

“ASSEMBLING” A CIVIC NATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE NATION-BUILDING ROLE OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE PEOPLES OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

The countries of the former Soviet Union inherited a unique system for managing the needs of ethnic minorities. The question is how these countries utilize Soviet constructs to develop policies suitable for their distinct political contexts. Kazakhstan’s leaders have chosen to fashion a multiethnic civic nation and established the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan to oversee the work of creating a uniform national identity. This paper discusses major theories pertaining to civic nation-building, highlights the Soviet approach to building a civic nation, and describes how the ideology, form, and activities of the Assembly contribute to civic nation-building in Kazakhstan. Finally, it describes the author’s own ethnographic research demonstrating how people react to Kazakhstan’s civic nation-building efforts. The paper argues that Kazakhstan’s attempts to create a civic national identity are failing because it has not yet provided a consolidating national discourse as strong as socialism was during the Soviet period.

Keywords: *Kazakhstan, ethnicity, civic nation-building, korenizatsiia, Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, Soviet minorities’ policies, identity.*

Introduction

As former republics of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries have inherited extremely diverse multiethnic populations produced through large-scale forced and voluntary migration. Their Soviet history has instilled their citizens and leaders with a unique way of thinking about ethnic nations, which the communist authorities largely constructed and proliferated from the 1920s until the Union disbanded in 1991. Since independence, Kazakhstan’s and other Central Asian countries’ approaches to nation-building reflect these Soviet constructs, but they have also offered new perceptions and strategies to the concept of the nation.

Kazakhstan is highly multiethnic. According to official statistics, 59.2 per cent of the population is Kazakh, 29.6 per cent is Russian, and 10.2 per cent comprises Germans, Tatars, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, and Uyghurs. The remaining 1 per cent includes members of over 140 other nationalities.¹ Rather than

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¹ These statistics are provided on the Kazakhstan embassy’s website in the United States. “Ethnic Groups” <http://www.kazakhembus.com/index.php?page=ethnic-groups> (accessed April 20, 2010).

constructing a state-sponsored national identity based exclusively on ethnic Kazakh culture to assimilate the large non-Kazakh portion of the population, the leaders of Kazakhstan have opted for a multiethnic civic nation aiming to enfranchise all of its citizens completely, regardless of their cultural identities. This nation-building approach encourages the state's ethnic minorities to preserve and revitalize their own ethnic cultures and languages while it simultaneously characterizes Kazakh culture and language as the instruments of national consolidation. To oversee the work of ethnic minority cultural preservation and participate in the project of civic nation-building, the government established the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan.

The Assembly is a government-sponsored institution promoting “peace and harmony” among the ethnically diverse population of Kazakhstan. Among the Assembly's tasks are the provision of minority representation in state and local government, the support of national cultural centers mandated to preserve and revive ethnic minority cultures, and the establishment of facilities and forums, such as cultural festivals and Houses of Friendship, for the exercise and performance of ethnic culture. Some of the stated intentions of these efforts include forming a civic Kazakhstan national identity, strengthening multiethnic and multi-religious harmony and tolerance, and countering the appearance of extremism and radicalism in society.²

In the comments that follow, I will examine the process of civic nation-building in Kazakhstan through a focus on the Assembly's underlying ideologies. To do this, I will discuss major theories pertaining to civic nation-building, highlight the Soviet approach to building a civic nation, and describe how the ideology, form, and activities of the Assembly contribute to civic nation-building in Kazakhstan. I will conclude the paper by briefly discussing my ethnographic research in northern Kazakhstan to demonstrate how local populations react to Kazakhstan's civic nation-building efforts.

