

KAZAKHSTAN: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTEGRATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH RUSSIA

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Rustem KADYRZHANOV

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor,
Chief Researcher, Institute of Philosophy,
Political and Religious Studies, Science Committee,
Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Kazakhstan
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Nazken ABDYKAIMOVA

*Doctoral Student, Al-Farabi National University of Kazakhstan
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

ABSTRACT

The authors have traced down and analyzed the post-Soviet evolution of Kazakhstan's national identity in the context of its relations with Russia. The process began in the Soviet-style "friendship of peoples" rhetoric that dominated the 1990s-2000s. In the 2010s, unionist nationalism of the previous decades was replaced with the national identity of Kazakhstan that demonstrated much stronger elements of Kazakh identity and much stronger reliance on national interests when dealing with Russia.

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, Russia, national identity, unionist nationalism.*

Introduction

The post-Soviet states demonstrate different, or even opposite, attitudes to integration with Russia: while some of them willingly join integrational structures headed by Russia, others avoid them carefully. Kazakhstan, which has joined the ranks of the former, belongs to all regional structures in the post-Soviet space headed by Russia and has formulated numerous integration initiatives. Experts define this policy as unionist nationalism with a space for the country's national identity.

Due to the common Soviet past and the still thriving Soviet mentality, as well as domination of the Russian language and culture, regular people and the elites of Kazakhstan perceive Russia as the core of the Soviet Union and the center of the post-Soviet regional security complex. Integration rela-

tions between Kazakhstan and Russia are highly emotional in the Soviet “friendship of peoples” style. This explains why the relations with Russia strongly affect Kazakhstan’s national identity.

Everything written on the subject so far had merely skimmed the impact of Russia and foreign policies of the post-Soviet states on their national identities. The authors aim to fill the gap in regard to Russia’s impact on the national identities of its integration partners. We have agreed with the experts who insist that the national identities of the newly independent states are closely tied with their foreign policies. Ilya Prizel states: “...the interaction between national identity and foreign policy is a key element in both established and nascent polities, but this interaction is particularly important in the newly emerging or re-emerging states since nationalism and national identity are often the main, if not the sole force binding those societies together.”¹

On National Identity and the Unionist Nationalism of Kazakhstan

Today, the existence and opposition between the Kazakh and Kazakhstan identities is one of the widely discussed subjects in Kazakhstan. Part of its poly-ethnic society identifies itself as Kazakhstanis while another part, as Kazakhs. According to Marlène Laruelle, three types of identities coexist in contemporary Kazakhstan (Kazakhness, Kazakhstanness, and Transnationalism). The third type was formulated by the ruling elite to fit their country into the modernizing and globalizing world in order to tap the advantages offered by the policy of openness to the state and its citizens.²

Today, people are mostly aware of Kazakhness and Kazakhstanness; the rivalry between Kazakh and Kazakhstan identities can be interpreted as a disagreement over their roles in Kazakhstan: which should be treated as dominant and which should be pushed to the sidelines. “‘The nationalizing nationalism’ of newly independent states ... involves claims made in the name of a ‘core nation’ or ‘nationality’ defined in ethnocultural terms and sharply distinguished from the citizenry as a whole.”³

In the majority of post-Soviet states, “the nationalizing nationalism” of the core nation dominates, as it is practically uncontested by the rest of society. In these countries the language of the autochthonous population as its symbol becomes the principal language, while Russian is gradually pushed out of social life.⁴ The same applies to all other ethnic symbols in art, history and other social spheres.

The situation in Kazakhstan is different: the culture of the autochthonous population cannot ensure the domination of Kazakh symbols in the linguistic and other spheres, mainly because a considerable part of the core nation considers themselves Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis and, therefore, appreciate Kazakh symbols and symbols of other peoples of Kazakhstan, Russians in the first place. The fact that urban Kazakhs do not use their native tongue, and that written and spoken Russian is the only language of communication speaks volumes. At a meeting with editors of Kazakh-language newspapers in April 2008, President Nursultan Nazarbayev said that out of nine million Kazakhs four million do not use their native language.⁵

¹ I. Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 2.

