

Kazakhstan's Youth Vision of National Identity: Then and Now

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Introduction

This paper explores the youth dimension of the nation-building in Kazakhstan and aims to reveal various dominating narratives in the Kazakh- and Russian-language audiences, both in terms of state-sponsored nation-building and youth policy efforts as well as in the societal reactions and public discourses to these efforts. What kind of national identity vision is being developed by the Kazakhstan's government and how does this vision correlate with the youth's vision of the country's identity? What does this tell us about how the Kazakhstani national identity discourse presents 'National Self' and its 'Others' and what are the age implications across generations? How can these developments over time be explained?

This study focuses on the three main aspects – a brief analysis of youth-related policy documents, analysis of the surveys results, conducted in Kazakhstan in 2005 and 2016, and of the contemporary media discourse on the youth and national identity in Kazakhstan. First, the paper provides an overview of the policy documents and programs, in which the government presents its view on the youth's role in the country. Second, this paper analyzes data of two surveys conducted in 2005 and 2016 and aims to highlight the dynamics of changes in societal perceptions of the national identity-related issues, such as interethnic relations, trust, and nationalism. The usage of two focal points allows to highlight dynamics and changes in identity issues and their perceptions. Finally, this paper incorporates media discourse analysis perceptions of the civic 'Kazakhstani' national identity in the discourse of Kazakh- and Russian-language media of Kazakhstan and highlights the divergent views on the civic nationhood of Kazakhstan in these two linguistic realms.

The main research question explored in this paper is to explore what the youth's perception of the national identity issues and narratives in Kazakhstan would be and how did it change in the last decade. The project aims to contribute to the existing discussion in the scholarship by focusing specifically on the youth's perceptions of national identity and their dynamics along with significant demographic changes, rapid urbanization process, rural-urban migration, emigration of the Slavic population and other changes.

By incorporating these different approaches, this study illustrates the complexity of the Kazakhstani supranational identity project and how this project is reflected in the state policies, media discourse and popular perceptions. By doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the Kazakhstani national identity discourse by adding the multi-level perceptions, which incorporates both the "top-down" and "bottom-up" perspectives.

Studies of the national identity issues in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet Central Asian countries expanded considerably with activation of the nation-building processes in these countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The scholarship explored in details several important areas, such as the growing 'revenge' of the nationalizing Kazakhization process, the relationship between Kazakhs and other ethnic groups living in the country, notably Russians, the role of intra-Kazakh cleavages and continuity between Soviet policies and independent Kazakhstan's approaches to the language situation (Brubaker 1996; Cummings 2006; Luong 2003; Commercio 2004; Chong 2006; Peyrouse 2008; Karin & Chebotarev 2002; Fierman 2000; Dave 2004; Oka 2000; Kolstø 1999; Jones 2010; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2011). Recent works on multiculturalism in Kazakhstan have been focusing on the state role and instruments, such as the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (Rees et al., 2017; Burkhanov and Sharipova 2014; Burkhanov 2017; Sharipova et al. 2017). Some scholarship also focused on the micro-level developments, as well as made an argument that multicultural approach of Kazakhstan remains a more of accidental choice rather than a cohesive policy (Burkhanov 2017). The scholarship covered progressively nationalist domestic policy discourse and statements,

which were never explicitly authorized but silently supported. This new public discourse included new interpretations of historical narratives about the Soviet past and Russian colonial administration (Kissane 2005), as well as manipulations with Kazakhstan's population censuses survey data in order to create an image of a more Kazakh-populated version of Kazakhstan that the linguistic and ethnic composition realities would suggest (Dave 2004). Later the scholarship also highlighted the national identity messages in the cultural environment (Isaacs 2015) and architectural design (Fauve 2015).

The literature also emphasized massive and rapid urbanization of post-independence Kazakhstan which caused significant internal migration flows of young ethnic Kazakhs from predominantly Kazakh rural areas into the more diverse and wealthy cities as a primary reason for expanding radical Kazakh nationalism (Fierman 2000). Similarly, scholars mentioned that the Kazakhstan's government inclined towards supporting ethnic Kazakh identity instead of trying to develop a more inclusive multicultural civic nationhood of Kazakhstanis. Furthermore, some studies specified that the intellectual and academic polemics in Kazakhstan followed the state discourse and policies and started supporting ethnic Kazakh nationalism through the officially approved school history narratives (Diener 2002), which are oftentimes based on Kazakh intra-ethnic tribal affiliations and genealogies (Esenova 2002). In terms of timeline, the scholarship distinguishes more explicit stages of Kazakh nationalism of the early to mid-1990s, with a gradual political mobilization, albeit limited, of the ethnic Russians. Others claim that, in contrast, Kazakh nationalist groups have been criticizing the government's policies, which in their views are inconsistent and not nationalist enough (Oka 2002).

Language policy in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is another important issue illustrating the dynamics of the national identity situation in the country. Here, the scholarship touches upon the usage and legal status of the Russian language and its role as an important communication tool in Kazakhstan. Another important implication is a gradual, although more sporadic than systematic, enforcement of a stricter Kazakh language proficiency requirements in the government's office work, in the educational sphere and everyday life (Fierman 2009, Davenel 2012), and the role of the Kazakh language in reestablishing the sense of Kazakh groupness (Fierman 2005).

