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THE ZHANAOZEN CRISIS AND *ORALMANS*' PLACE IN THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE KAZAKH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Since gaining independence in 1991, the post-Soviet authoritarian state of Kazakhstan started a process of renegotiating and reconstructing its national identity. The country, which is home to 125 different ethnic groups, began its transition from the mentality of a Soviet national identity to a new form of Kazakhstani national identity built upon the concept of a single Kazakh ethnic identity, language, religion and culture. This article discusses the place of *Oralmans* – the Kazakh returning diaspora, who were encouraged from 1991 to come back to their historical motherland by the Kazakhstani government – in this process of national identity reconstruction. *Oralmans* became the recipients of a number of favorable policies including medical assistance, education and housing. The focus is the Zhanaozen crisis of 2011, which, the authors argue, became a catalyst for re-examining the policy towards *Oralmans* and generated public debate about *Oralmans*, their place in the post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the differences between the Russified Kazakhs and the traditional Kazakhs (*Oralmans*), and the ongoing debate about the reconstruction of the Kazakhstani national identity. This article is based on data drawn from a media content analysis that looked at the role of social media in Kazakhstan taking the Zhanaozen crisis as a case study.

Introduction

Following its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan embarked on the path of identifying and building its new national identity and the new Kazakhstani society. Being the home to more than 125 different ethnic groups, Kazakhstan was the only Soviet country upon independence in which the percentage of the titular nation was lower than the population of ethnic Russian, Ukrainians and Germans. Russian language was the lingua franca, and the majority of Kazakhs had been Russified under the Soviet regime. The post-Soviet Kazakhstani government initiated a return migration policy inviting ethnic Kazakhs, later referred to as *Oralmans* ("returnees" in Kazakh), from neighboring countries to return to their country of origin in an attempt to strengthen Kazakh culture and language and thus revitalize Kazakh identity.

Although this policy was widely perceived to have an adverse effect on the Kazakhstani society by adding an extra burden to the existing socio-economic conditions, the impact was largely ignored by the government until a crisis occurred during the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Independence of Kazakhstan on 16 December 2011. What started as a labour conflict between the oil workers of Zhanaozen

and the state-run company *KazMunaiGaz* turned into a civic conflict, resulting in the deaths of at least 14 people (General, 2016). It was then suggested by mainstream media that among those who caused the conflict 25 percent were *Oralmans* (Zhampeissov, 2013). The new returnees struggled with the integration or the lack of it. As the many problems that the Oralmans deal with are of a socio-economic nature, Zhanaozen became a catalyst for inequalities that the Oralmans are faced with. Although the existing issues initially did not involve only the Oralmans, evidence suggests that Oralmans become the scapegoats. Initially the government did not necessarily know how to respond to the Zhanaozen conflict, as government authorities had not had any experience or understanding of how to deal with the political opposition in a peaceful manner through negotiations, rather than through physical suppression of the opposition. This resulted in some government officials, including the president himself, jumping on the bandwagon and holding Oralmans accountable for the conflict rather than the locals. By scapegoating the Oralmans the government was able to shift public attention from the actual socio – economic issues to the issue of Oralmans. This resulted in growing public dissatisfaction with the return migration policy and forced the government to reassess this policy.

In this article, the authors discuss the place and role of *Oralmans* in the context of the wider debate on the new Kazakhstani identity in the attempt by the Kazakhstani government to disassociate itself not only from its Soviet past but also from the Russian influence during the post-Soviet years. Although the article has a particular focus on Kazakhstan and *Oralmans*, it contributes to further understanding migration and state building processes in the former Soviet republics, as the collapse of the former Soviet Union resulted in complex population shifts between former republics and even more complex reconstruction of nation-states (Pavlenko, 2008).

