

KAZAKHSTAN'S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE CONTEXT OF KAZAKH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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Rustem KADYRZHANOV

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor, Chief Researcher,
Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies,
Science Committee, Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Kazakhstan;
Professor, Ablai Khan Kazakh University of
International Relations and World Languages
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Zhannat MAKASHEVA

*Ph.D. student, Department of International Relations,
Ablai Khan Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Zhyldyz AMREBAYEVA

*Ph.D. (Philos.), Chief Lecturer, Department of Philosophy,
al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Aidar AMREBAYEV

*Ph.D. (Philos.), Director of the Center of Political Research,
Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and
Religious Studies, Science Committee,
Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Kazakhstan
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

ABSTRACT

The article examines the problem of sovereignty of the Republic of Kazakhstan through the prism of Kazakh-Russian interstate relations. The key conclusions made by the authors are that, first of all, Kazakh-Russian relations are based on

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the post-Soviet model and the concept of the sovereignty of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which retains significant elements of the Soviet constitutional model of relations between the Union center and the republics; secondly, as part of this sovereignty model, the Republic of Kazakhstan has to make concessions in the economic, financial and other forms of sovereignty.

However, the Republic of Kazakhstan makes no concessions in matters of territorial integrity and other fundamental aspects

of its sovereignty. Thirdly, it was easier for the Republic of Kazakhstan to maintain the image of the Russian Federation as a strategic partner between 1991 and the mid-2000s, but since that time, the Russian Federation has been pursuing an openly neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space, thus, the increasing securitization of the relations with the Russian Federation requires great efforts from the Republic of Kazakhstan to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, Russia, sovereignty, national interests, territorial integrity.*

Introduction

This article aims to study the problem of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan in its relations with Russia. Kazakhstan is one of Russia's closest allies, and many reviewers have the impression that Russia is a reliable defender of Kazakhstan's sovereignty. It is, however, clear that there are influential nationalist political forces in Russia, which have been making territorial claims to Kazakhstan since 1991. The diplomatic scandal in December 2020, caused by the statements made by the State Duma deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov, unequivocally indicates that the issue of Kazakhstan's territorial integrity in relations with Russia remains topical and relevant thirty years after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and Kazakhstan's acquisition of independence.

To study the problem of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the article proposes to discuss the following three questions:

- (1) Russia's attitude to Kazakhstan's sovereignty in Kazakh-Russian relations;
- (2) The existing relations between Kazakhstan and Russia on the issue of Kazakhstan's sovereignty as seen through concessions and upholding of sovereignty in various spheres of these relations;
- (3) Two main stages of Kazakh-Russian relations (1991 to mid-2000s; mid-2000s to present day) from the viewpoint of protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan.

Methodologically, the study is based on a realist approach of the international relations theory, in which the concepts of state sovereignty and its territorial integrity play a central role. When studying the post-Soviet sovereignty model, a realistic approach is projected onto the international relations system in the Near Abroad.

In addition, since the issue of Kazakhstan's sovereignty is being examined in the regional context of the post-Soviet space and its security system within it, Buzan and Wæver's theory of regional security complexes is undoubtedly beneficial in the study of this issue.

Russian Deputy's Territorial Claims and Kazakhstan's Reaction

In December 2020, the issue of Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity came to the fore in its relations with Russia. The impetus for the aggravation of Kazakh-Russian relations was the statement made by State Duma deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov, who announced the historical belonging of northern Kazakhstan to Russia. These words of the Russian deputy caused a diplomatic scandal, wherein Kazakhstan handed a note of protest to the Russian embassy, which stated that “the provocative attacks of some Russian politicians towards Kazakhstan, which are growing more frequent, are causing serious damage to allied relations between our states.”¹

In fact, this is not the first time Kazakhstan has faced territorial claims made by Duma deputies and non-government politicians in Russia. This is not the first time that the Kazakh Foreign Ministry has expressed protest to the Russian Foreign Ministry in connection with such statements. As a rule, after yet another diplomatic protest, Kazakh-Russian relations quickly returned to their usual condition, which are characterized by the leaders of both states and experts as friendly and allied.

