

KAZAKHSTAN GRAPPLES WITH CULTURAL REVIVAL DILEMMAS **A EurasiaNet commentary by Taras Kuzio: 1/17/02**

The Soviet Union's social and cultural legacy is responsible for stubborn state-building dilemmas in Central Asia states. In Kazakhstan's case, striking a balance between reviving local traditions and the rights of Russian speakers is perhaps more problematic for the government than economic reform.

Across Central Asia, the Soviet era was characterized by a colonial attitude, secularization, Russification and the establishment of artificial borders that left ethnic groups divided. At the same time, Russian-speaking migrants, mostly ethnic Slavs, rarely mixed with indigenous peoples, and few inter-married or learnt the local languages. Even today, Russian speakers tend to identify more with the Soviet Union than with the newly independent Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In Kazakhstan, Soviet cultural legacy is particularly evident because the titular nation was divided by language and by region. When Kazakhstan became an independent state in 1991, official census data indicated the population was composed of 40 percent Russians and 39 percent Kazakhs. It was the only former Soviet republic where the titular nation was a minority. Most Russian were concentrated in northern parts of the country.

Over the last decade a radical demographic shift has occurred. According to January 1995 census figures, which some analysts view with skepticism as to their accuracy, the country's population comprised 7.6 million Kazakhs and 5.8 million Russians. Since then, this trend of an increasing Kazakh share of the population has continued to rise, helped in part by the emigration of Russians back to Russia proper, as well as the departure of ethnic Germans to Germany.

Since the Soviet collapse in 1991, a key element of the state building process in every Central Asian state has been the revival of local traditions, especially language. Demographics in Kazakhstan make state building especially complicated. Russians find it difficult to accept that they are now "national minorities" as their presence in Central Asia was as part of a classic "civilizing mission."

The new state is both defined as the Kazakh homeland (as all non-Russian republics were in the Soviet Union) and a bi-ethnic society. Nevertheless, this political community utilizes only Kazakh symbols and myths. The ethno-cultural core of the state is therefore defined by the titular nation. This practice, although often criticized by Western scholars as a "nationalizing state," was actually a common feature of nation-states. Only France still clings to the traditional assimilationist policies of a nation-state while others, including the United States, since the 1960s have balanced the state's definition by its titular culture with greater respect for diversity.

A combination of pressure from below from the cultural intelligentsia, and from above from the former communist elites, helped forge a consensus that sought to undermine sub-ethnic and regional loyalties as a part of state building. Constitutions in all the Central Asian states ensure the pre-eminence of the titular nation whose culture and "ancient homeland" requires protection by the nation state. The Russian language, though, has continued to expand or remain stable in Kazakhstan because its new political and economic elites are divided between Kazakh-speakers and Russian-speaking Kazakhs.

Meanwhile, ethnic Russian organizations, many of which are based in northern regions, have supported regional autonomy, two state languages and dual citizenship. Their reluctance to embrace the new order is linked to the Soviet cultural legacy. During the Soviet era, the percentage of Russians who knew the titular language in Kazakhstan was the lowest of any of the 14 non-Russian republics - less than one per cent. And few Russians have learned the Kazakh language during the decade of independence.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev's government has reacted quickly and forcefully to demonstrations of Russian separatism or Cossack activity. Some Russian organizations have been accused of fomenting separatism and shut down. In 1999, 22 alleged plotters (12 of whom were from the Russian Federation) were arrested with an arms cache on suspicion of planning a separatist uprising in Ust-Kamenogorsk.

To strengthen Kazakhstan's state identity among ethnic Russians in northern regions, the capital city was moved at a cost of \$1 billion from Almaty to Astana, which had been known as Tselinograd during Soviet times. Almaty, which had a Russian:Kazakh ratio of 60:22 in the Soviet era, retains its cultural and economic importance.

Another aspect of state building involves the widespread change of place names. A uniform policy on re-naming places according to Kazakh orthography was launched in the 1990s. Transliterations of new names in Russian are to be replaced by the original Kazakh spelling. This has affected thousands of regions, cities, towns and streets.

As in all other post-Soviet non-Russian states (apart from Belarus), Kazakhstan has introduced a new historiography that legitimizes the independent state. This legitimacy rests on the claim that it is being built on the basis of a 500-year tradition of statehood going back to the mid-15th century Kazakh Khanate. The revival of Kazakh history means, in Nazarbayev's words, that the "spirit has been restored to the nation." Under the new historiography, the 1731 and 1740 treaties with Russia have been recast as "temporary alliances" - and not voluntary submission as Russian and Soviet historiography argued. This is similar to the re-analysis of treaties with Russia now being undertaken in other post-Soviet historiographies.

Within the state-building context, the language issue continues to pose a particular challenge for the government. The Kazakh language was declared the state language in 1993 and three years later Russian was recognized as an "official language." This has created ambiguity in nationality policy, as there is little distinction between "state" and "official." Local officials have thus emerged as the final arbiter on language issues.

Nazarbayev's administration has aggressively promoted Kazakh. The Kazakh Language Society is state-funded and the Kazakh language has been mandatory in schools since 1993. Kazakh has been gradually increased in bilingual schools which have then be converted into Kazakh-only schools. Government communications are mainly in Kazakh and businesses have been fined for not using Kazakh.

Yet, Russian continues to be used far more in Kazakhstan than in neighboring Uzbekistan. Two-thirds of urban Kazakhs use Russian as their first language. These Kazakhs are occasionally derided as "Mankurty" - rootless, cosmopolitan. Although most Kazakhs accept that language is central to national identity, its revival faces the problem of low prestige, a factor common to other CIS member states. Many continue to see knowledge of Russian as being essential for higher education and for lucrative economic opportunities.

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