

Evaluation

Nation-Building Policies and Interethnic Relations in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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Master Thesis

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Regional identities, nation-building policies and inter-ethnic relations belong to the most intriguing matters in the post-Soviet history. Contemporary history of Kazakhstan is a specific laboratory which helps us to understand struggles for national recognition, transformation of older identification patterns and negotiation processes among various groups on language, religion, state affiliation etc. Unfolding on the ruins of the Soviet empire, Kazakhstan was defining its national identity and implementing it in school books, monuments, and local (political) institutions. Yet, the new imagery of the Kazakh history was sometimes challenging the self-definition and self-consciousness of the strong Russian minority in the country and thus causing confusion and conflicts about the identity of the state.

First of all, I would like to appreciate the courage of Anastassiya Ushakova in dealing with the difficult subject. It was necessary for her to historicize the main positions, to understand the origins of different standpoints and to comprehend the dynamics of the conflict. I am very happy that Anastassiya Ushakova – despite her initial tendency to defend the Russian standpoint – managed to deliver a thesis that meets the demands of historicizing the recent past of Kazakhstan (instead of just delivering evidence for one side of the conflict).

Secondly, I have to emphasize well-considered and elaborated analytical approach of the thesis. Benedict Anderson's book on *Imagined communities* seems to be most influential for choosing educational policy, administrative system, and mass media (especially in terms of imagery of symbols and monuments) as the most important fields of her research. Using the category of nation-building process and doing systematic research in the field of school-books, local policies and the "politics of memory", she demonstrated how the post-Soviet transformations influenced the relations among nations in the region.

And third, the thesis is well structured, clear in its argumentation, and convincing in its conception. The very introduction, problem and questions, reflection of the terminology and the sources, overview of the historiography of nationalism, most important approaches in contemporary history of Kazakhstan, then three major analytical categories and their systematic analysis (school-books, social development and public space) and clear conclusion

– all this reveals how much Anastassiya Ushakova has done in the last two years. She invested a lot of energy in her research and she made a huge intellectual progress.

If there are some aspects that could be focused on in more detail in future or that could have been elaborated with more perfection, I would mention two points. Above all, despite the attempts to historicize the issue, there are clear residues of the “Russian” point of view in her text. I would like to believe it was mostly the matter of text-editing that had not rewritten the “negative”-“positive” approach to Kazakh-Russian history (p. 30-31) or that had not removed polemicizing against the sources („Here the author contradicts himself, since“, p. 30). If Anastassiya Ushakova continues to work on the issue, I would strongly recommend her to avoid triumphalist statements such as “most of the times, such affirmations [that Russian policies are conceived as colonial ones in Latvia etc.] are not proved by real facts, data or numbers” or that “the historiography of Kazakhstan is full of methodological contradictions and even myths”. In other words, if she keeps writing that “consciousness of non-educated, immature pupils can easily take this information as the unique truth” (p. 37), she might be easily accused of reproducing – instead of historicizing – colonial stereotypes and cultural arrogance.

And this would be, taking the whole work of Anastassiya Ushakova, inappropriate. Her work reveals that she is very sensitive towards ambivalent issues, such as (a) the emigration of the Russian speaking population, who was often disappointed after moving to Russia (p. 61), or (b) existence of the “German” institutions (that must have been visible for the Russians in Kazakhstan, see p. 66) or (c) monuments with contradictory messages (imperial Russian, Soviet, Kazakh) side by side (p. 61-62) or (d) persistence of April 22 (Lenin`s birthday) as an important date for “ordinary” people (p. 86) etc. If she goes on in her research, it would be definitely very promising and interesting to focus on these ambivalent issues. They might also contribute to explain the fact, which I find to be the most important findings of the thesis, that the policies of kazakhisation became less direct in the last 15 years (compared to the 1990s) and included “soft” strategies of hegemony (renaming streets, accepting some aspects of the Russian “civilizational” master narrative) into the process of Kazakhstani nation-building.

All in all, the master thesis of Anastassiya Ushakova is well written, very thoroughly conceived and based on a deep, systematic research. I can fully approve the thesis and propose to mark it with A.

doc. Michal Pullmann, Ph.D.

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