

Kazakh Capitals and the Construction of Kazakh National Identity in the Post-Soviet Period (1991-2011)



by

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Abstract (in English)

This thesis explores the urban landscapes of the two major cities in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Astana and Almaty. Analysis of their urban architecture, organization of public spaces and toponymy provides information about the identity and the identification of the country in the twenty-first century. The main sources for this research are texts produced by geographers, graphic representations (mainly photographs and postcards) and several textbooks on the history of Kazakhstan.

The primary research questions include how historical and political change (mainly the transition from Soviet domination to national independence in the 1990s) influenced the urban landscape, the role of the urban landscape in construction of national (self-) identification, and what symbolizes “Kazakhness”.

From the temporal point of view, the study attempts a diachronic comparison of Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan. From the spatial point of view, the analysis of the urban landscape in two cities located in different parts of the country with different histories and geographies helps to reveal different, heterogeneous territories that are part of one country. Astana is the capital of Kazakhstan, a city with the sharpest contrasts between “past” and “contemporary” styles of architecture and construction. During the Soviet period, it was a peripheral agrarian city; in 1997 it became the national capital. Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest city and former capital, is a place with a unique landscape and microclimate (it is wedged in a mountain valley) that has retained a special status as one of the main cultural and business centers of Central Asia.

Kazašská hlavní města a konstrukce kazašské národní identity v post-sovětském období (1991-2011)

V centru pozornosti této práce je otázka identity a identifikace Kazachstánu a jeho obyvatel v postsovětském období, kterou zkoumá prostřednictvím analýzy městské krajiny obou hlavních měst: nově ustavené Astany a původní/opuštěné Almaty. Analýza jejich městské architektury, organizace veřejných prostranství a toponymie poskytuje informace o identitě a identifikaci země po secesi ze svazku sovětských republik. Hlavními zdroji pro tento výzkum jsou texty z produkce geografů, grafická znázornění (hlavně fotografie a pohlednice) a několik učebnic o historii Kazachstánu.

Primární výzkumné otázky zahrnují jak historické a politické změny (zejména přechod ze sovětské nadvlády k získání národní nezávislosti v devadesátých letech dvacátého století), jež ovlivnily městskou krajinu, otázka o roli městské krajiny v konstrukci národní (sebe) identifikace a otázka o elementech, které symbolizují “kazašství”.

Z časového hlediska se studie pokouší o diachronní srovnání sovětského a post-sovětského Kazachstánu. Z prostorového hlediska, analýza městské krajiny ve dvou městech v různých částech země s různou historií a v různých geografických podmínkách pomáhá odhalit heterogenní území, která jsou součástí jednoho státu. Astana, jako nové hlavní město Kazachstánu, město s nejostřejším kontrastem mezi “minulostí” a “modernitou” ve stylu architektury a v urbanismu. Během sovětské éry, to bylo periferní agrární město; v roce 1997 se stalo hlavním městem. Almaty, bývalé hlavní město, je stále největším městem a místem s jedinečnou krajinou a mikroklimatem (zaklíněné v horském údolí), které si uchovalo zvláštní postavení jako jedno z hlavních kulturních a obchodních center ve střední Asii.

I hereby declare that I researched and wrote this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.

Paris, 15 June 2013

Nariman Shelekpayev

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nariman Shelekpayev', written in a cursive style.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Table of contents..... | 3 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| A Note on the Conceptualization of Kazakh Cities..... | 8 |
| Chapter 1 | |
| Almaty: The City and its Identity | 12 |
| I. What Did the City Look Like and Who Were its Inhabitants..... | 14 |
| II. How Does Almaty Appear Today and What Are its Main Identification Markers..... | 18 |
| III. Almaty’s Republic Square..... | 23 |
| Chapter 2 | |
| Astana: Fort, Town, City | 30 |
| I. The Choice of the Capital and the Morphology of Astana..... | 32 |
| II. Between the Two Pasts..... | 42 |
| III. Reading the Left Bank..... | 45 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| City Toponymy in Almaty and Astana | 51 |
| I. The Case of Almaty..... | 52 |
| II. The Case of Astana..... | 57 |
| III. Similarities and Differences..... | 59 |
| IV. Intentions and “Reality”..... | 61 |
| Chapter 4 | |
| Identities, Continuities and Power: “Astanisation” as a Surrogate of National Identity ...65 | |
| I. Symbols “à la carte” for the Construction of National Identity before “Astanisation”..... | 66 |
| II. Haussmann, Foster and Kurokawa | 73 |
| III. Utopia, Myths and Legitimacy..... | 83 |
| IV. The use of Space. Back to “Imagined Communities”..... | 88 |
| <i>A quoi ça sert?</i> Conclusive remarks | 92 |
| Bibliography | 95 |

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¹ In alphabetical order.

Introduction

Vaclav Havel, first president of Czech Republic, wrote in 1993: “For long decades, the chief nightmare of the democratic world was communism. Today—three years after it began to collapse like an avalanche—it would seem as though another nightmare has replaced it: post-communism. There were many, not just in the West, but in the East as well, who had been looking forward for years to the fall of communism, and who had hoped that its collapse would mean that history had at last come to its senses. Today, these same people are seriously worried about the consequences of that fall. Some of them may even feel a little nostalgic for a world that was, after all, slightly more transparent and understandable than the present one.”²

It is uneasy to say if the communist world was more transparent, but before 1991, thanks to clear ideological “settings,” it definitely was more understandable from both sides of the iron curtain. “More understandable” implies both a category of analysis and one of practice; both inside and outside. But is post-Communism so dreadful?

The Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s following unsuccessful reforms, unfavorable economic conditions and rise of democratic movements inside the Union. By October 1991 fourteen Soviet republics declared their independence from Russia. Each country consequently had its own experience due to some unique historical, social and geopolitical factors, but in all of them democratic and national rhetoric used in attempts to break from the Soviet ideological past became dominant feature of the “transformation” or “transition” period.

Kazakhstan was no exception. The ideological and cultural spheres experienced ideological updating, which led to changes of public discourses and representations. “National” became a keyword. Abandoned and useless for seventy years, national history, traditions and roots were reinvented and reinterpreted. The Kazakh language was to become national language: linguists began to create new words in an attempt to modernize rich but archaic vocabulary and make it usable. Russian was still spoken by everyone and everywhere but Russians became a minority or had to become a minority even though they constituted a dominant ethnic group in many regions of Kazakhstan. *Les lieux de mémoire* were created in order to replace featureless

² Vaclav Havel, “Post-Communist nightmare”, *New York Book Review*, April 1993.

Soviet monuments. Toponymic changes, that is changes in the names of places, became common. Nationalization of institutions, currencies and public places manifested the Kazakh appropriation of their country that finally got rid of the Soviets.

The transition was complicated. Toponymy and portraits on banknotes could be changed and government resolutions could be translated and published in the national language but people, the very same people who had lived in the Soviet Union, remained. And if the working and middle classes were mainly passive observers during the “transition” period, the situation of the elites was more ambiguous. The “old” Soviet elites were not or could not be removed because there were no other elites to replace them.

These social, economic, political, and cultural changes require analysis and conceptualization. Various scholars have produced a number of studies dedicated to the “transformation period”. However these works emphasized political or economical aspects of the transition and its main actors, while the impacts on important urban centers and the representations shaping their identities have been studied less or, in some cases, not studied at all. The question to understand is not only how the transformation from Soviet to “national” occurred, but also what kind of impact it produced on key cities and, consequently, on the people’s self-identification, and to what extent a political transformation from “outside” led to a changing of identities from “inside.”

The research is based on the example of two cities, one being the former capital of a state within the Soviet Union and the other being the new, contemporary capital of an independent Kazakhstan. The former, Almaty, is a city with a particular natural landscape, microclimate, and history. Despite losing its status of the capital city, it maintains an important position in country’s life and its population is growing steadily. The latter, Astana, was founded in the nineteenth century but acquired a new identity after it became the capital of Kazakhstan in 1997. It is sometimes called a “branding” and “advertising” project of Kazakh power. Presently Astana is the most rapidly growing city in the country and a magnet for internal migrants.

The term “identity” is ambiguous, overused and confusing. However, I employ it, because the use of this term is not an objective *per se* but rather a guiding light. This paper does not tend to deconstruct the term “identity” or what is meant by it explicitly or implicitly in different texts and circumstances. A considerable number of academic and popular works on

“identity” (human, urban, regional, national etc.) was produced by different authors starting with Sigmund Freud and ending with Rogers Brubaker, but the concepts in them are contradictory and confusing, making “correct” definitions merely impossible.³

However, I proceed from the assumption that an identity does not have immutable, innate characteristics.⁴ Rather, it is constructed by different actors in constant interaction with each other. Thus, identity is a mosaic comprised of different tiles or a picture constantly drawn by many painters: some of the colors and lines crumble and have to be replaced, while some remain relatively constant over time and space. What is important is *how* the entire picture looks, and if the parts are in harmony with the whole of the picture. Additional issues are *who* creates the picture and *what* motivation they have for doing so. However, in this study, “identity” per se is not a category of analysis or an initial object of research. The task here is to describe the urban reality of two cities and compare them, providing necessary conceptualizations in order to draw conclusions about Kazakhstan’s contemporary identity after twenty years of independent state-building.

³ Claude Levi-Strauss once characterized identity as a kind of virtual hearth: something non-existing in real life, to which one must turn in order to explain certain things (*foyer virtuel, une limite à quoi ne correspond en réalité aucune expérience*).³ (*L'Identité, Séminaire interdisciplinaire dirigé par Claude Levi-Strauss, professeur au Collège de France, 1974-1975 - Paris, Grasset, 1977, p. 332.*) Rogers Brubaker’s texts (Rogers Brubaker – Frederick Cooper, *Beyond Identity*, “Theory and Society”, 29 (2000): 1-47), despite a skepticism concerning the usage of the term “identity”, has been a helpful antidote against my initial over-enthusiasm for “constructivist clichés” and provided a few terms that allow more precise formulation in order to avoid overusing of the term “identity”.

⁴ Wojciech Sadursky, *Equality and Legitimacy*, New York 2008, p.116.

The essential physical means of a city's existence are the fixed site, the durable shelter, the permanent facilities of assembly, interchange, and storage; the essential social means are the social division of labor, which serves not merely the economic life but the cultural processes. The city in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity.⁵

Lewis Mumford, 1937.

Conceptualizing Kazakh cities poses several challenges. Some of them are common for urban studies in general, including searching for acceptable definitions, balancing between quantitative and qualitative data and appropriate approaches, among others. Apart from this, a specific “Kazakh” problem results from the fact that Kazakh society traditionally was nomadic, thereby making the entire discourse, parallels and tools for its conceptualization somehow different from those applied to sedentary cultures. Before describing the modern cities of Almaty and Astana, a few words about the general history of the emergence of Kazakh cities are necessary.

In the post-Mongol period, in terms of urbanism and urban culture, the most developed territory of today's Kazakhstan was its southern part. Settlements in the central part appeared as winter camps established by the nomads that gradually were transformed into sedentary points, acquiring functional roles as centers of trade and logistics. The Silk Road, for instance, passed along several medieval cities in the southern part of today's Kazakhstan. Large settlements were almost always residences of rulers for various structured or semi-structured entities. The

5 Lewis Mumford, “What is a City?” in *The City Reader*, New-York 2011, p.91-96.

settlements across northern, north-western and north-eastern parts of Kazakhstan emerged as fortresses founded by the Russian Empire, as the outlying borders of the state that were used as a springboard for southern expansion. The expansion was very successful: by the second half of nineteenth century, the Russian Empire completely dominated Kazakhstan and Central Asia. The territory of central Kazakhstan was, with rare exceptions, settled by nomads, permanently roaming from place to place and having no constant settlements even in the nineteenth century.

Since the eighteenth century, the emergence and transformation of settlements started along with the process of the sedentarization of nomads. Looking globally at this process, it is clear that from the early nineteenth century until the 1930s, the cultural and economic integration of nomads with people sent by the Russian Imperial and later the Soviet administrations gradually occurred; Kazakhs developed contacts with Russian-speaking, semi-Cossack, semi-military settlements. In the second half of the nineteenth century southern Kazakhstan territories also became part of the Russian Empire: Vernyj (the previous name for Almaty) was founded in 1854. This integration and absorption process, relatively peaceful under Tsarism, became rather violent in late 1920s and early 1930s when a policy of forced industrialization and collectivization (called “dispossession of the kulaks”) took place. More than a million Kazakhs left their homeland for China, Mongolia, Turkey and other places. Those who remained had to accept new rules, give up cattle breeding and move closer to industrial zones. Historian and anthropologist, Nurbulat Masanov, wrote that “Kazakh nomadic ethnics, which started to appear in sixteenth century died in the 1930s”⁶ During the Second World War many factories and plants were moved to Kazakhstan from the western Soviet Union: it gave another huge impulse to the process of industrialization. As a result, due to migration factors⁷ and rapid forced industrialization, new centers as well as new peripheries appeared. Newly emerged industrial clusters transformed previous unstructured settlements into functional urban centers, which eventually formed the shape of modern Kazakhstan.

Can these young urban centers be called “cities”? If yes, then from which moment of their existence can this label start to be applied to them? Another important question to consider is: to what extent is it possible to conceptualize Kazakh cities using “Western” tools and

⁶ Nurbulat Masanov, “Mifologizatsia Etnogenezisa Kazakhskogo Naroda I Kazakhskoi Nomadnoi Kulturi” in *Nauchnoe Znanie i Mifotvorchestvo v Sovremennoi Kazakhskoi Istoriografii*, Almaty 2007, p.52-131.

⁷ Stalin sent hundreds of thousands of political prisoners to Kazakhstan.

bibliographies? Research on the concept of the city is not the objective of this thesis but it seems necessary to discuss a couple of ideas on the essential features and qualities of a city which at different times caught my attention.

Bernard Lepetit ironically wrote of “myths-founders: immobility, city wall and ancience”.⁸ Fernand Braudel insisted that “a simple requirement to any urban center, and the condition of its effectiveness is the spatial closeness. The city should collect, congest shops, markets, houses, artisans, people... But first of all any city should prevail on something. And while giving definition or evaluation it is important to consider how big the territories under the city’s influence are.”⁹ Brigitte Marin suggested that the fundamental difference between Italian medieval city from a “non-city” or “under-city” was the presence of the bishop and his residence.¹⁰ (Braudel provided earlier a similar example of competition between medieval Carpentres and Avignon for installation of the court, which gave a certain status and weight to the city.)

But, as was previously mentioned, until the nineteenth century Kazakh society was mainly nomadic, so there was not so much immobility and congestion of people in a limited space, which is considered a prototype or a promise of future cities. There were, indeed, settlements within the town walls on the territories of Kazakhstan, but their inhabitants were not considered Kazakhs by the rest of population: being Kazakh meant living in the Steppe and being mobile.

Clergy residences’ criterion can be useful (for example in the case of Vernyj in which was the residence of Turkestan and Tashkent’s bishop in the late nineteenth century) but in Kazakhstan, the presence or non-presence of a religious hierarch in a particular place depended mainly on the supreme authority. In the steppe, religion was not a double of or a counterweight to centralized power - as it was for centuries in Europe - but only its legitimizing appendix. As for the Soviet period, religions were either prohibited or invisible: there could be no question of any bishop’s residence.

⁸ Bernard Lepetit, “L’évolution de la notion de ville d’après les tableaux et descriptions géographiques de la France (1650-1850)”, *Urbi, II*, 1979, pp. XCIX-CXVIII.

⁹ Fernand Braudel, *L’identité de la France* (vol. I, Espace et histoire), Paris 1986, pp. 158-167.

¹⁰ See for example, L. Coudroy de Lille, J.-Ch. Depaule, B. Marin, C. Topalov, *L’aventure des mots de la ville à travers le temps, les langues, les sociétés*, Paris 2010.

Does this mean that there were no “real” cities on the territories of Kazakhstan? Yes and no. In any case, cities there appeared lately and their quality and functions were significantly different from those “historical” cities with visible or invisible walls, described by Fernand Braudel, Marcel Roncayolo or Henri Lefebvre. Several examples, taken from different authors in previous paragraphs, show how far the “European” “reality” differs from a Kazakh one. That is why, on the one hand, I often consciously reject the term “city” for the term “settlement”; it has neutrality and a smaller conceptual load. This does not mean that what is called “settlement” did not have or could not have real or imaginary “city” aspects. I just want to take less responsibility for using the term, the propriety and correctness of which I have no way to prove or reinforce with data. On the other hand, in those cases when the word “city” is used, it will be done functionally rather than “historically”.

Claude Levi-Strauss once wrote that anyone can propose any paradigm on the condition that necessary explanations and the intentions of the author are provided. Thus, the methodology of this research does not consist of searching for historical parallels or “appropriate” definitions to define the city on the basis of its past,¹¹ but rather to look at today’s Astana and Almaty in terms of certain functional criteria, including residential, administrative, industrial, tertiary/services, cultural, and educational factors, and also statistics. A certain quantity of people living compactly who are not predominantly employed in agriculture, a concentration of diverse and highly specialized production, and a large number of educational, cultural and administrative institutions situated in one limited area are the main criteria. Such approach has its limitations, but it is adopted here as the most rational one.

¹¹ An example of such an approach would be to call “city” a settlement on a river or nearby a source of potable water, likely founded by Romans, having visible or invisible city wall, a legal basis for existence coming from Middle Ages (like Nurnberg law), and obviously ex-residence or capital of a bishop or a ruler. One of these criteria or their combination would be enough to say that A or B is a city.

CHAPTER ONE

Almaty: The City and Its Identity

Identity begins with a name. Therefore, before discussing streets, squares, landmarks and public places, it is necessary to say a few words about the name of the city and the evolution of and any changes in its name. Emergence and crystallization of a name is a complex process and identifiable modifications in the evolution of naming can tell a lot about the past and the present of the place. In the case of Almaty, the Central State Archives of Kazakhstan contain documents dating back to 1853, when a subject of Russian Empire, Colonel Peremyshelskij mentioned and recommended to his superiors a place for a future settlement. He described,

[...] two Almatov hills and a valley between them, convenient for getting wood; with a lot of beautiful lands, full of ditches, pastures and haylands far bigger than the Issyk and Talgar tracks. [...]¹²

The fact that Peremyshelsky mentions the ditches suggests that there existed a previous settlement or settlements on the given territory, and subsequent archaeological researches confirm this. However, it is thought that modern Almaty's history started in 1854, when the Russian government decided to build a fortification called *Zailiiskoe* on the left bank of the river *Malaya Almatinka*. This fortification was renamed Verniy the following year. Later the city twice changed its name. In the Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary (1890-1916), the most complete and solid encyclopedia of prerevolutionary Russian Empire (which also included Kazakhstan), there is a separate article dedicated to Verniy. It states,

When we [Russian Empire, N.S.] occupied the Trans-Ili region in 1853 and subordinated the Great Horde of Kyrgyz¹³ in 1854, a new fortification of Verniy was founded on the place of the former settlement of Alma-Aty (Apple Valley), to protect the latter from the raids of savage Kara-Kyrgyz. So, Verniy fortification was the first administrative center

¹² Hereinafter author's own translation from Russian into English.

¹³ The Russian Colonial Administration called ethnic Kazakhs Kyrgyz until the twentieth century. A clear distinction between Kyrgyz and Kazakhs "appeared" in the twentieth century during the first territorial reforms of the Soviet Government.

of the Alatau district of the Semipalatinsk region. Later, the formation of the Turkestan Military District and the Semirechensk Region led to the establishment of administrative center of the region in loco under the name of Verny. Natives and partly Russians, however, kept calling it Alma-Aty.¹⁴

This laconic but substantial passage, hints at a double toponymy of the city which led to differences in identification and, perhaps, self-identification of its inhabitants and the multifaceted identity of the city: Alma-Ata for some, Verny for others. At the turn to the twentieth century Kazakh society was not uniform, the Nation-State as such did not exist, and ethnic Kazakhs could not influence the place-naming or the city-naming of their own country. The only thing they could do was to keep calling a place in their own way, as a force of habit or opposition. In 1921, after the October Revolution, Verny was renamed *Alma-Ata*. The old name irritated Bolsheviks: Verny literary meant “loyal” (to the tsar) and was unacceptable after 1917. The city’s new name was a russified version of the Kazakh *Alma-Aty*. “Alma” in Kazakh means “apple” and “ata” – “father”. Further, for a long time the Soviets linked these two random words in order to construct a common meaning, although the linkage was untenable from the point of view of Kazakh grammar and stylistics. While collecting material for this chapter I stumbled upon information that *Alma-Ata* is nothing but an artificial name, invented by Russian-speaking members of Tashkent Communist Party members during a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the former Verny in 1921. This interesting version deserves careful and critical consideration, because if it is true, it shows again how insignificant the participation of local Kazakhs was in decision-making concerning their own country.

An article from the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1969-1978) provides an etymological hint about the name of the city, when it mentions the Slavicized version of the name, that is, Yablonevoe, which can be roughly translated as “apple-ness”.¹⁵ Therefore, it is certain that apples

¹⁴ Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary in 86 volumes, article: *Verny*. Saint-Petersbourg, 1890—1907, author’s translation from Russian.

