

Kazakhstan's Posture in the Eurasian Union: In Search of Serene Sovereignty

By Marlene Laruelle, Washington DC

Abstract

Among all post-Soviet states, the position of Kazakhstan towards the Eurasian Union project is likely the most complex. The country has managed to keep a good dose of pragmatism within its approach, subtly fluctuating between a façade of serenity, active corridor diplomacy, and reinforcing its sovereignty via its symbolic attributes. Nazarbayev has formulated Kazakhstan's posture on the Eurasian Union project unambiguously and repeatedly. Yet many other symbolic aspects are discreetly at play, and the Kazakh authorities have received and responded to them well, as can be seen from Nazarbayev's announcement that 2015 would be the 550th anniversary of the birth of the Kazakh state.

Among all post-Soviet states, the position of Kazakhstan towards the Eurasian Union project is likely the most complex. The country must strike the right balance between its historical drift of supporting any regional integration project and posturing itself as Moscow's equal partner, with its own distinct voice. The Ukrainian crisis has disturbed this quest for equilibrium and rendered Kazakhstan's posture more fragile. However, the country has managed to keep a good dose of pragmatism, subtly fluctuating between a façade of serenity, active corridor diplomacy, and reinforcing its sovereignty in its symbolic attributes.

The 'Yes, but' of Kazakhstan to the Eurasian Union

Kazakhstan's foreign policy goals have been distinctly stated, and pursued. Russia is Kazakhstan's main strategic and economic partner, but Astana follows a so-called multi-vector policy that welcomes China, the West, and other Asian countries. Kazakhstan has always been an enthusiastic supporter of all integration projects, whether at the Central Asian or larger Eurasian/post-Soviet levels. However, the Kazakh authorities have never explicitly addressed the potential overlap and/or competition between these two orientations. On one hand, prospects for deeper Central Asian integration, despite favorable economic opportunities for Kazakh businesses that this would provide, are seen as above all a burden rather than a blessing, especially due to having difficult neighbors such as Uzbekistan. On the other hand, the Russia-led Eurasian Union project, whose treaty Astana ratified in May 2014 and is now seen through the lens of the crisis in Ukraine, is interpreted as an imbalance that favors Russia rather than Kazakhstan. Both views carry with them their own set of problems.

This was the context for Nazarbayev's February 2014 suggestion to, at some undetermined future point, change the country's name to *Kazakh Eli*, with the goal

of no longer being a *-stan*. The *Kazakh Eli* idea can be seen as drawing a third line to the criteria that the regime promotes. Firstly, it allows Kazakhstan to position itself as a 'neither, nor' by creating its own distinctive brand, rather than being merely a part of a regional entity. Secondly, it highlights the Kazakh ethnic component of the country and the historic destiny of its steppe culture, something that younger generations increasingly support. Thirdly, it uses as its model, Asian countries—such as Singapore, Malaysia, Mongolia—that are perceived as successful in encountering economic modernity and cultural globalization. However, this identity project has raised serious criticism at home and encountered opposition from influential figures, and in any case Nazarbayev has pushed its timeline into the indefinite future.

Nazarbayev has formulated Kazakhstan's posture on the Eurasian Union project unambiguously and repeatedly.

- First, those who would draw a parallel with the Soviet Union, either to denounce the current integration dynamic, or with the hope to revive the defunct Soviet structure, are in the wrong. He has emphasized: "There have been many rumors of Kazakhstan reportedly losing its independence, about the USSR allegedly being revived. Complete nonsense. Those willing to get the USSR revived are not in their right mind. We have gone a long way away from that."¹
- Second, the Eurasian Union is an economic project, not a political one, and the Kazakh authorities have expressed strong reservations towards any supranational institutions or parliament, and joint citizenship. Nazarbayev stated: "Economic interest, rather

1 "Economic Eurasian Union bears no resemblance to USSR: President Nazarbayev," *Tengri News*, December 22, 2014, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Economic-Eurasian-Union-bears-no-resemblance-to-USSR-President-Nazarbayev-258039/>.

than abstract geopolitical ideas and slogans, is the main engine of the integration processes.”²

- Third, Kazakhstan’s membership is the result of a choice that can be reversed if the country considers its interests are not being upheld. Here too, Nazarbayev expressed plainly: “If the rules which were previously established in the treaty are not fulfilled, then Kazakhstan has the complete right to end its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Astana will never be in an organization which represents a threat to the independence of Kazakhstan.”³ He could not be clearer.

