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DESOVIETIZING NATION-BUILDING IN KAZAKHSTAN: CASE OF 2020 KORDAY VIOLENCE

Abstract

This article examines the effects of the Soviet legacy in nation-building process in Kazakhstan to argue that the roots of many conflicts come from the Soviet concepts, methods, and institutions in nation-building, which divide society between Majority and a minority. The *goals* of this article is to illustrate how the Soviet structures of nation-building formed antagonistic views among two ethnic communities at the local level through methods of legal and sociological analysis and ethnography. By looking at the case of intercommunal violence in Korday in 2020, we show as our primary *result*, that the concepts with the binary division between titular and minorities, produced interethnic clashes at the local level embedded in the antagonistic expectations and practices. *Conclusion*. The need to desovietize nation-building strategies and the crucial definition of ‘narod’ is vital to sustaining peace at the local level. Such analytical exercise requires not only academic, but also policy interventions as key stakeholders responsible for nation-building policies continue to rely and use the binary divisions. As academics, we need to think critically and offer alternatives to the existing notion of ‘narod’. To ensure national unity in Kazakhstan, it is necessary to constantly integrate social and political changes and rethink the national ideology.

Keywords: Nation-building, interethnic conflicts, unity of the people, desovietization, Soviet heritage.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ҰЛТТЫҚ ҚҰРЫЛЫСТЫ ДЕСОВЕТИЗАЦИЯЛАУ: 2020 ЖЫЛҒЫ ҚОРДАЙ ОҚИҒАСЫ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада көптеген қақтығыстардың тамыры қоғамды көпшілік пен азшылыққа бөлетін кеңестік тұжырымдамаларға, әдістерге және мемлекеттік құрылыс институттарына түсетіндігін дәлелдеу үшін кеңестік мұраның Қазақстандағы мемлекеттік құрылыс процесіне әсері қарастырылады. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты-кеңестік мемлекеттік құрылыс құрылымдарының құқықтық және әлеуметтанулық талдау және этнография әдістері арқылы жергілікті деңгейдегі екі этникалық қауымдастық арасында антагонистік

көзқарастарды қалай қалыптастырғанын көрсету. 2020 жылы Кордайдағы қауымаралық зорлық-зомбылық жағдайын қарастыра отырып, біз негізгі нәтиже ретінде титулдық және азшылықтар арасындағы екілік бөліну тұжырымдамалары антагонистік күтулер мен тәжірибелерге негізделген жергілікті этносаралық қақтығыстарға әкелгенін көрсетеміз. Қорытынды. Мемлекеттік құрылыс стратегияларын кеңессіздендіру қажеттілігі және «халық» ұғымының маңызды анықтамасы Жергілікті деңгейде бейбітшілікті сақтау үшін өте маңызды. Мұндай аналитикалық жұмыс тек академиялық араласуды ғана емес, сонымен бірге саяси араласуды да қажет етеді (stakeholders), өйткені мемлекеттік құрылыс саясатына жауапты негізгі мүдделі тараптар екілік бөліністерге сенуді және пайдалануды жалғастыруда. Ғалымдар ретінде біз сыни тұрғыдан ойлауымыз керек және бар тұжырымдамаға балама ұсынуымыз керек "халық". Қазақстанда ұлттық бірлікті қамтамасыз ету үшін әлеуметтік және саяси өзгерістерді үнемі біріктіріп, ұлттық идеологияны қайта қарастыру қажет.

Кілт сөздер: ұлттық құрылыс, ұлтаралық қақтығыстар, халықтың бірлігі, десоветизация, кеңестік мұра

Алғыс. Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің «Қазақстандық қоғамдағы жергілікті деңгейдегі этникалық қауымдастықтардың өзара іс-қимыл мәселелері (2014-2021 жж.): этносаралық қақтығыстар динамикасы және зорлық-зомбылықтың өршуіне жол бермеу тәсілдері» гранттық қаржыландыру жобасын іске асыру шеңберінде дайындалған (тіркеу нөмірі: АР 14869488)

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ДЕСОВЕТИЗАЦИЯ НАЦИЕСТРОИТЕЛЬСТВА В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: ПРИМЕР НАСИЛИЯ В КОРДАЕ В 2020 ГОДУ