¹⁵ *Yablonevoe* means “related to apples”.

are “recorded” in the name of the city and its identity: in fact, Almaty is famous for its fruit, in particular apples. In 1993, after independence, Almaty was renamed again, or rather its name was corrected to reflect Kazakh grammar and stylistics: Alma-Ata became Almaty. This time, the renaming process was quite different compared to 1921. At the end of the twentieth century it was full of tensions and controversies. The society was split into two camps: those pro and those contra renaming. To some, *Alma-Aty* symbolized a Soviet yesterday, not cloudless but stable, while *Almaty* seemed to be a recent and bizarre novelty, and even a sort of “mockery” of the old name brought about through forced “kazakhisation”.¹⁶

Thus, an interesting chapter in the history of the politics of identity can be observed in how in twentieth-century Kazakhstan the change of toponymy accompanied the changes of regimes and governments. It is ironic that renaming from “foreign” into “native” was often accompanied by references and citations from non-Kazakh sources and authors, including Peremyshelskij, Semenov-Tyan-Shansky, Abramov and others.

What Did the City Look Like and Who Were its Inhabitants?

Russian historian and geographer, Pyotr Petrovich Semenov-Tyan-Shansky, left a source of information about Vernyj. This source, a diary with evidence of his field work called “Journey to the Tian Shan in the years 1856-1857” contains only a fleeting mention of Vernyj:

During our last track section from Almaty picket to Verniy (35 miles) it started to get dark, and when we arrived to Verniy it was already a dark night. [...] I know that there were practically no houses built in Verniy, except one hastily put up for the inspector of the Great Horde. [...] Only a few of the wealthiest people built the foundations of their houses and managed to prepare some wood material for further construction. This material was great, straight as an arrow, combatant Tien Shan spruce trees (*Picea schrenkiana*), brought here from the Almaty Valley.¹⁷

¹⁶ See for ex. Nurbulat Masanov, “Perceptions of ethnic and all-national identity in Kazakhstan” in N.Oka (ed.), *The Nationalities Question in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan*, Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies, 2000.

¹⁷ Author’s translation.

This description sheds light on several things. First of all, at the moment when Semenov-Tian-Shansky visited Almaty, it was not a city or a town, but, at maximum, a settlement. In fact, Almaty was granted the status of a city ten years later, in 1867. The fact that Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky writes so much about spruces is not surprising: after all, he was not only historian and geographer, but also botanist.

The General Census of the Population of the Russian Empire dated 1897, shows that the urban situation in Vernyj changed radically: at the end of nineteenth century, it hosted 22744 people of both sexes.¹⁸ The ethnic composition was quite mixed. Less than two thousand people from the total indicated Kazakh as their native language.¹⁹ There were respectively 1970 and 1582 people who indicated Uyghur and Uzbek, 1220 who declared Chinese and 1211 who called Tatar their mother tongue. Russian was, however, the absolute “champion”. There were no less than 14511 people, or almost seventy percent of the population, that considered Russian to be their mother tongue. Almaty was a real melting pot.²⁰ Kazakhs, however, not only were not an absolute majority, but not even a simple one: they were just a rather big ethnic group in the city that became their capital during the biggest part of the twentieth century. The statistics of the Soviet period will register the same trends, namely a multiethnic population, as well as prevalence of non-Kazakhs in Almaty. Only in the twenty-first century did the situation started to change: according to the National Census of 2009, ethnic Kazakhs were the largest ethnic group living in the city with fifty-three percent of the total.²¹ Considering that it is difficult to change *nacional'nost* (ethnicity or nationality) in Kazakhstan from a legal point of view, it must mean that ethnic proportions really changed or the statistics are faulty.

Another interesting source from the beginning of the twentieth century is the nineteenth volume of the *Full Geographic Description of our Fatherland*, dedicated to the Turkestanskij Kraj, which V. Masalsky prepared and V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky edited. In it they provided a

¹⁸ N.A. Troinitskiy, *First General Census of the Population of Russian Empire, 1897*, published in 1899-1904. [Н.А.Тройницкий, *Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи, 1897 г.* / *Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи, 1897 г.*, 1899-1904.], author's translation from Russian.

¹⁹ For Semirechensky **Region** statistics were quite different: Kazakhs were a dominant ethnic group everywhere but in the city of Verniy.

²⁰ The relation between “nationality” or *ethnie* and mother tongue can be argued, but there is no better data for the period under study.

²¹ *2009 General Census*, Kazakhstan National Statistics Agency, www.stat.kz.

following description:

All of the provincial institutions were concentrated in Verniy including the residences of the military governor and the bishop of Turkestan and Tashkent. The overall population reaches thirty seven thousand people (twenty six thousand were Russians and the rest were Uyghurs, Dungans, Sarts, Tatars and Kyrgyz²²). The town boasted 2100 houses, nine churches, four mosques, eighteen schools, a small museum, 66 factories and plants with 313 workers. Its revenue was 199.515 rubles with expenses totalling 119.113 rubles. [...] The natives still called it Almaty (“Apple City”)²³. Verniy could hardly be called a comfortable city; the streets were very large and well-planned but still not paved and covered with dust that rose when vehicles or pedestrians passed over them. [...] The buildings were small, one-storeyed and mostly wooden, which is very practical since earthquakes were common in Verniy...²⁴

Through this attentive and thorough description many things become clearer including the toponymy confusion, details on city planning, and the nature of houses and building materials. The wood, that Semyonov-Tian-Shansky mentioned in 1856-1857 still was dominated as the main building material in the end of the nineteenth century: not only because of its abundance and accessibility, but also because it helped the city to manage the seismic danger. Verniy grew very rapidly and began to resemble, at least from a functional point of view, a true city. Above all, the main characteristics of Almaty and its clear “self” began to be identifiable: mountains, apples, warm climate, seismic *angoisses* and an ethnic tossed salad based on a solid Russian community. Further evidence adds to the image of Almaty in the early twentieth century:

²² In fact Masalsky uses the ethnonym “Taranshi”(тапанчи in Russian) for Dungans. He also designates Uzbeks as Sarts and Kazakhs as Kyrgyz. For more details see Masalskiy, V.L., *Russia. Full Geographic Description of our Fatherland. Volume 9. Territory of Turkestan*, Saint-Petersbourg, 1913. [*Rossija. Pol'noe geografičeskoe opisanie naiego otečestva. Volume 9, Turkestanskij Kraj*, Saint-Petersbourg, 1913.] Author's translation from Russian.

²³ Ibid, p.770.

²⁴ Ibid.

[In 1909 there were] 66 factories and plants (two vodka-distilleries, one brewery, seven dairies, four tanneries, three tobacco processing plants etc.) with 313 workers and a total productivity of 800.000 rubles per year; as well as military, public and commercial assemblies.²⁵

It is interesting to note that of the 66 industrial units in 1909, only those that processed food were mentioned. Apparently the city industry worked mostly for inner consumption. The mention of two vodka-distilleries is worth noting.²⁶ It was typical for the Russian Empire to construct vodka-distilleries on conquered territories, since the alcoholization of the indigenes had been part of imperial policy.²⁷ But there was nothing new about such policy: Braudel wrote about Romans who conquered Gauls with the help of the wine.²⁸

It is useful to compare information on economy and production given in pre-revolutionary sources with data from Soviet and post-Soviet periods in order to understand better how the city grew and developed. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia depicts a totally different city fifty years later:

145 plants and factories in 1967. The main sectors are alimentary (36 percent of total production) based on local products and light industry (31 percent). The main food industries are: meat-preserving, flour-grinding and pasta factories, dairy, winery, brewery, liquor and vodka distilleries, tobacco and yeast factories, confectionery and tea-packing factories. Light industry is represented by textile and fur production centers, cotton-spinning factory, knitted goods factory, shoe and clothing factory as well as printing plant etc. Heavy industries are mechanical engineering, electric plants, foundries,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that Russians themselves were important consumers of vodka and since Verniy was populated primarily by Russians, there was certainly a demand for it from Russians themselves.

²⁷ “Drunken people are easier to rule”: legendary expression, attributed to Russian Empress Catherine II. A literature on alcoholism in Russian Empire is vast. See, for example, I.I. Pantikhov (1909) and A.P.Bogdanov (mid XIX century) apud A. M. Ziukov, *Proiskhojdenie kriminalnoi etnopolitiki Rossiskoi Imperii*, Vladimir 2008, p.66.

²⁸ Fernand Braudel, *L'Identité de la France*, vol. 1, Chapter 3, “Le test décisif : la frontière”, Paris 1999.

wagon repair plant, ball bearing factory; building, construction, woodworking and reinforced concrete structure plants etc.²⁹

Undoubtedly, the appearance of the Turksib railway (1930) and the airport which connected the city with the rest of the Soviet Union contributed to Almaty's astounding growth.³⁰ Between 1941 and 1945, when the Soviet Union was fighting against Nazi Germany, due to the wartime evacuation of the industries from western to eastern regions of the Soviet Union, the industrial potential of Almaty increased again. The economically active population jumped from 104,000 in 1919 to 365,000 in 1968. By 1967 Almaty had a developed and rather balanced industry, although food production was the most important part of it. The city was inhabited by 684,000 people versus 37,000 in 1913.

In terms of economy and production, contemporary, post-socialist Almaty inherited many features from the Soviet past. There are indicators of deindustrialization, but in general production remains focused on food and light industry. The city's population continues to increase and is now about 1.5 million officially; unofficially the number is close to two million including the inner city and metropolitan area. The latter number includes unregistered seasonal migrants and workers from other regions and countries, students and tourists, among others.³¹

Did Almaty preserve its particular features mentioned by nineteenth century authors? How did the "self" of the city transform in the light of extensive growth and industrialization? It is best to answer these questions using some empirical evidences, including photos and maps.

How Does Almaty Appear Today and What Are Its Main Identification Markers?

When seen from bird's eye perspective, Almaty has classical rectangular urban planning. A net of vertical and horizontal streets divide it into visible and symmetrical squares. This planning creates a resemblance to some European cities which inherited the structure of Roman castrums. Such

²⁹ Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopediya, 1968-1978, article "Almaty", author's translation from Russian.

³⁰ The Turkestan-Siberia line was one of the largest and most ambitious of the early Soviet projects, the railway arteria connecting Siberia and Central Asia.

³¹ Sharip Kurakbaev, *Almaty's social and economic problems are exacerbated by the influx of rural folk* (RCA Issue 54), Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2005.

resemblance is, however, illusive: Romans, unlike Slavs and Germans, built their military camps on uplands while Almaty is situated in a valley. Another “anti-castrum” argument would be that Almaty does not possess a clear compositional unit such as a forum or plaza. Before the October Revolution a similar unit might have been Gostinodvorskaya Square. Later, during the Soviet Union several important public spaces were created, but none of them was a central one. It is important to note that the ideas of three prerevolutionary Russian architects Krishtanovsky, Serebriakov and Gourdé, who worked on Almaty city plans in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century did not undergo fundamental changes during Communism and even in the twenty-first century. The city was growing and changing but did not lose the squareness characterizing its “planning identity”. By the way of contrast, the use of frontal projection views bring to light the multi-dimensional and irregular nature of Almaty’s landscape: city, mountains and sky.



(Fig. 1) Panoramic view of Almaty³²

Administratively Almaty is divided into seven districts which are in turn divided into quarters or microdistricts (in peripheral parts of the city).

³² Photograph from the site: www.voxpopoli.kz, saved on 12/09/2012.



(Map 1) Almaty's districts³³ Alatauskij (orange), Almalinskij (yellow), Auezovskij (dark blue), Bostandykskij (violet), Medeuskiy (red), Turksibskij (light blue) and Zhetysuskij (green) Districts.

Almaty's cityscape is unimaginable without mountains. It is the only city in Kazakhstan where mountains (not hills) are visible and easily accessible.³⁴ But Almaty's "embedding" is not immediate, like in some Alpine or Pyrenean towns or villages where mountains are sometimes in the very city and houses literally cling to them, producing a feeling of a settlement climbing the mountains.

Braudel wrote about the "domestication" of European mountains comparing them to the "untamed" and inaccessible Andes. The mountains nearby Almaty are well studied but not very tamed: they represent not only beauty but also danger. Two destructive earthquakes (1887 and 1910), small earthquakes happening from time to time each year, as well as strong mud flows threaten the city, making it fragile and sensible. Giacomo Leopardi complained that "nature is not

³³ A photo from the official site of the city of Almaty: www.almaty.kz, saved on 23/10/2012.

³⁴ Except some private chalets there are no large-scale construction projects in Zailiskiy Alatau. Mountains are considered dangerous to live upon. Except Medeu skating-rink which was in the first place the ideological project and anti-mudflow barriers constructed during Communism, Alatau remains a place for alpinism, *randonnées* and skiing.

a mother but an evil step-mother of human beings”.³⁵ The whole history of Almaty is a proof of this *frase sfrezante*, proof of the struggle between man and nature. Many things were done to protect the city and its inhabitants in the second half of twentieth century, including a series of anti-mud consolidations and special anti-seismic building strategies. Nevertheless, the city is never in complete safety.

Almaty differs from other cities in Kazakhstan by its flora and inimitable vegetable kingdom, which includes a diversity of vegetables, fruits, plants, flowers and trees. Almaty is called city-garden thanks to dozens of parks and public gardens situated *intra muros*. This phenomenon is a combination of natural and human factors, to be discussed next, starting with Almaty’s soil, then moving to its climate and water supply.

The soil structure in Almaty is to a large extent determined by the vertical zonality of Zailiskiy Alatau: the natural environment as well as the soil-vegetable zones change according to elevation. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky, as far back as mid nineteenth century mentioned “five [soil] zones situated one above another like five floors”.³⁶ Almaty is situated between 600 and 2200 meters above sea level, with a center at a height of 785 meters above the sea. A very large diapason between 600 and 2200 meters includes three zones: piedmont-steppe, forest-meadow and piedmont (which is divided into two subzones: chestnut soil subzone and high piedmont subzone). All three zones are highly fertile; the level of humus is between eight and thirteen percent. This is an incredibly high indicator of soil fertility for Kazakhstan, where similar indicators barely reach four-five percent on average and in Western Kazakhstan they are sometimes below two percent.³⁷

Almaty is situated at a relatively low latitude (it is the same level as Marseille, for example). Its climate is sometimes depicted as acutely continental, which is not completely correct. We have already mentioned that Almaty is situated in Zailiskiy Alatau, the foothills of Tian-Shan. These foothills protect the city from strong winds and create a sort of greenhouse effect. For decades,

³⁵ Giacomo Leopardi, *Ultimo canto di Saffo*, in *Canti*, Rome 1996, pp.67-73.

³⁶ Semenov-Tian-Shansky, P. P., *Puteshestvie v Tian-Shan v 1856-1857*, [Путешествие в Тянь-Шань в 1856-1857 гг.] [*Travels in the Tian'-Shan 1856-1857*], Moscow 1947, pp.138-141, author’s translation into English.

³⁷ B.N. Nuralin, *Technicheskoe obespechenie sobranenia i vosstanovleniya plodorodiya pochvi v usloviakh Zapadnogo Kazakhstana* (Ph.D. dissertation), author’s abstract, Orenburg 2011, p.21.

average annual temperature in Almaty has been around plus ten degrees Celsius. Almaty boasts relatively mild temperatures in winter: while the average temperature here in January is -2,8 degrees Celsius, in Astana the same number reaches -12 degrees Celsius.

Water and its abundance are very important features of Almaty. Rivers, flowing down from the mountains, provide the city with clean water and energy: eleven hydroelectric power stations were built on the rivers Bolchaya [Big] and Malaya [Small] Almatynka. In addition to providing energy and potable water they nourish Almaty's aryks.³⁸

It is interesting to compare water issues in Astana and Almaty. In the landscape of both cities water is a very important marker of identity. In the case of Astana, the river was not visible in the city landscape until very recent times and had to be rediscovered or “invented” in order to decorate the city and give it a “capital-like” appearance. As for Almaty, it has always had rivers, which accumulate glacial waters originating from mountains. However, these rivers are also not visible, instead running in the city under the form of closed canals, called aryks, because they are too fast, unpredictable and savage. That is why there is no quay and promenade in Almaty. Still, this is a sophisticated irrigation system with important functions. The aryks feed plants and provide to the city an important feature of “central-asianness” or Central Asian civilization; because Almaty does not have so many bazaars, mosques and tea or coffee-houses.

Indeed, Almaty has a ramified system of aryks. In the twenty-first century they are rarely used for drinking or swimming, besides, the irrigation within the city gradually becomes less important. Aryks are clogged up from time to time, irritating the municipal government, but in summer they protect the city from heat. The quiet murmur of aryks is a typical sound accompanying pedestrians in Almaty in summer. Aryks are also part of checks and balances system against the surplus of mountain water. If there is too much melted or melting water the

³⁸ Aryk is a hydro-technical construction in form of irrigating canal in Central Asia. Aryks are normally used on the territories with dry climates, where planting without irrigation is impossible. Aryk is not a ditch nor a gutter, because the latter are used for the drain, while aryks are used for irrigating with relatively clean water. In the past there were specially nominated elders for the control of aryks and their activity. Aryks create their own biogeocenosis or ecosystem with plants and animals which need water. Earlier aryks were also used as a source of drinking water especially in the areas having no water supply system.

system helps to distribute it evenly and/or take it away from the city. Many non-locals spoke and wrote about Almaty aryks, in particular Soviet epoch writers: their works and memoirs helped to form a mental construction, related to the so-called “Soviet Almaty”. In a documentary essay by Yuriy Dombrovskij, dedicated to a Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbayev, the main Aryk of Almaty was mentioned at least once:³⁹

He lived nearby Main Aryk which was considered in those times a very distant place.

Farther there were no street lamps but a huge field overgrown with burs and full of swampy holes covered with green-blue scum.

Abai died in 1904, but the ryk already existed when the poet was alive. This simple juxtaposition indicated that by the beginning of the twentieth century at least one (main) aryk had already existed in Almaty. Aryks are indeed a very important part of the identity of Almaty, along with apples, mountains and gardens. If one tries to read Almaty structurally, *à la* Barthes⁴⁰, and its space as a system of signs, aryks have to be put in the coordinate system.

Almaty’s Republic Square

According to Pavel Šuška, places are both material things and sets of meanings. A distinction between the social production and social construction of place is necessary, though, since the former refers to the intended goal of which is the physically creating the material setting while the latter is the actual transformation of space through people’s social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of material setting into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning.⁴¹ Almaty has many significant public spaces that may deserve a study but Republic Square is a

³⁹ Yu. O. Dombrovsky (1909-1978), writer and publicist, author of novels: *Khranitel Drevnostej* [Ancience Keeper, English, N.S.] [*Хранитель древностей*, Russian] and *Fakultet Nenujnikh Veshei* [*Факультет ненужных вещей*, Russian] [Faculty of useless things, English, N.S.] which took place in pre-war Almaty. First came to Almaty in 1932 as a political exile. Later he was arrested five more times (four times for political disloyalty or other “political” articles) and each time went back from prison to Almaty. In 1960s moved to Moscow but almost each year came back to Kazakhstan.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *L’empire des Signes*, Paris 2005, pp.47-51, 84-87, 93-99, 112-117.

⁴¹ Pavel Šuška, “Constructing Identity and Place” in *Crossing Frontiers, Resisting Identities*, ed. by Lud’a Klusáková, Martin Moll ; with Jaroslav Ira ... [et al.], Pisa 2010, p.95.

representative example of a place where the material and the symbolic may be distinguished and deconstructed in order to understand not only the dialectical complexity of the Square itself but also that of the Kazakh State after 1991.

Republic Square in Almaty was the most important square of Kazakhstan from 1972 until 1997. In 1972 a decision was made to demolish old two-storied houses situated on the central North-South axis of the city. The construction of a new modern main square for an important capital of the Soviet Union started and was completed several years later. In 1997 Almaty passed its functions to Astana. The “golden age” of the square was, thus, the 25 years between 1972 and 1997.

It is necessary to start with a morphological description: the square is situated at an intersection of two central transport arteries, Baiseitov and Satpayev Streets. It is 580 meters long horizontally and 210 meters long vertically. There is a complex including stele, several sculptures and texts connected at compositional and symbolic levels in the center of the square: it is an object for ethno-symbolic analysis par excellence. The thoughtfully selected details and elements chosen to represent “kazakhness” are loaded with meaning. Three main iconemes on the surface of the square, containing important polysemantic elements are 1.) a stele (Golden Man, snow leopard and inscriptions) 2.) a sculptural composition around the stele and 3.) reliefs 18 meters away from the stele.



(Fig. 2) Independence Monument on the Republic Square in Almaty⁴²

The form of the stele is a reference, a “link” or a reminiscence of *Mangysblak Kultipas*, an ancient memorial site of Kazakh culture. “Golden Man” is a representation of a ruler, which was created on the basis of a 1969 archeological excavation in the burial mound of Issyk, near Almaty where an elegant Saka prince⁴³ or nobleman, wearing full dress and golden decorations was buried.

The question I ask is why was a Saka prince dating from the sixth century B.C. chosen to represent the Republic of Kazakhstan at the end of the twentieth century? Saka, even if considered by some Kazakh historians as “ancestors” of Kazakhs formally have less to do with them than, for instance, Turkic kagans or even more so the Kazakh Khans. One possible

⁴² Photograph from the site: www.myfoto.kz, saved on 10/08/2012.

⁴³ Or princess.

answer is that the choice was made for the sake of instrumental appropriation: the tumulus was excavated by Kazakh archeologists on Kazakh territory and the authors of the monument and the Commission that chose it among other projects wanted to emphasize that Kazakhs are real ancestors of the Saka. In the context of the 1990s when Central Asian countries were feverishly searching for attractive and powerful “ancestors”, such an appropriation was not at all surprising. Uzbekistan at that period turned itself to Timurids and Tajikistan to Aryans. The only exception was probably Turkmenistan where its leader, Saparmurat Niazov, created a regime with himself as the main “hero” and “father of the nation”: in fact all monuments, national celebrations, cultural and social life events were dedicated, controlled and focused on him.

