CAN SOME SORT OF 'DONBAS AND TRANSNISTRIA SEPARATISM' HAPPEN IN KAZAKHSTAN?

A look at (potential) enhancers and impediments.[1]

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This article examines whether separatist dynamics like those in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk and in the Moldovan region of Transnistria could also appear in the northern and northeastern provinces and districts of Kazakhstan that border Russia and whose populations comprise large Slavic and Russophone minorities, if not majorities. It discusses the social and political factors and the circumstances that have engendered secessionism in the aforementioned areas, and compares them to the situation in northern Kazakhstan.

Keywords:

communitarianism; Donbas (Donetsk and Lugansk); de facto states; northern Kazakhstan; regionalism; (internationalist) separatism; social geographic fault lines.

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'Donbas and Transnistria separatism'?

In order to examine the question in the title of this article, one has to clearly define what, exactly, is meant by 'Donbas and Transnistria separatism'. Generally speaking, the expression refers to scenarios and movements that occur in states of the former Soviet space in which regions with sizeable portions of ethnic Russians or at least of Russophones among their populations practically seceded from these states after initial violent social communitarian unrest, and became so-called '*de facto* states'—which are polities that have several institutional political characteristics of states but that are not recognised and operate on the basis of a highly informal economy and hybrid governance systems.[3]

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3 For a more in-depth examination of the concept and the functioning of *de facto* states, or *quasi-states* as they are also called, see Andreas Hahn, *Realitäten der Quasi-Staatlichkeit: zur politischen Ökonomie alternativer Herrschaftsordnungen* (Duisburg: Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden an der Universität Duisburg-Essen, 2006), https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/duepublico_derivate_00029211/report82.pdf.; François Grünewald and Anne Rieu, "Les 'quasi-états':'OVNI géostratégiques' ou outil de déstabilisation politique?," *Diplomatie*, no. 30 (January-February 2008): 34-38, https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ArtFG_AR_quasi-Etats_Diplomatie30_2008.pdf.

This is essentially what happened ten years ago with the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Lugansk[4] in the Donbas region of southeastern Ukraine until the full Russian invasion of early 2022, and two and a half decades earlier, from 1990-1992, in the Moldovan region of Transnistria.[5] All of these secessions were preceded by armed conflict, though in Transnistria, this was considerably shorter, less intensive and less devastating than in Donetsk and Lugansk, the two Donbas provinces in which secession was attempted. Importantly, the separatism did not legitimise itself on the basis of 'classical' ethno-nationalism, at least not openly, but mobilised and legitimated itself in its discourse and political symbols, on the basis of a regionalist and a civic identity and the survival and defence thereof.[6] And finally, even if the process in all cases was rooted in and determined by very local and regional circumstances and dynamics, the (semi)-covert and even open involvement of a variety of actors from Russia played a crucial role, and eventually turned the polities into Russian protectorates.

Figure 1 - General administrative-political map of Kazakhstan

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4 Officially called *Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika* (People's Republic of Donetsk) and *Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika* (People's Republics of Lugansk) in Russian, the areas under the control of the separatist Donetsk and Lugansk polities prior to the invasion was some 8,900 and 8,730 km², respectively. Their joint population was reportedly some 3.7 million in 2017. For an overview and examination of the events leading to their secession, see Sabine Fischer, *Der Donbas-Konflikt. Widerstreitende Narrative und Interessen, schwieriger Friedensprozess* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2019), https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019S03/.

5 Officially called the *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika* (literally *Cis*-Nistrian Moldovan Republic) in Russian, Transnistria covers an area of 4,163 km² and has a reported population of some 469,000. For a thorough examination of the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, see Gilles-Emmanuel Jaquet, *Histoire du conflit moldo-transnistrien* (Saint-Denis: Connaîssances et Savoirs – Droit et Sciences politiques, 2017).

6 For this aspect, see Alexandr Voronici, "Internationalist separatism and the political use of 'historical statehood' in the unrecognised republics of Transnistria and Donbass," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 3 (May 2019): 288-302, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1594918; and Ion Marandici, "Multiethnic parastates and nation-building: the case of the Transnistrian imagined community", Nationalities Papers , 48 (1) Special Issue 1: Special Issue on the Emergence and Resilience of Parastates , 2020 , 61 - 82.

Why the interest for Kazakhstan in this matter?

The question whether something similar could happen in the northern and north-eastern provinces and districts of Kazakhstan that border Russia and whose social geography and cultural composition comprise large 'European'[7] and Russophone minorities, or even majorities, has been preoccupying foreign and local researchers, media and, not in the least, the country's authorities for some time already.[8] This was spawned by two major momentums: the run-up to, and the seven to eight years following, Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, and the secession attempts in the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk in the mid-2010s.

The run-up to and the seven to eight years following Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 was not only a period when Kazakhstan as a state and society was confronted head-on with the crisis preceding and following the Soviet collapse. The Yugoslav wars (1992-1995) which occurred during that same period influenced much of the way that one looked at issues of ethnicity and regionalism in successor countries of the Soviet Union. Consequently, there was an assumption that the demonstrations by Kazakh nationalists in Uralsk that took place in the summer of 1990 and again in 1991 after local Cossacks rallied for the return of the Uralsk province to Russia, the 1994 rally in support of the establishment of a Slav autonomous area in Ust-Kamenogorsk in 1994 and the foiled 'Pugachev rebellion' in Ust-Kamenogorsk in 1999, the aim of which allegedly was to establish some sort of 'Transnistria', would unavoidably result in a separatist dynamic.[9]