² See: M. Laruelle, “The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan: Kazakhness, Kazakhstanness, and Transnationalism,” in: *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2015, pp. 1-20.

³ R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 5.

⁴ See: “Govoriashchikh po-russki stanovitsia vse menshe,” *Rusaskaia sluzhba BBC*, available at BBCRussian.com [<http://www.bbc.co.uk>], 23 November, 2006.

⁵ See: “Nursultan Nazarbayev: Velikiy put proydem v edinstve,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, No. 118-119, 3 June, 2008.

A considerable share of five million who used their native tongue in 2008 also knew and used Russian in their professional activities, when communicating with Russians and other nationalities living in Kazakhstan; they read Russian-language newspapers and books, watched Russian-language TV and listened to Russian-language radio programs. This means that the Kazakhs who insist on their Kazakh identity and reject the Kazakhstan identity are not in the majority in their ethnic group. They, however, constitute the most active part of the autochthonous population that demonstrate a lot of activism in consolidating the symbolic core of the Kazakh identity. Those who share not only the Kazakh, but also the Kazakhstan identity are doing the same.

What are the roots of bifurcation of the national identity of the Kazakhs into Kazakh and Kazakhstan identities that makes them aware of Kazakh symbols and the symbols of Russian culture? This phenomenon is best explained by the concept of unionist nationalism used by Henry Hale, an American political scientist in his article “Cause without a rebel: Kazakhstan’s Unionist Nationalism in the USSR and CIS.”

Having outlined unionist nationalism in general terms, he asked himself: Why would elites or masses in an ethnically distinct region ever opt for “alien rule” over national independence? Whatever has already been written in scholarly literature and the media deals mainly with separatist movements that try to detach themselves from an “alien” state to set up their own independent state. At the same time, the ethnicities that prefer to remain in a unionized multiethnic state dominated by other ethnic groups remain on the sidelines of political analysis.⁶

Meanwhile, Hale deemed it necessary to point out that the number of unionist groups, oriented towards unions with other ethnicities within a multiethnic state, is much bigger than the number of separatist ethnicities. Indeed, the fact that there are one or several unionist regions around each of the separatist regions in a multiethnic state is practically ignored. In the 1960s, there was Yoruba in the civil war Biafra was waging for independence from Nigeria. The Northern Caucasus is a much closer example: separatist Chechnia’s neighbors: Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Dagestan and other national republics of the Russian Federation. Often enough, unionist ethnicities insist on political integration when they have every reason to demand independence. Political science and the theory of nationalism that consistently ignore unionist ethnicities cannot explain how different ethnicities coexist in a multiethnic state.⁷

Hale designated Kazakhstan a unionist nation; described the specifics of its unionist nationalism, explained its origins and gave a strictly logical answer to the question of why the Kazakhs, who had every reason to be separatist and nationalist, spared no effort to save the Soviet Union and remain a part of it until its final disintegration. Today, Kazakhstan is determined to consolidate the CIS.⁸

It should be said that Kazakhstan’s pro-Russian foreign policy is one of the forms of unionist nationalism in new, post-Soviet conditions. In fact, it has a different, internal dimension: for different reasons, many Kazakhs support the cultural status quo. They can be considered carriers of Kazakhstan identity, which is closely connected with the unionist nationalism of Kazakhs, as can be clearly seen in the attitude to the Russian language and culture and the approval of Kazakhstan’s special relations with Russia.⁹

At the same time, the share of Kazakhs who object to the status quo in culture and seek to change it has considerably increased in the post-Soviet years. These people want to move the ethnocultural symbols of the Kazakhs to the center of the sociocultural structure of Kazakhstan society.

⁶ See: H. Hale, “Cause without a Rebel: Kazakhstan’s Unionist Nationalism in the USSR and CIS,” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 37, No. 1, January 2009, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-12.

⁹ See: “Russkiy iazyk—eto Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia Monitor*, 5 December, 2019.

These people are carriers of Kazakh national identity closely associated with the Kazakh ethnocultural titular nationalism, which is the opposite of unionist nationalism.

