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Unstoppable.
The decolonisation of Kazakhstan

Over the course of its 35 years of independence, the society of Kazakhstan has undergone profound ethnic, cultural, linguistic and identity-related changes. From a state with a multi-cultural, post-Soviet population, it is becoming an increasingly politicised community with diverse values, orientations and political attitudes. It is able to influence the policies of the state's authoritarian rulers who – to some extent – now take into account the demands of the majority of society, for example regarding the boosting of the Kazakh people and 'Kazakhness'. In doing so, the rulers are seeking to avoid accusations of nationalism and discrimination against minorities (particularly the Russian minority).

The identity project which was implemented in Kazakhstan during the three decades of Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule was a top-down process. Following his removal from power, and especially following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, grassroots efforts to forge a new narrative for the nation and the state gained momentum and political significance. At the heart of this debate lay a critical re-evaluation of the Soviet-Russian legacy, as well as a drive to write a new history of the state which would be free from external influence and interpretation. This coincided with a policy of cautious distancing from Russia and a greater emphasis on the country's own cultural and political distinctiveness, more clearly pursued by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2022–3.

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UNSTOPPABLE.
THE DECOLONISATION OF KAZAKHSTAN

The decolonisation discourse, while primarily shaped by the country's intellectuals, is also alive and well among the general public. It touches upon the realms of collective memory and historical policy, language and education, and it challenges the state's hitherto dominant position in shaping national and state identity. In this context, the anti-Russian dimension of this debate is posing a challenge to the Kazakh authorities.

The process of freeing the country from Russia's cultural influence is a long-term (longue durée) phenomenon. It is now irreversible in nature, driven as it is by fundamental demographic shifts, although the Kazakh authorities will attempt to shape its content and manage its progress. Following a period of increased assertiveness towards the Kremlin, they are now reshaping national and civic identity in a more cautious manner, in order to minimise the risk of conflict with Russia in this area. The greatest threat to this policy is the deepening rift between the ruling elite and the majority of society, particularly its ethnic Kazakh segment.

1. A NEW SOCIETY

Kazakhstan's socio-political reality during its years of independence has been shaped and determined by demographic processes[1]. **Throughout almost the entire Soviet period, ethnic Kazakhs were outnumbered by Russians in the Kazakh SSR**. According to the 1989 census, they did not even constitute half of the republic's population, although for the first time since the 1930s they were the largest ethnic group there. The republic was inhabited by 39.7% Kazakhs (6.5 million people), 37.8% Russians (6.2 million) and many other minorities, including Germans (5.8%), Ukrainians (5.4%), Uzbeks, Tatars, Uyghurs, Koreans, Dungans, Belarusians, Poles and peoples of the Caucasus.

The ethnic structure of the Kazakh SSR had its roots in the colonial and modernisation policies of the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, the Kazakh population declined as a result of widespread famine, artificially induced by the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the compulsory settlement of nomads, amidst their armed resistance[2]. The number of victims of this catastrophe is estimated at over 1.5 million people, or more than a third of the Kazakh population at the time[3].

During the Soviet era, the territory of Kazakhstan was an 'ethnic laboratory' in which the 'Soviet man' [Homo sovieticus] was to be created[4]: a place of mass deportations and the gulag system[5]; resettlement campaigns, such as those linked to the 1954–1960 plan for the agricultural development of the steppe lands[6], and localised selective urbanisation & industrialisation projects. **A key aspect of this approach was its colonial justification based on the carrying out of a putative 'civilising mission'[7].**

The attempt to create a 'melting pot of nations' in the Kazakh SSR in the form of a Soviet nation was not implemented on such a large scale in any other union republic: and to a certain extent, it came close to success (with the exception of northern Kyrgyzstan, and excluding Russia proper)[8].

Since Kazakhstan gained independence, the proportion of Kazakhs in its ethnic structure has increased significantly, and they have now become the state's overwhelmingly dominant ethnic group. By 2025, they accounted for over 71% of the country's population (almost 14.5 million people); during the same period, the proportion of Russians fell to 14.6% (almost 3 million)[9]. This significant change in the demographic makeup of Kazakhstan's society occurred due to the mass emigration of members of minority groups (mainly Russians, Germans and Ukrainians)[10], a high birth rate among Kazakhs, and a successful policy of repatriating ethnic Kazakhs from neighbouring countries. **By 2025, 1.2 million repatriates had arrived in the country, primarily from China and Uzbekistan**[11].

Internal migration is another factor influencing socio-cultural change in independent Kazakhstan. Over the past decade, a significant number of Kazakhs have moved permanently to the north of the country, which is home to dense concentrations of the Russian minority, and to its most populous cities (including Astana)[12]. Government policy promotes the settlement of repatriates there, but also supports migration flows from the more densely populated south of Kazakhstan to the hitherto rapidly depopulating north of the country[13].

2. THE LANGUAGE ISSUE: THE LITMUS TEST OF CHANGE

The high, officially regulated status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan and its widespread usage (for example, it still predominates in business) constitute the most deeply ingrained social legacy of the Soviet period. During the Soviet era, Russian was favoured in politics, culture, public institutions, education and the military. **The policy of Sovietisation manifested itself primarily in linguistic Russification. The Kazakh language and 'Kazakhness' were then relegated to the realm of folklore and rural life**.

If one did not know Russian, career opportunities and social advancement were limited, which influenced decisions regarding which language of instruction was to be used[14]. Culturally Russified Kazakhs had the greatest chances of professional success in the republic[15].

Demographic changes after 1991 led to a levelling out of proficiency in Kazakh and Russian in society. The ethnically Kazakh segment of the population is predominantly bilingual.

According to the 2021 census, 84% of citizens declared proficiency in Russian, whilst 80% declared proficiency in Kazakh (although only 25% of Kazakhstan's Russians claimed this)[16].

The role and importance of the Kazakh language were reinforced from above. A requirement to know the language was introduced for those wishing to hold public office. Education in this language also developed: **in 1992, 38% of pupils were studying in secondary school classes where Kazakh was the language of instruction, but thirty years later this figure had risen to 67%. A similar trend was observed in the spread of Kazakh in university education**; in 2000, 32% of students studied 'in Kazakh', and by 2022 this figure had risen to over 64%[17].