Because of Kazakhstan's paradoxical approach of 'indigenisation' of the state organs, law enforcement and state-affiliated corporations, all while actively promoting an 'inclusive patriotism' that recognises and accommodates ethnic minorities because of the absence of effective external support for separatists and because of the dissuasive effect in society of the ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus, Slavic-northern secessionist scenarios did not materialise.[10] What is more, most ethnic violence that did take place in Kazakhstan between 1989 and 2020 was not of a separatist nature and was not between Kazakhs and Slavs but mostly between Kazakhs and groups originating from the Caucasus, expatriate

7 By Kazakhstan's 'European population' we mean citizens who (declared themselves to) belong to ethnic groups who (were) settled in the area of present-day Kazakhstan at some point in history and often in circumstances defined by population policies and social engineering in the Soviet Union, but whose ethnographic core areas are situated on the European continent. The main groups in this category are the ethnic Russians and Russian sub-ethnic groups like Cossacks, the Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles and the ethnic Germans. In 2019, country-wide, they numbered some 3.7 million of a total population of 18.39 million. A sizeable part of Kazakhstan's non-Russian European ethnic groups is linguistically assimilated into the country's wider Russophone population.

8 For examples of recent (Russian) media reporting on alleged separatism in northern Kazakhstan, see Konstantin Kolosov, "Stepnoratizm. V Severnom Kazakhstane na fone voyny v Ukraine obostrilis' separatistskiye nastroyeniya (Stepparatism). In northern Kazakhstan, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, separatist sentiments have worsened)", *Novaya Gazeta*, 13 July 2023, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/13/stepnoratizm.; and Timur Yermashev, "'Russkiy mir' na severe Kazakhstana. Spetsreportazh o tekh, kto podderzhivayet separatizm i khochet, chtoby region stal Rossiyey ('The Russian world' in the north of Kazakhstan. Special report on the supporters of separatism who want the region to become Russian)", *Nastoyashcheye vremya*, 7 July 2023, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/est-li-separatizm-v-severnom-kazahstane-spetsreportazh-nv-s-granitsy-kazahstana-i-rf/32483364.html.

9 See Michèle Commercio, "The 'Pugachev rebellion' in the context of post-Kazakh nationalization," Nationalities Papers 32, no. 1 (March 2004): 87-113, https://www.uvm.edu/~mcommerc/NP04.pdf. According to a poll held among Russian residents of Ust-Kamenogorsk in 2000 and quoted on page 102 in the mentioned source, 52 percent of the respondents were in favour of some sort of (re)-unification with Russia then. It is not clear what the outcome would be if a similar survey were to be held today. In the meantime, much of what there is in terms of a secessionist mood has moved to social media which give a rather skewed picture.

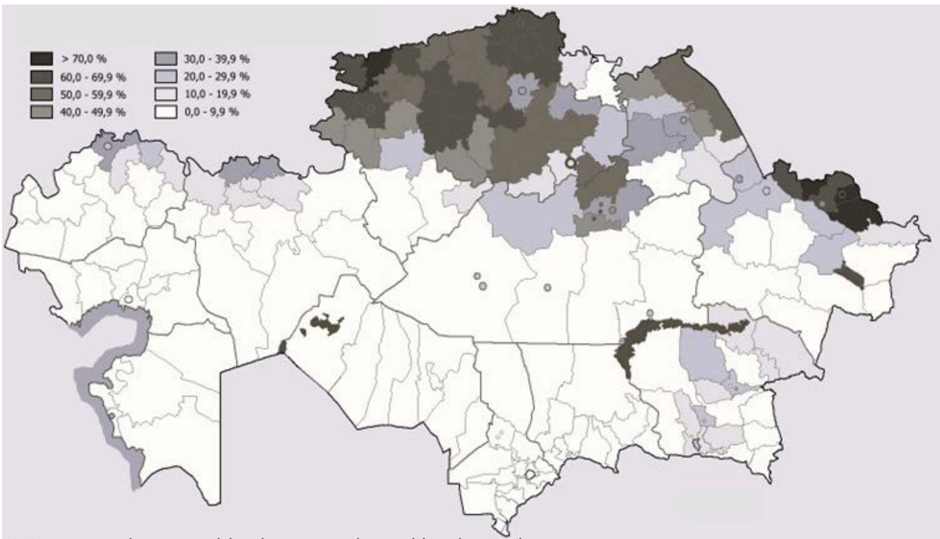
10 For the 'indigenisation policies', see Commercio, 93-99. For an in-depth discussion of the position of the Russian population in Kazakhstan's post-1991 state-building, see Béate Eschment, *Hat Kasachstan ein 'russisches Problem'? Revision eines Katastrophenbildes* (Cologne: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, 1998): 27-73; 104-8, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/4436.

Turks and people of Chinese origin.[11]

The second momentum that drew attention to the issue of separatism in the north was the outbreak of the pre-invasion war in the Ukrainian Donbas. As reports about small groups of volunteer fighters from Kazakhstan in Donbas started to circulate already early in the war,[12] concerns grew about the potential impact of returnee fighters in the whole country and in the north in particular. This suggests that at the official level, somehow conflict potential is still considered to smoulder there.[13] In 2017 and 2018, courts in Aqtöbe, Ust-Kamenogorsk and other cities sentenced Kazakhstani citizens who fought in Donbas on the separatist side to three to five years' imprisonment. In autumn 2022, the authorities also issued a ban on its citizens fighting for either side in Ukraine.

What areas of Kazakhstan are we specifically talking about in relation to the topic of this article? In early 2023, the overall official share of Russians in Kazakhstan's population of 19.76 million was some 3 million or 15.5 percent. The share of the country's enlarged 'European population' at that same moment was 3.64 million which comes to 18.45 percent.[14] While such national averages are certainly helpful to obtain an insight into the country's ethno-demographic situation, when it comes to interpreting communitarian dynamics, it is more relevant to look at the district and city levels. As can be seen on the map in Figure 2, Kazakhstan's Russian and broader European population is especially present in the country's northern tier, in the districts which are coloured from dark grey to black.