It is logical to proceed from the constructivist understanding of national identity but from its primordial interpretation; this means that national identity should be considered a product of activities of national elites, rather than heritage from the past. Its content may change due to the efforts of people in power, cultural figures and scientists.¹⁰

The question is, who designed the unionist national identity of Kazakhstan? Our answer is: the power elite and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the republic's Communist leader from 1989 and the First President of independent Kazakhstan. As distinct from the Baltic and Transcaucasian states, the population of Kazakhstan looked at the president and the Supreme Soviet actively involved in the social, political and national processes unfolding in the republic, rather than at the nationalist movement and organizations that had nothing to do with republican powers.¹¹

During the last years of the Soviet Union, unionist nationalism of Kazakhstan comprised the Kazakh ethnic nationalism within the Kazakh S.S.R. and the desire to preserve the union state, albeit in a new form—with stronger economic ties with Russia and its greater economic support. Unionist nationalism of the Central Asian republics was comparatively the same. Their elites and regular people were convinced that Russia should preserve its dominant positions in the new states, and Russians should remain the leading nation.

Henry Hale notes that Nursultan Nazarbayev did not hail the Soviet Union's disintegration and the emergence of the CIS.¹² Having realized the unavoidable nature of this process, he became one of the most active and consistent supporters of the new structure. While many republics interpreted the CIS as an instrument of "civilized divorce," Nazarbayev tried to use it as an instrument of restoring and consolidating the ruptured economic ties between the former Soviet republics, first and foremost, between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. In other words, the unionist nationalism of Kazakhstan did not disappear along with the Soviet Union, but was adjusted to the new conditions by the president of this newly-independent state.

Nazarbayev's integrationist policy is well known. From the very beginning he was extremely active in drafting and promoting the CIS agreements. By May 1993, he signed 312 out of total of 318 CIS-related documents. Russia led with a total of 315 signed documents. Ukraine signed 229 documents, while Azerbaijan signed only 72. One hundred and twenty-one documents out of the 318 adopted by the CIS were related to the central structures of the new organization (Kazakhstan inked 118 documents). In the economic sphere Kazakhstan signed all 118 agreements; in the non-economic sphere—194 out of 199.¹³

Further developments confirmed that Kazakhstan stood apart from its Central Asian neighbors, where the level of unionist nationalism was concerned: post-Soviet Russia was too weak to extend subsidies, subventions and other types of economic aid. Its decision to limit the ruble to its own territory confirmed that Moscow was looking after its own interests and abandoned its Central Asian allies to their fates.

Predictably, they gradually moved away from their pro-Russian orientation to pursue differently orientated foreign policies. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and, to a lesser extent, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, started discussing their own national interests. Their relations with Russia generally became more pragmatic, even if their unionist nationalism did not disappear altogether and the sepa-

¹⁰ See: A. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno and Las Vegas, University of Nevada Press, 1991, pp. 110-116.

¹¹ See: A.B. Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2010, pp. 26-27.

¹² See: H. Hale, op. cit., p. 15.

¹³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 21.

ratist nationalism in their internal and foreign policies became much clearer. The interests of each of the nations and states began to take priority, the interests of Central Asia and the CIS were pushed aside.¹⁴

Eurasian Integration and National Identity of Kazakhstan

The failure of the ruble zone did not undermine the unionist nationalism of Kazakhstan, which initiated one integrational project after another, the most ambitious of them being the Eurasian Union, formulated by the president of Kazakhstan in his lecture delivered at Moscow University in March 1994. Four months prior to this, Russia had refused to establish a ruble zone and allow Kazakhstan to join it.

Neither in 1994, nor later this idea was supported by all post-Soviet countries, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan. According to the president of Kazakhstan, in 1990-2000 the idea of Eurasianism and Eurasian integration was realized through three structures—the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC); the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Confidence Measures in Asia (CCMA).¹⁵ The level of integration achieved in the three organizations fell short of what Nazarbayev had suggested in 1994.

Vladimir Putin, the then Prime Minister of Russia, gave the idea a new lease of life in his article “A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making” that appeared in *Izvestia* on 3 October, 2011. In the article he described the Eurasian Union as one of his priorities that should become one of the world’s mightiest integration structures, but would not, however, revive the Soviet Union.¹⁶

The idea of the Eurasian Union formulated by Nazarbayev in 1994 was wholeheartedly supported in Kazakhstan—no political force in Kazakhstan (including the opposition) publicly rejected the idea in the media or at mass meetings. The society was living in hope that it would be translated into post-Soviet social and economic realities.