The article draws on data from a research project (see Beisembayeva *et al*, 2013) focusing on political participation and social media in Kazakhstan that used the Zhanaozen events as a case study. The methodology involved quantitative and qualitative content analysis of blogging sites and mainstream newspapers in Kazakhstan, using the following criteria: framing of the conflict, voice, story subjects, language use and sources of news reports and blogs. During the data-analysis process a number of themes emerged with a strong emphasis on national identity reconstruction, the role of *Oralmans* in this process and the actual Zhanaozen events that merited further discussion and analysis that is presented here and supported by an examination of the historical and political context. This research thus has used the lenses of media analysis as a way of understanding the links between Soviet and post-Soviet policies, national crisis and public discourse as they were reflected in the country's social media platforms and traditional mainstream media.

Kazakhstan – the current context

Kazakhstan was the last of the Soviet republics to declare its independence. Its former Soviet leader – Nursultan Nazarbayev, became Kazakhstan's first President, a position he still retains today. Despite the public move towards constitutional reform and greater democratization, Kazakhstan is dominated by a formal political elite and a highly centralized power base (Knox, 2008).

Nazarbayev is described as a reform and market-oriented leader (BBC, 2015). Despite his family being accused of corruption, the President's economic reforms based on the country's vast natural resources, helped improve the standard of living of ordinary Kazakhstanis (Thu, 2005). Unlike other former Soviet states, in the early years of independence, Kazakhstan experienced a higher economic growth rate (CIA, 2014). Oil is Kazakhstan's largest source of export revenues and the most significant contributor to its national economy resulting in rising average living standards. However, not all areas of the country benefited from this wealth. The Mangystau region where the Zhanaozen events took place has stayed poor, with little economic activity outside the oil sector. Although Mangystau produces more oil than any other Kazakhstani region, in 2008 the UN estimated that it had more people living below the poverty line than in any other region, and that it had only reached the national average in terms of the UN development indicator (UNDP, 2006). Due to falling oil prices and weakened domestic and external demand, there was a significant drop in Kazakhstan's GDP growth (World Bank, 2016). Although the government attempted to soften the impact by protecting social spending and increasing pensions, low-income households are still vulnerable to rising food prices, decreasing wages and diminishing employment opportunities (World Bank, 2016). These have been seen as contributing factors to the rising militancy in the Mangistau oilfields during 2010, especially amongst *Oralmans*, who were promised a bright future upon returning to the newly independent state (Beisembayeva, 2016).

Soviet identity, migration policies and the creation of the Oralmans

The process of the post-Soviet nation-state building that started upon independence in the 1990s is based on the historical past of nation building processes in the former USSR. The ramifications of these processes along with the Soviet collectivization of Kazakhstan have been far-reaching and directly linked to its post-Soviet concept of nationhood and the case of *Oralmans* discussed in this article.

In 1927, the Soviet government started transforming the Kazakh nomads into a settled population organized into collective farms with communal property, which started with the confiscation of livestock and redistribution of land. Neither the population, nor the authorities were ready for the implementation of the collectivization campaign, which resulted in a great famine in rural areas. This led to more than 1.5 million (almost half of the Kazakh population at the time) dying from starvation, related disease and violence (Olcott, 1987). Additionally, over 200,000 Kazakhs left Kazakhstan to escape collectivization and moved to China, Mongolia, India, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey in the early 1920s. The number of dispersed Kazakhs increased to 794,000, creating a large Kazakh diaspora living predominantly in the neighboring countries and Soviet republics (Bokayev, 2013). Internal Soviet migration policies resulted in large number of Russians and Ukrainians moving to Kazakhstan, changing the population balance dramatically. Another large group of immigrants consisted of Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars and Koreans, all forcibly deported to Kazakhstan prior to and during World War II as a part of the internal forced migrations under the Stalin regime. Overall, about one million immigrants moved to Kazakhstan before the war. In 1953 the Soviet authorities launched the *Virgin Lands Campaign* (*Tselina*), opening vast steppes of northern Kazakhstan to wheat farming. Approximately, one million of people from all

over the Soviet Union came to Kazakhstan (Olcott, 1987). That was the last wave of mass migration to the country.