At the level of state policy, there was no radical break with the Russian language (as there was in the 1990s in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), but its special, official status has been retained. Despite numerous announcements of changes to the spelling of the Kazakh language, it is still predominantly written in the Cyrillic alphabet[18]. Support for it is being implemented slowly and gradually. An example is the new Act on Mass Media (which came into force in August 2024), which raised the minimum proportion of television and radio programmes conducted exclusively in Kazakh to at least 55% on a weekly basis from 1 January 2025, with a planned increase to a minimum of 60% from 2027.

In accordance with the new constitution, which was approved in a referendum on 15 March 2026, Kazakh remains the state language. Russian, on the other hand, is officially defined as 'used alongside' Kazakh in state and local government institutions (a change from the previous wording 'on an equal footing'). This symbolically emphasises the superior status of Kazakh, whilst in practice it gives priority to Kazakh-language versions of documents in the event of discrepancies.

Nowadays, knowledge of Kazakh is not only necessary for everyday life, but is also increasingly prestigious for its speakers, in a reversal of the country's previous linguistic hierarchy. Thanks to changes in media and cultural consumption patterns, but also due to the migration of the Kazakh-speaking population from rural areas to cities, **Kazakh is becoming established as an urban language**[19].

After 2022, there was a veritable boom in language activism (particularly online)[20]. The growing popularity of entertainment, culture and science in the Kazakh language is also having a positive impact on reducing the influence of Russian 'soft power' on society.

From the perspective of the younger generation of Kazakhs, Kazakh-language popular culture is not only more accessible but also more appealing than contemporary Russian pop culture[21].

3. POST-SOVIET AMBIVALENCE OF IDENTITY

Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 as a state that had to 'reinvent' itself at every level. The identity policy of the state authorities, led by President Nazarbayev, was shaped by three ke'y factors: the need to gain international recognition, to strengthen sovereignty, and to consolidate a multi-ethnic society around the state and maintain stability within it. In response, **a hybrid, two-pronged strategy for identity-building was adopted. This involved strengthening the ethnic identity of the Kazakhs and creating an inclusive civic identity for all ethnic groups[22].**

On the one hand, a consistent 'Kazakhisation' of state structures was carried out. Representatives of the main ethnic group took up key political and administrative posts, ethnically Kazakh symbols were introduced (the national flag and anthem, the coat of arms, official nomenclature, the currency)[23]. and in 1997 the capital was moved from Almaty to Akmola (now Astana)[24], amongst other things to stimulate migration to the north of the country[25]. **On the other hand, 'Kazakhstan-ness' was being created in parallel – a supra-ethnic state (civic) identity based on the idea of the state as a 'home of many nations' and Kazakhstan's 'Eurasian-ness' as a bridge between Europe and Asia.**

The state artificially created an absence of internal ethnic tensions, much like Soviet internationalism with its slogan of 'friendship of nations'. On the international stage, the open nature of this identity project was emphasised, which was intended to prevent internal conflicts, facilitate relations with Russia and build a modern image for the state. Kazakhstan did not make a clean break from the legacy of Sovietisation and Russification, remaining open to Russian media and popular culture whilst perpetuating the myth of the Great Patriotic War with a strong Kazakh element[26].

Society retained a positive view of Russians, whilst the state participated in Russia's integration initiatives across the former USSR[27]. Education was dominated by an uncontroversial narrative in which the positive effects of Communist modernisation balanced its costs. **However, Kazakhstan did not preserve 'Sovietness' to the same extent as Belarus[28], Kyrgyzstan[29] or Russia itself[30].**

In situations of political and symbolic tension in relations with Moscow, Astana's strategy was to tone them down. This was the case when, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin described Nazarbayev as the 'founder' of a state that had previously been said not to exist[31]. At the same time, the Kazakh authorities were careful to combat manifestations of separatism among the Russian minority[32].

Under authoritarian rule, the state long monopolised the shaping of the identity debate, the depoliticisation of society[33], and the use of a sense of economic stability (achieved thanks to the oil boom in the first decade of the 21st century) as a social glue**. Efforts to break this deadlock began to gain momentum following the suppressed social protests by oil workers in Zhanaozen in 2011, which evolved into political demands, signalling a change in social attitudes[34].**

At the same time, one of the effects of state modernisation during Nazarbayev's rule was the emergence of a young generation of Kazakh officials, intellectuals and cultural figures: these were the state's new symbolic elite, who had no memory of the Soviet era, were often educated abroad or in domestic institutions offering a high standard of education, and who had ambitious life goals. These people came to be known simply as the 'Nazarbayev generation'[35].

Tokayev, who has held the office of president since 2019, has strengthened the policy of promoting Kazakh identity and emphasising the distinctiveness of Kazakh historical memory from official Russian memory. This was followed by adjustments in the area of historical policy. The narrative of Kazakh martyrdom during the Soviet era began to be highlighted more prominently in public, for example through the President's active participation in the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repression and Famine (31 May), even though this is not a public holiday. Under the President's auspices, a commission was established which led to the authorities rehabilitating 311,000 victims of repression from the 1920s to the 1950s in June 2023 and declassifying 2.4 million personal files of repressed individuals.

In the early phase of Tokayev's rule, the military component of the parade during Victory Day celebrations was also discontinued. **Compared to Nazarbayev's rule, greater emphasis was placed on the history of Kazakhstan and its heroes from the 19th and early 20th centuries**, such as the intellectuals who between 1917 and 1920 formed the Alash Orda, a Kazakh autonomous national-territorial entity within Russia following the February Revolution[36]. Programmes promoting Kazakh traditions in a more appealing way than before appeared on state television[37]. Furthermore, Tokayev – to a far greater extent than his predecessor – promoted and expanded the celebrations of Nauryz (the start of the New Year according to the Persian-Turkic tradition) as a public holiday[38].

