



KIMEP University - Department of International Relations and Regional Studies
Glasgow University - School of Social & Political Sciences

The Rise of a Nation? Sino-Russian Relations Impacts on Kazakhstan from 2001 to 2018

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Danielle Amaral Makio
Glasgow Student ID: 2583858M
KIMEP Student ID: 20210691

Supervisors:

Dr. Marcin Kaczmarek, University of Glasgow
Dr. Nurseit Niyazbekov, KIMEP University

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ABSTRACT

Economy and security are the main drivers of the ongoing Sino-Russian rapprochement, which has been happening since the beginning of the 2000s and are especially aimed at Central Asia. The region is a focus of shared interests to both Beijing and Moscow, which strengthens their search for an increased regional presence: on one hand, the Chinese are deepening its relations with local actors; on the other, Russians have been engaging in strategies that seek to maintain their influence in Central Asia despite the growing Chinese expansion over the region. Among the Central Asian nations, there is one that is particularly relevant in this context for geographic, economic and ethnic reasons: Kazakhstan. Thus, under the aegis of the Sino-Russian relations, both Beijing and Moscow have been striving to deepen, or keep, their presences in the country, which has been done mainly through economic and diplomatic initiatives. Even though this scenario has been causing several economic implications to Kazakhstan, the increased interaction between Astana and both Russia and China seem to be also reflected in other aspects of social and political order. In this sense, despite the government's support to Chinese and Russian initiatives, Sinophobia and Kazakh worries regarding the Russian minorities are some examples of how Kazakhstan's society have been reacting to the consequences of Sino-Russian relations. This dissertation, thus, aims to discuss what are the non-economic consequences of Sino-Russian relations towards Kazakhstan and to what extent they are related to the country's nation-building from 2001 to 2018. The study will be conducted through a content analysis of official discourse and different content from media outlets from Kazakhstan to apprehend how different groups react to the subjects here established (Sino-Russian relations and Kazakhstan's society and politics). This is an exploratory study inasmuch as academic contribution on the above-mentioned subject are limited.

KEYWORDS: Sino-Russian relations; Kazakhstan; nation-building; society; politics.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Belt and Road Initiative	BRI
Collective Security Treaty Organization	CSTO
Commonwealth of Independent States	CIS
Common Economic Space	CES
Economic Eurasian Union	EEU
Eurasian Economic Community	EAEC
Evraziiskii Soyuz	EAS
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	OSCE
Organization of the Islamic Conference	OIC
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	SCO
Silk Road Economic Belt	SREB
United Nations	UN
World Trade Organization	WTO

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INTRODUCTION

Russia and China's rapprochement has been drawing the attention of scholars and promoting different consequences which, to a large extent, remain uncertain. One of the main pillars that supports and guides this movement is the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), a Chinese enterprise that has led Xi Jinping to increase his country's presence in Central Asia. Although Sino-Russian relations do not appear to have been affected by China's gain in influence over Central Asia, Russia has historic interest in the region and Putin has reoriented his foreign policy in order to guarantee the maintenance of Moscow's influence in the region despite the China's growing influence (Bolt and Cross, 2018).

Among the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan holds a central position in the Sino-Russian relations, which is justified by a few factors, as: size, it is the largest country in the region, concentrating important natural resources; location, Kazakhstan share borders with both Russia and China; connections to the BRI (Bitarova, 2018). To China, Kazakhstan is considered an "entrance to the West", which is closely related to Beijing's "Great West Development Program", a project that aims to transform the Western part of China into an international economic hub. The endeavor is particularly dependent on Kazakhstan because the country's vast flat land areas and decent pre-existing transport infrastructure make it an ideal option for building new infrastructure (Bitarova, 2018).

Another factor that raises China's interest in Kazakhstan is Xinjiang, whose foremost partner in both security and economic matters is Astana. In 2015, trade between both accounted for ~30% of Xinjiang's total exports and imports. Furthermore, separatism and the migration rate between Eastern Kazakhstan and Xinjiang is high enough to justify China's concerns regarding the province. In 2017, ~1.59 million Uyghurs moved to Xinjiang, while approximately 216.000 ethnic Chinese went to Kazakhstan (Bitarova, 2018: 159). Furthermore,

Kazakhstan's strategic location and its role in Eurasian politics, in which it plays a protagonist role in Eurasian integrationism, contribute to the development of Astana's relevance to China (Bitarova, 2018).

Russia and Kazakhstan's long-lasting approximation has always been strongly characterized by an asymmetric interaction where Moscow holds the higher ground. Thus, since its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has always sustained important ties with Russia. In this sense, it is of utmost importance to highlight Kazakhstan's ethnic composition, which currently consists of ~25,9% ethnic Russians (Ethnic Groups, n.d). In economic terms, Kazakhstan is highly dependent on Russia's oil and gas market and distributive infrastructure. Security also plays a fundamental role in Russian-Kazakh relations, which have been led by a cooperative approach since 1994. Among other examples, Moscow is an important supplier of military equipment to Astana, Kazakhstani officials are regularly trained by Russian personnel and both countries are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Kumenov, 2021). Furthermore, Russia plays an important role among Kazakhstan's elite, which is mainly formed by remnants of the groups that were in power when the USSR collapsed. Likewise, since 1991, many Russian companies increased their presence in Kazakhstan either through the installment of bases *in loco* or through the purchase of shares of local companies' capital (Isaacs, 2020).

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 not only changed Moscow's foreign policy as a whole, but also promoted important shifts in the country's interactions with Kazakhstan. On Astana's side, a fear grew regarding the possibility of a similar move towards its territory, which could be justified by a potential Russian interest to (re)integrate parts of the country that are mainly inhabited by ethnic Russians. Such concern was reinforced by Vladimir Putin's speech at a summit in Shanghai in 2014, when he stated that "the Kazakhs never had any

statehood” (Putin *apud* Najibullah, 2014), alluding to the discourse used to justify Moscow’s actions towards Crimea. On Moscow’s side, the events in Ukraine and its consequences inaugurated an era in which Russia increases its aims to protect its role and its influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), strengthening the country’s concern to maintain its presence in Central Asia and, consequently, Kazakhstan (Vanderhill; Joireman; Tulepbayeva, 2020). The growing Chinese presence in the region, a consequence of Sino-Russian relations, adds another level to Moscow’s preoccupation regarding the maintenance of its local influence. Thus, the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing has been leading both to increase and/or redefine their presences in Kazakhstan as a way to accomplish their goals.

This scenario produced several economic effects that have been vastly addressed by scholars. Economy, though, is usually not the only consequence when great powers are interested in expanding their presences upon another state. Given this debate, the present dissertation aims to answer the following central questions: *what are the political and social impacts of the Sino-Russian rapprochement to Kazakhstan? Are there connections between them and Kazakhstan’s nation-building under Nazarbayev’s presidency?”*.

Methodology

To answer the central question, the analysis will be divided into a literature review on Sino-Russian relations and Kazakhstan’s nation-building that will be followed by two sections: a content analysis of Nursultan Nazarbayev’s addresses to the nation between 2001 and 2018; and a content analysis of mediatic material on social and political consequences of the Chinese and Russian presences. It is important to highlight that this is an exploratory work which has been done in a context of scarce academic and mediatic production regarding social and political effects of Sino-Russian relations upon Kazakhstan.

In this sense, content analysis was chosen as our main methodological path for two reasons. The first is related to the very nature of our subject. When discussing society and how it interacts with external stimuli, we are discussing subjective, fluid elements connected to discourses, ideologies, personal experiences, emotions, and memories. These are usually dispersed through the way one engages with its surroundings and expresses its identities and world views, topics that are most likely found in between lines and behaviors. The second reason is related to a strong characteristic of Kazakhstan's society and government: control. The country's media is closely controlled by the elites in power, which potentially reduces the capacity for articulation of opposition groups and the spread of news and ideas that may diverge from the government's official narrative. Thus, a close interpretation of the content mobilized by different materials is important as it allows us to extract more levels of information from one same text, expanding the horizon of information that we can work with. Especially regarding official discourses, this method is potentially beneficial because it may allow us to extract further meanings from governmental official narrative that may camouflage or hinder the articulation of certain topics.

Presidential speeches

Traditionally, Kazakhstan's president makes an yearly "state of the nation", a speech in which the president sets the main goals of the present term and what strategies will be used to achieve them. The speech covers everything considered vital for the survival and development of the state and, as it is directed to the people of Kazakhstan, the topics of nation and nation-building are often addressed by the president. Thus, to have a clearer understanding of how the government mobilizes the aforementioned nation-building foundations, it is of utmost importance to unveil how the subject is treated by Kazakhstan's official political narrative.

The analysis of the speeches will be done under a qualitative approach. Thus, our aim is to interpret the content of the discourses in order to visualize how Kazakhstan's main nation-building aspects and determinants are addressed by Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2019. Namely, we will focus on elements that are connected to each of the nation-building narratives that compose the country's political behavior. In this sense, we will look for the presence of elements such as, but not limited to: presence of terms such as "Kazakh" and statements that overvalue cultural-ethnic features of the indigenous people, promoting a narrative of nation that is more closely related to the centrality of the Kazakh ethnicity and may flirt with a nationalizing aspect of the state; (ii) the use of terms such as "Kazakhstani" and statements that emphasize the harmonic coexistence of peoples and the predominance of democratic values related to a more liberal and civic concept of nation; (iii) passages that relate Kazakhstan's foreign policy and/or international prestige to a diverse and stable aspect of the nation, narratives that are related to Nazarbayev's Eurasianism.

The speeches being analyzed are the ones between 2001 and 2018 and were taken from akorda.kze, the government's official website. This time frame was selected for two main reasons. We define the year 2001 as the beginning of this study because that is when the Treaty of Friendship was signed between China and Russia and the SCO was formed. Such events institutionalize the beginning of the Sino-Russian rapprochement as a clear and organized movement. On the other hand, 2018 is not only Nazarbayev's last year in presidency, but also because 2019 is the starting point to another phase of Sino-Russian relations, which is inaugurated by the formal link between the Economic Eurasian Union (EEU) and the BRI. Thus, we understand that for Kazakhstan the power shift may change the country's goals and behavior, making it more challenging to understand how all the elements analyzed behave and relate to each other.

Beyond the selection of speeches from 2001-2018, we will further divide the analysis of the speeches in three main periods: 2001-2008; 2008-2013; and 2014-2018. Each of these time intervals is related to a different phase of Sino-Russian cooperation. The first goes from the Treaty of Friendship and the inauguration of the SCO until the 2008 financial crisis. These events are important because they represent, respectively, a more intense movement of Russia towards China, which is mainly encouraged by the search for a partnership that could provide the resources the West no longer could give Moscow. The second interval goes from 2009, a year in which the effects of the crisis start to spill over and affect China and Russia's relations in a more consistent way, to 2013, the eve of the Crimean crisis, which is central to the beginning of the next phase. Finally, the third period starts in 2014, when the Western sanctions against Russia speed up Moscow's pivot to Asia, inaugurating one important phase of Sino-Russian relations, ending in 2018.

In this first moment the goal is to understand how Astana conceives its nation-building whilst two large regional powers direct their interests to Kazakhstan. Thus, there is a bigger picture in which simultaneously visualizing how Kazakhstan behaves in terms of nation-building *pari passu* with the evolution of Sino-Russian relations.

Beyond Nazarbayev

Even though Kazakhstan's regime contributes to the centralization of nation-building initiatives in the hands of the political elite, and despite most theories affirming that such an endeavor is mostly led by the state and its apparatus, it is also important to look beyond it. A nation is a social construct that involves much more than interest, ideas and goals shared by those in power (Isaacs and Polese, 2015). Often, between a concept of nation and its practical implementation via public policies and other means, changes may happen resulting in a reality

that does not necessarily embody what was pursued by the policy makers, hence the importance of studying society in addition to the government's position.

Thus, to comprehend Kazakhstan's nation-building from 2001 to 2018 it is important not only to look at Nazarbayev and his group's visions and attitudes, but also consider how society interprets what is officially promoted by the government and how people's lives, ideas and relations with the state-nation are influenced by these contexts. Only then will there be a more robust understanding of what is (or are), indeed, Kazakhstan's nation(s).

As one goal of this study is to comprehend possible relations between the Sino-Russian axis and Kazakhstan's nation-building as well as social and political consequences of the former upon the latter, we will particularly look at society's reactions to the context created by Russia and China's cooperation. Considering the same time frame defined in the previous section, the use of media and academic publications will be dedicated to this issue as sources of materials that contemplate how different groups of Kazakhstan's society have reacted to changes promoted by the increasing presence of China and Russia in the country. Due to Kazakhstan's high levels of media monitoring/controlling this search will not be limited solely to national outlets as the government's control over them may hinder the number and content of existing publications, which can potentially affect this research. Thus, mainly non-government media outlets and academic content written by experts that are not connected to government organizations have been selected in order to avoid potential limits imposed on the conclusions made by the authors. Also, in order to attach to a more local view of the topics covered by this research, an effort was made to privilege the selection of materials written by citizens of Kazakhstan or by people who are closely related to the issues being analyzed, be it because they are a member of communities that suffer direct influence of these variables, or be it because they are a part of the ethnic minorities/groups represented here.

It is important to highlight that limited content has been published regarding direct impacts of Sino-Russian relations and Kazakhstan's social and political environment. This specific characteristic of this research was an important limitation on the search for materials to analyze, which is the reason why the established checklist for selecting content is not overly rigorous. With these considerations made, the first goal with the proposed methodology is to identify which events related to the Sino-Russian rapprochement were sensitive to the people and how they were interpreted. Then, it will be possible to identify if and how each of Kazakhstan's nation-building determinants (ethnic, civic and Eurasian) are articulated in the popular discourse.

Once both phases of the analysis are done, I expect to have a clear vision of how the official discourse of nation-building evolves *pari passu* the development of the Sino-Russian relations; and how society has been reacting to the social and political changes that rise during this context.

CHAPTER 1 - SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: HISTORY AND EXPANSION TO CENTRAL ASIA

The Sino-Russian partnership is mainly sustained by Russia's need for economic and financial support and China's search for a larger military and security footprint to safeguard its own interests in regions like Central Asia. Although the cooperation is characterized by asymmetric dynamics where Beijing is the stronger part, Moscow seems to accept its status as the conjecture benefits its regime. Despite the convergence of both states in many aspects, there are areas of potential rivalry that may represent limits to the cooperation. This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of how the Sino-Russian cooperation has been developing through the years and how it is being accommodated in Central Asia.

1.1 Historical development, drivers and limits

The Treaty of Friendship from 2001 marked the beginning of an organized and progressive growth in the (re)approximation of Russia and China, which was marked by events such as the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and deeper commercial interactions. In this context, authoritarianism, economic development and anti-West feelings were pointed as central drivers for Sino-Russian relations. Despite existing convergences, through the beginning of the 2000s, the relationship was limited due to, among other factors, Russia's fear of the Chinese growing influence in Moscow's domestic and regional space (Lo, 2008). Despite each side's caveats, trade between both states increased from around \$10 billion in 2001 to \$20 billion in 2004 (Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2018: 70).

Economic damages caused by the 2008-2009 crisis changed Russia's perceptions of China. Lowered oil prices and diminished Russian revenue; liquidity problems in the West that decreased its capacity to finance Moscow; and a reduced internal demand for oil all together

made Russia's GDP fall 9 points. While Dmitri Medvedev, then President of Russia, was struggling to deal with these circumstances, China, whose growing rate was at 8,7%, became an alternative for Russia to overcome its challenges. In 2009, Beijing granted loans to Vnesheconombank and lent ~\$25 billion to Transneft and Rosneft via China Development Bank, making China Russia's second most important partner. However, Russia's concerns regarding China's access to reserves considered strategic, among other factors, limited the rapprochement (Kaczmarek, 2015: 60; 64).