However, this time Kazakhstan's reaction to the territorial claims made by Russian public figures was markedly different from previous cases in both duration and media coverage. Usually, a diplomatic note was followed by the publication of several materials by Kazakhstani experts refuting and condemning territorial claims, after which the situation returned to the normal track. But in this case, the media campaign lasted much longer—over several weeks—and involved a far greater number of authors, including well-known politicians, public figures, publicists and activists of various movements. A protest demonstration was held by Kazakh nationalists at the Russian Consulate General in Almaty.²

The campaign culminated with the publication of an article by the country's president, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev under the title “Independence Above All.” Written through the prism of the 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, the article affirms “the eternal triad of our sovereignty—our vast land, our (Kazakh) language and our (interethnic) unity.”³ Tokayev's main focus in the article was on the land of Kazakhstan and its territorial integrity within the internationally recognized borders. At the same time, he emphasized that it is important “to adequately respond to all provocative actions that cast doubt on our territorial integrity ... and to be ready to defend national interests not only through diplomacy, but also from a tougher position.”⁴

Experts have made various assumptions about the causes of the incident and its impact on Kazakh-Russian relations. In general, however, the prevailing opinion was expressed by the well-known expert Sultan Akimbekov, namely, that one episode could not have an impact on the complex relations system between Kazakhstan and Russia.⁵ Akimbekov noted that Kazakhstan has publicly demonstrated its disagreement with some aspects of Russian politics. Kazakhstan probably had a certain

¹ “Territorii Kazakhstana—podarok Rossii”: MID RK otreagiroval na zaiavlenie rossiyskogo deputata,” available at [<https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/politics/18537-territoriia-kazakhstana-eto-podarok-so-storony-rossii-mid-rk-otreagiroval-na-zaiavlenie-rossiiskogo-deputata>], 12 December, 2020.

² See: “MID Kazakhstana peredal notu Rossii v svyazi s vyskazyvaniiami deputata Gosdumy Nikonova,” available at [<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10241035>], 2 January, 2021.

³ K.Zh. Tokayev, “Nezavisimost prevyshe vsego,” available at [<https://www.kazpravda.kz/news/prezident2/polnii-tekst-stati-tokaeva-nezavisimost-previoushe-vsego>], 6 January, 2021.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ See: “Kazakhstan i Rossia: soiuznichestvo i ekonomicheskaya konkurentsia. Interv'yu s Sultanom Akimbekovym,” available at [<https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21466/kazakhstan-i-rossiya-soiuznichestvo-i-ekonomicheskaya-konkurenciya-intervyu-s-sultanom-akimbekovym>], 21 February, 2021.

tactical need for this demarche. It was as a surprise for Russia, but the parties clarified their positions. This episode will most likely not affect their relationship as a whole.⁶

Having accepted the protest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan through its embassy in Nur-Sultan, Russia did not respond to it for a long time, apparently considering the incident insignificant and not in need of an official diplomatic response. Only in early May 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov responded and commented on the situation in an interview with the Khabar channel on Kazakh TV. Lavrov lamented the drawbacks of democracy, when Russian politicians are simply trying to attract attention to themselves by making provocative statements about the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan.⁷ At the same time, the Russian Foreign Minister pointed out that such statements come from politicians who do not determine Russia's policy towards Kazakhstan. "But no statements of this sort, statements that somehow question any of the agreements or our alliance have been or will be uttered by those who do determine the policy of the Russian Federation in relation to Kazakhstan. These agreements are based on complete respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence. We are developing allied relations on the basis of those documents that have been agreed and signed by the heads of state, approved by parliaments and constitute the law, being a part of international law."⁸

Russia and the Sovereignty of Post-Soviet States

Kazakhstan's course towards allied relations with Russia has put the former in the group of post-Soviet countries that prioritize their relations with Russia. Experts divide the post-Soviet states into three groups, depending on their policy towards Russia. The first group includes the three Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which at the end of the 1980s viewed their dependence on Russia as a threat to their security and sovereignty, and prioritized the establishment of relations with the West. In the 2000s and 2010s, Georgia and Ukraine, which increasingly pursued a pro-Western and anti-Russian policy, grew closer to this group of states. The second group of post-Soviet states that view their dependence on Russia as a favorable factor, and therefore pursue a pro-Russian foreign policy include Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Finally, the third group of post-Soviet states assume the middle position between these two groups: its member states do not shift their policy either towards Russia or the West. These states include Azerbaijan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.⁹ If the ruling elites of the post-Soviet states saw a threat to their sovereignty in relations with Russia, they tried to distance themselves from it. Where relations with Russia were not viewed as a threat to sovereignty, the leaders of the post-Soviet states tried to strengthen their relationship with it.

