

The “heart” of Eurasia? Kazakhstan’s centrally-located capital city

Central Asian Survey

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Abstract. In a world still dominated by a geopolitical system of territorial states, one tool in the state- and nation-building repertoire is the strategy of moving a capital from one city to another, and to an ostensibly more ‘central’ location of a geometrically-conceived territory. From Ankara to Brasília, the technique has been used in a variety of places around the world, and Kazakhstan’s new capital since 1997, Astana, is one more recent iteration. Taking a Foucauldian approach to analysing political technologies of government, I examine the strategy of the centrally-located city and consider how it has been instrumental to simultaneously producing a ‘state effect’ and a ‘territory effect’ in newly independent Kazakhstan. Part of a larger mixed-methods study, this article draws on a diverse range of methods, including data from interviews, participant observation, textual analysis, focus groups, and a country-wide survey.

Keywords: capital city, state-making, territory, governmentality, Kazakhstan, Astana

Geopolitics is certainly not geometry and a government’s geographic centre is least of all like the geometric centre of a circle. The geopolitical centre of Kazakhstan is not just linear measurements and dimensions, but in many ways, shall we say, non-linear ideas and perspectives. The question was in fact not so much about moving the capital to the exact centre, if there even is a geographical centre of Kazakhstan. The question was about moving the capital to a point, which could become the centre of Kazakhstan in many ways. Not only geographically, but also the centre of gravity of geopolitical, social, economic, political and cultural ties and relationships within and outside the state. Astana – the new capital of Kazakhstan – also being very near the geographical centre of the country, has become precisely this ‘generalizing’ and ‘integrating’ centre. (Nazarbayev 2005, p. 31)

Introduction

In this quote from Kazakhstan’s first and only president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, it would appear that he rejects the modernist view of space as geometry, in favour of a relativist and socially-imbued vision of space. Yet this quote is exceptional in his vast writing about the most important political project of his tenure: the capital change from Almaty to Astana in 1997. Instead, Nazarbayev typically taps into the image of geometric centrality in discussing Astana. The city is consistently referred to as the ‘heart’ of Kazakhstan, and often the entire continent of Eurasia (Nazarbayev 2003, 2006). His book on Astana is tellingly entitled, *In the Heart of Eurasia* (Nazarbayev 2005).

Although Nazarbayev might be considered the initiator of this discourse, the image of centrality has come to resonate with Kazakhstan’s general population, and is reproduced through

a dense semiotic network, including everyday conversations. For example, I was at a conference in Astana in July 2011 and before the event started, I introduced myself to my neighbour, an older Kazakh man and a historian. He asked me about my research subject and, as usual, I gave the easiest answer, '*perenos stolitsy*' ('the capital change'). As with many people in Kazakhstan, he was delighted that I was researching (what he deemed to be) such an important issue, and launched into an explanation of why the government moved the capital in 1997. But unlike most people, who generally drew me a mental map with their words, he, completely unprompted and with great excitement, found a blank piece of paper and drew me an actual map: a squiggly oval with a big dot in the middle. 'Do you know why they moved the capital? Here is Almaty [pointing to a place in the bottom right], and here is Astana [the dot in the middle]. From there [Astana], it is possible to control here [he drew an arrow up], to control here [he drew an arrow to the right], to control here [he drew an arrow down], and to control here [he drew an arrow to the left]!' He spoke briefly about the demographic constitution of the country, but his narrative about the capital change primarily articulated a depopulated space, bounded by geometric lines, and controlled by some abstract authority emanating from the central urban node.

What went into making this interaction possible? What is the origin of this geometric imaginary of Kazakhstan's territory? What is its political significance for Kazakhstanis and the wider international community? And what can it tell us about the nature of power and state-making both in contemporary Kazakhstan and globally? These are some of the questions I seek to answer in this article through examining the imaginary of the 'centrally-located' capital city and how it both performs and materializes certain constructs of the 'state' and 'territory' as coherent *things*. In contrast to early scholarship on the Almaty-Astana capital change (e.g. Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004; Schatz 2004b), I am less concerned with assessing the political 'motives.' Considering this to be foremost an exercise in speculation, I instead treat the capital change *discourse* as a site of analysis. In so doing, I argue that such discursive practices are fundamental to naturalizing the 'state' as a structural effect, and are an important source of the continued 'stickiness' (Murphy forthcoming) of the concept of the territorial state.

My central argument is that the popular performance of the capital change discourse has contributed to the development of a unique set of geopolitical imaginaries about this territorial unit called Kazakhstan. In developing this line of inquiry, I aim to answer Alec Murphy's (forthcoming) call for more serious consideration of the persistent 'tenacity and power' of

modernist territorial thinking and modes of identification. ‘How else,’ he asks, ‘can we come to grips with the fact that countless people around the world identify so strongly with the political territories where they live that they are willing to risk their lives to defend those territories?’ (Murphy forthcoming, p. 9). Via the Astana case study, I explore how the very practice of talking about the motives works to constitute state authority and inscribe specific geopolitical imaginaries in the independence era. I argue that such discursive practices are fundamental to naturalizing the ‘state’ as a structural effect.