Аннотация

В этой статье рассматривается влияние советского наследия на процесс государственного строительства в Казахстане, чтобы доказать, что корни многих конфликтов уходят в советские концепции, методы и институты государственного строительства, которые разделяют общество на большинство и меньшинство. *Цель* этой статьи - проиллюстрировать, как советские структуры государственного строительства формировали противоположные взгляды между двумя этническими общинами на местном уровне с помощью методов правового и социологического анализа и этнографии. Рассматривая случай межобщинного насилия в Кордае в 2020 году, мы показываем в качестве нашего *основного результата*, что концепции с бинарным разделением между титульными и меньшинствами привели к межэтническим столкновениям на местном уровне, заложенным в антагонистических ожиданиях и практиках. *Выводы.* Необходимость десоветизации стратегий государственного строительства и важнейшее определение понятия «народ» жизненно важны для поддержания мира на местном уровне. Такая аналитическая работа требует не только академических, но и политических вмешательств, поскольку ключевые заинтересованные стороны (stakeholders), ответственные за политику государственного строительства, продолжают полагаться и использовать бинарные разделения. Как ученые, мы должны мыслить критически и предлагать альтернативы существующему понятию «народ». Чтобы обеспечить национальное единство в Казахстане, необходимо постоянно интегрировать социальные и политические изменения и переосмысливать национальную идеологию.

Ключевые слова: нациестроительство, межэтнические конфликты, единство народа, десоветизация, советское наследие.

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Introduction

Several scholars attempted to deconstruct Soviet concepts that remain in the contemporary nation-building strategies of former USSR member-states. However, not many of them linked mutual perceptions with theoretical frames on nation-building. It is well-known that the Soviet unity, characterized by the ‘friendship of peoples’ and the construction of *Homo Sovieticus*, was imposed by a highly ideological repressive apparatus and institutional framework for example [1,2]. The results of the previous studies show that the entire conceptual apparatus of nation-building that relies on the Soviet distinctions of ‘people’ (narod) and elites, between ‘titular’ vs ‘minority’ nations is highly problematic for Kazakhstan [3]. The terms assume that ‘nations’ are made by rank-and-file people, rooted in the ‘authentic’ historical locations, linked by language, and common ethnic traditions [4, 118-119p]. State efforts to transform this Soviet view into a single modern unified nation failed to elicit changes not only because the institutions and approaches copied the Soviet propaganda methods [5], but also because the nation-building process in Kazakhstan is highly exclusionary and insular [6]. The model imposed from the top exists in parallel with the social changes on the ground. In order to ensure national unity in Kazakhstan, where interethnic conflicts, violent public protests, and nativist claims remain a reality, a critical overview of the Soviet legacy in the nation-building process at the local level is required. Especially since each national ideology must permanently reinvent itself to integrate societal and political changes and engage in a national dialogue about “who we are” and “where we are heading as a nation.”

Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet empire. One of the major pitfalls of Soviet nationality politics is depoliticization of the category “nation.” By silencing people and exercising extreme violence, the Soviet state aimed to nurture loyalty of different ethnicities towards the political center in Moscow. Soviet nationality policy was deeply colonial and disempowering for ethnic and cultural groups. Unfortunately, modern Kazakhstan continues to use the Soviet terminology “narod”, which at that time pointed to ordinary people and did not include those who did not share the ideas of communism. The Soviet doctrine attributed statehood only to certain groups of people in society, that is, “the working class, peasants and sympathetic intelligentsia” [7, 59 p]. Rich people were excluded from political power and participation in political life on the grounds that their values differed from “ordinary people”. In Kazakhstan, the concept of “people” also includes ordinary people who are still opposed to elites who have money and connections [3]. In addition, Kazakhstan also continues to treat nationalism as a modernizing project against traditional values to create another supranational identity of no longer Soviet, but Kazakhstani People. The belonging to the ‘new’ national identity was depicted through the linguistic prowess and knowledge of the Kazakh language (in contrast to Russian in the Soviet times). The implications of such a model were yet to come in another article, but academic literature already criticizes the remnants of Soviet legacy in Kazakhstan as one of the primary reasons for social grievances and the absence of unity.