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 changed everything. The West imposed harsh sanctions against Russia in response to Putin's actions, endangering Moscow's access to funding and technological resources and jeopardizing the profits of its oil sector. In these conditions, China turned out to be Russia's best, if not only, chance to keep its regime safe. Hu Jintao came to the conclusion that although the possibility that the conflict posed a special risk to China because of Xinjiang and Taiwan, the benefits outweighed the dangers (Gabuev, 2015).

Russia's "irrevocable" move toward the East and China's desire to take advantage of the situation to develop its security and infrastructure projects have marked the start of a new phase in the Sino-Russian partnership (Larson, 2020). On one hand, China saw Russia as an important partner because it represented, among others, a means to diversify its energy supplies, benefit its telecommunication industry and access to military resources (Gabuev, 2015).

The positive outcomes of promoting a closer interaction with Moscow in 2014, though, were not attractive enough to convince China to risk Western embargos due to its geopolitical "support" of Russia, which limited Beijing's investments in the Russian economy throughout the maintenance of the conflict. Despite a momentary decrease in the amount of Chinese loans destined to Russia, though, China continued to support the survival of Putin's regime ever since

(Kaczmarek, 2020: 202). Nevertheless, the developments that followed the year of 2014 inaugurated a greater partnership between China and Russia in which there is a clearer cooperation between both with regard to positions adopted in issues related to international politics. Their coordinated efforts to stop the United Nations (UN) from developing a new consensus on R2P and their "sovereignist" discourse on cyberspace are a few examples of this new degree of articulation between both countries (Kaczmarek, 2015: 127). These common attitudes, though, remain limited as Beijing and Moscow still diverge on a few subjects, especially in security matters. Thus, China and Russia built a solid partnership that can be interpreted as an "axis of convenience" as suggested by Bobo Lo (2008), a cooperation that does not hold the status of full alliance, but that has some room to be deepened.

Despite their beneficial aspect, Sino-Russian relations are asymmetric. Between 2008 and 2019, China alone accounted for nearly half of the increase in the global demand for oil, which was largely fueled by Russian imports, resulting in a surplus in Moscow's international trade (China's crude oil..., 2020). Additionally, China has invested billions in Russia through, among others, loans for the expansion of state-owned businesses and the construction of new pipelines, which have been essential to the Russian regime's survival. However, Moscow has never demonstrated that it has sufficient power or resources to provide China with the same assistance. For instance, Moscow was unable to alleviate the effects of the US-China trade war or assist Beijing with Western sanctions against Huawei (Larson, 2020).

On the other hand, China is still catching up to the military capabilities of the US and Russia, which is especially important for Beijing because of its security goals. China's purchase of S-400 missile defense systems is an example of Russia's role as a weaponry and military technology supplier, making it an important ally (Asryan and He, 2020: 2). Despite the fact that Russia holds the upper hand in this scenario, its role in a larger picture is still that of a

"weaker" actor, which appears to be currently accepted by Putin due to the benefits provided by Beijing, but its maintenance is in doubt given Moscow's primary political objective, which is to reestablish Russia as a strong power.

The opposition to the West is an important feature of Sino-Russian relations. In this sense, Putin's growing conflictive approach towards the West, which has been promoted by Moscow since 2012 (Tsygankov, 2019), and Trump's election in 2016 are important events. During the Republican's term, US-China relations were greatly jeopardized. The recurring criticism of Trump in relation to the Chinese political-economic model and the trade war waged by both countries led to a greater detachment between them. Therefore, Beijing's criticism towards the US-led world order grew stronger and was made more visible in China's international behavior. Thus, as the rivalry between them grew, so did the need for Xi Jinping to advance his military development process (Lukin and Torkunov, 2020). The enmity that began over economic issues had been securitized in a way that raised China's need to increase its military capacity to confront the US, strengthening one of the crucial drivers for Sino-Russian cooperation.

Ideological convergences aside, Sino-Russian relations have been limited due to distrust especially regarding predictions that China and Russia will become "inevitable" geopolitical rivals. China has been increasing its presence in Central Asia – an effect of the BRI – where Beijing affirms to be conducting actions mainly limited to economy. However, as China grows its footprint in the region, the maintenance of the a peaceful coexistence with Moscow's regional interests is questioned and may represent a massive limit to the rapprochement (Facon, 2018).

1.2 Sino-Russian Relations and Central Asia

The US is also an important element in the political alignment between Moscow and Beijing in military and economic terms, especially regarding Central Asia. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 inaugurated the beginning of a new moment in which, even though the partnership between Russia and China was still not highly developed, new understandings regarding shared political and economic aspects were promoted. The achievement of such a normative convergence inaugurated a strengthened cooperation between the countries and was made possible, for example, by the fact that both Beijing and Moscow had domestic separatist issues and were worried with spillovers of the recent events (Lo, 2008).

Throughout 2003 and 2004, thus, two main tendencies were seen in Central Asia. First, further to increasing its regional military presence via CSTO, Russia began searching for a stronger influence on Central Asia's economy, particularly in the natural gas market. Focused on balancing the influence of American companies, Moscow began strengthening bilateral talks with the local nations to lead Russia to the status of main transit territory of Eurasia. Given Gazprom's historic infrastructure, agreements were made to assure Russia the role of main actor in energy and water distribution in Eurasia. Second, Beijing led a series of bilateral negotiations with Central Asians to establish military cooperation and to increase its economic presence in the region in response to the growing American local influence and the danger posed by the spread of liberal and democratizing ideas (Wilhelmsen and Flikke, 2011). Behind these decisions lies not only Beijing's will to maintain a stable political scenario in the region, but also its concerns regarding migratory and ethnic issues.

Putin and Hu's initial attempts to enhance their presences within Central Asia were mainly conducted through the establishment of several bilateral international agreements, a formula that, despite having positive outcomes, was shown to be insufficient. In this sense, the SCO was seen as a way to get around the limitations of the bilateral approach that had been in

place up until that point. The normative and conceptual similarities shared by China and Russia became more apparent as a result of the SCO's increased involvement, contributing to the achievement of mutual understanding. Evidence of a normative convergence between Moscow and Beijing can be seen, for example, in their joint actions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2005 and in the Chinese support for Russia in Georgia in 2008 (Wilson, 2019).

The announcement of the BRI in 2013, along with the Ukraine crisis of 2014, inaugurated yet another moment in the Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia. On the Chinese side, such events led Beijing to seek an increased presence in the region. Given the dimensions of the BRI, new agreements were made between China and the five Central Asian nations, leading not only to an increased presence of Chinese people in the region, but also to widespread local dominance of Chinese companies and capital. On the other hand, Russia's dependence on China was strengthened and Moscow's role as one of the most influential foreign powers in the region was endangered.

Moscow has been trying to sustain its regional position by enhancing the activity of its own multilateral agreements, such as the EEU and the CSTO. Simultaneously, Putin has been hindering a deeper economic cooperation among the members of the SCO, which is understood by Assel G. Bitabarova (2018) as a way to limit China's growth in the region in order to guarantee the maintenance of Russia's political role in the Eurasian space, showing the limitations of the partnership. In this sense, as stated by Aleksey Asiryan and Yiming He (2020), Putin's attempts to integrate the BRI and the EEU are also a good example of this dynamic. While Moscow has for a while been striving to link its own initiatives to the BRI in order to guarantee its leading role in the region, Beijing's declining interest in it exposes the asymmetry of both power and goals among Russia and China regarding Central Asia.

However, it is undeniable that to successfully implement the BRI, an endeavor in which Central Asia is of utmost importance, the Chinese need the Russians, and they know it:

“China also recognizes that Moscow plays an important role in the success of the BRI in Central Asia. While Russia’s cultural hegemony in the region is fading, it retains a strong influence over Central Asian political elites. It is especially relevant in the context of a growing Sinophobia and ethnonationalism in the region caused in part by China’s policies in Xinjiang [...] According to Arkady Dubnov, a Russian political analyst, ‘Russia was forced to recognize China’s leading role in financing and investment in Central Asia, and China promised to consider Russian interests in the region’” (Asiryanyan and He, 2020: 3).

Thereby, regarding the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia there are a few points that can be highlighted. First, the region holds a special role in the dynamics of the rapprochement given its importance to both countries. On the Chinese side, it is an indispensable space for the success of the BRI. For Russia, it is a historical stronghold of power and influence especially important for Moscow’s Eurasianist ambitions.

A second point regards how Russia and China’s partnership is framed locally. While Beijing needs to expand its presence in the region in order to advance its project, Sinophobic reactions are instigated among people and economic dependence towards China is deepened. Because of that, Russia becomes an important ally as it holds the capacity to assist the Chinese to proceed with its expansion in a harmonious way. Due to Moscow it is easier to create consensus among the elites, making the challenges for the Chinese to advance less outstanding.

CHAPTER 2 – BUILDING A NATION: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

According to Anthony Smith (1986), the concept of nation-building emerged as a reaction to the classic understanding of the nation state. Smith argues that the hegemonic Western mode of state formation, in which ethnicity equals territorial boundaries, cannot be applied to most of the world. In places such as Latin America and the Post-Soviet space, where the creation of the state apparatus was not given by genuine efforts led by one indigenous ethnicity, the classic logic of nation state creation is no longer valid.

Despite the mode of state formation, the nation remains an important element for the survival and the development of a country, hence the importance of nation-building and its strategies. The reasons behind the relevance of the nation to the existence of a state and the possible paths for its creation are manifold. Ernest Gellner (1983), Benedict Anderson (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1991) argue that nation and nationalism matter because they are connected to industrialization and economic development initiatives. The authors agree that the formation of a well instructed labor force requires universal education and language unification, both instruments of nation-building as they assist in the homogenization of persons and the standardization of culture. The organization of a national educational system requires the defining of one official historiography, an important tool to create one homogenous notion of state ancestry. Language unification, on the other hand, gathers persons around one idiom, enhancing the formation of a sense of community, and promotes the circulation of news, literature and other media that endorses the ideological homogenization of the individuals inhabiting the same place.

Liah Greenfeld (1993) considers that nationalism can be understood as a pre-industrial event. She argues that nation and nationalism emerged as important elements during the late 15th and 16th centuries because of the events of the War of Roses in England. She suggests that

the succession crisis created a scenario in which it was important for each party to guarantee that the people would accept their own versions of state birth in order to legitimize their reigns. The role of historiography and cultural standardization, thus, is again a fundamental instrument of power legitimacy and nation-building. Charles Tilly (1975) affirms that states make wars to defend their elite's interests. However, if war is an endeavor conceived by a limited group of privileged individuals, it is fought by the people. Thus, it is of utmost importance to guarantee the legitimacy of such a fight, hence nationalism/nation-building: to create a whole population that is willing to defend its country's interests no matter the circumstances.

There is one element that gathers all of the above -mentioned authors: the role of the elites. All the contributions considered that the elites assume the fundamental position in the promotion of nation-building. In a more economic/industrialist understanding, the elite's interest to promote its business and to develop the state economically is responsible for the beginning of processes of linguistic, historiographic and cultural homogenization. Greenfeld and Tilly's arguments, similarly, prioritize the need of the elites to guarantee the legitimacy of their endeavors among the people, which is only possible if the latter understand itself as a part of a larger community for which it is worth fighting for. In all these cases the need to create a sense of unity is central to the formation of the so-called nation.

The path taken to promote such a homogenization may vary. According to Anthony Smith, there are two main non-exclusive ways to build a nation: to invent them and to imagine them. The first draws on Eric Hobsbawm's contributions and is related to the way myths and traditions are used to promote an idea of a historic belonging to a state. In this sense, we may have new traditions being formed and spread under a narrative that portrays them as ancestral, existing traditions being revived and other possibilities that, ultimately, aim to create a common understanding of belonging that is the basis of the sense of unity that forms a nation (Smith,

1991: 355). The other path evokes Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and is related to the implementation of public policies that promote the standardizing of languages, culture, history and other elements that contribute to the hegemony of the feeling of belonging to one same nation (Smith, 1991: 359-360).

One may question how effective these practices may be if an intended nation is formed by groups that are too different, be it regarding ethnicity, religion, culture etc. Rogers Brubaker (1996) offers a third path that addresses this query: the *nationalizing state*. A nationalizing state is a multi-ethnic state in which one ethnicity desires to be the core ethnic group of the country and holds the means to implement policies that intend to legitimate such a quest. Quoting R. Isaacs and A. Polese (2015: 373-374):

“A “nationalizing state” is viewed in ethno-cultural terms whereby the titular national majority seeks to reinforce and promote its national identity upon the state, its institutions, symbols, and practices, at the expense of national minorities”.

Besides the nationalizing state, Brubaker suggests the existence of other two types of nation-building: civic-state and multinational state (Brubaker, 1995). The author argues that the latter is extinguished, and used to be represented by the USSR and Yugoslavia. The first, on the other hand, is constituted by a definition of nation that is not, in theory, influenced by ethnicity. Thus, to be a part of the state an individual only needs to accept the ideological and cultural aspects of the nation state, there is no ethnic aspect attached to the sense of belonging and to the right to citizenship. The two others are the opposite: the right to belong to the state has an ethnic influence (Kuzio, 2001: 138).

Brubaker's schematic understanding of nation-building is criticized by Taras Kuzio (2001), who questions the real possibility for nationalism and the concept of nation to be non-ethnic. According to the author, even the civic state has a clear ethnic core.

“If we accept that civic states have ethno-cultural cores they cannot be wholly neutral when deciding such questions as historical myths, state languages, anniversaries, symbols and flags” (Kuzio, 2001: 136).

If we consider that Kuzio’s conclusions on the role of ethnicity are true, then questions regarding the differences between nationalizing and civic state are raised. In this sense, the contributions of Kymlicka may be useful. The author argues that if the ethno-cultural core is a common feature in both, then the real difference between them is defined by how an individual or a community may integrate the nation (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 24). As we are about to see, in Kazakhstan, for example, an ethnic Russian is considered a regular citizen whose rights are guaranteed by the constitution. However, there are some privileges whose access may be denied or hampered to those who are not members of the national ethnic core, Kazakhs.

2.1 Nation-Building in Kazakhstan

2.1.1 Heritages of the USSR

The Soviet institutionalization of ethnicity is a defining aspect of Kazakhstan’s current nation-building. In the context of the indigenization (*korenizatsiya*) policy promoted from early-1920s to mid-1930s, Kazakhs were considered a *nation* among the possible classifications adopted by the USSR and were granted an autonomous republic in which they were the titular nation. *Korenizatsiya* aimed to integrate non-Russian ethnicities to the Union to prevent the rise of potentially rival national identities that could lead to the dismembering of the Soviet state. Thus, not only were non-Russians made the titular nation in some regions, but they were also given a broader representation in the cultural, political, and bureaucratic scenes in their own republics. Kazakhs, in this way, were nominated to occupy cadres in the Communist Party, became a majority in the republic’s administration and managed to promote their own culture and language (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013: 267-268).

This scenario was inverted from 1937 under Stalin's Russification efforts. Fearing that the previous approach to nationalities could foment the creation of separatist movements, Russians were, again, made the main nationality in the USSR both in the republic's state bureaucracy and in the expression of cultural features (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013: 268). According to Jones (2010: 164), the effects of such a political shift produced broad consequences in all the republics but were especially felt in Kazakhstan, where most Kazakh-language schools were closed (Fierman, 2005: 406), incentives to the use of the local language were severely diminished (Dave, 2007: 65) and most government positions were given to ethnic Russians (Jones, 2010: 164).

This abrupt inversion is still felt in present-day Kazakhstan.