Using a mixed-methods approach, data for this project were collected in Kazakhstan between 2009-2011, and included participant observation, focus groups, formal and informal interviews, a country-wide survey, and textual analysis. While the qualitative methods did not entail any explicit sampling strategy aside from regional variation (being conducted in Almaty, Astana, Oskemen, Pavlodar, Petropavl, and Shymkent), a few words are in order about the sampling procedures for the other methods. The country-wide survey was administered on my behalf by a professional research firm, CESSI-Kazakhstan, from September to October 2010. Professional CESSI interviewers conducted the survey as door-step interviews with individuals over the age of 18 in all 16 of Kazakhstan’s *oblast*’s (regions), to achieve a final sample size of 1233, which was representative of country-wide age and ethnic distributions, as well as urban and rural distributions. The focus groups were conducted at the Al’-Farabi Kazakhstan National University, and included 4-8 participants each for a total sample size of 36 participants spread across five mixed-gender groups. The targeted recruiting did not control for ethnicity (89 per cent identified as Kazakh) or home region/*oblast*’ (16 came from Almaty, 3 from Aktobe, 3 from Kyzylorda, 3 from South Kazakhstan, 3 from Zhambul, 2 from East Kazakhstan, 2 from West Kazakhstan, 1 from Atyrau, and 1 from Pavlodar). All participants were between 18 to 25 years old, members of the first generation of citizens who have grown up in independent Kazakhstan. I did not participate, but I was present in the room and took notes for the duration of the discussions. The groups were conducted in Russian and all translations here are my own, though they were transcribed into Russian by a native speaker.

The centrally-located city

Despite all the rhetorical and material transformations brought by the contemporary era of globalization, today’s geopolitical system is still marked by the hegemony of the territorial

state (Murphy 2012). Modernist conceptions of territory prevail in the statist system, which is to say that territory is viewed as a geometrical, bounded space – a sort of abstracted unit of space, or ‘container’ (Taylor 1994). In the history of the geometrically-conceived territory, one long-standing tool for political actors to inscribe their authority territorially is the strategy of moving the capital from one city to another, and to an ostensibly more ‘central’ location. From Ankara (Çınar 2007) to Brasília (Holston 1989) to Ottawa (Knight 1977), Abuja, Dodoma and Yamoussoukro, the places where the capital city relocation tactic has been used are extensive and highly diverse. In all cases, however, it has been employed by territorial states – or rather, by actors seeking to give the impression of a coherent ‘state’ controlling a coherent ‘territory.’

The modernist ‘state effect’ (Mitchell 1999), as it turns out, is inseparable from the modernist ‘territory effect,’ i.e. the ossification of a geometric imaginary of territory as bounded, emptiable space. And yet, as Sack (1986, p. 34) notes, this modernist construct of territory ‘conceptually separates place from things and then recombines them as an assignment of things to place and places to things.’ The construction of abstract or emptiable space is thus never about actually *emptying* space, but about imagining the social and the spatial as separate. This geopolitical imaginary is something that Timothy Mitchell (1988, 2002) has termed ‘enframing,’ which is the practice of setting apart an abstract framework from an ostensibly separate material realm. Take, for example, the USSR and the various successor states. Once imagined as a singular and coherent ‘unit’ in global affairs, the Soviet Union’s disintegration meant the sudden reconfiguration in terms of new spatial abstractions: 15 independent states governing separate tracts of land and social bodies. In the making of contemporary Kazakhstan, born into this modernist state system, the construction of the state and its territory as an abstract framework separate from the social ‘stuff’ of the country was nearly automatic, given the USSR’s break-up along republican borders. Nonetheless, in the early days of independence, the precise boundaries of the state and the territory were not seen as ‘natural’ and there was particular concern, popularly and among elites, that the contents of the new political unit were not properly aligned with the new framework.

Elite concerns about the relationship between places and things – the territorial and the social – found expression in the discourses and practices surrounding the capital change to Astana in 1997. Of particular note is how this dream – of political effectiveness originating in a specific point in space and being diffused over the smooth space of the state’s territory – is

articulated through the image of the city. In Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, the development of a centrally-located capital city was thus a political *strategy* (or ‘technology’ in the Foucauldian sense), designed to remedy concerns about the proper circulation of power, people, and things in the geometrically-conceived territory. Michel Foucault (2007) traces this concern with circulation to an early political treatise on the perfect capital city, *La Métropolitée*, written by Alexander Le Maître in 1682. Le Maître argues that a capital should ideally be located at the centre of a circular state, and it should not just have a political role, but:

The capital must also have a moral role, and diffuse throughout the territory all that is necessary to command people with regard to their conduct and ways of doing things. The capital must give the example of good morals. The capital must be the place where the holy orators are the best and are best heard, and it must also 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. Finally, there is an economic role: the capital must be the site of luxury so that it is a point of attraction for products coming from other countries, and at the same time, through trade, it must be the distribution point of manufactured articles and products, etcetera. (Foucault 2007, p. 14)¹

Foucault (2007, p. 14-15) argues that in this vision, Le Maître connects the effectiveness of sovereignty to the diffusion and circulation of power, ideas, will, orders, and commerce – superimposing ‘the state of sovereignty, the territorial state, and the commercial state.’ A precursor to the modernist framework, the spatial (the territorial state) and the social (the state of sovereignty and commerce) are seen as separate sites of government: what is to be governed are the ‘territory’ and the ‘society’ contained therein – as well as the relationship between them. The central city strategy thus sits at the nexus of the relationship between the governors and the governed (Veyne 1997).

As a question implicating the relationship between the state and subjects, a critical analysis of ‘capitalizing the territory’ (Foucault 2007, p. 14) also demands that we view this relationship as a matter of geopolitics, i.e. the political structuring of space. And where there is a centre, there is a periphery. The idea of a capital as the centre of circulation automatically implies a broader spatial unit in which the centre is embedded. In the case of Kazakhstan, the image of Astana in the approximate ‘centre’ of the country’s territory draws much of its strength from the stark and dramatic contrast to the ‘barren’ landscape of the city’s hinterland. Having much in common with the modernist urban development schemes in Ankara and Brasília, the Astana project is framed by the regime and its planners and architects as an allegory for the

Kazakh nation's ability to prevail over the harsh environment, and construct a 'green oasis' (Nazarbayev 2010, p. 53) in the middle of the steppe. This discourse echoes Soviet discourses about conquering 'nature,' and serves similar political purposes.