Figure 2- Population shares of Kazakhstan's 'European population' at the district and city-under-republican-subordination level in 2022.



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We are talking about a belt that stretches roughly from the region of Ust-

11 For an overview of the violent ethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan between 1989 and 2020, see Ruslan Karatabanov, Kulchikan Janaleyeva, and Sergey Pashkov, "Kazakhstan's multi-ethnicity: factor of inter-ethnic tension and development of cross-border tourism," *Geo - Journal of Tourism and Geo-sites* XIII (29), no. 2 (2020): 740, https://gtg.webhost.uoradea.ro/PDF/GTG-2-2020/gtg.29227-502.pdf.

12 See, for example, "Na vostoke Ukrainy voyuyut Kazakhi (Kazakhs fight in Ukraine's east')," *Ural'skaya nedelya*, 8 July 2014, https://www.uralskweek.kz/2014/07/08/na-vostoke-ukrainy-voyuyut-kazaxi/

13 Although it is not officially said that way, Kazakhstan's prohibition of dual citizenship, which was first included in the citizenship law of 1991 and reaffirmed in later legislation, primarily aims to prevent ethnically Russian citizens in the northern parts of the country massively acquiring Russian passports, as happened in Transnistria and later in Donetsk and Lugansk. See, for instance, Nicoleta Mirza, "'Passportisation' in Transnistria," *Centrum pro bezpečnostní analýzy a prevenci*, 8 February 2021, https://cbap.cz/archiv/4657.

14 For a definition of Kazakhstan's 'European population', see note 7.

Kamenogorsk in the east to the area of Uralsk in the west.[15] As can be seen on the map, in quite a number of districts in this tier, Slavs and ethnic Germans form over half to up to more than two-thirds of the local population. For the sake of clarity, we do not suggest that the existence of specific regionalist identities nor the concentration of ethnic-linguistic minorities in parts of a country automatically lead to conflict and secessionism. In fact, they can perfectly exist and maintain a degree of individuality in a unitary state. Whether secessionist dynamics or at least a support base for these come into being or not depends on a number of factors which we will now examine more closely.

The issue of determinants

On the basis of research on what at some point caused a separatist dynamic in Donetsk, Lugansk (Ukraine) and also Transnistria (Moldova), a number of factors and conditions can be identified which can hypothetically fuel, or attenuate, something similar in northern Kazakhstan. It is often tempting to analyse this kind of secession scenario through the lense of abstract geopolitics focusing on external support. Although the latter factor was certainly crucial in the cases of Donetsk, Lugansk and Transnistria, one must not ignore the most fundamental local and internal societal and identitarian factors. For in general, much comes from the perceptions of security and perspectives of survival of the self-group within the existing polity and society.[16]

What did it take in precedent cases?

There is quite a large body of research literature on what exactly caused and drove the pre-2022 invasion and secessionist war in the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Lugansk.[17] What generally comes to the fore if we cross-compare the sample literature is, that secessionism does not need large majority support among the grassroots in order for it to turn into an insurgency. If the sociological evidence cited in the literature is to be believed, the idea of some form of secession was initially sup-

15 Respectively called Öskemen and Oral on the map in Figure 1.

16 Marvin Suesse, "Causes and consequences of secessionist movements: lessons from the Soviet breakup," *VIVES Briefing*, no. 2016/07, 4, https://feb.kuleuven.be/VIVES/publications/briefings/Briefings/2016/Briefing-201608. A number of other relevant factors which we included in this examination come from cases beyond the post-Soviet realm where certain sectors of populations of European descent in majority non-European societies come to support some form of secessionism or at least the creation of parallel societies in a specific geographic area. More concretely, see Chris Jooste, "A Volkstaat for Afrikaners," *Indicator* 15, no. 3 (January 1998): 21-27, https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/AJA0259188X_1602.

17 See, amongst many others, Elise Giuliano, "Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (January 2018): 158-78, Elise Giuliano, *Istoki separatizma: narodnoe nedovol'stovo v Donetske i Lugankse [Root causes of separatism: popular discontent in Donetsk and Lugansk]* (Washington: PONARS Eurasia, 2015), https://www.ponarseurasia.org/8185/.; Sergiy Kudelia, *Vnutrennie istochniki vooruzhennogo konflikta na Donbasse [Internal causes of armed conflict in Donbas]* (Washington: PONARS Eurasia, 2016), https://www.ponarseurasia.org/7268/.; Tobias Sæther, "War of broken fraternity: competing explanations for the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2014," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 36, no. 1 (June 2023): 28–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2023.2201114.; Courtney V. Bower, Mark J. Minton, and John I. Carruthers, "Endogenously driven de peripheralization through political secession: the case of the Donbas region," *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 15, no. 7 (September 2023), 1647-1664, https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12661.; and Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, "War and identity: the case of the Donbas in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2–3 (January 2018): 139–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209.

ported to one or another extent by, on average, a bit over one-quarter of the populations in Donetsk and Lugansk. Though a minority, it was not a marginal group either. Yet it took a number of other circumstances and events for the situation to take the turn that it eventually took.