The media discourse has a significant impact on the identity construction. Altheide (2000) points out that the young people's identity is more negotiated than institutionally grounded. In this sense, the media and TV industry is seen as making an important contribution to the affirmation of identities. It contributes to the definition of situations in social life and to the generalization of others. Similarly, Hamley (2001) asserts that young people make use of imagery derived from the popular media to construct their identity. However, the meanings gathered from the media are open to reshaping and refashioning and can be updated or changed.

Similarly, existing scholarship of the mass media industry in post-Soviet Central Asia tends to operate under more generic framework of comparative authoritarianism studies and to focus on the role that mass media play (or rather, are allowed to play) in modern authoritarian societies (Freedman 2009; Matveeva 2009; Krasnoboka 2010; Kartoshkina et al. 2007; Juraev 2002). Scholars of Central Asian media also addressed the restrictive environment in which media outlets have to operate, including censorship and pressure on journalists, extensive legal regulations limiting blogging and independent journalism, the lack of a functioning and competitive mass media market, limited financial resources and the dependence of journalists on the state and private sponsorship and patronage (Freedman & Shafer 2003; Allison 2006; Ferrando 2011). However, relatively little has been done to address the role of media outlets in the nation-building process, although there were some recent studies related to the perception of "self" and "other" in the Kazakhstani media discourse

(Burkhanov & Chen 2016; Collins and Bekenova forthcoming). This aspect of the media powers is especially important as the media have the capability to ‘set the agenda’ for domestic and international politics as they not only inform the audience of politically salient issues, but also influence readers’ evaluations of these issues by interpreting news in positive or negative fashion (Wanta et al. 2004; Ghanem 1997). In ethnically diverse and multilingual societies, media can also reflect different perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes that various ethnic groups possess or express about each other and thus contribute to the perception of the national identity issues by mass audiences. Kazakhstan, together with other countries of post-Soviet Central Asia, is a good case to examine the public debates on national identity being a multi-ethnic post-Soviet state in the process of nation-building with significant ethnic minorities present in the country as well as two languages that are widely used in the media and everyday life. Through analyzing the public debate on national identity policies in Kazakh and Russian-language media, I aim to highlight different views and narratives that exist in the country with regard to the nature of identity policy that should be implemented in Kazakhstan; I also seek to study the media discourse as a reaction ‘from the ground’ to the government policies and practices with national identity-related issues.

Survey-based studies on Kazakhstan’s national identity issues have been expanding in the last few years. Rees (2017) and Sharipova et al. (2017), among others, focus on the mass surveys and interviews to highlight popular perception of the national identity issues, as opposed to the earlier predominant approach in the scholarship that almost exclusively on the “top-down” state approach and narratives. This paper adds to the discussion the comparison element between surveys conducted at several time points to illustrate the dynamics of change in perception of multiculturalism and identity politics in Kazakhstan.

Methodology

This paper will use the following methodology. First, it will look at the existing government youth-related policy documents and papers with the aim to highlight the view of the government on the role of young people in the society. This would also allow and highlight what the government perceives to be as most important issues for the young people in Kazakhstan. By juxtaposing these policy priorities with the survey results and media discourse, this will highlight the relationship between the ‘top-down’ policy discourse and ‘bottom up’ perceptions from the ground.

Second, this paper will use the results of the two surveys conducted in Kazakhstan in 2005 and 2016. The AsiaBarometer survey for Kazakhstan was conducted in 2005 and this project overall includes surveys done in fourteen different countries in South and Central Asia. The Kazakhstan survey was based on face-to-face interviews with a stratified random national sample of 800 cases, performed in September-November 2005. Another source of data is an original nation-wide survey conducted among 1,600 respondents across Kazakhstan in 2016. This survey was administered in both Kazakh and Russian languages (according to interviewees’ preferences) by the local staff of the Center for Social and Political Research (CSPR) and was conducted in January 2016, covering all 16 administrative regions of Kazakhstan (14 oblasts and two major cities, Almaty and Astana). The survey included individuals aged 18 and over. The sampling procedure was designed to capture a representative sample. The data were collected using a multistage stratified sampling method. The stratification was based on territorial-administrative units and rural and urban populations. Within each stratum, primary units were selected randomly – villages and rural townships in rural areas and districts in cities. Each interviewer had a randomly assigned household to start a survey. The selection of the next household was based on a skip interval — five in cities and three in towns and villages.

Once a household had been identified, a respondent was chosen based on his or her most recent or next birthday.

While the two surveys used are not completely identical, they both include multiple similar questions related to the issues of national identity, citizenship, interethnic relations, perceptions of nationalism and language usage. Usage of the two datasets collected in 2005 and 2016 will permit to trace changes and dynamics in the national identity vision, especially focusing on the youth's perception, which both datasets allow to do. With the available survey data, this paper will focus on a number of factors which relate to the expression of national identity, ethnic solidarity and trust, nationalism and patriotism sentiments among the young people as well as societal roles expected to be played by the youth and intergenerational relationship.

While this paper does not utilize a statistical model, it allows hypothesizing that certain perceptions and factors related to the age and ethnic identity will be important for triggering nationalist sentiments among people, and hence, affect the national identity perceptions in the country. One of these factors would be the level of trust to the fellow group members. Overall, scholars agree that trust is an important element for cooperation and, thus, collective identity. People are more likely to trust each other if they belong to the same ethnic group. In surveys done in 2005 and 2016, the majority of ethnic Kazakhs have a clear self-identification with other Kazakhs (Sharipova et al. 2017). However, as was mentioned earlier, in Kazakhstan, the multiethnicity rhetoric from the government has to some extent contributed to the formation of a civic identity. Thus, it is possible to hypothesize that a high level of ethnic intragroup trust promotes ethnic-nationalist sentiments in Kazakhstan and this is even more the case with the younger audience.

