

Domesticating elite education: Raising patriots and educating Kazakhstan's future

Natalie Koch

Department of Geography

The Maxwell School

Syracuse University

144 Eggers Hall

Syracuse, NY 13210

nkoch@maxwell.syr.edu

+ 1 315-443-2605

Abstract. In Fall 2010, Nazarbayev University (NU) opened its doors to its first class of students. Named for Kazakhstan's only president since 1991, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the university is just one nation-building project among many in the development of the country's new capital city, Astana. Using interviews and focus group data, this article traces the establishment of NU and its relationship to the Nazarbayev regime's other major education program, the Bolashak international scholarship program. This study considers the subject-forming effect of material and rhetorical practices surrounding these two programs, illustrating how they underpin the paternalist state-society relations that have characterized post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Keywords: practices, higher education, nationalism, soft authoritarianism, qualitative methods, Kazakhstan

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Introduction

In one of his yearly speeches, President Nursultan Nazarbayev introduced a new dimension to his plans for developing Kazakhstan's new capital city, Astana, into 'a city of modern international standards and one of the largest centres of international interaction in Eurasia' (Nazarbayev 2006). This was to be the establishment of a 'prestigious international university to create a unique academic environment' (Nazarbayev 2006). Foreign Ministry spokesman Yerzhan N. Ashykbayev noted that the new university was intended to become 'an Oxford or Harvard of Central Asia' (Myers 2006). Four years later in Fall 2010, this institution opened its doors to its first class of 486 undergraduate students, under the name of 'Nursultan Nazarbayev University' (hereafter 'NU'). That the library had no books on its shelves, that there were no complete science labs, and that the newly-erected walls were already cracking – was no matter.¹ The university was opened to great fanfare and with a delightfully blunt injunction to prospective students from Nazarbayev: 'Young people should try to enroll in this university. I have agreed to give my name to it, so you should not fail me' (RFE/RL 2010).

In this chapter, I consider the role of this new university in Kazakhstan's shifting higher education scene, as well as the government-funded international scholarship program 'Bolashak' (meaning 'future' in Kazakh). I interrogate these programs as part of the government's nation-building efforts, which have been fundamental to legitimating the country's 'soft authoritarian' state-society relations. While scholars have variably characterized Kazakhstan's contemporary political system (e.g. Adams and Rustemova 2009; Cummings 2005; Isaacs 2010; Junisbai 2010; Peyrouse 2012; Schatz and Maltseva 2012), I prefer Ed Schatz's application of 'soft authoritarianism,' i.e. a system in which the government relies less on 'naked coercion' or force, and is more 'rationed' than in its hard authoritarian counterparts (Schatz 2008; Schatz and Maltseva 2012, 46).

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan's government has been headed by one man: Nursultan Nazarbayev. Under his control, the country has never had free or fair elections, there is no free press, no due process, bribery and nepotism are rampant, and opposition groups are systematically persecuted. Despite all this, among large segments of the population, Nazarbayev is revered as the benevolent 'father of the nation' ('Kazakhstan's Atatürk' as some regime mouthpieces would have it; Koch 2013b; see also Isaacs 2010; Kucera 2011), and the institution of the presidency has consistently held high public approval ratings (IRI 2011).² In large part, this is attributable to the extensive 'positive' nationalist measures initiated by the regime. That is, under Nazarbayev's influence, the government has prioritized certain nation-building strategies that present the state as a magnanimous force. In particular, this is embodied in the Astana capital city development project, which has figured centrally in the efforts to 'refashion' Kazakhstan as a modern and forward-looking state. Elsewhere, I have argued that Schatz's (2009) explication of the soft authoritarian 'toolkit' – which focuses on what elites do – can usefully be supplemented with a consideration of the relationship between elites and the citizenry (Koch 2013a). Specifically, I argue that an essential element of the soft authoritarian toolkit is that the leadership sets in motion an effective nation-building project, which not only works to naturalize the very existence of the national state but also – and here this is specific to the *soft* authoritarian regime – inculcates the citizens with a degree of gratitude toward the 'benevolent' state (Koch 2013a, 43).

¹ This was still the case during my most recent visit, in July 2011.

² Although the exact usefulness of public opinion surveys is debatable in any discursively 'closed' setting, the results from the International Republican Institute's (2011) large-sample (n= 1521) survey in Kazakhstan are enlightening. To the question, 'Some people have called for the resignation of President Nazarbayev. Do you think that he should resign or not?', 10 per cent of those surveyed thought he should, whereas 81 per cent thought he should not (IRI 2011, 27). To the question, 'do you support or oppose President Nazarbayev's re-election to another term as president?', 11 per cent opposed, while 75 per cent supported his re-election (IRI 2011, 38). The survey results show that the office of the president is consistently ranked as the institution with the highest favourable public opinion (IRI 2011, 45), and the February 2011 results indicated a 91 per cent approval rating for Nazarbayev, up from a consistent range in the low- to mid-80s in previous years (IRI 2011, 46).