To begin with, it needed a major crisis leading to and following popular protests in the country's centre that led to a level of state fragmentation and elite factionalism as well as to a collapse of the capacity to keep or restore order in Donetsk and Lugansk. Then, there was the perceived rise in ultranationalism—often labelled as 'fascism' in separatist circles—among the titular group aiming to establish an exclusive ethno-state at the detriment of non-titular groups and ethnic minorities.[18] This was also at play in Transnistria at the time. There were the foreseen changes in language legislation at the detriment of the Russian language in particular, that were felt to be a prelude to sociocultural marginalisation if not outright expulsion of ethnic Russian and Russian speakers.

Furthermore, there was the perception integrated into regionalist and secessionist discourse of discriminatory redistribution, in which Donbas as an industrial heartland was felt to gain less than it contributed to the country, not only in terms of social investments but also in terms of recognition and respect. Instrumental also were various forms of external (i.e., Russian) support for the secessionists and their polities, be it with (para)military support, economic financial and relief aid and political agents who try to influence and 'steer' a local regional movement in a preferred direction.

To this one must add the belief that Ukraine's intended geopolitical reorientation and integration course towards Central-Western Europe and the EU would not only lead to the complete marginalisation of the industrial regions of Lugansk and Donetsk but also destroy their social identity because of de-industrialisation and the imposition of the 'liberal values' that come with EU integration.[19] Lastly, but certainly not least, the emotional climate and the role and impact of both online social networks and traditional media are crucial factors to consider.

Identitarian self-defence

To see whether patterns that appeared in Donetsk, Lugansk and Transnistria could also apply to parts of northern Kazakhstan, is it crucial to emphasise that all three cases were not instances of ethnonationalist separatism implemented in the interests of a specific ethnic group. They are rather instances of what Alexandr Voronovici calls 'internationalist separatism'. This is a form of separatism that legitimates itself as the defender of a Russophone internationalist societal identity and Russian *Leitkultur* that is inherited from the Soviet Union, and that is perceived to be under threat by ultranationalism, globalisation or Westernization, 'the EU' or something else. As the said author states,

"(...) there has hardly been talk of Transnistrian or Donbas nations. Even after the establishment of the unrecognized states, separatist leaders have preferred to use the word narod, 'the people', rather than 'the nation'. The separatist regimes declare

18 By 'titular group' we mean the ethnic community for which the state was historically created and after which it is named. So in Ukraine it is the Ukrainians, in Kazakhstan the Kazakhs, in Belarus the Belarussians and so on.

19 For the consulted literature base, see note 17.

themselves to be representatives of the local multiethnic population, united by, amongst other things, rejection of any ethnic nationalism (… and are thus …) a specific case of what can be termed 'internationalist separatism'. (…) (I)n both cases there is an explicit pro-Russian orientation (… which is…) of a rossiisksii (referring to Russia) rather than russkii (Russian)… character. (…) The leaders of Transnistria and Donbas declare that these regions belong to a larger multi-ethnic space, be it called 'the Soviet Union', 'Orthodox Slavic civilization' or 'the Russian world' (Russkii mir). Internationalist separatism in this logic emerges as a reaction to central governments' attempts to build a nation-state rather than a state-nation".[20]

To what extent do the populations in question identify with the nation-state of Kazakhstan? Although it is recently reported that this identification is increasing among the younger segments of the residual Slavic population, it has traditionally been substantially lower among non-Kazakh citizens compared to the titular Kazakh majority. In 2016, for example, 87.7 percent of the surveyed ethnic Kazakhs expressed pride in being citizens of Kazakhstan. Among Russians, it was 51.6 percent and among other groups of European as well as non-European origin, it was 58.5 percent.[21] Beyond these national averages, identification rates are substantially lower in the north. In Petropavlovsk in 2015, for example, only 19 percent of the surveyed local Russians considered Kazakhstan as their homeland, while 23 percent considered their locality—so the city and district of Petropavlovsk—to be their homeland instead.[22]

This brings us to the question of how 'historically ours' the Russian and Russophone populations consider the areas in question, and what the role of the self-group plays in the formation of that specific area's identity. Except for instances of autonomous and self-reliant Cossack settlements in specific areas around Uralsk, Petropavlovsk and a number of other areas, there is no real historical precedent in what is now northern Kazakhstan of an independent Slavic polity, the aspired societal project, historical memory and restoration of which could inspire and self-justify a secessionist movement.[23] In the Soviet Union, there were no autonomous republics or districts for Slavs or other groups in Kazakhstan either.

The historical belonging there, instead, lies in the consciousness that northern Kazakhstan's specific demography and social geography were shaped during the integration and transformation of these areas in a form of Russian greater space, whether during the tsarist-imperial or the Soviet version. This comes to the fore in two elements. The first is the steppe frontier formation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a process during which cities like Uralsk, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, Semipalatinsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk were founded as Cossack forts and became areas of Slavic settlement between 1613 and 1720.[24] Thus, long-estab-

20 Voronovici, "Internationalist separatism," 291.

21 Serik Jakhsylykov. *Otnosheniye zhiteley severnykh regionov Kazakhstana k perspektive glubokoy integratsii v Yevraziyskom ekonomicheskom soyuze: faktor grazhdanskoy i etnokul'turnoy identichnosti (The attitudes of inhabitants in the northern regions of Kazakhstan towards perspectives of deep integration within the Eurasian Economic Union: factors of citizenship and cultural identity).* Almaty: Programma dlya molodykh issledovateley v oblasti publichnoy politiki Fonda Soros-Kazakhstan, 2016.

22 Aleksey Goncharov, Igor Savin, *Nastroennie Russkikh, zhivushchikh v Kazakhstane (Moods among the Russians who live in Kazakhstan)*, Fond Podderzhki i zashchity soochesvennikov, prozhivayuchshikh za rubezhom, 5 August 2015, https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/statit/nastroeniya_russkikh_zhivushchikh_v_kazakhstane_1394/.