Second, the data would also allow (albeit with limitations) to test the impact of various sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, income, place of residence (rural vs. urban areas), and education on national identity issues and their changes between 2005 and 2016 surveys. According to the existing scholarship, higher levels of nationalism are expected in rural areas, lower educated people, and lower income citizens (Scheepers et al. 2002; Hjern and Schnabel 2010). Since Kazakhstan had experienced a massive internal migration from predominantly Kazakh-populated rural areas to more ethnically diverse urban communities, combined with Slavic youth's emigration to Russia, a significant change in the perception of the national identity narrative can be expected.

Kazakhstan's Youth Policy

For almost entire post-1991 period of Kazakhstan's history, government's commitment to the internationalist rhetoric and inter-ethnic friendship of the peoples living in the country has been a signature feature of domestic policies and a point of pride of the new regime. The youth policy in general had a strong sentiment of the Soviet legacy, where the pioneer and Komsomol were supposed to train and indoctrinate the youth into the mainstream values of the society.

The main document regulating youth policy in Kazakhstan is the Law "On State Youth Policy" (2004); the state also has adopted several specific policy programs and doctrines, such as the "Program for Youth Policy for 2005-2007", "State Program of Patriotic Education of Citizens of Kazakhstan for 2006-2008", "Concept of the State Youth Policy till 2020: Path to the Future". All these documents outline government's view of the youth and its role in the society, as well as what government perceives to be as most important issues for the youth.

The Law “On State Youth Policy” declares that the main goal of the youth policy is “creating socio-economic, legal conditions for spiritual, cultural, educational, professional development of youth” (Art. 3). The state also commits to provide certain guarantees in the labor conditions, housing issues and state support for youth entrepreneurship (Art.2). Among those guarantees, the state specifically commits to provide a stipend for those attending universities on the state education grant (e.g. students attend university on a tuition-free basis and receive a monthly stipend), as well as to allocate funds for certain training programs aiming at easier integration to the labor market. Interestingly, the Law defines ‘youth’ as between 14-29 years of age; ‘young family’ is defined where both spouses are under 29 years of age. In terms of national identity, although the Law itself does not mention any specific ethnic group, it also establishes a specific quota system for university admissions for the “rural youth”, which is mostly composed of the ethnic Kazakhs.

The issue of the “rural youth” is given a special and sizeable attention in Kazakhstan’s youth-related policy documents, which demonstrates it’s the salience of the issue for domestic policy-making. Kazakhstan inherited a sizeable rural population, many of whom were affected by the socio-economic issues and lack of opportunities in rural areas, limited access to quality education and healthcare and lower living standards. The government launched a special program called “Rural Youth” in 2010-2011, specifically aiming at solving social issues affecting the rural youth. One of the most ambitious initiatives within this policy framework was the program called “With Diploma to the Village”. Under this program, recent university graduates (especially teachers and doctors) were encouraged to come work to the rural areas and were given some financial incentives, such as free housing, low interest mortgage loans and other financial benefits. According to the governmental statistics, about 16,000 people joined this program and relocated to the rural areas, most of whom were teachers and doctors. Later, however, there were some reports about these employees leaving the villages they were assigned to and relocating back to cities, even at risk of losing all the financial benefits given to them.

Among other nation-wide and youth-oriented initiatives there was a “Zhasyl Yel” (Green State) program, mostly inspired by the environmental discourse. Within this program, the youth (mostly high school students) were encouraged to plant trees and participate in the state-funded environmental programs across the country. The “Youth Cadre Reserve” was another initiative aiming at involving talented youth into the future public service corps, with a nation-wide competition and selection of 100 candidates. There is limited information, however, on whether or not the selected candidates were given jobs in public service.

Perhaps, the most publicized youth-related government program in Kazakhstan is the Bolashak scholarship system. Launched during the first years of independence, this program had sponsored undergraduate, Master and doctoral studies of thousands of Kazakhstani students across variety of disciplines and countries. Some of the Bolashak graduates have taken prominent positions in the political hierarchy, including Cabinet-level appointments and mayor of Almaty.

Surveys Results and Descriptive Statistics

In this section, I will discuss the results of two surveys, conducted in Kazakhstan in 2005 and 2016. As mentioned above, the two surveys are not identical, yet they both include multiple similar questions related to the issues of national identity, citizenship, interethnic relations and language usage. Usage of the two datasets collected in 2005 and 2016 will permit to trace changes and dynamics in the national identity vision, especially focusing on the youth’s perception.

In terms of identity-related questions, the AsiaBarometer survey included several questions which touched upon respondents’ attachment to the country, patriotic sentiments and inter-generational relationships. One question, for instance, asked respondents what future they would wish to their sons and daughters – and the results clearly demonstrated a more traditional view on the gender roles in the Kazakhstani society at that time. For instance, for their sons, 35.5% of respondents wanted to be “respected by masses”, while “being very wealthy” and being more “proficient in profession” than their parents also scored fairly high, with 25% and 23.8% respectively. There was also a strong emphasis on family values was also highlighted – answers such as “caring about family” scored 31.2% and being “a loving and charitable person” received a fairly high response rate (32.2%) (Fig. 1).