“Soviet nationalities policy meant that, even as the culture and way of life of the Kazakh steppes were being destroyed, a primordial sense of ethnicity became valorised as the most important marker of identity; and the Kazakh SSR, in which Kazakhs were a minority, was deemed the homeland of the newly defined Kazakh nation. The result is that modern Kazakh identity is marked by a deep sense of insecurity: while there is an awareness on the part of the Kazakhs that their position in modernity is shaped by the Russians, who both bullied and helped them into it, there is nevertheless a sense that they must be distinct from Russians, that the nationality inscribed in their papers should carry some meaning” (Wheeler, 2010, *apud* Melich and Adibayeva, 2013: 268)

In this sense, the promotion of a strong ethnic sentiment and its correlations with nationality can be identified as an important propeller of protests that took place in 1986 in reaction to the removal of Kunayev, an ethnic Kazakh, as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party and replaced by Gennadiy Kolbin, an ethnic Russian with shallow knowledge of the republic (Lillis, 2019, n.d). Furthermore, Wheeler mentions another important consequence of Russification: the Russian diaspora. The incentive for ethnic Russians to migrate to other Soviet republics caused a remodeling of Kazakhstan's society: The titular ethnicity was no longer the majority.

Thus, further to the removal of Kazakhs from the command of their republic and the reduction of the number of representatives of the titular nation in Kazakhstan, the combination of *korenizatsiya* and Russification bonded the country's current identity to ethnicity. In this sense, aligned with Kuzio, we can affirm that in Kazakhstan, ethnicity plays a fundamental role for the state to define its nation-building and for society itself to organize as a cohesive political body. On the other hand, however, there are some events that suggest that despite the centrality of ethnicity in Kazakhstan's political context, the country has a strong connection to the Soviet concept of the "friendship of peoples", which contributes to the construction of a multifaceted nation-building.

2.1.2 Independent Kazakhstan

When Kazakhstan achieved independence, in 1991, Kazakhs, the national titular nation, represented only 39.7% of society. Ethnic Russians accounted for 37.8% of the total population, the second largest percentage of ethnic Russians out of Russia at the time (Laruelle, 2015, n.d). The outnumbered position of the titular nation in independent Kazakhstan is the main propeller of one important facet of the country's official nation-building project during the 1990's: Kazakhness.

Kazakhness is present in two main goals and practices of the regime: to promote indigenous culture, language, traditions and other aspects that dialogue directly to the ethno-cultural aspect of the nation; and to change the social constitution in order to increase the titular nation. This intent of Nazarbayev's government was institutionalized in the "Declaration of Sovereignty of the Kazakh SSR" from 1990. The document has several definitions that indicate a will to support the promotion of ethno-cultural aspects of indigenous communities, such as:

“[...] rebirth and development of a specific culture, traditions, the language, and the reinforcing of national pride of the Kazakh nation and the other nationalities living in Kazakhstan constitutes one of the main missions of the

statehood of the republic of Kazakhstan” (Decree of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR, 1990).

The incentives to Kazakhness expressed in the Declaration are also reflected in the 1995 Constitution, that stipulates that “We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on the indigenous Kazakh land [...]” (Kazakhstan Const., preamble). Kazakhness is also a recurrent topic in presidential discourses and orders from the 1990s. For example, Nazarbayev mentions the concept in his *V Potoke Istorii* from 1999. In this case, the president states: “The culture of the Kazakhs must be seriously assimilated by the representatives of the other *ethnoi*, just as the Kazakhs, in their own time, earnestly studied Russian culture” and “A legal, constitutional, and international foundation has been given to the fact that all Kazakhstan is the historic-genetic territory of the Kazakh nation” (Nazarbayev, 1999: 195).

In this period, Kazakhness was also promoted through more symbolic ways, such as the definition of the country’s national symbols. In this sense, the national flag, the national anthem and the national coat of arms all make reference to traditional Kazakh symbols, such as the *shanyraq* traditional Kazakh ornaments, the eagle (referring to the nomadic heritage) among others (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013: 269). We can also mention urbanist initiatives such as the renaming of streets and buildings, whose Soviet names were replaced by the names of important Kazakh representatives (Laruelle, 2015, n.d).

On the policy level, Kazakhness is mainly expressed in the country’s attempts to repatriate ethnic Kazakhs and, thus, stimulate an increase in the size of the titular nation. During the 1990’s, especially in the first years that followed independence, there was a general concern regarding possible territorial issues with Russia. Yeltsin’s declaration on Moscow’s strong will to protect the Russian people inside or outside the country’s borders added to the Russian

majority in the North of Kazakhstan raised awareness regarding the possibility of potential Russian secessionist movements (Pannier, 2014).

In this sense, Kazakhstan, in 1991, established policies to encourage the return of Kazakhs living abroad. The program of ethnic repatriation was mainly focused on the concession of financial incentives like the covering of travel, moving and resettlement expenses. The *Oralmans*, as the repatriates are called, could also benefit from social welfare programs such as subsidies destined to housing, transportation and language training (Zhang and Tsakhirmaa, 2022: 7). It is important to stress that the definition of an *Oralman* is strictly ethnic and other types of repatriates or migrants were not given access to the same privileges as those given to Kazakh repatriates. In 2009, Kazakhs represented 53.4% of Kazakhstan's population, a result achieved by the conjugation of the repatriation policy; the emigration of ethnic Russians; and an increase in the national birth rate (Zhang and Tsakhirmaa, 2022: 9).

In addition to the ethnic composition of the country, the government also engages with language policies to promote the Kazakhization of the state. Kazakh was adopted as the state language in 1989 as a way to express the sovereignty of the state. Even though the state has since been trying to enforce the use of the language, for example making its knowledge mandatory for one to occupy public roles and receive student grants, promoting the teaching of it in schools, etc, Russian still retains an important role as a language of communication and remains as an official language. However, even though the implementation of a compulsory proficiency in Kazakh is still an uncertain topic, some effects can be felt, such as the indigenisation of personnel. Annette Bohr (1998: 154) argues that there is a much higher concentration of Kazakhs in the public sector, in state-run media, in administrative roles and others.

The promotion of the idea of an ethnic Kazakh nation put Kazakhstan closer to being defined as a nationalizing state once it seems to guarantee privileges to the Kazakh community and to induce some level of assimilation of other ethnicities, which is particularly evident in discussions regarding Kazakh language. In this context, we can conclude that the Kazakh nation-building project is based on both the idea of an imagined and an invented nation. The former is justified by the state's constant attempts to normalize and legitimize an indigenous cultural and ideological narrative as the moral core of the nation. The latter, thus, can be understood as some kind of instrument used to guarantee the legitimation of the imagined Kazakh community. The revival of old Turkic and nomadic symbols and their adaptation to the current political scenario is an interesting example of tools of remembrance and (re)invention used by the state to justify its project of nation-building. However, even though the ethnic core of Kazakhstan's political discourse is evident, the country's nation-building project is more complex and multifaceted.

Even though the fear of secession was an important factor for the definition of nationalizing policies, it was also a reason for the formulation of a civic aspect of national identity: to accommodate multiple ethnic groups as a way to prevent the rise of organized separatists movements. Hence the development of a Kazakhstani nation based on a Kazakhstanness paradigm which is especially careful with the large presence of Russians (Schatz, 2000: 71).

One of the most emblematic decisions taken in this regard was the foundation of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan in 1995, which was created to guarantee the place of ethnicity in national politics and in the public debate. With this instrument, Nazarbayev expected to promote a closer interethnic dialogue in order to create a multiethnic civil society guided by liberal-democratic values (Peyrouse, 2007: 483). Other state efforts directed to the

construction of a Kazakhstani nation are: the automatic concession of citizenship to all former citizens of the Kazakh SSR regardless of ethnicity; and the enshrinement of religious, linguistic, political and speech freedoms to all citizens of the country based solely on a citizenship aspect, not an ethnic one (Schatz, 2000: 72).

The paradigm of a civic nation has an evident impact on society: “the policy toward nationalities has distinctly divided the minorities into several groups” (Peyrouse, 2007: 483). Despite the success of the Kazakhstani nation-building in terms of preventing the rise of truly threatening interethnic conflicts, when juxtaposed to the ethnic facet of the state, such civic approach ended up strengthening the ethnic differences of Kazakhstan’s society (Schatz, 2000). The concession of certain benefits to Kazakhs, even if restricted to the discursive level, was an impediment for the construction of a truly harmonious society in terms of ethnicity. In this sense, we have the creation of a ranking of social status acquired by each nationality in which Kazakhs occupy the first position (Schatz, 2000: 72). Thus, Kuzio’s statement regarding the inexistence of a purely civic society is again confirmed.

Another consequence of the Kazakhstani project is its relation to regime-building:

“[T]he Assembly enables Nazarbayev to manipulate the nationality question to consolidate his personal power and reinforce authoritarianism. It represents a form of post-Soviet fake democracy” (Peyrouse, 2007: 484).

By the beginning of the 2000s, 80% of the state administration seats were occupied by Kazakhs. Similarly, positions in cultural and parliamentary fields were mainly filled by Kazakhs and other nationalities started facing high barriers to achieve such roles. Thus, there is the formation of a certain type of ethnocracy in Kazakhstan’s politics (Peyrouse, 2007: 486).

An important aspect of a country’s nation is its international legitimacy. It is crucial for a state to be recognized as a unique and sovereign being. Thus, there is a matter of foreign affairs, which is closely related to the local domestic politics, that must also be considered by

any nation-building initiative (Campbell, 1992). In this sense, there is a third aspect of Kazakhstan's national project, one that concerns the country's international image: Eurasianism. This approach is related to the construction of the idea of Kazakhstan as the "heart of Eurasia". By promoting this image of the country, the government has one main goal: to become a regional leadership, which reinforces Nazarbayev's legitimacy and, thus, strengthen the regime, be it by assisting the development of the country or by discursively presenting the political elite as a prepared and legitimate one. In this sense, Eurasianism is intrinsically articulated with the idea of multinationality (Laruelle, 2015, n.d).

In terms of nation-building, Eurasianism is based on the construction of a positive image of the country internationally. The goal is to cultivate an image of a modern state, which has been done by different means such as: urban and architecture modernization; hosting international events. The project of Astana is an interesting case of Kazakhstan's nation-branding. The city was built to be spectacular: ostensive buildings, modern architecture, planned urbanism. Efforts directed to nation-branding are usually related to a state's search for development. The construction of a modern image of a country is known to be an effective tool to attract foreign investments and new partnerships. In Kazakhstan's case, this was a well-known goal of Nazarbayev's presidency, a period in which the search for development was a way not only to guarantee stability, but also regime legitimacy (Insebayeva, 2016).

The process of nation-branding is connected to a performative aspect that is related to the way the state promotes itself internationally. A multi-vectored foreign policy is a strong feature of Nazarbayev's national project. Diversification of Kazakhstan's international relations, engagement with several multinational organisms and an active role in the promotion of new cooperative initiatives and international events are some of the key tools Astana has

selected to promote its idea of Eurasianism, and they are all related to Kazakhstan's global image. Such strategies have been implemented since the beginning of the 1990's.

The first speech Nazarbayev made in Moscow after independence dates from 1993 and is filled with an Eurasianist tone. In this event, the leader embodied Kazakhstan's disillusion with the Russian-led CIS and, as an alternative, proposed the launch of the *Evrasiiskii Soyuz* (EAS), an organization that should promote a political-economic reintegration among all the post-Soviet republics (Anceschi, 2017: 4). Kazakhstan's application to become a rotative chairman of the OSCE and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as well as its leading role in proposing the creation of a Eurasian Union in 1994 are other examples of the country's active search to increase not only its presence in multilateral forums, but also its leading role in them (Anceschi, 2017: 2).

The search for autonomy and for a leadership position sustained by Eurasianism is yet related to another aspect of Kazakhstan's international insertion, and nation-building: anti-imperialism. Since Nazarbayev's first speech in Moscow in 1993, counter-hegemonic feelings could already be felt. During the discourse, the former president of Kazakhstan stressed the imperative need to recalibrate Eurasia's leadership in a way that its regionalization and integration initiatives would not be so dependent on Russia nor so influenced by it. In this context, it was of Nazarbayev's interest for Kazakhstan to emerge as an alternative regional leadership, one that would be the center of the Eurasian multilateral system along Russia (Anceschi, 2017: 5-6).

The Eurasianist approach adopted by Putin during his first term in presidency was an important stimulus to the strengthening of Nazarbayev's own Eurasianism. During the 2000's, thus, we had important developments in this matter. The first important aspect to be highlighted is the readjustment of Kazakhstan's discourse. If during the 1990's the need to consolidate the

state's sovereignty and to prevent potential expansionism from the Russian side made Astana develop a strong anti-imperialist tone to its position, during the 2000's this criticism was relatively diluted. In this context, Nazarbayev seemed to more openly support an equal partnership between Russia and Kazakhstan instead of focusing on the containment of Moscow's influence. Given Putin's own interests, of expanding Russia's influence through the CIS through multilateral mechanisms, the 2000's were, indeed, a moment of closer relation between Moscow and Astana (Anceschi, 2017: 8-9). Moscow-Astana cooperation remained a global model of bilateral relations. However, Eurasianism, a founding feature of this partnership, would later lose its momentum after the Crimea annexation in 2014. In this context, an anti-imperial, yet not anti-Russian, tone rises again in Nazarbayev's positions, a reaction to a new geopolitical scenario in which expansionism seemed to grow stronger in Moscow's foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, despite being accepted as a full member of the EEU in 2014, Kazakhstan remained reluctant to deepen cooperation in political subjects, preferring to expand relations on the economic field (Anceschi, 2017: 13).

Anthony Smith (1986: 253) argues that the search for development is one of the main reasons why a state, most specifically its elites, engage with nation-building. This affirmation sounds particularly true in Kazakhstan. The fall of the USSR created a state with no nation and with a delicate domestic scenario. Hence Nazarbayev's efforts to create a nation, which has been done in a multifold and controversial way. If on one hand the Kazakh nation narrative is closer to a nationalizing aspect of the state, on the other it is impossible to not accommodate interests of other nationalities.

“Nazarbayev's policy is especially delicate because Kazakhstan's large Russian population requires him to portray the republic as a secular, multinational entity rather than as a Central Asian one of Turkic and Muslim pedigree'. But he is also 'obliged' to pronounce the national and religious facets of the nation to prevent the rise of nationalistic or religious opposition” (Zardykhan, 2004: 77).

Kazakhstan's nation-building is strongly dependent on Nazarbayev's regime and international recognition (and investment). The Eurasianist discourse, thus, is strengthened to serve both needs. Anti-imperialism, in this context, can be understood as Astana's search for autonomy. Thus, Eurasianism is intimately connected to the legitimacy of Nazarbayev's regime and its nation-building architecture, especially regarding its civic aspect; and is the main guideline of the country's foreign affairs decisions. The Crimea events in 2014 seemed to reframe Astana's discourse regarding multilateralism and anti-imperialism: while the latter raised again as an important aspect of Kazakhstan's discourse, potential anti-Russian remarks were carefully hidden away, cooperation with Moscow continued strong and multilateralism remained to be encouraged.

CHAPTER 3 – “DEAR PEOPLE OF KAZAKHSTAN”: NATION-BUILDING IN NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV’S DISCOURSES

3.1 Phase one (2001 to 2008)

The 2001 state of the nation starts with an extensive exaltation of the country’s economic performance during the previous decade. The setting of a market oriented national production, economic liberalization and the “democratic development” are praised as solid indicators of the successful path chosen by the government. Economic development is portrayed not only as the country’s main desire, but as the condition for further political and social development: “Growing economy allows to successfully solve social tasks” (Poslaniye Prezidenta Respubliki..., 2002).

Regarding the economy, the need to establish a pragmatic, multilateral foreign policy is mentioned as a central strategy. “[...] the situation and needs of the country require increased attention to such directions as: accelerated formation of regional markets, first of all, Eurasian and Central Asian Economic Communities; enlargement of cooperation within the SCO”; “The movement towards a multipolar world is growing. Such tendency meets the strategic interests of Kazakhstan [...] It is principally important for Kazakhstan to be the head of all neighboring states” (*ibid*).