Scholars have long pointed to the central role of education in the re/production of nationalist attachments and thus, national selves (Billig 1995; Ersanlı 2002; Herb 2004; Hobsbawm 1994; Kaiser 2002; Mitchell 1988; Paasi 1996). So although nation-building strategies may be initiated by elites or ‘ethno-political entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker 2004), nationalist projects rapidly become a broader social force as they take on meaning and material significance for ordinary people, for whom they become instrumental to performing and reasoning about one’s self and one’s role in the world (Billig 1995; Brubaker 2004). In this chapter, I take up this volume’s concern with the micro-politics of nationalism to illustrate some of the ways in which nationalist projects and discourses have been implicated in the formation of new modes of subjectivity and perceptions of the national self in Kazakhstan, and what implications this has for the rearrangement of practices of government and power relations in the era of independence. Just one dimension of the Nazarbayev regime’s nation-building toolkit, I present the case of higher education programs – specifically the new Nazarbayev University and the ‘Bolashak’ international scholarship program.

As part of a broader state- and nation-building project in Kazakhstan, the higher education polices operate on the basis of and reproduce various geopolitical imaginaries about the ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic,’ and Kazakhstan’s ‘place in the world.’ This approach thus complicates the bounded notion of the ‘national,’ insofar as these policies are explicitly about nation-building, but emphatically draw upon the ‘foreign’ as a source of prestige. The motivating agendas are clearly designed for this nationalist end of building up the idea of and attachment to the national ‘homeland,’ but they are also tied to broader attention to projecting a positive image of Kazakhstan internationally. In this geopolitical project, Kazakhstan’s new capital, Astana, figures centrally. Government education programs there have a privileged place: elites claim to be working to shape the city as the academic capital of Kazakhstan, as if taking seriously Le Maître’s vision of an ideal capital city, which is to be ‘the site of academies, since they must give birth to the sciences and truth that is to be disseminated in the rest of the country’ (Foucault 2007, 14). The official descriptions of NU, for example, consistently highlight the university’s conformity to ‘international’ standards (NU 2011b, 2011c) (effectively meaning those of elite Western universities), whereas was initially conceived as an essential tool to educating a new generation in the language and know-how required to participate in the country’s newly-‘internationalized’ political economy. The articulation (discursively and materially) of both these projects exemplify a broader trend in Kazakhstan’s contemporary nation-building projects, which is what I will call an effort to ‘domesticate the foreign’ (for a related discussion, see Schatz 2008).

Informed by a loosely ‘postmodern,’ practice-centred approach to discourse analysis, my data are drawn from fieldwork conducted between 2009-2011, as part of a larger study on Astana and political geographic transformations in Kazakhstan since 1991. Specifically, I employed formal and informal interviews (n ≈ 150), focus groups (5 groups, n=36), participant observation, and textual analysis. While the focus groups were conducted in October 2010, the bulk of the interview data presented here is from July-August 2011. Over the course of many hours, I conducted interviews with variously ranked officials and administrators working at NU and the Centre for International Programs (CIP).³ In my analysis here, I emphasize how the various actors – ordinary citizens and elites alike – are implicated in the nationalist educational initiatives by the sheer necessity of working with the policies and discourses set in motion by the country’s planners. By explicitly attending to the specific practices by which these actors have worked with the two nationalist educational initiatives (NU and Bolashak), this chapter moves beyond the early work on nationalism and education, which often (if implicitly) treats state education policy as a top-down matter. By contrast, the practice-centred approach adopted here accords more agency to the ordinary citizens, while also stripping the ‘state’ and its policy-makers of the aura of coherence that they are (still)

³ I have chosen to make all their comments anonymous, out of consideration for their well-being. What they discussed with me may not have seemed politically sensitive to them, but when put together with other data I have collected, I have concluded that it is. Although it would be preferable to provide sources to allow for independent verification, I prioritize the safety of my informants in my decision to keep them anonymous. Naturally, this introduces the issue of ‘reliability,’ but my role as author is to assure that I only present those data, which I reasonably believe to be accurate. Lastly, out of consideration for my on-going research in Kazakhstan, I too must limit some of the data presented here.

so commonly accorded (Foucault 2007; Mitchell 2002). As I strive to illustrate, both calculated and spontaneous practices, together with heterogeneous material forces, form a field of power relations, which constrains how people relate to an idea and how they work with it once it has ‘arrived.’

Contested ground: Developing Nazarbayev University, eliminating Bolashak

The effort to establish NU as an institution is inarguably a nationalist project; among the university’s seven ‘guiding principles’ identified on its website is ‘Love of Country.’ This is defined as serving ‘the good of Kazakhstani society in order to build a modern prospering state’ (NU 2013). The avenue for this prosperity is Science: the institution was envisioned as a technical university from the beginning. It has planned to have degree programs in engineering, natural sciences, and medicine, and is supposed to eventually accommodate 20,000 students and teachers (RFE/RL 2010). The specialties offered are said to be ‘determined by the priorities of the Kazakh economy,’ so as to ‘prepare the best technical and engineering specialists for the industries already developed in Kazakhstan.’ (NU 2011a). Though we can see a link with the ‘hard sciences,’ the rhetoric about ‘priorities’ of the state’s economy are left rather nebulous. Although this ambiguity may or may not merely reflect a lack of critical vision, it is important because it opens the door for wildly differing interpretations of what this could mean. Indeed, the discursive and material resources opened up by the NU project have been a key site of political contest in the reconfiguration of Kazakhstan’s higher education environment in recent years.