23 In Donbas and Transnistria, by contrast, a historical precedent of 'statehood' did exist and is referred to in separatist discourse and legitimation. More specifically, it is the ephemeral Soviet republic of Donetsk and Krivoi Rog (1918) and the Moldovan autonomous Soviet republic which was centred on Transnistria (1924-1940). Voronovici; 289-290; 297-298.

24 For a more in-depth examination of this episode, see Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's steppe frontier. The making of a colonial empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 126-183.

lished Russian sub-ethnicities like the Uralsk and Petropavlovsk Cossacks consider themselves native rightsholders to their respective areas.[25] But more importantly, there is the idea that since the pastoralist Kazakh population had no practice of cities, and there was almost no urbanisation in these areas prior to their integration into the Russian greater space, northern Kazakhstan's major cities are, by nature, Russian.

The second element is the so-called *Osvoyenie tseliny*, the Soviet Union's reclamation campaign of 'virgin and idle lands' (1954-1963) during which under- or uncultivated steppe land was brought into intensive grain cultivation in order to increase food security and turn the Soviet Union into a net exporter of grain and overtake the US in this field. Although the campaign targeted several parts and regions of the Soviet Union, it was centred around five northern steppe provinces of the Kazakh Soviet republic where a total of 21.97 million hectares or 297,000 km² of land had been integrated into the scheme by the end of 1963. Heavy industries and agro-industry were also expanded in Pavlodar and in Petropavlovsk.

The radical repurposing of land and industrial expansion coincided with a radical ethno-demographic change as the affected areas, known as the *Tselinny kray*, experienced an influx of approximately two million workers and cadres of Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian and other ethnicities from other parts of the Soviet Union.[26] With it went the construction or expansion of multi-ethnic agro-industrial towns and cities like Stepnogorsk and Tselinograd. These were also meant to be 'social laboratories' to promote and practise the Soviet internationalist ideal.

However, whether the defence of the Soviet internationalist legacy of this episode and of any societal alternative inspired by it is politically as mobilisable and a 'rally-around-the-flag' issue nowadays as it was in the old industrial basins of Donetsk and Lugansk or in Transnistria remains to be seen. It is somehow present in wider nostalgia for the Soviet Union among certain social and age categories. But although it did sociologically and demographically reshaped parts of northern Kazakhstan, as a historical momentum, the *Osvoyenie tselin*y had ended by 1965 and did not really leave a backbone for a regional identity in the *Tselinny kray* areas.

Language policies

Although it was certainly not the main or only cause of the Donbas insurgency, a major trigger were attempts to repeal Ukraine's language legislation which provided official recognition for Russian and other minority languages in regions and municipalities where the number of speakers exceeded one-tenth of the population. Kazakhstan is officially bilingual and has a legislative setup in which Kazakh is the state language and is actively promoted by the state and state-affiliated civil society, while Russian remained recognised after 1991 as the language of inter-ethnic communication.

25 Marlène Laruelle, "Why no 'Kazakh Novorossiya'? Kazakhstan's Russian minority in a post-Crimea world," *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 1 (October 2016), 65-78, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1220257.

26 Roza Buktugutova, Gul'mira Zhanayeva, «Demograficheskiye posledstviya Osvoyeniya tselinnykh i zalezhnikh zemel' v Kazakhstane - nekotoryye aspekty (Demographic consequences of the Virgin and Idle Lands Campaigns in Kazakhstan—some aspects) », Nauka i real'nost', n° 2(6), 2021, 154-157, and Ainur Saparbekova, Jiřina Kocourková and Tomáš Kučera, "Sweeping ethno-demographic changes in Kazakhstan during the 20th century: a dramatic story of mass migration waves", *Geographica*, 49, no. 1, 2014, 71–82.

According to the 2021 census, 25.1 percent of Kazakhstan's ethnic Russians, 23.7 percent of Ukrainians, 22.8 percent of Belarussians, 22.1 percent of Poles and 25.2 percent of ethnic Germans declared that they knew Kazakh. Although the data does not specify at what level and with what fluency and many census respondents may have answered in the interests of social desirability, this was significantly more than two decades ago. At the same time, Kazakhstan's Russophone population is wider than the share of ethnic Russians in the sense that Russian is de facto the mother tongue of 80 percent of the country's ethnic Ukrainians, 45 percent of the Belarussians, 78 percent of the Poles, 65 percent of the Germans and also of many long-urbanised Kazakhs.[27]

Since Kazakhstan is the only polity that had been created for Kazakhs and in which the Kazakh language and identity previously marginalised can flourish, it is logical that these obtain a prominent position in both governance and society. So even if since 1991, the authorities and a state-affiliated civil society have been promoting inclusive patriotism and celebrating multi-ethnicity, in the longer term, this is likely to lead to official Kazakh monolingualism and to the confinement of Russian to the private domestic sphere and to workplaces in the private sector. Although this will certainly meet active opposition in the north, it does not have to take the form of separatism provided that language facilities are maintained for Russophones at the level of municipalities and districts where they form a critical mass in the local population.

Although not as politically explosive as the language laws and more situated in the sphere of 'symbol wars', there is the issue of 'indigenisation' of northern topographic names and more specifically the question whether Petropavlovsk and Pavlodar should be renamed Kiziljar and Kereku, respectively. During previous rounds of 'topographic Kazakhisation'—during which Öskemen became the Kazakh version of Ust-Kamenogorsk, Oral of Uralsk, Petropavl of Petropavlovsk and Semey of Semipalatinsk—place names remained recognisable and still clearly related to the Russian names. The radically different names that are proposed for Petropavlovsk and Pavlodar, however, are not only perceived among local Slavic opinion to have no real ground in historical reality but also to be attempts to minimise, if not wipe out, the central Russian role in the coming into being of these northern urban centres.