It is interesting to notice that the SCO, which had just been created, is mentioned as a key interest. Also, the country is portrayed as a leading regional player. Even though these points seem to recognize the success of Kazakhstan’s international relations, it is not made without criticism.

“Don't we assume too many international obligations? Do all of them meet Kazakhstan's interests? Don't they prevent us from developing our national legislation according to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan?” (*ibid*).

These words suggest that there is some concern that too many international obligations may hinder the country's development.

The speech does not explicitly address ethnicity or subjects related to it, such as Kazakh language, cultural/religious revival, indigenous heritage, historic narratives. Words like Kazakh/Kazakhstani are not used. The people is always addressed as "Citizens of Kazakhstan" and variations.

Acknowledging the advances of the previous year, Nazarbayev opens the 2002 speech establishing a correlation between nation-building and democracy:

"We have also made significant progress in the field of nation-building and the development of democracy. Our country and the entire Kazakh society have changed dramatically: economic and political rights and freedoms have become an immutable fact of our reality" (Poslanie Prezidenta..., 2002).

On one hand, Nazarbayev highlights an important development of the *Kazakh* society, which suggests the formation of an ethnic-centered nation; on the other, he points to the advances made on the level of political freedom, typical aspects of a civic society ruled by liberal-democratic norms. Ethnicity is further mentioned again.

"It must be admitted that it was agriculture, its workers who suffered the imperfections of the Soviet economy [...] We must remember that it is the rural population that is the genetic embodiment of any nation. [...] And it is it that most acutely and subtly perceives the ideals of independence and strong statehood, because at the genetic and information level it preserves and reproduces the aspirations and hopes of our ancestors" (*ibid*).

Nazarbayev criticizes the Soviet rule, an attitude that does not agree with the historiographic understanding supported by Russia and ethnic Russians, who portray the USSR period as a moment of progress to Kazakhstan. This decision points to a revisionist historiography that moves further from civic narratives of the nation, which typically avoids criticism towards the Russian/Soviet past. The will to revive the village may also be understood

as a way to strengthen a community that is typically less Russified. The civic term *Kazakhstani* is also present and related to economy:

“But there are reasons and purely economic ones [...] Paradoxically, it's a fact: all nearby and remote markets are in need of food, primarily grain and meat. But Kazakhstani food cannot break through there due to poor quality and high costs, weak state and diplomatic support” (*ibid*).

Economy is again the central feature of the speech. Politics, social development, and nation-building are all subordinated to the economic future of the country.

Nazarbayev also mentions interethnicity as a fundamental aspect of the country: “Unity, interethnic harmony and political stability are the main things our people want. I know that” (*ibid*). Ethnic diversity is also addressed by the president as a matter that must be protected: “Issues such as the introduction of legal norms that prevent political extremism in the activities of parties; exclusion of party building on ethnic or confessional principles” (*ibid*).

Finally, there is foreign policy, which is said to be pragmatic and multilateral following the needs of the country’s development goals. The SCO is mentioned as an important instrument of international relations. Care regarding the adoption of external practices is again mentioned as a potentially negative subject: “We will move step by step, preserving the values of our culture, which is based on mutual assistance, tolerance, collectivism, mutual respect between people of different nationalities. Other people's recipes can hurt us” (*ibid*).

The 2003 speech is again mainly centered on economic plans for the country. In this sense, the will to reduce Kazakhstan’s dependency on raw materials and to develop a more innovative economy are central topics. An active and multilateral foreign policy is also mentioned as a key pillar of the national development: “[...] establishing security institutions in Asia and on regional integration of Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. In his words,

Kazakhstan will be a consistent supporter of the idea of integration” (Address of the President..., 2003).

Despite the focus on economy, the speech also refers, in a secondary way, to topics related to the nation and the people. In this context, it is important to stress mentions made to development and maintenance of the cultural and historic heritage, a goal that is to be addressed by the *Cultural Heritage Program*:

“The program is aimed to establish an integrated system of research of the massive cultural heritage of the people, reestablishment of historical, cultural and architectural monuments, generalization of the ancient experience of national literature and literary texts, creation of a proper humanitarian education in Kazakh language” (*ibid*).

The return of the “ancient experience” and the revival of the Kazakh language suggest that the government seeks to properly advance ethnic aspects typically representative of the titular nation, pointing to a more nationalizing approach. There are no references to elements related to a civic idea of the nation.

In 2004, Nazarbayev began his speech addressing the need to increase Kazakhstan’s competitiveness in the world market, which, among other ways, should be achieved by adherence to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Despite the conditionalities attached to the inclusion to the latter, the goal is sustained by the president as one of utmost importance because: “It is important to welcome and encourage the movement of Kazakh capital abroad” (Address of the President..., 2004). Interestingly, Nazarbayev refers specifically to the *Kazakh* capital.

Another goal is to increase cooperation with Russia. “[...] Realization of joint space programmes with Russia will promote the development of our space science, new technologies and the main thing, it will strengthen the training of our cadres in this sector” (*ibid*). Relations with China and its initiatives are also put in a central position.

“Kazakhstan's foreign policy should be directed towards speeding up the country's economic development and boosting its standing worldwide. Kazakhstan has showed itself a firm supporter of integration and multifaceted cooperation. Given that, we should continue to work within the framework of a single economic space, EAEC, the SCO [...]” (*ibid*).

“It is vital for us to have stable and friendly relations with our neighbor - China. It is our reliable partner with whom we are conducting a constant dialogue on all issues of mutual interest. We should work to increase the volume of bilateral trade. The high level of mutual understanding that we have achieved will promote this” (*ibid*).

References to ethnic markers are again made when Nazarbayev sets the goal to strengthen the repatriation of *Oralmans*: “We should also stimulate the further inflow of people into our country, so the immigration quota for Kazakh repatriates in 2005 should be raised to 15,000 families. A total of 9.8bn tenge should be allocated for their relocation and purchase of houses” (*ibid*). Ethnicity is also mentioned when Nazarbayev refers to the achievements of the *Kazakh* people: “We have already proved that Kazakhstan is ready for great achievements and the Kazakh people can carry them out” (*ibid*).

Democratization is also present: “This year, we will continue to work on the further democratization of our society [...] It is necessary to take steps to strengthen stability, democracy and the protection of citizens' rights” (*ibid*).

Economy is again the main focus of the 2005 speech, which is clearly stated by Nazarbayev as the most important goal for the country: “Over these ten years, we have been moving forward, towards democratization taking into consideration the specific features of our country and following the principle of ‘first economy, then politics’” (Address of the President..., 2005).

Other topics are mentioned during the speech, namely democratization and freedom of religion. “We should build a free and tolerant society where every citizen of Kazakhstan, regardless of his or her ethnic background or confession, is free to practice the culture, customs, and religion of his or her choice” (*ibid*).

Despite the references to a democratic and diverse society, the speech makes important points related to cultural and linguistic revival of Kazakh traditions, historical revisionism and other subjects that are intimately connected to an ethnic-centered political discourse.

“It is necessary to carry on implementing the “Cultural Heritage” program; by reflecting on the past, we will be able to ensure our cultural advancement [...] We should also work together to sustain one of the mainstays of the unity of our nation, our national language, the mother tongue of all the Kazakhs” (*ibid*).

“I see integration as the only way to become worthy of our common great ancestors who always envisioned us together. The Czarist Empire and Stalin’s ethnic policy abhorred this unity; they broke our region into administrative territories” (*ibid*).

As usual, an active and multilateral foreign policy is an important subject. The president highlights the importance of cooperation with regional nations (namely Russia and China) and engaging with regionalization initiatives.

“Our priorities remain unchanged – an activist, multifaceted and balanced foreign policy able to confront the challenges of the 21st century and aimed at pursuing the long-term national interests [...] We put priority on the development of cooperation with Russia, China, the United States and the European Union” (*ibid*).

“Kazakhstan attaches great importance to the SCO, to reforming the CIS, the EEC and to proceeding with the establishment of the Single Economic Space” (*ibid*).

The president also raises awareness to potential negative influences of the external scenario: “Today, we are again witnessing superpower rivalry for economic dominance in our region. We have to address correctly this new global and geo-economics challenge” (*ibid*).

Democracy and religious diversity, recurrent subjects, are also present in the 2006 speech and elected by Nazarbayev, respectively, as the path of Kazakhstan’s development and a foundational aspect of the country. Democratization is mentioned as a national goal: “Third, we are building a free, open and democratic society”; “Fifth, in Kazakhstan we guarantee and ensure full equality and harmony among all religions”; “It is necessary to consider both general

laws of building a democratic and prosperous state and the important cultural and historical features and traditions of our society” (Address of the President..., 2006).

The discourse also refers to the need to rescue and develop ancient traditions of the titular nation: “Sixth, we strive to preserve and develop the ancient traditions, language and culture of the Kazakh people while also providing interethnic and intercultural harmony and progress of the single nation of Kazakhstan” (*ibid*). The strengthening of the Kazakh nationality is also mentioned when Nazarbayev stresses the need to integrate *Oralmans* to society:

“Our attention should be focused more on creation of conditions for preparatory training in special centers, and the adaptation and integration of oralmans into our society” (*ibid*).

Foreign policy is again mentioned as a subject related to the country’s economic development and it must continue to be diverse, pragmatic and engaging with regional powers and initiatives. Russia and China are especially mentioned.

“Development of strategic partnership with Russia on the basis of broad integration processes between our countries. The Kazakhstan-Russia relationship is on a high level of confidence and strategic partnership. The Russian dimension is the most important priority in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy” (*ibid*).

“Strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation with China. We will continue to implement bilateral treaties on economic and political cooperation with the People’s Republic of China. Kazakhstan understands there is no alternative to mutually beneficial relations with this rapidly growing country. Economic collaboration should be reinforced by active political dialog on issues of international security” (*ibid*).

While discussing Kazakhstan’s goals to maintain an active role in the international environment, Nazarbayev stresses the need to guarantee the country’s position as a “bridge between Europe and Asia” (*ibid*), reinforcing Eurasianism.

One final aspect of the 2006 speech is religious extremism. For the first time, Nazarbayev addressed episodes of social and political unrest during a speech: “For the first time during an election campaign, we faced a phenomenon such as the worry of citizens, and

in some cases the sheer fear of possible destabilization in the country, especially so that some were counting on that” (*ibid*). The president also highlights the success of the work of the Assembly of the Peoples in dealing with Kazakhstan’s multi-ethnic society.

Nazarbayev opens the 2007 speech saying “Dear Kazakhstanis!”, a phrase that is repeated five more times. Overall, the term *Kazakhstani* is used 20 times against none mentions of the term *Kazakh*.

The speech is opened by an approximation between economic achievements and the country’s abilities to strengthen “social orientation of reforms”. Thus, economic development is again referred to as the fundamental goal of the country. In this sense, broader economic internationalization and the establishment of a foreign policy focused on regional integration and multilateralism is one of the most relevant subjects mentioned. Russia, China, the SCO and Eurasian cooperation are recurrent topics.

“At the same time, the main attention should be focused on the markets of Russia, China, Central Asia, the Caspian and Black Sea regions. Economic integration within the CIS, EurAsEC, SCO remains the main benchmark in trade. We propose to create the Eurasian Economic Union of States, to make it profitable for the entry of all our other neighbors” (Poslaniye Prezidenta Respubliki..., 2007).

Economic performance is also related to education and democratization. The first is mainly related to the need to reform the educational system to better adapt it to the market. Thus, regarding education there is no mention of ethnicity, literature, history nor any other subject potentially related to the creation of the moral values that form a nation. Instead, the debate is solely focused on subjects such as natural sciences and math. Democratization, on the other hand, is said to be an important goal because it is connected to the creation of a political environment in which economic development is more easily achieved.

Furthermore, during the 2007 speech, the term multi-ethnicity/multiethnic is replaced by multi-nationality/multinational, which seems to be closer from a civic perspective of nation. “The main task at the new stage is to further strengthen the foundations of an open, democratic and rule of law, which harmoniously combines both universally recognized democratic values and the traditions of our multinational and multi-confessional society” (*ibid*).

The speech also mentions the importance of the Trinity of Languages project and suggests that the Cultural Heritage Program should continue its work. Such considerations, however, are carefully made to prevent the rise of potential inter-ethnic issues. An example of such caution is the use of “our peoples”, a more integrative idea, instead of “Kazakh people”.

“First, continuing the work carried out within the framework of the “Cultural Heritage” program, the issue of creating the “Fund for Spiritual Development of the Peoples of Kazakhstan” should be studied. The Fund should regularly monitor and support the development of cultural values and traditions of our peoples [...] Kazakhstan should be perceived all over the world as a highly educated country whose population uses three languages. These are: Kazakh is the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication and English is the language of successful integration into the global economy” (*ibid*).

During the speech, Nazarbayev launches the *Strategy Kazakhstan-2030*, a plan that points to the main directions of the country regarding domestic and foreign policy. The majority of the 28 paths are related to economics. Some of them are related to the need to strengthen economic development through regionalization, start joint projects with other countries and increase Kazakhstan’s infrastructure. In this sense, we mention the need to cooperate with China, Russia, the SCO and initiatives of Eurasian unification.

“Cooperating with other countries in solving vital problems: from energy security to combating epidemics and environmental disasters, we will continue to strengthen our role and authority as a responsible member of regional cooperation and the international community. This is reflected in our good-neighborly relations with Russia and China, which are priorities” (*ibid*).

The 2008 speech is mainly a crisis contentment plan aimed at softening the negative effects of the financial crisis. In this sense, economic and political cooperation with China and

Russia as well as participation in multilateral initiatives like the SCO are highlighted as key strategies.

Despite the clear economic focus of the speech, Nazarbayev stresses the importance of improving democratic instruments in the country while maintaining society's traditions. In this sense, the president highlights the creation of a proper Kazakhstani nation: "Over the 16 years of our independence, we have implemented our own model for securing public stability and inter-ethnic accord, molding the Kazakhstani identity and shared Kazakhstani patriotism" (*ibid*).

Even though the creation of a Kazakhstani nation is said to be one of the government's goals, ethnicity is still important. Increasing the repatriation of *Oralmans* and the implementation of the Kazakh language are examples of it. "In 2009, the annual quota for resettlement of *Oralmans* to their historical homeland should be raised by 5 thousand families to 20 thousand families a year"; "I would like to draw your attention to the urgent need to increase the quality of Kazakh language teaching, as this language unites the entire society" (*ibid*). References to the health of the *Kazakh* people and the *Kazakh* Army are also interesting elements.

3.2 Phase two (2009 to 2013)

A warm "Dear Kazakhstanis!" opens Nazarbayev's 2009 speech. The civic term, mentioned 4 times, is again employed when the president praises the development of the country despite the ongoing crisis. In this sense, political stability is mentioned as one important achievement: "A country where the well-being of *Kazakhstanis* is improving from year to year" (Poslaniye Prezidenta Respubliki ..., 2009).

Talking about the way the country chose to fight economic depression, Nazarbayev mentions that: “There may be different attitudes towards it, but we, *Kazakhstanis*, have included our thoughts in the general search for a way out of this crisis” (*ibid*). In this sense, Astana is mentioned as a proof of Kazakhstan’s resilience: “In the most difficult years, we began to build and created a new capital of the country - Astana, when no one believed that we could do it” (*ibid*) and the creation of new jobs for all *Kazakhstanis* is pointed as a fundamental strategy

“The released funds will give us the opportunity, first of all, to implement the employment strategy of *Kazakhstanis*. It will not only help us cope with crisis shocks but will also ensure the effective development of the economy in post-crisis times. It should give new opportunities to every *Kazakh* family” (*ibid*).