Romantic discourses about 'Man' conquering 'Nature' are arguably a legacy of Enlightenment-era thinking, characterizing a broad range of high modernist projects the whole world over (Bozdoğan 2001; Scott 1998; Forest and Forest 2012). However, they took on intensified significance in the Soviet Union's nation-building discourses, in which the idea of conquering nature became an allegory for the conquest of the new socialist order (Josephson 1995; Kotkin 1995; McCannon 1995, 2003; Richter 1997; Pohl 1999; Sssorin-Chaikov 2003; Bolotova 2004). Reproduced heavily through socialist realism, these discourses were especially salient in the early years of the Soviet Union under Stalin, in which nature was constructed as wild and hostile, but capable of being transformed into the *rodina* ('homeland'). A nationalist testament to Soviet strength, nature was to be 'tamed' by rationalist planning. A key site for this performance was the Arctic, where the Soviets saw a 'perfect blank slate – a discursive tabula rasa' on which to 'inscribe their visions of the new socialist world they were purporting to build' (McCannon 2003, p. 251). Likewise, the vast steppe of the Eurasian continent was similarly imagined as empty and boundless space, and 'a persistent reminder of the impotence of human beings in the face of the power of nature. But for the Bolsheviks, supreme champions of humankind's ability to bend nature to its will, the steppe was a fortress to be taken. And take it they did' (Kotkin 1995, p. 29).

Among the central tropes of the steppe, like the Arctic, are those of 'emptiness,' 'nakedness' (*golaia*), and 'virginity.' These associations with the Central Asian steppe can be traced at least as far back as 1816, to the first expeditionary reports of a Russian mining engineer, Ivan Shangin (Buchli 2007, p. 48). But the steppe was never 'barren' or depopulated as in the Russian imagination; it has been home to the nomadic local populations for thousands of years (Cameron 2010). Instead, the Russian discourses of emptiness were active constructions of 'emptiable space' (Sack 1986, p. 33), that is, the notion of abstract space as separate from the social and material 'stuff' contained therein. In her striking comparison of Karaganda, Kazakhstan and Billings, Montana, Kate Brown (2001, p. 30) notes that 'what most people failed to mention was that the land was not empty but *emptied*.' Discourses of emptiness were fundamental to the introduction of a modernist mode of seeing space as 'container' (Sack 1986).

The fiction of the steppe's 'emptiness' notwithstanding, Buchli (2007, p. 48) makes the important point that the geographical imaginary of 'nothingness' (despite evident presences) legitimizes certain material interventions. In Soviet Kazakhstan, one of these interventions (among others) was the Virgin Lands Campaign. Initiated in 1954 by Khrushchev, the campaign sought to bring enormous swaths of Kazakhstan's steppe land under cultivation, and encouraged the migration of peasants from Eastern Soviet territories to do so.² Astana's history is closely tied to the Virgin Lands Campaign: in fact, then called Tselinograd (*tselina* meaning virgin soil), the town was its capital (Buchli 2007, p. 44). Developing cities in Kazakhstan was part of the Virgin Lands agenda, as scholars in the 1950s argued that 'of a series of ways of developing the desert, semi-desert and dry steppe, the opening up of land by the foundation of towns is one of the best. Towns are, as it were, the most organized troops in the attack on nature' (Gladysheva and Nazarevskiy 1950 cited French 1995, p. 62).

As with all state-led interventionist schemes, these blank slate projects are also opportunities for ruling bureaucrats to constitute 'the state' as author and authority (Scott 1998). Alev Çınar (2007, p. 154) notes this when she describes the establishment of Ankara in 1927 and the newly independent Turkish state as self-constitutive acts:

the state constitutes itself as an agent of modernity vested with the power and authority to control space, dictate the meaning of urbanity, shape the evolution of the public sphere, and suppress contending ideologies. By constructing a city, the state becomes the agent of the nation, the author that inscribes the nation into space, hence creating the nation-state.

Nazarbayev's discussion of the capital change is likewise one strategy (among many) of situating newly independent Kazakhstan within the imagined 'global' community of states, all lined up next to each other as neat territorial containers (Anderson 1983; Agnew 1994; Billig 1995; Mitchell 2002). Evidencing the 'cartographic anxiety' (Krishna 1994) common to regimes of new states, Nazarbayev has doggedly pursued 'equivalence' as a territorially sovereign state in the international community (Schatz 2006, 2008). By his own account, the capital change 'was thoroughly calculated both geopolitically and economically' (Nazarbayev 2010, p. 53). In his various works, he generally gives four justifications for this decision: 1) to strengthen

Kazakhstan ‘geopolitically’ (the meaning here typically left rather vague); 2) to preserve the country’s security by locating the capital far from external borders; 3) to produce an economic ‘multiplier effect’ through this new development project; and 4) to affirm the government’s stable and ‘polyethnic’ nature by locating it in a ‘multinational’ region (e.g. Nazarbayev 2006, p. 344).