Results in other Central Asian countries were similar, but there were some notable differences. Survey results in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also highlighted ‘being respected by the masses’ (39.6% and 40.8% respectively) and being “caring about family” (32.2% and 32.1% respectively), while in Turkmenistan top results were “being very wealthy” (55.6%) and “finding a good marriage partner” (27.1%). In Tajikistan, most respondents also picked ‘being very wealthy’ (36.4%) and “being a great scholar” (35.5%).

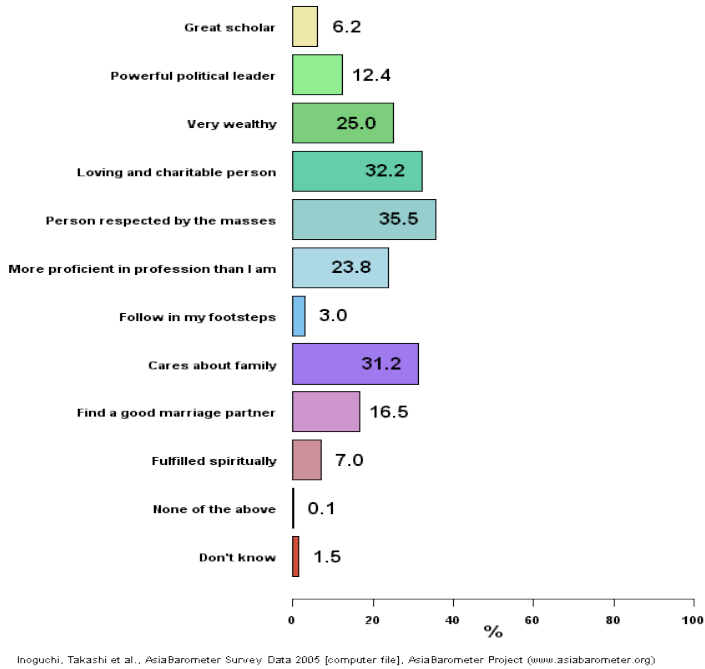


Figure 1.

However, in a similar question about the desirable future for their daughters, 63.5% of respondents in Kazakhstan chose “finding a good marriage partner” (Figure 2), which is consistent with the results of other Central Asian countries – Uzbekistan (76.6%), Kyrgyzstan (63.4%), Turkmenistan (54%), and Tajikistan (71.9%). Interestingly, in some other Asian societies, becoming “a great scholar” was a more desired path for daughters. For instance, this response scored 42.1% in India, 53.9% in Afghanistan, 62.6% in Bangladesh and 66.9% in Nepal, while in Central Asian countries this option was chosen by much smaller number of respondents, scoring 0% in Turkmenistan, 2.1% in Uzbekistan, 2.4% in Kazakhstan, and 6.5% in Kyrgyzstan. This certainly implies a much more conservative view on the traditional gender roles in Central Asia. At the same time, it is worth noting that this is the view of the older generation (mostly Soviet-born) on youth and the actual aspiration of youth may also be quite different.

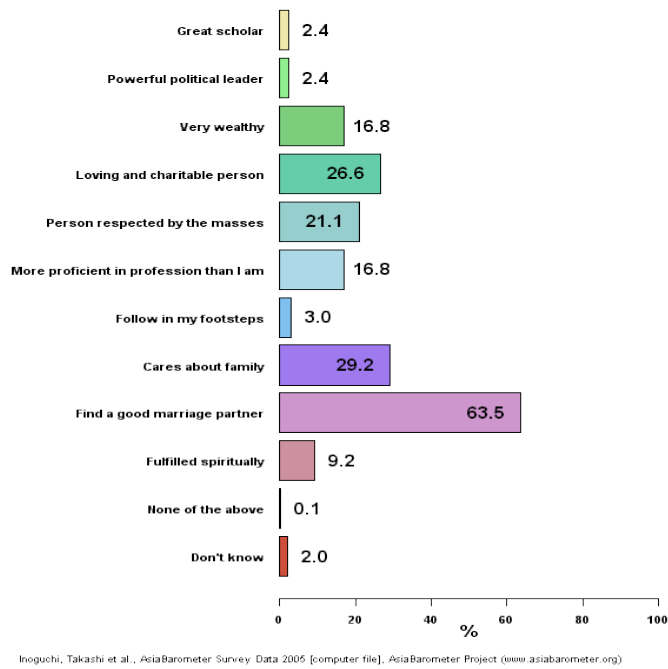


Figure 2.

In terms of national identity, the 2005 survey clearly demonstrated a strong association with an ethnic identity marker in Central Asia (Figure 3). For instance, in response to the question “Do you think of yourself as being [YOUR COUNTRY'S PEOPLE], or do you not think of yourself in this way?”, most responses in Kazakhstan highlighted ethnic identity, with 46.9% identifying as Kazakhs and 33.4% as Russians. This is again consistent with other Central Asian countries, as similar results were demonstrated in Kyrgyzstan (66.9% Kyrgyz, 11.9% Russians, and 9.9% Uzbek), Uzbekistan (59.8% Uzbeks, 11.1% Russians and 5.6% Tatars). The 2016 survey results, in contrast, demonstrate that the level of civic identity or association with citizenship had clearly increased since 2005. In this survey, 74.30% respondents agreed that “Kazakhstani” would be an appropriate identity marker for people in Kazakhstan (Figure 4).