Addressing the country’s ability to overcome critical situations, the president uses both the concepts of *Kazakhstanis* and *Kazakhs*. While mentioning the latter, Nazarbayev refers to the revival of the village and indigenous traditions on the construction of the country.

“As a country, as a *Kazakh*, as a state, our generation will not forget that such a bright sun has settled on our heads only because of independence. We must prepare for this special milestone in the annals of the country. From now on, if we restore a small part of each village [...]” (*ibid*).

Despite mentioning civic and ethnic aspects of the nation independently and suggesting diverging levels of importance to each, Nazarbayev tries to silence potential conflicts by electing unity as one of the most crucial elements on the surpassing of the critical scenario.

“There is only one force that overcomes adversity, it is unity. As much as unity is needed to protect your country and land, it is necessary to preserve the fruits of independence and our achievements today. Was it not this unity that gave birth to the country, which preserved our people as a nation even in ancient times? The *Kazakh* people, “a thousand dead and a thousand resurrected”, were able to preserve their country thanks to solidarity and unity even in other great dark years of the Soviet era” (*ibid*).

Criticism of the Soviet period is again present, suggesting the creation of a genuine view from Kazakhstan based on historiographic revisionism.

The 2009 speech is the first one in our selection that does not focus on foreign affairs as one central goal of the country, an anomaly that is not repeated in the 2010 discourse, which is heavily dedicated to praising past accomplishments on this matter and setting new horizons for Kazakhstan's international relations. Aside from pragmatic decision-making and economic-oriented plans, strengthening cooperation with China via new bilateral projects and direct investment are especially mentioned. Russia is particularly addressed through mentions to the Customs Union: "Kazakhstan is an active participant in integration processes in the CIS. The creation of the Customs Union with Russia and Belarus, which entered into force on January 1, 2010, is a breakthrough of all Kazakhstan's integration initiatives" (Poslaniye Prezidenta Respubliki..., 2010).

Having an active role in the definition of the global architecture is highlighted as an important goal in terms of foreign affairs:

"Kazakhstan intends to participate in global decision-making processes in the formation of a new architecture of international relations and the contours of the world trade and financial system" (*ibid*).

This passage is interesting not only because it highlights Kazakhstan's will to be a leader in the international arena, but also because it suggests a need to change the global order, a narrative that bonds together countries like Russia and China and relates to an anti-imperial approach.

As usual, the 2010 speech makes several references to economic development, which is the central goal of the country and to which all other subjects are related, if not subordinated, to: "the economic boom is a nationwide affair for each of us. This is the key to solving the social problems of society and starting all of us to success" (*ibid*). Political stability is highlighted by Nazarbayev as an important feature the country must guarantee to achieve its development goals.

The speech also mentions that economic development is relevant because it will guarantee Kazakhstan's true independence: "The ultimate goal of this program is to promote the independence of our country, to open the way for the development of Kazakhs as a nation, to create opportunities for the broad spread of their language and culture" (*ibid*). Despite the open mention to the Kazakhs, Kazakhstanis are also addressed in different moments, for example, when the president opens some parts of the discourse saying "Dear Kazakhstanis".

Unity is said to be a compulsory condition for development, however, the weight of the Kazakh features of the country seem to be more openly addressed by Nazarbayev: "We are proud of our country, our statehood is strong, our four qibas are worthy of the glory of the Kazakh people, and we have become famous in the world" (*ibid*). By the end of the speech, the leader quotes a letter received by a citizen of the country and suggests that it represents the majority of people's opinions regarding his government and Kazakhstan's achievements: "Dear Nursultan Abishevich, today the Kazakh has reached the top of Europe. This is the joy and pride of the *entire Kazakh people* [...] May you honor yourself, our *Kazakhs* in this high status" (*ibid*).

The 2011 speech is mainly focused on exalting the 20 years of independence and setting goals for the future. One of the first achievements of independent Kazakhstan mentioned by Nazarbayev is the repatriation of *Oralmans*, which suggests the importance of the revival of the titular nation in the formation of the country: "In these years, more than 800,000 compatriots came back from foreign states and the population increased by one and a half million" (Address of the President..., 2011). Incentives to the strengthening of the Kazakh people are also referred to in economic terms: "Exports of Kazakhstan's goods to the Customs Union countries increased 52.4 percent. At that, the contribution from customs duties to our budget increased by 25 percent. It will provide a huge market for *Kazakh* producers" (*ibid*).

The use of the Kazakh language is mentioned as a key achievement, one that can even be pointed as a reason for the wellbeing of the nation:

“It is gratifying to note that the people of Kazakhstan, showing respect and dignity, began studying the state Kazakh language [...] Our task is to make sure that by 2017 the number of people in Kazakhstan who have mastered the state language reaches at least 80 percent” (*ibid*).

Interestingly, the will to promote the Kazakh language is immediately followed by the assurance that other languages, especially Russian, will not lose their role: “We will also develop Russian and languages of other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan” (*ibid*). Such care regarding other linguistic traditions is connected to the strengthening of the civic feature of the country’s identity and nationality. Incentives to the creation of a linguistic and religiously diverse environment are pointed as main strategies to guarantee harmony and peace despite Kazakhstan’s ethnic variety: “My fellow people of Kazakhstan, peace and harmony in our multilingual and multi-faith society are our common achievement” (*ibid*).

Even though the above-mentioned ideas are present in the speech, most of the discourse is focused on the exaltation of the country’s ability to develop, especially in economic terms, despite the turmoil of the 1990’s and the recent crisis; and on the setting of the directions that must be taken from now to lead Kazakhstan to an even brighter future. These are, again, mainly focused on economic goals. International relations are mentioned as an important tool to help the state in this sense and engagement with the Customs Union and the SCO are particularly presented as key strategies.

“Kazakhstan will remain committed to swift and efficient development of the Customs Union among Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus [...] The SCO was created with our active participation, and we must do our best to make it stronger” (*ibid*).

The 2012 speech is entitled “Social-Economic Modernization as Main Vector of Development of Kazakhstan”, which suggests its focus: to set the path that must be taken to

achieve economic development which would, further, bring social and political modernization. Besides questions related to infrastructure and development of national production, the president also highlights the role of international relations in the search for economic development. Strengthening bilateral relations and actively engaging with key multilateral instruments are the main strategies in this context: “One of the important challenges facing our current development is the need to diversify the flow of foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan’s economy” (Address of the President..., 2012B). China, Russia, the SCO and Common Economic Space (CES) are pointed as main actors.

“For that, the state’s foreign policy priority must be friendly relations with neighbors [...] The completion of Kazakhstan’s section of the international motor road corridor “Western Europe – Western China” is very important” (*ibid*).

“We are responding to the global challenges of the 21st century by deepening Eurasian integration [...] Along with Russia and Belarus, we have formed a CES and head towards the creation of the EEU” (*ibid*).

Political ideology, nationality, national identity and similar subjects are minimally mentioned. These topics are mainly addressed in passages destined to exalt Kazakhstan’s harmonious diversity and the strength of the Kazakh language.

“Patriotism, morality and ethics, inter-ethnic harmony and tolerance, physical and spiritual development, and respect for the law are values that should be instilled in all educational institutions regardless of the form of ownership. Multinationality and multilinguality are parts of these values and one of the main assets of our country. According to our Constitution, the Kazakh language is the state language. The Russian language is officially used in state bodies along with Kazakh [...] The planned development of the Kazakh language will not be harmful for the Russian language” (*ibid*).

There is no 2013 speech available. However, Nazarbayev had another important discourse in December 2012, in which the president launched the “Strategy Kazakhstan 2050”, a detailed project of all that the state is supposed to do to guarantee the achievement of a certain level of economic development and political/social modernization in 2050.

This speech begins with an extensive exaltation of the country's historic achievements: "For over 20 years our country has worked to strengthen its sovereignty and political influence - a goal which we have accomplished. The formation of our nation has been successfully completed" (Address by the President..., 2012A). The nation, ethnicity, cultural revival and other topics related to nation-building are further mentioned: "We have to continue our work to establish the historical conscience of the nation" (*ibid*). Sometimes, there is a special focus on an ethnic concept of the nation, as in: "We have worked to restore our historic Kazakh culture and language after many years of decline. Besides our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, we have maintained peace and stability in our country" (*ibid*).

"Special responsibility for implementation of the Kazakhstan 2050 is laid first of all on us, Kazakhs. We should not forget that we would be able to adequately respond to the challenges of the time only if we preserve our cultural code: language, spirituality, traditions and values" (*ibid*).

"Responsible language policy is one of the consolidating factors of Kazakh ethnicity [...] Our sovereignty, our independence will finally gain something that binds the nation and cements it – a mother tongue. This is the crown pearl of our state's sovereignty" (*ibid*).

Learning of Kazakh language is not mentioned without the assurance of the maintenance of the status of Russian: "We should treat Russian language and Cyrillic writing in the same caring way as we do for Kazakh. It is clear to us all that knowing the Russian language provided a historic advantage to our nation" (*ibid*).

The speech mentions civic visions of the nation to celebrate and guarantee ethnic and political stability: "We have secured fundamental rights and liberties in our country's Constitution. Our citizens have equal rights and opportunities"; "Civil peace and interethnic harmony remains a key value for us [...] We have consistently developed civil institutions based on a democratic development model" (*ibid*).

Likewise:

“The new Kazakhstan patriotism is something that should unite all of society without any ethnic differences [...] We are a multiethnic society and there should be no double standards when it comes to interethnic relations” (*ibid*).

When mentioning and praising both concepts of nation – ethnic and civic – Nazarbayev highlights the harmony between them and stresses the need to guarantee their pacific coexistence, which, according to the president is endangered by external forces:

“I am concerned that the nation is artificially divided into “true Kazakhs” and “false Kazakhs”. I feel very ashamed for those who do that, for those who divide the society [...] The world is undergoing an acute crisis of outlook and values. We increasingly hear voices heralding the clash of civilizations, the end of history and the failure of multiculturalism. It is critically important that we stay away from this kind of discourse, preserving our time-tested values. We know exactly how we turned what was called our Achilles heel – multi-ethnicity and multi-religious reality – into an advantage [...] Despite all burdens and adversities suffered under the Czars, shocks of revolutions and totalitarianism, Kazakhs and representative of other ethnic groups have managed to preserve their cultural distinction. Moreover, in the independence years, in spite of globalization and westernization, our cultural foundation has been significantly strengthened. Kazakhstan is a unique country where various cultural elements have united to complement and enrich each other. We must preserve our national culture and traditions in all their diversity and greatness by collecting it bit by bit. Our history teaches us: a country is strong only if its people are united, therefore the unity of Kazakhs is a key issue for us” (*ibid*).

Nazarbayev’s concerns regarding the division of society are especially related to systemic changes that are related to the international environment and its consequences in Kazakhstan. In some points, the president openly talks about these fears: “Kazakhstan has its own culture, traditions and customs. Women are an important part of our society and should not be restricted from driving cars, pursuing a career or forced to wear traditional dress that has never been worn in Kazakhstan” (*ibid*).

“Whoever attempts to “drive a wedge” into the interethnic harmony of the nation should be prosecuted by Law. And here we Kazakhs bear a special responsibility. We must understand that the epoch of single-ethnic states has gone. Kazakhstan is our land. It is a land that has belonged to our ancestors. The land that will belong to our descendants. We bear a direct responsibility for the peace and harmony of our land” (*ibid*).

The above-mentioned quote is especially interesting because it both values the diversity of the nation as a positive feature of Kazakhstan and puts an especial responsibility on Kazakhs, who are portrayed as the ultimate responsables for state stability and order.

“Today the pressing issue for Kazakhstan in the religious arena is religions that have not been traditionally practiced in our country. We have also seen an influx of people claiming to represent a non-recognized faith or belief. Some of the young people unconsciously accept these views due to a lack of immunity on the part of our society against pseudo-religious influence. It is a fact that our Constitution guarantees freedom of faith. However, as you might know this is not unrestricted freedom as this would produce chaos” (*ibid*).

Nazarbayev makes a relatively extensive address to nation-building, however, it is not the central subject of the speech, which is mainly devoted to economy. As explicitly said by the president: “Economy first, then politics” (*ibid*). To achieve the level of economic development envisioned by Nazarbayev, a detailed path of investments and technological modernization is presented along with other subjects that are closely connected to Kazakhstan’s economic performance. Among these, foreign affairs have a special place and are meant to remain pragmatic and diverse.

Main subjects of international relations are economic development, the already-mentioned concerns regarding the influence of negative global trends and the unrestricted entrance of pervasive external influences as religious extremism. The former is mainly translated into engagement with multilateral organizations and bilateral relations with important players while the latter is mostly related to the engagement with initiatives aimed at fighting terrorism and extremism. In this sense, Eurasianism and the alignment with China and Russia is of utmost relevance.

“As this century progresses, Kazakhstan should become a bridge for dialogue and interaction between East and West [...] We are reviving a New Silk Road by setting up a “Western Europe – Western China” transportation corridor” (*ibid*).

“Our priorities remain unchanged – development of partnerships with our neighbors – Russia, China” (*ibid*).

“Our next aim is to create a EEU in consensus with our partners whilst respecting full political sovereignty” (*ibid*).

3.3 Phase three (2014 to 2018)

The 2014 speech is a lot more succinct than most discourses analyzed here, though the main focus is still economic development. In this sense, international relations are especially mentioned as necessary to achieve the established goals. Beyond economy, cultural and linguistic revival are also mentioned.

“Kazakh language has become the language of science, knowledge and the Internet [...] This year, the number of representatives of other ethnicities who speak Kazakh has increased by 10 percent [...] Our native language has become the Eternal Language in our Eternal Land. We should consider it not as a ground for debates, but as a foundation to unite our country” (Address of the President..., 2014).

“We, the people of Kazakhstan, are a united nation! And our shared destiny - our Mangilik Yel or the Eternal Land – is our great country of Kazakhstan! Mangilik Yel is the national idea of our shared Kazakh home” (*ibid*).

The 2015 speech was abnormally made by the end of November and not at the beginning of the year as usual. The discourse is opened with a warm “Dear Kazakhstani!”, which is again repeated another 3 times. References to Kazakhstanis are also made in other moments, especially when Nazarbayev talks about economy and/or wishes to address wealthier communities.

“Fourthly, in 2016, pension assets should be transferred to the management of private Kazakhstani or foreign companies [...] The state has created all the conditions for you to develop your business and get on your feet. In such critical hours as today, you will have a great responsibility [...] I want to appeal to the entrepreneurial class, all wealthy *Kazakhstanis*, all businessmen and businesspeople” (*ibid*).

“After all, each social payment is an additional burden not just on the budget, but on every working Kazakhstani. It should be clearly understood that the idea of social justice should not turn into social injustice towards working Kazakhstanis. It's their money!” (*ibid*).

There are no references to Kazakhs, though cultural, historic and linguistic features typically shared by the indigenous community are timidly mentioned by Nazarbayev, as in:

“Our goal is to make Kazakhstan ‘Mangilik El’, our sacred homeland, where the country is happy and prosperous!”; “We took stock of our history and achieved the prosperity of our culture” (*ibid*). All references to ethnicity are carefully made in order to not raise potential rivalries.

Challenges imposed by the international environment are another important subject:

“The global situation is changing before our eyes, with new threats and new opportunities. The confrontation of superpowers and mutual exchange of sanctions is starting to bring the world to a dead end. The prices of our main export products on the world market have fallen many times [...] We must preserve our unity and work hard for the good of our country” (*ibid*).

The path to be followed is briefly presented by Nazarbayev as a threefold one in which economy holds the primary position: “Now and at any other time, our main anti-crisis stratagem is identical to three simple but important concepts: growth, reforms, development” (*ibid*). In this regard, cooperation with China and regional diplomacy are mentioned as one of the main paths to be taken.