4. WAR AS A CATALYST FOR THE DEBATE ON DECOLONISATION

Over the past decade, there has been a marked politicisation of society in Kazakhstan. A significant step towards the emergence of an active political nation, capable of expressing its demands, took place during the mass protests of January 2022, in which 238 people were killed. These events have been etched into the collective memory as 'Bloody January', and led to Nazarbayev and his family being removed from power, in line with the demonstrators' demands; as a result, President Tokayev assumed full power. Once the situation had stabilised, thanks to the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a de facto Russian body, Tokayev opted not to use widespread repression against the population. Although the 'New Kazakhstan' policy which the president soon announced did not contribute either to the democratisation of the state or to resolving the underlying social causes of public discontent, the authorities' narrative was reformulated to place greater emphasis on taking the views of the general public into account and engaging in an indirect 'dialogue' with them. This was reflected, for example, in changes to Kazakhstan's historical policy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. **Kazakhstan's government interpreted Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a dangerous precedent for them, as it undermined the post-Soviet borders in terms of 'concern for Russian speakers'[39]. It initally increased the**

country's political distance from Russia, for example by permitting a large pro-Ukrainian demonstration in Almaty, the country's most populous city. The state also accepted Russian 'relokanty', while occasionally extraditing to Russia its own citizens who faced charges in political cases, for example in connection with their anti-war stance. A further administrative and territorial reform was also carried out (March 2022) which reduced the proportion of Russians in north-eastern Kazakhstan. The creation of new national history textbooks for upper primary school (years 7–9) and secondary school (years 10–11) was also announced. These came into use in 2024–5 and emphasise the continuity of Kazakh statehood and the positive role of the Alash Orda; they also offer a more critical assessment of the Soviet period in Kazakh history than previous textbooks. This direction of state policy was maintained from March 2022 to autumn 2023[40].

In social terms, Russia's war against Ukraine has become a major factor in the deterioration of the image of Russia and Russians among Kazakh citizens since 2022, particularly among young Kazakhs. This is confirmed by the results of a series of independent quantitative and qualitative surveys conducted between May 2022 and May 2023.[41]. **Meanwhile, a survey from autumn 2025 indicates a sharp decline in Kazakh citizens' sympathy towards Russia, although this trend had already emerged before the full-scale Russian invasion.**

As recently as 2020, 81% of respondents viewed the country positively, whereas five years later this figure had fallen to just 53%. At the same time, hostility towards Russia rose over the same period, from 13% to 34%. Russian-speaking respondents were most likely to give Russia a positive rating (70%). Among Kazakh-speaking respondents, the proportion viewing the country critically was higher than those viewing it favourably (42% to 38%)[42].

According to the largest group of respondents, Russia bears the blame and responsibility for the outbreak of the war (26%) [43]. A year after the war began, as many as 48% of respondents in Kazakhstan considered the aggression against Ukraine to be unjustified (an increase of 4 percentage points year-on-year). 23% of respondents held the opposite view (a decrease of 7 percentage points year-on-year).

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been closely followed in Kazakhstan since the very start of the full-scale invasion (from 71% of responses in 2022 to 64% in 2023), **has contributed to a** 2022–2023 they tended to show greater understanding and sympathy towards Ukraine than towards Russia (21–22% vs. 15–12%)[44]. Support for Ukraine in Kazakhstan correlated with whether the respondents were younger, obtained their news from the internet, whether they preferred to use the Kazakh language and identified with Kazakh ethnicity. The anti-war stance is based on denying Russia the right to interfere in the affairs of its neighbours. In this context, the war was perceived as an act of aggression against Ukraine's sovereignty[45].

Public **attitudes** towards Russian aggression are largely shaped by attitudes towards the country's Soviet-Russian past. **The generation that remembers the USSR and the 'independence generation' use different frameworks to define 'us' and 'them'. For the younger citizens of Kazakhstan, Russia is a foreign country with which they may or may not sympathise, whereas for older people Russia is 'their own' country or a 'close' one**[46]. It should be noted that the majority of Kazakhstan's current population (around 60%) were born after 1991. Positive or negative views of the Soviet era among the independence generation are shaped primarily through family socialisation (intergenerational, familial 'transfers of knowledge' about that period), within the framework of school education and individuals' own explorations.

It is worth noting that the decolonisation debate in Kazakhstan, which intensified after 24 February 2022, does not take place in a vacuum limited to that country and its society. It is part of a broader discourse of this nature across the former Soviet states – most powerfully, obviously, in Ukraine, but also (to a lesser extent) in the South Caucasus (in Armenia and Azerbaijan; the de facto cultural and historical decolonisation of Georgian society took place earlier) or, to a limited extent, in other Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan.

In this sense, the Russian-Ukrainian war marks a turning point for the former Soviet republics (with the exception of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), marking the de facto end of the 'post-Soviet world'[47]. It must be agreed that this term should no longer be applicable to this region[46]; its potential to explain current reality is limited, whilst its potential for stereotyping is significant. Its use has also been criticised within the decolonisation debate by researchers from Kazakhstan[39].

5. GRASSROOTS DECOLONISATION AND ITS DEMANDS

The Russian attack on Ukraine has not only revived the debate on nation and identity in Kazakhstan, but has also caused actors other than the state to become significant participants in it. Since February 2022, demands for the decolonisation of various spheres of socio-political life have been a constant feature of public discourse in Kazakhstan[50]. These have mainly been formulated by academics (historians, political scientists, socio-cultural anthropologists, linguists)[51] and cultural figures[52]. **This narrative rarely calls explicitly for a loosening of Astana's political ties with Moscow, though this is its *de facto* political message. Within this framework, Russia is portrayed as a colonial empire *vis-à-vis* the Kazakhs and the peoples of Central Asia**[53].

The discourse on decolonisation is predominantly shaped by representatives of the 'Nazarbayev generation': the people who were intellectually formed during his long rule and experienced disappointment with its last decade. **They often hold liberal-left-wing or nationalist-conservative socio-political views**. According to the typology of political segmentation of Kazakhstan's society from the 2024 PaperLab study on the political values of Kazakhstan's citizens, **these people can be described respectively as 'progressive reformers' (26% of the population) and 'ethnocentric conservatives' (16%)**[54]. Under Kazakhstan's system of government, they have no political representation, and prior to the 2022 'carnival' of decolonisation, they had not left a significant mark on public consciousness. Their ties to Russia are most often limited to knowledge of the Russian language. An example of the liberal-left wing of these 'decolonisers' are the members of the Oyan, Qazaqstan! movement (Eng. "Wake up, Kazakhstan!").