As a result of this migration, Kazakhstan became home to many different ethnic groups, and the only republic where the titular nationality, the Kazakhs, were a minority. The dominant Slavic population led to the Russification of public life in Kazakhstan (Bokayev, 2013). The Russian language was predominant in the spheres of education, administration and mass media, whereas the Kazakh language was marginalized and used in private spaces and often forgotten, especially by urban Kazakhs. Although Kazakhstan is now considered a Muslim-majority secular state, there is still a significant Slavic Orthodox Christian minority.

The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR), as it was called between 1936 and 1991, had the status of a Union-level republic and was one of the fifteen Soviet republics that made the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Smith, Law, Wilson, Bohr, and Allworth (1998) suggest that Soviet Union was not the 'federation of sovereign and equal states' proclaimed by the official Soviet discourse. In fact, the incorporation of the borderland territories was often extremely brutal, as in the examples of Georgia in the early 1920s and the Baltic States in the 1940; as well as Stalin's deliberate mass starvation of Ukrainians and Kazakhs in the 1930s. Yet it is important to acknowledge the paradox that reflected the relationship between the borderland republics and the center, a relationship that might be better termed 'federal colonialism'. In other words, it is safe to assume that the Soviet Union was neither wholly 'federal' nor 'colonial' but contained elements of both systems (Smith *et al*., 1998).

In the 1930s, the Soviet nation-building policy changed its focus from building national identities within the Soviet Union's republics to constructing a historically unprecedented Soviet nation on the platform of a vast multi-ethnic state. A new language policy mandated by the central government promoted Russian as the single language for all Soviet people (Omelicheva, 2014). The process of massive secularization and suppression of religious practices was another tool for instilling a uniform Soviet identity on the diverse populations. The Soviets' ultimate goal was the fashioning of a *Homo Sovieticus* holding the greatest allegiance to the Soviet Union itself, while maintaining a secondary identity as a member of a constituent nationality. Yet, the construction and promotion of ethnicized national identities as the foundation of the multi-ethnic nation-state was detrimental to the strictly political identity of the Soviet state. Furthermore, the Soviet nationalism allowed the national republican leaders to further loyalty to ethnic identities and build sub-systems within these republics, as long as they remained loyal to Kremlin.

Kazakhstan's post-independence migration policies and Oralmens' role in identity reconstruction

Although the situation changed in 1991 as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the formation of the Kazakhstani state, according to some scholars, was not driven by nationalism amongst the Kazakh political elite who preferred to keep strong ties with Russia (Smith *et al*., 1998). Nevertheless, since then, the political elite of

independent Kazakhstan has embarked on the process of state- and nation-building involving a search for a new consolidating national ideology which would provide a viable alternative to the previously dominant Soviet nationhood. As the majority of the Kazakhstani political elite came from the Soviet state apparatus, for those politicians who have survived the break-up of the Union, most notably in the Central Asian republics, the only way to remain in power has been to distance themselves from the previous regimes by switching to employing ethnic codes (Smith *et al*., 1998). However as these elites, including the newly elected in 1991 first Kazakhstani president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, were the product of the former Soviet regime, their approach to the governing and nation building was similar to that in the Soviet era. In the case of Kazakhstan the difference was that the Kazakhs were now the titular ethnicity and all the policies implemented were there to serve them. Indeed, as Fragner (2001) puts it, post-Soviet nationalism is not a break with Soviet traditions but rather a more or less unconscious continuation of Soviet habits towards the 'National Question'. The Soviet system was supposed to oppose nationalist attitudes with the aim of melting or molding various nationalities into the model of *sovetskii chelovek* (Homo Sovieticus), in principle, and therefore tolerating nationalist habits rather reluctantly, if at all. As a result, the Kazakhness (*Kazakhskii* in Russian) of Kazakhstan became a very important issue. The Kazakhstani government had to balance these two contradictory agendas in the process of re-constructing its new national identity: to develop its Kazakhsness on the one hand and, on the other, to keep the image of Kazakhstan as the harmonious homeland of various ethnic groups. This task was very similar to the one the former Soviet Union faced during its existence.