The attitude to sovereignty in general and to the sovereignty of post-Soviet states in particular is of great importance in Russia's foreign policy. As noted by Ruth Deyermond, in its foreign policy, Russia demonstrates two different approaches to the sovereignty of the states with which it maintains

⁶ See: Ibidem.

⁷ See: "‘Eto neizbeznaia chast demokraticeskoy zhizni.’ Sergey Lavrov prokommentiroval skandalnye zaiavleniia v adres Kazakhstana," available at [<https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/politics/23829-eto-neizbeznaia-chast-demokraticeskoi-zhizni-sergei-lavrov-prokommentiroval-skandalnye-zaiavleniia-v-adres-kazakhstana>], 5 May, 2021.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ See: R. Abdelal, *National Purpose in the World Economy: Post-Soviet States in Comparative Perspective*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2001, p. 4.

relations. The first approach, which corresponds to the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty, is used by Russia for states that are not a part of the post-Soviet space. However, Russia applies a different concept of sovereignty for the post-Soviet states, which can be defined as the post-Soviet model of state sovereignty.¹⁰

The classical Westphalian concept of state sovereignty is based on the principles of the territorial integrity of the state, the legal equality of all states and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Russia regards the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty as the unshakable basis of relations between states and the foundation of the system of international law and international institutions that form the legitimate structure of interstate relations.¹¹ As Ruth Deyermond notes, from the very beginning of the 21st century, Russia has acted in the international arena as the most consistent defender of the Westphalian state sovereignty model. From this position, Russia condemned the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a violation of sovereignty of an independent state, unsanctioned by the U.N. Security Council. From the same standpoint, Russia condemns the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space, considering them interference in the internal affairs of the former Soviet republics by Western states.¹²

In its relations with states outside the post-Soviet space Russia adheres to the classical Westphalian concept of sovereignty, but in relations with the post-Soviet states, Russia uses a different concept of sovereignty, which experts define as post-Soviet. As Ruth Deyermond notes, since the 1990s Russia's relations with the former Soviet republics has been based not on the international sovereignty model, but rather on the Soviet constitutional model of relations between the Union center and the republics.¹³ According to the Soviet constitution, the Union republics were considered national states of their titular nations. However, the Kazakh S.S.R., for example, could not be considered a full-fledged national state of the Kazakhs:¹⁴ the republic was deprived of the most important condition of national statehood—sovereignty: the republic was ruled from Moscow, rather than from its own capital.

In post-Soviet conditions, decisions made by several states, including those made with significant participation of Russia, use the terminology of international law, rather than Soviet constitutional law. Thus, the CIS charter, adopted in the first years after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., indicated that relations between the member states of this organization were built on the basis of respect for the sovereignty of the parties and international law.¹⁵ In reality, however, Russia largely applied the practice of Soviet constitutional law in relation to the CIS states, violating their sovereignty in one way or another.

As Ravi Abdelal notes, post-Soviet governments view their dependence on Russia in a dramatically different light.¹⁶ While Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states see this dependence as a serious threat to their very existence, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia see their dependence on Russia as a favorable factor. They consider their relationship with Russia not as a threat to their sovereignty, but as mutually beneficial cooperation. The leaders of these four countries do not see a serious threat to their sovereignty and national interests in the post-Soviet model used by Russia in its approach to the sovereignty of post-Soviet states.

¹⁰ See: R. Deyermond, "The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, August 2016, pp. 957-984.

¹¹ See: *Ibid.*, p. 957.

¹² See: *Ibid.*, pp. 962-967.

¹³ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 967-971.

¹⁴ See: R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1996, pp. 32-35.

¹⁵ See: *CIS Charter*, available at [<http://cis.minsk.by/reestr/ru/index.html#reestr/view/text?doc=187>], 1 May, 2021.

¹⁶ See: R. Abdelal, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Kazakhstan: Concessions of Sovereignty in Relations with Russia

In hierarchical relations with Russia, which seeks to assert its dominance and hegemony in relations with post-Soviet states, the latter have to make certain concessions of their sovereignty and national interests in order to obtain economic and other benefits. This is typical not only of the post-Soviet space, but also of other world regions. In the post-Soviet space, Russia's application of the post-Soviet model of sovereignty leads to noticeable concessions of sovereignty by the CIS countries. For instance, experts define Belarus, whose leader Alexander Lukashenko agreed to create a Russia-Belarus union state in 1999, as a "semi-sovereign state."¹⁷

It is apparent that Russia is the leading party in the Kazakh-Russian relations, and Kazakhstan is dependent on Russia in many aspects. This situation developed back in the Soviet period and remains in many respects to this day. Therefore, today the issue of Kazakhstan's sovereignty is at the core of Kazakh-Russian relations.