Another explanation could be that a Saka prince was chosen due to a lack of choices among recent figures. The Soviet past was still too present in mid 1990s, and since history has been under constant reconsideration starting in 1991, all possible “representable” figures were or could become questionable.⁴⁴ As for Kazakh Khans, some of them were thought to be guilty of “collaborationism” or “excessive integration” with the Russian Empire and, thus, they were not completely ideologically “correct”.⁴⁵ Others were not acceptable because they ruled only in one of three Jüz⁴⁶ and not in other two. That is a likely reason why the choice was made in favor of a mythical Saka prince, who had no visible relationship with modern Kazakhstan. The snow leopard (lat. *Panthera Uncia*), is a rare animal, put into the Red Book and an unofficial symbol of Kazakhstan as well as the Golden Man. As for the inscriptions on the Stele, their content does not require special deconstruction. The dates of the acquisition of independence and proclamation of sovereignty are engraved on the stele’s façade. On the opposite side it is written that the Russian Federation, the United States, Great Britain and the People’s Republic of China respect the sovereignty, independence and borders of Kazakhstan. This inscription points to the countries which were considered important for Kazakhstan in the beginning of 1990s.

⁴⁴ I. V. Yerofeeva, “Events and People of Kazakh Steppe (late Middle Ages and Modern Time)” in *Scientific Knowledge and Myths of Modern Kazakh Historiography*, ed. by Reinhard Krumm, Almaty 2007, pp.132-224.

⁴⁵ A. Kuzembayev, Ye. Abil, *Istoriya Kazakhstana*, Astana 2001, pp.158-267.

⁴⁶ The meaning and origins of the jüz formations have been subject to different interpretations. Some researchers argued that originally jüz corresponded to tribal, military alliances of steppe nomads that emerged around mid-sixteenth century after the disintegration of the Kazakh Khanate. Others proposed that jüz are geographical ecological zones separated by natural boundaries. Nomads adapted to these geographical zones and developed nomadic migration routes within the natural boundaries.

The sculpture groups “Wise Sky” and, “Mother-Earth”, referring to Tengrianism⁴⁷, and two children riding foals, symbolizing youth and hope, are situated at the pedestal of the stele. On both sides of the Stele at a distance of eighteen meters there are ten horseshoe-shaped reliefs containing inscriptions. These relief-sculptures “envelop” the stele making it complete. The topics represented on the reliefs depict the most significant events in Kazakh history from ancient times until the present: protection of the Homeland, “Years of Great Disasters,”⁴⁸ the independence movement of 1920s, Second World War, Zheltoksan, proclamation of the independence, among other. It is important to note that many episodes from Kazakh history that are considered important, especially the 1986 Zheltoksan events, were represented explicitly in the main square of the State for the first time in history.⁴⁹ I read this as a clear ideological sign: in fact 1986 was the year when Kazakhs, for the first times in decades, started to be nationally-oriented, openly conflicting with official Soviet authorities.

In addition to the symbolic elements which identify or represent Kazakhstan in people’s imaginations, we can find nearby, on the same square, a number of other iconemes, ideologically neutral but significant for the landscape. Among the latter, two blocks from a building from the Brezhnev era and once part of the Kazakh government. These Soviet-era buildings, even if their appearance is ambiguous, are integrated into the Republic Square landscape and can be interpreted as a broader frame to the stele, sculptures and reliefs. Thus, at issue here is substratum-superstratum relationship between two overlapping layers of Soviet and “national” iconemes is at issue. But a final frame for the square, a substrate which is beyond ideology and the temporal dimension, is nature. Different things are meant and understood in different cities by nature, but in Almaty nature is mountains. So, nature remains, in case of Almaty, a raw material for the production of space.

⁴⁷ Ancient pagan religion of Kazakhs.

⁴⁸ Between 1720 and 1740 when Kazakh lands were invaded by Jungars.

⁴⁹ December Events in Almaty, also known as Zheltoksan are spontaneous protest actions of Kazakh youth that took place in Almaty on December 17th and 18th 1986. According to the official version, protests were a reaction to the decision of Central Political Bureau of the Communist Party in Moscow to dismiss from office the Secretary General of Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic Dinmukhamed Kunayev and replace him by Gennadiy Kolbin, ex-Secretary General of Uliyanovsky Regional Committee of Communist Party, who never worked in Kazakhstan before and was not Kazakh by origin. Later Almaty events spread to other cities and regions of Kazakhstan and became one of the first “national” movements in URSS against the dictate of “Moscow” in domestic policy. Similar events later took place in Minsk (1988), Tbilisi (1989), Baku and Dushanbe (1990), Vilnius and Riga (1991).



(Fig. 3) Republic Square of Almaty: A View of the Stele and the ex-Headquarters of the Kazakh Government⁵⁰

The following description of the relationship between architecture and nature in Almaty can be found on the internet site of city's Bostandykskij district: ⁵¹

The architects cared about the maximal usage of the view of mountains covered with snow while designing the Square. The color solution is based on the combination of white and green: white mountain peaks, white buildings and big green parkers.⁵²

These words provoke a question, similar to one that Henri Lefebvre raised in *The Production of Space*.⁵³ Is this square a produced or a created space? And to what extent can we distinguish “the set of meanings” and “the material things” advocated by Pavel Šuška? On the one hand

⁵⁰ Photograph from the site of a Building Company “Basis”, www.basis.kz.

⁵¹ http://www.bostandyk.almaty.kz/page.php?lang=1&page_id=317.

⁵² Author's translation from Kazakh.

⁵³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Social Space, Oxford 1991, pp.69-85.

Republic Square is a typical national square with a standard set of “national” attributes and symbols from different epochs and spaces united in an ideological ensemble. Even its name manifests a reproduction, copying or resemblance with other national squares, regardless of how we interpret national. On the other hand, its landscape, location and history make this square unique: there is no other Republic Square like this one in Almaty anywhere in the world. The distinction between symbolic and material is a useful exercise but I fear that its remainder will be similar in most cases and will not help to understand what makes one square different from another. I conclude though that the Republic Square is an example of historical and landscape continuities which are possibly stronger than political changes. Constructed over the existing Brezhnev Square, it is surrounded by a double frame of Soviet iconemes and Alatau Mountains. As a consequence, it can be considered a place of a meeting and a melting of the material and symbolic through the embedding of “national” elements into Soviet ones spatially and temporally. It is a place of creation and incorporation of the old into the new, rather than a pure detaching from the past or destroying it.

CHAPTER TWO

Astana: Fort, Town, City

Canberra a été fondée en 1913, et fut élevée au rang de capitale le 9 mai 1927. Le plan de Canberra fut choisi parmi 113 concurrents lors d'un concours international d'architecture. Islamabad est un peu plus récente puisqu'elle fut élevée comme capitale du Pakistan en 1959 et construite pendant les années 1960. Le chantier fut lancé en octobre 1961, et la ville fut inaugurée le 26 octobre 1966, date de la première installation d'un immeuble de bureau. Il faut noter que ces trois villes ont été construites à proximité d'autres grandes villes. Ainsi Canberra n'est qu'à 244 kilomètres de Sydney et Washington à 327 kilomètres de New York. Quant à Islamabad, elle est si proche de Rawalpindi qu'elles sont considérées comme une seule agglomération. Brasília, elle, se situe à 931 kilomètres de Rio de Janeiro et 870 kilomètres de São Paulo, à vol d'oiseau, la nouvelle capitale devant promouvoir la conquête de l'intérieur du pays.⁵⁴

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Astana was given its present name in 1998. Similar to Almaty, it was renamed several times: *Akmola* between 1992 and 1998, *Tselinograd* between 1961 and 1992 and *Akmolinsk* anno urbis conditae until 1961. It has been Kazakhstan's capital since 1997. Now it is Kazakhstan's third largest city with an officially estimated population of around 800 000 inhabitants. It is located in the north-central portion of Kazakhstan, within Akmola Province, though administrated separately from the province as a federal city area. The word *Astana* in Kazakh literally means *Capital*.

Initially a huge fortress on the upper Yessil,⁵⁵ Astana was founded by Russian Empire in 1824. Later the fortress was turned into a small population aggregate and got the name of Akmolinsk. During the early twentieth century, the town became an important railway junction, causing a major economic boom that lasted until 1917. Between 1930 and 1950, Akmolinsk, Karaganda and other territories of Central and Northern Kazakhstan hosted eleven labour camps.

⁵⁴ Neli Aparecida De Mello, François-Michel Le Tourneau, Hervé Théry et Laurent Vidal, 2004, *Brasília, quarante ans après*, Editions de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes de l'Amérique Latine (IHEAL) / La Documentation française, Paris, pp. 36-37.

⁵⁵ Yessil is the name of the river in Kazakh, Ishim is its version in Russian. Later on the Kazakh version will be used.

Outside Astana, there once stood the ALZHIR [АЛЖИР] camp⁵⁶, an acronym for the Akmolinskiy Camp for Wives of Traitors of the Motherland. In 1961, Akmolinsk was renamed Tselinograd (Virgin Lands City) and made capital of the Soviet Virgin Lands Territory (Tselinniy Krai) and the center of the Virgin Lands Campaign led by Khrushchev in the 1950s. Large number of immigrants from western parts of the Soviet Union (mainly Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states) arrived in Kazakhstan, some of them decided to stay and settle down. Additionally, many Russian-Germans were resettled in or nearby Tselinograd after Stalin deported them at the beginning of World War II. Following Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, the city was renamed "Akmola", literally meaning "White Shrine" or "White Mausoleum."⁵⁷ In 1995, Akmola was designated as the future capital of the newly-independent country, and the capital was officially moved from Almaty to Akmola on December 10, 1997. The new name, Astana, was bestowed in 1998. Today's capital of Kazakhstan experienced several major transformations of its identity during the twentieth century. They include six phases:

1. 1824 -1920s: from military fortress to a functional city;
2. 1930s-1950s: center of reception for political prisoners;
3. 1950s-1970s: regional (oblast) center for *tselina* territories, new important afflux of population, and the city started to create peripheries around itself;
4. 1970s-1991: peripheral medium-sized town;
5. 1991-1997: from a provincial town to the national capital;
6. 1997 to the present: the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan;

The fifth phase, when the city acquired the status of national capital, is in the spotlight of this chapter. My main questions mainly concern about interconnections between the change in the city's status and its urban landscape, I will also explore the possible ideological message of its new architectural projects. Understanding the way in which "past" (old, Soviet) and "present" (new, post-independence) coexist in Astana requires a critical reading of its urban landscape. Before discussing the city's landscape, it must first be explained why Astana – an undeveloped provincial

⁵⁶ Akmolinskij Lager Zhen Izmennikov Rodiny', [АКМОЛИНСКИЙ лагерь жен изменников родины], [Akmolinsk Camp of Parricide's wives].

⁵⁷ Another translation is possible as well.

town – was chosen to be a capital city. Some morphological details about its structure and organization must be provided to facilitate the reading of both this text and the city of Astana.

The Choice of the New Capital City and the Morphology of Astana

In 1994 the Kazakh Government decided to transfer the capital from Almaty to Astana. The decision was unexpected and was received rather coldly. The state's economy had been in bad condition since 1991 and there existed a common fear that the costs related to the move would create an additional burden for the state budget.

Between 1960 and 2006 seventeen states from all over the world moved their national capitals. At the same time Astana became the only such example for the entire post-Soviet space. Apart from the claims to territoriality by ethnic Kazakhs, dozens of reasons for the move of the capital city were mentioned by the researchers, state actors and, journalists, to name a few. It is interesting to mention that the official discourse was more “anti-Almaty” than “pro-Astana”, appealing to the fact that the former is situated in a zone of high seismic activity, too close to the southern borders of Kazakhstan and too overcrowded to develop harmoniously. On the contrary, unofficial discourses invoked the danger of separatism from the northern and western regions of Kazakhstan and a *démarche* of the Kazakh president who sought to “eliminate the rivals and bolster the supporters” and to reinforce a political control with the help of geographical means.⁵⁸

According to the authorities, the new capital had to be urbanized, at least minimally and be able to accommodate thousands of people and offices (not only governmental, but those of companies and diplomatic missions) until new headquarters would be built. It had to be as close to the center of the country as possible, even if there are no cities in Kazakhstan which are perfectly centered. Three cities were short-listed to become the new capital: Karaganda, Kokshetau and Astana (at that time called Akmola). The first two were finally rejected by the State Commission: Karaganda was too industrial, Kokshetau was undeveloped and too close to the Kazakhstan's northern frontier. Astana was chosen as the lesser of three evils: it had a potential for growth and no huge ecological problems. But its appearance had to be transformed or even recreated: the new capital was not presentable and did not have any visible and

⁵⁸ Edward Schatz, “What Capital Cities Say about State and Nation Building”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9:111-140, 2004.

recognizable identity.

Astana is located in central Kazakhstan on the Yessil River in the very flat, semi-arid steppe region that covers most of the country's territory. The elevation of Astana is 347 meters above sea level. Astana boasts a spacious steppe landscape; it is situated in the transitional area between the fertile northern lands of Kazakhstan full of forests and the extremely dry, poor territories in the country's center. The older parts of the city lie to the north of the Yessil River, while the new quarters are located to the south of the river, which constitutes a border between them. Astana has three districts: Almaty, Saryarka and Yessil. The Almaty and Saryarka Districts were administratively established in May 1998. Their total area is 21,054 (81.290 sq.miles) and 19,303 (74.139 sq.miles) hectares respectively populated by 650,000 people approximately. Yessil District was established in August 2008 and occupies the territory of 31,179 hectares (77 045 acres) with a population of roughly 180,000 people. The border between first two districts, situated on the Right Bank, is rather blurred, but Yessil district is separated from them by the river. A district (*Audany* in Kazakh and *Rayon* in Russian) is an administrative category or unit which Kazakhstan inherited from the Soviet Union. *Audany/Rayon* is a second degree of administrative division after *Oblys/Oblast* (Region/*Région* or Province/*Province*).⁵⁹

Districts exist as an urban but also as a non-urban category: all Kazakh regions are divided into districts, although urban districts in Kazakhstan are much smaller than non-urban ones. In our opinion, a parallel with French *arrondissements* can be made, but only to a certain extent. The fundamental resemblance is that the borders between units are not homogeneous: they can be natural (river), artificial (bridge or road) or rather blurred and even not at all visible. A limitation for possible parallels with *arrondissements* would be that Kazakhstani districts (not only

⁵⁹ Regions or Provinces? Or States? The latter should be rejected because Kazakhstan is a unitary republic with a strong central power and a minimal freedom of maneuver on local level. As for the choice between “region” and “province” there are a lot of arguments and bibliography for both of these options. Linguistic issues and the problematic of translation have to be taken into consideration either. I would like to mention a classic definition by Etienne Julliard, in which he defines “region” as a “territorial subdivision immediately inferior to the State on a hierarchical scale”. Thus, the word “region” will be used to signify what is referred to *oblysi* in Kazakh and *oblast* in Russian.⁵⁹

in Astana) are normally much bigger in territory but smaller or equal in terms of the size of the population. This is due to the particularities of social and physical landscape in the Central and Central-Northern parts of Kazakhstan: broad plain and under-populated territories in the steppe, thus no need for *encadrage* or compact construction. Unlike Parisian *arrondissements*, or London boroughs Astana's districts are rather large, spacious, and architecturally and stylistically homogenous (practically no buildings predate the twentieth century) but also rather empty. The railway line, that crosses Astana from east to west, touches industrial and poorer residential areas. Residential areas are situated in western and eastern parts of the city. As for Power, new areas with governmental, administrative and business headquarters are situated on the Left Bank of Yessil. Here many large building projects are underway; including the construction of a diplomatic quarter, and a variety of different government buildings. Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa created the original Astana master plan. Astana's current chief planner, Vladimir Laptev, declared it his wish to build a "Berlin in a Eurasian style" stating that "a purely administrative capital such as Canberra is not the goal." The remaining "Soviet" buildings are being gradually replaced by new structures resulting in significant construction work throughout the city.



(Fig.4) Remains of the City Wall in 1911.⁶⁰

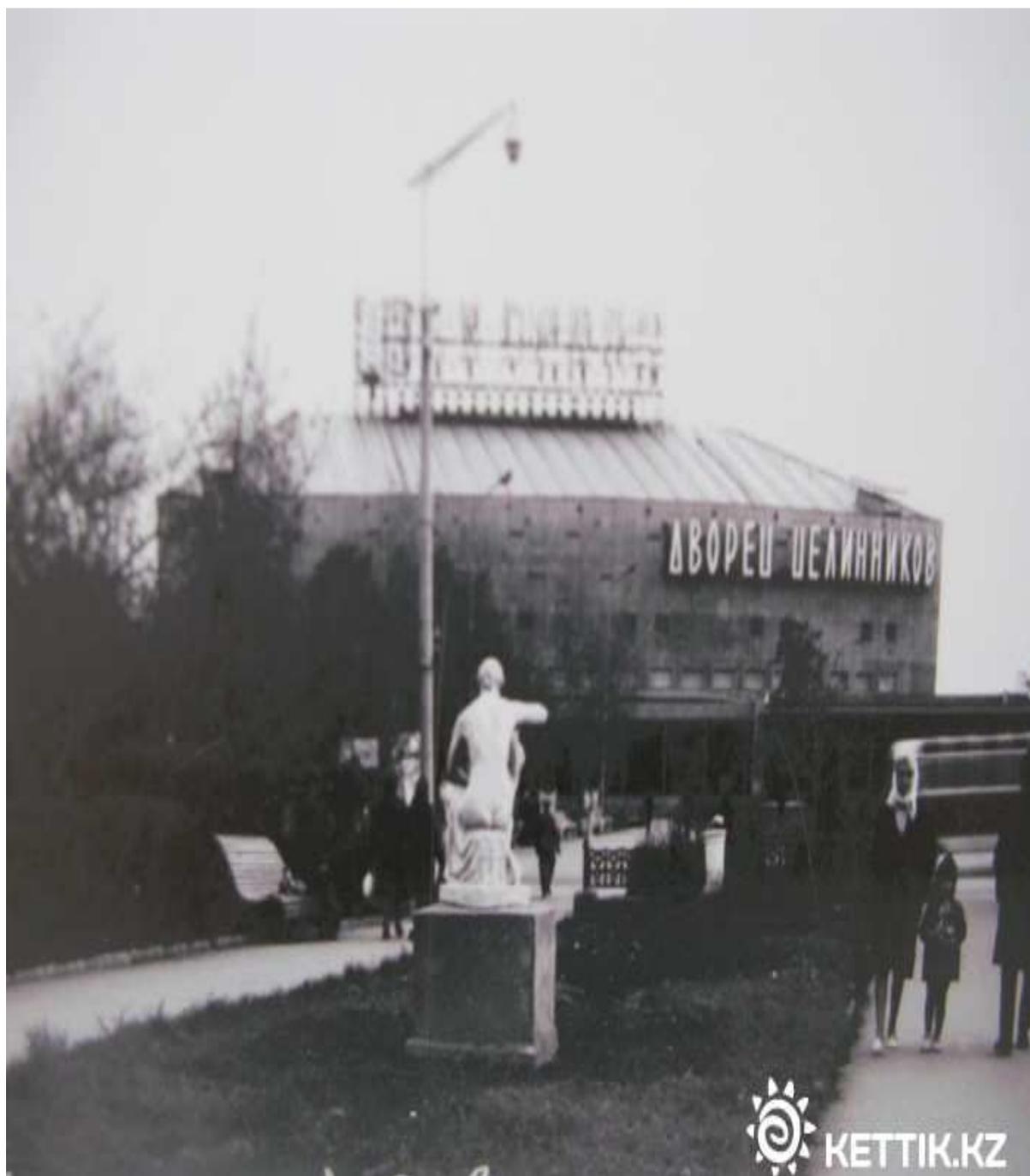
⁶⁰ Source: www.kettik.kz, saved in May, 2013.



(Fig. 5) Merchant Kubrin's House (1911).⁶¹

The one-storey brick building was constructed in the beginning of the twentieth century and as office for Kubrin's Merchant Company. Its architectural style reflects typical eclecticism of the beginning of the twentieth century. The building is protected by the State since there are few buildings in Astana remaining from the pre-revolutionary epoch.

⁶¹ Source: www.kettik.kz, saved in May, 2013.



(Fig. 6) Dvoretz Tselinnikov (1965)⁶²

A neoclassical sculpture in front of Dvoretz Tselinnikov (Virgin Land workers' palace), built in 1960s.

⁶² Source: www.kettik.kz, saved in May, 2013.



(Fig. 7) Bayterek (2011).⁶³

The ninety-seven meter high *Bayterek*, meaning “poplar” in Kazakh, is one of the most important landmarks of Astana, created by Kazakh architect Akmurza Rustambekov. The construction was achieved in 2002. The ninety-seven meters symbolizes the year 1997 when the national capital was moved to Astana from Almaty. Official and other sources say that the structure represents the world tree, where the magic bird, Samruk, laid its egg. The World Tree or Tree of Life is a central symbol in ancient Turkic mythology, from which Kazakhstan drawn much of its mythology. The blue sky around the tree reflects the peaceful nature of the country and the red ring that surrounds all of the elements symbolizes the ancient faith of growth and rebirth. Baiterek is made of metal, glass and concrete. Its sphere is twenty two meters in diameter and weighs 300 tons, made of “chameleon” glass changing its color depending on sunlight and held in place by 1000-ton metal carcass standing on 500 pylons.