“During my visit to China, agreements were reached with EximBank to attract loans in the amount of \$2.6 billion. Now many roads are being built at the expense of the state budget [...] We must effectively use the economic potential of neighboring countries. First of all, these are China, Russia, Iran, Mongolia, India, Pakistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus [...] It is necessary to conclude free trade agreements of the EEU with key regional markets” (*ibid*).

“An agreement on cooperation in the non-primary sector for \$23 billion has been reached with China. The visit of the President of Russia to our country showed the stability and strength of our traditional good-neighborly relations and the development of economic integration” (*ibid*).

One last subject that concerns the external environment is terrorism.

“International terrorism now poses a serious threat to peace. This is the result of the destruction of statehood through the interference of external forces in the internal affairs of sovereign States” (*ibid*).

The statement also refers to threats to statehood, which can be interpreted as dangers to territory, sovereignty, economic independence and so on.

No state of the nation was made in 2016.

The 2017 speech is extremely focused on economic development and modernization. Secondary topics, like nation-building, cultural development and related issues are much less addressed by Nazarbayev.

Regarding economy, two topics are mainly present: industrial modernization and international relations.

“It is necessary to create a new model of economic growth that will provide the country's global competitiveness [...] Secondly, there is a need to continue industrialization with emphasis on the development of competitive export industries in priority sectors” (The President of Kazakhstan..., 2017).

“Kazakhstan should keep the leading position in attracting foreign investment [...] It is critical to fit into global chains of production and distribution of goods and services” (*ibid*).

“It is necessary to effectively implement a joint investment program with China to establish production facilities in Kazakhstan [...] Protection and promotion of national economic interests in the framework of international cooperation shall be provided. This includes, before everything else, the activities within the EAEC, SCO, interfacing with the Economic Belt of the Silk Road” (*ibid*).

Terrorism is again mentioned as a threat that must be controlled: “In modern conditions humanity is faced with terrorism growth. The key here is the fight against financing the destructive forces and links with foreign terrorist organizations” (*ibid*).

There are some secondary mentions to Kazakhstan's nation and its formation, which are mainly connected with the strengthening of the Kazakh language and the country's multiethnicity. “Gradual transition to trilingual education. The Kazakh language retains its dominant position”; “Kazakhstan is a new multi-ethnic, confident in its future, and dynamically developing country!” (*ibid*).

The 2018 speech mainly discusses the consequences of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and how Kazakhstan should modernize itself in order to adapt to this new reality. Economy

remains the central subject in this sense, but other topics are also covered with more emphasis than usual, such as the path to be taken regarding international relations, that should remain pragmatic and active. There are no explicit mentions to countries or organizations that should be Kazakhstan's main partners.

Incentives to the study and use of Kazakh language are especially mentioned by Nazarbayev, who treats it as the ultimate frontier to the formation of the country's nation and guarantees the maintenance of Russian as an active language in the country.

“The future of the people of Kazakhstan lies in the fluent use of Kazakh, Russian and English languages [...] Knowledge of the Russian language remains important [...] As a result, all our graduates will master three languages at the level necessary for life and work in the country and in the global world. Then a genuine civil society will emerge. A person of any ethnic group will be able to choose any kind of work, up to the extent of getting elected as the President of the country. The people of Kazakhstan will become one nation” (State of the Nation..., 2018A).

Furthermore, Nazarbayev recognizes the importance of the harmony between an ethnic, Kazakh nationality, and a civic, liberalized Kazakhstani one. The latter, however, seems to be the main goal of the national path to social modernization while the coexistence of both is portrayed as the short-term goal for the state's social architecture: “Our society's role model should be a citizen of Kazakhstan who knows his or her history, language, culture but who is also modern, fluent in foreign languages and has progressive and global worldview [...] We have launched the process of modernizing our national identity” (*ibid*).

In October 2018, Nazarbayev made another state of the nation which is mainly focused on the connections between improvements in social welfare and economic development. The most interesting characteristic of this discourse is the tone set by the president: different from other speeches, there are nearly no references made to the country's diversity and ethnic harmony and the audience is strictly referred to as *Kazakhs*. In this sense, “Dear Kazakh citizens!” is the most used way chosen by Nazarbayev to refer to the people. Kazakhs are

mentioned again in several other opportunities, such as: “The growing welfare of Kazakh citizens must be the highest priority”; “Well-being of Kazakh citizens depends, first and foremost, on the steady growth of income and quality of life. It is business that creates new jobs and provides higher income to the majority of Kazakh citizens” (State of the Nation..., 2018B). The term Kazakhstani is not present.

The only reference to not-strictly-ethnic-based concepts of nation is at the end of the speech, when the president states:

“We always adequately respond to the challenges of the time. We manage to do so, primarily, thanks to our unity. As we say, ‘A rich country is the country where people live in harmony’. We face complex challenges at this current time. If we have harmony, there are no heights we cannot reach” (*ibid*).

The speech affirms that “[The] well-being of the population and accession of Kazakhstan to the list of 30 developed countries are the long-term goals of our independent state” (*ibid*), which justifies the strong presence of goals related to economic development and industrial modernization. In this sense, foreign affairs are, as usual, an important topic. In this sense, cooperation with the EEU, China and Russia are specifically referred to.

“The EEU is successfully functioning as a fully integrated association and an active participant of global economic relations [...] A comprehensive strategic partnership with the People’s Republic of China has been gradually developing [...] The One Belt - One Road programme gave a new impetus to our relations with China” (*ibid*).

Finally, it is interesting to highlight Nazarbayev’s will to develop the rural communities, traditionally known to be less Russified and less economically developed. “This will be facilitated by the launch of a special project “Auyl – Yel Bessigi” (“Village is the cradle of the nation”)” (*ibid*), the very name of the project suggests the presence of ethnic features in the planning of it.

CHAPTER 4 – SOCIETAL RESPONSES TO RUSSIA AND CHINA IN KAZAKHSTAN

To identify the consequences of the Sino-Russian relations upon Kazakhstan's society and its possible relations to the country's nation-building it is necessary to better understand how China and Russia have been conducting their relations with Kazakhstan and vice-versa and what are the effects of their presence. In this sense, it is of our interest to identify: the historical context of the interactions between Kazakhstan and each of the other two countries; and how China and Russia deal with Kazakhstan and how they are locally interpreted by society.

To promote such debates, this chapter will be divided in three sections. The first will elucidate the opinion of different sectors of society about Sino-Russian relations. In this sense, analysis will use materials taken from two outlets: TengriNews and Radio Azattyk. These were chosen based on their circulation and popularity and their role as important non-governmental vehicles of communication. Furthermore, the fact that they have contrasting perspectives is also a positive point: while one is essentially closer to expressions of Kazakh nationalism, the other is closer to liberalized and perhaps civic visions of the nation. This effort may not be enough to integrally apprehend Kazakhstan's social views and understandings of Sino-Russian relations, but I believe that both websites have a well-established reputation and, given their capacity to reach different publics, represent an important voice on the formation of society's mentality and can positively contribute to this first attempt to connect Sino-Russian relations and Kazakhstan's social and political environment. Finally, the following sections will be dedicated to the analysis of the effects of Sino-Kazakh and Russian-Kazakh relations upon Kazakhstan during the aegis of a broader Sino-Russian rapprochement.

4.1 Local impressions on Sino-Russian relations

In a publication released in December 2018, TengriNews, a non-governmental website known for frequently addressing themes related to the Kazakh ethnicity, commented on the Chinese withdrawal from a long-standing agreement with Russia. The treaty, whose content was basically oriented to create new instruments of currency integration, was to be signed when China pulled off. While analyzing the reasons behind Beijing's decision, the author highlights a fundamental characteristic of Sino-Russian relations, one that can, according to the text, be interpreted as an important limiting aspect that could potentially hinder further developments in the cooperation: diverging drivers behind both Russian and Chinese behaviors. The article suggests that the former is primarily driven by ideological terms while the latter is a classic pragmatic player. In this sense, Moscow would privilege its Western rivalry and revisionism when making decisions regarding international politics and Beijing would remain attached to its own national interests regarding economic development and regime stability (Kitay vernulsya iz davno..., 2018).

The perspective provided by TengriNews on Sino-Russian relations are somehow aligned with the impressions shared by another non-governmental media outlet in Kazakhstan: Radio Azattyk, a branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a US sponsored institution operating in the country. In Kazakhstan, Radio Azattyk's materials are written by journalists that are specialized in specific themes and geographic regions who may or may not be citizens of the place they write about but who are usually settled in big centers of the countries they are engaging with. In Kazakhstan, Radio Azattyk is established in Astana and Almaty. The content is fully written in Russian and/or Kazakh.

In an article published in August 2013, Radio Azattyk provides an overview of the status of Sino-Russian relations at that moment. The text mentions some drivers, outcomes and possible limits to further cooperation. The author mentions revisionism against the Western-

led global order as an important factor of approximation as it provides a common moral and ideological ground for interaction. Further to this ideational factor, economic complementarities are also mentioned, especially concerning China's need for hydrocarbons and Russia's offer of such products. Although the text stresses that these and other factors were central to the expansion of the relations, which is said to have room to further growth, challenges are also mentioned. According to Radio Azattyk, possible conflict of interests, especially regarding security, were relevant obstacles to the Sino-Russian rapprochement and could potentially impose a limit to it (Otnosheniya mezhdru Rossiyyey..., 2013). In this context, Central Asia is highlighted as a region of utmost competition:

“It is most likely that the biggest stumbling block in their relationship is Central Asia. Russia continues to consider this region as a "near abroad", but China quickly includes it in its economic interests” (*ibid*).

In September 2022, Radio Azattyk would again address the topic of Sino-Russian relations. This time, the news website talked about Putin and Xi Jinping meeting at the SCO Summit that year. The author stresses that given the results of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia finds itself in a fragile position, making China an even more important ally. Although the article mentions that both countries have signaled the existence of an “unlimited” relation, challenges seem to be even greater nowadays. In this sense, the author highlights that the Sino-Russian cooperation always had challenges that could hinder its development, but that the current situation seems to be more dependent on China's pragmatism and Beijing's awareness towards possible negative reverberations of a boundless alliance with the former is still present (Standish, 2022A).

“China observes sanctions against Russia because of its war in Ukraine, and some Chinese companies have even severed ties with Moscow so as not to violate restrictions and deprive themselves of access to Western markets” (*ibid*).

The article suggests that a weakened Russia means a more open way for China to deepen its footprint in Central Asia, pushing the rapprochement to one of its greatest limiting factors.

Another article by Radio Azattyk from December 2022 repeats the same ideas: Sino-Russian cooperation have a vast horizon of opportunities to be deepened but important challenges have always been in the way: “Experts say that Beijing still clearly does not intend to abandon Moscow as a partner, but there are clear limits to any political or economic assistance that China could offer to Russia” (Standish, 2022B). These seem to be particularly relevant in critical contexts such as Russia's military movements in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Likewise, such limiting factors, although multilayered, are basically understood as points of collision between both states’ interests especially regarding security terms and political influence, themes that always point to Central Asia.

Both TengriNews and Radio Azattyk agree that the Sino-Russian rapprochement is possible due to the existence of a large amount of common or complementary interests between China and Russia, especially in economic terms. However, both media outlets agree that it is a limited phenomenon *per se*. Both countries have overlapping interests that will eventually collide, leading them towards conflict instead of alliance. In this sense, it is interesting to notice that TengriNews seems to have a more negative perception towards the life expectancy of the partnership (the article was written in 2013 and it already mentioned a substantial difference between the drivers behind the political formulation of both countries). In the first text, Radio Azattyk focuses more on the positive outcomes and on the possibilities of expansion. A more skeptical vision towards the resistance of Sino-Russian relations is more evident in the 2022 publications and both mention Central Asia as a fundamental aspect to understand the current limits of the partnership. Furthermore, Radio Azattyk usually implies a critical vision regarding

both Russia and China. Each of the countries' regime is more than once presented as authoritarian and increased economic activity in other countries is usually cited as an expression of aggressive expansionism.

Thus, even though both outlets diverge in topics such as the level of alignment of the countries in ideological and material terms, both agree that Sino-Russian relations have a strong economic driver and that it is a limited phenomenon that can be hindered by the overlapping of security interests from Moscow and Beijing, collisions that are more likely to take place in Central Asia.

One last factor that deserves to be mentioned is that of the frequency with which the topic of Sino-Russian relations is addressed. Both TengriNews and Radio Azattyk do not have many articles that speak specifically about the subject. Even though small, the latter has a larger collection on the subject than the former, which shows only one result that perfectly matched the search for Sino-Russian relations and similar names (such as Sino-Russian cooperation/partnership/alliance, Russia and China, China and Russia). In both cases, the results of searches for content published on this specific topic were usually divided in two main types: (i) those that talk about developments of Sino-Kazakh relations and the effects of the Chinese presence in Kazakhstan under the time frame of Sino-Russian relations; and (ii) those that talk about Russian-Kazakh relations and the effects of the Russian presence in Kazakhstan under the time frame of Sino-Russian relations. When searching in Google and other websites the outcome is the same: the majority of existing content published by Kazakh/Kazakhstani non-governmental media outlets does not treat specifically about Sino-Russian relations, but about effects of Sino-Kazakh and Russian-Kazakh relations under one same period.

4.2 The Chinese factor

The 1990's were marked by the first steps in establishing new relations between Kazakhstan and China, particularly considering issues in Xinjiang (Peyrouse, 2016: 15-16). The period is mainly characterized by China's expansion of credit and exports to all Central Asian nations to guarantee the creation of a stable regional environment, a goal traditionally pursued by Beijing (Kassenova, 2022: 11-12).

The 2000s brought new dynamics to Sino-Kazakh relations, especially given the creation of the SCO and a more active Chinese behavior in terms of establishing bilateral relations through Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2016: 15-16). China, in this context, expanded its role as an aid donor. Thus, training of personnel, equipment and other goods were more regularly sent by Beijing to Astana as well as generous assistance packages destined to help the country develop its economy. For example, during the SCO summit in Tashkent in 2004, then President Hu Jintao announced the provision of a credit line of \$900 million to Central Asia. In 2009, the package would be increased to \$10 billion (Kassenova, 2022: 12).

Besides the broader presence of Chinese credit and aid donations, the 2000s also represented an important period of partnership between China and Kazakhstan's state and private companies. In 2005, Petrokazakhstan, once the biggest oil company of the USSR, was bought by China National Petroleum Corporation, which also invested \$700 million in the creation of new infrastructure to enhance the distribution lines between both countries. Similarly, in 2009, China gained MangistauMunaiGas after lending Kazakhstan \$10 billion (Le Corre, n.d, 2019). Thus, an important expansion of China towards one of Kazakhstan's most central economic activities can be noted, which would set the ground for the establishment of a deeper partnership in the 2010s.

In September 2013, during a speech at Nazarbayev University, Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), a regional branch of the BRI. A few months prior to it,

Nazarbayev launched the integration of the SREB and the Nurly Zhol, a development project to improve infrastructure and connectivity in Kazakhstan (Bitarova, 2018: 152). From this moment on, Astana-Beijing partnership has been intensifying, coming to the level in which billions of US dollars were invested in Kazakhstan by China: more than US\$131.45 billion were traded between them (Peyrouse, 2016: 16-17) and over 50 joint projects were signed (Shakhanova and Garlick, 2021: 89).

The BRI matches Kazakhstan's self-perception of being a linchpin of Eurasian integration and the government's efforts to upgrade domestic transport infrastructure and effectively integrate it into international transport systems. Kazakhstan needs China to finance Nurly Zhol (which was endangered after the 2014 low in commodity prices). Likewise, China needs Kazakhstan to implement its project, once the main railways and pipelines projected by Beijing pass through the Kazakh steppes (Bitarova, 2018).