The Kazakhstani regime was driven by the discourse of re-integration that was designed to support Kazakhstan's "persistent unionism" (Hale, 2009). Framing a rhetorical discourse that introduced newly independent Kazakhstan as a resolute supporter of post-Soviet integration helped the regime in defusing the ethnic tensions that erupted in the non-Kazakh segment of the population (Cummings, 2003), while also diluting some of the citizens' preoccupations with Kazakhstan's uncertain politico-economic future (Anceschi, 2014). Since 1991, in response to the task of developing Kazakhness as a new national ideology, the newly formed Republic of Kazakhstan has been actively working on returning ethnic Kazakhs back to their motherland.

The emergence of a state bearing the "Kazakh" name in 1991 was sufficient to catalyze a process of nationalization, inspire ethno-nationalism among ethnic leaders, and initiate a migration stream of ethnic Kazakhs from diasporic venues throughout the early 1990s (Diener, 2005). Due to the fact that at the time only 40.1% of the population were Kazakhs, the state elite with the help of prominent Kazakh scholars were eager to increase that number. Tatimov (1992) suggests that this may have dominated the rational decisions in relation to the formation of migration policies. As a result, an open call for diasporic Kazakhs to join their co-ethnic kinsmen was promoted in public speeches and Kazakh-language newspapers throughout the first decade of the state's existence. The number of returnees in the 1990s was about 500,000 out of 4.1 million Kazakhs living abroad, which was substantial enough to strain the Kazakhstani economy during the early years of independence (Diener, 2005).

At first, those attempting to migrate back to their homeland found it considerably challenging. This was due to the cultural and social differences *Oralmans* experienced in their effort to reintegrate, especially in the cases of those migrating from non-Soviet countries, as they lacked Russian language skills which limited their ability to participate in the Kazakhstani society (Kuscu, 2013). Consequently, newly migrated Kazakhs also found themselves politically, socially, economically and even culturally marginalized.

Kazakhstani authorities equally experienced challenges around the ethnic return migration policy including the basic question of defining the notion of "*Oralmans*". While the term came into use in 1994 and means in Kazakh language "returnees", it has taken on new meaning and a broader popular appeal following the adoption of a new migration law in 1997 (Kazakhstan, 2016). Fraught with inconsistency, this law has succeeded in further isolating formerly diasporic Kazakhs from their Kazakhstani kinsmen. The law defined *Oralman* as "ethnic Kazakh, who at the time of acquisition of the sovereignty of the Republic of Kazakhstan, resided abroad; his children, also of the Kazakh ethnicity, who too resided overseas at the time of acquisition of the sovereignty of the Republic of Kazakhstan; who arrived to reside permanently in the Republic" (Kazakhstan, 2016).

Although Kazakhstan received its independence only in 1991, the destruction of the Soviet Union began with the "linguistic revolutions" of 1989 manifesting in the development of the Law on Languages of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. The desire to reintroduce Kazakh language became a strong motivational factor in the return of diasporic Kazakhs, the majority of whom were fluent in Kazakh language. Consequently in 1991, Kazakhstan followed the route of creating a state of a "self-determined Kazakh nation" (Ide-Jetro, 2016). The nationalistic fervor carried over from the new language policy to the immigration policy and reinforced one another. According to the Law on Migration of Population, *Oralmans* are defined exclusively on ethnic grounds (Chesnokov, 2008). Others define *Oralmans* as "a person of indigenous nationality", or as "any foreigner or stateless person with Kazakh ethnicity who resided outside the boundaries of Kazakhstan on the day of independence and who entered Kazakhstan in order to settle on permanent basis" (Laruelle, 2014). According to Diener (2005), the term "*Oralmans*" is legally restricted to Kazakhs coming to Kazakhstan from abroad and within the structure of a quota system established by the government (Diener, 2005). In other words, those who migrate to Kazakhstan independently or from former Soviet republics do not fall under the category of *Oralmans*.