Theoretical Interpretations of Civic and Ethnic Nations and Nation-Building

The urge to create and maintain a civic nation – an official national identity incorporating all of the citizens of the state regardless of ethnicity, race, or gender – is a prominent strategy for political leaders to establish hegemony in multiethnic states. But what exactly is a “nation,” and what forms its constituent parts? In order to clarify the composition of nations, Anthony Smith differentiates state citizenship from ethnic membership by positing the existence of two nations, a civic nation and an ethnic nation. According to this formulation, people with ethnic ties emphasizing elements of kinship, customs, and languages form the components of ethnic nations, while the formation of states presupposes civic nations created through the administration of capitalism, centralized government, and the secularization of education and culture. According to Smith, therefore, membership in the civic nation relies upon citizenship in the state, while ethnic nations may exist within the civic nation composed of people linked together through culture and kinship. This perception of nations suggests that one may belong to two nations simultaneously – as both a citizen of a state and a member of an ethnic group within the state.³

² Нурсултан Назербаев, «Об Ассамблее народа Казахстана» Казахстанская Правда – October 21, 2008 [Nursultan Nazerbaev, “On the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan,” Kazakhstan Pravda, October 21, 2008].

³ Anthony D. Smith, “State Making and Nation-Building,” in *States in History*, ed. John A. Hall (Chichester, UK: Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), 228-63.

Others contest the concept of the nation as a civic formation. Walker Connor, for example, disputes discourses on the nation that improperly conflate its members with the citizens of states. While Connor agrees with Smith's understanding of ethnic nations, he argues that the notion of the civic nation inaccurately associates the nation with all citizens in a state whether or not they maintain mutual cultural identifications. "Nation-building" projects among state citizens will therefore inevitably fail because the term nation applies exclusively to populations sharing deep ethno-cultural ties (as in Smith's ethnic nations). Those cultural ties which successfully unify "true nations" are unavailable to create common feelings of togetherness among all state citizens (except of course in instances where the state and nation are truly aligned, such as in World War II Germany and Japan). As a result, nation builders are hard-pressed to create national discourses compelling enough for the population to uniformly pledge its loyalty to the state.⁴ Connor's argument regarding the ambiguity of the term "nation" is certainly valid, and attempts at civic nation-building have undoubtedly failed. As a good deal of research on the nation demonstrates, however, political projects aiming to unify state populations using civic national discourses persist as popular strategies for the powers which govern them.⁵

While Connor and Smith perceive nations, at least in their ethnic form, as cultural formations, constructivist theorists of the nation argue that other forces are at play. According to this body of work, the political, economic, and technological contexts of modernity represent the primary forces constructing the nation, rather than exclusively cultural factors such as languages, traditions and customs.⁶ Ernest Gellner, for example, suggests that the formation of nations occurs under the conditions of social mobility and instability characteristic of early capitalism. Using the industrial revolution in Western Europe as a model, Gellner argues that a nation forms when agricultural societies transform into industrialized states. During the process of industrialization, the development of a highly mobile, educated, and literate society produces nationalism – the organization of human groups in a state into a large, centrally educated, and cultural homogenous unit.⁷ While the constructivist position does not explicitly argue that such modern social organization creates "civic nations," Gellner maintains that when the culture of a society becomes standardized and homogenous (under the conditions of industrialization and technological advance), individuals willingly and often passionately identify with the preexisting political unit. Under these conditions, nations exist through a common material culture and its convergence with the dominant political unit – the state.⁸

Some more recent views characterize the nation as a category of political practice rather than as a concrete community of co-ethnics with a coherent sense of collective identity. Rogers Brubaker, for example, refers to the nation not as a group, but as a category in which political actors practice possible

⁴ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 97-99.

⁵ See, for example, Mary Crain, "The Social Construction of National Identity in Highland Ecuador," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 631 (1990): 43-59; Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53:1 (1994): 92-123; Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15.

⁶ For the primary constructivist views on nations and nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1991 [1983]); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982); Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Eric John Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric John Hobsbawm, and T. Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14.

⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

variants of nationalism to meet political objectives.⁹ For Brubaker, state authorities practice civic nationalism when attempting to assert the status and welfare of the state's citizens for the purpose of legitimizing their authority.¹⁰ By extension, citizens practice civic nationalism simply by recognizing the legitimacy of the regimes authority and policies. Civic nationalism therefore exists through political practices and the naturalization of those practices rather than as discrete movements making it difficult to detect its presence as a political phenomenon.¹¹ Brubaker also recognizes that ethnic nationalism may take place when cultural minorities in the state pursue their own political interests while utilizing "nation"-oriented idioms, practices, and possibilities that are continuously available in modern cultural and political life.¹²

While Brubaker sees the political mobilization of cultural minorities in states as the expression of ethnic nationalisms, others totally reject ethnic nationalism as originating from homogeneous cultural communities. John Breuilly, for example views ethnic nationalism not in terms of cultural minorities, but as the actions of opposition politicians seeking to gain or maintain political privileges by making claims for subordinate groups whom they frame as members of minority cultural polities.¹³ Hence, nations and nationalism, according to these theorists, exist as strategies that political elites institutionalize within the workings of the state system and utilize for the purpose of legitimizing their political authority.

In addition to ethnic nations, Brubaker points to how political leaders might imagine two other variants of the nation in the context of states – nationalizing and civic nations. Nationalizing nations exist when state leaders attempt to establish their territory as a nation-state – the state of and for a particular nation of which they perceive themselves to be part.¹⁴ In this context, Brubaker sharply differentiates the nationalizing or "core" nations from the citizens of states. Political leaders characterize themselves as members of the core nation and promote its language, cultural preservation, economic welfare, and political hegemony as official priorities of political practice. Those who do not belong to the core nation, however, do not share in the "ownership" of the state.¹⁵ By contrast, Brubaker describes civic nations forming when the state insists that both its minority and majority cultural groups belong fundamentally to the dominant nation. In this way, state authorities recognizes the political and cultural claims of ethnic nations, but institutionalizes a more encompassing state-wide sense of national belonging, which only requires citizenship.¹⁶ It is precisely this form of civic nation building that early Soviet leaders selected to consolidate non-Russians into the new socialist multiethnic state and subsequently serves as a model for Kazakhstan's leaders as they attempt to establish a statewide national identity.

Soviet *korenizatsiia*: The "Roots" of Kazakhstan's Nation-Building Project

Rather than alienating the non-Russian populations of the old Czarist Empire through privileging the Russian core as the nationalizing nation, early Bolshevik leaders opted for a civic nation hoping to

⁹ Rogers R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16-17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5-10.

¹³ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 360-71.

¹⁴ Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 27.

consolidate its multiethnic territories into a Soviet state. Beginning in the 1920s, Soviet authorities encouraged, or even helped to create, ethnic nations with corresponding nationalisms. In formulating this policy, Lenin argued that cultural autonomy for non-Russians living in the boundaries of the former Russian empire would signal to these populations that the Bolshevik regime valued their interests. An additional objective was to simplify the available categories of personal identity, granting Soviet officials with greater influence over how non-Russians could identify themselves. Once categories of identity became simplified, institutionalized, and naturalized, Soviet leaders expected that adherence to one's ethnic national identity would wither in favor of one's membership in the Soviet civic nation.¹⁷

Soviet authorities designated this program as an indigenization, or in Russian a *korenizatsiia*. The term *korenizatsiia*, which literally means "rooting" in Russian, implied the attempt to rediscover and utilize the cultures of the populations, which had historically "rooted" themselves into the Soviet Union's territories. *Korenizatsiia* functioned as an affirmative action policy for non-Russians in the Soviet Union emphasizing the use of local languages and cultural traditions, empowering native cadres as regional political leaders, and filling government administrations with members of the regional ethnic nations.¹⁸ To accomplish *korenizatsiia*, Soviet leaders employed ethnographers to survey the entire population and fashion it into groups of ethnic nations. In this way, Soviet authorities asserted the right to determine the size and number of the state's ethnic nations and tightly control the nature of their national character and expression. The authorities required state ethnographers to determine how various linguistic groups, clans, and tribes might best be consolidated into single ethnic nations. Soviet authorities also charged ethnographers with the task of forming national territories, creating linguistic vernaculars, constructing cultural traditions, and writing histories for the newly constituted national groups. They then divided all of the Soviet Union's citizens into the officially established ethnic national categories. Using the newly established or refashioned ethnic national traditions, vernaculars, and histories, the Soviet leadership trained and appointed indigenous Bolshevik cadres as the leaders of the officially designated ethnic nations.¹⁹