4.2.1 The BRI: enhancing the Chinese presence

Considering the BRI/Nurly Zhol cooperation, China seems to maintain its win-win approach focused on economic development, which has been guiding most of Beijing's international behavior. This narrative is endorsed by the flexibility of the Chinese portfolio, which, different from Western examples, does not attach extensive conditionalities to the concession of financial resources. For example, Beijing does not demand the receiver country to adhere to specific fiscal policies or liberal-democratic norms (Tian, 2018: 24-26).

Economically, Sino-Kazakh relations seem to be positive for both. The rapprochement between China and Kazakhstan, though, also has significant effects on aspects such as the conduct of Astana's policies regarding economy, foreign affairs and society.

Topics such as the large influx of Chinese capital into Kazakhstan, followed by an increase in Chinese immigration to the country and a growing presence of Chinese companies in Kazakhstan's market, were well regarded by Nazarbayev's regime. As demonstrated by Gaziza Shakhanova and Jeremy Garlick (2021), the government's official position has been to support the Chinese presence since the beginning of the cooperation, which is also evident in Nazarbayev's national speeches, which often cite China as an important partner. Using interviews and discourse analysis of selected articles published by mixed sources, the authors concluded that this partnership was encouraged by the country's government and elites, which appears to be aligned with governmental positions such as the absence of Kazakhstan's initiatives to address the problem of the Uyghur ethnic minorities despite society's concerns regarding the subject. Likewise, Nazarbayev's worries regarding Muslims and extremism seemed to be in line with the Chinese discourse towards Uyghurs, which can be interpreted as a trial of normalize and deep the relations.

The apparent alignment in Kazakhstan and China's political agendas can, however, be understood as a symptom of an asymmetric relation hidden behind statics of growing economic activity. Nargis Kassenova (2022) criticizes the apparent unlimited benevolence of the flexible, non-demanding donor role played by China. According to the author, even though the Chinese do have a historical tradition of being more open to amicable relations and putting itself in the position of sharing goods and gifts with others, such a behavior is not unattached from Beijing's own interests. In this sense, the caring for other countries' development is, to some extent, linked to certain demands. Even though the "Chinese way" does not comply with traditional Western conditionalities, it has its own requirements, of which we can highlight two central aspects: (i) the receiver country must attend Beijing's expected material return, meaning the financing of a project and other examples of Chinese endeavors must be accompanied by the results calculated by China at the moment of the concession of such benefit; and (ii) political

alignment, meaning that a country must share China's rhetoric in key issues such as the fight against extremism and separatism. The obedience to both of these conditionalities not only allow a country to maintain its access to Beijing's generous concessions, but it also grants, in Kassenova's (2022: 9) words: "membership in the club of sovereign states and the right to noninterference in a country's internal affairs".

Beijing, therefore, uses its higher hierarchical position to set main points of convergence between its own political pillars and other countries'. Considering Kazakhstan's context, that explains the absence of potentially conflictive pronouncements by the government regarding sensitive topics such as Xinjiang and the official rhetoric regarding extremism and Islam. Because it needs China to achieve its own goals, the regime complies with Beijing's norms despite its own domestic situation. This asymmetry is also present in trade (Peyrouse, 2016) as Beijing not only depends on Astana's position as an exporter of low value products, but it also reinforces Kazakhstan's position as a source of primary products and a buyer of capital intensive goods made in China, hindering Astana's industrial development.

China's objective, though, is not simply to guarantee rhetorical alignments with Kazakhstan and pave the way to the pursuit of Chinese economic goals. Beijing also needs to promote a broader acceptance of China by locals, leading the country to mobilize efforts so that the formation of consensus within society favors its objectives (Kavalski, 2013: 250), suggesting that Sino-Kazakh relations have consequences beyond economy and diplomacy.

4.2.2 Sinophobia in Kazakhstan

The Chinese presence has been instigating fear among Kazakhstan's society, a fact that was broadly expressed through Sinophobic public manifestations. In 2016, in Atyrau, protests were triggered against the government's try to facilitate the use of Kazakhstan's land by

Chinese companies. Protesters shared fears regarding the possibility of soil contamination by the use of dated and highly polluting production techniques by Beijing, which could hinder the activities of local producers (Kazakhstan's land reform..., 2016). In 2017, human right activists handed a copy of a referendum entitled "Centers of Political Education" to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. The document denounced China's attempts to prohibit Kazakhs to express their own ethnic-cultural traditions in Chinese territory, a transgression of human rights that would be worsened by Beijing's refusal to allow the minorities to go back to their home country (Sharip, 2018).

In 2018, issues related to the deportation of a Kazakh from China triggered protests against Chinese migratory policies that would keep *Oralmans* from returning to Kazakhstan. Protesters also condemned Beijing's extreme nationalizing approach in Xinjiang (Kumenov, 2018). In 2019, new anti-Chinese protests were triggered in factories in western Kazakhstan (Umirbekov, 2019). Aside from criticizing their country's "sale" to external agents, mainly China, protesters did not have a clear agenda or claim to material gain. Recurrent concerns were also related to the formation of a clientelist relation with China as a result of Kazakhstan's growing debts with Beijing.

These protests are not isolated evidences of Sinophobia nor do they contemplate all the reasons behind the fear of the "Chinese threat" among Kazakhstan's society. Growing levels of urban violence and marriages between people from different ethnicities are also recurrent aspects of Kazakhs'/Kazakhstanis' reservations regarding the Chinese. As affirmed by Catherine Owen (2017), Central Asian people share the belief that Chinese men are moving to the region to marry local women. This idea has been growing stronger due to the increase in migratory flows from China that started in 2013/2014 and that has been raising fears regarding the maintenance of the region's traditions and customs. In addition, Peyrouse (2016) argues

that these Sinophobic groups, usually formed by people from proletarian and urban classes, believe that the entry of Chinese migrants is directly linked to an increase in urban violence.

Such arguments are well aligned with Le Corre's (2019) findings based on the results of a research conducted by the Institute of World Economics and Politics made in July 2017. The study contacted 2216 respondents in Kazakhstan and asked them *what do you think about China's expansion – Is there a threat of intensification of the influence of China in Kazakhstan?*. Answers are listed below:

Table 1: Kazakhstanis' impressions of China as a threat

	# of respondents	%	Gender (%)		Age group (%)						Ethnic Identity (%)		
			Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Kazakh	Russian	Other
Yes, there is a clear threat	451	20,4	20,1	20,5	18,5	18,5	20,4	22,5	21,6	22,8	23,5	13,9	14,7
There is no clear threat, but it can arise in the future	998	45,0	46,1	44,1	40,7	49,4	46,2	44,8	45,9	37,4	44,6	46,6	44,8
There is no threat	567	25,6	25,5	25,6	31,2	24,3	24,7	23,6	23,5	27,7	24,0	26,2	32,5
Difficult to answer	200	9,0	8,2	9,8	9,6	7,8	8,8	9,0	9,0	12,1	7,9	13,3	8,0
Total	2216	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,00	100,00

Source: Le Corre, n.d, 2019

It is interesting to notice that even though only 20,4% of the answers were a solid yes, 45% of the people who replied to the survey understand that China may become a threat to Kazakhstan, suggesting the existence of a shared level of prejudice. It is also important to highlight a greater concentration of “yes” amongst ethnic Kazakhs, suggesting a possible relation between Sinophobia and ethnic nationalism.

According to Peyrouse (2016), because of different processes and periods of state formation, there is a “civilizational difference” between Central Asia and China, which is coated by a negative rhetoric given the persistent Soviet mindset of a threatening China. According to Peyrouse (2016), under the Soviet rule, negative understandings of China were largely socialized through education and media, leading to a shared sense of rejection towards Beijing that was not addressed by the newly independent republics after the collapse of the communist bloc. Therefore, the ideas that for a long time supported a biased understanding of Beijing were perpetuated, which, in view of the greater Chinese presence in Kazakhstan, corroborated the eruption of Sinophobia. Returning to table 1, the highest concentration of people openly afraid of China’s presence is located amongst older persons, which seems to be in line with Peyrouse’s findings once this group is the one who was exposed to the Soviet narrative towards the Chinese for longer.

Social Sinophobia, thus, has, at least, four explanations: (i) the creation and maintenance of negative images of China; (ii) differences in culture and civilizational aspects; (iii) worries about the effects of Beijing’s economic activities in Kazakhstan (especially in matters such as environment damage, decrease in local production, indebtedness etc); (iv) criticism of the working conditions and wages offered by China.

In this sense, according to Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse (2012), Sinophobia can be identified at least in three communities: (i) Kazakh nationalists; (ii) pro-Westerners; and (iii) Russian leaving in Kazakhstan. The first group fear the establishment of strong dependence on Beijing, which would threaten Kazakhstan's political autonomy. According to the nationalists, given the benefits offered by the Chinese alternative, it represents a viable option to counterbalance Russia’s hegemonic position in the conduction of Kazakhstan’s politics. However, one must be careful not to allow new dependencies to rise under the same conditions

as those seem in relation to Moscow. In addition, nationalists contend that projects signed under the SREB may increase the concentration of power among the country's elites, corroborating the maintenance of an unequal economic structure and harming the development of local producers (Kulintsev; Mukambaev et.al, 2020: 139-140). Also, nationalists are particularly dissatisfied with China's approach to ethnic minorities in the province of Xinjiang and express concerns about damages to the environment caused by Chinese companies as it harms the country's productivity.

A pro-Western is basically someone who advocates for a closer relationship with the West at the expense of an Eastward orientation under the argument that Chinese authoritarianism can negatively affect Kazakhstan because it is more likely to emphasize undemocratic aspects of Astana's regime. China's approach towards Xinjiang, especially considering its non-alignment to the liberal agenda for Human Rights, is also mentioned as a main point of dissatisfaction regarding Beijing's growing relations with Kazakhstan (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012: 4). Russian communities, on the other hand, fear that China's approach may cause an inversion of values, instigating a deeper aversion to Moscow among Kazakhstan's society (Plakhina, 2021).

There is one last community of fundamental importance on the perpetuation of prejudices towards the Chinese: academia. Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland (2019) argue that Kazakhstan lacks institutions dedicated to the study of China, which corroborates the maintenance of prejudices created under the Soviet rule, hampering their dissolution and, thus, indirectly favoring their spread. In this sense, experts from Kazakhstan usually share fears regarding the growing Chinese presence. Such dreads are distributed through the following areas: (i) security, because of the border shared with Xinjiang and China's growing military investment; (ii) politics, scholars argues that a closer cooperation with Beijing may lead to the

formation of clientelistic relations; and (iii) economy, experts fear the deepening of Kazakhstan's dependency towards China (Peyrouse, 2016).

Sinophobia is not solely as a consequence of a broader Sino-Kazakh partnership. However, the SREB's association with Nurly Zhol was a turning point in the interactions between the two countries. In this context, the increase in immigration and financial flows from China to Kazakhstan mobilized pre-existing sentiments and prejudices, forming the current context in which Sinophobia becomes a key factor in analyzing the dynamics of the relationship between both states. Even though Sinophobia is an important feature of Kazakhstan's national contemporary politics, it is important to stress that it is mainly concentrated in different social extracts and do not represent the government's official narrative, which is extensively supportive of the Sino-Kazakh relations.

4.3 Russia's lasting influence

Unlike China, Russia's relations with Kazakhstan date back to a long history of state union. Despite years of coexistence under the same political and governmental body, however, the nature of Russian and, later, Soviet domination is contested by different interpretative views. These are mainly divided into two narratives: (i) Russia has always acted as an important ally of Kazakhstan and played a fundamental role in the development of the latter; (ii) the compulsory Russian domination was conducted in a violent way and contributed to the suffocation of local economy and genuinely Kazakh notions of culture, state and nation (Shlapentokh, 2016: 146). Despite the clear dichotomy between both visions, one issue remains unchanged: Russia and Kazakhstan shared the same state structure for decades, which, added to the asymmetry of power observed between them, justifies the maintenance of Moscow's influence over Astana. Unlike the case of China, a country that has been gradually building its presence in Kazakhstan more recently, Russia has much deeper ties with the

country. Russia-Kazakhstan relations, therefore, deal with more distinct issues, dealing not only with political, security and military influences, but also with culture and identity.

The advance of the Chinese presence in Central Asia has raised some concerns related to the maintenance of the Russian influence in Kazakhstan. This issue, in turn, has been translated into some reformulations in the way Russia behaves and, also, in the way Kazakhstan itself interprets the Russian presence in its territory and deals with it.

4.3.1 Diverging narratives

The expansion of the Russian empire over Central Asia from the 19th century guaranteed tsarist rule over Kazakhstan. According to official Russian historiography, Kazakhstan “simply dissolved in the Turkic world, which lived in a happy “symbiosis” with Russia”. This perspective is based on a narrative that Russia is an heir to the Mongol empire, a view strongly promoted by Moscow. In this context, the incorporation of Kazakhs to the Russian state is understood as a natural and voluntary event and Russia, both imperial and Soviet, is portrayed as a great provider of scientific and economic resources responsible for the development and modernization of Kazakhstan (Blackburn, 2019: 222-223). The independence of Kazakhstan, in this context, is interpreted as an event that was made possible thanks to the advances promoted by Moscow.

On the other hand, if we adopt Kazakhstan’s official historiography to analyze the same period, conflicting interpretations will emerge. According to Astana's discourse, Kazakhstan did not become a real nation for the first time in the 1990s at the time of its independence from the USSR. This narrative affirms that since the times of imperial domination, the peoples that inhabited the country's territory already had their own ethnic, cultural and civilizing traits that differentiated them from Russia. The combination of the years of belonging to other states

before the 19th century and the proximity of Turkic peoples led to the construction of a political body whose identity aspects are unique and not exactly compatible with Russian notions of nationality. In this way, the compulsory Russification promoted by the Tsars and the Soviets is criticized as the ethnic-cultural suffocation promoted by Moscow is understood as a conflictual process that harmed the formation of an identity defined by truly Kazakh factors. The adoption of Russian over the local language is a good example of how this expansionist and violent dynamic is manifested (Shlapentokh, 2016: 151).

It is necessary, however, to consider that there is a wide spectrum over which this vision promoted by an independent Kazakhstan extends. There are those who push this narrative to the extreme, as do the Kazakh nationalists, who promote very harsh criticism of Russian domination and do not demonstrate a conciliatory posture towards the Russian/Soviet legacy (Shlapentokh, 2016: 148). On the other hand, there are those who direct some level of criticism towards Moscow's narrative of "Russian benevolence", promoting a certain revisionism that does not compromise reconciliation and corroborates an idea of a nation that defines itself through Russian and Kazakh characteristics (Zardykhon, 2010: 77).

Nazarbayev is part of the last group. As seen during our analysis of his speeches, even though critics to the Russian domination do exist, these are usually not too extensive and are always followed by remarks on the importance of inter-ethnic harmony and the construction of a peaceful civic nation in which equal access to rights and citizenship are foundational features. In the same way, even though Nazarbayev consistently seeks for the strengthening of the Kazakh language, it is usually accompanied by guarantees of the maintenance of the status of the Russian.

4.3.2 The Russian community in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan stands out among other post-Soviet republics for the size of the population of ethnic Russians that inhabits the country, a fact that is explained, above all, by the social and migratory policies implemented during the Soviet regime. This high Russian presence can be understood as a portrait of Kazakhstan's vulnerability, or even dependency, on Russia.

“The major problem confronting the young republic has been its dependence upon and vulnerability to Russia. Kazakhstan is unique among former Soviet states in having a huge Russian population along with numerous other ethnic groupings. The Russian presence and lack of strong national consciousness and identity at the time of independence (16 December 1991) exacerbated the delicate situation in the country” (Zardykhan, 2004: 61).

