

15 Svetlana Shakirova, Country Image of Kazakhstan: From Stereotype and Critique to Positive National Branding, *Journal of Eastern European and Central Asian Research* 2(2015)1, pp. 1 – 12, here p. 1; Rustem Kadyrzhanov, Kazakhi i Kazakhstantsy, in: ORSAM Chernomorskii mezhdunarodnyi doklad 75, 13.8.2011, Russian version pp. 27 – 42, here p. 28. https://www.academia.edu/40249491/ORSAM_Analiz_75_Rustem_Kadyrzhanov_Kazaklar_ve_Kazakistan%C4%B1lar.

16 Aziz Burkhanov, Dina Sharipova, Kazakhstan’s Civic-National Identity, in: Nationalism and identity construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions, Mariya Y. Omelicheva (ed.), Lanham 2015, pp. 21 – 36, here p. 30.

17 Jorn Holm-Hansen, Nation-Building in Kazakhstan: Civic, titular and multiple re-ethnification, in: Arne Tesli, Jorn Holm-Hansen (eds.), Building the State: Political mobilisation, rhetoric and social differentiation in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, (Oslo) 1999, NIBR’s PLUSS series 2 – 99, pp. 43 – 108, here p. 55.

18 Nurken Aitymbetov, Yermek Toktarov, Yenlik Ormakhanova, Nation-Building in Kazakhstan: Kazakh and Kazakhstani Identities Controversy, *Bilig* Summer 2015 (74), pp. 1 – 19, here p. 3.

19 Holm-Hansen, Territorial, op.cit., p. 8.

20 Özgecan Kesici, The Dilemma in the Nation-Building Process: The Kazakh or Kazakhstani Nation?, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 10(2011)1, pp. 31 – 58, here p. 55; Nurtai Mustafaev, Kazakhstanskaya model’ etnopolitiki. Interesy, resursy i ogranichiteli, in: Kazakhstanskaya model’ etnopolitiki, Almaty 2002, pp. 53 – 68, here p. 54 f; Marlene Laruelle, The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan, in: Nationalism and identity construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions, Mariya Y. Omelicheva (ed.), Lanham 2015, pp. 1 – 29, here p. 16.

21 For example, Aitymbetov et al., op. cit., p. 5; Kadyrzhanov, op. cit., p. 30.

22 Davenel, Yim, op. cit., p. 49.

23 Yves-Marie Davenel, Cultural mobilization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: views from the state and from non-titular nationalities compared, *Central Asian Survey* 31(2012)1, pp. 17 – 29, here p.28.

24 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Zusammenleben ethnischer Gruppen in Kasachstan, Almaty 2017 / 18, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323571799_Zusammenleben_ethnischer_Gruppen_in_Kasachstan, pp. 70 – 74.

25 Diener, op. cit. p. 141.

respondents to choose one or the other—either a civic or an ethnic identity—and/or drew their conclusions about identity from other questions (e.g. about national pride or trust in members of other ethnic groups). Last but not least, information was often lacking about the parameters of the surveys, such as location, number of respondents and methodology. In contrast to the unproven assertions referred to above, however, they all appear to confirm a strong prevalence of Kazakhstani civic identity over ethnic identity. In a 2004 survey, for example, 57% of respondents are reported to have self-identified as citizens of Kazakhstan and 26% as members of a local community, with just 4.9% mentioning their ethnicity as the primary marker.²⁶ The results of two 2009 surveys mentioned in the literature are less extreme: 53% of respondents described their civic identity as primary, compared with 26% for ethnic identity in the first case;²⁷ 75.1% identified primarily as citizens of Kazakhstan and only around 12% defined themselves primarily in terms of their ethnicity²⁸ in the second. The results of two surveys conducted in 2016²⁹ deviate from this schematic, not in terms of their basic finding that there is a strong predominance of civic identity, but in that the questionnaire apparently allowed respondents to choose both ethnic and civic identity in parallel for the first time. Accordingly, this opinion survey was the first to ascertain that a significant number of respondents identified in both ethnic and civic terms.

Almaty residents' identities — survey findings

Based on these findings, a survey commissioned by ZOiS was conducted in Almaty in September/October 2019:

1. The strength of respondents' sense of ethnic and civic identity was investigated in two separate questions.
2. The survey included not only Russians and Kazakhs but also members of several small ethnic groups.
3. The statistical bases were disclosed.