Welcome home? Oralmans in Kazakhstan

The above cited multiple definitions of *Oralmans* point to the absence of agreement of who *Oralmans* actually are and to a weakness in the state's migration policy. The national discussion about *Oralmans,* as it emerged from the Zhanaozen crisis, also indicates that both the Kazakhstani authorities and the public are interested in maintaining a divide between returnees or "others" versus "us" or the local population of Kazakhs, Russians and representatives of the many other ethnic groups who have lived in Kazakhstan for some time (Beisembayeva, Papoutsaki, & Kolesova, 2013).

The geography of *Oralmans'* settlement played an additional factor in the growing divide between them and the rest of the population. Most of the newly migrated Kazakhs tended to settle in the southern and south-western regions of the country and in Mangistau region in particular due to the warm climate, as well due to the fact that the majority of the population in the south speak Kazakh rather than the Russian language. In contrast, the majority of Russified Kazakhs as well as Russians live either in the central, eastern or northern parts of the country. This resulted in creating a territorial divide between returnees and the Russified Kazakhs and Russians who often constitute the economic and political elite.

According to Laurelle (2014), repatriation policy in Kazakhstan has had two aims: first, to overcome the disadvantageous demographic position of ethnic Kazakhs within Kazakhstan, and, second, to rebalance the geographical distribution of Kazakhs within the national boundaries. But this state-run process of ethnic Kazakhization of Kazakhstan has come up against several social and economic challenges for *Oralmans* such as high-level unemployment, difficulties in schooling children, a lack of integration mechanisms, a lack of familiarity with Soviet cultural codes still strongly present in everyday life, and poor knowledge of the Russian language for many (Laruelle, 2014). In fact, it is not just Russian language. Even knowledge of the Kazakh language is uneven among *Oralmans* and depends on their country of origin which adds an extra divide within the *Oralmans* community. According to Bokayev *et al*. (2012), the highest level of Kazakh language speakers is demonstrated by the repatriates from China who scored 97.8 per cent (p. 338). This is followed by returnees from Uzbekistan with 81.7 per cent fluent in Kazakh (p. 338). *Oralmans* from Tajikistan and Russia make the lowest numbers of Kazakh speakers, 6.3 per cent and 8.2 per cent respectively (p. 339). Different language abilities further contribute toward deepening the divide within *Oralmans* themselves and add another layer of complexity for Kazakhstani authorities who need to cater to a heterogeneous ethnic diasporic group.

The initiation of the ethnic return migration policy in Kazakhstan, which privileges the titular ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state, has intensified the debate over the definition of the national identity (Oka, 2013). However, some strong inconsistencies started to emerge between the government's attempts to construct a new national ideology based on ethnic nationalism and its inability to provide a reasonable settlement policy for *Oralmans*. Rephrasing this, the government policy to create a new statehood around the titular nation and the actual implementation of this policy created a gap that resulted in leaving the majority *Oralmans* in a disadvantaged position. Finally, the analysis of *Oralmans* in Kazakhstan indicates a clear divide between *Oralmans* and the rest of the Kazakhstani population.

The situation was noticed by the Kazakhstani authorities from the early days of the new immigration policy. Already in mid-1990s, the Kazakhstani elite began to question the open-door policy for ethnic Kazakhs as the country was not prepared financially, socially and culturally to accept such a large number of migrants. In fact, according to one official, "[t]here were many problems for the repatriated Kazakhs. Kazakhstan was not ready for so many of our relatives to return" (Diener, 2005). However, contrary to what some Russified Kazakhs have expected of the government in regards to either

stopping or putting the repatriation policy on hold, the number of newcomers kept on growing. The number of *Oralmans* according to the latest statistics of 2013 reached 960,000. At the same time, according to the Committee on Migration, only 61.5 per cent of *Oralmans* of working age were employed in 2006, up from 32 per cent in 2000. Although the numbers indicate an increase in employment, it is still significantly lower than the employment rate amongst the general population, which stood at 91.6 per cent in 2006 (UNDP, 2006). Often Kazakhstani employers are reluctant to hire *Oralmans* due to existing stereotypes which see the returnees as 'backward and lacking sophistication' (Diener, 2005, p. 338). All these factors contributed toward creating an explosive environment waiting for a crisis to happen.