⁶³ Photograph from the site: www.aboutkazakhstan.com, saved in August 2012.



(Fig. 8) Kazakhstan Central Concert Hall inaugurated in 2009.⁶⁴

Designed by Italian architect Manfredo Nicoletti, the building shape is reminiscent of the petals of a flower. These “petals” create an imposing envelope that encloses and protects all the functions from the extreme climatic conditions of Astana. It houses a large concert hall for classical music with a total of 3,500 seats, two small music, cinema and conference halls with 400 and 200 seats each, restaurants, bars and a lobby of about 3000 square meters. The main music hall has been designed to adapt to all kind of performances such as classical, pop and traditional music concerts, theatre, ballet, conferences and cinema, by means of a special false ceiling design and a system of acoustic curtains. The building is approximately 200 meters long and rises up to forty meters high for a total of 55.000 square meters. The external cladding is done with blue back-painted transparent glass panels inspired by the colour of the Kazakhstan flag.

⁶⁴ Source: www.asia-trip.info, saved in August 2012.



(Fig.9) Ak-Orda Presidential Palace⁶⁵

Ak Orda (“the white horde”) is the official workplace of the President of Kazakhstan. This neoclassical Palace was constructed in 2004 of monolithic concrete as a five-story building. The lining was reinforced using twenty to forty centimeter thick Italian marble. The height of the building is eighty meters and its total area is 36,720 square meters. Ak Orda includes a Yurt Hall designed of marble and granite, a Marble Hall for summits and official visits by foreign-country representatives, and a Golden Hall for negotiations and private discussions between the head of the state and the leaders of other countries.

⁶⁵ Photograph from: www.en.wikipedia.org, saved in August 2012.



(Fig.10) The Khan-Shatyr Entertainment Center designed by Norman Foster⁶⁶

A giant transparent 150-meter high tent has a 200-meter elliptical base covering 140,000 square metres, built in 2010. Underneath the tent are situated an urban-scale internal park, a shopping and entertainment venue with squares and cobbled streets, a boating river, a shopping centre, a minigolf course and indoor beach resort. It is considered a place for the *classes aisées*. The roof is suspended on a network of cables strung from a central spire. The transparent material allows sunlight through which, in conjunction with air heating and cooling systems, is designed to maintain an internal temperature between 15–30°C (59–86 °F) in the main space and 19–24°C (66–75 °F) in the retail units, while outside the temperature varies between -35 and 35°C (-31 and 95 °F) across the year. In general, the description of Foster's projects in Kazakhstan focuses a lot on the overcoming of technical difficulties and those related to the technological backwardness of Kazakhstan.

⁶⁶ Source: www.yvizion.kz, saved in August 2012.



(Fig. 11) The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation designed by Norman Foster.

“In September 2003, Kazakhstan – the largest of the former Soviet Republics – hosted the inaugural Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in the capital, Astana. Spurred by the Congress' success, the President of Kazakhstan decided to make it a triennial event and commissioned a new venue. The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation was conceived as a permanent venue for the Congress and a global centre for religious understanding, the renunciation of violence and the promotion of faith and human equality.”⁶⁷

Between two Pasts?

In “Space, Knowledge and Power,” Michel Foucault points out that capital sets the pace for the whole country.⁶⁸ By moving the capital from the south to the north Kazakh authorities definitely

⁶⁷ Quotation from the official site of Norman Foster: www.fosterandpartners.com.

⁶⁸ J.M.Grampton and S.Elden (ed.); *Space, Knowledge and Power. Foucault and Geography*, Hampshire; Burlington 2007, Chapters 14, 17, 19, 20.

wanted to give an impulse to the development of the country and accelerate its growth. As a result Astana received a really contrasting and even striking appearance that, however, preserved three distinguishable historical types of landscape that coexist and overlap. These three layers can be roughly referred to respectively as nineteenth/early twentieth century, Soviet twentieth century, and twenty-first century. The most interesting for me is not the very fact of such coexistence — it is rather normal in almost any modern city — but *how* they coexist and *how* the new building structures fit into the city's entire look. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century's buildings that were previously crowded by Soviet *khrushchevki* are now overshadowed by skyscrapers or sometimes destroyed. Replacement of the old is inevitable, albeit sometimes lamentable, because the presence of early twentieth-century eclecticism gives a particular charm to modern cities. In Astana's case its additional value would be to produce some missing diversity, while emphasizing the presence of a certain past.

Twentieth-century architecture dominates the Right Bank of Yessil. It can be divided *da bene esse* into several periods: pre-Soviet, early Soviet, Stalinist, Khrushchev era and Brezhnev era, and other. There are only few Stalinist buildings in Astana: because they were expensive and monumental they could not be produced easily in a peripheral city like Akmolinsk/Tselinograd. Today “Stalinist architecture” is perceived as “created” rather than “produced”, especially given the pettiness of stylistical and architectural solutions in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The latter were with rare exception, a pure industrial production of space that helped (unlike Stalinist elitist architecture) to solve the key social and economic problem of the Soviet Union, namely lack of habitation. Nowadays, apartments in residential quarters built between the end of 1950s and 1980s are economically accessible, if questionable from an aesthetic point of view.

There was no wholesale destruction of Soviet buildings in Astana: most of them have been maintained waiting for when sufficient “new” housing will be provided. But as more and more people who need accommodation are migrating to Astana, the circle closes. City “freshmen” buy or rent apartments in old Soviet buildings, while the new bourgeoisie moves from the Right to the Left Bank. Moving to the Left Bank means crossing a social Rubicon or, entering a different caste. I have already mentioned that the Left Bank is primarily an administrative center where the Government and national companies have headquarters. This makes the cost of real estate very high so that, consequently, only few can afford both working

and living on the Left Bank. It is typical to see thousands of young clerks going from the Right Bank where they live to the Left Bank where they work twice a day by car (often in *covoiturage* or taking a common taxi) or by public transport. Astana does not have subway which can make comedies and dramas of urban life transparent.⁶⁹

The buildings belonging to the third provisional layer – the twenty-first century layer – are situated mainly on the Left Bank. They are visible and recognizable. Many of them are Landmarks⁷⁰ par excellence. Besides the image of modernity, their appearance and names carry an ideological load. The Left Bank landmarks merely resemble ponderous Soviet ensembles with their appeal to friendship between workers and peasants or idyllic representations of happy Soviet people. Ak-Orda's name and design details (the cupola in particular) are nothing but reminiscence of Kazakh Khan's Headquarters. Khan-Statyr's is not even reminiscence of Kazakh Khanate but its name has a clear appeal to it (in Kazakh khan means "king" while shatyr means "tent" or "pavillon," together they mean "Royal Tent").

According to S. Cummings, Kazakhstan's elite has employed three methods – ceremonial, pictorial, and verbal – in its legitimation process.⁷¹ Khan is a symbol of power and maybe, for some, its ideal. In 2011 the President of Kazakhstan was inaugurated for the fourth time. A new element was introduced into the ceremony and it became the subject of debate and controversy. The president was to ascend to the white felt mat. The inauguration was broadcast live and watched by four to seven million people according to different data. Historically, starting from Genghis Khan, the ascent to the white felt mat accompanied the ascendance to the khan's throne.

Eric Hobsbawm wrote: "The peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition."⁷² I argue that both the white felt mat (as a symbolic "practice") and the main Left Bank landmarks such as Khan Shatyr and Ak-Orda (as embodied architectural form), mobilizing "tradition" and

⁶⁹ A reflection on City as Theater is inspired by reading Lewis Mumford's texts.

⁷⁰ In Lynchian sense. (See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge 1960)

⁷¹ Sally N. Cummings, "Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12, pp. 177-204, 2006.

⁷² Eric Hobsbawm, Terence O. Ranger (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press 1983, pp.2-3.

instrumentalizing history, contribute to the construction of a myth of presidential power and thus, legitimize this power, creating an artificial symbolic continuity between previous and contemporary rulers.

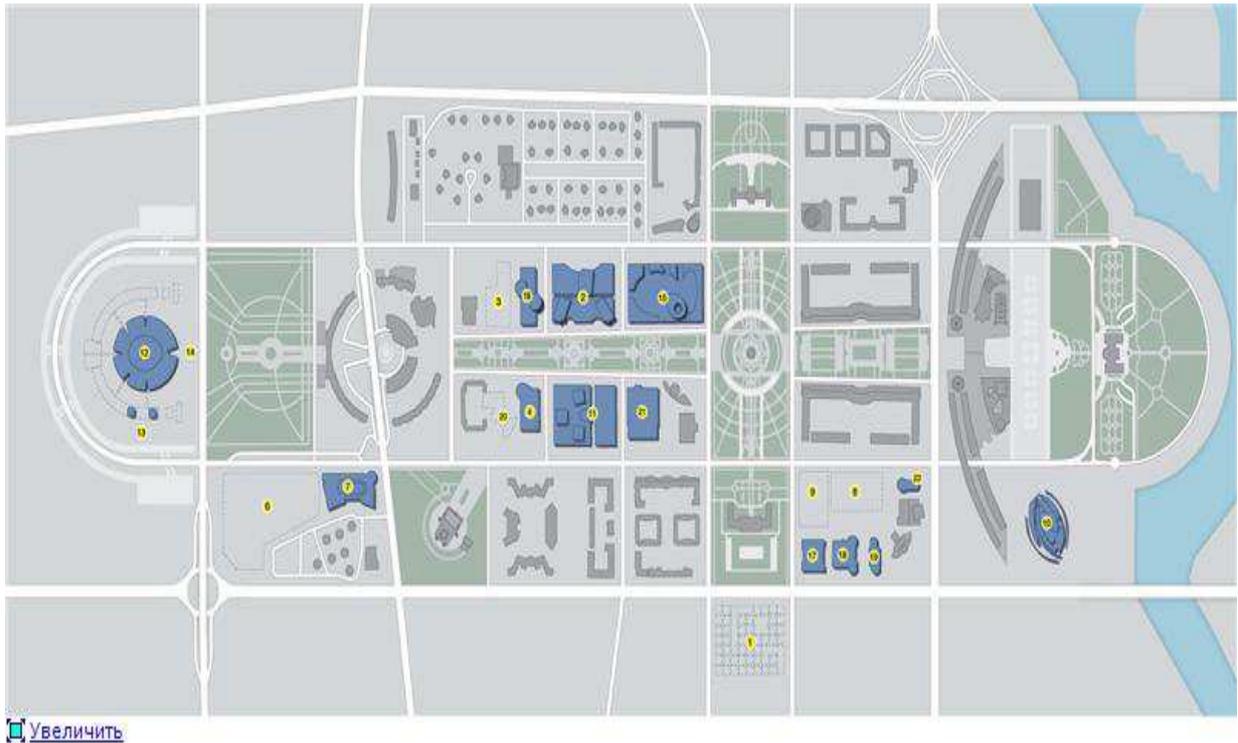
Reading the Left Bank

The Left Bank of the Yessil is a post-Soviet creation. Before 1991 it was an abandoned industrial zone where few people lived. Until 1995 there existed only one bridge uniting the Right and the Left sides of the city, but now there are four of them.

The presence of a river and bridges necessitates an introduction to the development of quays. The latter not only play a functional role but also can be important public spaces giving a particular charm to a city or, on the contrary, making it insipid or ugly. Quays can be important social spaces where people socialize, walk, spend their time. Therefore a presence of beautiful, well-attended quays has the potential to become a very important part of a city's identity.

It was in the end of 1990s when the city government of Astana decided to create and reconceptualize Astana's riverbanks and public spaces near the river. Yessil is not a big river compared to the Danube, Seine or Tiber, but its presence is important for Astana to look elegant and capital-like. Generally speaking, rivers have different functions and can be read differently. Some are present in the collective image and the "reality" of the city to such extent that they become a visiting card, a part and parcel of it: for example, Paris is unthinkable without the Seine. Some play a modest role: for instance, the Danube is not very visible in Vienna's city landscape but, on the contrary, it is very visible in Budapest. In some cities rivers unite (the Vltava in Prague) and in others they divide (Huanghe in Shanghai). That is why at a certain point defining a river in the city becomes a question of interpretation.

The Yessil seems to carry a dividing function for two different parts of the city, one that is old, unattractive and crowded and the other that is new, beautiful and spacious. Thus the River in Astana has a symbolic role: according to my hypothesis it separates the Right Bank signifying the Past from the Left Bank which is a place for making of new identities for the City and the whole country. In other words, thanks to the river, the *énoncé* of the city acquires its dialectal unity.



(Map 2) The Plan of the Left Bank by Astana’s Chief Planner Kisho Kurokawa⁷³

To read the Left Bank, we need keys, codes and an ability to distinguish the essence from the collateral. Let us look at Map Two. The public space created on the Left Bank is spacious and symmetrical. Baiterek, Ak-Orda, Khan-Shatyr and Palace of Peace and Reconciliation⁷⁴ are laid out along a single axis. A fountain between Khan-Shatyr and Bayterek helps tie together the ensemble.



(Fig. 12)⁷⁵

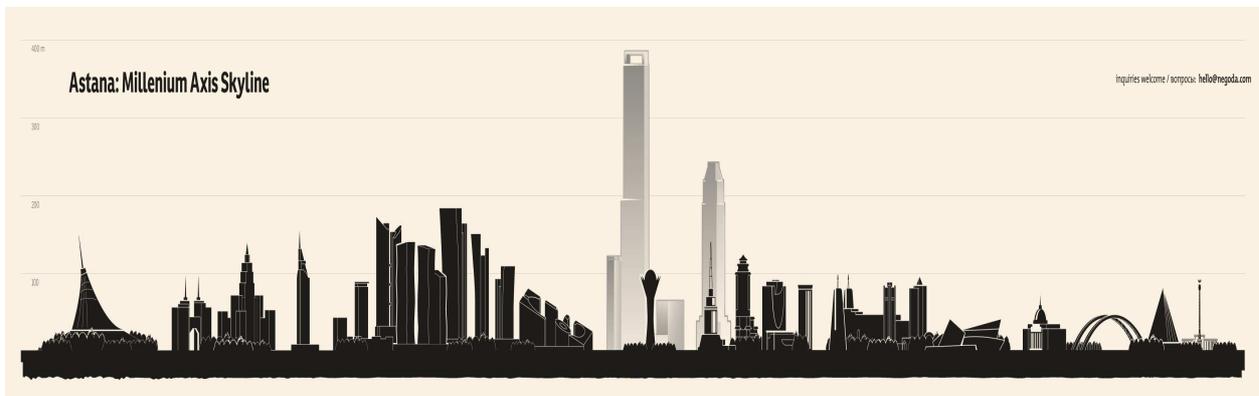
⁷³ A photo from: www.skyscrapercity.com saved on 17/11/2012.

⁷⁴ The last two are created by Foster & Partners.

⁷⁵ This photo is provided by the embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in France.

Buildings symbolizing power (neo-classical Ak-Orda), the spiritual (cubist Pyramid of Peace), the worldly (Khan-Shatyr) and the Unity of the State (Baiterek) are lined up. Like any morphological structure this space has main and secondary elements. For example, the rectangle of the Left Bank has a mosque. However, it is not situated at the central axis but to the side, on the periphery, unlike the Pyramid of Peace. I read it as a clear sign that a religion-like identity associated with the entire state is more important than a single religion, even the dominant one. At the same it should be noted that only the mosque is built on the Left Bank; the synagogue, and Catholic and Orthodox temples are on the Right Bank.

The key to the entire space, the main element of the *énoncé* is the Baiterek, which is the central iconeme and, the heart of the Left Bank.



(Fig. 13) Astana Skyline⁷⁶

“Par centre il faut entendre tout ce qui occupe une position décisive : le centre géométrique d’un plan, le sommet d’une montagne, le pouvoir sur une communauté, le terme d’une évoution, l’origine du phénomène”, according to Jérôme Monnet.⁷⁷ There are no words better to describe the situation and role of the Baiterek: it is a statement about the evolution and the origin of the phenomenon all in one. Left Bank planning is an example of acupunctural urban landscape: its essence was a creation of several important iconemes and landmarks that contributed to the further construction of other buildings.⁷⁸

Kevin Lynch distinguished five types of elements creating a public image of the city:

⁷⁶ A photo from www.skyscrapercity.com, saved in May, 2013.

⁷⁷ Jérôme Monnet, *La Ville et son Double, la Parabole de Mexico*, 1993, pp.167.

⁷⁸ See Jaime Lerner, *Acupunctura Urbana*, Editora Record, 2011, p.3-17, 22-39.

Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes and Landmarks⁷⁹. Ak-Orda, Palace of Peace, Khan-Shatyry and Bayterek are undoubtedly Landmarks: they are visible from practically any point of the axis and even the whole Left Bank. There are several Paths which cross it from the west to the east: Sarayshyk, Tauelsizdik, Dostik and Syganak streets are transport roads while Nurzhol Boulevard is only for pedestrians. There are also two other pedestrian Paths that cross the entire space from the north to the south but they are less important because of a strict horizontal logic of the Left Bank. Four clearly distinguishable Edges: the Yessil River in the east, Kabanbay Batyr Avenue in the west, Dostik Street in the south and Teulsyzdyk Street in the north create a frame for the whole ensemble. Nodes and Districts are present on the Left Bank, but their identification is difficult because of the blurred structure of the area. Many districts and buildings there are still under construction, and the means of public transport and their stations are in evolution. Thus, conclusions are unlikely to be drawn for ten or fifteen more years.

E. Schatz has written, “State building should not be conceptually reduced to the development and location of bureaucratic apparatus. It involves constructing a symbolic order to propagate ideas about an elite’s political legitimacy, cultural rectitude, and effectiveness in governance. It involves setting the terms of a normative regime.”⁸⁰ The normative regime, translated into a new city plan though is an expression of a certain order sought by the elites. The Left Bank refuses Soviet squareness, inspired by Cubism in the beginning of the twentieth century and driven to the absurd later. But the Left Bank does not seek either to envelop (*encadrer*) the buildings into its space, making each of them a thing in itself. That is what makes Astana much closer to its futuristic homologue in Brazil, than to traditional Eurasian capitals. “*Dès lors que l’antiquité grecque a associé mystique et géométrie, on peut considérer que le quadrillage des villes nouvelles participait de la recherche d’une harmonie entre la cité terrestre et l’ordre céleste*”, wrote Paul Claval in 1981.⁸¹ Kisho Kurokawa’s writings reveal his inclination to symbiosis and linear principle that is a negation of the previous radial city plans of Akmolá and Tselinograd. Kurokawa’s Astana is also a negation of European concentric cities in which the center, always crowded, is a signed place

⁷⁹ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge 1960, pp.46-91.

⁸⁰ Edward Schatz, “What Capital Cities Say about State and Nation Building” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9:111-140, 2004, p.120.

⁸¹ Jérôme Monnet, *La Ville et son Double, la Parabole de Mexico* apud Paul Claval, *Espace et Pouvoir*, Paris 1978.

where the values of the civilization are condensed.⁸² Astana is empty outside, since it is situated in the middle of the steppe and not related to any agglomeration like Washington or Tokyo. On the contrary, inside it is more congested than any city in Kazakhstan except, maybe, Almaty. Finally Astana, is clearly an anti-Almaty in terms of landscape and controllability, which were the reasons to move the capital city away from the South.



(Map 3) A Satellite Photograph of Astana⁸³

Map Three shows that physically the Left Bank is much smaller than the Right Bank. On the contrary the Left Bank occupies a very significant role at psychological and symbolic levels. When Astana is shown on TV, it is the Left Side that is generally shown. As for postcards, albums and recently published books on Astana, it is again the Left Bank that mostly appears. An analysis of chosen postcards and formal representations of between 1990 and 2010 has shown a shift of attention from Right to Left Bank. As a whole, the Kazakh capital is represented as a very modern city, a kind of cloudless *Civitas Solis*, “aiming at the future”, with no or very few traces of a colonial or Soviet past.

Astana is a place of great intentions. It is supposed to be “a demonstration of

⁸² Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*, Paris 1970, pp. 47-51.

⁸³ From www.maps.google.com, saved in August 2012.

Kazakhstani progress, success and future endeavors”, says the official website of the city. The choice made by elites in the 1990s when the city became the national capital did not favor destroying the symbols of the past (which in practice would have meant destroying old Soviet and Russian colonial style buildings on the Right Side) but *detaching* from them. The river though became a kind of barrier and the Left Bank became an expression of a new identity.

... ..

Chapter Two was an attempt to deconstruct the particularities of Astana’s urban landscape from both temporal and spatial points of view. In this chapter I did not make a direct comparison with Almaty. However, some differences (at both the symbolic and material levels) between Republic Square in Almaty and the Left Bank’s Public Space were revealed. They permit us to make a hypothesis on the different nature and evolution of the appropriation of space but also time in Kazakh capitals: from spontaneous and “romantic” in Almaty to legitimizing and “solidifying” in Astana.

CHAPTER THREE

City Toponymy in Almaty and Astana

Dans cette ville immense, véritable territoire urbain, le nom de chaque quartier est net, connu, placé sur la carte un peu vide (puisque les rues n'ont pas le nom) comme un gros flash ; il prend cette identité fortement signifiante que Proust, à sa manière, a explorée dans ses Noms des Lieux.⁸⁴

Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des Signes*

This chapter explores the changes occurred in the city toponymy of Almaty and Astana, starting from 1991, when Kazakhstan became an independent state. Particular attention will be given to the process of renaming urban categories (including streets, avenues and squares) since the change of name(s), in my opinion, indicates a wish to produce a change in self or in the perception of self by others.