Almaty is the most populous city in Kazakhstan, with 1,927,700 inhabitants (1.3.2020)³⁰, i.e. around 10% of the country's population. It is probably also the republic's most multinational city. However, it is not representative of the composition of Kazakhstan's population as a whole: above all, the proportion of Kazakhs—60%—is lower than the national average, while the proportion of Russians and Uzbeks (now the third largest ethnic group) is higher³¹. Most EKO's are still headquartered in Almaty, although

26 Quoted in Burkhanov, op. cit., p. 35.

27 Kazakhstan Institute of Social and Economic Information and Forecasting (KISEIP), quoted in Scott Spehr, Nargis Kassenova, Kazakhstan: constructing identity in a post-Soviet society, *Asian Ethnicity* 13(2012)2, pp. 135 – 151, here p. 142.

28 Survey by the Social Funds Strategy, quoted in Aitymbetov et al., op. cit., p. 13 f.

29 <https://www.demos.kz/rus/?poll=53>; Sharipova, Burkhanov, Alpeissova, op. cit., pp. 203 – 226.

30 <https://stat.gov.kz/region/268020>.

31 Most data on the ethnic composition of the population are estimates at best as the last census in Kazakhstan took place in 2009 and the next one has been postponed from 2019 until October 2021.

TABLE 2
Ethnic composition of Almaty's population, 2019

	Absolute figure	%
Total	1,854,656	100
Kazakhs	1,120,532	60.42
Russians	468,059	25.24
Uyghurs	101,059	5.45
Koreans	34,089	1.84
Tatars	24,733	1.33
Azerbaijanis	13,340	0.72
Uzbeks	12,034	0.65
Ukrainians	10,412	0.56
Dungans	10,340	0.56
Turks	9,618	0.52
Kyrgyzs	8,738	0.47
Germans	7,564	0.41
Kurds	3,941	0.21
Chechens	2,920	0.16
Ingushs	2,756	0.15
Armenians	2,242	0.12
Belorussians	1,567	0.08
Others	20,708	1.12

Source: <https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT306580>;
 author's own calculations

Astana/Nur-Sultan became the capital in 1997 and is the seat of the ANK and all the political institutions. Almaty recorded Kazakhstan's second highest gross regional product in 2019 after the oil-producing region of Atyrau; the city is reported to have generated 20.9% of national GDP.³² The choice of Almaty as the location for the survey meant that a large proportion of the population was covered. However, neither its composition nor its socio-economic conditions are typical of the country as a whole.

The same applies to the selection of ethnic groups: 215 representatives of each of the two largest ethnic groups in the city itself and the country at large, i.e. Kazakhs and Russians, were surveyed, along with the same number of representatives of five other ethnic groups (listed in alphabetical order): Armenian, Chechen, Dungan, Kurdish and Kyrgyz. This means that the survey covered Christian, Muslim, early immigrant, deportee and newcomer communities, some close to the Kazakhs in terms of their language and traditions, others differing strongly. The survey was thus representative of 28,181 Almaty residents, i.e. 1.6% of the former capital's total population and 10.6% of the population group designated as small ethnic groups (28,161 out of 266,065).³³ ► **TABLE 2**

The analysis of the answers provided by all respondents to the separate questions about the strength of their ethnic and Kazakhstani (i.e. civic) identity shows that in contrast to previous surveys, there is a strong predominance of ethnic identity. The overall difference between the highest categories amounts to almost one-third. ► **FIGURE 1** However, there is also a large group that attaches considerable importance to both identities.

For further analysis, the five small ethnic groups were clustered into a single group and the answers were then collated separately for this group, for Kazakhs and for Russians and presented as an average for each. ► **FIGURE 2** This shows that in all three groups, ethnic identity predominates over Kazakhstani identity, although the latter also scores highly. A clear difference can be discerned, however: for Kazakhs, the two identities are broadly similar, whereas for Russians and small ethnic groups, there is divergence between the two and ethnic identity has noticeably more resonance than civic Kazakhstani identity. The Russian respondents identified most strongly with their ethnic group.

In order to determine whether the strength of ethnic identity has any influence on civic identity, regression analysis was performed on the data. The responses from the survey were compiled into a dataset using the quota method and were then presented in a bivariate and a logistic regression model. In order to compare the effects, (standardised) beta coefficients were used; the confidence interval was set at 95%. This produced a positive correlation between ethnic and civic Kazakhstani identity for Kazakhs and small ethnic groups. This means that respondents from the "Kazakh" group and "small ethnic" groups with a strong ethnic identity also tend to

32 <https://stat.gov.kz/region/268020/news/ESTAT349329>; Kasachstan 2020. Daten-Fakten-Hintergründe, Botschaft der RK in Deutschland, Berlin 2020, pp. 243 – 245. Official statistics in Kazakhstan do not provide information on real incomes. Wages and living costs are relatively high in Almaty, as is the official unemployment rate (5.1% in the fourth quarter of 2019). Even so, the standard of living in Almaty is presumably much higher than the national average.