An Ambivalent Message Coming from Russia

Yet many other symbolic aspects are discreetly at play, and the Kazakh authorities have received them well. At the Selinger youth camp in August 2014, Putin answered a question about the growth of nationalist feelings in Kazakhstan with an ambivalent statement. He celebrated Nazarbayev, who “has performed a unique feat” because “he has created a state on a territory where there has never been a state. The Kazakhs never had a state of their own, and he created it. In this sense, he is a unique person on the post-Soviet space and in Kazakhstan.”⁴ The statement stirred Kazakh public opinion, especially among young, nationalist-minded elites. Western observers interpreted it—too simplistically—as a signal sent from Moscow to Astana that Kazakhstani statehood could easily disappear. I read Putin’s message as more about the risk of the country facing political instability after Nazarbayev’s presidency ends, than as a threat of it following Ukraine’s destiny of failed sovereignty.

Other more radical, and more marginalized, voices expressed themselves and were widely commented in the Kazakhstani public space. On February 20, 2014, Edouard Limonov, the leader of the (banned) National Bolshevik Party, a beacon of Russian nationalism, and fervent Putin opponent, hoped that both Ukraine and Northern Kazakhstan, which he judged as collapsing, would reintegrate with Russia. This statement raised the ire of the Kazakhstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which

demanded an explanation from Russia.⁵ A few days later on Rossiya-24, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy expressed hope that all five Central Asian republics would reintegrate with Russia as a Central Asian federal district with Almaty—which he called by its colonial name, Verniy—as its capital. Astana again sent a diplomatic note to Moscow and declared the LDPR leader *persona non grata* in Kazakhstan, a label he had already received in 2005. Given that Limonov is fiercely opposed to Putin, the Kremlin cannot be held responsible for these remarks, and Zhirinovskiy is known for his imperialist provocations, which have been a part of his political brand for more than twenty years. More disturbingly, but at the margins of Russian political landscape, in April 2014 the president of the Supreme Soviet of Khakassiya, Vladimir Shtygashev, recalled that several districts of the Ishim region, once a part of the Omsk region, were given to Kazakhstan when it acceded to federal republic status in 1936, and could be asked to be returned. But he retracted his statement, citing a misinterpretation by the newspaper that reported his comments.⁶

Kazakhstan’s Answer: Strengthening Sovereignty and Promoting Patriotism

The Kazakh authorities’ response to the ‘Ukrainian’ atmosphere came straightforwardly. Less than a month after the annexation of Crimea, the new Kazakh penal code included an article that made threatening the country’s territorial integrity and calling for secessionism punishable by ten years in prison.⁷ A second measure accelerated access to Kazakh citizenship for Oralmans, the ethnic Kazakhs repatriated from neighboring countries.⁸ Close to one million already have ‘returned’ and the waiting period for citizenship, 6–7 years, will be sped up, probably with the objective of increasing the ethnic balance of the population in favor of Kazakhs, especially in northern regions where Russians dominate.

2 Samat Ordabayev, “Building Eurasian Economic Union on Consensus, Mutual Respect and Benefit,” *The Astana Times*, May 20, 2014, <<http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/05/building-eurasian-economic-union-consensus-mutual-respect-benefit/>>.

3 “Nazarbaev zayavil o vozmozhnom vykhode Kazakhstana iz Evraziiskogo soyuza,” *Newsru.com*, August 31, 2014, <newsru.com/world/31aug2014/nazarbaev.html>.

4 “Seliger 2014 National Youth Forum,” August 29, 2014, <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/22864>>.

5 “MID RK gotovit noty Rossi posle ‘predlozheniya’ Limonova o zakhvate severa Kazakhstana,” *Tengri News*, February 20, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/mid-rk-gotovit-notu-rossii-predlozheniya-limonova-zakhvate-severa-kazakhstan-250762/>.

6 “Vyskazyvanie o pretenziakh Rossii k Vostochnomu Kazakhstanu prokometirovali v Khakasii,” *Tengri News*, April 10, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/vyskazyvanie-pretenziyah-rossii-vostochnomu-kazakhstanu-prokometirovali-253398/>.

7 “Nakazanie na separatizm uzhestochat v Kazakhstane,” *Tengri News*, April 8, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nakazanie-za-separatizm-ujestochat-v-kazakhstane-253259/>.