This enthusiasm is explained by the fact that the memory of the Soviet Union (which had disintegrated two years earlier) was still alive in the minds of regular people. In the 1990s, the former Soviet republics could barely cope with the huge economic problems caused by their switch to market economy and ruptured economic ties. The ideas of integration of newly independent states stirred up hopes in people coping with high and growing prices, unemployment, delays in wages, pensions and benefits and plummeting living standards. The high level of support of the initiative proposed by the president of Kazakhstan was, to a certain extent, an echo of the very high share of votes cast for continued existence of the U.S.S.R. at the 1991 referendum and evidence of the high level of unionist nationalism in Kazakhstan and among the Kazakhs. People were prepared to limit the sovereignty of their newly independent state to a certain extent in order to restore the Soviet living standards.

Today, the idea of a Eurasian Union or, rather, the idea of the Eurasian Union Putin had formulated in 2011, lost much of its attractiveness. Protests against the joint integrational projects with

¹⁴ See: I. Bobokulov, “Central Asia: Is There an Alternative to Regional Integration?” *Central Asian Survey*, No. 25 (1-2), March-June 2006, pp. 76.

¹⁵ “K ekonomike znaniy cherez innovatsii i obrazovanie.” Lecture of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the Eurasian National University, *Kazhstanskaia pravda*, 27 May, 2006.

¹⁶ See: Article by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin “A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making,” *Izvestia*, 3 October, 2011, available at [<https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3-1>].

Russia began in 2010. On 18 March, 2010, a large group of leaders and members of the national-patriotic organizations, political parties, NGOs, public figures and members of the intelligentsia in a letter to Nazarbayev and other leaders of Kazakhstan demanded that the Customs Union Treaty¹⁷ should be denounced as highly unprofitable for Kazakhstan. The authors warned that as a member of the CU their country would lose its economic and, later, political independence and warned that they would respond the intention to join the CU with a public movement Defense of Independence.

The gap between the responses to the idea of the Eurasian Union in the 1990s and the 2010s was too extensive to be ignored. In the 1990s, the idea was unanimously supported by the elites and the masses, but in the 2010s, the idea was resolutely rejected by the elites, national-patriotic organizations, political parties and movements and some of the local intelligentsia.

This makes the attitudes to the issues of independence and Eurasian integration of Kazakh national patriots and the powers of Kazakhstan especially interesting. Both groups spoke of independence as an absolute value; those in power described it as the core point in their ideology. Officially, independence and the national statehood of Kazakhstan have become associated with Nazarbayev as head of state since Kazakhstan's independence, and even earlier (from June 1989), as the Leader of the Nation, and also founder of the sovereign state who consolidated its independence as president of Kazakhstan.¹⁸

National patriots of Kazakhstan treated its independence as the greatest value rooted in the titular ethnocultural nationalism as the ideological cornerstone of their activities. They see independent Kazakhstan as a Kazakh state that should support Kazakhs, their material well-being, culture and language. They were very critical of the authorities that they believed did not do enough to support and consolidate independence; retreated on the issues of the Russian language and culture and, on the whole, depended on Russia too much. Their country's membership in the Customs Union and its future membership in the EAEU was an unacceptable concession to Russia and its hegemonic plans in the post-Soviet space.

The attitude to Eurasian integration is the benchmark of the ideas of independence held by authorities and national patriots. People in power accept integration, in any form, as absolutely compatible with their country's independence. In fact, integration with Russia is economically profitable for Kazakhstan. To put it differently, independence of Kazakhstan corresponded to its unionist nationalism. National patriots insist that any form of integration with Russia will bury Kazakhstan as an independent country and that, therefore, independence and integration with Russia are two separate issues. In short, national patriots reject any form of unionist nationalism as unacceptable in independent Kazakhstan.