The language of equivalence is the language of sovereignty. In the case of the capital change discourse, this is not just visible in that Nazarbayev clearly perceives a national capital to be one of the stamps of statehood, but also in his preoccupation with the historical precedence of capital changes throughout the world. In his book on Astana, Nazarbayev (2005, p. 32-38) provides a lengthy exposition on similar capital relocation projects, going as far back as Alexander of Macedonia’s relocation of his capital to Babylon. In his account, the development of a capital city has the credibility and aura of a time-worn tradition and hallmark of historically notable (and thus ‘legitimate’) states. By vigorously asserting independent Kazakhstan’s legitimacy in the statist system, Nazarbayev’s modernist state-making project is predicated on this modernist vision of territory itself as a site of government – but notably one that is crucially tied to governing the social elements ‘contained’ therein. Nazarbayev (2006, p. 358) himself writes: ‘Looking at all these plans, I always imagine people behind them (*za nimi*). For all these plans in themselves mean nothing without people, ready to incarnate (*voplashchat*) them.’

From the perspective of elite discourses, it is clear that, as noted above, the central city strategy sits at the nexus of the relationship between the governors and the governed. But what of the other side of the equation, of the ‘governed’? How is the territorial imaginary of Kazakhstan as a discrete and coherent spatial ‘unit’ *popularly* reproduced today, and with what political effects? As I shall argue in the remainder of this article, the production of this ‘territory effect’ is

not solely a top down process: diffuse popular practices are also responsible for the construction of this particular geographical imaginary. I thus explore some of these discourses in order to illustrate how ordinary citizens are complicit in this act of materializing the authority of the 'state,' as well as the impression of it being 'external' to both their own agencies and the spatial abstraction of Kazakhstan as a territorial unit.

'Offsetting' regionalisms and imagining the territory

Engaged by academics, politicians, journalists, and citizens alike, the topic of Kazakhstan's capital change has occupied a perennial place in independence-era elite and popular discourses. There is even a national holiday, Astana Day, celebrating the city's status change (on 6 July, which is also President Nazarbayev's birthday). It now being nearly 15 years since Astana acquired the capital status, the question should be, why are Kazakhstanis still so interested in the question, 'Why was the capital moved?' Each individual has a different set of reasons for engaging in the discussion – for some it may be the focus of research or a whimsical news story (Koch 2012), for others it might be a passing topic not given much thought, and for yet others it may be determining factor in their entire career (e.g., for bureaucrats). Despite the fact that each person is responding to a unique set of immediate stimuli, I argue that their very engagement with the question has contributed to an overarching 'territory effect,' i.e. the naturalization of 'Kazakhstan' as an abstract spatial unit.

One of the most common scholarly and journalistic explanations for the Astana capital change is that it was necessary to ward off the threat of ethnic separatism. Official narratives never state this goal, but most foreign observers have nonetheless tended to read the capital change as motivated by fears of ethnic Russian separatism, stemming from the 'beached

diaspora' (Laitin 1998) in the north (e.g. Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004; Schatz 2004b; Fauve 2009). This narrative about the 'threat' of separatism in Kazakhstan's north has its roots in Kazakhstan's markedly regional demographic diversity, together with certain discourses emanating from (more or less extremist) Russian nationalists that laid claim to this area in the 1990s.

Figures 1-2, based on 2009 census data, give a general sense of the population distribution, where one can see the dominance of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and other 'European' nationalities in the north, and the dominance of Kazakhs in the rest of the country. It is important to note, however, that these data come after about 20 years of independence, over which time, there has been a massive out-migration of non-Kazakhs: in 1989, the Kazakh SSR's demographic breakdown was about 40 per cent Kazakh, 38 per cent Russian, and 22 per cent other (for a total population of 16.4 million) (Sinnott 2000), while in 2010, it was 63 per cent Kazakh, 24 per cent Russian, and 13 per cent other (total population of 16 million) (ASRK 2010). Given the pervasive inter-ethnic conflict immediately before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union (e.g. in neighbouring Tajikistan), Kazakhstan's elites have overwhelmingly treated the country's great diversity as a liability. They have dealt with this, on the one hand, by seeking to homogenize the country, and on the other hand, to discursively overwrite ethnic differences through a discursive successor to the Soviet rhetoric about the 'friendship of the peoples,' namely the civic nationalist script of 'Eurasianism' (see Schatz 2004a). In any case, the implication of this is that substantive conversations about the 'nationality question' (*natsional'nyi vopros*) – that is, about Kazakh-Russian relations – are taboo. As such, public discussions of the 'nationality question' are strictly avoided (but for a consideration of how this surfaces in Kazakhstan's mass media, see Tussupova 2010).