The most important change was that of the state's name. During the first years of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was called Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Republic within the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and in 1925 it became the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.⁸⁵ Then in 1936 it became the “independent” Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But the story did not end there. In 1991 the country became the Republic of Kazakhstan. “An epochal document” – that is how the 2009 textbook “*Contemporary History of Kazakhstan*”, edited by historian B.G. Ayagan characterized the decree, renaming the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic the Republic of Kazakhstan. Since that date renaming and toponymy-changing became a routine. Names of regions, cities, districts, streets, squares, public institutions and, national currency were gradually renamed. Rather than gathering

⁸⁴ Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes*, 2007.

⁸⁵ In the documents and written sources of the Russian Empire Kazakhs were generally named *Kyrgyz-Kaissakhs*.

as much quantitative data as possible and classifying them, my task is highlighting the most characteristic changes in the naming of urban categories and raising questions about the role of these changes in the process of identity-construction. It is interesting to know who the streets were renamed in honor of, but also why some streets were renamed and some *were not*.

The Case of Almaty

Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that “the almost magical power of words comes from the fact that the objectivation and *de facto* officialization brought about by the public act of naming, in front of everyone, has the effect of freeing the particularity (which lies at the source of all sense of identity) from the unthought, and even unthinkable.[...] And officialization finds its fulfillment in demonstration, the typically magical (which does not mean ineffectual) act through which the practical group – virtual, ignored, denied, or repressed – makes itself visible and manifest, for other groups and for itself, and attests to its existence as a group that is known and recognized, laying a claim to institutionalization.”⁸⁶ In 1990, a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a massive renaming of urban categories and a sweeping out of communist names was indeed unthinkable. But already in 1991 “a claim to institutionalization”, theorized by Bourdieu, showed up first in Almaty and later covered the whole country.

According to information from Almaty Inquiry Service, between 1991 and 2011, approximately 170 streets were renamed. Given that there are a total of 833 streets⁸⁷, this means one in ten has been renamed. Streets differ in size and importance, so a renaming or, on the contrary, a non-renaming of an avenue in the city center and a side street on the periphery are not equivalent. Also renaming *per se* is not an absolute indicator of a major identity change, Minsk, for instance, had a large-scale street-renaming campaign in the 1990s, but remains a Soviet city *par excellence*.

⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. by John B. Thompson, translated by G. Raymond and M. Adamson, Polity Press 1991.

⁸⁷ From www.kaznavi.kz, saved in July 2012.

The zenith of street-renaming was in the 1990s. What characterized the names of Almaty streets before renaming? First, there were “ideological” names: “10 years of the Kazakh Communist Youth”, “50 years of October”, “60 years of the Komsomol”, “XXIIIth Party Congress”, “Communist”, “Komsomolskaya”, “Lenin”, “Red Partisan”, “Soviet” and more. Some toponyms pointed to certain “industrial” features of the city: “1st, 2nd, 3rd Brick Factory”, “Industrial”, “Locomotive”, “Railway” and others. Heroes of the Soviet era figured in the toponymy as well like Chapaev, Frunze, Dzerzhinskij, and Gagarin. A few streets were named after scientists: Kovalevskaya, Pasteur, Michurin, Lobachevskij. Some street names referred to geography: Danube, Leningradskaya, Port Arthur and Warsaw. There were several that pointed to the history, characteristics or founders of the city including Grushevaya, Rozovaya (referring to botanics), Kazach’ya (Cossack) and Zenkov (one of the founders of the city).⁸⁸ A famous Soviet-era cult film *Ironiya Sudby* [*The Irony of Fate*] starts with an ironic monologue:

[...] The street-naming was not very diverse. Which of our cities does not have First Garden, Second Peripheral, Third Manufactory, Second Industrial, Third Builders’ Street! Beautiful, isn’t it? Standard staircases painted with standard “pleasant” color. Typical apartments boast typical furnishings, and impersonal typical doors are provided with impersonal typical locks[...].⁸⁹

Therefore, Almaty reflected typical Soviet street-naming, which could be found throughout the Soviet Union, including in Kazakhstan. By 1991 the old toponymy started to be replaced because of its ideological and aesthetical unfitness. I have classified the renaming into five conventional categories: 1.) revenge of nationalism, 2.) geopolitics, 3.) “beyond classification”, 4.) a revanche of eternity over time, 5.) and embodiment of myths.

⁸⁸ *Grushevaya* means “Pear”, *Kazachya* – “Cossack”, *Rozovaya* – “Rose”, Zenkov was the Chief Architect Almaty in the end of the nineteenth century.

⁸⁹ *Ironiya Sudbi ili s Legkim Parom*, 1975, a film by Soviet director E.Riazanov.

Of the 170 renamed streets, none was initially related to Kazakhstan. As a result of renaming the situation completely changed, and at least three-quarters of new names have been “kazakhized.” In most cases, streets were renamed after important or famous ethnic Kazakhs, much less after geographic denominations and not at all after historic events. Almaty’s toponymy was enriched by the names of statesmen (Kazybek bi, Nauryzbai Batyr or Ablai Khan), musicians (Shamsha Kaldayakov, Gaziza Zhubanova), poets and akims (Akan-Sery, Mukagali Makataev, Anuar Alimzhanov, Akhmed Baitursynov etc), as well as athletes, writers and, public figures. Many of these people either lived or worked in Almaty. In several cases, there were tablets explaining the biography of the person. However, according to my respondents in Almaty⁹⁰ many of the “new” names were unknown to average citizens. Only two new names played on Kazakhstani geography: the Mashinostroitel (Machine builder) district became the Turkestan district and Kurchatov Street became Otrar Street.⁹¹ In addition, Brezhnev Square, mentioned in the first chapter became Republic Square.

Abstract Soviet toponymy was replaced by specific “nationally-oriented” names: for instance “50 Years of October” became “Raiymbek”⁹² and “Komsomol” was renamed after Tole bi. “Bauman” became “Turgut Ozal”. Turgut Ozal was a Turkish president and Turkey was one of the first countries that recognized Kazakhstan on a diplomatic level. Turkish investments into Kazakhstan’s economy were very considerable in the 1990s. In addition, in the 1990s Turkey initiated the opening of 24 Kazakh-Turkish Lycées and later, Yassavi Kazakh-Turkish University in Turkestan and Demirel Turkish University in Almaty. All of these institutions became the providers of Turkish language and pan-Turkic ideology in Kazakhstan.

The renaming period coincided with an active search for historical roots, construction of national ideology and identifying geo-political friends and foes. In 1990s Kazakhstan actively cooperated with Turkey, considering it a closest country culturally. The discourse on Turkic roots

⁹⁰ Three persons, aged 23, 51 and 17, living in Almaty since their childhood.

⁹¹ Both Turkestan and Otrar are cities in southern Kazakhstan with long histories.

⁹² Kazakh national hero from Middle Ages.

of Kazakhs was very popular in the 1990s among historians and public figures. While positioning Kazakhs and Kazakhstan as cultural heirs of the Mongols or the outskirts of Russian Federation would have been a political suicide, the Turkish model of secular conservatism was very attractive for Kazakhstan, left rudderless after 1991. In documents from the 1990s Turkey flashed in the speeches of politicians, media and official documents, identified as a kind of “elder brother” and example of successful social, economic and political development. Turkey, for its part, has been very supportive and active in Central Asia, wishing to increase its weight and become a privileged partner for a “new” region, in contrast to Russia. Since 2000, Turkey has been gradually losing its political importance for Kazakhstan, but two countries are still very close: there are frequent bilateral visits on different levels.

Therefore, rebaptizing of a street which initially bore the name of a minor Russian revolutionary, with the name of the President of one of the most important geopolitical friends was not surprising. It should be noted that no other street in Almaty received the name of a foreign politician except the above-mentioned Turgut Ozal. What a contrast with, for instance, Georgia, where the central avenue of the capital – Rustaveli (a poet of national scale) was renamed in honor of G. W. Bush.

“Domostroitelnaya” (House-Building) was renamed as “Ulugbek”, “Bezimyannaya” (Nameless) as “Dulati” and “XXIII Party Congress” as “Fizuli”. Ulugbek was an astronomer and ruler from the Timurid dynasty, who lived in Samarkand, Dulati - historian, born in Tashkent and dead in Kashmir. The poet and philosopher Fizuli lived in Iraq and is considered sometimes Azeri, sometimes Turk, depending on sources. By contrast with Turkey, in the case of Ulugbek, Dulati and Fizuli, rather than a political message, a historical reappropriation took place – a desire to show that Kazakhstan is also entitled to the spiritual and scientific heritage of Central Asian civilization. Only three renaming cases are related neither to Kazakh nor to Russian/Soviet patterns: “Leningradskaya” became “Goethe”, “Vladimirskaia” – “Xi Xinhai”, and “Turukhanskaya” has been renamed after Finnish poet Suonio. Suonio (1835-1888) is a German-born Finnish poet, Xi Xinhai (1905-1945) is a Chinese composer-songwriter, who studied in Paris and died in Moscow. Links between them and Kazakhstan are not so obvious: at

least their names are not present in obligatory school and conservatoire programs. Moreover, they never lived in Kazakhstan. Thus, except for small “oddities” mentioned above, the new toponymy seems clearly a “fulfillment in demonstration” *à la* Bourdieu, with some tinges of rehabilitation of historical “injustices”.

An example of the latter would be replacing the names of little known “Rudnev” and “Ushakov” with the well-known “Brusilovsky” and “Prokofiev”. E. Brusilovsky, a famous Soviet composer, spent many years in Almaty, and did much for the development of Kazakh professional classical music. He wrote operas and other musical works based on Kazakh popular themes.⁹³ World-famous composer Sergei Prokofiev had to spend a part of his evacuation time during the World War II in Almaty. In Soviet times, Prokofiev was out of favor, so the renaming of a street in his honor became not so much an ideological revenge a possibility to remind the role and importance of Kazakhstan for evacuated Soviet elites during the World War II.

A different example would be the renaming of “Karl Marx” as “Kunaev”. Dinmukhamed Kunayev was born and spent all his life in Kazakhstan. During twenty-two years (from 1964 until 1986) he was the chairman of the Communist Party of the KSSR. His time in office described as the Golden Age of the Soviet Kazakhstan. At the end of his term, he was accused of corruption and clientalism and replaced by G. Kolbin, ex-chief of Ulianovskij Regional Committee of Communist Party, who had previously not worked in Kazakhstan. The transition caused unrest, discontent and mass riots, later called Zheltoksan. The result of the renaming was a belated recognition of Kunayev’s merits. Apart from Kunayev, Prokofiev and Brusilovsky, other emblematic names that have long been suppressed or even taboo (such as Kazakh intellectuals A.Baytursynov, B.Aymaulytov, M.Zhumabaev shot in 1930s during Stalinist terror) reappeared in Almaty’s toponymy.

The renaming of “Chapaev” as “Manas” and “Zenkov” as “Aldar Kose” is very interesting. Aldar Kose is not a real person but a hero from tales and anecdotes, a “man of the

⁹³ E. Brusilovsky’s work can be compared to what Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály did in Hungary in 1930s: searching for inspiration and writing music with the help of carefully selected and recorded folklore.

people”, a poor but cunning human, who by deceiving the wealthy, gained their money and valuables. Aldar Kose tales were claimed during the Soviet era, published in large editions, and presented as containing ideologically “correct” and rather primitive ideological constructs – poor-clever-crafty vs. silly-rich-sluggish. Literature on Aldar Kose provides an example of the appropriation of a “folk” image by Soviet ideology. (There are good reasons to believe that Kose was invented at the right time.) However, there is no doubt that after Kazakhstan independence in 1991 this folk character was not forgotten and consigned to the dustbin of history, along with, for example, the 170 street names described so far. In 2005, Aldar Kose was depicted on two stamps (with a face value of 35 and 40 KZT⁹⁴) and a circulation of 100 000 total pieces. But a stamp is not a name of the street. Would it be possible to rename, for example, a street in Los Angeles after Mickey Mouse, or one in Prague after Jara Zimmermann? I leave this “stylistic” question open. Another open question is changing “Zenkov” to “Manas”. Manas is a Kyrgyz national epic playing a large role in Kyrgyz self-identification. The renaming is undoubtedly a tribute to the southern neighbor of Kazakhstan. But is it plausible to assign the name of the Epic to a street?

As for non-renamed streets, horizontally the city is criss-crossed by large Ryskulov, Raiymbek, Tole bi, Abay, Satpayev, Zhandosov, Timiryazev and al-Farabi Avenues. Vertically one finds Auezov, Sain, Navoi, Rozybakiev, Zharokov, Seifullin, Nauryzbai-Batyr, Abylai Khan and Dostyk Avenues. Six of these seventeen - Tole bi (formerly Komsomolskaya) Auezov (formerly Fifth Line), Navoi (formerly Wisniewskij), Rozybakiev (formerly Seventeenth Line), Abylai Khan (formerly Communisticheskaya) and Dostyk (formerly Lenina) – have been renamed. The remaining eleven have retained their earlier names. Such changes in the city toponymy might be considered evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Even if considerable, they were not dramatic: city toponymy was updated rather than completely stripped of its previous features.

The case of Astana

⁹⁴ KZT: Kazak national currency, tenghe.

Fifty eight streets were renamed in Astana between 1993 and 2010. The total number of streets in 2012 reached 708. A full list of the names can be found in city reference books and various informational websites.⁹⁵ It should be noted that Astana is physically smaller than than Almaty. (In 1997, after the transfer, it was several times smaller. Now, after a major expansion, it is still behind Almaty.) Still, the new capital is under a very intensive construction. New streets and neighborhoods appear, so the toponymy is being enriched not so much by renaming as by direct shaping of urban space and categories.

The logic and the trend of renaming in Astana is in many ways similar to Almaty. Names symbolizing the Soviet Union or Sovietness gradually disappeared, including “Krasnaya Zvezda” (Red Star), “Socialistichskaya” (Socialist), “Krupskaya”, “50 let Oktiabrya” (50 years of October), “Komsomol”, “Sovetskoj Konstitucii” (the Soviet Constitution), “Krasnoarmejskaya” (Red Army), “Oktabrskaya” (October), “Lenin” and “Mikoyan”. The same holds true for obvious industrial clichés like “Stroitel'naya” (Construction), “Asfaltovaya” (Asphalt), “Lesozavodskaya” (Sawmill), “Zavodskaya” (Factory), “Tselinnikov” (Virgin Soil) and “Rabochaya” (Workers). Known and unknown Soviet revolutionaries (Budenniy and Ordzhonikidze), and Soviet personalities (Likhachev, Drizge, Monin, Kalachev, Katchenko, Shvernik, Telmann, Avdeev and others) sank into oblivion, as did featureless neutral identifications *à la russe* such as “Vokzal'naya” (Railway Station), “Polevaya” (Field), “Dal'nyaya” (Far Away). So did a few names of the World War II heroes such as Kuibyshev and Grekov. Yet the names of WWII monuments and the monuments themselves remained intact. Some vernacular names disappeared but later reappeared in a different place: Abay Street had been renamed after Kubrin but later Abay Avenue reappeared. Ualikhanov Street reappeared with a new kazakhized spelling (Ualikhanov instead of Valikhanov).

What names comprised the new toponymy? First, there were Kazakh pre-Soviet figures, and through them, the legitimization of the relevant past. These changes included Birzhan-sal, Kenesary and Abylai Khan among others. Second, there was a belated tribute to the Kazakh

⁹⁵ For example: www.kaznavi.kz

intelligentsia of the first half of twentieth century, exterminated during the Stalinist purges in 1930s. Thus, Astana was decorated with the names of A. Bukeyhan, T. Ryskulov, M. Tynyshbaev and M. Dulatov. Third, new streets were renamed after Soviet personalities of Kazakh origin, including A. Alimzhanov, G. Mustafin, I. Esenberlin and N. Tlendiev. A place also remained for non-Kazakhs who played a large role in the history of the city or the state: so street signs can be seen with the names of M. Zataevich, G. Potanin, A. Izmailov, E. Brusilovsky, academician Skryabin and others. Several “new” toponyms reflect a very recent past. These are Zheltoksan and Ryskulbekov which directly point to the events of December 1986, described in the first chapter. Sometimes the “kazakhization” banally disguised into translation: Mira Street became Beibitshilik Street: both mean “peace” but the second one is spelled in Kazakh language since 1996. Same as in Almaty, Astana could not avoid some renamings in honor of semi-legendary or mythical characters (Karasaj batyr and Korkyt Ata) and Kazakhstani places that were symbolically important (Bayanaul, Otyrar, Taraz, Sary-Arka, Syrdarya etc). I read it as an attempt to create a symbolic continuity with a longer “national” past. The “cupolization” of Kazakhstan, evoked by several researchers, is a phenomenon of the same nature.

Similarities and Differences

Generally speaking, common features in the toponymy of the two capitals are useful for understanding the process of nation-building in general, but differences can say a lot about the level of “resistance” of local identities and the importance of local memories. It seems that in Kazakhstan the state tends to play first fiddle in the process of naming and identifying its toponymy. However, the role of local actors and issues should not be underestimated. If we compare Astana and Almaty, many more streets dedicated to local citizens can be found in the latter. At the same time it is not a rare thing both in Astana and Almaty that local citizens do not know in whose honor “their” street is renamed.⁹⁶

In Almaty “local factors” probably play a significant role due to the presence of active and educated *long-term* city patriots with their own opinion that have to be taken into

⁹⁶ Two of my respondents in Almaty acknowledged that they were far from being familiar with all the toponyms (especially “new” but also “old”) of their home city. One said that he “knew 90%” of them.

consideration by the authorities. Astana tends to be an impersonal, stand-offish city with a constant turnover of people where the feeling of belonging and appropriation of urban categories by people is articulated subject to functional needs. Does the name of a street really matter if one only crosses it going home from office during weekdays and takes a plane to his/her *home* city on Friday night (to be back on Monday morning)? Shall this psychological homelessness, weak ties and even *enmity* towards the city evolve into a feeling of belonging or a real appropriation of Astana by its young and dynamic population?

The Astana toponymy reflects the intentions and ideas of Power about the national identity and serves as a proving ground for the production of symbols and signs. In this regard, the appropriation of Lev Gumilyov's name is revealing. When the Eurasian National University was created in Astana on the basis of the former Akmolinsk Pedagogic Institute, a question was raised in whose honor it would be named since most higher education institutions in Kazakhstan are "dedicated" to someone. As a result, the Eurasian University, which in Soviet times bore the name of Kazakh playwright Saken Seifullin, was renamed in honor of Lev Gumilyov. On the contrary, in Almaty, the national University bears the name of Al-Farabi but was previously named in honor of Soviet statesman Kirov.

Lev Gumilyov was a historian and political prisoner in the Soviet era. He is known for his fundamental research on the ancient Turks. In his second Ph.D. dissertation "The Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of the Earth" he developed a so-called "passionate theory of Ethnogenesis", criticized in academic circles. When the theory became known to public at large in the 1980s, Gumilyov became quite popular among nationalists and ultra-conservative militants. In addition, his works contain the idea of "Eurasianism", another trend which became popular in 2000s among the supporters of post-Soviet integration. The idea to perpetuate the name of Gumilyov, who is associated to "Eurasianism", according to open official sources, belongs to the president of Kazakhstan. N. Nazarbayev became, since late 1990s, a supporter and adept of "Eurasian integration", which meant in political terms Russia and other post-Soviet countries. In his books he constantly evokes Gumilyov and his writings. Characteristically, another National University, opened in Astana 10 years later and created "from scratch" is named in honor of

Nazarbayev himself. Thus, due to political reasons, “Eurasianism” became “popular” in Kazakhstan in 2000s having replaced Pan-Turkism of 1990s and new Kazakh toponymy witnessed this turnover. Russia, the successor of the Soviet Union, speaking a language understandable in Kazakhstan, with direct common borders and close economic and business interactions, was closer to Kazakh elites than Turkey, a NATO member and EU candidate, with which Kazakhstan had no common borders and weak geopolitical interests.

Intentions and Reality

Any substantial change of ideology or political transformations can hypothetically inspire a wish to reshape or reconsider the existing names: it is easier to rename than to rebuild. In this regard, the example of Turkmenistan, where a shift of dictators occurred already in the post-Soviet period, is revealing. Squares and monuments of Turkmenbashi are gradually being replaced by a glorification to Arkadag. Kazakhstan did not experience a change of ruler since 1989 and the persistence of today’s toponymy is not under question. Instead, *les noms des lieux* in Astana and Almaty appear today a polyphonic “blooming buzzing confusion” of “new” incorporated unto the “old” and a triumphing vernacularism. But the latter I mean that one ideology was replaced by another one: new toponyms were used instrumentally to provide a legitimation through the past for the sake of self-determination. But did this legitimation succeed?

Michel de Certeau wrote in 1990 that the toponyms “hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city, operating chronological arrangements and historical justifications”.⁹⁷ Chronological arrangements and historical justifications in Kazakh toponymy are disguised in the rediscovery of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁹⁸ and a certain evisceration of the Soviet twentieth century. Accordingly, renaming of Lenin Streets and demolition of Lenin monument were acts of the same nature. Quite often old toponyms did not traumatize anyone in particular - but their place was too important strategically to let them persist. Thus, a desire to

⁹⁷ M.de Certeau, “Marcher dans la ville”, *L’invention du quotidien*, Vol.1, Arts de faire, Paris 1990.

