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# Politics of Titular Identity and State-Legitimization: The Unique Case of Post-Colonial and Post-Communist Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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## Introduction

Central Asia has been a relatively unexplored region. However, in recent years the region's compound cultural and religious uniqueness has allowed it to become a formidable player in international peace and security. As part of the Syrian peace talks initiated in 2011 in hopes of finding a solution to the on-going Syrian War, delegates from Russia, Turkey and Iran, in conjunction with Syrian rebel fighters, met in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan from May 25 to May 27, 2015, and then from October 2 to October 4, 2015. Nur-Sultan was specifically picked as the venue because all parties to the talks saw Kazakhstan as a neutral party. The Kazakh (and accordingly Central Asian) identity of Russian-speaking, ethnically-Turkic Muslims created an idiosyncratic opportunity for world leaders to hold a diplomatic dialogue with rebel fighters through the appeal of relative sameness to all included parties. Further evidence of Kazakhstan's formidable standing as an international player is its chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Organization of the Islamic Conferences, and its hosting of the Seventh Winter Asian Games and the World Islamic Economic Forum (Omelicheva, 2015). Similarly (although not to the same degree) Kyrgyzstan held the reputation of the "most open society in post-Soviet Central Asia" and has been hailed for its democratic values that align with the Western world (Omelicheva, 2015, 79 Collins, 2006; Bingol, 2004).

Yet, only thirty years ago the Central Asian region faced many obstacles after years of imperialism and colonization, such as state legitimacy, the existence of a myriad of sub-national groups and impositions of "formal state institutions and rules upon a predominantly informally organized but strong society" (Collins 2006, 332). The region's short trajectory from independence to a formidable foreign relations player allows for a worthwhile case study for the

aggregation of decolonization and state-building. The region's communist affiliation and legacy makes it an even more fascinating case study. The Kazakh administration that took power immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union had approximately thirty years of governmental participation in the Soviet communist party under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev. After the collapse of a myriad of communist governments in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars have highlighted the newly established democracies that sprouted in their place as cases for study (Chen 2016). Chen (2016) points to the varying degrees of successful implementation of democratic practices in these post-communist states as variables for examination. While the imposing competition between the ideologies of communism and capitalism has seemingly concluded, China's arguable standing as the East Asian hegemon points to the relevance of communist ideology and the need for its study, especially in its approach to constituting the national titular ethnicity and its conduct with ethnic minorities.

The communist ideology, its implementation in the Soviet bloc, and its demise had an enormous influence on the understanding of one's identity. Czaplicka *et al*. (2009) point out that "the trajectory of postsocialist development points variously in global, European, national, local, and personal directions, as these cross-cutting vectors of identity guide the processes of cultural, economic, and political reorientation" (2). Central Asia doesn't escape this post-socialist reality, being pulled additionally in the Islamic and Asian directions in addition to those listed above. While scholars like Czaplicka *et al*, rightfully survey the dichotomy of post- socialist and "European," this paper attempts to analyze the composite intersection of modifiers *post-socialist*, *Asian* and *Islamic* and answers the empirical puzzle: how did Central Asian administrations approach the constructing of their post-Soviet identities through the installment of a titular ethnic group as they were faced with decolonization in a post-communist space?

## Methodology

### Case Selection

To attempt to answer the theoretical puzzle of how independent states go about constructing their national identity after a period of colonization and communism, this study will limit its temporal scope and study to two Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where religion, race, political ideology, language, and culture are tightly intertwined. The study will also limit its temporal scope to the 1990s (1991-1999) in order to focus on the first decade of the two administrations' national-identity development.

The two nations were chosen as the case studies due to cultural and historical similarities:

*Post-Communism:* both countries were "created" by the communist party, which "supervised the creation of the nationalities that were associated with the established republics," including the language policies and the titular ethnicity (Fierman 2009, 1207). The countries' legacies are the primary similarity that make them ideal for comparison. The Soviet Union's Marxist ideology pushed strongly towards "internationalism" and unity, which then became "synonymous with 'Russian'" (Fierman 2009, 1208).

*Post-Colonialism:* both countries experienced close to two centuries of full and partial political and economic control by the Russian Empire and its successor.

*Pre-colonial historical similarities*: both territories, before the official establishment of the Kazakh Autonomous Social Soviet Republic and Kyrgyz Autonomous Social Soviet Republic were inhabited by Turkic, nomadic, pastoral tribes that were forced into modernization and settlement by the-Russian and tsarist authorities in part and, later, the Communists.

*Language:* both Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages belong to the Turkic language family, whose use declined in favor of the modern, Russian language. However, what makes language such a fascinating area of study in independent Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is the use of Russian and its status as a native language to their large ethnic-minority populations (ethnic Russians, ethnic Germans, ethnic Koreans, etc).

*Islam:* the primary identifier that separates Central Asia from its Eastern European counterparts is its religious identity. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Nazarbayev and Akayev were given the choice of approving freedom of religion, in which many Central Asians saw a potential answer to their questions of identity.

**Research Agenda**

This paper will analyze language, national identity, inclusion and religion-specific policies enacted by the Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations in the first nine years of their rule, and the presence of nationalist rhetoric present in presidents' speeches and addresses to the nation. The paper will use both available primary sources, including legislation, public speeches, official census, and statistical data provided by the official administration archives as well as secondary sources to present the comparative case analysis.