33 <https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT306580>.

FIGURE 1
Ethnic and civic identity strength: overview

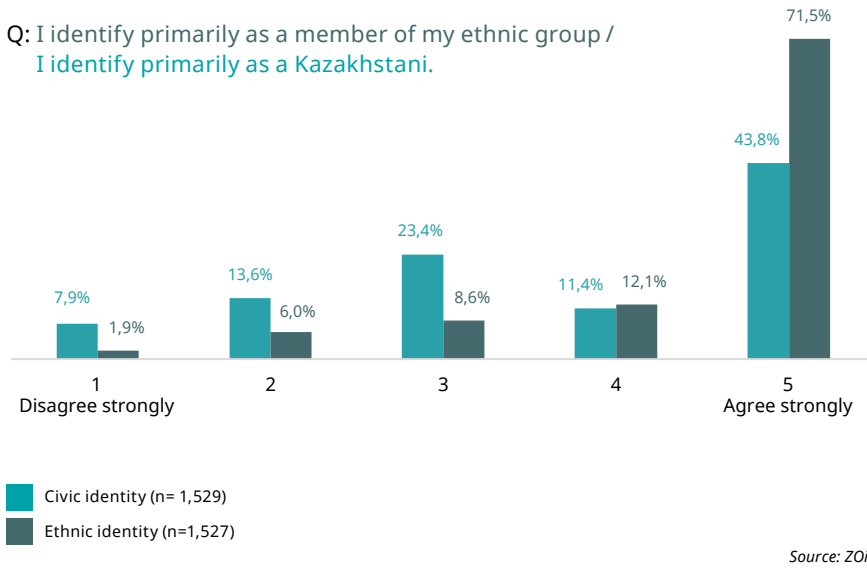
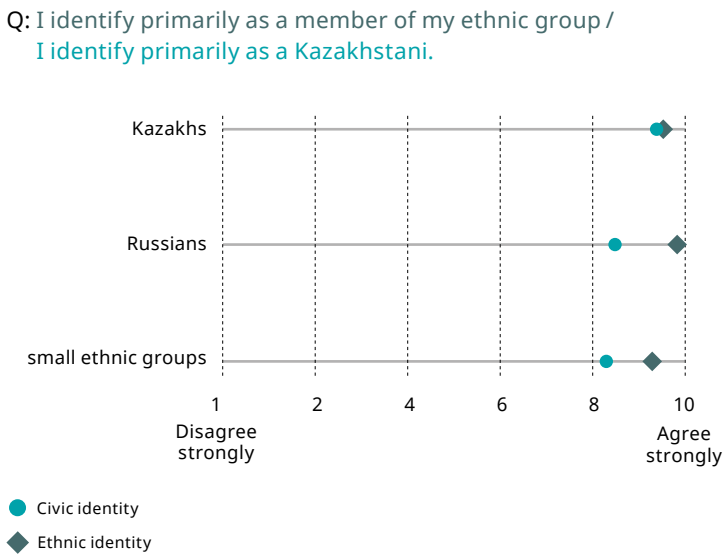


FIGURE 2
Ethnic and civic identity strength by ethnic groups (mean parameters)



have a stronger civic identity. For Kazakhs, the supportive effect is stronger than for the small ethnic groups. By contrast, no significant correlation between the strength of ethnic and civic identity was demonstrated for the Russians.

To sum up, then, all respondents show a very high degree of attachment to their ethnic identity. At the same time, their commitment to civic identity is also very marked, such that it is appropriate to talk about multiple identity

For respondents, there seems to be no conflict between their civic identity and their identity as members of their ethnic group.

in the case of most respondents. Characteristic differences in the relationship between the two identities were observed between the three groups analysed; however, the findings of other recent analyses were confirmed, in that for the respondents themselves, there is obviously no conflict between their civic identity as Kazakhstanis and their identity as members of their ethnic group. On the contrary, a marked ethnic identity appears to strengthen civic identity in the case of Kazakhs and small ethnic groups.³⁴

What might explain the considerable differences in the strength of civic and national identity compared with previous surveys? It is conceivable that the population of Almaty differs more strongly from the rest of the country than previously assumed. However, several earlier surveys also appear to have focused on the former capital. Another factor which cannot be ruled out is that views may have changed between 2016, i.e. the year of the last surveys mentioned, and 2019 following the resignation (at least formally) of Nursultan Nazarbaev, the architect of the dual approach. Above all, however, it is likely that the shift can be explained by the much stronger representation of the small ethnic groups in the survey (and hence the much smaller proportion of Russians, who are in a different position). The findings thus demonstrate the importance of involving these groups in surveys of this kind.