⁹⁸ The colonization of Kazakh lands by Russian Empire started in 1731.

detach from the past and construct a certain model of the present attained a dialectical unity through the process of toponymy transformation.

This process, in spite of its apparent spontaneity, seems to have had a foolproof logic. The actors of the toponymy change could be the government, public or private institutions, local groups and also individuals acting as the citizens of independent Kazakhstan *en plein droit*. These actors could have more or less nationalistic, neutral, or nostalgic views and intentions. It happened that local or national authorities were acting “on behalf” of “citizens.” In other cases, the State took the initiative directly, in order to avoid “undesirable” names or events on its territory and in the minds of its people. Therefore stating who undertook renaming is more difficult than saying what it became: a clear distinction between the roles of the actors in order to establish hierarchies is problematic. Besides, “reality” is always a product of crisscross interactions and is a mirror of multiple identities. The problem is that those who renamed in Kazakhstan in 1990s, be it the state or private actors, did not interact or interacted insufficiently with the addressees of the initiative: locals, tourists and passers-by. This lack of communication created a gap packed with abilities and inabilities of the citizens to reshape their own system of coordinates in the “new” reality.

Another facet of the renaming process is people’s memory. Collective memory or products of collective remembrance of the past can be a useful instrument for facilitating acceptance and adaptation of a new toponymy. Pierre Nora wrote: “*Lieux de mémoires* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. Even if apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. [...] *Lieux de mémoires* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that result in their reciprocal overdetermination.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ P.Nora, « Between Memory and History: les lieux de mémoires », *Representations* 26, The Regents of the University of California, 1989, p. 7.

As described above, new, Astana and Almaty toponymy was updated to signify the presence and the importance of a *longer* past, i.e. to create continuity. But ironically the very process of appropriation created discontinuities from the point of view of perception and practices and gave a dare to the collective memory. In this way, a plate with the street name hanging on one and the same place for a hundred years is not a *lieu de mémoire*, but an object of a daily practice, the role of which no one reflects upon. If the plate is substituted by another one with a different name, it has a chance to become a place of memory for those who have to perceive it, at least until a force of habit destroys the cognitive dissonance resulting from the interaction with the unknown signifying which intruded into the usual system of signs. It is a question of time, but it is true for any place of memory. Why in this case the places of memory are created? *Because those who they are supposed to “immortalize” have long been forgotten.* In addition the contribution of so many of them was probably not so significant (at least in Kazakh case), but the nature of nationalism is that the patria must have its and its own heroes.

“The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs.”¹⁰⁰ To create a memorial is to create a permanent place of memory. To rename a street is to create a temporary place of memory until the practice wipes down the active and fresh perception of a toponym’s primary meaning, turning its perception into something passive and mechanical. But whether it is temporary or permanent, creating a place of memory is always an exercise of legitimation aiming at the future.¹⁰¹ The purpose of renaming is an artificial creation of continuities: an attempt to deceive, correct and somehow absorb the Soviet and pre-Soviet past, highlighting selected “dark” places and characters, producing a *menu à la carte* of the hierarchy and the system of coordinates and signs at a national level while the process of it is nothing but a deliberately created discontinuity. If younger generations associate it mainly with functional inconveniences (changing residence permit documents, and more), for elder generations it turns into a traumatic experience. Psychological inconvenience is added to functional ones worsening the spiritual crisis and the problem of identity. For the generations born between the 1940s and 1960s the change of Karl Marx into

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 13.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 15.

Kenesary means clearly that they no longer live in the country where they grew up, lived all their life and were or, could have been, happy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Identity, Continuities and Power: “Astanisation” as a Surrogate for National Identity

- Che fai? - mia moglie mi domandò, vedendomi insolitamente indugiare davanti allo specchio. - Niente, - le risposi, - mi guardo qua, dentro il naso, in questa narice. Premendo, avverto un certo dolorino. Mia moglie sorrise e disse: - Credevo ti guardassi da che parte ti pende. Mi voltai come un cane a cui qualcuno avesse pestato una coda: - Mi pende? A me? Il naso? E mia moglie placidamente: - Ma sì, caro. Guardatelo bene: ti pende verso destra.

Luigi Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* ¹⁰²

A true reflection on identity begins with looking narrowly into oneself. Pirandello’s *uno* – one of thousands, a fraction of “imagined community”, stopped in front of the mirror to look at himself. The logic of “asking about the self” for a person and for a nation are different. It is all the more unlike for literature and “reality”. However, the drama and a special feeling of novelty emerging from a different perception of “self” through internal or external circumstances must have something in common. Until the mid 1980’s the notion of “identity” was not manifest in Kazakh society. Even now, Kazakh language does not have a word meaning “identity” as such.¹⁰³ After the 1986 events, mentioned in the first chapter, discourses on national consciousness and self-determination began to appear. They were spontaneous and bottom-up rather than top-bottom. The Government (whose structure was the result of the balance of power between the center and the periphery, typical for ex-Soviet Union republics) did not know how to behave at that time: on the one hand nationalistic movements gained strength and could not be ignored without prejudice to the integrity of the State, on the other hand - the Union as a powerful

¹⁰² Luigi Pirandello, “Mia moglie e il mio naso” in *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, Book I, Chapter I, Giunti Demetra 2007, p.1.

¹⁰³ The closest kazakh word to english term “identity” is *birdeilik uqsastyk* [бірдейлік ұқсастық], but it can not be considered a full synonym of the term and notion of “identity”, such as implied in this research.

supranational structure still existed.

Symbols *à la carte* and Techniques for the Construction of National Identity before “Astanisation” ¹⁰⁴

a) Symbols: Nomadism and Struggle for Independence

After the acquisition of independence in 1991, Kazakhstan attended to a top-bottom search of “national” idea and the design of “national” representations. Flag, coat of arms, Republic Square in Almaty, national currency, territorial reform and much of new toponyms were inspired by the new government and sequentially introduced in the beginning and mid 1990s. With the transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana the construction of national identity and its articulation become somewhat different. Or, better: a new phase of appropriation has started and the quest for legitimacy in time gradually substituted a spontaneous appropriation of space that took place in the 1990s.

Rawi Abdelal wrote that Kazakhstan was one of the post-Soviet countries that thoroughly marginalized its nationalist movements.¹⁰⁵ But did the country have a national movement that could inspire the Power by a needed ideology? Edward Schatz wrote that unlike the Baltic republics and Ukraine, where the elites had managed to transform embryonic state apparatuses in the late 1980s by rallying them to the cause of ethnic nationalism, in Central Asia the independence movements were weak. Republican leaders [...] were Soviet-era *apparatchiks*.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs Yerzhan Kazykhanov declared in 2011 that “Kazakhstan is a young nation with a vibrant society and a dynamic economy. Yet twenty years ago, in December 1991, when it just *regained* its independence, it was not at all apparent that two decades later that would be the case.”¹⁰⁷ It seems that the Minister tried to pass the desirable for

¹⁰⁴ “Astanisation” is a term invented and introduced in this Research in order to explain the process of the identity-construction Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Rawi Abdelal, “Memories of Nations and States: Institutional History and National Identity in Post-Soviet Eurasia”, in *Nationalities Papers*, vol.30, No.3, 2002, pp.459-460.

¹⁰⁶ Edward Schatz, “What Capital Cities Say about State and Nation Building”, in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9:111-140, 2004, p.124.

¹⁰⁷ Yerzhan Kazykhanov, “Kazakhstan’s twenty years of independent development”, in *Kazakhstan 1991-2011: Twenty years of Peace and Creation* (an official publication of the Government of the Republic

reality. Yes, the struggle for independence could be a true basis for the construction of national identity: but Kazakhstan did not fight for its independence. Not a single day. In 1991, the Republic [became independent, N.S., and] inherited Soviet-era drawn borders not through revolution or liberation but by default.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, its first and only post-Soviet president did not want to leave the Soviet Union until its very disintegration and signed the “abdication” last of all his colleagues. As for the population, in 1990 ninety-four percent of Kazakhstanis voted for preserving the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, although the acquisition of “independence” in 1991 was used instrumentally in the political discourses, its further representation could hardly become a solid foundation for the construction of national identity.

The question which I asked was if the acquisition of independence was lived and perceived as a major emotional event by the citizens. My respondents A., G. and V., who were 43, 38 and 45 in 1991 told that “for their generation” “the independence” had more to do with the fear and the uncertainty caused by the end of Soviet system than with the joy of becoming a sovereign State.

If for Baltic States being part of the Soviet Union was a burden, for Central Asian ones, especially after World War II, the situation was somehow different. In the second half of the twentieth century the internal colonization of the territories conquered or annexed by the Russian Empire in Central Asia since the eighteenth century did not stop but accelerated. Infrastructure, industry, educational and cultural institutions were established in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the common economy and market some post-Soviet Central Asian States faced de-industrialization, political and social instability and setbacks. At the same time, these countries have gone their separate ways in terms of identity-construction.

My respondent, 24 years old N., an Uzbek emigrant living in Prague, pointed out that the word *uzbekchilik* (“uzbekness”) came into fashion in Uzbekistan “in the 2000s” and became one of the keywords for the discourses and oral representations related to nationhood and

of Kazakhstan), Newsdesk Media Inc., 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Sally N. Cummings, “Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan”, in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12:177-204, 2006, p. 177.

¹⁰⁹ V.A.Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, London 1997, p.51.

national identity. What is even more important, *uzbekchilik* is used by people in everyday life and is appropriated by media (newspapers and magazines) and cinema. Nothing similar was happening at the same period or earlier in Kazakhstan. S. Cummings wrote in 2006 that in Kazakhstan “the state-builders have failed to mobilize by using predominantly ethnic Kazakh symbols to serve the supra-state Kazakhstani identification project, instead of compartmentalizing these symbols for the more discrete ethnic Kazakh cultural revival.”¹¹⁰ “Kazakhness” never was a “natural” term, used by anyone. Debates on national identity happened, but mostly among social scientists. On the other hand, nationalist claims of indigenous Kazakhs were often reduced to ethnic or linguistic issues directed outward (*Who is the Other?*), and not to their own identity (*Who are We?*). All this is to say that for the Uzbeks, who are sedentary with some exceptions, the search for national identity has been facilitated by the fact that their traditional mode of life – based on agriculture - was not eradicated in the Soviet era. “The Uzbeks are rather conservative; they appreciate their traditional way of life. They are a traditional society that is constantly returning to its traditional forms of life after the collapse of the Soviet Union.”¹¹¹ At the same time, in Kazakhstan, as a traditional way of life nomadism had been exterminated at the root in the 1930s. Kazakhstan is a sedentary country par excellence in the twenty-first century and no “real” return to the sedentary past is possible in Kazakh case.

In the article “Nomadic Nationhood: Cinema, Nationhood, and Remembrance in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan”, Steven Norris hypothesizes a “nomadic nationhood” and puts forward an instrumental usage of Nomadism by the Power, in order to construct an evokable national identity.¹¹² The appropriation of nomadism is beyond any doubt, but its conceptualization poses several problems. First of all, nomadism, by its very nature, lacks physical reminders of a greater past.¹¹³ The second is about the relevance of such notion as “nomadic nation”. Is not this an oxymoron after all? Nationhood, as I understand it, is a phenomenon based on the belonging to a certain territory and ties between this territory, its boundaries and a suzerain. On the contrary, Nomadism means essentially the liberty of movement and the absence of externally imposed

¹¹⁰ Sally N. Cummings, “Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan”, p. 197.

¹¹¹ Daniil Kislov, *Mustakillik, Uzbekchilik i vizhshenoje pol'e* [Даниил Кислов, *Мустакиллик, Узбекчилик и выжженное поле*], interview for www.lenta.ru, saved on 22.10.2010, author’s translation from Russian.

¹¹² Stephen Norris, “Nomadic Nationhood: Cinema, Nationhood, and Remembrance in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan”, in *Ab Imperio*, 2012/2, pp. 378-403.

¹¹³ Sally N. Cummings, “Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan”, 2006, p. 193.

territorial imperative, limited by someone or something.

As for the film “Nomad”, deconstructed by Stephen Norris, no data on where and when the film was shown is provided in the article. Though its premiere was held in Kazakhstan, it was not shown in all the cities. Box-office in Kazakhstan was a modest amount compared to abroad. According to one of the critics, “Nomad is no different from American epics. Had the spoken language been English instead of Kazakh, it would have been impossible to distinguish this film from movies like ‘Gladiator’, ‘Braveheart’ or ‘Troy’. It's just the latest entry in an overused genre”. All this gives an indication that “Nomad” was more a single attempt than a link in a succession of ideological efforts of any “nationhood” strategy. Also, its messages were directed outward, which allows to think about this film as an export product that has little to do with the “internal” identity of Kazakhstan. Norris evokes the site of the President of Kazakhstan, full of representations which have to do with the nomadic past as a source for contemporary Kazakh nationhood.¹¹⁴

But the president himself asks in one of his books: “Can we reduce our traditional history only to Nomadism? Today it is more and more problematic. A well-developed system of urban settlements on the territory of Kazakhstan, both during the ancient times, and in times of the Ethnogenesis of the very Kazakh nation, do not allow an unequivocal interpretation of our past. Besides, some areas have a long sedentary tradition. Finally, the interpretation of Nomadism is not as clear as it was even a decade ago.”¹¹⁵ These words suggest an ambiguous and cautious attitude on the part of the president towards nomadism and its instrumentalization.

b) Techniques: School and Language

School and language are important ideological instruments.¹¹⁶ School is considered by many

¹¹⁴ Stephen Norris, “Nomadic Nationhood: Cinema, Nationhood, and Remembrance in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan”, 2012/2, pp. 378-403.

¹¹⁵ N. Nazarbayev, *V potoke istorii*. [H.Назарбаев, *B nomoke ucropuu*], Almaty 2003, pp.173-217.

¹¹⁶ See Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation”, *New Left Review* (March-April 1993), pp.3-11; same author, “National Self-Determination from a Historical Perspective” in *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 37, No. 3/4 (September-December 1995), pp. 283-299; R.Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox & Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton University Press, 2006; Aira Kemiläinen, *Nationalism: problems concerning the word, the concept, and classification*, Jyväskylä Kasvatusopillinen Korkeakoulu in Jyväskylä, 1964.

researchers as an effective ideological tool.¹¹⁷ I went to school in Kazakhstan from 1992 to 2003 and remember that even though “independence” came in 1991, portraits of Lenin disappeared from classes around 1993-1994. As for my 1994 Letter of Commendation, it was printed on paper which still contained the coat of arms of the Soviet Union. As for sovereign attributes, including the obligatory listening to the national anthem and the first “national” tutorials and textbooks (first of all, History ones, and then, gradually, of other subjects) were introduced in the late 1990s, almost ten years after the acquisition of “independence”. The 1990s were a period of stagnation, or rather of eclecticism, a mixture of old and new attributes and ideology, not to mention the fact that 90 percent of teachers were previously trained according to the “previous” ideology. In the 2000s the situation changed and the government began to be sensitive to the school system as an ideological tool. But the creation of a clear and unified ideologically articulated school system, starting from the writing of textbooks and ending with the introduction of certain “rituals” for the school etiquette requires clear and regular efforts and would only bear fruit in twenty or thirty years, when two or three generations pass through its crucible. And most importantly - the school is not the manufacturer but the conductor: it can replicate and “stamp” the national idea and ideology in the minds citizens only when the ideology already exists.

Language is often used in conjunction with the school. The role and status of the Kazakh language in post-Soviet Kazakhstan has increased significantly. According to D. Beachain and R. Kevlihan, the language question highlights the ambivalence of many Russian-speaking Kazakhs in embracing a narrow ethno-linguistic definition of Kazakhness that focuses on everyday use of the language as opposed to rhetorical support for its importance.¹¹⁸ Giulia Panicciari put out that according to official statistics, in 2009-2010 the total number of secondary-school students studying in Kazakh throughout the country was one and a half million, whereas for Russian the number was only 870.000 while for the same period in Almaty the

¹¹⁷ See Nancy M. Wingfield, *Flag wars and stone saints: how the Bohemian lands became Czech*, Harvard University Press, 2007; Lilia I. Bartholomé (ed.), *Ideologies in Education: Unmasking the Trap of Teacher Neutrality*, New-York 2008.

¹¹⁸ Donnacha O Beachain, Rob Kevlihan, “Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ehno-nationalist state-building”, in *Nations and Nationalism*, 2013, p.8.

majority of secondary schools still taught in Russian.¹¹⁹ The point is not in which language you learn: an ideology can be perfectly “transmitted” both in Kazakh or in Russian. On the other hand, it is evident that Kazakh language is still far from being able to oust Russian. Kazakh officials (including the highest ones) pronounce speeches in Russian, the largest and the best part of print media are published in Russian too. The language of the educated urban population is also Russian.¹²⁰ Kazakhstan's President wrote this about the role of the Kazakh language: “We need to be realistic and understand that today only political values can rally us. Although such cultural integrator as Kazakh language should certainly play a more significant role, the afterburner by way of forging a single ethnic consciousness of all Kazakhstanis may turn into a drama”.¹²¹

At the same time, the creation of urbanism (from simple houses to large-scale urban plans) and architectures require fewer actors, but more concentrated and easier effort in a lesser time than above-mentioned instruments. In Kazakhstan unlike other post-Soviet Republics, the fastest and most effective way for the state to legitimize itself lay in the urbanism, that is, through the construction of new buildings and/or areas that would signify ; explicitly, implicitly, or both; the new system of political and social relations. There is nothing new in this phenomenon: the new is rather *how* it was realized. For example, such important issue as the quality of construction in Astana is reasonably put under question.¹²² It was mentioned that “both civic and ethnic nationalisms are ideal types, the challenge is therefore not to seek to pin down a fixed point and declare definitely that either a civic or ethno-nationalist label defines the nature of nationalism in any given state but rather to identify divergent tendencies inherent in governing processes tending towards characteristics in each type. [...] The ongoing strategic ambiguity between civic and ethnic nationalism remains a core plank in political strategies.”¹²³

In my hypothesis, neither nomadism (a possible background for “ethnic” nationalism)

¹¹⁹ Giulia Panicciari, “Almaty as a New Kazakh City: Kazakhisation of Urban Spaces After Independence”, in Marco Buttino (ed.) *Changing Urban Landscapes: Eastern European and Post-Soviet Cities Since 1989*, Viella, 2013, pp.30-31.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ H.Назарбаев, *В nomine народа* [N.Nazarbayev, *V potoke istorii*], Almaty: Atamura, 2003, p.182.

¹²² V. Butchli, “Astana: Materiality and the City”, *Urban life in post-Soviet Asia*, ed. by Catherine Alexander, Victor Buchli and Caroline Humphrey, London; New York: 2007, pp.40-69.

¹²³ Donnacha O Beachain, Rob Kevlihan, “Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno-nationalist state-building”, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2013, p.14.

nor the struggle for independence (a possible background for “civic” nationalism) could mobilize a sufficiently broad response in Kazakh society in 1990s. At the same time school and language could have become instruments of the national propaganda but were not “appropriated” by the new Power in extenso. These were the conditions that favored the creation of Astana and the Astanisation of Kazakhstan that was an attempt to mobilize public consciousness and a way that evaded the sharp corners and the inevitable determinism of both ethno-symbolic and “civic” decisions for the nation-building. *Astanisation as a process is not a model of nation-building in the classical sense, but became a substitute of it and an instrument for mobilizing the public imaginary, inspired and implemented by the Power for the seek of its own legitimation in the eyes of Kazakhstani people.*

Hausmann, Foster and Kurokawa

When we talk about legitimations, it is necessary to reveal who carries it out, to whom it is addressed and with the help of what it is implemented. In the model I propose, the state tries to legitimize itself in face of people (“inner” legitimization) but also in face of the international community (“outer” legitimization) since “new capitals (or existing towns radically refashioned into capital cities) are designed to highlight the state’s place in the international system”.¹²⁴ What is then the object of legitimation in Kazakh case? First of all, the State itself, its political and cultural entity, the decision to move the capital (apparently controversial at early stages), the status quo of the existing power structure inside the country. Finally and most importantly it is the power of a particular ruler.

Almaty knew a spontaneous appropriation of the previous Kazakh-Soviet or “sovietized” space. But this appropriation was not entirely successful due to objective and subjective reasons, examined in previous chapters. Powerful natural substratum, ironic attitude of local citizens and a banal lack of “free” space did not let the process of appropriation reveal its strength. As for subjective factors, the will of the president, who was eager to move the capital city from Almaty to Astana, played a significant role. It is widely known and acknowledged that the current President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev pushed and inspired the construction

¹²⁴ Edward Schatz, “What Capital Cities Say about State and Nation Building”, in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9:111-140, 2004, p.121.

of Astana. Most major decisions concerning the establishment of the new capital itself, as well as its new buildings, districts and administrative divisions were taken personally or with Nazarbayev's awareness. Astana was once called ironically "a favourite plaything of Nazarbayev". All this is to point out that today's look of Astana should be conceptualized critically since is a product of not merely standard urban developing projects and strategies or market-driving forces but of a single person's vision.