As mentioned above, Russia applies the post-Soviet concept of sovereignty in relations with the post-Soviet states, including Kazakhstan, which is different from the Westphalian concept that is rooted in the Soviet period. The post-Soviet concept presupposes sovereignty concessions to Russia from the neighboring countries for the sake of economic benefits and maintaining security. However, states often have to make concessions of their sovereignty in relations with larger states. This occurs not only in the post-Soviet space, but everywhere in international politics.

As a state pursuing an active pro-Russian policy, Kazakhstan is an important economic partner of Russia, which, along with the EU and China, is one of the country's top three trading partners. The volume of mutual trade between Kazakhstan and Russia has averaged \$12 billion in recent years.¹⁸ For Russia, Kazakhstan is one of the leading trade partners among the post-Soviet states. At the same time, there are factors in the economic relations between Kazakhstan and Russia that are harmful to Kazakhstan. One of these factors is Kazakhstan's long-standing negative balance in mutual trade with Russia.¹⁹ Kazakhstan's negative balance in trade with Russia arises, in particular, due to the fact that Russia often restricts the supply of Kazakhstani products to its market by non-economic methods. This irritates the business sector, but Kazakhstan rarely protests against the actions of the Russian authorities.

Perhaps, the concessions of economic sovereignty in trade relations between Kazakhstan and Russia are determined by Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia in the transport infrastructure for exporting Kazakh oil to Western markets, which is deemed more important by Kazakhstan's leaders. The problem with Kazakhstan as the world's largest landlocked oil state is that it has no alternative for exporting its oil other than China and—mainly—Russia. Drawing attention to Kazakhstan's lack of access to the sea, Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized that the state should pay special attention to the development of cooperative ties and the strengthening of complete confidence with neighboring states, primarily with Russia and China.²⁰

¹⁷ K.J. Hancock, "The Semi-Sovereign State: Belarus and the Russian Neo-Empire," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, No. 6, 2006, pp. 117-136.

¹⁸ See: A. Nikonorov, "Glavnye torgovye partnery Kazakhstana: 10 stran s naibolshim tovarooborotom," available at [<https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/glavnye-torgovye-partnery-kazakhstana-10-stran-s-naibolshim-tovarooborotom/>], 2 May, 2021.

¹⁹ See: N. Kassenova, "Kazakhstan and Eurasian Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future," in: *Eurasian Economic Integration: Law, Policy and Politics*, ed. by R. Dragneva, K. Wolczuk, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, USA, 2013, pp. 149-154; B. Sultanov, "Kazakhstan and Eurasian Integration," in: *Eurasian Integration—The View from Within*, ed. by P. Dutkiewicz, R. Sakwa, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, p. 106.

²⁰ See: *Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N. Nazarbayev "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050": New Political Course of the Established State,* available at [https://www.akorda.kz/en/events/astana_kazakhstan/]

As Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer note, the landlocked post-Soviet countries remain closely tied to Russia economically and strategically, and also maintain a very balanced policy towards Russia and the West.²¹ Being landlocked imposes serious restrictions on Kazakhstan's foreign policy, including the need for sovereignty and territorial concessions to the country that provides access to the sea. In particular, Kazakhstan has demonstrated compliance in the delimitation of borders with China, Russia and Uzbekistan.²²

As experts point out, Kazakhstan's financial system depends on the financial system of Russia in the economic relations between Kazakhstan and Russia. After the idea of a ruble zone failed in the early 1990s, Kazakhstan, like other post-Soviet states, was forced to introduce its national currency, tenge, which from the very beginning was made dependent on the Russian ruble.²³ For almost thirty years, the Kazakhstan authorities have always set the tenge/ruble rate to keep the tenge weak against the ruble. As has been observed in recent years, whenever the ruble has weakened as a result of Western anti-Russian sanctions, the tenge automatically weakened against the ruble and Western currencies, although Kazakhstan is not under sanctions. The Kazakhstan authorities are pursuing this course voluntarily, without pressure from Russia, as it is economically beneficial for the country. However, this course reflects Kazakhstan's financial dependence on Russia.