Although Stalin officially halted *korenizatsiia* in the late 1930s, the program's lasting effect was a fundamental transformation in how people identified themselves. The ethnographic surveys, territorial mapping, writing of new histories, and the affirmative action policies associated with *korenizatsiia* precluded Soviet citizens from identifying themselves with previous familiar categories, such as religion, locality, or kin. Instead of utilizing such identifications, *korenizatsiia* trained the non-Russian population to identify themselves as members of officially designated ethnic nations. In this way, adherence to ethnic nations served to standardize identity by replacing former localized identities with ways of thinking about oneself that political authorities could easily quantify and manipulate.²⁰

Thus *korenizatsiia* helped to eliminate potential oppositions to state-sponsored identities making the officially sponsored forms of identification tightly linked to life under socialism more tangible. Using socialism in a consolidating role, therefore, the state subjugated national ethnic identity to the

¹⁷ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1-20.

¹⁸ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15.

¹⁹ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 1-20.

²⁰ Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 226-40.

preeminence of a Soviet socialist identity, which Stalin expressed through the mantra “national in form, socialist in content.”²¹ This reduced ethnic nationalism to the level of form through the usage of ethnic languages and the performance of cultural traditions, while Soviet citizens practiced “civic nationalism” through a socialist “content” – the daily, lived reality of socialism by participating in labor and other state-influenced activities. The task has now fallen on the Soviet Union’s former republics to create new civic national discourses in the absence of the overriding economic and political ideology which socialism provided for the Soviet civic nation.

Building a Kazakhstan Civic Nation Through Cultural Preservation and Revitalization

Together with the other former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan has inherited the legacy of *korenizatsiia* and subsequently the ethnic national categories perpetuated under socialism. Instead of pursuing a course of nationalizing nationalism privileging ethnic Kazakhs or attempting the wholesale assimilation of the population into a Kazakh linguistic and cultural identity, Kazakhstan’s authorities have chosen to employ the Soviet nationalities’ discourse and thus embrace and further develop the categories created under *korenizatsiia*. Kazakhstan’s government, for example, requires individuals upon reaching their sixteenth birthday to choose an ethnic nation by which to identify themselves on their state identity cards (*удостоверение личности*).²² In addition, the activities of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan further naturalize ethnic categories as they strive to preserve and/or revitalize minority languages and other cultural repertoires.

Similar to the prior Soviet nationalities’ discourse, Kazakhstan’s lawmakers argue that encouraging the growth of minority ethnic identities is a viable strategy to strengthen a sense of Kazakhstani state citizenship among these minorities. At a recent parliament-sponsored round table convened to discuss the “the models upon which interethnic harmony can be achieved in Kazakhstan,” participants suggested that the freedom to belong to an ethnic nation and to preserve one’s ethnic language functions as an incentive for the population to identify as citizens of the state.²³ For lawmakers, the freedom to belong to an ethnic nation and exercise a cultural identity corresponding to a chosen ethnic category achieves two primary goals; it provides a motivation to value one’s citizenship in the state and it supports the maintenance of peace and harmony among its ethnically diverse population. This perception suggests, therefore, that a fundamental task of the state is to further entrench Kazakhstan’s citizens into their chosen ethnic categories and through that entrenchment increase the value of their state citizenship. For the time being, the state has chosen the Assembly as the primary tool with which to undertake this task.

A piece of legislation passed in October 2008 entitled *On the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan*, which was designed to lend constitutional support to the Assembly, clearly demonstrates Kazakhstan’s path of civic nation building. The law states that “the Assembly contributes to the realization of the

²¹ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 202.

²² According to Article 19 of Kazakhstan’s Constitution, every citizen has the right to indicate or to decline to indicate an ethnicity; however, Article 57 (On Families and Marriage) states that children must select the ethnicity of one of their parents. Therefore, technically anyone may refuse to select an ethnicity on applications for state identification cards and passports for international use.