Under the aegis of the USSR, a set of practices contributed to the current ethnic constitution of Kazakhstan, like: (i) social and migration policies; and (ii) the appointment of the bureaucratic body of the republic. The first element concerns Politburo's efforts of Russification between 1927 and 1953. To guarantee the cultural, religious and linguistic unification of the peoples of the Union, Stalin started a great migration policy that displaced thousands of ethnic Russians who, at the time, settled in several Soviet republics. Among these, Kazakhstan stands out (Zardykhan, 2004: 64-65). As a result of these policies, in 1989, the constitution of Kazakhstan's population was as follows: 39.7% were Kazakhs; 37.8% were Russian; 5.4% Ukrainians and 5.8% Germans (Spehr and Kassenova, 2012: 138).

On the other hand, the appointment of mostly Russian politicians and bureaucrats to govern Kazakhstan during the Soviet period also left marks on the social and political formation of the republic. The number of Kazakhs in the public administration was negligible throughout most of the USSR administration. Only after the appointment of Dinmukhamed Kunayev as first secretary and member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Party in 1971 did Kazakhs start increasing their presence in the government (Zardykhan, 2004: 65). If Soviet migration policies contributed to a demographic constitution in which Kazakhs were not even the majority of the population, this system of nominations and appointments of

political leaders contributed to distancing Kazakhs from the government and crystallized a profound dependence on Russia.

Apparted from the government of their own country and for decades having their state, and resources, led by Russians, Kazakhs had little familiarity with the exercise of running their own state. Furthermore, the years of Russian command solidified an economic structure highly dependent on Moscow, which is directly reflected in Kazakhstan's economic and political limited autonomy (Zardykhan, 2004: 67). Finally, it is also important to point out that the Soviet experience stifled, or even completely prevented, the formation of a genuinely Kazakh identity. Thus, when the republic gained independence, Kazakhstan did not enjoy the ideational and normative bases necessary to build a cohesive nation and, therefore, a strong and unified state (Spehr; and Kassenova, 2012: 137). If we briefly adopt the contributions of Benedict Anderson (2008), we can say that, at the time of its independence, Kazakhstan did not have the necessary instruments for the formation of an imagined community.

Despite the aforementioned dependence of Kazakhstan on Russia, the relations between both countries have remained reasonably peaceful and harmonious since the dissolution of the USSR. Although in the period immediately after Kazakhstan independence some events apparently threatened the peaceful coexistence between the two, the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Aid in 1992 seems to have ensured good relations. Subsequently, the 1996 statement made by then Russian President Boris Yeltsin, in which he stated that Russia had no territorial interest in Kazakhstan, seems to have corroborated the good-neighboring approach adopted by the countries (Zardykhan, 2004: 71).

In this context, it is interesting to note that the Russian population inhabiting Kazakhstan, with some occasional exceptions, also never seemed to have shown a well-organized political desire to move away from Kazakhstan. Thus, the quest for secession or

some other similar movement never seemed to have relevant traction among the Russian community. Zharmukhamed Zardykhan (2004: 70) suggests that the Russians inhabiting Kazakhstan never had a strong national identity, which explains, to a certain extent, why they never demonstrated a high level of political organization. On the contrary, as said by Matthew Blackburn (2019: 227):

“Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan, despite lacking their own powerful informal networks, have managed to compensate for this with success in the private sector of a growing economy. Thus, increasing acceptance of ethnic-Kazakh domination over state-sector jobs has not led to resentment and emigration but a stabilization of out-migration alongside the emergence of a middle class”.

Blackburn’s contributions seem to justify the reason why Nazarbayev usually refers to Kazakhstani when talking about economy and when addressing wealthier communities, as happened during the 2015 speech.

Blackburn (2019) refers to the nationalizing initiatives that began in the 1990s under the rule of Nazarbayev and its effects: currently, approximately 63% (Aitymbetov; Toktarov; Ormakhanova, 2015: 13) of the population is composed of Kazakhs and most public positions are held by locals (Daminov, 2021).

Nazarbayev's actions, though, aroused some discontent in sectors of Kazakhstan's Russian community. According to Blackburn (2019), there is some discomfort among Russians living in the country with what is interpreted as an attempt to separate them from state administration. In this sense, they speak of a certain Russophobia on the part of the government due to its quest to privilege Kazakhs' access to the public-bureaucratic sphere. Despite this criticism, the community of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan have never displayed considerable political mobilization, a reality that gets even more evident after the first decade of independence. In this context, the main reaction of this community has been emigration, which peaked in the 1990s (Zardykhan, 2004: 76). Blackburn (2019) interviewed young ethnic

Russians aged 18 to 30 whose families have lived in Kazakhstan for years in search for a better understanding of the level of political organization and identity strength of these communities.

As a conclusion, Blackburn (2019: 228) says:

“Although ethnic Kazakhs have enjoyed a demographic majority since 1999, respondents did not readily identify as a ‘national minority’. This status was often rejected on the grounds of belonging to the Russian linguistic and cultural sphere. Here we find society imagined as bipolar, with a stable equilibrium between Russian- and Kazakh-speaking components”.

The author's conclusion seems to be quite representative of Russia's current presence in Kazakhstan. There is an asymmetric dependency relationship in which the latter occupies the dependent position. This scenario, added to economic and security interests, ensures that Kazakhstan continues to occupy an important position in the Russian foreign policy agenda. On the other hand, the Russian community that inhabits Kazakhstan demonstrates a low level of political mobilization and does not seem to be the target of major negative manifestations by the Kazakh population (Blackburn, 2019: 228). In my searches, I found no reports of extreme popular anti-Russian sentiments among Kazakhstan's society. Eventual clashes between Kazakhs and Russians come, above all, from nationalist discussions related to the model of nation-building employed in the country. On the one hand, we have an ethnic nationalist movement that grows among communities of indigenous Kazakh peoples who defend the idea that Kazakhs should be the main ethnic group of the country and contradict civic visions of nation and nationality. This ethno-patriotic perspective does not exist as an exclusive opposition to the Russian community, but rather as an attempt to promote a nation-building process that privileges ethnic Kazakh as the titular nation among the more than 100 ethnic groups that today inhabit Kazakhstan (Aitymbetov; Toktarov; Ormakhanova, 2015: 3). In this process, however, the attempt to move away from typically Russian-Slavic elements, such as the systematic use of the Russian language, can be interpreted as a direct affront to Russian communities.

Since 2014, after the events that took place in Crimea, nationalist groups from Kazakhstan have been showing their discontent regarding the Russian presence in the country more often. Their critics are mainly focused on Putin himself and his administration and on Russians' desire to keep their influence in the country (Goble, 2018). These Russophobic expressions, however, seem to be quite different from those against China as they are much less violent, smaller and more limited regarding the scope of protesters' actions. It is also interesting to note that this discomfort towards Russia is mainly focused on Moscow's political regime and does not usually translate into clashes with ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan.

Russians, thus, are mostly more sympathetic to the idea of a Kazakhstani nation, that is, a nation that builds and organizes itself based on a civic idea of state and nationality. Although much of the Russian population does not engage in large public demonstrations of support for these views of nationality, Russian elites and Russians who do not live in Kazakhstan eventually position themselves in favor of fostering a civic identity for Kazakhstan in order to protect the strength of Russian-Slavic symbols (Aitymbetov; Toktarov; Ormakhanova, 2015: 11-12). These same groups sometimes strongly criticize Kazakhs for their potentially-Russophobic public expressions despite their shallow size and relevance in the national scenario (Goble, 2018).

Thus, the asymmetric relations between Russia and Kazakhstan seem to be fostered at the political/diplomatic level and relatively indifferent on a social level as seen in the low political mobility of the Russian community that inhabits Kazakhstan and in the absence of relevant Russophobic movements on the part of the Kazakh/Kazakhstani population.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ethnic, civic, Eurasian. All three dimensions of Kazakhstan's nation as conceived by Nazarbayev are present in the speeches here analyzed. Not only are they mobilized by the president, but they are also articulated as non-exclusive features of one same country. In this sense, nationalizing policies/narratives seem to be much more connected to the need to guarantee the majority of the indigenous people among society, to make Kazakhs the proper titular nation of Kazakhstan. According to Nazarbayev, such a goal by no means affects the consolidation of a civic nation in a negative way. Thus, the strengthening of multi-ethnicity would not be hindered by the creation of a Kazakh state. Kazakh and Kazakhstani are presented as concepts that can be compatible inasmuch ethnic minorities accept the adoption of Kazakh features at a state level and Kazakhs agree with the maintenance of aspects of the other communities, among which Russians are particularly relevant especially in linguistic terms.

However, declarations such as the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 2012; the many expansions made in the repatriation program, still encouraged even after the consolidation of a Kazakh demographic majority; and strong reservations against key religious practices, namely Islamic ones, suggest that the coexistence of both civic and ethnic approaches to the nation are potentially not as peaceful as proposed by Nazarbayev. Even though the government did not change its ideas regarding the harmonic presence of both forces – nationalizing and liberalizing – society responded to the dichotomies lying underneath the surface, though the reactions were not always worrying.

Fears regarding Russophobic attitudes from Kazakhstan's leadership and critics from the Russian minorities regarding the absolute majority of Kazakhs ahead of official posts are a clear example that the official discourse regarding the role of ethnicity in the country's nation-building is, in practice, not fully aligned with Nazarbayev's official project. The absence of

well-organized and large political reactions from society, however, suggest that the project of a multi-ethnic Kazakh state was not exactly a failure.

On the other hand, discussions regarding the hindering of religious freedom – shown clearly on Nazarbayev's critics to the adoption of so-called "not Kazakh/Kazakhstani practices" – suggest that the reality of a multi-ethnic state changes depending on the ethnic community we are referring to. Even though Nazarbayev does not explicitly mention any nationality/ethnicity when addressing the threats of a potential link between terrorism and religion, the mention of the use of veils and lack of gender-related issues point to religions of Islamic origins. Such securitization of religion is present in speeches made in phases 2 and 3, in line with the ascension of more solid counterterrorism attitudes in China since 2012, the year that Xi Jinping became president.

Here, it is interesting to notice that even though Kazakhstan has well-known issues regarding the Uyghur minorities and the migration of Kazakhs to and from China none of them are never mentioned by Nazarbayev as a matter to be taken care of. Instead, the president openly criticizes the religion shared by the majority of these groups, suggesting a normative alignment with China despite the interests of its own society. This is a fundamental point to be made and is connected to the Chinese normative power formulated by Kavalski (2013). Even though China has not been imposing any severe economic/fiscal counterpart from Kazakhstan, the latter seems to be adhering to the former's political discourse in order to approach Beijing and have access to its financing sources.

Approximation towards China is consistently supported by the government. Analyzing the speeches, we can see that from 2009 on Nazarbayev openly refers to bilateral joint-projects specifically concerning China and Kazakhstan (during the previous phase, China was often mentioned as an important partner but specific initiatives other than multilateral agreements

such as the SCO were roughly mentioned). No criticism is made of Beijing, a positive not necessarily shared by society. As seen in the previous chapter, society has been negatively reacting to the increased Chinese presence in Kazakhstan, which suggests the complete absence of alignment between government and society's goals and perceptions and the failure of the civic, multi-ethnic Kazakhstani nation.

The reason behind the disconnection between government and society has multiple causes, however, there is one that seems to be fundamental for our study. One of the most striking aspects of each one of Nazarbayev's speeches is the role of economy. The president more than once openly affirms that economy is more important than politics, which is probably the reason why every single goal set during the discourses, be it related to education, healthcare and other topics is connected to the achievement of an economic objective. Thus, even though secondary goals related to nation-building and other political aspects of the country may be present, they will always be subordinated to the economy. In a way, the debate regarding the forging of the nation is deliberately depoliticized in order to prioritize economic achievements. That is why subjects such as the social impacts of the increasing Chinese presence in the country are not addressed by the president despite its daily consequences.

Considering the high levels of Kazakhstan's personification of politics and Nazarbayev's attempts to strengthen the regime, we argue that the country's elites seem to be more concerned with strategies of regime survival typically related to the increase of control over economy and economic development than with nation-building. This trend becomes even more clear if we consider the behavior of the government amidst the social unrests regarding China. Thus, Sinophobia can be pointed as one main outcome of the Sino-Russian relations in Kazakhstan, expressing an important feature of the country's nation-building, that of the irrevocable centrality of economic development. Furthermore, protests questioned the

effectiveness of the multi-ethnic feature of the Kazakhstani nation, a construction framed by Nazarbayev as a well-established element.

Another aspect of the Kazakhstani nation is related to the Russian minority. Usually, the president relates this group with the economy, be it by mentioning the wealth of *Kazakhstanis* and their duty to assist the country; be it by pointing to the need to expand the market for *Kazakhstani* products and so on. These word choices are in line with the economic status of many Russians living in the country and are also connected to the regime's main goal of economic development. Added to Kazakhstan's strong economic dependence on Russia and fears regarding Moscow's expansionism towards Astana, the role played by Kazakhstani Russians in Nazarbayev's plans seem to be well structured despite Nazarbayev's understanding of the potential negative effects caused by the strong presence of ethnic Russians in its lands and Moscow's attempts to diminish Kazakhstan's dependence.

Two consequences of this scenario can be mentioned. First, it seems that the regime's need of Kazakhstani enterprises and Russian partnership is one of the many factors behind Nazarbayev's caution regarding approving policies or making statements that promote an abrupt rupture with Russia/Russians own interests of maintaining their status in Kazakhstan. Even though the president has taken decisions, rhetoric or practical, that are clearly linked to a nationalizing behavior that could threaten the survival of ethnic Russians and their cultural and political organizations, it has always been followed by assurances regarding the status of the Russian language, the access to equal rights etc. to counterbalance the potential negative effects of the former decisions made. The second point regards society. Different from what we saw in the Chinese case, social expressions of anti-Russian sentiments are not common. Considering Russia and its role in Kazakhstan's politics under the aegis of Sino-Russian relations, thus, the latter seem to mainly influence diplomatic decisions.

There are fears of potentially negative answers from Russia regarding the growing presence of China in Kazakhstan, however, they do not seem to be a relevant factor in the conduction of Nazarbayev's nation-building. If we look at society, anti-Russian movements did not escalate, though levels of Russian emigration from Kazakhstan demonstrated an increase after 2014 and were especially felt in 2016 given Moscow's own policies to encourage the return migration of ethnic Russians living abroad (Pannier, 2016). On the regime's side, there is a permanent worry to (re)assure Russia and Russians that their status will be maintained and that their rights will be protected in view of the Kazakhzation of the country. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan does continue its search for an alignment with Russian-led multilateral organizations, which strengthens the civic idea of the nation, and praises Moscow's role in the country's foreign politics.

Finally, an important conclusion we already mentioned but which must be highlighted is that Kazakhstan's nation-building is a highly depoliticized process that is consistently overshadowed by the imperative need of economic development. This behavior is explicit in the absence of mediatic and academic content written by authors from the country regarding non-economic features of Sino-Russian relations and many other subjects. The rapprochement between China and Russia, in this sense, seems to be another sensitive topic that can potentially influence the daily lives of every Kazakhstan's but whose consequences are blurred by the absence of more critical and politicized interpretations of it, understandings that go beyond economy to unveil what lies behind any great-game-like context. During this analysis, I could see that the main relations between the Sino-Russian cooperation and Nazarbayev's nation-building are related to China and mismatching reactions to its presence. Russia, on the other hand, was able, due to its role in Kazakhstan's environment, to reasonably maintain its status.

In other matters beyond nation-building, it is interesting to notice how Sino-Russian relations have been causing some level of social turmoil given Kazakhstan's rising Sinophobia. Another outcome of the partnership is the creation of an interesting relation with China, one that is characterized by (i) a political-normative alignment made despite Astana's own domestic environment, which hinders the country's capacity to deal with issues such as that of the Uyghurs; and (ii) a potentially dependant economic interaction in which Kazakhstan assumes the weaker position.

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