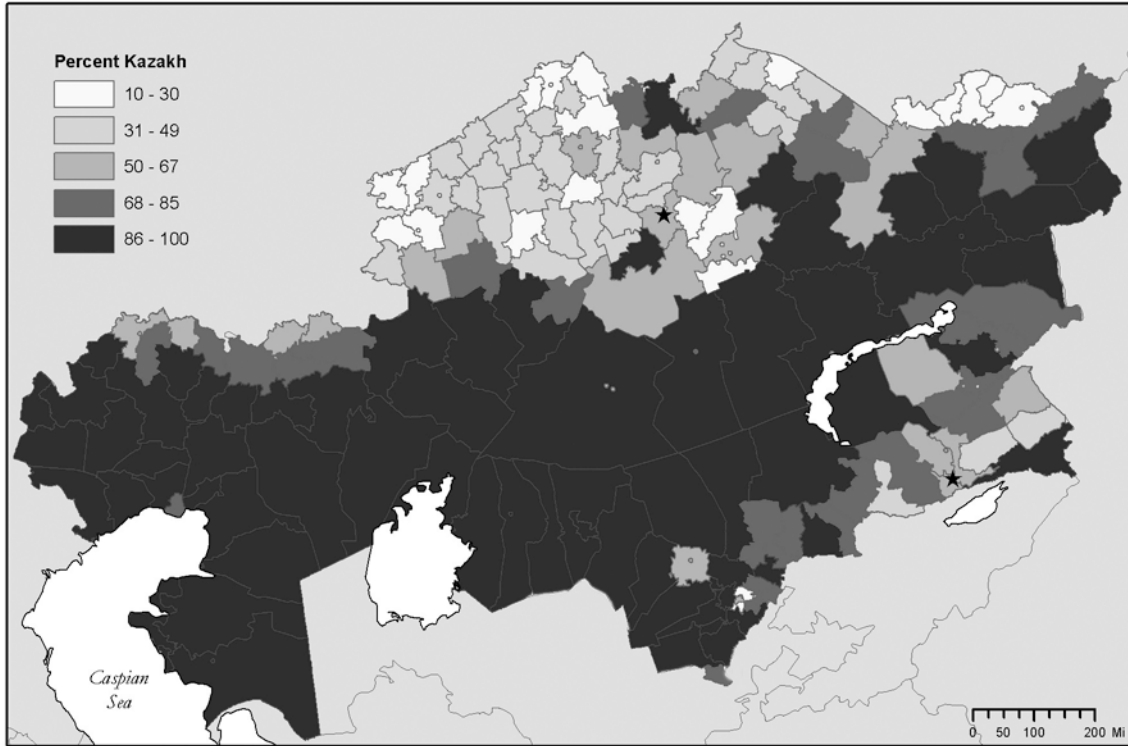


Figure 1. Kazakhs as a percent of total raion population. 2009 census data from the Agency for Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (ASRK 2010). Map source: Author.

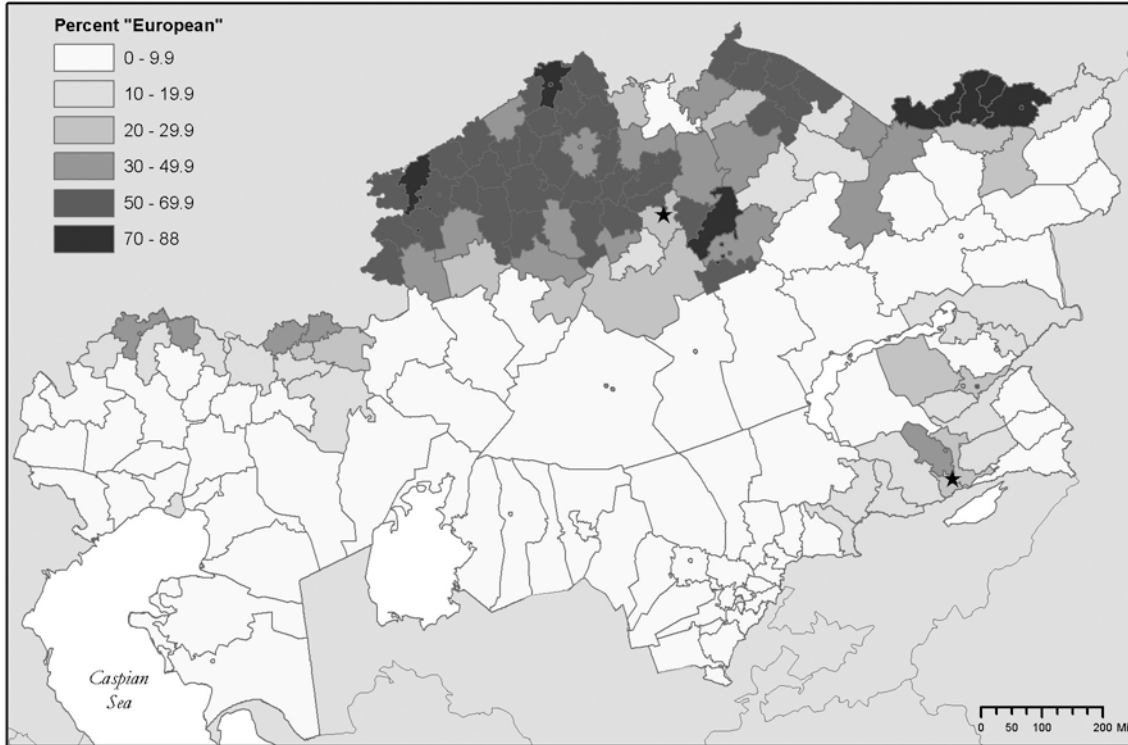


Figure 2. ‘Europeans’ as a percent of total raion population (Russians, Ukrainians, Belorusians, Germans, Poles, Moldovans, Lithuanians, Greek, Italian, Bulgarian, and English). 2009 census data from the Agency for Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (ASRK 2010). Map source: Author.

So while there may be a muted popular counter-narrative, in the state-promoted account of the capital change, the diversity of the north is to be celebrated: ‘by moving the capital to a multinational region, we are again affirming the course to establishing a stable, polyethnic government, preserving and perpetuating the friendship between nations populating Kazakhstan’ (Nazarbayev 2006, p. 334). While the official rhetoric underscores a need to redistribute an ethnically-unmarked population, it simultaneously highlights a concern with the ‘biological’ attributes of the territory. Indeed, central city narratives are commonly infused with various biological tropes. These are most evident in the ways that capitals have often been referred to as the ‘heart’ of the nation, in which they are symbolic of the national unity of a country riven with social differences. In Turkey, for example:

References to Ankara in official and popular publications of the time as ‘the heart of the nation’ (*ulusun kalbi*) point to more than the geographic centrality of its location within the boundaries of modern Turkey. It was a powerful metaphor for the organic unity of the nation, as in the other nationalist slogan of becoming ‘one body, one heart.’ (Bozdoğan 2001, p. 68)