The proposed model of national identity, according to some of these liberal-left-leaning decolonisers, is self-identification as a Kazakh, and for ethnic minorities as a Kazakhstani. Some representatives of this wing advocate exclusively civic identification ('Kazakhstani') as the correct approach, for both ethnic Kazakhs and national minorities. According to some nationally conservative decolonisers, minorities should ultimately assimilate and identify as "Kazakhs of [a given ethnic] origin". The audience for the decolonisation discourse consists of consumers of online content, rather than the state-controlled television and radio broadcasts. **It is popularised on social media (YouTube, Instagram), where it finds a mass audience**[55].

According to Kazakhstani intellectuals, the foundations of the decolonisation of the state and society lie in a critical re-examination of its own history and the reinterpretation of it, in order to imbue historical memory with new content, and to seek models for the modern state and its citizens.

This discourse entails a re-evaluation of the role of Russia and the USSR in Kazakh history. This includes a critique of Soviet-Russian historiographical myths, such as the notion of the peaceful incorporation of Kazakh state bodies into the Russian Empire. It also challenges the narrative of Russia as a civilising force whose influence on the socio-economic modernisation of Kazakhstan was exclusively positive, demanding that this be weighed against the human (including the extermination of the national elite) and socio-cultural costs such as linguistic or racial discrimination. Martyrdom narratives are gaining prominence in this discourse, which representatives of the decolonisation movement regard as having been 'silenced' or insufficiently researched. These include: the forced sedentarisation of Kazakh nomads; the great famine of the 1930s; the Stalinist repressions and the Great Terror, during which both Kazakh intellectuals committed to nation-building and the first generation of Kazakh Communists were executed (the boundaries between these two categories were still fluid at the time); the transformation of Kazakhstan's territory into a place of exile & deportation and the establishment of the GULAG system there; and environmental degradation[56].

In the decolonial narrative, the history of the Kazakh Khanate (1465–1847) has been prioritised as the first expression of Kazakh statehood prior to the period of Russian colonisation. The leaders of the Alash Orda, such as Alikhan Bukeikhanov, Ahmet Baitursynuly and Mustafa Chokay, are becoming new national heroes[57]. There is also growing interest in representatives of Jadidism, the Muslim reformist movement from the turn of the twentieth century. There is also a growing positive perception of Dinmukhamed Kunayev[58], whose period in power is widely associated with the prosperity and development of Soviet Kazakhstan; his dismissal from office led to protests by Kazakh youth (primarily students) in December 1986, which were violently suppressed[59].

At the same time, the discourse of decolonisation in Kazakhstan relates directly to the present. In this context, it takes the form of self-affirmation, overcoming a sense of cultural inferiority and a reckoning with (self-)stereotypes, such as the notion of Kazakh 'laziness'[60]**. It has liberated the resentment they harboured towards the Russians, and allows – as is particularly evident during conversations with 'ordinary' Kazakhs – for the processing of that resentment.** This manifests itself in the courage to speak out and recall memories of instances of personal discrimination (particularly linguistically based) or of being shamed as backward, 'second-class people'[61]. **In this sense, the decolonisation taking place in the mind of the 'average' Kazakh involves shedding the shame of being oneself and freeing oneself from the mental influence of narratives other than one's own or those of one's own group[62].**

This positive aspect of the discourse under analysis reinforces a sense of patriotism and community, and is creating a fashion for Kazakh identity. This manifests itself in '**banal nationalism**': the popularity of identity-based clothing (such as the Qazaq Republic brand), ethnic ornamentation (such as tamga, equivalents of family crests), the saturation of public spaces with historical murals, improved knowledge of one's family and clan genealogies, and the use of non-Russified versions of first names and surnames. The spread of these manifestations of Kazakh ethnicity would not have occurred had it not been for the 'hunger for (true) history' that prevailed among Kazakhs even before 2022; evidence for this includes the popularity of popular science books by Radik Temirgaliev, including those on historical Kazakh-Russian relations and the history of Kazakh tribes & clans.

6. THE STALLING OF THE PROCESS OF STATE DECOLONISATION

Kazakhstan's more assertive identity policy in 2022–3 was noted by Russia, and met with increased pressure on Astana from Moscow. This manifested itself in strenuous efforts to return to the previous status quo, alongside the updating and formulation of an economic offer favourable to Kazakhstan, an intensification of aggressive political and media propaganda – including accusations of nationalism[63] – and controversial symbolic actions, such as the unveiling in July 2023 of a monument to Alexander Nevsky on land adjacent to a church in Almaty, presented to the Kazakhstani side as a fait accompli. At that time, isolated but likely grassroots acts of Russian separatism emerged, in locations including Petropavlovsk (Kaz. Petropavl) and in Uralsk (Kaz. Oral).

Kazakhstan's cultural and historical liberation from Russian influence was also directly opposed by Vladimir Putin. The issue of protecting the rights of 'Russian-speakers' was the subject of a conversation between him and Tokayev during the former's state visit to the country in November 2024. This was preceded by a meeting between Vladimir Medinsky (the main proponent of the 'Russian World', 'Russkiy Mir' concept) and Erlan Karin (a State Counsellor and architect of the 'New Kazakhstan' policy) on 29 September 2024.

The fact that talks were held at the highest level on language and historical policy, including explicitly on the decolonisation of Kazakhstan, indicates that this issue has become a thorny matter in Kazakh-Russian relations. Until then it was telling that, despite the multitude of incidents relating to bilateral relations[1], these did not escalate to the highest political level; meanwhile the leaders of both states pretended in a sense not to 'notice' these cases, and were satisfied to ritually emphasise the 'allied' nature of their mutual relations.

The Kazakh government took into account Russian demands regarding the Russian language and the toning down of the anti-Russian edge of state decolonisation. Tokayev presented himself as the guarantor of the rights of Russian speakers in Kazakhstan, supported the development of education in the Russian language (including agreeing to open a branch of MGIMO)[65] and gave his consent to the launch of a joint Russian-Kazakh historical commission (the Russian side of which is sponsored by MGIMO and the Russkiy Mir Foundation)[66].