The Zhanaozen crisis: blaming Oralmans

The Zhanaozen crisis provided a culmination point of a growing conflict not only between the oil-workers and their employers, state owned and private oil companies but also between *Oralmans* and the rest of the population. The ongoing imbalance in the distribution of wealth in Kazakhstan over the past two decades and government's inability to solve the existing problems intensified the discussion around socio-economic inequalities, especially in regards to the increased volume of migrant and diasporic returnees. To an ordinary Kazakhstani, Oralmans posed a threat of competition in the labour market. Furthermore, the integration of returnees in the western part of the country has turned out to be problematic (Shmitz and Wolters, 2012). This contributed to the growing anger among the established population of west and south west Kazakhstan especially in the Mangistau region already displeased to see oil revenue flowing out of the region, rather than raising the standards of living and foreign nationals being paid considerably more than the locals. Following the government's inability to address these issues, such dissatisfaction led to the lengthy strike of the oil workers (Idrissov, 2012). It was reported that in 2011 as many as 12,000 oil workers participated in the uprising, representing a novelty in the post-independence history of Kazakhstan (Rysaliev, 2011) and creating a precedent that authorities would be uncomfortable with.

The strikers' ceasing of oil production began in early 2011 at a facility jointly owned by the Kazakhstani state-owned *KazMunaiGaz* and the *China National Petrolium Corporation* (CNPC) and spread over the course of a couple of months to a Kazakhstani-Italian venture and a *KazMunaiGaz* subsidery – *OzenMunaiGaz*. The strikers' demands were for equal pay with the staff of other production companies and generally better-paid foreign workers, improved working conditions and the recognition of independent trade unions (Rysaliev, 2011).

The management of the affected companies rejected these demands with the argument that pay was already high compared with the national average and responded with mass dismissals of the oil workers. Management also took legal action against some activists with the district court ruling the strikes illegal. Representatives of the independent trade unions and political activists were arrested and some sentenced to long prison terms (Shmitz and Wolters, 2012). However, neither these measures, nor the intimidation of the activists, nor attempts to prevent the protests from spreading

by shutting down the regional mobile phone network succeeded in ending the strikes (Sharip, 2011). Instead, the employers' intransigence and the open bias of the state led growing numbers to join the strike over the course of summer of 2011 with the labour dispute taking an increasingly political character.

Until 16 December 2011, the government managed to control the information that was coming out of Mangistau before it reached the rest of the country. However the situation changed on 16 December, when, during the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, a group of oil workers were shot at by the police in the town of Zhanaozen. According to the official reports, 14 civilians were killed with many more wounded (General, 2016). Research by Beisembayeva (2016) on social media indicated that at least 100 people died as a result of the clash with local police. Evidence of the Zhanaozen incident was uploaded on YouTube and went viral not only in Kazakhstan but also abroad. Unable to filter information any longer, Kazakhstani officials shut down all forms of communication with Zhanaozen and arrested a number of Nazarbayev's political opponents suspected in initiating this uprising. By not allowing any TV or radio stations as well as state newspapers to report about the crisis in Zhanaozen, government officials inadvertently encouraged Kazakhstani bloggers to take the discussion online. The majority of the commentators online criticized the government and President Nazarbayev for their inability to resolve the crisis and for having to resort to killing civilians during the celebrations of Independence Day.

The Kazakhstani government, realizing that no amount of censorship could stop spreading the information about the crisis, decided to deploy a group of bloggers to Zhanaozen to report about the events online. The group, consisting of ethnic Kazakh citizens only, previously known for their support of the Nazarbayev's regime, were subsequently called 'bloody bloggers' by the rest of the Kazakhstani online community (Beisembayeva, Papoutsaki, Kolesova, & Kulikova, 2013).[1] Opposing bloggers, organized a trip of their own to Zhanaozen and referred to themselves as the "independent bloggers". The rest of the Kazakhstani blogosphere was then either supporting the "bloody bloggers" or the "independent bloggers" or opposing both groups and referred in this research as the "other bloggers". The Kazakhstani population and those who were interested in the Zhanaozen uprising from abroad received the initial information through the blogging activities of these blogging groups (Beisembayeva, 2016).