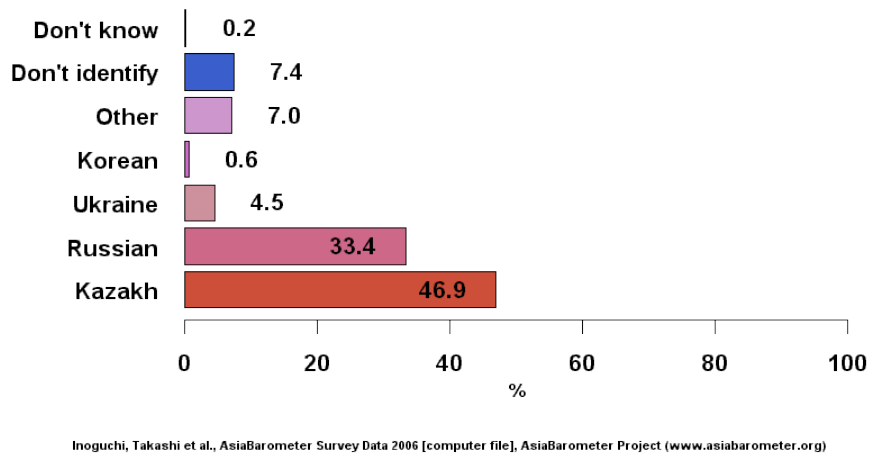


Figure 3.

Kazakhstani	Mostly disagree	3.40%
	Neutral	15.90%
	Mostly agree	74.30%
	No answer	6.40%
Kazakhs	Mostly disagree	50.60%
	Neutral	19.10%
	Mostly agree	18.30%
	No answer	12.00%

Figure 4.

At the same time, in a survey conducted by a private sociological center in Kazakhstan in 2004 (Ivanov 2017), 57% of respondents claimed to identify themselves as citizens of Kazakhstan, 26% highlighted belonging to a local community, and only 4.9% stated that ethnic identity would be the primary identity marker for them (Fig. 5). While the methodology and sampling of this survey are not entirely clear, this still provides interesting data, with a rather high number of people preferring “civic” identity, or even highlighting a global aspect, calling themselves “citizens of the world.” One potential explanation could be that the respondent base consisted of a younger, urban audience.

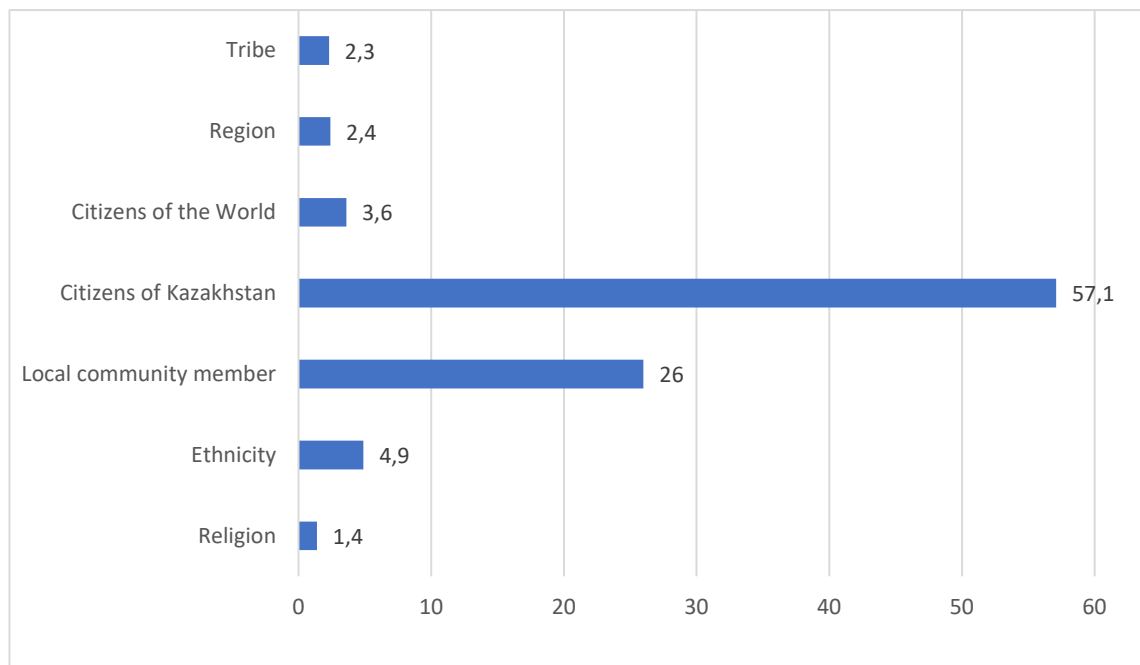


Figure 5.

Another youth-related question was asking what qualities children should be encouraged to learn at home. Most respondents stated that “honesty” and “respect for senior persons” were the most desirable qualities with 55% and 49.0% of respondents respectively, while “independence” score only 21.1%, which is in line with more traditional vision of societal roles.

Similarly, in terms of national pride and patriotism, the 2005 AsiaBarometer survey results in Kazakhstan showed that 50.9% of respondents stated that they were “very proud” of their country and 34.8% were “somewhat proud”. Interestingly, in 2005 survey, 74.4% of respondents claimed they cannot recite the national anthem by heart, while only 23% were able to do so. It is worth noting, however, that in 2005, the country still had the first post-independence national anthem, which was later replaced with a more popular, yet modified, song “My Kazakhstan”.