Kazakhstan represents an interesting case, where colonial and Soviet pasts collide and reinforce each other. In the use of ‘desovietizing,’ we refer to the concepts that draw the boundaries between society that were derived from the Soviet doctrine and were rooted in the theory of Marxism-Leninism. It is important to distinguish this term from postcolonial experience, which largely refers to the continuing legacy of Soviet colonial policies in Central Asia, which remain and are visible in state institutions, practices and policies. Soviet colonialism was economic in nature, a remnant of the settler-colonial form of violence, which not only aimed to extract resources but also to destroy any forms of sovereign aspirations. Although the two terms may overlap in practice, the distinction is important to keep as the solutions for the recovery from postcolonial experience may differ. The discussion of postcolonialism brings us to the last term that may be important for our argument, the decolonial critique. The growing decolonial literature points to the fact that rather than trying to destroy and expunge colonial notions, practices and institutions, the agency of change remains within an individual who carefully chooses the notions and reference frames about their personal, communal and national experience. In this article we do not offer a decolonial reading. Instead, our aim is rather limited to desovietizing the notion of ‘narod’ (the people) in order to patch ethnic divisions in Kazakhstan.

There are plenty of examples from both rich and poor countries alike that managed to forge a unified national identity despite numerous ethnic, religious and linguistic differences, as well as colonial experiences. Wimmer outlines three important criteria for success, namely “the early development of civil-society organizations, the rise of a state capable of providing public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication” [8, 152p]. Although these frameworks are optimistic, they are not the focus of this research, but remain relevant for future publications.

Materials and Methods

The overall research is based on mixed methods where we collected qualitative data to analyze sentiments of major stakeholders towards conditions and tendencies in the nation-building process. Such snap short revealed the main incongruities and map the stakeholders within the spectrum of attitudes and values. The sampling method included not only major formal institutional stakeholders, but also included informal opinion-makers and agenda-setters and ensured representation from multi-ethnic and mono-ethnic communities and regions, gender, educational differences, as well as rural and ethnic divides. We conducted analysis of sentiments, visions and opinions that have an impact on the political positionality of major actors and their public attitudes. Such research design not only assisted in understanding crucial particularities in Kazakhstan with its unique multiethnic communities and regional differences, but also shed light on the factors that undermine national unity.

Discussion: *Drawing the Lines in the Existing Scholarship.* Contemporary nation-building of Kazakhstan remains entrenched in Soviet terminology and institutions responsible for producing this ideology and policy implementation. Although celebrated for the Soviet, seemingly successful, nation-building process of creating a *Homo Sovieticus* and a collective unity [9], these efforts disregarded the immense repressive apparatus and overall skepticism and resistance of society [10]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the nation-building process, its institutions and ideological production transitioned into the contemporary era compounded by numerous alternatives of liberal and illiberal and even radical nature [11]. Various actors began to preach the entitlement of the titular nation, evoke the ‘friendship of peoples’ in defense of minority rights, setting up divisions between the ‘regular people’ and the elites (such as the legendary photo of Bloody January 2022 with people behind the poster *qarapayimhalyqpyz* from Kazakh) in their attempt to question the nature of local financial distribution and access to public good. All these voices that raise Soviet concepts cause precarious uncertainty and divisions in the nation.

The results of the previous academic studies locate Soviet-ness in the following dimensions of nation-building process. First, they critically examine Stalin’s conflation of ethnicity and citizenship [12] as well as his definition of the Soviet culture, which was allowed to be “national in form and socialist in content” [13]. This definition imposes a supranational Soviet culture on every nation, which not only encourages a split in society, but also assumes that a nation is the unification of all nations into one common, which is an oxymoron [5]. In an attempt to protect the rights of national minorities, the Soviet regime introduced the concept of “friendship of peoples” to enable other “nations” to preserve their identity among the titular majority. “Friendship” was based not only on comprehensive control, but also on careful propaganda of positive discrimination (as *korenizatsiya*) from among ethnic minorities [14, 410p].

Another problem in the literature on the Soviet legacy in nation-building is linked to the institutions. The Soviet system offered minorities that resided among the ‘titular’ ethnic group in Soviet Socialist Republics to have a representation through the Assemblies with the activities sponsored by the state. This version of multiculturalism was very much controlled by the state [15], but also depoliticized ‘national culture’ and emphasized the folkloric and gastronomic differences (16, 17). After the independence, the existence of this institutional structure politicized ethnic differences and undermined the establishment of national unity, as groups began to express their grievances over the assigned role of minorities, while the state continued to use control and repression to maintain stability [18]. As a result, neither minorities, nor majority had an opportunity for a dialogue to ensure unity and work out a common understanding of the common future.