8 “Repatriated Kazakhs to get Kazakhstan citizenship in 1 year,” *Tengri News*, April 23, 2014, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/laws_initiatives/Repatriated-Kazakhs-to-get-Kazakhstan-citizenship-in-1-year-253095/>.

Probably in response to Putin's ambivalent statement, in October 2014, Nazarbayev announced that 2015 would be the 550th anniversary of the birth of the Kazakh state, embodied by the Kazakh khanate created by Kerey and Zhanibek in 1465. He posits: "It may not have been a state in the modern understanding of this term, in the current borders. ... [But] it is important that the foundation was laid then, and we are the people continuing the great deeds of our ancestors."⁹ December 16 independence festivities were an occasion for more muscular discourse on patriotism. Nazarbayev recalled that "independence was hard won by many generations of our ancestors, who defended our sacred land with blood and sweat. (...) Independence is the unflinching resolution of each citizen to defend Kazakhstan, their own home, and the motherland to the last drop of blood, as our heroic ancestors have bequeathed us."¹⁰ A few days later in his address to the nation, Nazarbayev insisted on the need to develop patriotism among the younger generations, who no longer learn about history from books, and therefore should have it delivered through public commemorations.

Even in a period of economic crisis, the authorities allocated a significant budget to the festivities for the half millennium of Kazakh statehood: 3 billion tenge, or 16 million dollars, will be invested in exhibitions, video productions, conferences, and archeological expeditions, as well as in a large historical reenactment planned for the fall.¹¹ Television is one of the premier channels for this revived patriotic message. On Nazarbayev's order, a series on the history of the Kazakh khanate started production in January 2015.¹² Originally planned for 20 episodes, it was reduced to 10 episodes, probably for planning reasons—it had to be written urgently in order to be broadcast by the end of the year—but then coupled with a series of documentary films and an animated film.¹³ The historical series is being managed by Rustem Abdrashev, a film director well known abroad

for his 'Gift to Stalin', but known to the Kazakh audience for a film celebrating Nazarbayev's youth, entitled 'The Path of a leader'. The mini-series will cover the period from the beginning of the Kazakh khanate with Kerey and Zhanibek, the Kazakh leaders who refused the rule of Khan Abulkhair Sheibanid and moved to the Seven Rivers region, in the southeastern part of the present-day Kazakhstan, to create an independent khanate, to Kenesary, the last khan who tried—and failed—to resist Russian advances in the steppes in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Although the televisual response has been immediate, another longer-term response to narratives undermining Kazakhstan's statehood is also in place, but for an international rather than domestic audience. It consists of an increase in Kazakhstan's cultural legitimacy and uses UNESCO as its main sounding board. The Kazakh state is financing significant archeological expeditions in each province, in order to document all sites that testify to the 'Kazakh past' of Kazakhstan. The objective is to demonstrate the continued occupation of the national territory by Turkic nomads who can retroactively be declared Kazakh (from the Scythes-Sakha of antiquity to the Oghuz tribes of the Middle Ages), especially in the northern regions of the country. Kazakhstan set up the rather ambitious goal of getting around thirty sites classified as Silk Road monuments on the UNESCO's World Heritage List.¹⁴ At present, the country has only two—the Mausoleum of Khoja Akhmet Yassawi and the Tamgaly petroglyphs—both situated in the south, while regions potentially at risk are located in the north and west.

Conclusions

Kazakhstan's situation encapsulates what is at stake with the Eurasian Union. It raises the question of how to maintain sovereignty in a regional integration project where one player is more powerful than the others. This is precisely where Putin's parallel between the Eurasian Union and the European Union does not work.

One can only note the subtle and balanced policy being implemented in Astana, friendly with Moscow, recognizing Russia's key status for the country, and bolstering strategic cooperation in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), all

9 "Kazakhskoi gosudarstvennosti v 2015 ispolnitsia 55 let—Nazarbaev," *Tengri News*, October 22, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kazahskoy-gosudarstvennosti-v-2015-godu-ispolnitsya-550-let--nazarbaev-263876/>.

10 "Den' nezavisimosti prazduet Kazakhstan," *Tengri News*, December 16, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/den-nezavisimosti-prazduet-kazahstan-266983/>.