Within the Commonwealth of Independent States, the International Organisation of the Russian Language was also established on the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan, and last year he himself took part in the 80th anniversary celebrations of Victory Day in Moscow; a military parade was also organised in Astana to mark the occasion. At the same time, on the occasion of visits by Russian delegations to Kazakhstan or his own visits to Russia, Tokayev emphasised his nation's cultural distinctiveness (including by making statements in the Kazakh language, which 'surprised' Russian delegations, and using national symbols in place of Russian-Soviet ones, such as the St George's Ribbon). He also highlighted cultural successes in his country's relations with Russia, such as the opening of branches of Kazakhstani universities in Russia.

Kazakhstan has returned to a more cautious approach to shaping its historical policy out of reluctance to strain relations with Russia, to avoid this issue once again becoming the subject of heated media debate and creating a problem to be resolved at the presidential level. In this context it is significant that the authorities' calculations were guided by the conviction that Russia would not lose the war with Ukraine and would not become internationally isolated, thus retaining its potential to destabilise the socio-political situation in Kazakhstan.

In practice, between 2024 and 2026 this led to the more frequent extradition of Russian citizens (or those with dual citizenship) who were being pursued by the Kremlin for reasons including criticising the war.

There was also an increase in the frequency of criminal proceedings against its own citizens (mainly ethnic Kazakhs) for 'inciting ethnic hatred': one such case involved the satirist Temirlan Yensebek (a year after the social media post which formed the basis of the charges), **which was clearly intended to serve as a signal to Kazakh society regarding the current limits of permissible criticism of Russia**. At the same time, the main actors who have so far spoken out in the grassroots decolonisation discourse – with the exception of certain research centres – have not been the target of attacks by the state.

For the Kazakh authorities, grassroots decolonisation is a useful tool but also an uncontrollable one. They are attempting to channel it into their own narrative by steering it towards a cultural-patriotic direction based on non-confrontational support for Kazakh ethnicity, language, traditions and customs, whilst simultaneously promoting Kazakh and Kazakhstani identity within society. In their view, an overly lenient stance towards voices for radical decolonisation can provoke a backlash from Russia, whilst overly harsh repression of their own society (particularly ethnic Kazakhs) gives the impression that the state's ruling elite is taking Russia's viewpoint into account to a greater extent than that of its own people. **The paradox is that the strengthening shifts in identity within society, as expressed through the decolonisation discourse, are building resistance to Russian neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism not only among them, but also, in the long term, within Kazakhstan as a state.**

7. SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS

The process of infusing the framework of national and state identity with new content has been underway since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991. It has been shaped on one hand by demographic, linguistic and identity-related changes, and on the other by the policies of the state authorities. It has taken the form of a slow, top-down liberation from the Soviet-Russian legacy. **The lack of stronger social pressure delayed the need to update the nation- and state-building identity project and to address its inherent ambivalence, which combines concepts of 'Sovietness', 'post-Sovietness'/'post-coloniality' and 'Kazakhness'.**

The process of state 'decolonisation' gained momentum following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the year and a half after the outbreak of the war, the Kazakh authorities promoted an identity policy reinforcing 'Kazakhness' with greater boldness. This was coupled with a more assertive stance by Astana towards Moscow. At the same time, Kazakh citizens' perception of Russia deteriorated significantly.

During Tokayev's presidency, grassroots movements emerged: the state ceased to be the sole arbiter of thinking on identity and the nation. A new generation of intellectuals came of age who developed a new discourse of decolonisation. This proved attractive to the ethnically Kazakh section of society, which had been calling for a more profound re-examination of collective memory and historical policy, particularly among those with liberal-left and nationalist-conservative views.

In this sense, in Kazakhstan we are witnessing a genuine process decolonisation, which is being carried out in various forms and in different ways by the state and intellectuals, and which engages, expands and 'lives' in the minds of the citizens. It marks the end of the post-Soviet phase of the country's history. Just as following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Russia lost not only its political and cultural-historical influence over that country as a state, but also its mental influence over the Ukrainian people, so too, after 2022, did it begin to inevitably lose these tools of pressure over Kazakhstan and the Kazakh people.. A society that had been heavily Russified and historically Sovietised, by engaging in the discourse of decolonisation, demonstrated its agency and will, which the state authorities cannot fully ignore. This is all the more significant given the advanced stage of the construction of the Soviet nation in the Kazakh SSR during the late period of the Soviet Union's existence. The Kazakhs have decided to 'be themselves'; they have resisted, and are overcoming, their mental dependence on the former metropolis.

The irreversible nature of identity shifts in Kazakhstan – driven by demographic factors that will only intensify in the future – carries serious implications for state policy. It complicates the country's internal situation and has the potential to negatively impact its relations with Russia. Among the Kazakh authorities led by President Tokayev, the desire to avoid conflict with their northern neighbour prevails. In the years 2024–6, this led them to tone down the anti-Russian public sentiment and to accommodate the Kremlin's demands – including in areas concerning historical, linguistic and educational policy. At the same time they will continue, albeit in a symbolic manner, to assert their own distinctiveness and pursue a slow, top-down process of decolonisation.

In the future, however, the authorities' ambivalent stance in this area will increase the risk of social conflict between the Kazakh majority and the Russian minority, including the possibility of Russia exploiting these tensions. The potential for Kazakh protests against the government in connection with cultural and historical concessions to Russia is still low (it would only expand if there were an attempt to significantly weaken the position of the Kazakh language, which is unlikely). However, it may result in protests when combined with the second, strongly politically charged discourse present among the public, which concerns dissatisfaction with the general standard of living.