One of the clearest manifestations of Kazakhstan's pro-Russian policy is its participation in regional organizations headed by Russia. Kazakhstan is a member of both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), although not all post-Soviet states are members of these organizations, as they fear for their economic and political independence. The leaders of these states are concerned that Russia may be using regional integration as an instrument of economic, military, political and cultural domination over these countries. According to Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov, this makes Russia unable to find a balance between cooperation and domination in the post-Soviet space, which limits its possibilities for regional integration.²⁴ In this case, Kazakhstan has to balance between the Russian domination policy and the protection of its own sovereignty.

Kazakhstan: Where No Sovereignty Concessions Are Possible

Like any independent state, Kazakhstan views its sovereignty through the prism of the Westphalian concept of sovereignty. The foreign policy of Kazakhstan, its relations with other states are based on this understanding of sovereignty. This also applies to relations between Kazakhstan and Russia, although the latter, as mentioned above, builds its relations with the neighboring states on the post-Soviet sovereignty model, forcing them to make sovereignty concessions. As a result, some CIS countries limit their relations with Russia or even halt them altogether, while other countries are forced to seek a balance between sovereignty concessions in certain areas (usually economic) and the preservation of the fundamental aspects of sovereignty in its Westphalian understanding.

participation_in_events/address-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-leader-of-the-nation-[nnazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050-new-political-course-of-the-established-state-1](#)], 4 May, 2021.

²¹ See: A. Idan, B. Shaffer, "The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2011, p. 224.

²² See: *Ibid.*, p. 252.

²³ See: R. Abdelal, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See: I. Busygina, M. Filippov, "Russia, Post-Soviet Integration, and the EAEU: The Balance between Domination and Cooperation," *Problems of Post-Communism*, September, 2020, p. 2.

Over the thirty years of independence, Kazakhstan has developed a certain *modus vivendi* of relations with Russia in matters that relate to its sovereignty. Kazakhstan is willing to make sovereignty concessions on those issues that do not affect its independence, but at the same time defends sovereignty where it does concern its independence. Over the years, Kazakhstan sometimes had to defend its sovereignty against Russia's attempts to get concessions on issues that were considered by the Kazakhstan leadership as threatening its sovereignty and independence.

To understand Kazakhstan's approach to the issue of sovereignty in its relations with Russia, let us consider the case with the proposal to create a Eurasian Parliament in 2012. At that time, Kazakhstan did not agree with the proposals put forward by Russia on the creation of supranational bodies of the regional integration organization. However, as noted by *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, in Kazakhstan the idea of the Eurasian Parliament was received with hostility and considered an attempt on state sovereignty.²⁵ The framework and conditions for Kazakhstan's participation in integration projects was outlined by Nursultan Nazarbayev, who pointed out in December 2012 that issues of the country's political sovereignty were not even up for discussion, and therefore any act that would threaten Kazakhstan's independence would lead to a withdrawal from such an association.²⁶

Commenting on the situation with the Eurasian Parliament, Russian journalist Mikhail Rostovsky notes that the Kazakhstani political elite was generally ready for the idea of a close economic alliance with Russia. However, this time, Astana was offered something fundamentally different: the creation of supranational political bodies. Kazakhstani society perceived it as direct encroachment on state sovereignty. A wave of discontent began to rise in the country. By January 2013, the situation had grown so serious that Nursultan Nazarbayev, the founder of the concept of Eurasian unity, took over the fight against the idea of a Eurasian Parliament. Without directly mentioning the idea of the Eurasian Parliament, he actually put a decisive end to it.²⁷

As Rostovsky notes, Kazakhstan "is not ready to give up a single bit of its political independence. Indeed, at one time the republic was firmly focused on preserving the U.S.S.R. However, more than 20 years [Rostovsky's article was written in 2013] have passed since then. The Kazakhstani elite, and society as a whole, have realized all the advantages of independence, which nobody wishes to give up. However, it seems that many in power in Moscow do not see all these nuances at close range."²⁸

The situation with the Eurasian Parliament in 2012 resembles the incident with the statement made by the Russian Deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov in 2020 in regard to Kazakhstan's sovereignty in Kazakh-Russian relations. The similarity is that in both cases Kazakhstan's sovereignty came under threat. In 2012, Russia's proposal for a Eurasian Parliament threatened the political sovereignty of Kazakhstan in the sense of the state's right to independently make decisions and create laws, rather than concede this right to a supranational body dominated by another state. In 2020, the threat was to the state's territorial integrity as its fundamental prerequisite. The two situations were also similar in that both in 2012 and in 2020, Kazakhstan acted decisively in defending its sovereignty.