11 "Tri milliarda tenge vydeliat na prazdnovanie 550-letia Kazakhskogo khansta i 20-letia ANK," *Tengri News*, November 19, 2014, <http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/milliardatenge-vyidelyat-prazdnovanie-550-letiya-kazahskogo-hanstva-20-letiya-265489/>.

12 "Serial o Kazakhskom khanstve snimut v Kazakhstane," *Tengri News*, November 4, 2014, <<http://tengrinews.kz/cinema/serial-o-kazahskom-hanstve-snimut-v-kazahstane-264593/>>.

13 "Tri seriala k 550-letiu Kazakhskom khanstve snimut v Kazakhstane," *Times.kz*, February 16, 2015, <[http://timeskz.kz/6219-](http://timeskz.kz/6219-seriala-k-550-letiyu-kazahskogo-hanstva-snimayut-v-kazakhstan.html)

[seriala-k-550-letiyu-kazahskogo-hanstva-snimayut-v-kazakhstan.html](http://timeskz.kz/6219-seriala-k-550-letiyu-kazahskogo-hanstva-snimayut-v-kazakhstan.html)>.

14 Galia Shimyrbayeva, "New Projects Unearth Kyzylorda's Ancient Past," *The Astana Times*, March 17, 2014, <<http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/03/new-projects-uneearth-kyzylordas-ancient-past/>>. See the list of archeological projects at <http://www.madenimura.kz/en/culture-legacy/excavation/region/akmola_oblast>.

while seeking to preserve its strategic autonomy. However, this has all declined in just a few months.

Moreover, Kazakhstan has found itself in the same situation as Russia. It must face an ongoing economic crisis that could impact the legitimacy of the regime, which is based on a social contract of improving the population's standards of living. Although Kazakhstan does not have to manage the vast infrastructure network

that weighs on the Russian budget, it remains marked by oil dependency, difficulties in diversifying economic capabilities, and a population that does not want to postpone the steady improvement of its well-being. The Eurasian Union project will be called to prove itself on economic terms. But the question remains of whether the bathwater of the economic crisis will carry with it the baby of the Eurasian Economic Union.

About the Author

Marlene Laruelle is Director of the Central Asia Program and Research Professor of International Affairs at IERES, George Washington University. She works on identity, nationalism and ideologies in Russia and Central Asia.

ANALYSIS

Kyrgyzstan's Membership in the Eurasian Economic Union: A Marriage of Convenience?

By Sebastien Peyrouse, Washington DC

Abstract

Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is presented as an essential step toward its development, with the government currently unable to get the state, economically and socially, back on its feet. The EEU has, however, rallied analysts and parts of the population that are critical of the economic and political risks associated to it: inflation on basic foodstuffs and goods; the possible loss of Kyrgyzstan's status as a key re-exporter of Chinese products; and increased Russian influence on Kyrgyz affairs.

On 23 December 2014, the president of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, signed a membership agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), set to come into force in May 2015. The choice of these two dates is highly symbolic: the first commemorates, give or take a couple of days, the decision to terminate the Soviet Union, the second, the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The symbolism of the agreement is supposed to indicate the definitive erasure of the dark episodes of the 20th century, as well as the beginning of a period of development and peace in the Eurasian space. For Kyrgyzstan, it is presented as an essential step toward its development, with the government currently unable to get the state, economically and socially, back on its feet. This argument, nevertheless, does not enjoy unanimous support: between the stakes for Kyrgyzstan's future and political instrumentalization, the EEU issue has rallied analysts and parts of the opposition, as well as of the wider population, that are critical of the economic and political risks associated to this union.

The EEU to the Rescue of Kyrgyzstan?

Kyrgyzstan was one of the poorest republics of the Soviet Union and remains very poor to this day. Its GDP, at only 7.2 billion dollars¹, is among the lowest in Central Asia. The economy of this small state of fewer than 6 million inhabitants essentially relies on the gold operations at the Kumtor mine (today prey to several politico-juridical imbroglios that have considerably slowed its operation), remittances (more than 500,000 Kyrgyz leave each year to go to work in Russia and Kazakhstan), and the imports of goods from China, which are then re-exported to other post-Soviet countries. Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has endured endemic social and economic problems (poverty, unemployment, failing education and health systems, etc.), which, combined with political games of predation and corruption, have led to regular social unrest, the most serious incident being that in the Fergana Valley in June 2010, which led to the deaths of several hundreds of people.

1 World Bank Data, <<http://data.worldbank.org/country/kyrgyz-republic>>.