Institutional structure within the state that was responsible for ideological production also faced criticism. The Central Committee within the Communist Party pre-determined the future of ‘building Communism’ [19]. The set of values and practices were also provided from above with very little space for change and innovation at the local level [20]. In other words, the Soviet government paid much more attention to developing state institutions and holding power rather than allowing ethnic communities to work out their own visions of the common future from the bottom up [21]. Ideological production that forged the Soviet People remained under the closed doors. The top-down approach to nation-building took the form of propaganda rather than an internalized discourse embedded in social practices. By the end of the 1980s few people in the Soviet Union believed what their rulers said [15]. With a heavy load of skepticism, the Soviet public continued to live in their own world in a private setting nurturing their own visions of common good and common future.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, academics expected Kazakhstan to fall apart as its ‘titular’ people comprised only 40% of the population, but the country ‘belonged’ to them. However, Brubaker’s argument [22] that states go through the ‘nationalizing’ process when free from the Soviet control did not apply to Kazakhstan which remained peaceful and stable [23]. Scholars attempted to explain this stability through the regime’s capacity of balancing between civic and ethnic nationalisms [24]. The balancing act was linked to the language

of state propaganda used to describe important issues in public. In Kazakh it borrowed more ethnicized terms, while it relied on more civic terms when speaking in the Russian language. The problem was compounded by the fact that the government of Kazakhstan was also unclear in its own ideological messages to the people putting forward ideas of Kazakhstaniness, Eurasianism, and Kazakhness [25]. In an attempt to ‘speak’ to the widest audience, it created even more uncertainty, rather than unity as multiple actors began to broadcast nativist and populist slogans on various public platforms.

The need to re-evaluate ideological and institutional structure responsible for production of national unity has been manifested in various projects on de- and post-colonial perspectives [26, 27, 28]. The revision of the historical interpretations of Soviet modernity in Kazakhstan showed that Russian and later Soviet colonialism in broader Central Asia was a highly imperial project [29]. Both, the de- and post-colonial literature aims to recenter the stories of modernity away from the acclaimed role of the Center [30]. Although highly illuminating, this literature does not engage in practical implementation of knowledge. It shies away from open participation in politics and calls for an introspective reflexivity and deep personal responsibility for knowledge production [31]. Practical frameworks on forging national unity are yet to be in dialogue with this scholarship.

The practical application of these principles is complicated for several reasons. First, the nation-building is embedded with state- and regime-building, which makes it difficult to separate [32]. It also is very much linked to the liberal doctrine of democracy promotion and representation, which has been mired in failed international interventions around the world and remains highly problematic in its practical consequences. The social division between ‘titular’ and ‘minorities’ rooted in the Soviet past require not only conceptual reevaluation, but also a need to illustrate the workings of such a binary in practice.

Research Results: *Binary Division of ‘Narod’ in Practice.*

The Soviet doctrine had very clear criteria of who is included in the nation. First, it assumed that only working class, i.e. ‘rank-and-file’ people in each Soviet Socialist Republic had the right to claim sovereignty. Second, it demarcated those outside as enemies of the state or unreliable subversive elements due to their class status that determined their political standing and undermined their right for political participation. As a result, Soviet people were mostly referring to the working class and peasants. Other classes existed but did not have sovereign and full political rights. In the case of Kazakhstan, the notion of ‘narod’ (the people) continued to assume that only rank-and-file Kazakh people can be considered the true holders of sovereignty and determine the course of national history. Our research shows that the majority population cherished not only their right to ‘govern the state’, but also their superior social status that allowed them to define social boundaries and inclusion mechanisms. As a result, people who were doing better than the majority were perceived to be unreliable and highly antagonistic to the ‘national’ sovereign aspirations.

The 2020 violence in Korday was rooted in economics. Before pogroms, economic conflicts at the local level over land ownership and the scale and size of assets distribution depended on local government officials who are ethnically Kazakh. To get necessary lands, Dungan farmers paid rents; access to water involved additional expenses and trips to Akimat (municipality) to ensure the stable supply, i.e. for additional rewards [33]. The precarious status of Dungans solidified community into a close-knit social network that provided support and opportunities to those members who are disadvantaged [34]. They also engaged in investing their profits within the community by building solid houses, herding animals, buying land whenever possible for communal purposes [16]. However, such relative wealth made them vulnerable to the informal extra extortion of rents above the initial agreement in crucial time of the year. Many of them turned to shuttle trade with China in order to make a living. Family connections across the border with China and language skills allowed young people to benefit from such comparative advantage. Largely Russian speakers, Dungans felt that they are perceived just as a source of incentives, not as equal citizens. Numerous stories circulate in the community about different techniques and methods of extortion.