When Nazarbayev announced his plans to establish a new university in Astana in 2006, the Ministry of Education was put in charge of the project. All seemed to be going smoothly, but not long before the university was set to open, in mid-2010, someone in Nazarbayev’s inner circle informed him that the project was going ‘all wrong.’ Nazarbayev then commissioned the ‘National Analytical Centre’ to conduct an investigation. This ‘centre’ is a research unit under the office of the Prime Minister, then Karim Massimov, and it is now based on the premises of NU (although it is not ‘part of’ the university). Under Massimov’s direction, the National Analytical Centre subsequently produced a report for Nazarbayev, in which they suggested a new vision and strategy.⁴ Nazarbayev then agreed to the centre’s proposed changes, calling for the establishment a new entity, the ‘Project Management Team,’ to take over the entire university project and develop and implement a new strategy. The team was established as a joint-stock company, the JSC ‘New University of Astana,’ which took control in August 2010.

The JSC was officially established as a public organization, but it technically operated under the Prime Minister’s office. My informants were uncharacteristically murky about who actually controls the decision-making about the university, ostensibly because the NU JSC’s Board of Trustees structure was transitioning to a new structure. I was, however, given some ‘dated’ documents, which indicated Board’s first iteration. It was a perfect picture of the who’s-who list of elites then in Nazarbayev’s circle, such as its Chair, Karim Massimov (then Prime Minister, now Head of the Presidential Administration), the Deputy Prime Minister, the Corporate Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Office, the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, Assistant to the President, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Education and Science; the Mayor of Astana, the CEO of the ‘Samruk-Kazyna’ National Welfare Fund, and the founder of Sembol Construction Fettah Tamince (NU Strategy 2009, 12). As of March 2013, Massimov is still the Chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Performing patronage in elite power politics appears connected to who is given certain projects to control, visible, for example, in how the Prime Minister’s office apparently colonized the new university. Controlling such high-profile projects is not only about currying favour with Nazarbayev; whoever

⁴ I could only obtain a copy of the August 2009 strategy, ‘Nursultan Nazarbayev University Development Strategy’ (hereafter cited as ‘NU Strategy’). I was told that this is because the ‘new’ strategy has not been written yet, but that it would be posted online soon. As of March 2013, the full text is not available on the NU website, but it does list the following strategic goals: ‘1) to establish a research university, and enter the rankings of the best universities in the world; 2) to train highly qualified personnel capable of contributing to the development of the national economy and science; 3) to design and develop new forms of funding for research and innovation at the University; 4) to establish an integrated academic health system for Nazarbayev University (the Hospital of the Future project); 5) to contribute to Astana becoming an international hub of innovation and knowledge; 6) to create a multicultural and multinational university environment’ (NU 2013).

handles them is positioned to reap substantial financial rewards. How this transpires is elusive to even those working in the depths of the bureaucracy.⁵ Nor is it entirely clear, from construction to operation, where the dramatic sums of money involved in establishing and maintaining the project have originated.⁶ Some observers speculate that part of the funding is money re-directed from the government's 'Bolashak' international scholarship program – which was cut dramatically in May 2011. On the relationship between the two education projects, NU statements and interviews have been inconsistent, but the official explanation of the link is that NU is not 'taking' money away from the Bolashak program. Rather, Bolashak is cutting the undergraduate program and 'redistributing' its funds to the graduate level, with the idea that undergraduates would attend NU instead. At the university, I was assured that the leadership had a 'very good' relationship with the Bolashak leadership (although I found that this tidy version does not have currency among the Bolashak staff and leadership). Before I go into this debate further, it is necessary to give some background about the Bolashak program itself.

When Bolashak started in 1994, it was to become a prestigious program to send only the country's best and brightest to study at foreign universities. About 15-20 students a year were selected in a highly competitive process, including a Kazakh language exam,⁷ and they were all required to return to Kazakhstan to work for at least 5 years. As narrated to me, the motivation for establishing the program had no altruistic dimension,⁸ but came from the recognition of Kazakhstan's leadership in the early 1990s that the country simply did not have the knowhow and language skills to compete in the international marketplace. Elites were acutely aware of their naiveté in the early days of opening the country's economy to deals with foreign companies. The Bolashak program was seen as a way to remedy this and to acquire the human capital needed for the country's ambitious development plans.

Then, in 2004, Nazarbayev announced that the program was to be expanded, so that 3000 students would be studying abroad every year. When Nazarbayev issues an order, it is serious business, and bureaucrats rushed to make it a reality. About 15,000 students were sent abroad between 1994 and 2010 (Abazov 2011). But several major problems arose when the program expanded so suddenly in 2005. The first was an issue of institutional capacity. Previously, the program was managed by the Ministry of Education and the amount of students was so small that it could be handled without a system. Further, the quality of the students was such that there were few problems with grades, behaviour, etc. With Bolashak's dramatic expansion, a new organization, the 'Centre for International Programs' (CIP), was established to manage the program. When it was established, there was no efficient bureaucratic structure set in place to guide the work, 'so everything just developed spontaneously.' Six years later, this overarching structure is still missing. As a consequence, staff are forced to improvise on a daily basis:

⁵ But some speculate that this is one of the major reasons that NU was established outside the control of the Law on Education (RK 2007), as well as public finance regulatory frameworks (e.g. the '*Schyotnyi Komitet*' ('Accounting Committee'), which monitors the allocation of government money). This status means that NU it is not held accountable to state financial investigators – who can include a range of individuals, agencies, and frameworks, such as organizational 'curators' from the Kazakhstan National Security (KNB) agency (a KGB equivalent) or the Financial Police. As elsewhere around the former Soviet space, non-compliance with financial regulations is one of the most common tactics for eliminating competition (political, financial, or otherwise). For this reason, there is widespread fear of persecution by these agencies in Kazakhstan, but they are also reputed to simply consist of corrupt and avaricious interest groups. Nonetheless, these institutions are understood to serve a purpose in elite power politics, i.e. to keep in check the most greedy of the top-rank officials. For this reason, among others, some have read the regulatory exclusion of NU as dangerous, potentially opening way for corrupt officials to take money from the state budget without being held accountable for its disposal.

⁶ Abazov (2011) claims a price tag of US \$2 billion, but the NU Strategy (2009, 47-48) documents outline capital and operational expenses totaling \$1 billion over the period of 2010-2012.

⁷ Russian Kazakhstanis generally recognize this to be discrimination against them. Statistics covering the period 1994-2008, which are no longer publically available, reported that 93.6 percent of successful candidates were Kazakh nationality, 3 percent Russian, 0.9 percent Korean, and 0.5 percent Tatar. This stands in stark contrast the to country's 2009 demographic composition of 63 percent Kazakh, 23.7 Russian, 2.9 percent Uzbek, 2.08 percent Ukrainian, 1.4 percent Uighur, 1.3 percent Tatar, 1.1 percent German, 0.6 percent Korean (ASRK 2010).

⁸ However, a high-ranking CIP official believed that the most important virtue of the program's reality was its ability to inspire and motivate the underprivileged. Through its rural quota and focus on merit in the selection process, this official praised its ability to give hope to young people from poor and/or unconnected families, who could see role-models succeed through the 'fruits of their labor,' rather than through connections and bribes.

‘We can only respond to the immediate. There just isn’t time to think about the big picture.’ This is due in part to a lack of vision and experience with administrative management, but also because the presidency and administration of CIP has always been highly politicized – ostensibly because of the large sums of money involved and the eagerness of those with means to bribe their children’s way into the program.

Second, with the program’s expansion, the ‘prestige’ of being a Bolashak recipient was completely lost. In part, this was because people became aware of the corruption, but mostly because there were just so many mediocre students going that it became clear they were not the brilliant generation of before. Given such a large quota, there were simply not enough qualified applicants, i.e. who could pass entrance exams in the US and Europe, where the previous Bolashak scholars had studied. As a consequence, the CIP staff had to revise the list of eligible universities to include universities in countries with lower admissions standards (especially Malaysia and the Czech Republic). These ‘back-door’ options also became a necessity because the CIP was increasingly forced to grant scholarships to low-performing children of powerful parents.⁹

The third problem resulting from the program’s expansion was that returning students flooded the labour market and could not find economic opportunities to satisfy their expectations (and perhaps, their new tastes, preferences, and worldviews acquired in the course of 2-5 years abroad). Many developed what those in the CIP call the ‘Bolashak syndrome’ – they expected the (since vanished) prestige of the scholarship to immediately get them a high-paying job, and with benefits that employers in Kazakhstan do not typically offer. Employers viewed their demands as irrational and complained loudly. Now that so many students have returned, who are all essentially competing for the same jobs, they no longer make such demands and their expectations are more ‘realistic.’ In any case, it became clear that there was a mismatch between expectations and real job opportunities in the country.

Many of these problems were never adequately addressed or handled with foresight, primarily because of the politicization of the CIP presidency.¹⁰ Since 2005, there have been eight different presidents, many of whom have left in the wake of major accounting scandals. Or if they were more fortunate, they were simply rotated out of the post quickly – a strategy used in Kazakhstan’s bureaucracy, ostensibly, to limit the potential for corruption via entrenchment. The main implication of this rotation is that the program has become a random assemblage of ‘mutants’ (in the words of one informant in the Bolashak bureaucracy), i.e. policies and projects that one administration started, but whose tenure did not last long enough to see them through. Tied to certain regulatory frameworks, the staff still have to work with their various protocols, which often send them through endless and redundant steps. The overall effect for the program is one of curious loopholes, lost efficiency, and a complete absence of a long-term vision. At the time of my interviews, the administration included many young, self-proclaimed ‘reformers’ who aimed to effect change as quickly as possible – for they too know that their time was limited. As one informant said: ‘The job is so hard and so exhausting at times, but it is ok because you know that it won’t last.’

Major cuts in the Bolashak program in 2011 made their job somewhat easier, however. President Nazarbayev’s decision came suddenly. Though there had been discussion of its looming ‘downsizing’ in 2010, the extent of this was broadly unanticipated. On 17 April 2011, the CIP president announced the complete elimination of the Bachelor’s degree funding. An employee explained: ‘He just came to a meeting and said it would be cut. And that was it. There was no discussion.’ The change was only made public in early May, and by early summer 2011, Nazarbayev had already announced plans to cut the Master’s program, as well. Rumours in the CIP network suggest that someone ‘on the inside’ (i.e. in Nazarbayev’s closest circle) made the decisions about the cuts and went straight the president – as all the usual legal avenues for such a procedure were bypassed. While many in Kazakhstan were sad or angry to see the program eliminated, most people claimed to understand the logic of the decision, even if they

⁹ In my interview with an influential government official, he said: ‘By the way! I have had three children go through the Bolashak program. One went to Duke, another to Westminster, and the youngest, well, he went to Malaysia [laughs].’