Kazakhs and other Kazakhstanis

On the face of it, these results appear to confirm the success of the ambiguous dual approach pursued by the First President. The populace identifies, albeit with gradual variations, both with their ethnic group and with the nation of Kazakhstanis, as was the original ambition (although national unity does not seem to have been achieved as completely as official statements would have us believe.) However, a whole series of events and observations in the real-world politics and society of Kazakhstan would appear to conflict with this impression, just a few of which can be mentioned here.

Interethnic relations in Kazakhstan have been surprisingly peaceful over the past three decades. The sporadic outbreaks of interethnic violence³⁵ were always short-lived and localised, and the number of these incidents (about ten are known to have occurred) is not worryingly high. Officials in Kazakhstan were at pains to depict these incidents as every-day conflicts with no ethnic component. And indeed, economic inequality appears to have been the underlying cause of many of these incidents, with crime often the trigger. However, these conflicts invariably involved Kazakhs on the one hand and members of a non-Kazakh ethnic group on the other. These incidents generally erupted when a non-Kazakh committed a crime against a Kazakh. Intra-ethnic crime among Kazakhs did not have this effect. In many instances, the Kazakhs concerned demanded the deportation

34 A similar conclusion was drawn by Sharipova, Burkhanov, Alpeisova, op. cit., p. 215: "Unexpectedly, we found that trust in the fellow ethnic group members also has a positive impact on civic-nationalist sentiments. The more the people have in common with their fellow ethnic members, the more they support civic nationalism."

35 Recently, on 7.2.2020, violent clashes between Kazakhs and Dungans in Zhambyl Province in southern Kazakhstan are reported to have left 11 dead and more than 40 injured.

PICTURE 3

Members of Almaty's Assembly of People at the Nauryz procession in 2019



Source: Beate Eschment

of all members of the contested ethnic group; in other words, they were not thinking like Kazakhstanis but viewed Kazakhstan as the country of Kazakhs, with other ethnic groups merely granted visitors' rights that could be withdrawn at any time.

Statements by official representatives of non-Kazakh ethnic groups are infused with the desire to safeguard the continued formal existence of their community in Kazakhstan, coupled with expressions of their attachment to Kazakhstan. This implies, conversely, that they are worried about exclusion, assimilation or the loss of their equal rights. For example, it was the ethnic groups' representatives who wanted Section 5 (*Natsionalnost'*)³⁶ to continue to be included in the passports of Kazakhstan's citizens, despite frequent international claims that it was discriminatory. The amendment of the official designation "ethnic group" was also adopted at their request, as the previous terms "diaspora" and/or "national minority" were felt to be marginalising and discriminatory.³⁷

At the same time, overt proclamations of loyalty to Kazakhstani identity can be observed from non-Kazakh ethnic groups. During my interviews with representatives of various EKO in Astana (as it was then called) and Almaty, it was striking that almost every interlocutor, throughout the course of our conversations, exclaimed: "We are all Kazakhstanis!" several times and only revealed more precise details of their own ethnicity after repeating

36 The inclusion of an "ethnicity" section dates back to the Soviet era. Children from mixed marriages can choose their preferred ethnicity at the age of 18.

37 As stated by several Kazakh experts to the author.

Kazakhs and representatives of small ethnic groups might attach different meanings to a Kazakhstani identity.

this assertion. A visual expression of this overt commitment to Kazakhstan could be observed, for example, at the Nauryz procession³⁸ in Almaty in 2019: while the large majority of Kazakh participants, clad in elaborate costumes, followed behind the flag of the city of Almaty, the non-Kazakh participants, also in national dress, were the only ones who held a small flag of Kazakhstan in their hands. ► PICTURE 3

These observations suggest that within the united nation of Kazakhstanis, there are fracture lines which are not reflected in the survey results. One possible explanation is that the Kazakhs and representatives of small ethnic groups who were surveyed have very different motives for their expression of commitment to a Kazakhstani identity and/or attach different meanings to it. However, this aspect has not been explored in any of the surveys. The following thoughts are therefore largely hypothetical.