²³ Марьям Турежанова, «Под общим шаныраком» Казахстанская Правда – October 11, 2008 [Maryam Turejanova, “Under a Common ‘Janirok’ (Kazakh: ‘roof’),” *Kazakhstan Pravda* – October 11, 2008].

government's policies regarding nationalities ... [and] to guaranteeing interethnic harmony in Kazakhstan within the process of forming a Kazakhstan state identity and nation ... in relation to the consolidating role of the Kazakh people."²⁴ The law further claims that a primary assignment of the Assembly is to promote the preservation, revitalization, and the development of the ethnic cultures, languages, and traditions of the peoples of Kazakhstan.²⁵ This provision regarding the promotion of cultural preservation and revitalization among Kazakhstan's ethnic nations underlies the primary work that the Assembly actually performs.

Through a structure reaching from President Nazerbaev down to the members of the affiliated national cultural centers of the country's smallest villages, the Assembly and its partners operate as a system of hierarchical councils. The Assembly itself is a state-level organization, led by President Nazerbaev and composed of delegates representing the various officially registered ethnic cultural organizations of the state who meet together at least annually to discuss the Assembly's operating strategy. In addition to the national Assembly each Oblast, as well as the cities Astana and Almaty, has its own "small" Assembly whose composition and operations mirror that of the national structure. The Oblast Assemblies may also maintain filial in the counties (*raioni*) under their jurisdiction – the structure of the *raion*-level institutions again resembles those on the Oblast and state levels.²⁶

The organs which the Assembly utilizes to promote the nation-building ideology among Kazakhstan's population are the numerous national culture centers and unions organized at the state, Oblast, and *raion* levels representing members of the various ethnic nations in the regions where they are organized. The centers, often in cooperation with the Assembly, sponsor ethnic cultural activities for their members including language study, arts and crafts classes for children, social clubs for youth and adults, as well as the preparation and execution of performances involving traditional singing, dancing and dramatic pieces usually in ethnic national costume. According to the legislation passed to support the mission of the Assembly, the primary purpose of these activities is the "preservation and revitalization of the cultures and peoples of Kazakhstan."²⁷

Kazakhstan's lawmakers stress that in addition to the state-supported opportunities to preserve and/or revitalize ethnic national cultures, ethnic Kazakhs and Kazakh culture must play a primary *consolidating* role in developing and sustaining the Kazakhstan civic nation. The authorities have suggested that the primary instrument of culture with which to draw non-Kazakhs into the Kazakhstan civic nation should be the Kazakh language. In recognition of this, federal lawmakers have stated that "knowledge of the Kazakh language is the most important condition to achieve inter-ethnic peace and harmony."²⁸ Concerning the Assembly's role in this project, the head of the presidential administration, Kairat Kilimbetov, stressed that the national cultural centers and the structures of the Assembly must work together to raise the general proficiency of the Kazakh language – "the state language."²⁹

²⁴ Nursultan Nazerbaev, *On the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ С. Малдыбаев, «Филологическая Миссия Алаша» Казахстанская Правда – September 13, 2008 [S. Maldibaev, "Philological Mission of Alasha" Kazakhstan Truth – September 13, 2008].

²⁹ С. Горбунов, «Единство Нации – Ключ к Успеху: Консолидирующий Фактор Ассемблеи» Казахстанская Правда – September 13, 2008 ["Unity of the Nation – The Key to Success: The Consolidating Factor of the Assembly" Kazakhstan Truth – September 13, 2008].

State support for the preservation of ethnic national cultures through the activities of the Assembly and its affiliates is thus rhetorically contingent upon the simultaneous adoption of Kazakh language and culture within the official domain of ethnic minority cultural life – the national cultural centers. Hence, Kazakhstan's authorities have chosen Kazakh language and culture to replace socialism as a consolidating civic national discourse. Perhaps this insistence on the inherent primacy of Kazakh culture and language while emphasizing a civic national model indeed represents a counterfeit form of civic nation-building intent on Kazakhification. President Nazerbaev and other officials, however, have strongly asserted otherwise. In October of 2009, the president sponsored the publication of a "Doctrine of National Unity," in relation to which he insisted that "the country had developed to a point where it [is] time for people's identity to be based solely on their citizenship of Kazakhstan."³⁰ In addition to these comments about national identity, the text of the "Doctrine" itself states that favoring a civic rather than an ethnic model of national community is the course upon which Kazakhstan's leaders have chosen to establish interethnic stability in the society.³¹ Whether or not the reality of Kazakhstan's nation-building policies supports the effort to *Kazakhify* rather than *Kazakhstanify*, the state's leadership has publicly conceptualized its efforts precisely as a case of civic nation-building rather than its ethnic alternative.