8. FOOTNOTES

1) On the demography of Central Asia, see Zuzanna Krzyżanowska's comprehensive commentary with numerous references to Kazakhstan. Z. Krzyżanowska, 'Long live youth! Demography of Central Asian States', OSW Commentary 684, 27 August 2025.
2) According to the latest research, between 1929 and 1931 there were almost 400 mass protests by Kazakhs against the policies of the Soviet authorities, 25 of which took the form of armed uprisings. Around 80,000 people took part in them. T. Allaniyazov, 'Uprisings and protests of people in 1928–1932 in Kazakhstan', Gumilyov Journal of History 2025, vol. 153, no. 4, pp. 91–110.
3) These reached their peak intensity between 1931 and 1933. Relative to the population size, the number of victims of the Kazakh famine – referred to in historiography as the 'asharshylyk' – was most likely greater than that of the Ukrainian Holodomor, and may have affected as much as 40% of the Kazakh population. See Sarah Cameron, The Hungry Steppe. Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan, Ithaca–London 2018.
4) Criticism of this nationality policy as it applied to the Central Asian republics during the period of perestroika was voiced by the Kyrgyz-Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov. In his work The Day Lasts Longer Than a Hundred Years, he introduced the concept of the 'mankurt' into public discourse, meaning 'a person who has no memory of the past [and was forced into that state – author's note], deprived of the historical experience (...) of his own nation'. Aitmatov, The Day Lasts Longer Than a Hundred Years, [in English] Bloomington 1983.
5) See Joanna Czeczott, Cisza nad stepem. Kazachstan i pamięć o Rosji [Silence over the Steppe. Kazakhstan and the Memory of Russia], Wołowiec 2025. See also, for example, Jerzy Rohoziński, Pionierzy w stepie? Kazachstańscy Polacy jako element sowieckiego projektu modernizacyjnego [Pioneers in the Steppe? Kazakh Poles as an Element of the Soviet Modernisation Project], Warsaw 2022.
6) For more on the colonial role of Russian settlement in Central Asia, see Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva, 'Expropriation, assimilation, elimination: Understanding Soviet Settler Colonialism', 'south/south dialogues', 5 July 2023.
7) Ibid.
8) Mariusz Marszewski is correct in stating that a supra-ethnic community of 'Russian-speakers' emerged in the Soviet Union, whom "one could describe as that part of the USSR population who became 'Soviet people'". M. Marszewski, 'Kyrgyz Russian-speakers and Kyrgyz – a sketch from the anthropology of everyday life'in A. Dzhusupbekov, W. Jakubowski, P. Załęski (eds.), Kyrgyzstan. Cultural and socio-political issues, Warsaw–Bishkek 2011, p. 264.
9) Krzyżanowska, op. cit.
10) It is estimated that during the 1990s a third of the resident ethnic Russians (c. 1.5 million people) left Kazakhstan, ibid. These departures were caused by the country's economic crisis and their aversion to the new state. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, 'Perestroika – the Nazarbayev way. Crisis and reforms in Kazakhstan', Point of View OSW 58, Warsaw 2016, pp. 14–16.
11) Krzyżanowska, op. cit.
12) According to the 2021 census, social mobility was high between 2009 and 2021. 13.4% of Kazakhstan's citizens (including 76% of Kazakhs) changed their place of permanent residence. Ibid.
13) Since 2017, Kazakhstan has been running an internal resettlement programme called 'South–North'. It cannot be considered a complete success. Between 2018 and 2022 it covered 59,000 families, but a third of them later returned to their previous places of residence in the south of the country.
14) Kamila Smagulova, Joanna Bagadzinska, 'Language Activism in Kazakhstan: Decolonial Sentiments and (Post-)Soviet Reality', Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 18 March 2026, pp. 5–6.
15) A. Zamarajewa, P. Załęski, 'The Cultural Identity of the Peoples of Central Asia' in T. Bodio, W. Jakubowski, A. Wierzbicki, The Transformation of Society and Power in Post-Soviet Central Asia, Pułtusk 2008, pp. 38–39. "For the Kazakhs, the rejection of traditional models became a prerequisite for enjoying the benefits of the system, including social advancement. The culture of the 'whites' was adopted not only by a significant part of the local nomenklatura, but also by the Kazakh 'intelligentsia'. This group of people can be described as 'Euro-Kazakhs', modernisers, the evolved or the inter-elite." Ibid., p. 38. They are also referred to by the term 'half-Kazakh' (Kaz. šala-qazaq), that is, a Kazakh who has lost his ethnic attributes, such as language and customs. See Zhumabai Zhakupov, Šala qazaq: past, present, future, Almaty 2009.
16) Krzyżanowska, op. cit.
17) Dina Kucherbayeva, Juldyz Smagulova, 'Language Revitalization: Challenges for Kazakh in Higher Education', Journal of Eurasian Studies 14, issue 2, August 2023, p. 169.
18) During the Soviet period, the script of the Kazakh language was changed twice. Between 1928 and 1929, it switched from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin script, and then in 1940 to Cyrillic. The aim was to weaken the influence of the former elite, such as the Muslim clergy and tribal establishment, and – through the eradication of illiteracy and mass education – to indoctrinate society in the spirit of Communist ideology.
19) In the 1990s and 2000s, its speakers in Kazakhstan were labelled with the pejorative term 'peasant' (Kaz. 'mambet'). However, a shift in public consciousness has taken place, and this is now politically incorrect.
20) Smagulova & Bagadzińska, op. cit., pp. 14–16.
21) Hip-hop in the Kazakh language is extremely popular among young people, particularly the group Irina Kairatovna, the singer Yenlik, and the rappers Jah Khalib and Dragon KNM. The boysband Ninety One creates music which draws on Kazakh pop (with South Korean influences). The music of Dimash Kudaibergenov is a stage phenomenon that extends beyond the borders of Kazakhstan. For more, see e.g Aliya Tlegenova, Anastasia Reshetniak, Serik Beisembayev, Kamila Smagulova, '30 лет независимости Казахстана глазами граждан: события, символы и герои' [30 Years of Kazakhstan's Independence Through the Eyes of Citizens: Events, Symbols and Heroes. Analytical Report on the Results of the Study], PaperLab, 7 July 2022, p. 94.
22) In a 1994 public opinion survey, 95% of ethnic Kazakhs and 40% of ethnic Russians identified as citizens of Kazakhstan. Andrzej Wierzbicki, Ethnopolitics in Central Asia. Between Ethnic and Civic Community, Warsaw 2008, pp. 189–192.
23) Ibid., pp. 310–313.
24) The futuristic city became the state's showpiece and a symbol of its modernisation. Mateusz Laszczkowski, 'City of the Future': Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana, New York-Oxford 2016, pp. 5–14.
25) To reduce their proportions in the regions, the number and boundaries of the districts were also modified.
26) K.M. Rees, 'Public Commemoration and Nationalising the Cult of the Second World War in Kazakhstan' in D. Sharipova, A. Bissenova, A. Burkhanov (eds.), Post-Colonial Approaches in Kazakhstan and Beyond. Politics, Culture and Literature, Singapore 2024.
27) Kazakhstan was the driving force behind the development of the Eurasian Economic Union. Wierzbicki, op. cit., p. 319.
28) On this subject see Anna Engelking, Kołchoźnicy. Antropologiczne studium tożsamości wsi białoruskiej przełomu XX i XXI wieku [Kolkhoz Farmers. An Anthropological Study of Belarusian Rural Identity at the Turn of the 21st Century], Toruń 2012.
29) Piotr Załęski, Radzieckość w tożsamości kulturowo-społecznej we współczesnym Kirgistanie [Sovietism in the Cultural and Social Identity of Contemporary Kyrgyzstan] in ibid., E. Breslavskaya, M. Włodarkiewicz (eds.), Tożsamości narodowe na obszarze postradzieckim. Między dziedzictwem i tradycją wynalezioną [National Identities in the Post-Soviet Space. Between Heritage and Invented Tradition, Warsaw 2012].
30) Aleksandra Zamarajewa, W poszukiwaniu utraconych obrazów. Nostalgia postsowiecka w polityce symbolicznej Rosji (2000–2008) [In Search of Lost Images. Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Russia's Symbolic Politics (2000–2008)], Warsaw 2014.
31) Russian resentment towards Kazakhstan was eloquently articulated by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his 1990 essay 'How to Rebuild Russia?'. See Wojciech Górecki, 'Ever further of Moscow. Russia's stance on Central Asia', OSW Studies 48, Warsaw 2014, p. 15.
32) Wierzbicki, op. cit., pp. 342–347.
33) Jarosiewicz, op. cit., pp. 20–21.
34) Ibid., pp. 21–25.
35) See Marlene Laruelle (ed.), The Nazarbayev Generation. Youth in Kazakhstan, Lanham-Boulder-New York-London 2019. In 1993, the 'Bolashak' (Eng. 'future') programme was launched to train highly qualified personnel for the needs of the state and its economy. As of 2025, over 13,000 students from Kazakhstan had received presidential scholarships under the programme and graduated from leading universities worldwide (more than half of them in the United States). Over 42% of them took up employment in the private sector, whilst 31% entered the public sector. It is widely regarded as one of the most significant achievements of independent Kazakhstan. At the same time, it has sometimes been criticised for being accesible predominantly to the children of the political and business elite. Tlegenova, Reshetniak, Beisembayev, Smagulova, op. cit., p. 36. The majority of students from Kazakhstan who