As Bozdoğan suggests, these biological narratives are also connected to the perceived threat of territorial ‘dismemberment,’ ostensibly emanating from beyond the state’s borders. But in the case of Kazakhstan, we see the unification of this concern with social diversity and territorial integrity connected in fears of separatism and irredentism. Even though the fears of separatism are rarely acknowledged publicly by the regime’s discursive apparatus, it is still possible to hear the account reproduced by elites, such as the Astana master plan chief, Amanzhol Chikanayev. During my interview with him in July 2011, needing to show himself as a supporter of the regime, he began our interview by launching into an explanation about why the capital was moved, and finally declaring his support for the decision (despite my not having asked). In this political performance, he told me that the primary reason for the capital change was geopolitical, that there was a need to address the real threat of separatism. The move to the north was necessary, he argued, ‘to preserve the wholeness of the territory’ (*‘sokhronit’ tselost’ territorii’*). I asked for clarification on where the threat came from and he explained that, ‘We [i.e. the regime] couldn’t control the north or the west.’ Chikanayev’s mention of the west is a reference to the fact that this area is heavily influenced by a number of oil-rich Kazakh families, who are

suspected of wanting a degree of independence from the central administration (Schatz 2004a, p. 104).

While elites have been concerned with separatism in the north *and* the west, popular narratives tend to concentrate almost exclusively on the north.³ In large part, this reflects a popular memory of various acts of ‘provocation’ on the part of some Russian nationalists. The most cited example is when the prominent Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn claimed that the northern region of Kazakhstan, which has a predominantly ‘Russian’ demographic character, should be part of Russia and expressed his support for potential separatists (Wolfel 2002, p. 496). However, a popular narrative among many Kazakhs (and especially those with stronger than average nationalist sentiments) challenges the ‘naturalness’ of this Russian character. Although the colonial critique is markedly absent in official discourse in Kazakhstan, as compared to other Soviet successor states (e.g. Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan), some Kazakhs do consider the Russian and European settlement in the northern steppe as a naked act of Soviet-era colonization.

One of my informants, Gulnora, a Kazakh woman in her mid-50s and a university professor, for example, produced the commonplace Kazakh ethnic nationalist narrative that these northern territories were actually always ‘Kazakh,’ but only became Russified under Soviet policy. Having grown up in the northern city of Petropavlovsk, she lamented her minority status at school – she was one of only two Kazakh girls. ‘Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands campaign was never about cultivating the land, it was about settling more Russians there,’ she claimed. And regarding the move of the capital, she exclaimed, ‘*Pravil’no sdelali!*’ (‘They did it correctly!’), with the implication that it was needed to reassert Kazakh control over this area (author’s interview, 2009). A resolute nationalist, this woman’s views were typical of other particularly proud ethnic Kazakhs whom I interviewed. From their standpoint, the capital change was needed to counter this Russian dominance and to redistribute the Kazakh population toward the north.

Accompanying this conception of the north as Russian and/or culturally Russified is a conception of the ‘south’ as the home of ‘real’ or ‘traditional’ Kazakhs, whose superior Kazakh-language skills and social networks have notably plugged them into strategic government posts in the new administrative centre. The capital change is sometimes framed as a way to offset the demographic dominance of the southern region, as it has the highest density of inhabitants, especially as compared to the sparsely populated northern steppe area. But as I describe below, a counter-narrative among non-ethnic nationalists sees the capital change not as a way of offsetting

southern influence, but in fact of entrenching it and effectively colonizing the Russified north with their ethnic Kazakh nationalism/traditionalism.

Although they emphasize separations and differences, these scripts about regional divides actually work to produce a sense of the totality and indivisibility of the homeland. Like nationalism, these discourses ‘construct and maintain the past, present and future images of nation and homeland within a set of mutually understood and accepted parameters over time, so that members of the nation and homeland being made perceive both as ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’” (Kaiser 2002, p. 232). The broader territorial unit, which is described as consisting of various parts, comes to be taken for granted in these imaginaries. Yet, while these discourses about regionalism and separatism were central to my findings in the ethnographic dimensions of my research, they did not figure prominently in my survey data. I found the same contradiction with respect to discourses about the capital change being moved to the ‘centre’ of Kazakhstan to be far away from the border with China (ostensibly because of the threat of invasion), which I present elsewhere (Koch 2013). In the following section, I will take a closer look at the reasons that *were* most commonly cited in the survey and focus group responses to the question of why the capital was moved.

‘Why was the capital moved?’

In the country-wide survey, respondents were asked, ‘What were the most important reasons for the capital change?’ Based on my preliminary fieldwork, and what I understood to be the most common narratives, they were asked to rank what they considered to be the top three reasons for the capital change from a closed list of answers: 1) Almaty was located in an earthquake-prone region; 2) Almaty lacked sufficient space for government expansion; 3) clan politics, 4) Russian separatism in the north; 5) economic development in this region; 6) newly independent Kazakhstan needed a new capital; 7) a capital should be located in the centre of a country; 8) safer from invasion of foreigners (from whom?); 9) other (specify). Figure 3 shows the results from this question.