Position in the polity's institutions

Like a number of post-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan saw a rapid 'indigenisation' of state functions, the civil service and law enforcement from 1991 onwards, a process during which the manpower in these institutions became dominated by mem-

27 Calculations by the author on the basis of data from Qazstat—Byuro natsional'noy statistiki, «Itogi Natsional'noy perepisi naseleniya 2021 goda, Natsional'nyy sostav, veroispovedaniye i vladeniye yazykami v Respublike Kazakhstan (Results of the national census of 2021. Ethnic composition, faith and language knowledge in the Republic of Kazakhstan) (Astana: 2023), 316, 381, https://stat.gov.kz/upload/medialibrary/cee/3rsfg8ps3xo19orb284esg4rx27ihqf7/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%20%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2.pdf.

bers of the titular group.[28] For example, by 2009, 83.5 percent of the political and administrative positions in Kazakhstan's state apparatus were occupied by citizens of Kazakh ethnicity, despite Kazakhs constituting only 63 percent of the population that year. Citizens of Russian and other Slavic and of German ethnicity, who jointly comprised 27 percent of the population in 2009, occupied some 14 percent of these positions in the said reference year, mostly at the municipal and district levels.[29]

Slavs and other groups of European origin also usually do not have the clientelist networks that are necessary to access the civil service and political mandates and are therefore generally more active in the private sector. It is of course understandable that the Kazakh titular group actively claims the initiative in and ownership of a polity created as a Soviet republic for the Kazakhs from 1925-1936, on territory inhabited by the Kazakhs ever since they came into being as a people named as such in the second half of the fifteenth century, and that is the only polity for the Kazakh nation. Yet among citizens of Slavic and other European origins, it does negatively affect the level of identification with the state, and the degree to which state institutions are seen as the protectors and champions of the interests of the titular self-group.

'Regional under-appreciation'

On the eve of the separatist war, the metallurgy, mineral extraction and agroindustry of Lugansk and especially Donetsk reportedly contributed approximately one-seventh of Ukraine's gross domestic product. While the actual prewar economic significance of these regions is disputed, locally, their capacities of old industrial core areas with industrious traditions, in relation to which they were already in both the tsarist and Soviet Russian greater spaces, fosters a regionalist self-consciousness. In this perspective, the regions were locally long perceived as essential to 'feed the country' but receive little recognition, respect and social investment in return from the centre as well as among opinion-makers in the rest of the country. This went in tandem with veritable culture wars between the 'conservative-provincial' and 'progressive-urban and europhile' sectors of society or at least between their self-declared advocates and protectors.

In 2022, nearly half of Kazakhstan's gross domestic product was reportedly generated in Almaty, in the capital Astana, and in the western oil provinces of Atyrau and Mangistau while the joint share of the five northern provinces with the largest portions of Slavs, including industrialised areas like Petropavlovsk, Pavlodar and Ust-Kamenogorsk, was 13.8 percent.[30] The partial post-1991 de-industrialisation and the agricultural neglect in northern Kazakhstan that was caused by the unravelling of the Soviet economic texture and the firm focus of Kazakhstan on hydrocarbon extraction and exports did cause popular resentment in the north. But this translated more into resignation and outmigration rather than regionalist mobilisation.

What happened in Lugansk and Donetsk is also often explained in terms of re-

28 Commercio, 97-99.

29 Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, «Informatsiya o chislennosti gosudarstvennykh sluzhashchikh v razreze natsional'nostey (po sostoyaniyu na 1 yanvarya 2009 goda)—Prilozheniye №8 (Information on the numbers of civil servants, by ethnicity (as per 1 January 2009 - Annex №8)», https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/KZ/A_HRC_WG.6.6_7_KAZ_1_KAZAKHSTAN_Annex_1_R.pdf

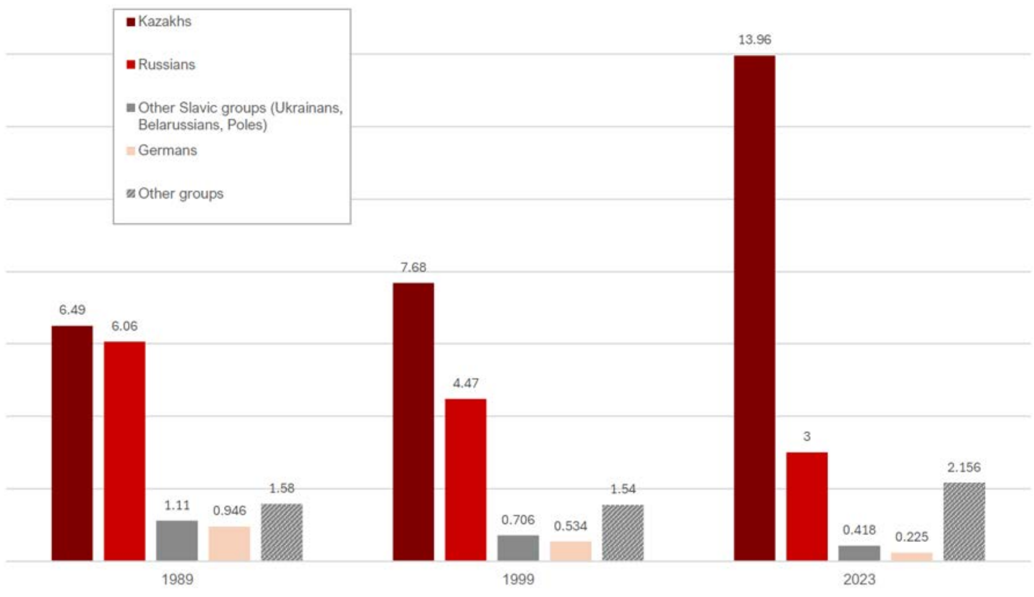
30 Qazstat—Byuro natsional'noy statistiki, «Valovoy regional'nyy produkt Respubliki Kazakhstan za 2022 god s vydeleniyem nenablyudayemoy ekonomiki (Gross regional product in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2022, highlighting the informal economy)», August 24, 2023, stat.gov.kz/ru.