## Literature Review

Identity

Identity as a term lacks a clear definition, and yet, as Roger Smith asserts it is "among the most normatively significant and behaviorally consequential aspects of politics" (302). Throughout history, one's identity affected the way one was perceived, treated and defined by

others and oneself. Scholars, including Smith and James Fearon, critique the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the term - "quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration," highlighting its inability to capture the extensive nuances of its effects on both social and political spheres. Due to this lack of clarity and universal vagueness of the term, some scholars argue against its use as a variable in social sciences (Abdelal et al. 2006, 695). However, Abdelal *et al*. (2006) argue that it is possible to use identity as a variable in social science research, despite its dynamic definition, by defining the term as a "social category that varies along two dimensions – content and contestation" (705). Thus, for a collective identity to be a sustainable variable there must be a shared meaning of the identity as well as an agreement within that group of the validity of the meaning.

One of the most cited works on identity scholarship is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson takes it a step further and argues that the concept of nation has no concrete scientific basis, and thus, social identity based on communities (and even these communities themselves) are simply imagined (6). He also highlights that these communities are imagined based on "deep, horizontal comradeship," despite the "actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail" (7). This sense of belonging, especially evident in our case study and its history with communism, is crucial to the imagining of a nation and political identity. However, identity creation has also been studied to go together with the creation and "demonization" of the "other" (Lebow 2008, 474). Lebow (2008) argues that the dichotomy of the two and the formulation of the "different" creates the bonding that may lead to an external conflict. However, what does this mean for the "others" who reside within the community as minorities and the overall stability of the state?

Identity Theory in International Relations and the Idea of Nation States

Identity within the study of International Relations regained its traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Berenskoetter, 2010). The emergence of identity also led to its inclusion in the discourse about constructivism, as it was used to argue for the "constructed nature of the state and its interests, and to explain the causes of war and the conditions for peace" (Berenskoetter, 2010, 3). As Zuo (2016) writes:

> The construction, ascription, internalization, refusal or the reclaiming of identities continually works behind, in, and as a part of social reality. In a politicized world, identity claims take various forms: seats at the bargaining table, control of land, and new languages taught in schools, but also wars, ethnic cleansing, racist graffiti, and increasing tension (Zuo, 2016, 12).

Thus, the state and those in charge of it have the apparatus to design the collective understanding of their identity as a political tool for gain. This paper will use the constructivist approach and paradoxically, its ability to utilize the primordial idea that nations and ethnic identities are fixed and natural, to analyze the processes of identity and nation-creation in Central Asia used by the Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations to legitimize their own positions during the turmoil of nation-creation and stabilization. Furthermore, this paper will operate under the definition that the idea of a nation-state, which developed along with "early reflections on group identity" in Western Europe, assumes "that populations are naturally divided into 'nations' speaking the same language and sharing common features, such as a common origin, common purpose, and common national culture" (Esenova, 2002, 11).

## Historical Background; Communist and Colonial Framework

**Figure 1. Population of the Kazakh Autonomous Social Soviet Republic based on Major Ethnic Groups in 1926**

| Ethnic Group | Population | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kazakh (Titular)** | **3,713,394** | **57.12** |
| Russian | 1,279,979 | 19.69 |
| Ukrainian | 860,822 | 13.24 |
| Uzbek | 213,498 | 3.28 |
| Karakalpal | 118,184 | 1.82 |
| Tatar | 80,642 | 1.24 |
| Other | 234,376 | 3.61 |

*Note. This figure displays results of the first official census conducted by the Soviet Government. The ethnically Kazakh population maintains their status as the titular ethnicity*. All-Union Population Census of 1926. National composition of the population in the republics of the RSFSR. Copyright 2021by The Institute of Demography A.G. Vishinevsky.

**Figure 2. Population of the Kazakh Autonomous Social Soviet Republic based on Major Ethnic Groups in 1989**

| Ethnic Group (Titular) | Population | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kazakh (Titular)** | **6,534,616** | **39.68** |
| Russian | 6,227,549 | 37.82 |
| German | 957,518 | 5.82 |
| Ukrainian | 896,240 | 5.44 |
| Uzbek | 332,017 | 2.02 |
| Tatar | 327,982 | 1.99 |
| Uighur | 185,301 | 1.13 |
| Belarusian | 182,601 | 1.11 |
| Korean | 103,315 | .62 |
| Other | 717,325 | 4.36 |

*Note. This figure displays the results of the official census conducted 2 years before the official collapse of the Soviet Union. The data shows the decrease of the titular Kazakh ethnicity and the increase of the ethnically Russian and other minority populations from the 1926 census, with the exception of the Uzbek population.* All-Union Population Census of 1989. National composition of the population in the republics of the USSR. Copyright 2021by The Institute of Demography A.G. Vishinevsky.

**Figure 3. Population of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic based on Major Ethnic Groups in 1926**

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kyrgyz (Titular)** | **661,171** | **66.79** |
| Russian | 116,436 | 11.76 |
| Uzbek | 109,776 | 11.09 |
| Ukrainian | 64,128 | 6.48 |
| Other | 38,460 | 3.88 |

*Note. This figure displays results of the first official census conducted by the Soviet Government. The ethnic Kyrgyz population holds the titular position*. All-Union Population Census of 1926. National composition of the population in the republics of the RSFSR. Copyright 2021by The Institute of Demography A.G. Vishinevsky.