In 2016 survey, the pride in Kazakhstan was confirmed as almost 60% agreed that they would want to be citizens of Kazakhstan rather than any other country and about 30% opted for ‘rather agree’ (Figure 6). Also, 86.3% of respondents believe that Kazakhstan is better than any other country in the world and 73.5% think that people should support their country even if it does something wrong. It shows that a high number of people tend to idealize Kazakhstan and perceive it as one of the best countries to live in and be a citizen of.

I'd rather be a citizen of Kazakhstan, than of any other country	Disagree	2.20%
	Rather disagree	4.90%
	Rather agree	30.60%
	Agree	59.40%
	No answer	2.90%
When Kazakhstan's athletes are successful, it makes me feel proud	Disagree	0.30%
	Rather disagree	2.10%
	Rather agree	31.30%
	Agree	63.10%
	No answer	3.10%
People must support their country, even if it is doing something wrong	Disagree	5.30%
	Rather disagree	16.90%
	Rather agree	31.30%
	Agree	42.20%
	No answer	4.40%

Figure 6.

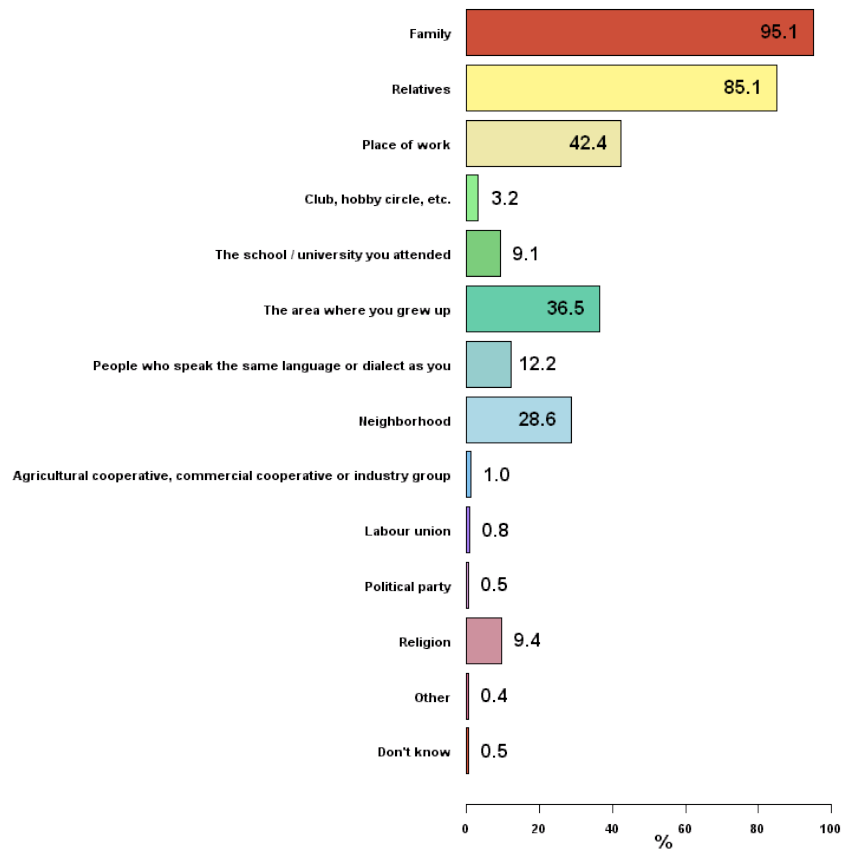
In other words, civic nationalist sentiments among the population seem to be very high. This is perhaps not a surprise, keeping in mind Kazakhstan’s relatively good economic performance and other social indicators. However, there are some important differences across ethnic lines. More ethnic

Kazakhs (93.9%) than ethnic Russians (68%) agreed that “Kazakhstan is better than other countries”. Similarly, regional differences coincide with ethnic distribution. In the northern Kazakhstan, populated largely by ethnic Russians, only 55.7% respondents agreed with this statement whereas in the south and west of the country, inhabited mostly by ethnic Kazakhs, 100% of respondents answered positively to the statement.

In the same vein, religion scored a relatively small importance for an identity in Kazakhstan in both 2005 and 2016, albeit with some variations. In AsiaBarometer survey of 2005, 32.5% of respondents stated that it is not more important than “other components of identity” and only 6.8% said religion was more important than ethnicity. In 2016 survey, more than 40% stated that practicing Islam was either “completely unimportant” or “rather unimportant” for Kazakhstani identity. The 2005 survey also highlighted a broader “transnational identity” aspect. Respondents were asked if they do identify themselves with a broader group – 33.5% stated that they identified with “Asian”, but most (50.5%) “don’t identify” with a broader transnational group.