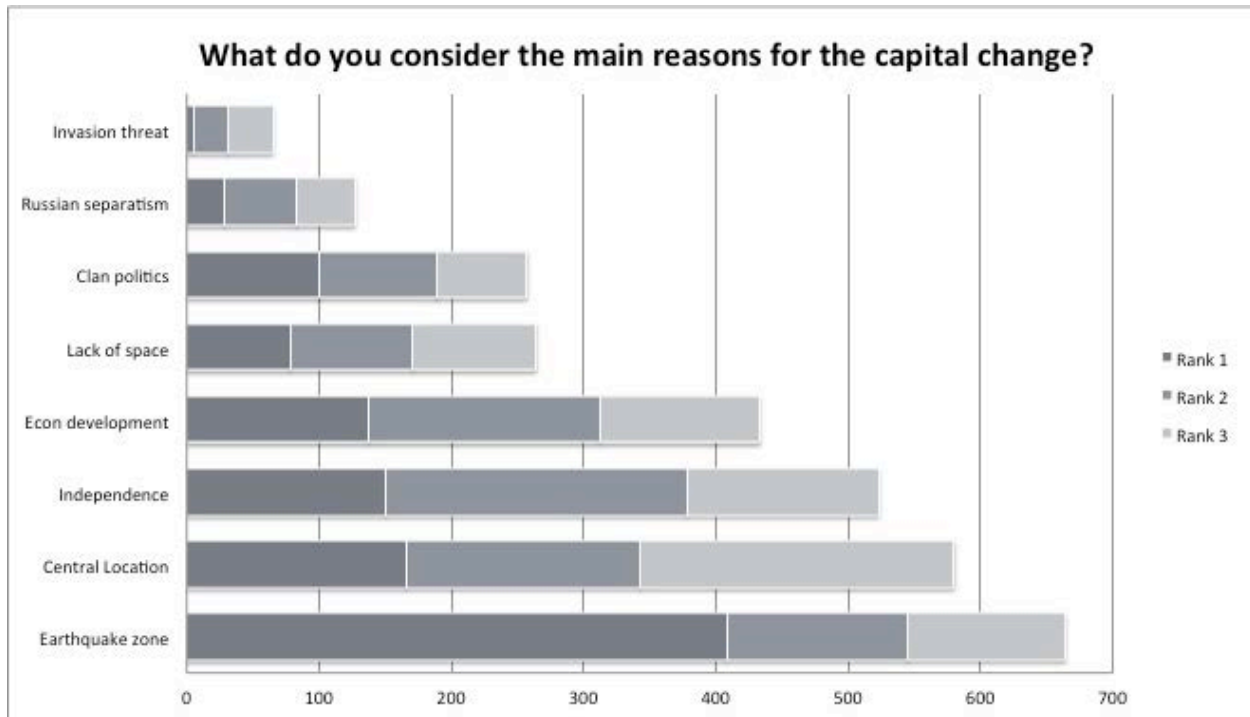


Figure 3. What do you think were the most important reasons for the capital change? Closed question with the possibility to write in an ‘other.’ October 2010. Source: Author.

The most common answer to the survey question was that Almaty is located in an earthquake-prone region (with 664 total mentions, of which 408 respondents ranked it first of three top choices). The earthquake answer was also frequently mentioned in interviews and in the focus group discussions about the capital change. The following examples are typical:

Moderator: Why was the capital moved precisely to the centre of Kazakhstan, to Astana?

FG4P2: In my opinion, Alma-Ata was in a seismologically unstable zone (*vneseismoustochivoi zone*). [...] It’s always like that around mountains. And if the capital is in the middle of the country, then it is in itself (*i po svoemu*) protected in the case of a military situation.

FG2P9: To relieve Alma-Ata. It is overloaded [with people]. And it is in a seismological zone.

FG5P5: I don’t know if this is the main reason, but Astana is on a swamp and there are no earthquakes. Because of that it is possible to build skyscrapers. And in Alma-Ata, there is seismological instability and skyscrapers could not be developed there.

The seismological argument reflects an official narrative, but it is notable that participants, especially in the focus groups and the survey, emphasize this answer over others. Of all the official explanations, this is arguably the most depoliticized: the move is constructed as something that had to be done for safety and on the basis of ‘objective’ physical geographic facts. The argument that a capital should be located in the centre of a country operates in a similarly depoliticized fashion. This was the second most popular response in the survey (with 580 total mentions, including being ranked first 166 times, second 177 times, and third 237 times), and the third was that Kazakhstan needed a new capital as a newly independent state (523 total mentions, including being ranked first 150 times, second 228 times, and third 145 times).

In the focus groups, some would simply repeat this reasoning, as if the properness of Astana’s central location were self-evident: ‘A capital should be located in the centre of the government’ (FG5P3); while others perceived a certain symbolism in the capital’s move closer to Russia and further from China. In the words of one participant, ‘The capital change – it is an artificial separation from the territory of China and closer to Russia – Russia because of our union, [they are] our friend’ (FG3P8) (for a full treatment of this theme, see Koch 2013). Others saw the symbolism as less rooted in geopolitical alignments, but more generally as a statement about Kazakhstan’s uniqueness for the imagined global audience:

Moderator: Why is it important that the capital is located in the centre of the republic, in the centre of the country?

FG1P9: I think that it wasn’t necessary when they made the decision; [it is] symbolic. But if you take many countries, like America, [which is] very developed, Washington is not located in the centre of America. Moscow is not located in the centre of Russia. Delhi is not located in the centre of India. Here it was purely symbolic that this specific city was selected – you could say to stand out from other countries.

Various group members: Yes, yes.

This focus group participant does not mention Ottawa, but this *symbolic* centrality was key to the selection of the Canadian capital: ‘A principal factor considered for each site was relative location, with specific attention being given to centrality. Centrality is a highly relative concept. The crucial question is, of course, centre of what and in what sense?’ (Knight 1977, p. 296; see also Holston 1989). But in general, the participants tended not to critically reflect on the meaning of centrality, or seek to articulate any alternative visions of ‘relative’ centrality that Knight (1977) so vividly traces (and which are apparent in this paper’s epigraph from President

Nazarbayev). Despite their recognition of the symbolic significance of the capital change, ‘centrality’ was primarily conceived of in its geometric sense.

