

# TERRITORY AS A FACTOR OF NATION-BUILDING IN NEW KAZAKHSTAN

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**T**HE problems of Kazakhstan's national territory have become increasingly pertinent in recent years, both domestically and internationally. This essay examines the territory of Kazakhstan from an internal perspective as a nation-building factor. It should be noted that there has been little research on the impact of territory on nation-building in Kazakhstan. As in other post-Soviet states, nation-building in Kazakhstan includes ethnic and civic elements. One of the aims of the paper is to analyze the ethnic and civic aspects in the concept of territoriality in Kazakhstan. Another aim of the paper is to examine the impact of the New Kazakhstan concept, especially reforms to democratize the political system and overcome social inequality, on nation building in terms of territoriality.

Methodologically, the research in the paper is based on the concept of political modernization, which allows the development of institutions and processes in Kazakhstan to be traced in a historical context, focusing on the socio-political transformation of New Kazakhstan. The theory of nation building, applied to the analysis of Kazakhstan's territoriality in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, has played a major role in the study of the topic of the paper. The concept of indigenous people was a concretization of the nation-building theory as applied to the relationship between territory and the formation of the nation, which was transformed into the concept of a state-forming nation during the period of independence.

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Photo: Guliver Image

*Kazakhstan's vast land*

## TERRITORY AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF KAZAKHSTAN'S STATEHOOD

**T**he New Kazakhstan concept refers to the systemic changes in the sociopolitical life of Kazakhstan under the leadership of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, taking place in the country after the tragic events of January 2022. The building of New Kazakhstan raises hopes among Kazakhstanis for a more just and democratic society that will create favorable conditions for their socio-economic and cultural development. This implies a profound transformation of the social, political, economic,

cultural institutions, and processes of Kazakhstan's society.

Nation-building is one of the most important institutions and processes of independent Kazakhstan. They are associated with the formation of the nation and the nation state as the most important prerequisites for the existence and functioning of Kazakhstan's society and its representation in the system of international relations. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that nation-building is not a frozen, once and for all given process, but on the contrary, it is in constant change and renewal, responding to

changes in the internal and external environment.

As this essay analyzes nation-building in Kazakhstan, it will outline the main features of the concepts of state and nation in the modern world, as the nation is inextricably linked to the state.

In this respect, the modern nation state possesses three essential characteristics and attributes which are the territory, the population, and the state machinery. These attributes of the state are closely interrelated and, in this interrelation, they

define the modern nation state. These attributes were formulated in the Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, adopted in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, in 1933. This Convention has been widely recognized as the classic legal definition of the state.

This essay also analyzes the impact of territory as an attribute of the nation state on nation-building in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's territory as a nation state was formed during the Soviet period, when Kazakhstan was an autonomous republic and then a union republic within the USSR. As an independent state, Kazakhstan was formed as a result of the collapse of the USSR into 15 independent states, formerly union republics within the Soviet Union. The

newly independent states were formed in place of the former Soviet republics, with their territory, population, state machinery, and other institutions.

It can therefore be argued that the Republic of Kazakhstan, as an independent state, is heir to the Kazakh SSR, just as

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other post-Soviet states are heirs to the national republics within the USSR. It is important to note, however, that apart from the Russian Federation as the successor state to the USSR and the three Baltic states that had nation states between the

two world wars, the remaining post-Soviet states did not have their predecessor forms of national statehood of the modern type.

The territory of Kazakhstan as it exists today was finally formed in the 1930s, when, after the demarcation of the borders of the former Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Kazakh lands, formerly part of Turkestan, entered the territory of the Kazakh Autonomous Republic as part of the RSFSR. Border demarcation in Turkestan in 1924-1925 took place on an ethnic basis. As a consequence, five national republics emerged in place of the Turkestan Republic and its associated territorial entities, which subsequently became five union republics, and today are the five independent states of Central Asia.

It is important to emphasize here that the Kazakh Autonomous Republic created by the Bolshevik regime in 1920 as part of the RSFSR became the historically first form of national statehood in the land of Kazakhstan. If in earlier epochs there were some forms of statehood on the territory of Kazakhstan (for example, the Kazakh Khanate), then they bore the features of ethnicity. Nevertheless, these early forms of ethnic statehood cannot be attributed to national statehood, which emerged in Europe only in the nineteenth century with the development of capitalism.

Although the Kazakh SSR was a national republic, named after its indigenous Kazakh people, it, like the other union republics, could not be called a national statehood of Kazakhs in the strict sense of the word. The Soviet Union republics lacked the main element of national statehood: sovereignty, understood as its ability to determine its own socio-political system and its own activities within its territory. In the absence and suppression of real autonomy in the republics, all issues of socio-political life in them and throughout the USSR were determined by the central authorities.