Adrian Fauve pointed out that Astana urbanists, architects and city planners were overshadowed by the President playing first fiddle in the "creation" of Astana.¹²⁵ My discourse analysis shows that the name of Nazarbayev like no other is mentioned in conjunction with Astana as an urban project. Epithets and tone may vary depending on the source, but no one would doubt that Astana is "Nazarbayev's project". To which extent the mythical "elites", mentioned here and there, in the scientific and popular discourse, are paraphrase meaning Nazarbayev himself is an open question but the fact that the latter dominates the discourse on the construction of Astana as "planner" and "inspirer" is obvious. This statement does not eliminate, however, more subtle questions about the nature of the participation of the head of state in the creation of the city. The direct involvement of top officials in architecture and urbanism was typical in the era of monarchies, becoming uncommon in the twentieth century that gave way to a "division of labor" and brought to the forefront architects and urbanists.¹²⁶

Marcel Roncayolo wrote about the haussmannisation: "*La transformation de Paris sous le Second Empire peut être considérée comme un cas exceptionnel : résultat de la volonté politique d'un régime à la recherche de l'ordre urbain et social, du prestige ou même du développement des affaires. On a tendance à rapporter cette ambitieuse intervention à Napoléon III, au préfet de la Seine Haussmann, responsable de ces oeuvres depuis 1853 ou à leurs inspirateurs immédiats.*"¹²⁷

From the point of view of the political intentions and their perception by the society, the parallel between Paris in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and Astana in early twenty-first century, seems fruitful. The difference, however, is that Nazarbayev and his planners

¹²⁵ Adrien Fauve, Cécile Gintrac, « Production de l'espace urbain et mise en scène du pouvoir dans deux capitales présidentielles d'Asie Centrale » in *L'Espace Politique*, 8/2009-2, pp.3-6.

¹²⁶ I am perfectly aware that this statement is controversial. By the way I am writing this thesis in France where the twentieth century *quinquennats* of Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand were marked by their most inambiguous involvement into urban projects.

¹²⁷ Marcel Roncayolo, *La Ville et ses Territoires*, Paris 2010, p. 111.

did not want to rehash old areas and expand the street on the right bank of Astana (see Chapter 2) in the manner Haussmann did, preferring to move the political and administrative center to the Left Bank. “*La centralité apparaît dans les dimensions géographiques, symboliques et politiques : l’exercice du pouvoir sur un groupe passe nécessairement par la définition de son identité et le contrôle de son centre, dans les contextes culturels d’origine européenne. [...] Les centres-villes semblent se reproduire par dédoublements successifs à l’intérieur de l’agglomération, comme si à chaque type de centralité, politique, financier, commercial, culturel, etc. devait correspondre un centre spécialisé.*”¹²⁸ In Paris, relocation of business (but not political) center to La Défense took place hundred years after Haussmannization when both Haussmann and the Second Empire were long gone. Napoleon III and his prefect were guided primarily by practical considerations: the desire to make the streets wider to avoid the barricades (protection of the Power), to extend the road by increasing their permeability (logistics), increasing air flow (hygiene), build new buildings and facades to give the city the gloss and certain style, based on the legitimization of the present (second Empire) through the past (First Empire).¹²⁹

By what considerations Nazarbayev and his city-planners were guided? Definitely, neither beauty nor safety were the last reasons. As for “real” urbanism, the practical considerations such as, for example, hygiene, so easily distinguishable in case of Haussmannization, are not at all as obvious as for “nazarbayevisation” of Astana. According to Astana Chief Planner’s official site, the main considerations were “to aim the future” and “to create a sustainable city of the 21st century”.¹³⁰ Given the economical conditions of 1997, this was, without any disguise, *an aim to realize Utopia*. Practical considerations were either not mentioned at all or moved to a second or even a third plan. Many documents, especially of a propagandist nature, declared Astana a “new” city, and its foundation date the year 1997.

In 2017, Astana will celebrate its 20th anniversary.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Jérôme Monnet, *La Ville et son Double, la Parabole de Mexico*, pp. 149-158, 181.

¹²⁹ I would like to thank Nicolas Verdier for being my guide during a marvelous excursion in Paris that inspired me to make this comparaison.

¹³⁰ Kisho Kurokawa, *Works and Projects*, “International Competition for the Master Plan and Design of Astana, Kazakhstan”, <http://www.kisho.co.jp/page.php/222>, saved on March, 15, 2013.

¹³¹ Expo 2017 Astana Booklet, prepared and published by Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan, p.7.

But Astana is not a new city. In the second chapter, I have shown that the city has a prior history full of events and architecture; full of interest. At the same time the ruling order that generated the official discourse and produced the urbanism, was systematicall trying to forget or to erase the “before” or at least, move attention away from it. However, once one crosses the bridge from the Left Bank to the Right one and lose him/herself in the streets of the “old” city, s/he would immediately understand that the past is still very present in the “reality” of the city. Thus, Astana – a landfill for a myth-making at some point becomes a myth itself.

From the point of view of the security the Left Bank – a new center of Power in Astana is a perfectly controllable space; the width of the passes¹³² and their visibility leaves no chance to barricades. Presidential residence Ak-Orda is literally a fortress surrounded by a moat separated from the men of mould living on the other side.



(Fig. 14) Ak-Orda¹³³

From an aesthetic point of view, Astana is essentially the same show-off that was the construction of *façades haussmanniennes*. However, the quality of construction of Astana - a consequence of clientalist tenders¹³⁴ built quickly and often with defects, can not be compared in any way to the quality of *ilots haussmanniens* that dominate Parisian landscape since 1860s. Even so,

¹³² In Lynchean sense.

¹³³ Source: www.astana.kz, saved in June 2012.

¹³⁴ Adrien Fauve, *Histoire de Statues au Kazakhstan : l'Atelier Urbain de Construction(s) Nationales* (abstract of the Ph.D.dissertation by the author), Paris 2013.

the discourse analysis shows that Nazarbayev is aspiring to combine both Napoleon III and Haussmann for the collective imaginary.

The above statement is not entirely objective. Several well-known architects worked for Astana on direct invitation of the authorities, or after winning open competitions. In the second chapter I mentioned, along with other names, Kishi Kurokawa and Norman Foster, who played a special role in creating today's image of Astana. Kurokawa is the author of the master plan of Astana, Nazarbayev University and the project of a new capital airport. Foster built the Pyramid of Peace and Khan Shatyr. But is their work truly independent? To what extent they are the creators and to what extent the performers of a political will? I argue that the work and the names of these architects is as much a legitimizing tool in which there is an act of creation. Of course, not only architects participated in the legitimation process. The singer Andrea Bocelli was invited to sing during the Khan-Shatyr opening ceremony. Another singer, Montserrat Caballé did the same during the opening of the Pyramid of Peace and Reconciliation. Cirque du Soleil performed at the Astana anniversary in 2012. But architects played a more significant role, given the durability of their efforts.

Kisho Kurokawa won an open competition that resulted in the realization of his draft master plan of Astana, chosen among fifty other projects presented by leading architects and planners. The site of the architect reads: "Since the new capital will go through rapid growth, the plan proposes a Linear Zoning System (Linear Land Use) instead of the Radius Pattern, which has a core at the center of the city. The Linear Zoning System is based on a well-balanced composition of each function of the city at every stage of its growth. The proposal aims to preserve and redevelop the existing city [with a population of approximately 300.000 people], and create a new city at the south and the east sides of the Yessil River, enabling the Symbiosis of the History and the Future. It proposes to cluster the new housings at both sides of the river, which will feature the symbiosis of the river and the city." Kurokawa's plan is rated up to 2030 with adjustments each five years, supposes not only a further development of the existing city but also a construction of Eco-Media City and Eco-Forest. It is very ambitious from a conceptual and a material points of view. Some elements of the project are still waiting in the wings, but others, in particular the transfer of political and administrative center to the Left Bank, have been realized.

Kurokawa's Proposal, since the 1960's, pleaded for the Paradigm Shift from the age of the machine principle to the age of life principle. His work is the embodiment of Metabolism and Symbiosis, which are the two most important concepts of the age of life principle. Since the new capital will go through rapid growth, Kurokawa's plan proposes a Linear Zoning System (Linear Land Use) instead of the [...] Radius Pattern, which has a core at the center of the city. The Linear Zoning System is based on a well-balanced composition of each function of the city at every stage of its growth.¹³⁵

It should be noted that the original idea of the expansion of the city towards the Left Bank does not belong to Kurokawa or to Nazarbayev but to Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union General Secretary, who visited the city in the 1960s, in the midst of virgin land campaign. Victor Buchli points out that “Nazarbayev’s adoption of the Kurokawa plan is not merely an attempt to gain international architectural prestige. Kurokawa himself trained in Moscow for a period during Khrushchev’s building boom, in particular to study the production and use of the panel construction which had been so highly developed by the Soviet architects during this period. Kurokawa’s architectural and cultural philosophy of symbiosis shares many structural and philosophical points with Nazarbayev’s Eurasianist philosophy for cultural and national development and Gumilev’s Eurasianism”.¹³⁶

Edward Schatz evokes reproducing of “Soviet Internationalism with a Kazakh face”. It is an inspiring idea that illustrates clearly continuities between Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan. It should be mentioned, however, that the so-called “Soviet internationalism” was used as the antithesis of nationalism and cosmopolitanism on the other hand. Situated comfortably between these two extremes, it aimed the production of myths but was based on a certain “soviet” reality. Astana’s planning and architecture are on the contrary a cocktail of myths aiming the production of a certain reality. This cocktail, mixed by renowned architects¹³⁷, is a combination of an

¹³⁵ Kisho Kurokawa, *Works and Projects*, “International Competition for the Master Plan and Design of Astana, Kazakhstan”, www.kisho.co.jp/page.php/222, saved in March 2013.

¹³⁶ Victor Butchli, “Astana: Materiality and the City”, *Urban life in post-Soviet Asia*, edited by Catherine Alexander, Victor Butchli and Caroline Humphrey, London; New York 2007, pp.40-69.

¹³⁷ A term used to describe architects whose celebrity and critical acclaim have transformed them into idols of the architecture world and may even have given them some degree of fame amongst the general public. Celebrity status is generally associated with avant-gardist novelty. A key characteristic is that the architect's designs are almost always iconic and highly visible within the site or context. As the status is

“international” superstratum and a vernacular substratum.

Another important Left Bank project by Kisho Kurokawa is the campus of Nazarbayev University, established in 2009. The construction will be fully completed by 2020.



(Fig. 15) The main hall of the Nazarbayev University ¹³⁸

According to Kurokawa’s site the planning and design concepts for the University would be “symbiosis between innovation and inheritance, lush greenery to create the urban Green Network throughout the city, symbolic University to symbolize the advanced urbanism in Kazakhstan, metaphor of Natural Landform to represent the diverse natural land form and variety of vegetation in Kazakhstan, healthy Campus with fine facilities and spaces for healthy campus life in mind and body, Student and Faculty Interaction encouraged by a variety of comfortable settings for communication and interaction among students and teachers,

dependent on current visibility in the media, fading media status implies that architects lose "starchitect" status—hence a list can be drawn up of former "starchitects".

¹³⁸ Photo from the official site of the University, www.nu.gov.kz, saved in September 2012.

Environmental Consciousness and Energy Efficiency.”

What is Nazarbayev University? A competitive higher institution or another Left Bank utopia? The University has a special autonomous status and is a hybrid between a private and a public institution. On one side it is funded (along with private donations) from the state budget of Kazakhstan. On the other side, its status and activities are regulated by a law ad hoc.¹³⁹ The University has a broad degree of autonomy; its funding exceeds ten times that one of other higher education institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan, besides most of the teachers are invited from abroad.¹⁴⁰ Nazarbayev University students are exempt from any form of state control of the Ministry of Education and the University itself from compulsory national accreditation obligatory for other state educational institutions.¹⁴¹ The University is administered by Senior Counsel of Trustees headed by the President of the Republic, the Board of Trustees, headed by the Prime Minister and the operational part by a professional manager Shigeo Katsu, who previously worked at the World Bank.

Why such a complicated structure? According to one of my respondents, 28-years old G., working at a “normal” university in Astana on the Right Bank, “the idea of a proper education in Kazakhstan has failed.” “Normal” schools are corrupt, education is no longer effective. Any tests and exams can be *razvesti*. *Razvesti* [“развести” in Russian] can be translated from Russian as “diluted”, and means to give a bribe to the teacher in order to have a good result for the exam. The level of students graduating from a “normal” university with a bachelor degree can be hardly compared with the level of students who graduated during the late Soviet Union and even in the 1990s. Even the masters and doctoral dissertations are often “bought” and/or “sold”. Periodically, authorities are trying to intervene, alternating carrot and stick, by introducing additional control or awards for the most successful teachers and researchers. But these measures can not improve the situation, since they do not mean not real reforms but rather a reaction to the events. At the same time the Power can not afford to accept the collapse of higher education and is still concerned about the formation of the intellectual elites. In the mid-2000s it tried to

¹³⁹ Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Status of “Nazarbayev University”, “Nazarbayev Intellectual School” and “Nazarbayev Fund” from January 19, 2011.

¹⁴⁰ www.nu.edu.kz, saved on 01/04/2013.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, Article 11, Paragraph 3.

solve the problem by sending “top” Kazakhstani students abroad. The attempt did not fail but either had a tremendous success: first, it turned out that for some sectors and specialties there were more grants than worthy candidates, and second, some of the students sent abroad stopped going back or experienced difficulties in finding jobs corresponding to their level of education. Another one of my respondents, 30 years old T., who now lives and works in Sweden and is not Kazakh citizen anymore, confessed that after graduating from the University in the United Kingdom where he had studied “robotics”, on his return was offered a job at a Bearing Plant (sic!). But there were opposite cases as well (more often for humanities) when after studying abroad people came back and were able to make successful career.

So, in my hypothesis, seeing that local education is not reformable and has an appallingly poor quality; that teaching students abroad is not a panacea and the entire educational system must be reformed in order to change the situation, the Power decided to create an “enclave” of uncorrupted, highly professional School, administered by foreign managers and driven by foreign teachers, independent from the Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Education. But the enclave remains an enclave. According to the information from the official site of the NU, in 2012, the university enrolled only 506 students, while the total number of Kazakh students in 2012 was 121 044 people.¹⁴²

As for Norman Foster’s projects, I argue that along with Kurokawa, the former responded to the claim of legitimacy and the realization of Utopia demanded in the 2000s. The Pyramid of Peace was created by Foster between 2004 and 2006 for the Second Congress of World and Traditional Religions, held in Kazakhstan triennially on President Nazarbayev’s initiative. Since Kazakhstan is a laic state, religious and “ethnic” issues are not linked closely and treated differently. The distribution of different ethnic groups on the territory of the country was “solved” by the administrative reform in 1997, when a balance between ethnic groups in different regions has been artificially adjusted due to a gerrymandering. The reform, which was per se an act of territorialization of ethnic Kazakh in their country, was done quickly and efficiently. Subsequently there was no need to return to the practices of the genre because *de jure* appropriation has reached its goal and was materialized into new administrative divisions.

¹⁴² Data from the Ministry of National Education of Kazakhstan, www.egu.gov.kz, saved in January 2013.

“Religious” issue is more sophisticated, since the religious identity of groups and individuals is more prone to changes than a subscription to a territory. The Power certainly has official position and policies towards the religions, but they have to resort to the adjustments, extra articulation and update the existing state of things. “The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation was conceived as a permanent venue for the Congress and a global centre for religious understanding, the renunciation of violence and the promotion of faith and human equality.”¹⁴³

For many years, Kazakh authorities were building a religious policy that consisted of encouraging four “traditional” religions (Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Judaism) and creating an image of a tolerant State with a multi-confessional population.¹⁴⁴ However, some religions and beliefs that were beyond the scope of this scheme from the point of view of the official ideology (Krishnaites, Muslim communities and mosques outside the DUMK etc.) were decried by the official discourse, persecuted by the authorities and doomed to semi-legal existence and official stigmatization.¹⁴⁵

“Spatially, the pyramid is organised around a soaring central atrium, which is animated by shifting patterns of coloured light. A glazed oculus in the floor of the atrium casts daylight down into the auditorium and creates a sense of vertical continuity from the lowest level of the building to the very peak. The assembly chamber itself - symbolically the most important space – is raised at the top of the pyramid, supported on four inclined pillars, characterised as 'the hands of peace'. Lifts take delegates to a garden-like reception space from where they ascend to the chamber via a winding ramp.”¹⁴⁶ The shape of the Pyramid, its four inclined pillars, the event for which it was created, and other direct and indirect signs urge to consider both Pyramid and the World Congress of the World's Religions an attempt to strengthen the image of the “ideal” religious identity for the Kazakh people, classified on the shelves between the four classical religions, or, again, an Utopia. Between 1991 and 2011, Kazakhstan built and renovated many

¹⁴³ <http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/palace-of-peace-and-reconciliation/>, saved in March, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Nariman Shelekpayev, “Kazakhstan : pays ‘musulman’? Identité religieuse ou identités religieuses? » in *Carnival*, 2012, pp.93-114.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Habiba Fathi, « Les réseaux mystiques au Kazakhstan : entre *dhikr* et militantisme ? », *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, num.15/16, 2007.

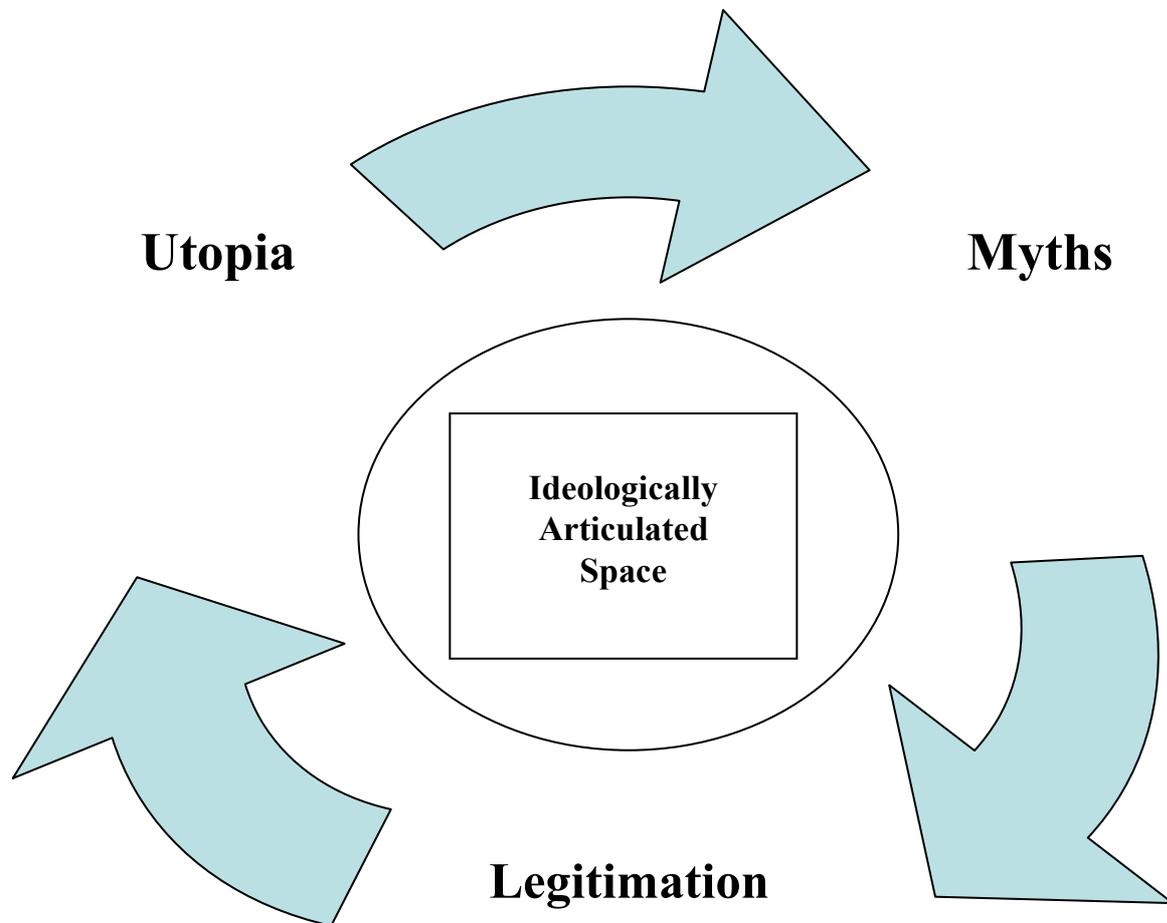
¹⁴⁶ <http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/palace-of-peace-and-reconciliation/>, saved in March, 2013.

places of worship. New religious communities and several Representative bodies of traditional Confessions were established, major religious figures including John Paul II came to Kazakhstan: these, however, were “unilateral” actions that served different Confession in Kazakhstan, but not the vision and representation of religious identity of the country as a whole. The Pyramid of Peace became such. “The four sides of our Palace are oriented to the four cardinal points. In a sense, this building embodies independent Kazakhstan, friendly embracing all people of all nations and religions”, says the site of the Pyramid.

Khan-Shatyr, was the second of Foster’s projects in Astana, implemented immediately after the Pyramid of Peace. It is the only case in the “new” architecture of Astana where nomadic motives were used, albeit indirectly. “The building's tented structure has great resonance in Kazakh history as the tent is a traditional nomadic building form - Khan Shatyr translates as 'the Tent of the Khan' ”, says Foster's website. In the first chapter, I have shown how nomadism was used in the creation of the post-Soviet image of Almaty. In Astana, its instrumentalisation wore a different character. Instead of an active image (riders with horses and, accordingly, the rhetoric of “young” country), a passive and solidifying one (a representation of a dwelling, yet not a classical yurt but a Khan’s tent) was implemented.

Utopia, Myths and Legitimacy

In the previous paragraphs I have shown that the main features for Kurokawa and Foster’s projects, inspired by the Power and paid, at least, partially from the state budget was the realization of Utopia. Then, the Left Bank is not a simple appropriation of space, a “claim to territorialization” or an embodied detachment from the Past, but mainly an attempt to create an ideologically articulated space, based on the instrumentalisation of the Myths concerning real and symbolic time for the sake of the legitimation of the status quo existing in physical and mental space.