At the same time, the situations in 2012 and 2020 also had their differences. They are mainly of a socio-psychological nature and are associated with the perception of threats to state sovereignty by

²⁵ V. Panfilova, "Nazarbayev reshil problema 'Baykonura.' Prezident Kazakhstana sgladit raznoglasia po kosmodromu vo vremia vizita v Moskvu," available at [https://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-02-08/1_nazarbaev.html], 5 May, 2021.

²⁶ See: *25 let idei evraziiskoy integratsii N.A. Nazarbayeva (v otsenkakh ekspertov KISI pri Prezidente RK)*, Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, 2019. 296 pp., available at [http://kisi.kz/images/files/_19.pdf], 6 May, 2021.

²⁷ See: M. Rostovsky, "Pochemu Nazarbayev razliubil Soiuz. Kak zamazat treshchiny v alianse Rossii i Kazakhstana," available at [<https://www.mk.ru/politics/2013/01/31/806106-pochemu-nazarbaev-razlyubil-soyuz.html>], 6 May, 2021.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

the Kazakh society. In our opinion, the threat of 2020 was perceived in Kazakhstan as more serious, as more existential than the threat of 2012, which did not attract as much attention to itself as the most recent case. In order to understand this difference, we would like to briefly analyze the evolution of Kazakh-Russian relations since 1991.

Geographic Factor and Security in Kazakh-Russian Relations

In the study of international relations, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's regional security complex theory (RSCT) is prevalent. It attaches paramount importance to the geographical factor in relations between states.²⁹ The key RSCT concept states that, despite globalization, most security threats in international relations are still territorial in nature and their degree depends on geographic distance.³⁰ RSCT, as its authors Buzan and Wæver emphasize, is a security theory in which geographic factors are central.³¹ Most states are concerned mainly with the capabilities and intentions of their neighbors.³² Due to this fact, interdependent relations in the security sphere are usually concentrated in regional clusters, or "security complexes." The Regional Security Complex (RSC) is defined as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another."³³

The concept of securitization is central to the Buzan-Wæver theory. It is "the discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat."³⁴ As a rule, in international politics, national states are considered the most important objects of securitization. Accordingly, desecuritization is understood as the reverse process of removing the perception of threats from any state from the public consciousness.

RSCT is, in our opinion, the most adequate theoretical tool for studying the relations between Kazakhstan and Russia in the post-Soviet period. This is primarily due to the fact that the geographical factor plays a vital role in the relations between Kazakhstan and Russia, which affects Kazakhstan's perception of its sovereignty and territorial integrity depending on Russia's actions and policies. It is important that, being geographically close, Kazakhstan and Russia are crucial components of a single Post-Soviet regional security complex. Kazakhstan's security cannot be discussed separately from that of Russia within this post-Soviet security complex, and vice versa.

Time-wise, our analysis is divided into two stages:

- the first lasted from 1991 to the mid-2000s, when Kazakhstan was dominated by the image of Russia as its ally and a guarantor of its territorial integrity.
- The second stage began in the mid-2000s and continues to the present day, wherein the securitization of Russia is gaining increasing importance for Kazakhstan.

²⁹ See: B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

³⁰ See: A.L. Lukin, "Teoria kompleksov regionalnoy bezopasnosti i Vostochnaia Azia," *Oykumena*, No. 2, 2011, p. 8.

³¹ See: B. Buzan, O. Wæver, op. cit., p. 70.

³² See: A.L. Lukin, op. cit., p. 8.

³³ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 491.

Sovereignty of Kazakhstan at the Early Stage of Kazakh-Russian Relations

At the first stage of Kazakh-Russian relations, Russia was perceived in Kazakhstan as a natural ally, which was in many respects a continuation of the strong pro-Russian and pro-Russia sentiments that emerged in Kazakh society back in the Soviet period. Back in the 1990s, however, nationalist forces made themselves known in Russia, making territorial claims to Kazakhstan and claiming that its northern part conceded to Kazakhstan by the communist regime, belonged to Russia. Such statements contribute to the securitization of Russia in Kazakhstani society, primarily its nationalist part. However, these sentiments could not challenge the image of Russian authorities as an ally of Kazakhstan, which not only makes no claims to Kazakhstan's territory,³⁵ but is always willing to help in case of outside encroachments.