Only after gaining independence, Kazakhstan was provided with the opportunity to dispose of its territory, to develop it in the interest of the state and population, i.e. those of their

goals and needs, which we define by the term "national interests." The definition of the borders of the state, i.e. the internationally recognized delimited territory of the state over which its jurisdiction extends, is crucial to the formation of national interests. After the collapse of the USSR, the administrative borders of the Soviet republics became the basis of the state borders of the newly independent states. This transformation of administrative borders into state borders is a large and complex undertaking for post-Soviet diplomacy, with varying degrees of success in dealing with the border problem in different states. Some post-Soviet states have border disputes with neighboring states that sometimes escalate into armed conflicts.

Just recently, in September 2022, a border conflict broke out in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan on the border with Tajikistan, in which the parties used heavy weapons, artillery and other types of weapons. The ongoing armed confrontation between the two states caused a large number of casualties, including among civilians who were forced to leave their homes and evacuate from the conflict zone. The territorial dispute between the two Central Asian states, which has its roots in the delimitation of borders in Turkestan in the 1920s, has not been resolved to this day, repeating itself every year in armed clashes between the two countries.

Kazakhstan has, by and large, successfully resolved its border issues with neighboring states. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev wrote convincingly about this in his paper “Independence Above All” in January 2021. Having led Kazakhstan’s foreign policy for a long time, Tokayev has made great efforts to resolve the issue of our state’s borders.

It is worth remembering that when we started to address the issue of the state border, some politicians and public figures urged us not to rush into it, saying that such issues could be resolved later. However, we immediately set about negotiating and consolidating the agreements reached. Time has shown the correctness of this approach. As a result, no matter what anyone says now, Kazakhstan has internationally recognized borders, secured by bilateral agreements. No one can argue with this.

Here it is important to draw attention to the historical aspect of nation building in Kazakhstan related to the concept of an indigenous nation. The concept of indigenous people played an important role in the national policy of the USSR, and it continues to have a decisive influence on nation-building in the newly independent states in the post-Soviet space. The concept of indigenous people was based on tying a certain people to a territory they had inhabited for a

fairly long period of time, at least until that territory acquired a certain political status in the USSR. Since the classification of the population of the USSR was based on ethnic rather than, for example, religious principles, the entire population of the country was divided into nations in the ethnic sense of this concept.

American sociologist Rogers Brubaker reveals Soviet nationality policy as consisting of two main components: territorial nationhood and personal nationality—i.e. the nationality of the individual. The Soviet institutions of territorial nationhood and personal nationality created a pervasive system of social classification throughout Soviet society. It was an organizing “principle of vision and division” of the social world, a standardized scheme of social reporting, an interpretative coordinate grid for public discussion, a set of boundary markers, a legitimate form for public and personal identity and, when political space expanded under Gorbachev, a ready template for sovereignty claims by the national republics.

The concept of indigenous people was central to the establishment and functioning of national entities in the form of union and autonomous republics, regions, etc. These national entities were a form of national statehood under the Soviet socio-political system. They could not create a political

foundation for the creation of a nation and a nation state on their territory because they did not possess the essential condition of national autonomy. Of these forms of Soviet national statehood, the closest to the status of a nation state for the indigenous peoples were the union republics, which achieved the status of independent nation states in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the USSR. The prerequisites of an administrative and cultural nature were created in the Soviet national system, and after 1985, during perestroika, prerequisites of a political nature were created which were closely related to the concept of indigenous people.

When Kazakhstan became an independent state in 1991, having inherited its territory and other bases of statehood from the USSR, it abandoned the ideologized name “Soviet Socialist Republic” and became known internationally as the “Republic of Kazakhstan.” In any case, the ethnonym “Kazakh” appears in the country’s name, indicating the leading, main, indigenous nation in the state’s multi-ethnic population. In international academic literature, such nations are referred to as “core nation,” which can be translated into Russian as “*yadernaya natsiya*.” We will also use this term in our paper, although it is not widely used in the Russian-language literature.

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In the post-Soviet independent states, the concept of indigenous people has been further developed in the form of the concepts of titular and state-forming nation. For the elites of the newly independent states, the titular nation is the core of nation-building (core nation) around which the nation state should be formed, because the titular core nation acts as the main driving force of nation building in the post-Soviet countries. The post-Soviet states therefore prefer to speak not of a “titular nation,” but of a “state-forming nation” as the social group whose activities are most associated with state and nation-building. In this process, in addition to the Kazakhs, the role of other nationalities of Kazakhstan is undoubtedly great.

In Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs are the state-forming nation. President Tokayev pointed to this in his Address to the People of Kazakhstan on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019: “We need, given the role of the Kazakh people as a state-forming nation, to continue strengthening inter-ethnic harmony and interreligious understanding. Our position is: The unity of the nation is in its diversity!”

The special role of the state-forming, or core nation in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states is manifested in its

historical connection with the territory of the state, its demographic majority in the population, the political and administrative leadership of its elites, the state status of its language, and the spread of its culture. Back in the Soviet period, as we have noted, for nation and state building in the Union republics, the historical connection of their territory with the indigenous nation was of great importance.

In the post-Soviet period, the historical connection of the indigenous core nation with the territory of the state has become even more important with the assertion of independence and sovereignty of the country. This is confirmed, for example, by Tokayev's words in his essay "Independence Above All":

The eternal triad of our sovereignty is our immense land, stretching from Altai to Atyrau, from Alatau to Saryarka, our language learn at mother's knees, and our unity, which helps us to overcome all difficulties. We keep these values as the apple of our eye. Our sacred land, inherited from our ancestors, is our greatest treasure. It was not "presented" to us by anyone. The national history did not begin in 1991 or 1936. Our ancestors lived here during the times of the Kazakh Khanate, the Golden Horde, the Turkic Khaganate, the Huns, and the Saks. In other words, the roots of our national history go far back in time.

### TERRITORY AND CIVIL NATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

In Kazakhstan, historical connection and heritage are not the only source of a person's identity with the territory and the state as a whole. A person can be connected with the territory and the state by his contribution to the building of cities and villages on the land of his country, by his work which strengthens the economic potential of the state, by his readiness to defend the land against foreign invasions and to die for the independence of the state with which he and his family identify themselves. These factors generate and strengthen a person's identity with the state in which he lives, contributing to his perception of himself or herself as a citizen of that state. This form of identity is called national identity, with the nation being understood not as an ethnos but as a civic community of citizens of different ethnicity.

Individuals live and settle where they deem it economically and otherwise beneficial to them. The demands of individual, group, and state expediency—economically and otherwise—dominate over the demands of preserving ethnic territory in the modern world. The legal framework of modern states ensures the primacy of national (understood in the civil sense) interests (economic and other) over regional and ethnic interests. In democratic States, national interests are realized through their balance with

regional and ethnic interests. This is the meaning of the civic nation: in it, the interests of individuals and their ethnic groups are realized through the common good of the nation as a whole.

From this we can conclude that in modern states the territory is not an exclusive attribute of an ethnic group like language, culture, traditions, etc. The territory is an attribute of the state as a whole, and hence of the entire nation as a supra-ethnic community. Thus, Article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan states that the sovereignty of the Republic extends over its entire territory. This means that the state, as the exponent of the will of the sovereign, which is the people of Kazakhstan, or the nation as the political community of all ethnic groups living in it, extends its power over the entire territory of the country.

One or another ethnos of a multi-ethnic society may regard all or part of the territory of the state as its ethnic attribute, but such a claim can only be expressed in historical or symbolic aspects, not in political and legal aspects. The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan begins with the words "We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historical destiny, creating statehood on the ancestral Kazakh land." Here the words "ancestral Kazakh land" indicate, as mentioned above, to the historical aspect of the territory of Kazakhstan as the

natural environment of the Kazakhs since their ethnogenesis. The word "Kazakhstan" itself can be translated as the "land, or country, of the Kazakhs." But again, this pertains to the territory of Kazakhstan only in the historical aspect. As for the political and legal aspects, sovereignty over the territory on behalf of all the people of Kazakhstan is exercised by the state, ensuring its integrity, inviolability, and inalienability.

In today's globalized world, for successful political and socio-economic development, the state must be territorially open rather than closed. This enables the state to actively attract investment in its economy, develop human capital and strengthen the nation as a cultural and political community. Territorial openness means, in particular, attracting highly qualified specialists from abroad to the country. President Tokayev spoke about this in his September 2022 Address to the People of Kazakhstan:

In general, for the development of human potential, it is important to attract talented specialists from abroad to the country, especially those who have achieved success in creativity and entrepreneurship. For valuable professionals in science, healthcare, industry and IT, the state will introduce exemptions and grant visas with the right to obtain residence permits. The strength of the nation lies in its people, in their health and profound knowledge.