sistance against Ukraine's aspired association and integration with the EU and the perceived threats that this would bring to local livelihoods, sociocultural identities and the inherent 'Pan-Russianness' of these regions. In areas like Pavlodar and Petropavlovsk, a customs union and an easy border-crossing regime with Russia is reportedly important for Slavic and Russophone citizens in the maintenance of a psychological hinterland, a grassroots economy and interaction with kinfolk.[31] EU integration and the supposed threats that it poses to the sociocultural identities and livelihoods of regions with Slavic and Russophone populations—a major conflict generator in Donetsk and Lugansk—is not an issue in Kazakhstan, since the country is not currently seeking EU membership. Also, the majority of ethnic Kazakhs are generally less inclined towards the 'liberal values' that are associated with EU integration.[32]

Radical changes in ethno-demographic patterns

A major factor affecting the perception of the self-group's chances of survival among the Slavic and European population is the demographic anxiety caused by a shrinking share in the population and by ageing. As Figure 3 shows, if in 1989, Slavs and ethnic Germans jointly outnumbered Kazakhs, in 2023, Kazakhs formed a solid majority of four times the size of the joint population of European origin. This is primarily the outcome of the massive outmigration of Slavs and ethnic Germans during the social-economic crisis that coincided with the demise of Soviet socialism in the 1990s, and of higher birth rates among Kazakhs as well as among Kazakhstan's Uzbek and Uighur minorities.

Figure 3 - Population numbers (in millions) and shares of Kazakhstan's ethnic categories in 1989, 1999 and 2023.



Source: figure created by the author on the basis of census data from the Qazstat—Byuro natsional'noy statistiki, stat.gov.kz/ru

31 Jakhsylykov, 31-32.

32 Mukhtar Senggirbay, "Ethnic identity of Kazakhstani Russians: the dynamics of change and the place of Russia as a kin state," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 13, no. 1 (July 2019): 67-89, DOI:10.2478/jnmlp-2019-0004, *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics*, 2019, №1, 74. For research on values among youth in Kazakhstan, see Dina Sharipova and Serik Beimenbetov, *Youth in Kazakhstan: assessing their values, expectations, and aspirations 2021* (Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), 36-39, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/18450.pdf.

Although these often-quoted national averages do give a useful overall image of the ethno-demographic shifts that the country has gone through, in order to assess regionalist dynamics, it is more relevant to look at changes in population patterns and sociologies at the local level, where these are experienced hands-on in the population's everyday life and livelihoods. Figure 4 shows the impact of the ethno-demographic changes that have occurred over the last fifteen years in a number of northern cities, towns and districts. We are not suggesting that the areas included in the table form (potential) cores of secessionism. They just serve as examples of ethnic-demographic shifts at levels where the radical change in the self-group's position in the country is directly being experienced.

Figure 4 - General ethno-demographic shift in a number of selected areas in northern Kazakhstan (2009 and 2023).

Name and nature of selected northern cities and districts	2009			2023		
	Titular group	*'European population'*	*Other groups*	*Titular group*	*'European population'*	*Other groups*
Pavlodar (city)	39.5	55.8	4.7	51.2	43.8	5
Uspenskii (district, Pavlodar province)	34.2	60.5	5.3	41	53.4	5.6
Stepnogorsk (town, Akmolinsk province)	36.1	59.7	4.2	45.6	49.5	8.9
Semipalatinsk (city)	65.3	30.8	3.9	73.5	22.7	3.8
Ust-Kamenogorsk (city)	33.6	64.2	2.2	50	47,3	2.4
Glubokovskii (district, East Kazakhstan province)	23.7	74	2.3	18.8	77	4.2
Ridder (Leninogorsk) (town, East Kazakhstan province)	10.3	87.6	2.1	20.6	76.4	3

Source: author, on the basis of census data from the Qazstat—Byuro natsional'noy statistiki, stat.gov.kz/ru

The psychological impact of this is stronger in locations where Slavs and Germans were once dominant, whose population share is still far higher than the national average and in cities and districts that are considered historically Russian yet where the official share of the Kazakh population reached the 50 percent 'tipping point'. It is also there that one experiences the impact of another development, namely the massive internal migration that has been occurring since 1991-1993 of rural Kazakhs to urban centres or at least to (semi-)rural districts closer to urban centres.[33] Besides bringing social and infrastructural challenges, one of the main lines of culture wars in northern Kazakhstan is caused by the presence of many recent rural immigrants and provincial lifestyles in cities that were historically predominantly Slavic and 'European'.