**Figure 4. Population of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic based Ethnic Groups in 1989**

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kyrgyz (Titular)** | **2,229,663** | **52.37** |
| Russian | 916,558 | 21.53 |
| Uzbek | 550,096 | 12.92 |
| Ukrainian | 108,027 | 2.54 |
| German | 101,309 | 2.38 |
| Tatar | 70,068 | 1.6 |
| Other | 282,034 | 6.62 |

*Note. This figure displays the decrease of the ethnic Kyrgyz population and the drastic increase of the ethnic Russian population*. All-Union Population Census of 1989. National composition of the population in the republics of the USSR. Copyright 2021by The Institute of Demography A.G. Vishinevsky.

The origins of ethnic Kazakh and Kyrgyz people go back to a time when Turkic nomadic tribes inhabited the Central and East Asian steppe, spanning modern- day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The modern designations of these areas quite literally mean Land of Kazakhs and Land of Kyrgyzs, the suffix -stan coming from the Persian word for "place of" – firmly and officially establishing the Kazakh and Kyrgyz people as the proprietors and the titular ethnic groups of the territory.

The Russian control and influence over the Central Asian region and its nomadic people date back to the beginning of 18th century, even though the territory (then referred to as Turkestan) along with Siberia was only formally added to the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century (Sabol, 2003; Sartori, 2010). However, the peoples' nomadic lifestyle survived into the 20th century until increased collectivization and settlement were imposed by the newly established Soviet government in the 1920s (Wright, 1999). The period of Turkestan's history up until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 indubitably falls within the standard understanding of colonialism. It is important to note that the Asian Turkestan differed from the empire's European colonies, such as Dnieper Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, etc, as the region was deemed as backwards due to the people's nomadic lifestyle and referred to as the "oriental, Islamic enemy" (Brower 2003, 7). Moreover, what further denotes Central Asian republics from their Eastern European counterparts is their absence of a period of national independence prior to the creation of the Soviet Union, meaning they lacked a collective memory of statehood which could be revisited during their official independence in the 1990s (Fawn, 2003). Thus, the task of creating a national identity and legitimizing the statehood of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was comparatively enlarged for the administrations of Nazarbayev and Akayev. This conception may explain the widespread feeling of disapproval for the collapse of the Soviet

Union in 1991 in the two nations, which can be used as some for argument against the colonial-framework (Fawn, 2003).

The official creation of Kyrgyz and Kazakh national entities (as well as the Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen national entities) may be attributed to the Bolshevik Revolution, in the modern understanding of the nation and state with the reorganization of the Soviet Union and the creation of Soviet nationalities and national lines of division (Wright, 1999; Esenova, 2002). The people who lived in the Central Asian steppe did not even identify themselves in national terms (Hirsch, 2000). Moreover, this historic moment can also be attributed to the transformation of "the classification of nationality from a speculative design into one of the most fundamental principles of state life and one of the chief instruments of administrative control" (Abashin, 2012, 152).

Daniel Brower in his book *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* writes that "the arguments that Russians put forward in the late nineteenth century in confronting the issue of integrating Turkic colonial peoples into the Russian Empire bear a strong resemblance to, and at times drew on, concepts of overseas empires then current in the West (9). For example, the Russian empire undertook the mission of civilizing their Asian colonies by establishing local judicial institutions in native areas with the purpose of establishing the Russian rule of law that would dissolve local customs and traditions (Brower 2003, 19). Even more explicitly, General Konstantin von Kaufman, was appointed Turkestan governor-general in 1867 and referred to the people of the Asian steppe as "half-savage nomads" while constructing a "complete administrative apparatus" (Brower 2003, 22). Thus, while Bolsheviks claimed to have dissociated themselves from their imperial past, they "retained political-administrative control over the former subject territories" (Kandiyoti, 2002, 286).

The debate on the appropriateness of the use of the colonial framework and terminology on the study of Central Asia post-Soviet Union is vast. In fact, scholars such as Adeeb Khalid (2008) argue that The USSR itself could be considered a post-colonial state itself, as the Bolshevik agenda itself dealt with questions of "anticolonial revolution, decolonization, nation-building, economic development, modernization and the quest to overcome 'backwardness,'" posing the question – where does Central Asia fall in this framework? In this paper, I will use the framework proposed by the scholar Francine Hirsch (2000) in her article "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," in which she argues that rather than the classical understanding of settler colonialism, Soviet powers used a "new (and presumably nonimperialistic) model of colonization [in which] colonization and "making nations" went hand in hand" and had similar outcomes to that of classical colonialism – economic exploitation, suppression of indigenous culture, traditions and language, an political control (203). This new type of colonialism borrowed from the West tactics such as violence and technologies of conquest to "integrate a vast expanse of territories and great variety of peoples into a highly centralized economic, political and ideational whole" (Hirsch, 2000). Thus, the Soviet government's ultimate goal was not the *deliberate* exploitation of indigenous people, but rather the establishment of a designed system that would (hopefully) lead to a total socialist state.