Today, nation-building in various regions of the world has taken the form of a synthesis of ethnic and civil nation. Scientists also define this synthesis as national integration. The interrelation between civil and ethnic forms of the nation through their synthesis takes place in many newly independent states. It is no coincidence that Anthony Smith and other national identity theorists argued that every nation contains civic and ethnic elements in varying degrees and forms. In the history of the same nation, in some moments, for example, civil and territorial elements may prevail, while in other ethnic and linguistic aspects may dominate.

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In today's world, there are various forms of connection between ethnic and civil nations in the process of national integration. The distinction between nations from the position of being classified as ethnic or civil nations is therefore determined by the proportion of ethnic and civil elements in the process of national integration. If ethnic elements dominate in the synthesis of ethnic and civic nations, the national community resulting from national integration is of the ethnic type. And if civil and

territorial elements (in the sense of the territoriality of a single supra-ethnic community) dominate in this synthesis, the nation can be considered civil.

Ethnic and civic elements of nation-building in Kazakhstan are also expressed in the question of attitude to its territory. Ethnic elements are manifested, in particular,

in the concept of indigenous people discussed above and date back to the Soviet period. Inherent in the concept of the indigenous people, their historical connection with the land, the territory of the republic, can produce in their psychology feelings that are called primordialist.

This means that such a perception of the territory, when its connection with the indigenous people is understood as a "given," is unchanged in time and space. Based on such primordialism, prerequisites for an ethnic understanding of the nation arise, which has been confirmed in the Soviet and post-Soviet period. The ethnic understanding of the nation, as the Soviet and post-Soviet practice shows, is persistent due to the fact that it is constantly fueled by primordialist emotions, which are widespread in society.

Primordialist sentiments, as demonstrated by the experiences of post-Soviet and modernizing societies, create obstacles to the civic elements of nation-building. Primordialism is characterized, as mentioned above, by the view that ethno-cultural elements such as language, culture, land, and religion are inherent aspects of the ethnic nation and should serve as the foundation for nation-building. In this case, ethnocultural elements become exclusive, which leads to the exclusion of other ethnic groups whose language, culture, and religion differ from those of the dominant ethnic group from the nation-building process. Such elements may also include the territory of the state, which can be interpreted in a primordialist manner, potentially resulting in overt and covert conflicts in multi-ethnic societies.

**NEW KAZAKHSTAN: JUSTICE & DEMOCRATIZATION**

One of the main causes of ethnic conflict is the perception of injustice felt by one of the groups involved in the conflict and the resulting protest. At the same time, the protesting group attempts to resolve its perceived situation of injustice through political means, which may include appealing to external forces, in particular, to neigh-

boring states, especially if that state is considered by this group, the ethnos, as its ancestral homeland. Therefore, as international practice shows, an internal ethnic conflict often becomes an international, inter-state conflict.

For Kazakhstan, as for a multiethnic society, the prevention of ethnic conflicts is of vital importance, one of the main

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priorities of national policy. For historical, demographic and other reasons, preventing conflict between the country's two largest ethnic groups, the Kazakhs and Russians, is key to Kazakhstan's nation-building and sovereignty. For Kazakhstan's leadership, the prevention of

such a conflict is the primary objective of the country's political development, both in terms of internal political relations between the Kazakhs and the Russians in Kazakhstan society and in terms of foreign policy of interstate relations with Russia. In other words, relations between the Kazakhs and Russians are of primary importance both for the nation-building and sovereignty of Kazakhstan at its present stage of development.

Since the earliest days of independence, Kazakhstan has proclaimed social justice as the most important principle of its national policy. Social

justice in nation-building is based on inclusive citizenship for all Kazakhstanis regardless of their ethnicity, their equal access to essential social resources, and other forms of social equality. Thanks to this, inter-ethnic stability is generally preserved in society, especially in relations between the country's main ethnic groups, the Kazakhs and the Russians.

However, the super-presidential system in Kazakhstan has created favorable conditions for growing socio-economic inequalities, facilitated by nepotism, corruption and other negative factors. According to President Tokayev, 162 families close to the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev owned half of the national wealth of Kazakhstan, which was probably one of the starkest examples of social inequality in the world.

In an attempt to overcome the causes of deep social inequality, Tokayev has directed his efforts against the super-presidential system and oligarchic capitalism. In March 2022, he proposed to the public a package of measures aimed at reforming Kazakhstan's political system towards overcoming the super-presidential system. These proposals have taken the form of amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan to be adopted by referendum on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022. During his visit to Turkey in May 2022, Tokayev said at the meeting with Turkish and Kazakhstani business representatives:

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, a nationwide referendum will take place in our country. Amendments have been made to 33 Articles of the Constitution. My goal is to give more freedom to my people, to strengthen democracy and the rule of law. As president, I am not interested in any privileges or benefits. I do not accept this.