Since the fall of 2012, integration policy of Kazakhstan has been changing in regard to relations with Russia and interpretation of unionist nationalism. In the past, there were no (open) contradictions in the bilateral relations. In October 2012, Kazakhstan disagreed with Russia's suggestion to set up a Eurasian Parliament as a supra-national structure.

In the summer of 2012, Russia had formulated an idea of a Eurasian parliament as a supranational institute of the Eurasian Economic Union; several months later, in October, chairman of the Majilis committee for foreign relations Maulen Ashimbaev said in Moscow that his country had rejected the idea and any role in the parliament. *Nezavisimaia gazeta* wrote that in Kazakhstan the idea had been rejected as an encroachment on its sovereignty.¹⁹ In December 2012, the head of state outlined the framework and the conditions on which Kazakhstan would be ready to join integration

¹⁷ See: "Zaiavlenie po povodu vstuplenia Kazakhstana v Tamozhennyi s'uz," *Internet-gazeta Kazakhsan*, available at [http://www.zonakz.net], 25 March, 2010.

¹⁸ "Novy Kazakhstan v novom mire," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 20 November, 2012.

¹⁹ See: V. Panfilova, "Nazarbaev reshit problemu Baykonura. President Kazakhstana sgladit raznoglasiu po kosmodromu vo vremia vizita v Moskvu," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 8 February, 2013.

projects, stating that the country's political sovereignty was not discussed and, therefore, the country would respond to any step challenging Kazakhstan's independence with withdrawal from this structure.²⁰

Russia was unpleasantly surprised: in the past Kazakhstan seemed to be the most consistent supporter of integration in the U.S.S.R. and, later, the CIS. Russian journalism Mikhail Rostovsky has written that Moscow was amazed by the unexpected change of Nazarbayev's attitude to the Soviet Union. This politician who had spared no effort to save the united country suddenly said that Kazakhstan "was a colony of the Soviet Union."²¹ He referred to Nazarbayev's statement made at a business forum in Istanbul in October 2012: "We live in the homeland of the Turkic people. When in 1861 the last Kazakh khan had been murdered, we became a colony of the Russian monarchy and, later, of the Soviet Union. In the last 150 years, Kazakhs practically lost their national traditions, customs, language and religion. In 1991, with the help of the Almighty we declared independence. The Turkish state was the first to rejoice at our independence and recognized it. Our people will never forget this."²²

We have already written that authorities and national patriots disagreed on the subject of unionist patriotism and integration with Russia: the former believe that they are compatible, the latter think differently and go even farther: unionist nationalism and national identity of Kazakhstan are unlikely bedfellows. This means that the idea of a Eurasian parliament outlined the limits of compatibility of unionist nationalism of Kazakhstan with integration with Russia. Integration is limited to the economy; any threat to state sovereignty makes it absolutely unacceptable for Kazakhstan.

This marked an important shift towards state sovereignty in the policy pursued by the president at a certain stage of integration with Russia. Russian analysts made a note of the above. One of them has referred to the speech delivered by Elbasy in Almaty on 9 January, 2013. Made at the ceremony of presidential stipend presentation to prominent figures in literature and art, the speech left no doubts that the country's leaders treated the sentiments prevalent among the nationally orientated circles as an instrument of strengthening their political and social base.²³ The president used elements of Kazakh identity to consolidate the national identity of Kazakhstan.

In her book *Russia's Relations with Kazakhstan* Yelena Zabortseva identifies five periods in the relations between the two countries: in the first period (1991-1994), immediately after the Soviet Union's disintegration, the relations were friendly yet fairly chilly, since both newly independent states (Russia and Kazakhstan) were building up their independence and consolidating their security. This is confirmed by the fact that Russia removed Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors from the ruble zone. Kazakhstan reciprocated with a refusal to accept dual citizenship for its citizens.²⁴

During the second period (1995-1999), the two states demonstrated significantly greater mutual interest: Kazakhstan was steadily widening its multi-vector foreign policy, while Russia demonstrated more openness in its relationship with Central Asia and Kazakhstan. It was at that time that Russia settled many of its military, nuclear and space problems by renting testing grounds in Kazakhstan, moving the Soviet nuclear arsenal out of Kazakhstan to Russia and leasing Baykonur. In the

²⁰ See: *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 10 January, 2013.