Scholar Benjamin H. Loring (2014) also argues that unlike its predecessor, Soviet colonialism's political and economic policies were not "because of any deliberate, cynical deception by the Bolshevik leadership but rather the unintended outcome of the regime's response to conditions on the world market" (80). And while Kyrgyzstan experienced modernization and industrialization in the 1920s, the benefits were largely seen by the urban population which consisted mostly of Slavic immigrants, while ethnic Kyrgyz people remained

in rural areas of the nation (Wright, 1999). Concurrently, the industrialization of the Central Asian nations resulted in the influx of European ethnic groups (namely Russian and German speaking ethnic groups) to the nations, culminating in titular nationality decline: the Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples became minorities in their own lands (Wright, 1999; Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3; Figure 4). Following the modernization processes (sedentarization of the nomadic people and collectivization), the number of ethnic Kazakhs dropped by 29 percent and the rapid migration into the nation of other ethnic groups to compensate for the loss. Kazakhs made up less than 40 per cent of the population (Esenova, 2002).

Again, while the Soviet intent was not to deliberately exploit the indigenous people of the Asian steppe, the outcome was still the same. The settlement of European ethnic groups in the steppe led to the reduction of livestock, a decrease in the already abysmal quality of life, and ethnic conflict (Allworth 1967, 161). Moreover, the market demand of the 1920s increased the need for raw supplies and cotton which was available in Central Asia, leading the newly established states to become a crucial part of a greater economic system of the Soviet Union, removing their self-sustainability (Loring, 2014). As Benjamin Loring (2014) writes, "this economic transformation deprived local officials, especially indigenous Central Asians, of control over their economic affairs, giving rise to political tensions between central, regional, and local authorities (101). The assimilation of Central Asia into the union reduced priority for local and indigenous needs in favor of the collective. This tension gave way for decolonization movements, such as thirty Kyrgyz officials signing a letter requesting the removal of European leadership from the local government and the return of administrative autonomy (Loring, 2014).

In addition to the colonial-framework, one must also look at the communist-framework that exists within the creation of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz states. The Soviet leadership, which

passed legislature to divide, establish and reinstate separate titular identities of Central Asia, contrastingly urged its citizens to adapt a 'world international' identity for unity, which later changed to a 'soviet' identity (Fierman, 2009, 1211). Accordingly, the Arabic alphabet used throughout Central Asia was replaced by the Latin Alphabet, and later the Cyrillic Alphabet. Again, the assimilation of the indigenous Central Asian people in the Union stripped them of their autonomy and now cultural identity in favor of the collective Soviet identity.

## Case Analysis

**Figure 5. Population of Kazakhstan based on Major Ethnic Groups in 1999**

| Ethnic Group | Population | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kazakh (Titular)** | **7,985,039** | **53.4** |
| Russian | 4,479,618 | 30.0 |
| Ukrainian | 547,052 | 3.7 |
| Uzbek | 370,663 | 2.5 |
| German | 353,441 | 2.4 |
| Tatar | 248,952 | 1.7 |
| Uighur | 210,339 | 1.4 |
| Other | 1,111,463 | 5.9 |

Note: *This figure displays the results of the official census conducted by the Republic of Kazakhstan.. The data shows the increase of the presence of the titular Kazakh ethnicity and the decrease of the ethnically Russian population after the collapse of the Soviet Union.* Brief results of the 1999 population census. Copyright 1991 by the Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National statistics.

**Figure 6. Population of Kazakhstan based on Major Ethnic Groups in 2020**

| Ethnic Group | Population | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kazakh (Titular)** | **12,764,821** | **68.51** |
| Russian | 3,512,925 | 18.85 |
| Uzbek | 605,137 | 3.25 |
| Uighur | 274,509 | 1.47 |
| Ukrainian | 263,962 | 1.42 |
| Tatar | 200,545 | 1.08 |
| Other | 1,009,880 | 5.42 |

Note: *This figure shows the continuous gradual increase of the ethnic Kazakh population.* The population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups at the beginning of 2020. Copyright 2020 by the Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National statistics.

**Figure 7. Population of Kyrgyzstan based on Major Ethnic Groups in 1999**

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kyrgyz (Titular)** | **3,128,147** | **64.9** |
| Uzbek | 664,950 | 13.8 |
| Russian | 603,201 | 12.5 |
| Dungan | 51,766 | 1.1 |
| Ukrainian | 50,442 | 1.0 |
| Uyghur | 46,944 | 1.0 |
| Other | 277,488 | 5.7 |

Note: *This figure displays the results of the official census conducted by the Kyrgyz Republic. The data shows the increase of the presence of the titular Kyrgyz ethnicity back to 65% and the decrease of the ethnically Russian population after the collapse of the Soviet Union.* Total

population by nationality (assessment at the beginning of the year, people). Copyright 2021 by National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

**Figure 8. Population of Kyrgyzstan based on Major Ethnic Groups in 2020**

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Kyrgyz (Titular)** | **4,695,646** | **73.49** |
| Uzbek | 940,628 | 14.72 |
| Russian | 352,960 | 5.52 |
| Dungan | 72,240 | 1.13 |
| Other | 328,026 | 5.14 |

Note: *This figure displays gradual increase of the ethnic Kyrgyz population and the decrease of all other ethnic minorties, with the exception of ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Dungans.* Total population by nationality (assessment at the beginning of the year, people). Copyright 2021 by National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

**Post-Communist Nation-Building; Neo-patrimonial and Clan Politics**

One of the primary differences between the administrations of the brand-new Republic of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic (as they were re-named after gaining their independence) is their connection to their previous communist administrations. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the First Secretary of the former Communist Party of Kazakhstan, presided over the nation for twenty-eight years (and was succeeded by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the former Soviet ambassador to Singapore and then as part of the Soviet embassy in Beijing). Unlike Nazarbayev (and other Central Asian presidents of the 90s), Akayev did not come from the Kyrgyz communist party and even vocally supported Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1991 coup led by renegade Communists against the Soviet leader (Omelicheva, 2015). Notably, he spent fourteen years

outside of Kyrgyzstan. From 1962 to 1976 he attended and worked at the Leningrad Technological Institute, and then went on to get his doctorate from the Moscow Institute of Engineering and Physics in 1981 (Engvall, 2011).