This perception of Russia in the 1990s suggests that it was based on Kazakhstan's profound trust in Russia, which has historically developed during the Soviet period. As Christopher Stevens notes, the policy that aims at a strategic alliance with Russia was determined not only by the rational calculation of President Nazarbayev, who was aware of Kazakhstan's vulnerability. The policy of multilateral cooperation with Russia was based on broad public support and the perception of Russia as a friendly state and a strategic partner of Kazakhstan.

In the long-term strategic document "Kazakhstan-2030," published in 1997, which determined the main directions of the country's development until 2030, Nursultan Nazarbayev pointed to the absence of threats to the security and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan as its most important advantage. "We understand that all potential threats to the national security of Kazakhstan at present and in the near future do not have and will not have the character of a direct military invasion and a threat to the state's territorial integrity. It is absolutely clear that neither Russia, nor China, nor the West and Muslim countries have any incentive to attack us."³⁶

Despite the image of Russia as a strategic partner of the regional states that is predominant in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, experts have pointed to the strength of imperial traditions and the influence of nationalist forces in the power institutions of the Russian Federation. The influence of these forces led the liberal reformist Russian government in power in the early 1990s to seek consensus with them in foreign policy, including policy towards Central Asia. As noted by Rajan Menon, this consensus is based on the formal recognition of the independence of the Central Asian states, but at the same time presupposes Russia's special rights and interests in the region.³⁷ In his opinion, the most likely scenario for the relations between the Central Asian countries and Russia in the post-Soviet period is "life next to the bear," that is, maintaining internal stability, while taking Russia's strategic interests into account.³⁸

Kazakhstan's Sovereignty and Russia's Neo-Imperialism

The image of Russia as a strategic ally in the public opinion of Kazakhstan has largely concealed the imperial essence of its foreign policy in 1990-2000. The economic crisis that followed the collapse

³⁵ See: C.A. Stevens, "Russia-Kazakhstan Relations in the Early Post-Soviet Era: Explaining the Roots of Cooperation," *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 7, 2020, p. 1155.

³⁶ N.A. Nazarbayev, "Kazakhstan 2030. Prosperity, Security and Improved Well-Being of All Kazakhstanis. Message from the President of the Country to the People of Kazakhstan," available in Russian at [<https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/K970002030>], 7 May, 2021.

³⁷ See: R. Menon, "In the Shadow of the Bear: Security in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1995, p. 158.

³⁸ See: *Ibid.*, p. 169.

of the U.S.S.R. during this period hindered the pursuit of Russia's neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space. The mid-2000s rise in oil prices contributed to Russia's economic recovery. Since this time, Russia's neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space acquired increasingly more distinct features.

In trying to explain Russian foreign policy under Putin since the mid-2000s, George Breslauer compares it to Russian policy under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. From his point of view, Gorbachev and Yeltsin mentally proceeded from a weak position of the Soviet Union/Russia in international relations. Emotionally, both leaders felt an irrepressible desire to be accepted by the West and to join the family of Western nations. Putin's foreign policy, on the other hand, is based on a sense of a new-found strength, and emotionally, on feelings of disappointment and resentment towards the West.³⁹

Russia's neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space led it to a war with Georgia in 2008, as a result of which Abkhazia and South Ossetia separated from Georgia and declared themselves independent states. However, Kazakhstan and other CIS states did not recognize their "independence." This was a collective decision of the CIS countries, which feared that they may be the next victims of Russia's neo-imperialism, encouraging it with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The CIS countries, such as Kazakhstan, believed at that time that no concessions should be made to Russia on this issue, since it directly affected their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Nevertheless, Russia's aggressive policy did not cause a high level of its securitization in most of the CIS countries, including Kazakhstan. In 2014, Russia's actions led to tangible securitization in Kazakhstan and other CIS countries by annexing Crimea from Ukraine and occupying Donbass with the help of local separatists. Subsequently, it immediately became clear that Russia poses a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the post-Soviet states, but first and foremost—its bordering countries.