¹⁰ As with most parts of the governmental apparatus, this presidency works on the basis of a ‘system of trust.’ This means that when the leadership is replaced, nearly the entire administration is also replaced, as each figurehead has a ‘team’ of trusted individuals who come and go with him or (though rare) her.

disapproved of the decision. The following section will explore some of their reasoning, but rather than looking to these debates to uncover the ‘true’ reasons for the development, these conversations are best analysed as a set of subject-forming narratives, which can shed light on the nature of state-society relations in independent Kazakhstan.

Interpreting the NU project: Inscribing the state and the homeland

Popular discussions have involved a great deal of speculation and rationalizations about the coincidence of Bolashak being cut and the opening of NU. Among the supporters, a common rationale is that the government had invested a great deal of money in the NU project, and it needs all the backing it can get. Because it is still new and lacks the prestige of foreign universities, the broad expectation is that Kazakhstan’s most promising students would invariably choose to study abroad if they had a choice between Bolashak and NU. In this narrative, there is a clear articulation of a geopolitical imaginary, in which Kazakhstan’s educational system is articulated as inferior to those found abroad, and especially in the West – but this is cast as something the government is positioned to remedy through the NU project. Simultaneously, there is a critique of the fact that Kazakhstan’s government has paid millions of dollars to *foreign* institutions to educate the Bolashak students, whereas this money would be better invested ‘at home.’

Another rationalization of the program changes underscores the poor quality of the Bolashak students themselves. For example, in my focus groups with students at the Al’-Farabi Kazakhstan National University (KazNu), participants consistently highlighted how ungrateful many of the Bolashak students are: they were critiqued for taking the government’s money, but unpatriotically not wanting to come back to Kazakhstan afterward. With a marked touch of *Schadenfreude*, these discussions consistently turned to the fact that they *must* come back, or else their families would lose their apartments, be forced to reimburse the government for all the costs, or face other serious repercussions. There was no small degree of jealousy evident in these narratives. After loudly insulting the scholarship recipients, when participants were asked if *they* would like to study abroad with Bolashak, the unanimous sentiment was ‘Yes!’ In any case, the narrative suggests that those who go abroad lose the patriotic sentiments and gratitude to the state, which they are expected to have for receiving so much at the government’s expense.

Nazarbayev University, by contrast, in the approving words of one focus group participant, ‘will educate (*vospityvat*) patriots’¹¹ (FG4P9). This narrative, regardless of whether or not it stems from jealousy, nonetheless works to valorise patriotism; it articulates a norm, in which citizens are expected to have gratitude for the state’s generous giving. All the elite political infighting behind the NU and Bolashak projects is important, but equally relevant are these ordinary citizens’ incorporation of the nationalist scripts about ‘love of country’ and gratitude toward the ‘benevolent’ state. Thus, jealous or not, many of the focus group participants clearly adopted this nationalist script in their own ‘styles of reasoning’ – about themselves, their values, and social norms. The language of nationalism was here mobilized as an interpretive lens for the ‘proper’ relationship with the state, and factored into their personal rationalizations and articulations of their positionality (i.e. as patriotic/normal citizens with a committed affinity for the state and the homeland, but also as non-recipients of the scholarship).

Another common rationale among supporters of Bolashak’s downsizing is that the program does students a disservice for failing to take into account the unique timing of a Kazakhstani youth’s life events. In Kazakhstan, there is tremendous social pressure for people marry young and start families as soon as possible. Since all Bolashak students are expected to return to Kazakhstan for at least 5 years after their studies, this means that the Bachelor’s students return precisely at the time in life when they are expected to marry, have children, buy a car and apartment. This is said to make it too challenging for them to continue to a Master’s program, if they so desire. This is then explained to contrast with NU, which would allow students to ‘stay home’ and develop families during their undergraduate years, and prepare for graduate study afterward. I have in fact seen several close friends suffer on account of this

¹¹ This word is much more active than ‘educate’ suggests, and is more literally translated as ‘to raise.’ The implication of the statement is that the university will actively *inculcate* these students with patriotism.

timing issue (which is better understood to originate in family and social pressure than time per se), but the narrative's 'validity' is irrelevant. Rather, the narrative is important because it is the means through which these social norms are articulated and reproduced.