The fourth most common response to the survey was that the capital was moved for the purposes of economic development in this region (with 433 total mentions, including being ranked first 138 times, second 171 times, and third 121 times). The city’s provision of economic opportunities for Kazakhstanis is a consistent theme in strategic planning documents (e.g. Kazakhstan-2030) and President Nazarbayev’s yearly addresses (most recently, e.g. Nazarbayev, 2011), and it was repeated consistently in the focus groups. This was especially apparent through the trope of Astana ‘opening up new opportunities’ (*perspektivy*) (e.g. Nazarbayev 2005, p. 31, p. 34) and correcting regional disparities within the country. One discussion illustrates this clearly:

FG1P9: Maybe more potential (*perspektiv*) was seen exactly in this city, exactly in the centre.

FG1P5: In Kazakhstan, we say the south, the southern part, is very developed in terms of industry and the economy (*interjection from another: yes!*) and in the north we say, it is not developed. Even in the north – I was there myself, in Petropavlovsk, there it is terrible (*uzhasno*). In one word, the city there is terrible. I was in shock. You can’t compare the north and south. [...] Our (*u nas*) south is very developed, compared to the north.

FG1P9: I know that when the new capital was chosen, they [originally] wanted to move it to the west, to the city of Aktyubinsk. And it seemed on the basis that the west is also a very economically-developed region.

Various group members: (*interjection*) Yes!

FG1P9: It seems that the Astana region was chosen precisely because it is necessary to develop this side in particular, so that there was not development here, development there, and here a gap. In order to fill the gap.

Another participant showed a mastery of the official reasoning, as well:

FG4P9: It is also good from the side that Alma-Ata took a hit. And now that the capital was moved, new opportunities (*perspektivy*) have opened up and some people around the country as a whole will start to migrate (*kochevat*) and everywhere, little by little, earn [money] (*zarabatyvat*), [so that] the economy picks up.

All these narratives about Astana’s geographic location, simultaneously contribute to producing the ‘state effect’ and the ‘territory effect’ in contemporary Kazakhstan; citizens actively participate in weaving the state’s myth of coherence through producing their mental maps of the country. But the act of discussing the capital change also has an important subject-forming effect, in that they identify themselves as citizens of this state, located within its geometrically-conceived confines, through the ‘complex deixis of little words’ such as ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘our’

(Billig 1995, p. 106). But it is notable that in these discussions about the capital change, the speakers also position themselves as separate from the land. The point may appear obvious, but unlike their nomadic ancestors, who have historically been framed as part of the natural landscape (Brown 2001, p. 30), these modern subjects are detached from the state's territory. Rather, they are the social 'stuff' that the state governs.

Conclusion

All these commentaries on Astana's central location within the country call into action a new and particular spatial imaginary. In it, neither Kazakhstan as a territorial unit is questioned, nor is the geometric understanding of space. Both are thoroughly naturalized. Although a handful of my informants pointed to the symbolism of the location, they did not dispute the fact that one could even locate a 'geographical centre' of the country. It is also striking to note that they never referenced how 'centrality' was redefined since the end of the Soviet Union, where Moscow was the 'the *axis mundi*, around which the Soviet world turned' (McCannon 1995, p. 26). Given the territorial reconfiguration, what is geographically central for citizens of the new state is very different from how centrality was imagined by Soviet citizens – but these discussions illustrate how this is largely taken for granted. Although these participants were all raised in the independent state, the way they speak about centrality nonetheless suggests the naturalization of the state's definition of its territory in the citizenry's spatial imagination. This naturalization is precisely the mechanism that makes the territory effect 'sticky,' why it acquires such force in contemporary affairs: it becomes an abstract framework and background set outside of the realm of politics.

As I have shown here, the vision of power diffusing out of the centre is characteristic of the 'centrally-located' capital city strategy. But the enactment of this strategy cannot be 'the same' everywhere because the imaginations of the territorial unit (of which the capital is the centre) are nowhere the same. This inherent diversity is precisely why Foucault urges us not to trace various regimes of governmentality through history, but rather to focus on *specific strategies* (or 'technologies') of government; for 'there is a history of the actual techniques themselves' (Foucault 2007, p. 8). Through considering the central city strategy, which sits at the intersection of various practices of government, I have sought to demonstrate how specific actors participate in the production of geopolitical imaginaries, and simultaneously constitute

themselves as subjects and agents. By considering the capital change discourse, I have illustrated how this works to develop a particular 'regime of truth' of the state, its territory, and society. These new state and territorial 'effects' are *not* an illusion; nor, for that matter, is Astana. On the basis of the survey and focus group results, the official rationales for the capital change carry meaning for Kazakhstanis today. In the era of independence, the rhetorical practices of discussing the capital change represent a key element to how the myth of coherence of the state, territory, and society have been strategically woven in Kazakhstan.

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¹ Many of the criteria that Nazarbayev (2006, p. 338-339) outlines as criteria of a proper capital city in his book *In the Heart of Eurasia* appear to come straight from this text. I have never found an explicit reference to *La Métropolitée* in Nazarbayev's writings, but he often claims to have conducted an extensive study of capital city schemes all over the world (Nazarbayev, 2005, 2006, 2010) and given the uncanny resemblance of his texts and Le Maître's ideas, it would be shocking if he and his experts had *not* read the work.

² For a detailed account of the campaign's social and environmental consequences, Pohl 1999; Cameron 2010.

³ In my estimation, this is likely because of the elites' heightened interest in the oil resources found in the west, and the general population's comparative disregard for this issue.