Akayev's dissociation from the Soviet leadership and elite, posed a hopeful future for the supporters of democracy, Forbes even calling Kyrgyzstan "new little Switzerland" in 1994 (Collins, 2006, 175; Bingol, 2004). Akayev's rhetoric was more Westernized than even Mikhail Gorbachev's, as he called for a "full democracy" and an "integration with the West and capitalist economies," even referencing Thomas Jefferson in his speeches to the nation (Collins, 2006, 177). In return, the US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot referred to Akayev as the "Thomas Jefferson of Kyrgyzstan" (Bingol, 2004, 49).

However, it is imperative to recognize the role ethnic and clan politics played in the coming to power of Akayev. To get your name on the presidential ballot, candidates were required by law to receive 252,000 signatures, which Akayev attained through "campaigning… conducted along clan and ethnic lines. As a result of the parliamentary election, ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan (mainly Russians and Uzbeks), who constitute[d] more than 40 per cent of the population, received almost no representation" (Bingol 2004, 51).

Nazarbayev's regime did not obtain the hopeful status for democracy that Akayev's did. The country is yet to hold free and fair elections. The neo-patrimonial style of his regime used fraudulent measures (ex. ballot-stuffing, harassment of media, pressure on local administrations, etc.) and familial and personal ties to ensure a parliament loyal to the president (Dave, 2007; Bingol, 2004).

The use of ethnic nationalism and identity politics by Nazarbayev and Akayev are unsurprising, considering the lack of previous collective memory of statehood. Yilmaz Bingol

(2004) argues that "*ethnic* nationalism has been at the core of Central Asian politics. It has become both the main ideology of the successor states and the main means to legitimize the policies of the ruling elites of Central Asian countries in the post-Soviet era" (44). The soviet legacy of the creation of titular ethnic identities of the newly created Central Asian states produced the groundwork for the Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations easy use of nationalism for legitimacy and control (Dave, 2007). The Soviet rhetoric of nationality as a "homogenous and bounded entity, which can be represented by a single official national-cultural center and leadership" continued into and was adopted by the new administrations to legitimize their statehood and place of power. This rhetoric implies the equality of all ethnic groups within the nation and notably does not use the term 'minority' *(Russian: меньшинство)* in official discourse and reinstates the idea that every ethnic group has a homeland (Dave, 2007).

Thus, the Kyrgyz system of kinship and identity, legitimized by the Soviet authorities as the titular system of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic manifested in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The Kyrgyz kinship systems transferred to the Soviet collective farms and translated into the "Communist Party apparatus of the Kyrgyz Republic" (Ismailbekova, 2017). As Akayev moved farther away from the Western democratic and free-economy oasis of Central Asia, he used his authoritarian power to benefit his own family and kinship (The Hectic Reemergence of Central Asia in International Affairs and the Region's Regression, 2002). The kinship systems, widespread across the Central Asian steppe before the 20th century, manifested in traditional clan and tribal identities still played a crucial part in post-Soviet Kazakhstan as well. Nazarbayev used his genealogical affiliation with the Senior Horde (*Kazakh:Uly juz; Ұлы жүз*) to centralize the executive power around his family (Collins, 2006; Esenova, 1998). However, these affiliations with pre-Soviet social structures are not officially

recognized by state and lead to division and tensions within the state, thus proving to be unfit for a nation-building concept (Morozova, 2005). Namely, Nazarbayev faced tension between his own Senior Horde, Middle Horde (*Kazakh: Orta juz; Орта Жүз*) and Junior Horde (*Kazakh: Kisi Juz; Kiuи Жүз*) and used oil rents to appease the rivaling Hordes (Collins, 2006; Schatz, 2004). And yet, the patrimonial connections were widely used throughout; for example, Nazarbayev's son-in-law Rakhat Aliev oversaw Almaty's taxation department, and he and his wife Dariga Nazarbayeva controlled independent media (Collins, 2006). Notably, Nazarbayev's use of his belonging Senior Horde is unsurprising, the idea of tribal divisions "plays a unified role for all Kazakhs," as they believe that unless you have a tribe, you are not Kazakh (Esenova, 1998, 451).

**Post-Colonial Nation-Building and Naturalization Policies**

The reinstatement of the legitimacy and dominance of the titular ethnic groups in Central Asia meant that the incoming administrations had to face large groups of non-titular ethnic minorities, namely ethnic-Russians. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan stood separate from other Central Asian nations in their moderate legislature and desire to co-exist with ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities (Abashin, 2012). The internal pressure on the two administrations existed because of two aspects: 1) the concern to not excite ethnic tension and conflict through de-colonization, and 2) the fact that the Central Asian republics were a product of the USSR and colonization (Abashin, 2012; Bingol 2004). The creation of the new states with their titular groups during the Soviet period has its own tensions, as there has been evidence of census and statistical manipulation in the 1920s, the grossest one being the lumping of various Turkic groups, such as nomadic Uzbek tribes, the Sarts and other, under the umbrella term

'Uzbek' (Ilkhamov, 2005). Notably, the statistical manipulation of ethnic groups and their percentages in Kazakhstan has been attributed as a 'compensation for previous cleansing, genocide and displacement suffered by ethnic Kazakhs' (Ilkhamov, 2005, 96).