All these rationalizations are brimming with the typical linguistic bounding practices of nationalism (Billig 1995). They define the 'home' and its unique social norms as standing in contrast to the 'outside' world of foreign study, where students are not able to enact their social obligations. They must 'come home' to realize themselves in the familial sense, but they are also imagined as only being able to best realize themselves academically 'abroad.' The NU project is striking because it engages and acts on this imaginary, by seeking to bring together the 'inside' and the 'outside.' What can be found abroad (the prestigious, quality education) is to be brought 'home.' This trend of 'domesticating the foreign' is an explicitly nationalist project, which is further illustrated in Nazarbayev's parallel justification of various extravagant projects in Astana, such as the Duman entertainment complex described here:

The President answered precisely and convincingly, arguing that these objects are needed for our children and grandchildren – they are the most serious because young Kazakhstanis are going to be proud that they have in the homeland (*rodina*) such wonderful things, and so that they can look at them and see that they don't have to travel to the end of the world to see them. He also argued that precisely such objects are used in judging the real civilization of the government. (Dzhaksybekov 2008, 247-248)

The foreign luxuries are to be domesticated and only thus are young Kazakhstanis to be proud of their homeland. Likewise, the NU project is framed as a means of bringing the luxury of elite Western education 'home.'

In this set of discourses, it is important to note that the very act of talking about NU as a 'domestic' project simultaneously situates the speaker in a place ('inside' the national territory) and as a subject in relation to both a state (which defines 'society's' priorities) and a broader international community (which defines 'global' standards). In practice, these standards are those of the West, and the project has been explicitly modelled on the US higher educational system (NU Strategy 2009, 17). Furthermore, it has been realized through an 'international partnership strategy,' in which the partner university have been enlisted to assist with:

developing academic programs and curricula; providing teaching materials for student training; selecting and appointing deans of schools and recruiting foreign faculty; developing the evaluation and quality assurance systems; designing and equipping classrooms and research laboratories; training and re-training of local human resources (faculty and administrative staff); and developing double-degree programs. (NU Strategy 2009, 28)

Practically the entire undertaking is the product of foreign design and implementation. NU students also have the opportunity to study abroad at the partner universities – for *up to 2 years* in some programs (NU 2011c). Nevertheless, the image of NU being physically located in Kazakhstan gives the impression of education being 'domesticated.' This is exemplified in the words of the focus group participant quoted above, who believed NU will 'educate' patriots. Seemingly paradoxically, even though most were aware that the faculty is to be comprised of professors from 'the best' foreign universities, this did not detract from the overall sense that it was a 'domestic' project, positioned to develop the country and the citizens' love of Kazakhstan (for the same trend in a different case, the Astana Professional Cycling Team, see Koch 2013a).

Cultivating the aura of prestige of attached to a foreign, and especially Western, education has been treated as a strategy to increase national pride, as well as to increase the prestige of the NU project itself. For example, an NU informant involved in the admission process explained the university's 'need' to highlight the Western control of admissions and to use foreign exams as the sole entrance assessments (British Council English Proficiency Test or the TOEFL and University College London's Subject

Entrance Test). He argued that ‘everyone assumes that if foreigners are in control, it’s “clean,” but as soon as Kazakhs are involved, people’s suspicions are raised.’ By using international admissions teams and entrance exams, the university could gain the image of objectivity, and convince the people that it was somehow ‘outside’ the system of rampant corruption that has long plagued Kazakhstan’s universities.¹²

Though there have been some muted critiques of the fact that the government has spent so much money on this high-profile project, while the broken education system in Kazakhstan goes untouched (more below), NU has largely been interpreted as part of the government’s development and international prestige-building agenda. This is encapsulated neatly in the following focus group discussion:

Moderator: So why do you think our president allowed his name to be conferred on the university? This university is still called the university of the future.

FG3P9: Because the goal was to give a reminder that we are not a third world country.

FG3P5: The country is not [part of] the third world.

FG3P9: We are developing. As far as I have heard, there are some of the best professors, in order to attract the attention of other countries, and so that foreigners come [here].

We again see that the ‘foreigners’ are understood to bring prestige and respect *for Kazakhstan*. Divisions between the domestic and the foreign are simultaneously destroyed and constituted in these imaginaries. But what work do these imaginaries do? I argue that they are instrumental to supporting the naturalized state-society relations, in which a coherent ‘state’ is constructed as *external* to passive citizen-subjects. But characteristic of the soft authoritarian mode of governing, these citizens’ mode of participation is primarily enacted through their emotional affiliation with the ‘nation’ and gratitude toward the government’s ‘generous’ policy agenda. The soft authoritarian nation-building agenda cannot stand alone, however. Nationalism is an international ideology (Billig 1995, 15), which is both enabled by and a product of the contemporary statist system. Thus, these border-drawing imaginaries also work to reproduce this broader geopolitical order. They are fundamental to demarcating a nationalist ‘inside’ space, founded on the idea of a territorial-unit-as-social-container, situated alongside other such state containers in the international system of states.

Interpreting the NU project: Space for critique?

But the state’s colonization of these geopolitical narratives and imaginaries is not seamless. They invariably allow space for critique and alternate readings. In a place where critiques of the official line are actively silenced (governing others through control, e.g. widespread persecution of journalists), and more passively silenced through social norms (governing the self, e.g. most people in Kazakhstan are ‘not interested in politics’), seemingly banal conversations about these education projects are an instructive place to look for these challenges to the official narratives – as are their silences. As noted above, one of the major critiques of NU is that the money would be better spent reforming the existing university system. Critical outlooks of the project’s largesse were most evident in 1) people’s reactions to the yearly cost of studying at NU, and 2) the university’s extravagant interior atrium (see Figure 1). Both are illustrated in the following focus group excerpt, when participants were shown a picture of the atrium:

Moderator: What do you think this image is of?