*“La propagande, en prenant la forme de mythe, échappe aux conflits sociaux et se transforme en évidence, en consensus, toujours dans l’intérêt de celui qui s’en sert. [...] Le nationalisme fut constitué à l’aide de mythes, qui fondent durablement les idéologies et les politiques destinées à assurer la stabilité des nouveaux Etats”.*¹⁴⁷ In Kazakh case several types of myths are identified and interpreted differently by different researchers. A precise classification is merely possible, but I would like to mention some easily identifiable ones. These are Eurasian Myth, Myth about the Integrity of the Nation, Myth about the Origin of the Nation, Myth about the President and Myth about Modernism. I argue that all these myths are generated by the Power and aim the unification and stabilization of the nation, yet avoiding social conflicts, according to Monnet’s paradigm.

I wrote in the second chapter that the installation of the Baiterek Tower inspired and gave a stimulus to a further urban development of the Left Bank. More than that, Baiterek is a

¹⁴⁷ Jérôme Monnet, *La Ville et son Double, la Parabole de Mexico*, p. 170.

brilliant example of mythmaking: it does not incarnate one myth but of a bunch of them behind a single Tower. On one hand, it expresses the Myth on the Origin of the Nation, based on Turkic or pseudo-Turkic mythology. On the other hand, “laic” myths and symbols hidden in Baiterek might evoke the Myth on the Integrity of the Nation. As for the “presidential” myth, it is also brought into play by the Baiterek. The president’s palm imprint is incorporated into the monument and became one of rituals created for visitors; so anyone can “try” it.

This makes think that Baiterek serves, inter alia, as a legitimization of President’s own power. Besides, apart from literal appropriation, we face an attempt of a fusion of two or several myths that can be read as an attempt to unite Nation and Power in the collective imaginary. Baiterek was the first “experiment” of the kind, later the attempts of fusion were “successfully” repeated for other symbolic and material issues: national currency, legislation etc. It can be thus hypothesized that legitimization is not a single, static action but a dynamic one that requires a certain frequency and new forms. Visiting Baiterek became obligatory for local and international tourists. As a symbol of Astana it is inscribed at almost all official representations.



(Fig. 16) The President’s Hand Incorporated into the Monument.¹⁴⁸

The practice described above can be interpreted differently. I consider it as an attempt to unite

¹⁴⁸ Author’s photo, 2007.

several myths in one, although some would say that there is nothing symbolic or hidden inside. What is important is that this practice (and all the practices of the kind) finally help the legitimation process. Kazakh people are mainly those who climb the Baiterek, who “try” the President’s palm and who use the monument symbolically or physically: as places of gatherings, excursions, promenades, weddings and their personal show-off. So practices, invented or created at, for and subsequently by Baiterek become at a certain moment independent of their architects and builders.

A Foucauldian approach might help to abandon the dichotomy of Power versus People (otherwise Nazarbayev vs. Kazakhstani people) that is to abstract away from the actors and the symbols and try to perceive Astana, Astanisation and the construction of an identity by the Power from the point of view of its very process. In *Surveiller et punir* Foucault evokes an expressive example of a “disciplinary power” that incarnates the aspiration of the Power to see everything, being invisible and control everyone, being anonymous. The Panopticon, according to Bentham, is a ring-shaped building with a Tower in the middle. Such a structure would be an ideal machine for the maintenance of Power that must not finally depend on concrete people who put it into practice. Likewise, the principle of the Power is not a personality able to reach it, but the Power itself managing to assign the subjects.¹⁴⁹

Initially the Panopticon was invented as a prison, but it can be used for a broad range of activities. Bentham imagined it as a mechanism of governing all the aspects of life. He considered that Panopticon would help “to revive moral, preserve health, strengthen the industry, spread the enlightenment, decrease the taxes, solidify the economy, untie and not cut the Gordian knot of the “poor” laws” So, Foucault explains when interpreting the Bentham’s idea, that the Tower is not only an instrument, used beyond or independently from the power relations but the very way of organization and the functioning of Power. Foucault seen in Panopticon the most concentrated expression of the disciplinary power. Is Baiterek a new Panopticon for the Left Bank? Is Astana a new Panopticon for Kazakhstan? After all, Left Bank is nothing but a closed space between the river and the swamps and is *a perfectly controllable space*.

The transfer of the capital from southern, mountainous, built up to the last meter Almaty to northern flat empty Astana, and then from the Right Bank to the Left Bank is, in my

¹⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris 2003.

opinion, an eternal variation on the theme of the search and the perfection of the control on the space and not only a “claim to the territoriality” by ethnic Kazakhs, advocated by so many researchers. It goes without saying that Panopticon is a metaphor but the idea is still timely in the twenty-first century. The role of the state does not consist in imposing anything or restricting the manifestations of the freedom, but being *omnipresent*, generating certain types of activities and communication, defining a substantial part of the life of the society and the people. Power is thus not an institute, not a structure and not even a might that certain persons can possess, but a notion signifying a complex strategic situation of the given society. Following Foucault we can see that the Power puts itself into practice in numerous aspects and relations; but it is not a “stranger” for other types of “non-power” relations neither, penetrating them invisibly and playing a productive role in their construction as well. The power maintains itself not through a strategy aiming a consistent achievement of previously established goals but through taking single local decisions. Those decisions, multiplying and following each other, relying one on other and spreading, form a certain whole, in which the goals can be distinguished but the concrete personalities, who wish them to be realized can not be identified.

Any ideal Power, according to Foucault, is productive in the way that it is not reducible to a single and definite source or body, but in the way that it is able to penetrate all the discourses and activities of the society. I argue that the Power in Kazakhstan aspires to this ideal. Soviet Power aspired to it as well. But the difference between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods probably consists in how the Power behaved itself towards the individuals’ personal space. The Soviet State tried to penetrate all the spheres of the life – private and public, although some private autonomy existed under communism as well. Postmodern authoritarianism that Kazakhstan lives nowadays is characteristic by the fact that the Power does not try to penetrate the personal space; instead it tries to control the public space. Baiterek, with the incorporated palm of Kazakhstan’s president is a quintessence of material and symbolic public space. It penetrates almost all the official and many non-official representations of Astana and, at a lesser extent, Kazakhstan, and giving them indelible seal and conditioning discourses, products and relations.

Sally Cummings insisted that legitimation, self-legitimation, and identification are mutually reinforcing. “The greater the sense of collective identification, the stronger the expected

cohesion among elites. The greater the shared sense of why rulers find themselves in power, and the stronger the collective sense that the ruler is justified, the greater the sense of these ruler's shared mission and policy goals".¹⁵⁰ Kazakhstan's state justifies itself with the help of a multitude of myths, independent or merging. This power does not use or rarely uses coercion, that is, actively repressive measures of control of the territory and the population. It relies more on a persuasion since it stimulates and at the same time determines the things that appear as a result of its efforts. All in all, the President is merged with the institution of presidency and the national identity that is constructed by the Power is inseparable from the presidential power.



(Fig. 17) Presidential Palm Depicted on the National Currency, against a Background with Baiterek and Other State Symbols.¹⁵¹

The Use of Space. Back to “Imagined Communities”.

After a deconstruction of symbols and myths identified in Astana, I would like to emphasize that all the above is not attempt to find any “truth” or even the most appropriate version of any “reality”. Rather I am trying a *menu à la carte* with several ideas concerning the reading of space that I am interested in. But would it not be a simplification to identify a “bad” Power or actors with “good” or “bad” intentions? To answer this question fully it is necessary to abstract from symbols and myths and switch the attention to the practices of the usage of the space.

¹⁵⁰ Sally N. Cummings, “Legitimation and Identification in Kazakhstan”, in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12:177-204, 2006, p. 179.

¹⁵¹ From www.profi-forex.org, saved on 01/04/2013.

According to Natalie R.Koch, “President Nazarbayev may describe the new capital as a symbol, the Western media may read and write it as a different symbol, and citizens may see it yet as another symbol. But the fact is, despite all this, real people labored to build its new structures, hundreds of millions of dollars changed hands, and hundreds of people can now call it home.”¹⁵²

The shift of the attention from actors to outcomes can lead to very far-reaching conclusions. How to know if Astanisation did actually succeed? How to know if all the legitimizations reach their “final consumers”? I do not have an ambition and a possibility to give a comprehensive answer to these questions. However I consider that the process of Astanisation conditioned the creation of a surrogate of a national idea. The attitude of “people” to this surrogate has considerably improved, from a negation in the 1990s to a common enthusiasm in the 2000s. Certain political and economical objectives were reached and thousands of informational occasions were established. Thanks to Astanisation, the Power created itself an instrument and a mode of legitimation that it needed. But who was engaged into the realization of the modernization tasks/projects: Kazakh architects and engineers? No, these were foreign specialists: Italian, French, Swiss or Turkish who were invited to Kazakhstan and paid more than generously. As for the construction itself, it was and is accomplished, at least partially, by Uzbek and Tajik *Gastarbeiters*, according to some data¹⁵³. This is maybe a reason for which Myths remain Myths and are received skeptically since trying to mobilize the social consciousness with hands and technologies of the “other” is a colossus with feet of clay. The paradox consists in the fact that probably the most important Identity Construction Project in the post-Soviet Kazakhstan, which is the urbanism of Astana (and not a linguistic or cultural kazakhisation of population) is a combination of foreign ideas and foreign labor force.

Adrien Fauve pointed out that the identity construction in Astana is not a clear and well thought-out strategy of the state, but rather a consequence of a series of social relations and clientalistic networks, which are a consequence of a frequent change of officials and contractors’ interests.¹⁵⁴ But not every citizen of Kazakhstan has access to clientalistic networks and relations.

¹⁵² Natalie Koch, *The City and the Steppe: Territory, Technologies of Government and the Kazakhstan’s New Capital*, Ph.D.dissertation, 2012.

¹⁵³ Guest workers are difficult to count since they are illegal or semi-legal in most cases.

¹⁵⁴ Adrien Fauve, *Histoire de Statues au Kazakhstan : l’Atelier Urbain de Construction(s) Nationales* (abstract of

Instead, the intensive construction and the expansion of the city has been taking place for sixteen years and has provoked a lot of inconveniences to the inhabitants of the city. Hundreds and thousands of new Astana inhabitants have nothing in common with the “old” “locals” and can merely take full profit of the city both culturally and economically. Giulia Panicciari wrote that the real urban problem in the case of Kazakhstan is not a hypothesized conflict between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians but a misunderstanding between cultured and educated urban Kazakhs and rural Kazakhs – the *mambeti* who moved to the cities in a search of a better life. Astana has its demographic and social dynamics but I do not see (although have no data to state it) a fundamental difference between these two cities regarding the above-mentioned social problem. From this point of view, legitimation attempts and the Astana imagery, produced by the Power are blank shots. Rural citizens who have just moved to the city may like the Left Bank or not, may love the Astana urbanism or not, but they will finally accept them because they have other immediate tasks and *angoisses*: to find a job, to buy a flat, to help other relatives moving to the city. And the “civilized” urban citizens, living in the city for generations, having access to various media, meeting foreigners and finally, asking *other* questions will always be critical towards the efforts of the Power to legitimize itself. Part of them will try to enter the clientelistic networks and earn a fortune, participating into the sharing out the oil or gaz rent. Others will prefer to quit the country.

The nation is an imagined community in the sense that it can never be lived or perceived by its members within their direct experience.¹⁵⁵ Nation is lived as a representation and only imagination can help to recreate a supposed integrity with other representatives of the same nation. The State is only legitimate when it is able to speak on behalf of its citizens, so it is necessary that it makes all the efforts to make the community real. In other words, by implementing certain practices directed inwards, the Power must try to make the national community as less imagined as possible. Anderson’s equation has the Nation from one side and the representations from the other. Does Astanisation make Kazakhstani people a real community or at least, a *less imagined* one (even if for Anderson a nation will always be an

the Ph.D.dissertation by the author), Paris 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso; New Edition edition, 2006, pp.1-30, 74-76, 100-116.

imagined community)? This is a debatable question. It seems that it does but only until the moment when people can really live the dichotomy of the Left and the Right Banks. The Left Bank is a center of Power that is physically detached from the Right Bank where most part of the population lives. If searching parallels with Central Europe, Left Bank reminds cold and majestic Buda while Right Bank - vivid and populous Pest, where day and night life is concentrated. Left Bank certainly has restaurants, entertainment and malls, for instance Khan-Statyr, but they are too expensive for people with medium and low income. Thereby real practices come into conflict with the myths, besides the physical detachment is accompanied by the social one. That is why I consider that Astanisation is a sort of “anti-Andersonian” phenomenon. Directed outwards, it is rather a or illusory representation of the Kazakh nation rather than a process aiming at real modernization or real national unity.

On the cover of this thesis, one sees a reproduction of Kazakh painter Aibek Begalin's canvas "Baiterek", created in 2012. The artist, who is not from Astana, told me that he indirectly learned about the Baiterek legend. He had travelled to Astana where he saw the monument for the first time and took an interest in it, later deciding to develop a work related to it. Artworks that are original, one-time pieces differ from mass reproductions not only due to the quantity and the quality of the public that experiences them, but above all by the fact that an artist can create a new *énoncé* on the basis of symbols and morphemes of the existing reality; and not only to reproduce already existing ones. In my opinion, the value and the interest of this picture is *per se* a crystallization of a visual vocabulary of the nation under construction, even if the artist does not go beyond an already existing language of symbol-myths. Certainly, the picture can be read and understood in different ways, but after it is painted it goes to a gallery and starts to live its own life: people see and think it. And those who appropriate it in their imaginations begin to perceive Baiterek-Myth, Baiterek-Object, Baiterek-Word or other expressions in a different way than before: the reality is thus transformed and becomes more complex. Now this newly painted picture adorns a newly opened Art Gallery "Aru-Art" in Astana.

In this thesis I wrote about a cocktail or a fusion of myths instrumentalized for the construction of identity, trying to show that at a certain moment such a cocktail begins to produce results regardless of what is behind it. Since 2011 many important landmarks were created and inaugurated in Astana that could not be included into this study. All of them have contributed to the construction of the identity of Astana and to some extent changed the city and perceptions of it. These updates are impossible to follow; and ultimately they make any of my conceptualizations fragile and relative. On one hand this upsets me; on the other hand, it promotes a return to the idea suggested at the beginning of this study: identity can be constructed, but its construction can not be achieved.

The move of the capital from Almaty to Astana had a clear rational and functional explanation. On the contrary, the move of the center of Power from the Right Bank of the Yessil to the Left Bank in Astana is a realization of Utopia. It is not related to any functional reasons (at

least according to what I discovered in the writings, official discourses and comparing Astanisation to *fin de siècle* Vienna and *Haussmannian* Paris) The ruling order needed this Utopia to mobilize public consciousness, to draw the attention away from certain aspects of “reality” and to unite a nation “in a single burst.” In this Utopia continuities with the previous Soviet regime can be seen. In Soviet times each republic had its capital city. They had their identities, tied to the representations of Soviet republics: they could have specific “national” features, and at the same time they were Soviet cities. The national identity, represented and constructed by Soviet ideologists, was stressed in order to demonstrate “cultural” “diversity”, but not political or social diversity. The fraternal competition between the Soviet republics was maintained, emphasizing a particular contribution to each of them to the Soviet Union. The creation of Astana is a radical turnover of this vision and political tradition – one that is symbolic but primarily material. It was a way for Kazakhstan to solve its present economic, demographic and geostrategic issues and challenges, but also to project certain messages towards the international community, including former Soviet and Central Asian states.

As for the transformation or transition period – a passage from Communist and Soviet to independent and post-Soviet regimes -- is perceived by many as a natural and inevitable discontinuity. This perception is reflected in official but also academic and popular discourses.^a While working on this research I gradually arrived at the idea that this type of relation between continuities and discontinuities should not be taken for granted. An attempt to look at these questions differently and rearticulate them can finally help to answer to a more fundamental question: how should we think about the 1989-1991 events? The perception of continuities is conditioned by a combination of spatial and temporal phenomena.¹⁵⁶ Many Kazakhstani people faced transformations of landscape and toponymy. Territorial reform and linguistic “Kazakhization” have influenced some, who found themselves involved in them due to functional reasons (for example, people living in a particular territory which was added to another administrative unit or civil servants who had to learn Kazakh to maintain the “kazakhized” paper work). As for Astanisation, the state propaganda at all levels generating discourses in history

¹⁵⁶ Charles Tilly, “The Time of States”, *Social Research*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 269-295.

textbooks, popular literature, intensive media brainwashing, organization of trips and other public-relations projects made all Kazakhstan involved in it. One of the consequences of Astanisation became a subjective and artificial creation of a discontinuity between Astana and its city-predecessor. This discontinuity is manifested not only in popular, but also in the academic discourses.¹⁵⁷ But Astana was not founded from scratch as was, for instance, Brasilia. Accordingly, Kazakhstan is not a new country, but an old country with a new capital. This statement is provocative and maybe erroneous: let it be so, I just do not want to “surrender to words.”¹⁵⁸ In the same way, the nature of the dichotomy of continuities/discontinuities results in the fact that the perception and the discourses on the “acquisition of the independence” and “post-Soviet” Kazakhstan are a mirror transformation of the perception, ideas and discourses on Soviet and maybe even pre-Soviet Kazakhstan. This makes me think about continuity in the perception of historical transformations.

Olivier Roy, well-known and quoted scholar who published regularly on Central Asia wrote in 1995, wrote: “*Une république soviétique, c’est un cadre vide qui produit un effet de réalité. [...] C’est l’habitus administratif, culturel et politique instauré par la puissance coloniale qui crée du nationalisme dans une entité qui n’avait aucun antécédent de nation*”.¹⁵⁹ Roy not only demonstrates a great deal of haughtiness but also a historical myopia, saying that Kazakhstan did not have previous statehood. Obviously, it would be naïve to evoke one of the three phases by Miroslav Hroch or try to distinguish a structured nationalism among Kazakhs who were nomads before the October Revolution. Still, Kazakhs certainly had a fundamental common identity as well as *un antécédent de la nation*. And this *antecedent* was destroyed not by Sovietization in the 1920s and all the more so not by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, but rather by the eradication of the nomadism in 1930s.

¹⁵⁷ See for example Marco Buttino (ed.) *Changing Urban Landscapes: Eastern European and Post-Soviet Cities Since 1989*, Viella 2013, p.6.

¹⁵⁸ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in “Beyond Identity”, *Theory and Society*, 1-47, p.1.

¹⁵⁹ Olivier Roy, *La Nouvelle Asie centrale ou la fabrication des nations*, Paris 1997, pp. 7-19.

The eradication of nomadism as a result of forced sedentarization was a taboo in Soviet times. Nowadays it is still poorly researched and does not have a great importance in the discourses. Kazakhs did not appropriate the topic and did not instrumentalize it as Ukrainians did for Golodomor (famine) and Jews for the Holocaust. Collectivization and goloshekinshina are present in the national memory of Kazakhs, but their ideological usage is impossible or undesirable for political reasons: the percentage of ethnic Russians that can be associated with the oppressors is still rather high and Kazakh-Russian interstate relations are too important to sacrifice them for inner ideology. Besides Russia, nostalgic for its glorious Soviet past, is trying to resuscitate centripetal integration into a post-Soviet space lately and Kazakhstan sympathizes with this, at least verbally.

I conclude, though, that Kazakh ideologists have chosen the mobilization of collective consciousness through myths and symbols and not through a “hard history”. As Sovietization and “nationalization” of Kazakhstan in Soviet times were not processes started from scratch, the acquisition of independence in 1991 did not become the creation of the country from scratch. In fact, there is still a lot that is Soviet in the new post-Soviet Kazakhstan, since the landscape and the mentality change slower than the juridical terms and the state symbols.

Is Astanisation the same Utopia as the practices and the high-powered projects of the middle Soviet epoch? Can Nazarbayev’s personality cult be considered as a continuation of the tradition of personality cults of Soviet leaders? How should we think about the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the independent Kazakhstan? Are the universally recognized clichés like “transformation” or “transition” correct and useful for translating the complexity of the phenomena? And finally which event is more important for Kazakhstan: the acquisition of “independence” in 1991, glorified in the official discourses nowadays, or the peremptory eradication and destruction of nomadism that occurred in the 1930s? I did not answer and did not pretend to answer these questions unequivocally, but I saw my task in trying to raise them at least.

The process of appropriation or “nationalization” evoked by various researchers worked in different ways on different territories and with unequal speed in Kazakhstan after 1991.

However the pioneers of the process were Almaty and Astana. I tried to show that “the appropriation” consisted not only in “claims to territorialization”, evoked by various researchers, but also, and very importantly, by the appropriation of time by Kazakhs. The construction of “Kazakhness” was characterized by distinguishable appeal to “hard history” in the case of Almaty, while for Astana it was based on detachment from the past and on the instrumentalisation of myths that had to legitimate the existence of Kazakh nation and its power.

I would like to reiterate that the invention of Astana and its urban identity is, by today, the most successful attempt of Kazakh authorities to create an evocable national identity. The Astana urban identity helps to understand how the ruling order imagines national identity and how it wants it to be. To what extent this attempt corresponds to the social and economical “reality” of Kazakhstan raises another question that could be a topic for another research. However, in my opinion, it is the gap between the two that makes Astana more a surrogate than a real product, even if this surrogate seems to work.

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