8. FOOTNOTES continued

study abroad (around 60,000 people a year) are educated in Russia. Since 2008, the country has been home to the so-called Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, a network of elite schools for children and young people aged 11–18, specialising in physics, mathematics, chemistry and biology. In 2010, Nazarbayev University was also established, with English as the language of instruction, to be the country's flagship university, focusing on engineering, medical, business and humanities & social sciences. The standard of teaching there is high: in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2026, it was ranked higher than Jagiellonian University or the University of Warsaw.

36) Smagulova, Bagadzińska, op. cit., p. 8.

37) The 'Cultural Context' programme is one example.

38) During the Soviet era, it was considered 'counter-revolutionary'. Zamarajewa, Załęski, op. cit., p. 36.

39) Both Nazarbayev and Tokayev treated Russia's earlier annexation of Crimea with understanding and without condemnation, although Kazakhstan did not recognise this act in formal, legal terms.

40) Bakhytzhan Kurmanov, 'From Kazakhstani to the Kazakh Nation? Understanding the Nation-Building Process under Tokayev in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine' in Assylzat Karabayeva, Ikboljon Qoraboyev, The Russia-Ukraine War and its Implications on Central Asia, Lanham-Boulder-New York-London 2024.

41) Research by the Central Asia Barometer Survey (CAB), DEMOSCOPE and PaperLab under the auspices of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Kazakhstan, compiled and published in 2024. A. Muzaffar, M. Edison, S. Gani, S. Beisembayev, E. McGlinchy, Echoes of War: Public Perception of the Russian-Ukrainian War in Central Asia, PaperLab, 2024.

42) D. Dauletbek, A. Reshetnyak, A. Dostaev, V. Nem, S. Orazbekova, S. Beisembayev, Partners and Priorities: What Matters to Kazakhstani Citizens in Foreign Policy, Analytical Report, PaperLab, 2026, pp. 5, 34–35.

43) 20% of respondents blamed Ukraine, 5% both sides, and 10% the US. On average, around 28% of respondents had difficulty answering this question in 2022–3. A. Muzaffar, M. Edison, S. Gani, S. Beisembayev, E. McGlinchy, op. cit.

44) Ibid.

45) Ibid.

46) Among the respondents, there was also a widespread narrative regarding Western interests in the conflict. A significant proportion of respondents attributed responsibility for the outbreak of the war to the US, NATO or the European Union. Even those who identified Russia as responsible for the outbreak of the war viewed the West's role negatively. Support for Russia increased with age, television viewing (particularly of Russian channels), Russian ethnicity, and a preference for using the Russian language. Ibid.

47) K. Strachota, 'The Twilight of the Post-Soviet World. The Case of the Caucasus and Central Asia' in P. Trudnowski (ed.), Rozpad starego świata. Próba syntezy po pół roku wojny na Ukrainie [The Collapse of the Old World. An Attempt at Synthesis Six Months into the War in Ukraine], Jagiellonian Club, Report 7/2022, Kraków 2022, pp. 47–60.

48) W. Konończuk, 'Pax post-Sovietica? The final end of post-Sovietness', AREI. Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics 2023, no. 1, pp. 38–53.