FG3P7: [Laughing] It seems to me that it’s a metro.

Moderator: A metro? With fountains?

FG3P4: Shopping centre.

Moderator: Do you want me to tell you what it is? It is the new university.

FG3P7: *Ne figa sebe!*¹³ [*Other group members express shock*]

¹² This is my own ethnographic observation, but on corruption and patronage in higher education in Kazakhstan at the end of the Soviet times and the early years of independence, see Nazpary 2002. Today this takes many forms, but it most significantly includes bribes paid for university admission and for desired grades. It is worse in some institutions than others.

¹³ This phrase is more crude, but is perhaps best translated as ‘Get out of here!’

Moderator: So, what do you know about the new university?
FG3P6: That it is very expensive. 20 thousand [USD] a year.
Moderator: No, not 20.
All: How much?
Moderator: 18 thousand.
[All laugh.]



Figure 1. Atrium in NU main building. Source: Author.

The stunning view of the university's central atrium is an image that can be found online, but at the time of my focus groups in 2011, it had not yet circulated widely – this becoming evident from widespread confusion about its origin (most seemed to think it was a mall). Immediately when they were told, many people were awed and seemed to fill with pride. These discussions followed a consistent pattern, in which people first expressed their pride, but then mentioned the staggering and prohibitive expense. This language of the caveat, the 'language of reservations, of however's, and of paradoxes' is simultaneously revealing and *unrevealing* (Massey 2007, 54). It is revealing in its identification of an object of desire, and unrevealing in its identification of the speaker's own exclusion from the elitism.

The same people who praised the NU project, and detailed how much better it is than the Bolashak alternative (it now appearing as the university's counterpart in an either/or narrative), tended to simultaneously view it as an elitist and exclusionary project. As I described above, NU staff have consciously promoted the university's Western 'objectivity' to show how it is 'clean' and free from the corruption and manipulation of the well-connected (a founder's myth, as we saw at the outset of this chapter). But this has not stopped people from assuming what one focus group participant summarizes nicely: 'It seems that simple people (*prostyye lyudi*) won't study at this university, that only big-shots (*krutyie*) will study there'¹⁴ (FG3P6). Others in the group contested this, citing the merit-based entrance

¹⁴ These two idioms, simple people (*prostyye lyudi*) and big-shots (*krutyie lyudi*), are difficult to translate adequately into English, but they are used frequently throughout Kazakhstan. '*Krutoi*' literally means 'steep' or 'stern,' but it operates here as the

criteria. Nonetheless, a widespread ‘rumour’ or ‘fact’ (I personally have no idea which) suggests that the merit criteria only applies to those who are accepted on scholarship¹⁵ – and that anyone could enrol if they paid the full price tag of US \$18 thousand.

Perhaps more instructive than the language of caveats is the absolute silence on some issues – for, ‘in a very basic way, in a culture of fear, meaning itself is made possible by what is missing’ (Mitchell 2002, 153). For ethical reasons, I too must maintain some of these silences, but one is worth mentioning here: the ethnic composition of students at NU and in the Bolashak program. In the Soviet times, university ethnic allocations were set at 50 per cent Kazakh – 50 per cent other nationalities. Since independence, allocations and admissions procedures now overwhelmingly favours Kazakh-speaker (Nazpary 2002, 157).¹⁶ As noted above, the Bolashak program’s Kazakh language exam is understood (as least by ethnic Russians) to work as a de facto discrimination in favour of ethnic Kazakhs (evident in the fact that a reported 93 per cent of recipients of the scholarship have been Kazakh, whereas they only represent 63 per cent of the country’s population). Though I have privately heard some disgruntled comments by ethnic Russians about this discrimination in the Bolashak program, a complete silence on the issue reigns publically. NU does not require knowledge of Kazakh, but Kucera (2010) notes that when the university posted a list of admitted students on its website, they consisted almost exclusively of ethnic Kazakhs. While there are countless potential explanations for this, I believe this is more likely an issue of self-selection, given the (Kazakh ethnic) nationalist framing of the project. Whatever the reasons, we can be assured that, at least for the time being there will be no public discussion about the imbalance. This is because we here enter the terrain of the forbidden ‘*natsional’nyi vopros*’ (‘nationality question’), which touches on the de facto privileging of ethnic Kazakhs and marginalization of other ethnic groups. This is perhaps the most politically sensitive topic in independent Kazakhstan¹⁷ – about which there is a very loud and uncomfortable silence pervading much more than these education programs.

Another reason we might be seeing self-selection pertains to yet an additional silence: NU’s relationship with KIMEP, Kazakhstan’s first English-language instruction university. Considered one of the best ‘independent’ universities in Kazakhstan, upper and middle class Russians who have remained in Kazakhstan would much rather send their children there (or abroad, if they have the means). For some years before, but especially since NU opened, KIMEP has come under pressure by government officials, and is constantly threatened with being closed down (for anything ranging from administrative sex scandal to cafeteria health compliance). This might be the result of certain elites seeing the university as a threat to the NU project, but it involves yet another series of confused relations, egos, and power politics that cannot be explored at length here. But it is notable that the focus group participant who argued that NU would educate patriots, also made the following point: ‘Well, we all know that KIMEP students are far from patriots’ (FG4P9). Indeed, the group did seem well aware. Again, the issue of jealousy among these KazNu students (who tend to be much poorer and studying on government scholarships) cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note the very *practice* of using this nationalist discourse as a ‘style of reasoning about the self,’ one’s emotions, and one’s desires. Ultimately, however, these discussions about NU and Bolashak, as well as their silences, are fundamentally subject-forming narratives.

