

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: KAZAKHSTAN AND THE SOVIET LEGACY: BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE

AUTHORS: Vakur SUMER

PAGES: 115-117

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/957818>

**KAZAKHSTAN AND THE SOVIET LEGACY:
BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE**

Vakur SUMER¹

¹ Eurasian Research Institute, 050004 Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: vsumer@gmail.com

Jean-Francois Caron (Ed.), Kazakhstan and the Soviet Legacy: Between Continuity and Rupture, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. pp. 209.

In December 2019, Kazakhstan celebrated its 28th year of independence. After nearly three decades of independence, it is now good time to assess the how the state of Kazakhstan has established its presence in the eyes of the global community as well as in the eyes of its citizens. The book “Kazakhstan and the Soviet Legacy: Between Continuity and Rupture”, edited by Jean-François Caron is a timely contribution on this matter. The book’s main argument is centered around the statement that Kazakhstan’s governance is showing more continuity with its colonial past and that its willingness to assert its uniqueness is still mainly a symbolic phenomenon than a reality.

The book is full of examples from a range of topics covering a lot of ground. The reader, whether a graduate student on post-Soviet space or an expert of sociology or political geography will surely find the story intriguing. While the book seems to present a panoramic picture on today’s -as well as yesterday’s- Kazakhstan, it heavily relies on Nur-Sultan-based, and specifically Nazarbayev University based experts which casts shadow on the diversity of the views actually present in the country.

Aziz Burkhanov and Neil Collins contributed the book with a chapter on the political Culture in Kazakhstan. The authors basically divided Kazakh society into three: disenchanted or ‘critical’ citizens; civic or ‘stealth’ citizens; and, nostalgic or ‘enthusiastic’ citizens. The chapter argues that the political culture in Kazakhstan is a combination of continuity of the Soviet ‘passive majority’ political legacy and a new, emerging group of pro-active citizens, who are able to act even in a politically restrictive environment.

In his chapter “End of an Era? Kazakhstan and the Fate of Multivectorism”, Charles J. Sullivan underlines the significance of Kazakhstan’s unique position in international arena which deems it necessary for the country to adhere a wise foreign policy. This position unfolds itself in at least four dimensions: Kazakhstan is a newly independent, a landlocked, a multiethnic country, bordering with two great powers of Russia and China. For Sullivan, this wise policy should be “proactive multivectorism”, which Kazakhstan used to follow until recent

crises. Regarding the crisis between Russia and Georgia, Kazakhstan issued a “muted protest”, which was, according to Sullivan, understandable. However, as to the Crimea problem, Kazakhstan has more openly aligned with Russia. To illustrate, Kazakhstan abstained from voting on the United Nations resolution concerning the “territorial integrity of Ukraine” in March 2014. The chapter also summarizes the official Kazakh attitude towards the Syria problem.

Beatrice Penati shows in her chapter, that the way the government has been dealing with the protection of environment over the last 25 years (Penati calls this “Kazakhstani way”) shows a lot of similarities with the old Soviet way. Even though the government has emphasized its willingness to correct the environmental tragedies of the past, namely, the drying up of the Aral Sea and the long-term nuclear contamination in eastern Kazakhstan (Semipalatinsk/Semey), it has not challenged the former logic in real terms. Like in the Soviet period, environment has to be dealt with engineers and economists. To illustrate, in Kazakhstan 2050 strategy, “ecology” is still perceived as “management of natural resources” and technical solutions are prioritized.

Alexei Trochev and Gavin Slade’s analysis of Kazakhstan’s Criminal Justice Reforms is an interesting one as this subject is one of the least studied themes in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Authors emphasize the need for further research on the ground with an aim to answer how and why some judicial reforms are accepted, while others are ignored.

Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai’s chapter, “Comparing Political and Economic Attitudes: A Generational Analysis” looks closer to the ideas and attitudes of the “Nazarbayev Generation”, the youth in the independent Kazakhstan in comparison with the transition generation (i.e. the people who have witnessed both the Soviet and the post-Soviet Kazakhstan). In their lengthy analysis which is loaded with data, the authors conclude that the youth in today’s Kazakhstan is heavily affected by the official views emitted by the state authorities. The “regime values, policies and practices”, as the authors call, have a strong shaping power over the young people’s mind-sets.

In the chapter “Youth Organizations and State–Society Relations in Kazakhstan: The Durability of the Leninist Legacy”, Dina Sharipova provides a detailed analysis of state-society relations in Kazakhstan after 1991. Sharipova observes that the Leninist legacy is still considerably alive in Kazakhstan through the functioning of similar structures and institutions as well as application of the same strategies by the ruling elites to build the state and nation. And for Sharipova, the creation of mass youth organizations including Zhas Otan, Zhas Ulan, and Zhas Kyran Soviet models and ideas. The hierarchical and centralized structures of the youth organizations are copied from those of Soviet youth organizations.

Hélène Thibault’s chapter on religion in independent Kazakhstan reaches intriguing conclusions contrary to some alarming reports disseminated by global think-tanks. The author, although aware of the threatening potential in unchecked radical religion movements, does not see a considerable risk for Kazakhstan. Thibault substantiates this view through three points. First, despite Kazakhstan suffered from a number of terrorist acts by radical Islamists in recent years, perpetrators seem not to be connected to global jihadist networks. Second,

these acts of violence can be better explained by pressing social problems of the country such as unemployment, poverty, and perception of injustice. And third, the secular structure of the Kazakh society is a powerful barrier against the radical religious ideas to thrive in the country.

Editor Jean-François Caron contributes the book with a chapter on the urbanism in the capital city of Kazakhstan, renamed recently as “Nur-Sultan”. He argues that Nur-Sultan’s architectural design reveals a “Kazakhisation” policy which, according to the author, is at odds with the more liberal rhetoric of the Kazakh government which usually emphasizes the harmony of multiple ethnicities. According to Caron, Kazakhisation, as exemplified by Nur-Sultan’s architecture, is a policy that represents a rupture with the Soviet and Russian legacy of the country.

All in all, this book tries to cover many faces of Kazakhstan. From religion to architecture, from youth to issues of justice, the reader may find many illustrative cases to compare and contrast the current policies of identity in Kazakhstan, with the legacy of the Soviet Union. However, one critical dimension of independent Kazakhstan seems to be largely ignored. It is the ongoing cultural integration of Turkic nations which Kazakhstan attaches great significance to. The word Turkic appears only twice in a single page, with reference to historical antecedents of Kazakh ethnicity. However, since its independence, Kazakhstan became increasingly engaged with the rest of the Turkic world. Today, Nur-Sultan hosts the Turkic Academy, science and research center of the Turkic world, of which Kazakhstan was a founding member back in 2012. Turkic Academy is an international organization under the aegis of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council) which was established in 2009 as an intergovernmental organization with an aim of advancing the cooperation among its member countries. Likewise, Kazakhstan is a founding and active member of this organization. Hence, this book could have been more complete with a chapter on Kazakhstan’s new web of relations within the Turkic world.

Overall, the book promises a good read for the students of Central Asia and Eurasia, in particular. The cohort of authors is articulate about their cases and well-presented their ideas. I recommend this book to both general reader searching for an introductory piece to the politics and society of Kazakhstan and Central Asia, and also to the expert-level reader who is inclined to find food for refined thought.