The securitization of Russia in Kazakhstan is determined by the fact that Kazakhstan projects onto itself the possibility of Russian aggression and, like in Ukraine, the loss of part of its territory. In our opinion, the high level of securitization of Russia in modern Kazakhstan determined the reaction of its leadership and society to the statement made by State Duma Deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov in December 2020. What is the reason for this resonance?

There is a vital detail that went almost unnoticed in the comments of experts and journalists, but which undoubtedly was in the center of attention of the Kazakhstan leaders when they launched the media campaign in response to Nikonov's statement. It is an interview with Vladimir Putin, which he gave in June 2020. In this interview, Putin noted that when the U.S.S.R. was created, "many republics received a huge amount of Russian lands." At the same time, Putin said: "The following question arises: what if a certain republic became part of the Soviet Union, but received a huge amount of Russian lands in the process, and then decided to withdraw? Then it should have withdrawn with whatever it came in with, and did not take gifts from the Russian people along with it." Putin did not specify which republics and which lands he had in mind. However, he did clarify that when the Soviet Union was created, the right to withdraw from it was stated in the agreement, however, the withdrawal procedure was not outlined.⁴⁰

The statement made by Putin has sparked great apprehension in Russia's neighboring post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan. For this reason, the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Peskov explained that the words of his superior do not mean that Russia has territorial claims to former Soviet republics. Putin "was not talking about gifts. He spoke about the systemic mistakes made earlier in the Soviet constitution, which did not provide for a number of situations."⁴¹

³⁹ See: G. Breslauer, "Observations on Russia's Foreign Relations under Putin," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2009, p. 370.

⁴⁰ A. Mamashuly, "'Nyneshnie granitsy i istoria ne dolzhny stat razmennoy monetoy.' Slova Putina vyzvali vozmushchenie," available at [<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/russia-putin-about-lands/30684930.html>], 7 May, 2021.

⁴¹ Ya. Shimov, "'Podarki ot russkogo naroda.' Kto i kak perekirailu kartu SSSR," available at [<https://www.svoboda.org/a/30686453.html>], 7 May, 2021.

Only a year later, in July 2021, it became clear from the article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”⁴² that Putin was referring to Ukraine in his interview a year earlier. However, there was no explanation from the Kremlin in 2020, except for Dmitry Peskov’s comment, thus, the leaders of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Baltic states and other states bordering on Russia were alarmingly wary of whether Putin had them in mind when he mentioned Russia’s territorial gifts?

Nikonov’s statement sounded amid the high level of securitization of Russia in Kazakhstan and was perceived in the context of Putin’s interview. Nikonov’s statement acquired a completely different meaning in Kazakhstan, with more weight than just another territorial claim made by a Russian deputy. Although the reaction was explicitly a response to Nikonov’s statement, it was implicitly referring to the statement of Putin-Nikonov. In this form, this statement had a completely different weight and meaning, which predetermined Kazakhstan’s reaction to the statement.

Conclusion

The research carried out by the authors demonstrates that the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity occupy an important place in relations between Kazakhstan and Russia. The unprecedented reaction of Kazakhstan to the statement made by Russian State Duma deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov about the historical belonging of northern Kazakhstan to Russia proves that the issue of the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan in relations with Russia has not lost its relevance over time, moreover, it has intensified. In its post-Soviet foreign policy, Kazakhstan is one of the countries for which relations with Russia are of priority importance. Russia builds its relations with neighboring countries on the post-Soviet sovereignty concept, so Kazakhstan has to make concessions of economic, financial and other types of sovereignty. However, as the history of Kazakh-Russian relations shows, Kazakhstan does not make concessions in matters of territorial integrity and other fundamental aspects of its sovereignty.

The image of Russia as a strategic partner of Kazakhstan is of great importance in the relations between Kazakhstan and Russia, as it contributes to the strengthening of trust. From 1991 to the mid-2000s, it was easier for Kazakhstan to maintain the image of Russia as a strategic partner, since Russia’s economic weakness had made it more difficult to implement neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space. Since the mid-2000s, Russia has been pursuing an open neo-imperial policy in the post-Soviet space, fostering its image as a threat, even in states loyal to Russia, such as Kazakhstan. The increasing securitization of Russia requires great efforts from Kazakhstan to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

⁴² “Statiya Vladimira Putina ‘Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkikh i ukrainsev’,” available at [<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>], 14 July, 2021.