Nonetheless, both Nazarbayev and Akayev pursued de-colonization and de-Russification in the 1990s. In his 1992 speech at the first World *Kurultai (congregation)* of Kazakhs, Nazarbayev touched upon the effects of colonial rule on the nation's cultural and historical legacy, by saying "we have carefully restored everything that was lost: half-forgotten traditions, historic rights, culture, language, beliefs… My duty as a person and as president is to be concerned constantly about the preservation and development of the Kazakh nation, its unique national characteristics" (Narottum, 2006, 61).

However, the situation in Central Asia is more complicated than a simple settler-colonial presence. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have substantial Uzbek, German, Uighur and Korean communities as a result of mass migration during the Soviet period (voluntary and involuntary) (Abashin, 2012). Thus, Nazarbayev and Akayev were both faced with the need to find the right balance between appeasing the titular ethnic group and pacifying the minority groups while actively promoting Kazakh and Kyrgyz culture.

During the drafting of the constitution, Akayev personally asked for the nationalist clauses to be removed from the text and the nation name to be changed from Kyrgyzstan, which means 'land of Kyrgyz' to the Republic of Kyrgyzia (Collins, 2006). However, the name was yet again changed to the Kyrgyz Republic, denoting the exclusivity of the Kyrgyz ethnicity (Bingol, 2004). Alternatively, the Constitution of Kazakhstan begins with the phrase, "We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by common historic fate, creating state on the indigenous Kazakh land," uses inclusive rhetoric while simultaneously specifying the prominence of the ethnic

Kazakh people (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Pmbl). As Aziz Burkhanov (2017) writes, Kazakhstan also "emphasized the commitment of the state to develop the national cultures and traditions of all ethnic groups living in the country" and granted state funding for the ethnic minority groups to establish a "national-cultural center" through the state agency, Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (3).

Nonetheless, the preferential treatment for the titular ethnic groups is evident in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. A clear example is the government of Kazakhstan denying its Russian minority citizens the rights for a dual citizenship, while offering the Kazakh diaspora abroad the same right (Bingol, 2004). A more subdued example of the bias and prevention of minority protests is Kazakhstan' 1998 Law of Public Assembly which requires permission from authorities to hold a public rally and Article 337 of the Criminal Code which declares that the "charge of inciting ethnic discord or displaying 'nationalism' is among the most serious [crimes] and incurs heavy penalties, together with earning disrepute" (Dave, 2007, 129). One of the more famous examples of enactment of this Criminal Code is the case of an ethnic-Russian opposition activist who was accused of "offending the dignity of the Kazakh nation" for writing an article in a Russian-language newspaper (Dave, 2007, 129).

Another case of government intervention for the restriction of ethnic-Russian citizens within Kazakhstan, is the reconstitution of the oblast (region) boundaries between 1994 and 1997, after ethnic Russians pressed for greater representation in their local governments in accordance with their majority status in certain oblasts. The reconstruction of boundaries resulted in the enlargement of the regions with majority Russian populations and thus increasement of ethnic Kazakhs which rendered the ethnic-Russian's demands baseless (Dave, 2007).

**Connection to pre-Russian Empire**

With the collapse of the USSR and the international recognition of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz as titular ethnic groups with their own independent nations, the two Central Asian nations saw a revival in their historic, pre-Russian empire collective memory and the creation of links between the modern nation-states and the empires that existed on Central Asian territories in ancient times (Fawn, 2003; Morozova 2005). This renewal cannot be called organic, as the Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations took proactive steps to ensure the essentialization and primordialization of their nations, by describing "ethnic identities as linear, eternal and uniform" (Abashin 2012, 150). For example, both Kazakhstan and Kygyzstan began eradicating 'Russian' names from geographical locations (toponyms) and replacing them with either Kazakh and Kyrgyz words or pre-Soviet historical figures. Thus, Tselinograd became Astana, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Frunze, reclaimed its pre-Soviet named Bishkek, and collectivization farms 'Communism,' 'Socialism' and 'CPSU Congress' were renamed after pre-Soviet era heroes such as Abylai Khan, Tole Bi and Rayimbek Batyr (Abashin, 2012; Burkhanov 2017).

The Kyrgyz authorities have used several key historical reference points for celebration of their national and ethnic identity - the Yenisei Kyrgyz tribes formed in modern day Siberia, the establishment of the town of Osh and the mythical hero, Manas who according to his epic first united the Kyrgyz tribes (Abashin, 2012; Gullette, 2010). Notably, in 1995, Kyrgyzstan celebrated the 1,000-year anniversary of the Manas epic as a "cornerstone of their ethno-national identity" and centered the city Talas where Manas' burial place is believed to be (Gullette, 2010) Understandably, ethnic minorities of Kyrgyzstan felt no loyalty to such conjunctions (Omelicheva, 2015).

