

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

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This Master thesis explores the construction of identity and the identification of Kazakhstan and Kazakh citizens through the cases of old and new national capital cities. Nariman Shelekpayev has chosen to analyse the urban landscapes of the two major cities in contemporary Kazakhstan: Astana and Almaty as places where the identification processes are concentrated, and national symbolic has wider impact than the city itself.

Nari has developed this project after a certain period of search for the focus and for the sources accessible even while he was out of the country. He decided to focus on the analysis of the urban architecture, organization of public spaces and on eventual changes in toponymy, which all provide for him the knowledge about the processes of on-going identification of the country and identity construction in urban environment in last two decades.

The task was by no means easy for Nari, as his previous academic training was in languages, music, and international relations, but he was determined to learn how to approach to the studied topic and work with quite different type of texts and use quite new analytical tools.

The research questions he has articulated were 1) how historical and political change during the period of secession from the Union of Soviet Republics and formation of new nation-state in the 1990s influenced the urban landscape; 2) what was the role of the urban landscape in the construction of national (self-) identification; 3) what symbolizes the "Kazakhness".

The analysis was carried in two perspectives. Firstly the diachronic comparison of Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Second the spatial perspective - the analysis of the urban landscape in two cities which are located in quite different parts of the country, they had different history, and they developed in different geographical conditions. Almaty represents the old capital, it is the link to the past, the memory of the expansion of Russian empire to Central Asia, and the memory of the Soviet period – sedentarization of Kazakhs and sovietisation of their country. Almaty is also the city with very particular climate and geopolitical location; it has acquired reputation of cultural centre of the region being the largest city of the old and new Kazakhstan. Astana is an innovation; it is a new Capital city, more centrally located in the context of the new nation-state. It represents deliberate break with the past, as the old locality was renamed and totally rebuild to create the new symbol of the new state.

For the historico-geographical perspective the author chose to study the works of P. Semenov-Tianschanskyi, Russian geographer who was key figure in the exploration of Central Asia during the period of Russian expansion, the geographical description of Russian Empire by V. Masalskiy, and the analysis of the first general census of Russian Empire by Tronitskiy. For the Soviet and Post Soviet period the memoirs of N. Nazarbayev, the number of texts and films produced as representation of the country were used. The representation of the transformation period was studied on the basis of history manuals used in Kazakh schools at present. The spatial perspective was studied through the analysis of maps, city plans, photographs, postcards and on-line digitalized representations.

Theoretically, the author accepted the constructivist approach – the identification is a continual process for him, and an individual is not an object but also an actor, active participant. The urban

space is the material memory of the society, and the tool of indoctrination of citizens.

The analysis of the use of the urban space of the two capital cities concludes that the strategies of renaming were used to change the identity, and for the branding of the city through statues and buildings which would identify it with the new state. The strategy can be identified in the old capital, as well, although the new state should be primarily identified with the new capital. The author creates a new term – Astanisation to identify these efforts which he classifies as a construction of utopia, on which international urbanists and architects participate.

I found very interesting the tension between the old and new capital, which was created through the construction of Astana, while Almaty is keeping its status of cultural and commercial centre with links to Central Asia, remaining the largest city of Kazakhstan. I think that Nari identified very interesting point, which is typical for the transfers of capital cities in all periods (f.e. Moscow- St. Petersburg or Warsaw – Kraków if we stay in eastern part of Europe), and the competitions and tensions between those cities can be observed even now. It might have been explored in the thesis, but we can consider it as a theme for the future. I propose the author to discuss this issue during the defence.

I have appreciated working with Nari, because he was very open to critical comments, and suggestions, quite independent in research, willing to read a lot. His text is written carefully, in good academic English, notes are in correct format. He mastered the method and the technique of analysis and interpretation of chosen sources. The thesis is dealing with important issue, which can be expanded, and compared with other cases, but on the other hand also interesting to wider public.

It is a solid piece of research of a master student, which deserves to be successfully defended. I propose to grade the thesis of Nariman Shelekpáyev in Czech TEMA grading as A “excellent”, in French 17/20 = très bien

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