Communal living served Dungan community well. They were relatively richer than the Kazakh majority and shared a different perception of wealth, in contrast to the Kazakh community. Dungan interpretation of wealth meant that wealth is largely linked to illegal practices and fast returns. For example, those who engage in corrupt practices or anyone who accumulated wealth without earning the returns through labor are considered wealthy. While the families that owned houses, cars and land earning them from growing three harvests per year were ordinary [prostye], i.e. not wealthy. For the Kazakh community, the amount of assets counted was not linked to the process of wealth creation, such as the number of hours of labor spent in the fields or the number of people in the household, including children, that worked in the fields towards accumulating this wealth. Majority community perceived Dungans on average as ‘too wealthy’ who negotiate with local officials to avoid penalties and engage in various illegalities, mostly contraband [35]. As a result of the relative wealth, Dungans seem to be getting away from justice. One of our interlocutors, a 70-year-old retired female bluntly stated:

They are not ‘ours’, they do not want to work for everyone, do not pay taxes, do not know and do not learn our language, they do not need our country and our problems. They live between each other and then scream that they are being discriminated... But in 15-20 years when they forget that they’ve got what they deserve, [and] youth will start to dictate their own rules’ again, everything [violence] will repeat again... They live on the other side of the bridge, we are on this side and we try not to look each other in the eyes, not talking.

Kazakh communities were also sharing myths about Dungans who raped and killed a young Kazakh girl and managed to avoid sentence [36]. According to Smagul and later picked up by Taizhan spread the myths about the tenets of religion (Dungans are also Muslim), as if Dungans are professing a wrong Islam in the language that they do not understand. Since Dungan communities live in closed settlements with 90% Dungan, 5% Kazakh and 5% Russian [37], the lack of knowledge and interaction with the minorities also leads to stigmatization of minority group as ‘guests’ on Kazakh lands. The expectations from the majority are not only that minorities should speak Kazakh (which they do, especially young generation under 30), but also that they recognize the formative (read: superior) status of ethnic majority [38]. Some people view Dungan wealth as a product of informal links with the officials and family connections abroad, which justified the collection of rents, and imposition of demeaning practices, which was no longer perceived as extortion, but as a legitimate income due to the official status. As a result, Dungans possess technologies that allow them to derive more profit from lands that are distributed by local municipalities in exchange for rewards. In contrast, Kazakh community has no economic opportunity to sell their cattle to markets as meat is the only product for sale and remains uncompetitive with the producers located geographically closer to Almaty.

As a result, Korday violence has shown the highly politicized nature of ethnic superiority and required the recognition of symbols of assimilation, such as the command of the Kazakh language, respect of Kazakh traditions, and relative economic equality. It also showed that for many members of the Kazakh community, Dungans were no longer perceived as part of the nation/narod due to their relative wealth. The accompanying communal living that assisted them in surviving the predatory system of political economy made them seen as isolated and independent – an entity that can potentially ask for sovereign rights due to their population size and congregation in relative geographic proximity (middle-aged female resident of Korday, March 2023). Such stigmatization informed the language of hate and undermined the possibility of inclusive definition of nation-building. It also inspired violence by nearly 5000 marauders after which 192 people were injured, including 19 police officers, 24 000 Dungans fleeing to the neighboring Kyrgyzstan between February 7 and 9 [39]. These violent actions caused USD4.5 million/ KZT1.7 billion in damages, including 168 destroyed houses and 122 ruined cars [40].

Conclusion

This article shows that Soviet legacy remains vibrant and important in the contemporary nation-building of Kazakhstan, especially at the local level. The structures that made Korday violence possible include not only the hate speech and discrimination by major Kazakh-speaking public intellectuals, but also come from the frames that inform the bordering of national inclusion that transitioned from Soviet-era vocabulary. The need to desovietize nation-building strategies and the crucial definition of ‘narod’ is vital to sustaining peace at the local level. Such analytical exercise requires not only academic, but also policy interventions as key stakeholders responsible for nation-building policies continue to rely and use the binary divisions. As academics, we need to think critically and offer alternatives to the existing notion of ‘narod’. Such proposals should be based on three crucial conditions that we have mentioned at the beginning of our article. Namely, following Wimmer, deriving inclusive definition of the nation must be based on “the early development of civil-society organizations, the rise of a state capable of providing public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication” [8]. This way, groups that are living together will be able to form their own rules of engagement and participation, as well as their own inclusive definitions of nationhood, which will assist them in creating peace and sustaining it over the years. State officials and institutions carry primary responsibility for such policies as they bear the main responsibility for providing safety and security to all citizens as the primary public good.

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