Additionally, the revitalization of traditional elements has become popular in all of Central Asia, and so the use of *Aqsaqal* courts (a local Islamic administration systemit is also a very "adat"-type system—indigenous and Islamic) returned in Kyrgyzstan (Abashin, 2012). Akayev also vocalized the 'democratic' elements of the Kyrgyz nomadic traditions, such as "spiritual freedom, freedom of movement and expression and practices of *Kurultai* (a national assembly)" to argue for the inherent egalitarian base work for the modern-day Kyrgyz Republic (Omelicheva, 2015, 81).

The Nazarbayev administration took a similar approach of bridging the Kazakh nomadic way of life and the new Republic of Kazakhstan, claiming that the election of their tribal leaders (khans) in the pre-Soviet era has laid out the framework for the modern democratic practices (Omelicheva, 2015). Even so, even without the creative linkage, the administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan celebrates historic figures such as Abul Khair Khan, Ablai Khan, Ghenghis Khan, etc, looking to create the narrative of a solid existence of the Kazakh state before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1997 (Abashin, 2012). This practice of linkage to the glorified historical periods and figures of the past mostly ignores ethnic and cultural evolutions in place of proof of deep historical roots (Ilkhamov, 2005).

Notably, the substitution of Soviet and Russian-centric iconography does not end with pre-communist and medieval figures. In 1997, a monument for two Kazakh World War II soldiers, sniper Alya Moldagulova and machine gunner Manshuk Mametova, was built on the same site where a monument for Lenin used to stand in Almaty (Rees, 2020).

**Politics of Religion**

The creation of the five Central Asian nations came with the agreement between the local elites and the Bolshevik elites that the newly established states would reject religion as "a source of legitimacy and identity" (Abashin, 2012, 159). While the reason for Bolshevik hostility against Islam was not fear of pan-Islam or pan-Turkic unity, the Soviet leadership clearly expressed renunciation of unity under Islam as a common religion (Fierman, 2009). The end of the USSR also brought the end of the agreement. Thus, Nazarbayev and Akayev had to address the diverging interests of their non-Muslim population (which often overlapped with their Russian-speaking population) and their Islamic-practicing minority which finally regained their right to practice religion (namely within their ethnic Uzbek minority groups) (Abashin, 2012). Moreover, the independence of the five historically Islamic nations, administrations of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were faced with the turbulent issue of the unfavorable status of Islam in global and foreign politics and its allure for providing answers to the questions of identity that were looming over the Central Asian population (Lewis, 2008). Withal, the Akayev and Nazarbayev administrations were forced to address this important tension while being poorly informed about the religion due to the century of anti-secular rule of the Bolshevik party (Lewis, 2008).

However, there was also promise and possibility of economic benefit that came with the acceptance of Islam as the national religion, such as the membership in the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). Ergo, Kazakhstan has finalized the "process of full legislation of Islamic finance" and Kyrgyzstan "launched a state-backed pilot project introducing Islamic banking services" (Aliyev, 2015, 20). While Eastern European heirs of the Soviet Union had the opportunity to join the European Union for assistance with economic and political stability, Central Asia lacked a

similar commonwealth, which made Islamic kinship appeal further. Hence, in 1994, president Akayev made the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca and received financial and other assistance from Middle Eastern powers and institutions throughout the 1990s (Fawn, 2003).

Yet, the Nazaarbayev and Akayev administrations still perceived Islamic activism as a possible threat to national security and operated to control and suppress Islam (Aliyev, 2015; Bingol, 2004; Fawn, 2003). Thus, by the mid-90s, governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan closely monitored Saudi missionary activity, a far less drastic measure than their neighbor Uzbekistan, which banned the activity all together (Lewis, 2008). These measures were taken after several instances of religious extremism in the late 1990s, such as Kyrgyz, Muslim youth attacking Russian vendors for selling pork at a marketplace or the setting off of a bomb in 1998 in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan (Fawn, 2003).

**Politics of Language**

In 1989, a Russian ethnographer Olga Naumova estimated that around 40 percent of ethnic Kazakhs no longer spoke their native language and that-three-quarters of ethnic Kazakhs in the big cities did not use Kazakh in their daily lives (Dave, 2007). The situation was similar in all of Central Asia, where authorities considered the reestablishment and revitalization of their titular ethnic language as one of the primary tasks of the 1990s following its devastating loss and decline during the Soviet rule, as a way of dissociating themselves from the Russian state and its symbolisms (Abashin, 2012, Marquardt, 2013).

The Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations utilized several types of methods to reinstall the daily usage of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages, ranging from state sponsorships of language revival societies, like the Qazaq Tili (*translation: Kazakh language*) society to official

language laws, such as the Language Law of 1997 in Kazakhstan which "eliminated the status of Russian as a language of interethnic communication," and instituted a quote for "Kazakh-language broadcasts" and the 1993 Kyrgyz Constitution which required that president candidates must speak Kyrgyz to qualify for the ballot (Abashin, 2012; Burkhanov, 2017, 6, Wright, 1999).