At question here, however, is not if Kazakhstan's attempts to nationalize its population are genuinely civic or covertly ethnic, but rather what the outcomes have been, and what has conditioned them. In spite of the multiethnic nature of Kazakhstan's civic nationalist rhetoric, the policy still depends upon an ethno-cultural form (the Kazakh language and culture) that is not necessary tangible to a large portion of the non-Kazakh population. In comparison with the Soviet "national in form, socialist in content" model, which completely subjugated ethnic nationality to an official state identity corresponding to the lived reality of socialism, Kazakhstan's authorities have introduced an additional national form rather than a "content" as the consolidating factor. What this form of civic national identity lacks is a comprehensive "content," or a way in which daily activities link the state's citizens into one single national whole as socialism had to an extent accomplished for the citizens of the Soviet Union. The result is that Kazakh language and culture seems to have much less salience as a consolidating discourse in the daily lives of non-Kazakhs in Kazakhstan than socialism had for non-Russians in the Soviet Union. The question remains, however, as to the salience of the ethnic national categories for the identities of Kazakhstanis.

Reactions to Ethnic National Categories and the Assembly's Nation-Building Role

One indicator of the outcomes of Kazakhstan's civic national discourse is the negative reaction from some ethnic Kazakhs. In response to the "Doctrine" published in 2009, a Kazakh group identifying itself as "the National Patriots" has argued that the Kazakh language is losing out to Russian and should maintain even more prominence in the state than Kazakhstan's official policies permit. Following the publication of the "Doctrine," the patriots published their own document entitled "Concept for National Policy" in which the group called for Kazakhs to assume their rightful role as "the state-forming

³⁰ Daulet Kanagatuly, "Arguments over Nationhood in Kazakhstan: Compromise Sought Between American-Style Melting Pot and Monoethnic Kazakh State," Reporting Central Asia, No. 606 (March 19, 2010): http://www.mail-archive.com/reporting_central_asia_english@iwpr.gn.apc.org/msg00161.html (accessed April 20, 2010).

³¹ The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, «Доктрина Национального Единства Казахстана», http://www.assembly.kz/index_en.php?ft=10020&type=10070&java_tree=10070 (accessed April 20, 2010).

indigenous nation” and to discard the notion of a Kazakhstani identity completely.³² On the other hand, the population’s non-Kazakhs have tended to express their concerns with nationalization policies with their feet, i.e. through emigration to the Russian Federation and Germany. While non-Kazakh emigration from Kazakhstan has been high, it has significantly decreased since the 1990s, suggesting that attempts to placate non-Kazakhs have experienced at least a measure of success.³³

However significant demographic trends and public political debates are to understanding the impact of Kazakhstan’s civic nation-building program, it is even more significant to ascertain how communities and individuals have reacted to the policies. With this in mind, I have examined the structures, procedures and outcomes of civic nation-building through sixteen months of ethnographic research in villages and urban centers in northern Kazakhstan from 2008 to 2009. My research involved observing and participating in the activities of the German National Cultural Center and other national cultural centers (Ukrainian, Tatar, Chechen-Ingush, etc.) in a rural region in the Pavlodar Oblast. The village in which I conducted the bulk of my study maintains a filial of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, which is affiliated with the oblast level Assembly in Pavlodar City. My primary concern was to ascertain how Kazakhstan’s approach to civic nation building articulates itself within local populations, and to accomplish this I attended national cultural center sponsored club meetings, language classes, performance rehearsals and cultural festivals. During these events, I spoke at length with and interviewed the participants and cultural center workers. I also spent time among the villages’ German, Tatar, and Russian populations to discuss their perceptions of ethnicity and ethnic cultural preservation.