49) In this context, it is worth quoting a longer excerpt from an interview with Botakoz Kassymbekova:

In Central Asia and the Caucasus, no academic journal or institution will refer to 'post-Sovietness'. We do not use this term. Categories such as 'post-Soviet' are always imposed by an external perspective, erasing the agency of the people and actors in these regions. Such vague concepts may seem to signal a poverty of political imagination. Instead, however, we should ask the question: what if this is not weakness or laziness, but a highly productive and useful term? People in Moscow are very fond of it, partly because it puts them in the spotlight. Together with a colleague, we have just published an article analysing terms such as 'post-Soviet', 'the Eurasian backyard' and 'the global East'. All the concepts that were used in relation to Ukraine were also used in relation to Kazakhstan. That is the problem. However, for us, for people from this region, it is important not to remain constantly on the defensive and tell everyone: 'Don't do this, don't say that'. We should not only be revising and editing colonial language. We must become producers of knowledge. We should speak of ourselves as producers of knowledge. We must produce knowledge not only about our region, but also about the United States, African countries, South America and so on. We need conferences during which we interpret the world and change our perception of ourselves. This will be part of a process of political and epistemic subjectivisation. This will be true decolonisation. Being constantly on the defensive means remaining in colonial relations with the empire.

See the interview with Daria Badior, Ludobójczy konstrukt [The Genocidal Construct], dwutygodnik.com, no. 362, June 2023.

50) We can distinguish approaches which are geared towards a more profound or more moderate revision of history in relation to the present day. Cf. A. Mustoyapova, ДеколонизацияКазахстана [Decolonisation of Kazakhstan], Almaty 2022; A. Bisenova (ed.), Qazaqstan, Казахстан, قازقستانن: лабиринты современного постколониального дискурса [Qazaqstan, Kazakhstan, قازقستان : Labyrinths of Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse], Almaty 2023, pp. 10–36.

51) In a post on the X platform on 25 June 2024, S. Durdiyeva listed 25 academic works on the decolonisation of Central Asia published between 2022 and June 2024.

52) See, for example, the works of the distinguished visual artist Almagul Menlibayeva from the 'Nomadised Suprematism' series, or the 2022 film Qas (Eng. 'The Hunger') directed by Aisultan Seitov.

53) Botakoz Kassymbekova, Erica Marat, 'Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence', PONARS Eurasia, 27 April 2022. The researchers emphasised that Western academic elites have played a role in perpetuating the perception of Central Asia as a region that benefited from Tsarist and Soviet colonisation. They propose separating Central Asian studies in the West from so-called Russian Studies. The application of the category of decolonisation to various aspects of socio-cultural life in the former Soviet states was popularised by Madina Tlostanova, who also draws attention to the "tacit consent of both the global North and the global South to the attribution of the whole of Eurasia to the Russian sphere of influence". See her interview: 'We, from the Caucasus and Central Asia, are overlooked along with our traumas and our history', OKO.press, 15 February 2026.

54) A. Tlegenova, A. Reshetnyak, S. Beisembayev, Невидимое разнообразие: ландшафт политических ценностей в Казахстане, [Invisible Diversity: The Landscape of Political Values in Kazakhstan. Analytical Report on Results of a Study], PaperLab, 2024, pp. 6–7, 21–26, 33–39.

55) The YouTube channel O'Dekolon and the Yurt Jurt podcast are dedicated to decolonisation. The topic has gained widespread interest due to its coverage in popular video podcasts such as DOPE SOZ, Basht, POISTINE, Диванные Эксперты, and in certain talks at TEDxAstana, such as those by the historian Zhaksylik Sabitov and Yuri Serebriansky, a writer and representative of the Polish minority.

56) Criticism of the colonial nature of the nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk test site was expressed in one of 2024's most successful publications in Kazakhstan, T. Kassenova, Atomic Steppe. How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb, Stanford 2022.

57) Kamila Smagulova, Echo of Alash-Orda in the 21st Century: Influence and Connection with Modernity, 3 February 2022. See their biographies. A. Mustoyapova, Leaders of the Nation. A Political History of Kazakhstan, Singapore 2024.

58) Kunayev was First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Sociaist Republic from 1964 to 1986.

59) The reissue of his memoirs was also a bestseller in Kazakh bookshops in 2024. D. Kunaev, О моем времени. От Сталина до Горбачева [On My Time. From Stalin to Gorbachev], Almaty 2024.

60) This same post-Communist (self-)stereotype was also perpetuated in political and media discourse in Poland, particularly in relation to the so-called 'losers of the transition'.

61) "There were many difficulties. But of course I am glad that we became independent. Our nation. There was a time when they told us that without them [Russia, Russians – author's note] we were nothing, that they were the ones who taught us to walk (...).". Tlegenova, Reshetniak, Beisembayev, Smagulova, op. cit., p. 16.

62) As Botakoz Kassymbekova astutely observed: "Postcolonial societies are often afraid to talk: for decades we were told that attempting to discuss the traumas of the past is 'playing the victim' or a manifestation of nationalism'. See her interview with Joanna Kozłowska, 'There is no de-Stalinisation without decolonisation', Kultura Liberalna 699 (23/2022), 31 May 2022.

63)Most telling in this context was Dmitri Medvedev's social media post from back in August 2022 that Kazakhstan was an "artificial state", consisting of "former Russian territories"; he accused its authorities of "genocide against Russians", stating that "until the Russians arrive there, there will be no order". Similar aggressive statements were made by Russian parliamentarians such as Yevgeny Fyodorov, Sergei Mironov and Andrei Gurulov, who claimed that Kazakhstan "[would] be next" after Ukraine; these were echoed by media propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov and Tina Kandelaki.

64) The main text discusses incidents at the media and political level. At the same time, between 2022 and 2026, a series of disputes took place which mostly involved verbal aggression and other interpersonal conflicts between Kazakhs and Russians (mostly Russians from Russia).

65) M. Popławski, 'An ambiguous alliance: Putin visits Kazakhstan', OSW Analyses, 4 December 2024.

66) 'Круглый стол «Общая история Казахстана и России и дискурс „деколонизации“»' [Round Table 'The Shared History of Kazakhstan and Russia and the Discourse of "Decolonisation"', MGIMO, 18 October 2024. On 26 November 2024, a high-level Kazakh-Russian forum of historians was also held. Zholdas Orisbay, '«Остудить страсти»: Москва хочет участвовать в написании истории Казахстана?' [Cooling passions': Does Moscow want to participate in writing the history of Kazakhstan?], Radio Azzatyk, 6 December 2024.

Fot.: Krzysztof Saternus/ Marcin Popławski

Photo 1: Krzysztof Saternus/ Marcin Popławski, Horses in the Kazakh Mountains.

Photo 2: Krzysztof Saternus/ Marcin Popławski, Astana.