For Kazakhs, there is growing convergence between their own identity as Kazakhs and the national identity of the state of Kazakhstan, whereas the above observations suggest that many non-Kazakhs self-identify as Kazakhstanis because—in stark contrast to the Kazakhs’ interpretation—they see the embracing of Kazakhstani identity as a way of protecting themselves from Kazakhisation, exclusion and/or assimilation. After all, in terms of the original concept, Kazakhstani identity was the roof under which they could develop and live their ethnic identity. This is borne out by the fact that among the ethnic groups surveyed, there is a close correlation between the relative strengths of the ethnic and the civic identity: anyone with a strong sense of ethnic identity is of course more likely to be worried about losing it. The original and deliberate ambiguity of the government’s approach, particularly its concept of Kazakhstani identity, has thus become self-sustaining and has produced worrying and unintended differences in interpretation within the populace as well.

If this interpretation is correct, the findings of our survey give less cause for satisfaction from the government’s perspective; on the contrary, they may well be a cause for concern. It is not just that less internal unity exists than would initially appear. The hidden fears of non-Kazakhs (and the intermittent resurgence of conflicts) point to potential for unrest on the Kazakh side. The current economic downturn is likely to make matters worse.

The core of the problem appears to lie in a seemingly illogical observation: the Kazakhs have obviously adopted the form of ethnic identity intended for them in the dual concept, while non-Kazakhs have identified and utilised the opportunities afforded by Kazakhstani identity. For genuine coexistence of the entire population, however, the Kazakhs would have had to identify a place for themselves in the originally postulated common home of all Kazakhstanis as well. Admittedly, they were initially assigned an integrating function and, later, even a central role in the nation-building process, but they never took on the role intended for them; instead, they regarded the ANK, for example, as merely representing the interests of non-Kazakhs and even considered that

38 The word “Nauryz” is of Persian origin and means “new day”. It is celebrated by Iranian and Turkic-speaking communities on the day of the vernal equinox to mark the beginning of spring. Hilda C. Eitzen, *Nawriz in Kazakhstan: scenarios of managing diversity*, Ingvar Svanberg (ed.), *Contemporary Kazaks: Cultural and Social Perspectives*, Richmond 1999, pp. 73 – 102.

it put them at a disadvantage.³⁹ This clearly reflects an omission by policy-makers, who need to take urgent action to protect non-Kazakhs here.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Our survey showed that the citizens of Kazakhstan self-identify both in civic terms as Kazakhstanis and as members of their ethnic group, in line with the leadership's ambition. However, empirical observations and interviews suggest that Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs identify as Kazakhstanis for different and perhaps even conflicting reasons. As things stand, the question posed in the title of this report about the national identity of Kazakhstan's citizens can be answered as follows: the overall trend is towards a Kazakh common home in which the non-Kazakh ethnic groups can (hopefully) keep a place for themselves. ► **PICTURE 4** Despite official statements to the contrary, interethnic relations in Kazakhstan in the Nazarbaev era were not regulated conclusively and to everyone's advantage, but require further policy monitoring, e.g. as regards the protection of minority rights, as well as further academic study, focusing, for example, on the status of individual ethnic groups, as along with qualitative interviews about their interpretation of the term "Kazakhstani".

It remains to be seen whether the forthcoming changes to nationalities policy under Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev will hold the line established by his predecessor and the architect of dual but ambiguous identity. His scope still appears to be limited, for as one of the numerous powers that Nazarbaev secured for himself for his retirement is his role as Chair of the ANK.

PICTURE 4
Model of the ethnic groups of Kazakhstan in the House of Friendship in Almaty



Source: Beate Eschment

39 Formally, Kazakh ethnic associations may also join the ANK; however, no such groupings exist. At present, some prominent Kazakh individuals are members of the ANK.

40 This is also pointed out by Kazakhstani experts in private conversations.

Imprint

Author

Beate Eschment
in collaboration with Taissiya Sutormina

Published by

© Centre for East European and
International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH

Address

**Centre for East European and
International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH**
Mohrenstraße 60
10117 Berlin
info@zois-berlin.de
www.zois-berlin.de

Citation

Beate Eschment "Kazakh and/or Kazakhstani? The national identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan and its citizens", ZOiS Report 4/2020, (https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_4_2020.pdf)

ISSN 2512-7233

Translation from German: Hillary Crowe

Layout

Yuko Stier

Cover image

Denis Karpenkov / Alamy Stock Foto