As stated above, the state requires every sixteen year-old to claim membership in an ethnic nation which is then printed on their state issued identity cards. As ethnicity is therefore an official category of identity (as it was under the Soviet Union), I was interested in how substantial such identifications are to peoples lives. The majority of my respondents indicated that possessing an ethnic identity was important to them. Only a small number, however, actually participate in activities contributing to the preservation or revitalization of ethnic cultures, languages, or traditions. Most are unaware of the existence and activities of the Assembly and express ambivalence about the consolidating role of Kazakh culture and language.

If a large number of Kazakhstan’s citizens are unlikely to participate in activities to preserve their ethnic cultures, why does the state rely so heavily on ethnic cultural preservation as a primary tool to create a civic national identity? In her work on ethnicity in Trinidad, Viranjini Munasinghe argues that those who construct ethnic categories design them to reflect a specific social reality, which may or may not conform to actual patterns of daily life. Munasinghe explains that ethnic discourses label and project cultural meaning onto certain practices corresponding to ethnic categories. Once the population becomes familiar with the discourses, individuals tend to imagine a personal and meaningful relationship to the practices even if they take place outside their immediate context of experience.³⁴ The legacy of Soviet *korenizatsiia* policies had already naturalized an ethnic discourse and categories for its citizens, leaving authorities in the Soviet Union’s successor states with an already meaningful mode of identification for

³² Kanagatuly, “Arguments over Nationhood in Kazakhstan.”

³³ Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of “Blood” in Kazakhstan and Beyond* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2004), 82.

³⁴ Viranjini Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad? East Indians and the Cultural politics of Identity in Trinidad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 27.

its citizens. Following the collapse of the USSR, these authorities were faced with the necessity to use the Soviet ethnic national discourse to their advantage or have it used against them.

Following Munasinghe's understanding of ethnic discourse, I argue that although the impact of cultural preservation appears to be negligible for most non-Kazakhs, it does preserve the perception among the population that ethnic categories actively exist. The efforts of the Assembly therefore rest not upon the actual preservation work of ethnic cultural traditions and languages, but rather the way in which this work maintains the categories where cultural preservation takes place. My observations indicate that the traces of the Assembly's work, rather than knowledge of the Assembly and its programs, transfer knowledge of ethnic categories to the population through holiday performances, cultural festivals, newspaper articles, and word of mouth. The work of civic nation-building thus depends upon this general recognition that ethnic categories exist, and something is officially being done about them, to raise the value of citizenship in Kazakhstan for non-Kazakhs.

Conclusion: Identity Crisis in the Former Soviet Union?

In spite of the lasting power of ethnic national categories that the Soviet *korenizatsiia* program has inspired, the strength of ethnic nationality pales in comparison to the strength of the Soviet civic nationality based on everyday forms of socialist life as a tangible source of personal identity. While interviewing and discussing ideas about ethnicity with people during my research, many expressed ambivalence about the ethnic categories to which they belonged and identified themselves simply as "Soviet people." Most attempts to replace this lost sense of Soviet socialist identity have failed, and in the worst cases influenced instances of violent conflict. In his study of post-socialist transitions in the Caucasus, Georgi Derluguian notes that while a minority of former Soviet states have successfully replaced the socialist identity with other tangible discourses – like westernization and market orientation in the Baltics – other regions have replaced socialism with tragically destructive forms, such as insurgency along ethnic and religious lines in the south and north Caucasus.³⁵

Certainly, Kazakhstan's civic nation-building strategy's reliance on Kazakh language and culture stands little chance of provoking violent conflict, but as a unifying discourse it has even less of a chance of consolidating its non-Kazakh population into a Kazakhstani civic nation. Now that the Assembly and its programs are backed by the constitution, however, leaders of the national cultural centers are at least optimistic that the work of the Assembly will assume a more prominent role among the population, potentially convincing Kazakhstanis that they indeed belong to a multiethnic civic nation.

³⁵ Georgi M. Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World System Biography* (Chicago, IL: University Chicago Press, 2005), 314-15.