²¹ M. Rostovsky, "Pochemu Nazarbayev razliubil Soiuz. Kak zamazat treshchiny v alianse Rossii i Kazakhstana," *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, No. 26152, 1 February, 2013.

²² N. Nazarbayev, "Poka my byli koloniei Rossii—edva ne lishilis svoikh traditsii, obychev, iazyka (rech v Turtsii), available at [<https://regnum.ru/news/1581244.html>]. Permanent address [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1350219540>].

²³ See: M. Kalishevsky, "Kazakhstan oboznachil granitsy 'evraziyskoy integratsii'," *Fergana.RU*, available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1361249160>].

²⁴ See: Ye.N. Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations with Kazakhstan: Rethinking Ex-Soviet Transitions in the Emerging World System*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, pp. 42-43.

context of Russia's claims on northern Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev moved its capital from Almaty in the south to Astana (now Nur-Sultan) in the north, a symbolic move.²⁵

The third period (2000-2004) is associated with the election of Vladimir Putin president of Russia and transformations in Russia's foreign policy, the details of which became clear somewhat later. It was at that time that both countries exploited the high oil prices to revive their economies. The post-9/11 geopolitical context in Central Asia forced Kazakhstan to strengthen its security, primarily with the support of Russia while pursuing its multi-vector policy.²⁶

During the fourth period (2005-2012) the two countries were developing their economic relations and regional cooperation. Kazakhstan relied on Russia to ensure its security.²⁷ Despite certain disagreements, Kazakhstan demonstrated that its relations with Russia were of priority importance as evidence of unionist nationalism and Kazakhstani identity. Russia, on the other hand, pursued the policy of economic regional integration across the post-Soviet space for its political aims.

The fifth period of bilateral relations (2013-2015) was unfolding under the impact of the Ukrainian conflict. Zabortseva notes that Kazakhstan initially supported Russia, which stirs up certain doubts. In view of Russia's weight and influence, Kazakhstan could not openly denounce the annexation of Crimea and a hybrid war in eastern Ukraine. It did all it could: it abstained from voting when the U.N. GA in March 2014 put the legality of annexation to a vote. Zabortseva has correctly remarked that Kazakhstan subsequently altered its Russian policy under the pressure of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the negative impacts of Russia's neo-imperialist policy on the situation in Kazakhstan, in particular, threats to its territorial integrity and political stability.²⁸

The leader of Kazakhstan responded to these threats with stronger support of Kazakhstan identity, intensified the civil national policy and the pressure on those who insisted on special rights of the Kazakh tongue at the expense of other tongues used in the republic. In August 2017, in his speech to the state media he said: "If we outlaw all other tongues except for the Kazakh language, we will become the next Ukraine." He warned that the exclusive language rights of the core nation may provoke the protests of the non-core groups, Russians in the first place followed by Russian interference. Nazarbayev deemed it necessary to say: "All Kazakhs have already probably realized that the policy of support of the Kazakh language as the only tongue used in the republic is dangerous. If we decide to beat all and everyone on the head to force them use Kazakh and shed blood, we will lose our independence."²⁹

This meant that the events of 2014 and subsequent developments created a negative image of Russia as a threat to security and independence. This was an absolutely novel phenomenon among the elite and the masses. Other post-Soviet states, including the Central Asian countries, revealed, to certain extents, their perception of Russia as a threat to their security and independence. Since the first days of its independence, Kazakhstan, however, considered Russia a friendly country; as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, it was and still is regarded as the key link of Kazakhstan's security and independence.

After 2014, the public has somewhat changed its idea about Russia. In the past, its image was absolutely positive; this was confirmed by the sociological polls of the 2000s and 2010s. In his interview to *Komsomolskaia pravda*, President of Kazakhstan Kasym-Zhomart Tokaev pointed out that for many years the level of confidence in Russia remained very strong (75%), a high and, what is even more important, sustainable value.³⁰

²⁵ See: Ye.N. Zabortseva, op. cit.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ "Kazakhstan ozhidaet ukrainskiy stseneriy v sluchae zapreta vsekh iazykov, krome kazakhskogo—Nazarbayev," *Central Asia Monitor*, 25 August, 2014.