Another demographic factor called forth by some authors is that northern Kazakhstan's Slavic population is ageing, which reduces the likelihood of unrest, including

33 Contrary to reports of northward Kazakh population settlement from the southern areas, most of the rural-urban migration in northern Kazakhstan takes place within the provinces. Serik Jakhsylykov, "The northern regions and the southern people: migration policies and patterns in Kazakhstan," *CAP Papers* 184 (April 2017): 1-14, https://app.box.com/s/cz4na19uknbqylvuz46t83c5c4zdceku..

separatist movements.[34] This is in line with the youth bulge theory, according to which the risk and potential for unrest and insurgency is connected to a so-called youth bulge—a demographic pattern where a large portion of the population consist of children, adolescents and young adults—while the chances of insurgency and unrest are considered to decrease as the population ages.[35] In Kazakhstan, in 2019, the population share belonging to the age categories of between 45 and 70 or older amounted to 24.8 percent among Kazakhs and 44.1 percent on average among the country's main European population groups.[36] However, while an ageing population does tend to dampen insurgency potential it is not an all-determining or 'waterproof' factor. This is evidenced by the cases of Donetsk and Lugansk, which also had similar top-heavy population pyramids.

So, any chance of 'steppearatism'?[37]

The above-discussed realities and circumstances don't necessarily lead to a form of secessionism. So even if the commonplace wisdom has it, to never say never, at present the short answer to the core question whether a secessionist scenario 'à la Donbas and Transnistria' could happen in northern Kazakhstan is no. Since 1991, the authorities of Kazakhstan and a state-affiliated civil society including associations of ethnic minorities, have been promoting an 'inclusive patriotism' within a unitary state in which the Kazakh titular group is affirmed, but minorities, as an outcome of history, are considered a component of the state-nation. The authorities have also refrained from establishing any autonomous districts in areas with a substantial presence of Slavic, Uyghur and Uzbek populations.

Unless a radical event triggers a new exodus similar to that of the 1990s, much of the residual population of Slavic and other European origin will probably stay in Kazakhstan. Unavoidably, as the sociocultural 'Kazakhisation' of the country continues, these populations will go through processes of cultural re-identification. Some sectors might start to identify more with religious faiths—Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Protestantism in particular—and thus gradually become Kazakhstan's 'Christian' rather than 'Russian' minority.

Similar to various groups of Cossacks or Russians in certain parts of Siberia, Russians in Kazakhstan, or at last certain groups, could develop area-specific sub-ethnic identities. This could manifest in features such as a Russian dialect influenced by Kazakh and a mentality and lifestyle that are partly influenced by living among Kazakhs.[38] Others will not so much come to identify with Kazakhstan on the whole as with their locality, city or micro-region.[39] The existence of regionalism and localism within a country can be recognised and accommodated in a unitary state and

34 See, for example, Laruelle, 7.

35 For a wider discussion of this factor, see, among others, Henrik Urdal, "A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 607-629, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4092795.

36 Qazstat—Byuro natsional'noy statistiki, «Itogi Natsional'noy perepisi naseleniya 2021 goda (Results of the national census of 2021)», chapter Natsional'niy sostav, veroispovedaniye i vladeniye yazykami v Respublike Kazakhstan (Ethnic composition, faith, and language knowledge in the Republic of Kazakhstan), section 5. Naseleniye otdel'nykh natsional'nostey po urovnyu obrazovaniya i vozrastu (Populations by ethnicity, and per education and age level) (Astana: 2023), 244 316, https://stat.gov.kz/upload/medialibrary/cee/3rs-fg8ps3xo19orb284esg4rx27ihqf7/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%20%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2.pdf.

37 The author borrowed this term from Kolosov (see note 8).

38 Senggirbay, "Ethnic identity of Kazakhstani Russians," 71-74.

39 Such localist and micro-regional identities exist in the region of Petropavlovsk and in the Rudnii Altay region around Ust-Kamenogorsk, for example.

does not automatically have to lead to some sort of separatism though.

One hypothetical situation in which some sort of Donbas and Transnistria scenario could materialise is when Kazakhstan comes to traverse a major societal and political crisis. More concretely, we refer to a scenario of new and more long-lasting social unrest of the kind that took place in the western oil town of Janaözen in late 2011 and the widespread unrest in early 2022 which started again in Janaözen but soon spread to Almaty and several other parts of the country.[40] For the sake of clarity, these instances of unrest were social and in no way ethnic. They were essentially caused by layoffs due to plummeting oil prices, disillusioned expectations of development, popular frustration with corruption and inflation, and the mental and social-financial stress caused by the 2020-2022 pandemic.

Yet whether social unrest or state authority crises, if these occur again and fester on, their actual nature as ethnic-communitarian or not is thereby less important than the extent to which, in a crisis situation, they are perceived to be so among minorities, and in which state authorities are perceived to be inept to protect minorities or become downright hostile to them. Critical incidents with a strong psychological impact, how these and other issues are covered on social media, and the extent to which locally-rooted situations, sociopolitical issues and movements are advocated and supported by actors in kin countries—in this case Russia—are crucial to the coming into being of a climate that can lead to some form of secessionism.

The emergence of separatist or insurgent movements is invariably rooted in very local causes and concerns, often spurred by grassroots initiatives within specific regions. The eventual turn that they take, however, is often determined by the presence and role of external actors, as was the case in Donetsk and Lugansk with various forms of Russian material support and attempts to fit a locally rooted cause into an irredentist design, ideological narrative and societal project.[41] Not seldom do such external support and interference cause an insurgency to deviate from what the grassroots and local oppositionists initially wanted. Finally, much also depends on whether the secessionist sociopolitical experiments in Donetsk, Lugansk and Transnistria, and the turn that they eventually took, are 'inspiring' and 'encouraging' enough for northern Kazakhstan's Slavs to ever attempt something similar. ●

40 Including to the northern cities of Pavlodar and Ust-Kamenogorsk. During the early 2022 unrest, at the request of the government of Kazakhstan, Russia sent special forces units to the country to help restore order. This operation was more intended to back up the incumbent government and security structures than to specifically protect the country's Slavic population though.

41 See Sanshiro Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian political technology in the Donbas war," Nationalities Papers 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 750–73, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.70.

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