However, some scholars, including Aziz Burkhanov, argue that the increase of Kazakh and Kyrgyz in the general population must be largely attributed to the exodus of Russian-speakers from Central Asia, and the internal migration of ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz from the rural areas to large cities. Markedly, close to 200,000 ethnic Russians and 100,000 ethnic Germans migrated out of Kyrgyzstan (Wright, 1999) The governments' failure to strongly assert and follow through with their plans to prioritize Kazakh and Kyrgyz as official languages and shift from Russian-dependent-symbolisms is quite evident. Akayev negatively responded to the mass exodus of European minorities out of the nation believing that he needed Russian government and elite support, even suspending a number of Language Laws in 1993 and establishing a "Russian medium university… to reassure the Russian speakers" (Wright, 1999). Furthermore, the Russian government financed the Russian medium university in the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, and at the sixth anniversary event ceremony of the university, Akayev declared that Russian "was and will always be an official language in [their] country" (Fawn, 2003).

Furthermore, while both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan began drafting legislature for the shift from the Cyrillic alphabet to a Latin alphabet in the first decade of the independence, Kazakhstan only plans to begin to transition to the Latin alphabet in 2023 and Kyrgyzstan is only theoretically speaking on Latinazation of the alphabet in the 2030s or 2040s (Abashin, 2012; Satubaldina, 2021; "Кыргызстан может остаться единственной тюркоязычной страной с кириллицей [Kyrgyzstan may be the only Turkic-speaking country with a Cyrilli alphabet],"

2017. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are arguably the only two Central Asian countries with this issue, as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were successful in passing harsh legislature that stripped Russian of its power status (Fierman, 2009).

An important factor in this, is the Russian-speaking population's (which includes ethnic-Russians, ethnic-Ukrainians, ethnic-Koreans, ethnic-Germans, etc) official appeals to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments to grant Russian the status of the official state language (Kurkhanov, 2017). This might explain why Kyrgyzstan's government refused to recognize the Uzbek language (despite the country's large ethnic-Uzbek population, see Figure 7 and 8), while granting Russian the status of the 'official, but not state language' (Fierman, 2009, 1218). It is of note, that there have been a number of ethnic clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz is southern Kyrgyzstan since independence in 1990s and as recent as Summer 2020 (Hashimova, 2021).

Diana Kudaibergenova (2020) attributes Nazarbayev's apathy for Kazakh as the titular language to designed calculation to divide the population based on their linguistic abilities to be able to "address different messages to various culturally differentiated groups and audiences" (105). Alternatively, again, the co-existence of the two language allows for the "peaceful function in both the official and everyday-life medium in equal measure" and averts possible ethnic tensions and conflicts, which was not awarded to the population on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border (Rakhmetova, 2007).

## Conclusion

Three decades have passed since the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are led by new administrations - Tokayev in Kazakhstan and

Japarov in Kyrgyzstan, but the legacy of 1990's Nazarbayev and Akayev remains, be it in the direct hand over of power in Kazakhstan or the more subtle institution of the two nations as legitimate heirs of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz tribes of the given Central Asian territories. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz people successfully reclaimed the majority status (raising their population percentage to 70%, see Figures 6 and 8), after vast migration of European-ethnic groups into the territories, and there is an increase of Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages in both nations. In 2006, up to 88 percent of Kazakhs claimed fluency in Kazakh (Marquardt, 2013). As demonstrated above, both the Nazarbayev and Akayev administrations, despite their differing origination and contrasting connections to the previous Socialist governments, used primordialism to legitimize their titular identity's ethnic and historic claim to the modern-day states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and sever their connection to their Communist past, while simultaneously attempting to appease their minority populations in "democratic" maneuvers, unlike Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

And yet, the legacy of the Soviet period remains in the continuous suppression of Islam, the Central Asian lexicon (all Central Asian languages to this day use words borrowed from Russian even when speaking their ethnic languages), and naturalization policies (Fierman, 2009). Moreover, fears over territory and political and cultural repression of the Central Asian states continues into the 21st century. For example, in 2014, when questioned about the potential response of the Russian government to president Nazarbayev's (Vladimir Putin's loyal ally) removal from office, President Putin asserted the fact that the Kazakh people did not have a statehood prior to the creation of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Michael, 2014). The political leader's comments are not unique, as this sentiment of newly fabricated statehood is common in ethnic Russian communities within Central Asian territories. Following the

annexation of Crimea, Central Asian leaders have taken these comments at full gravity, worrying that once Nazarbayev concludes his reign over the nation, Russia would no longer have "any reason to continue with this experiment in statehood" (Michael, 2014). More tangibly, the Russian authorization in Central Asia was most recently evident in Putin's offering to the United States to use bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for "limited security operations in Afghanistan," without consulting the Central Asian states (Вашингтону протянули базу помощи [Washington is offered base for help], 2021).

Territorial disputes in Kyrgyzstan have extended past hypothetical to bloody in the 2021 border conflict with Tajikistan, which left a death toll of 55 and forced the two nations' leaders to reconsider the official border (Abdulkerimov, 2021). The border dispute holds a direct bind to the Soviet era- decision regarding nation creation and border separation which left large groups of Tajik and Uzbek minorities within Kyrgyz borders (Walters, 2021). Furthermore, Russian and Chinese governments hold special interests in the border conflict, with President Putin's close relationship with the president of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's severe debt to the Chinese government (Walter, 2021). Finally, this deadly conflict takes place while the Kyrgyz government quickly moves away from the democratic-pretenses of Akayev's administration to a "consultative democracy, which would strike a balance between the traditions and values of Kyrgyz nomadic society and the country's development in the twenty-first century" (Omelicheva, 2015, 83).

The new question now stands – what will the new administrations of Tokayev and Japarov do with the legacy left to them by their 90s predecessors in the ongoing 21st century?

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