³⁰ See: Interview of President of Kazakhstan K.-Zh. Tokaev, *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 3 June, 2020.

In 2014, Russia lost a lot of its positive image of a friendly country in Kazakhstan, and began to be regarded as a threat to security and territorial integrity; confronted with numerous threats and challenges, the Central Asian security complex became much more complicated.³¹ Some of the threats are rooted in the authoritarian nature of power in the Central Asian countries; other similarly dangerous threats, are created by major geopolitical players (i.e., Russia) with interests in the region.

Perception of Russia as a threat to the security of Kazakhstan tipped the balance between the Kazakhstan and Kazakh identities and undermined Kazakhstan's unionist nationalism. In mass and elite consciousness, the ideas of integration with Russia and Russia as a threat have become inseparable. Predictably, Kazakh identity is gathering weight as opposed to Kazakhstan identity; this has been confirmed by the switch from the Cyrillic to Latin script, which was announced in 2017.

Moscow responded to the corresponding decree signed by Nazarbayev with a balanced statement of the Foreign Ministry of Russia that described this decision as "an internal affair of Kazakhstan."³² Response of the Russian media and social networks was much more violent: "disloyalty and retreat to the West." Comments followed one another: "It is hard to understand how the RF and Kazakhstan will continue their economic and geopolitical integration when Kazakhstan switches to Latin script. It is worse than actions of Bandera supporters in Ukraine;" "The switch to Latin script is a clear message of what the current leaders of Kazakhstan think about the Eurasian Economic Union and about integration with Russia in general. They want the revenues created by cooperation, yet connect the future of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh people with the West."³³

This is an obvious overstatement. An independent state, Kazakhstan can identify its foreign policy priorities according to its national interests. Russia as the main integration partner is one of its priorities in the spheres of security, economy and humanitarian contacts. In the above-mentioned interview to *Komsomolskaia pravda*, President Tokaev spoke of Russia "as the closest state."³⁴ He did not equivocate: his country had no intention to join Russia and Belarus as a member of the union state, it was prepared to develop its integration with both countries within regional institutions.³⁵ Kazakhstan should build up its integration with Russia and with all other states on the basis of rationally interpreted national interests stemming from its national identity.

Conclusion

The analysis of the impact of post-Soviet relations between Russia and Kazakhstan on the latter's national identity has convincingly demonstrated that it was a highly dynamic phenomenon. Throughout the first two post-Soviet decades, unionist nationalism dominated in their relations, adding elements of Soviet ideology and rhetoric in the "friendship of peoples" style. The foreign policy imperative of the importance of stronger and broader relations with Russia as a strategic ally moved the Kazakhstani identity to the fore in the structure of the republic's identities. The national patriotic circles, however, were highly displeased with the pro-Russian course and accused the authorities of concessions to the Russian language and culture, which had a negative impact on the development of a national state and Kazakhstan's national interests.

³¹ See: E. Klimenko, "Central Asia as a Regional Security Complex," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, 2011, pp. 7-20.

³² "Eto vnutrennee delo Kazakhstana—MID Rossii o perekhode na latinitsu," available at [www.Zakon.kz], 1 November, 2017.

³³ "Kazakhstan poshel na zapad," Radio Liberty, 13 April, 2017.

³⁴ Interview of President of Kazakhstan K.-Zh. Tokaev, 3 June, 2020.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

Russia's neo-imperialist policy changed the geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet space and strongly affected its relations with Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstani national identity, for that matter. The friend/foe perception of Russia became much more complicated and contradictory. This strongly affected Kazakhstani national identity, where elements of Kazakh identity were manifested clearer. From that time on, Kazakhstan has been relying on national interests that may contradict the interests of the Russian Federation. The 2017 decree of President Nazarbayev on the switch to the Latin script was an important symbol of the Kazakhstani national identity and Russia-Kazakhstan relations. In the new decade these relationships are likely to develop within the trends that emerged in the 2010s—less ideology of unionist nationalism and far more pragmatic and rational ties between the two countries based on their national interests.