In terms of Kazakh language proficiency, in the 2016 survey 77.9% of respondents agreed that every citizen of Kazakhstan should master Kazakh language. Significant differences, however, are again observed across ethnic groups. More Kazakhs (87.3%) would agree that every citizen should know Kazakh language, whereas only 55.6% Russians agree with this statement. Although many ethnic Russians (and some Russian-speaking urban Kazakhs) are still not at ease to learn the state language, this number is quite high. It shows that a significant part of ethnic Russians had internalized the idea that they should know and learn Kazakh language. There are also differences in answers in terms of toponyms: 58.2% respondents agreed that “Streets and cities should be given Kazakh names”, while 34% of respondents disagreed. This clearly demonstrates that while there is a considerable portion of the population that does not want the *kazakhization* of toponyms, the majority does support attribution of Kazakh names. The differences in answers are particularly high across ethnicities – 65% of Russian respondents disagree with this statement, whereas only 21% of Kazakhs disagree. Indeed, each time when an issue of renaming northern cities or city streets is raised, there are heated debates and strong resistance from the part of Slavic population, for whom those toponyms present an important symbolic marker. Similarly, there is a variation in terms of the Kazakh language usage in state agencies and public service. On the statement that all state services should be provided exclusively in Kazakh language, 59.2% of respondents disagreed while 36.4% agreed. The differences were again particularly high between ethnic groups – 49.7% of ethnic Kazakhs agreed while only 9.7% of Russian respondents agreed with this statement. As it was expected, the lowest percent of those who disagreed are located in Atyrau and Qyzylorda oblasts that are inhabited largely by ethnic Kazakhs. At the same time, the highest percentages of those who disagreed that state services should be provided exclusively in Kazakh, were in the North and North-East oblasts – 78.6% and 83.3% respectively.

The 2005 survey does not measure language proficiency but it adds another important nuance to the discussion – one of the questions asked what social circle(s) would be more important to the respondents (Figure 7). Most people choose family (95.1%) relatives (85.1%), and people who grew up in the same place (36.5%), while ‘people who speak the same language as you’ only scored 12.2%.



Inoguchi, Takashi et al., AsiaBarometer Survey Data 2005 [computer file], AsiaBarometer Project (www.asiabarometer.org)

Figure 7.

In the 2016 survey, age did not seem to contribute to ethnic nationalism in Kazakhstan. However, it would be important to look at the signs of some of the variables. The survey results show that the younger people are more likely to express ethnic nationalism than the older generation. It is an interesting fact that does not correspond to the findings of previous scholarship. It is possible to explain this by the fact that the older generation in Kazakhstan grew up in the Soviet period when the idea of internationalism was promoted. Many Kazakhs were Russified, and thus, today we observe that Kazakhs have a great deal in common with Russians. At the same time, younger generation that was born in the post-independence period might hold views different from older people when it comes to the Kazakh identity and language, as they became important issues for the national identification of the country. Trust in political institutions is not statistically significant but the sign goes in the predicted direction. The less people trust in political institutions, the more they endorse ethno-nationalist sentiments. Similarly, income and education have signs in predicted directions found in previous research.

The comparison between 2005 and 2016 surveys had demonstrated some shifts in the perceptions of national identity. There is certainly a trend towards lesser importance of ethnic markers and greater importance of civic identity of ‘Kazakhstanis’ in 2016 compared to 2005. At the same time, the 2005 survey results highlight a more traditional understanding of the gender roles – young people were expected to fulfill the roles that were traditionally associated with genders, e.g. finding a right marriage partner for women and having more ambitious career aspirations for men. The 2016 survey did not include such questions, but it had other signs of societal shifts – the youth becomes less dependent on traditional roles and embraces a more inclusive framework.

Discussion of the Youth in the media environment

In this section, I seek to highlight how the discourses in the Kazakh and Russian-language media would portray the role of youth in contemporary Kazakhstani society and what are the main issues that the youth has to deal with. The articles selected for analysis in this study were printed in the Kazakh and Russian-language media outlets, primarily newspapers and some online news portals between August 2017 and August 2018. They present a variety of genres, including interviews, news reports, reportages, open letters, op-ed columns, editorials, and readers' letters. The Kazakh media especially tends to include more interpretative articles with rather strong opinions rather than just representing news in a neutral tone.

The media discourse on the youth issues and identity in Kazakhstan highlighted various understandings of the role of identity matters as well as inter-generational relations in Kazakhstan. For instance, Kazakh press tends to highlight the traditional role of the older generation as 'bearers of wisdom' and young generation as having to follow the guidance of the elderly.

In some occasions, Kazakh press brings up the issue of the young ethnic Kazakhs leaving the country as they were unable to find jobs in Kazakhstan. A prominent movie producer Yermek Tursunov stated however, that he sees nothing wrong with people leaving Kazakhstan as they are looking for something new:

Most of those leaving Kazakhstan are those who have grown up in that state. They strive for innovation, look for opportunities... The problem is not that they leave – the problem is are they coming back? This is very questionable. I do not mind that our youth leaves the country to improve their professionalism. Only those young professionals would come back to their homeland and serve the future of their country. I have been living abroad for ten years, and then I came back. (Qamshy.kz, 09/07/2018).