The democratization of Kazakhstan's political system will create the conditions for overcoming the deep social inequality entrenched under the super-presidential regime and the oligarchic system. This was stated by the head of state in his Address to the People of Kazakhstan on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022: "The fair distribution of national wealth and the provision of equal opportunities to every citizen is the key objective of our reforms."

The amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022 are aimed at establishing a new political regime, the main purpose of which will not be to maintain the oligarchic system with its social inequality, but to strengthen social equality and social justice. As worldwide experience shows, a political system that sets social justice as its main goal is more stable than a political regime that cannot cope with social inequality and, moreover, protects it.

Social justice does not mean equality in wages, but equality in access to social benefits and resources. One of those

social benefits is education, which creates a foundation for self-fulfillment and achievement of social heights. The quality of education plays an important role here, as the person with the best education has an advantage over the one with the worst education. However, in today's Kazakhstan we observe that education in cities is noticeably better than in villages. The difference in the quality of education in cities and villages is largely due to the school infrastructure. To bridge this gap, President Tokayev initiated the Comfortable School national project. According to this project, 800,000 student places meeting modern requirements will be created in Kazakhstan by 2025. This measure will significantly level out the difference between the quality of educational infrastructure in cities and villages.

Addressing issues of overcoming inequality and promoting social justice as part of the political reform agenda of New Kazakhstan does not only have socioeconomic importance. In fact, overcoming the super-presidential regime is also important for nation-building. It is important to understand that a higher level of social justice in society increases the level of social trust, including interethnic trust. In the academic literature, trust in society be-

tween its different groups is referred to as "social capital." The higher the level of trust in a society, the higher its social capital, therefore resulting in the higher the level of civil political culture.

Political reform in today's Kazakhstan, while contributing to the development of social capital in society, will

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also have an impact on the development of horizontal ties between social groups in Kazakhstani society, including between ethnic groups. With the development of horizontal social ties in society, civic institutions as the organizational foundation of civil society should be developed.

The development of civic institutions will create the conditions for strengthening the civic political nation in Kazakhstan as a supra-ethnic community. The development of the civic nation presupposes a sufficiently high level of inter-ethnic trust, arising from regular inter-ethnic contacts, which means overcoming ethnic boundaries rather than being confined within them.

In his September 2022 address, President Tokayev noted the New Kazakhstan idea: "We are carrying out political modernization in accordance with the basic formula of 'a strong president – an influential parliament

– an accountable government.’ We will strengthen the nationwide consensus, a partnership between government and society, following the “Hearing State” concept. We should not focus on dividing lines, but rather consolidate for the sake of achieving ambitious goals. This is a very deep sense of the idea of the New Fair Kazakhstan.”

One can thus say that the democratization of Kazakhstan’s political system should contribute to the further formation of a civic nation. This means strengthening the identification of all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan with the state, hence strengthening the country’s sovereignty. The state can therefore be confident in its citizens that their identity in Kazakhstan is the key to maintaining the independence and territorial integrity of the state, the core of Kazakhstan’s sovereignty. Referring to the inextricable link between state sovereignty and nation-building, President Tokayev stressed:

We face a particularly important task—to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. We need power to further strengthen our statehood. There is no other way. The unity of the people has always been our most important value, which is even more important today. Our people have always put peace and stability above all else. In these difficult times, we must become even stronger in our unity.

The main conclusion of this analysis is that at all stages of Kazakhstan’s historical development, the territory has played a crucial role in nation-building. During the Soviet period, when the first form of national statehood of Kazakhstan emerged as an autonomous and then union republic under the national policy of the communist regime, its territory was defined along with it, coinciding with the historical lands of the Kazakhs as the indigenous people of the republic. During the post-Soviet period, the institutionalization of the territory of Kazakhstan as a nation state is based on the international recognition of the country’s borders and the concept of a state-forming nation. In nation-building, the territory acts as, on the one hand, an ancestral Kazakh land and, on the other hand, as an inclusive property of all citizens of the country, a factor in the formation of a civic nation. The high level of social inequality that emerged during the years of the super-presidential regime has had a negative impact on the various institutions and processes of Kazakhstan’s society, including nation-building. The political modernization initiated by President Tokayev—and particularly the measures to increase the openness of the territory of Kazakhstan in the context of human capital development—should have a positive impact on nation-building in a multiethnic society. ●