As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, the Bolashak and NU projects must be understood as a set of disjointed movements and decisions of various people, who are working with and limited by material conditions, and who are often just responding to the immediate. An NU informant, who

opposite of ‘*prostoi*’ (‘simple,’ ‘direct’). *Krutyye* are not just people with a lot of money, but those with a condescending or ‘snobbish’ demeanor.

¹⁵ I was told that 100 percent of the first NU class was, but it is impossible to know for sure.

¹⁶ This does not just discriminate against Russians and other nationalities, who did not learn Kazakh during the Soviet times, but also against ‘Russified’ Kazakhs, who were primarily urbanites who adopted culturally and linguistically ‘Russian’ behaviors.

¹⁷ Rhetorically, the Nazarbayev regime has stressed the ‘internationalist’ nature of its nation-building project, but in practice, there has been a systematic (and often strategically slow and subtle) privileging of ethnic Kazakhs in all arenas of social and political life. Given widespread fear(-mongering) resulting from violence in neighboring republics (especially Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), discussions about inter-ethnic relations are considered to be highly explosive, and accordingly seldom go deeper than trite rehearsals of the official discourse.

recounted the endless logistical problems and challenges the university's planners faced, explained how 'everything becomes a crisis': 'Because of that, we haven't really been "strategic," but "tactical."' This lack of strategy is paralleled in the CIP's administration of the Bolashak program. In both cases, it *appears* that egos and desires all come into collision 'underneath' the official 'surface' of the institution. But this very image of the surface and the coherent institution, as somehow detached from or standing apart from the 'back-room dealings' is a representational myth. It is a performance – rooted in rhetorical and material practices – that is instrumental to obscuring how power relations are institutionalized, and how people rationalize their material desires in their narratives and ways of governing the self.

The myth of coherence is also important because its performance sets in motion a variety of other forces. As I have sought to illustrate, programs of intervention can 'help some people and harm others, both outcomes routinely exceeding the plan' (Li 2008, 118), as people mobilize to 'devour' development plans (Ferguson 1990), pushing and pulling programs into helpful yet unapproved forms (Li 2008, 111). This has certainly been the case for the Bolashak scholarship program – as it has become a truly positive force in the life of many students in Kazakhstan, who have been able to use it to achieve great things that would have otherwise been out of their reach. As it develops, the NU project will likely provide similar opportunities for ordinary citizens. And yet, these students' resulting pleasure and feelings of gratitude and national pride cannot be so easily detached from the elite power plays and shady economic dealings that make the projects possible. Just as nationalism functions to transfer attachments to an 'objective' territory, allowing citizens to see themselves as supporting something other than the elites who have captured the state-society-territory unit, so too does the 'university' (as a coherent 'thing') allow participants to see themselves as supporting something detached from the unequal field of power relations, of which the idea, its material forces, and they themselves are all a part.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have rejected the impetus to search for the 'motives' of elite and ordinary citizens' political practices – whether that is using nationalist tropes or opening a new university. The problem with such a search is that it is predicated on the 'very distinction between what we see as a realm of signs or representations, and an outside or an underneath' (Mitchell 1988, 18), leaving uninterrogated the practice of representation itself. By examining the discursive practices surrounding NU and Bolashak, I have stressed the subject-forming effect of these narratives, which are essential to the newly (ethnically) nationalised configuration of power relations in independence-era Kazakhstan. In examining the speculative discussions about the regime's decision-making, such as why Nazarbayev chose to open a new university and cut the Bolashak scholarship program, it is impossible to locating an 'accurate' answer. Yet the very act of speculation confirms the observer's 'externality' to the decision-making processes. As such, these rhetorical practices are fundamental to shaping the image of a coherent and external 'state' (Mitchell 2002), of which ordinary citizens are but spectators. As I have sought to illustrate, the nation-building agenda in soft authoritarian Kazakhstan operates strategically on the basis of these geopolitical imaginaries, which help to naturalize the hierarchical state-society relations that have defined the country's independence era.

The various narratives and practices explored here help to give the impression of a unitary 'territory,' which stands apart from or serves as a backdrop to the 'state,' but which is to be populated by grateful, national selves. Given the extensive internalization of this conceptualization of patriotic gratitude and pride in the homeland, which were evinced in the popular narratives about NU and Bolashak, it appears that the ostensibly 'positive' tactics of nation-building employed by the Nazarbayev regime have been rather effective. In the years since gaining independence, state-scale actors have successfully mobilized nascent nationalist attachments in support of the country's nondemocratic political arrangements. But rather than relying on 'naked coercion' or force, as in the case of 'hard authoritarianism,' elites have done so with the help of nationalist discourses that have effectively naturalized the existence of the state and its prevailing political order. And yet, 'order' is forever a representational practice – an image constantly in the making and, thus, constantly under threat of being unmade.

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