The article acknowledges that there's a certain degree of disappointment that many of the young Kazakhs face when they notice a huge discrepancy between 'Kazakhstan' that is being shown on TV and 'Kazakhstan' they live in. This sentiment of disappointment was also highlighted in an interview of the Minister of Civil Society Mr. Nurlan Yermekbayev. He stated that up to 80 percent of the radical Islamic organizations are composed of the young people who were unable to find jobs or were otherwise affected by poor economic conditions (Qamshy.kz 12/10/2017). Similarly, in another article, the news portal reports about a research project done by the Institute of World Economy and Politics in cooperation with Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The results of this project highlighted that the main potential conflict zones in Kazakhstan are primarily concentrated in the Southern regions of the country and are mostly associated with socio-economic issues. High birthrate, regular migration, and frequent changes in the ethnic composition of the population led to the conflicts in Maktaaral, Sairam and Saryagash districts of South Kazakhstan oblast. High tension in these areas is due to shortage of workplaces, economic niches and other resources, including pastures, agricultural lands, water sources:

Our study shows that the young people are the driving force behind interethnic conflicts. They are susceptible to ethno-mobilization slogans, and also easily access active violence (Qamshy.kz, 19.10.2017)

Popular news portal Tengrinews.kz also reported about talented youth leaving Kazakhstan and inquired about the reasons why they leave. The portal narrated that, according to the government statistics, in 2018 about 7,000 people left Kazakhstan, with many moving to Russia, Germany and the United States. The article added that several thousands of talented young people from Kazakhstan already live and work abroad, including offices of the Internet giants, such as Google, Facebook and Twitter:

Kazakhstan needs to reduce the mass flow of educated citizens abroad. There are those who are interested in “Bolashak” programs and they do not want to return to the country and work for the future of their homeland. Plus, there are young people who move to Russia and Europe after taking the high school test every year (25.05.2018)

The article also narrates about corruption that demotivates young people to stay in the country:

Obviously, everybody wants to live in a comfortable environment. Under the concept of “well-being” there are several conditions, such as respect for human rights and the environment's convenience. According to these criteria, Kazakhstani people are more likely to compare their homeland with Europe, Australia, and North America. Up to 70 percent of young people are skeptical about the opportunities in their homeland, the “bright future” that is promised.

A competing narrative can also be found in the Kazakh-language discourse – the proponents of this narrative criticize the fact that so many young Kazakhstanis are going abroad for educational purposes and suggest establishing some restrictive regulations, based on the example of other countries (without specifying where they received such information):

The Kazakhstani youth has a strong desire to pursue education in a foreign country, and this aspect of the younger generation is supported by the state. But in other countries, there are certain restrictions – for example, in China there is a limit of six months or one year limit for education abroad. Japan, with its population of more than 120 million, also allows only 15 citizens to study abroad annually. What is the secret of this? Now you can meet Kazakhstani people who are studying anywhere in the world. How many young people educated in foreign countries are bringing new ideas and news to Kazakhstan? Are all of them working for the benefit of our country?

The theme of patriotism (or lack thereof) has also been quite prevalent in the public discourse. The traditional view that is quite predominant is that the state should endorse and teach an approved form of patriotism among the youth. For instance, in an article called “The Goal of State Youth Policy – Patriotic Education of the Youth” (Qamshy.kz, 31/05/2018), the news portal argues that:

Patriotic upbringing in a developing country is not merely a creative process. It is also a struggle for youth, against crime and drug addiction, alcoholism and extremism. The aim of the patriotic education program for citizens is to educate young people for their patriotic consciousness, their sense of pride for their country, and their willingness to fulfill their civil duty and constitutional obligations to protect the interests of the Motherland.

Modernity and traditions is another interesting topic that appears quite often. For instance, Ana Tili newspaper narrates about a reality TV show being broadcasted on one of Kazakhstan’s TV channels, in which the relationships between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are highlighted:

Looking at the development of Kazakh traditional family values so far, there are a lot of things to say. First, we would like to talk about changes in respecting family members, dignity. We talk about the “globalization”, but it is true that in today’s families there is a lack of respect between a father and a child, the wife and the elderly, the elder brother and sister. Of course, it is clear that this TV program’s goal is to a spectator a “show”. But do we need such “shows”? Through such shows, do not we break the tradition of the younger generation's family values? What is its educational meaning?

Implications and Concluding Remarks

Most of the scholarship of national identity in post-Soviet Central Asia had focused on the governmental policies and societal reactions. Relatively few studies have been dedicated to the issue of youth and their role in the new identity discourse. This paper presents several lines upon which the debates around youth and national identity debates are evolving in Kazakhstan.

First, there is certainly a broader shift towards more civic understanding of national identity and lesser prevalence of the ethnic markers. Yet, in some cases, it is possible to see the shift towards intra-ethnic divisions (e.g. Russian and Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs, for example). This is further demonstrated by the governmental policies to provide more opportunities to the rural youth, as well as by the discussions in the press and pop culture. The rural vs urban division seems to be getting more and more coverage and remains one of the main identity challenges for Kazakhstan. This division remains very much visible in the media debates and popular culture. This does not refer as much to the ethnic relations or citizenship, but more towards the intra-Kazakh debates between Russian-speaking urban Kazakhs and growing number of Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs. As some observers put it, the show makers make an attempt to reconsolidate the divided Kazakh ethnos.

Second, in terms of policy, the government seems to be operating in a Soviet ‘path dependency’ legacy approach when it comes to the youth policy. There is a substantial amount of the state-driven initiatives that are given and offered to the youth; yet, the government is avoiding any potential discourse of young political activism, associations and initiatives.

Third, a broader ‘traditionalism vs modernity’ debate seems to be getting more and more prevalence in the youth-related discussions in Kazakhstan. Substantial narratives in the media and surveys highlight the conflict between more traditional views of inter-generational relationships, gender roles and family values versus a more open and globalized view. As many other transitional societies, Kazakhstan had experienced a dramatic change in the way of life within last few decades, many of which put a challenge for traditional understanding of youth role.

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