As a result of these on-line activities, the Kazakhstan government had to acknowledge the existence of the crisis and to start addressing the issue. However, their first step was not to identify the cause for the uprising but rather to find those who were responsible for the situation. After the outbreak of violence, a pro-government newspaper, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, lamed the conflict on the striking workers and

1 The inclusion of ethnic Kazakh exclusively in this group of bloggers does not imply that the political regime and the president himself supported only by ethnic Kazakhs. There are plenty of support expressed by other ethnic groups but in this particular case the government made an attempt to empathise the importance of Kazakh ethnicity.

opposition groups, while shielding the security forces or police from any blame. They also relied solely on the official accounts of the conflict (Sanghera *et al*., 2012).

> Obviously, the situation was used by the opponents of the government who were trying to manipulate the protests from London… The oil workers of Zhanaozen ended up being a bargaining chip and a tool for loosening stability in the hands of the opponents of authorities who are hiding abroad (Vlasov, 2011).

From the very beginning, government officials tried to downplay the role of internal factors in this conflict by stressing the activity of external forces (Satpayev & Umbetalieva, 2015). In fact, Nazarbayev himself pointed at the opposition:

> These unprecedented acts of riots in Zhanaozen were the obvious provocation. Kazakhstan lives in peace and harmony with other nations, and is rapidly developing its economy as well as improving the welfare of citizens. However, some cannot get over it… Hiding from the justice abroad, they are dreaming of the bloody events taking place in the country (Nazarbayev, 2011).

However, on a number of occasions, Nazarbayev also suggested that the labour conflict should not be confused with the criminal actions of some individuals trying to downplay the socio-economic reasons for the workers' uprising.

Although initially Nazabayev did not blame *Oralmans* for the events of Zhanaozen, rather referring to non-locals, further investigations by the "bloody bloggers" led to the possible involvement of the Kazakhs returnees in this crisis (Beisembayeva, 2016).

> There was definitely a backbone of some 15-20 people who led the whole crowd. Oralmans? It is possible. The majority of those protesting are not locals. Oralamans also work in the lower positions in the (oil) company: drivers, mechanics… it is quite possible that they played a certain role but I cannot argue that point (Sadenova, 2011, 29 December).

Consequently, the events in Zhanaozen were framed through the prism of socio-economic difficulties, and linked to the challenges resulting from accepting large number of "Kazakhs" back in the country (Beisembayeva, 2016). Furthermore, some members of the government started pointing out the existing problems "new" Kazakhs – *Oralmans* - are causing:

> When I was the Head of the Agency for Migration and Demography, many people arrived into this oil-rich region; as a result, many social problems have occurred… Many could not receive the Kazakhstani citizenship… However, when the law was passed, not many wanted to become Kazakhstani…they ended up with their own plans, which sometimes weren't that straightforward. People knew very well they are not acting in accordance with the law,

> nevertheless, they protected their "right" desperately, and created a lot of drama around themselves to attract the attention of mass media, especially of the foreign one (Dzhaganova, 2011).

Such discussions in media resulted in the Kazakhstan society expressing further concerns with such return policies and the favouritism of a particular group of people. The president's daughter and media owner, Dariga Nazarbayeva backed those concerns:

> The incompetence of those responsible for the events in Zhanaozen is quite obvious; the incompetence of those who allowed the situation to drift, not take in to account the specifics of the regions, and its complex processes of internal and external migration. And of course, this hasn't started yesterday. The tension was building up for quite a while. The roots of this tragedy are much deeper than they seem, and it's more than just a labour dispute (Nazarbayeva, 2012).

Some members of the Kazakhstan blogosphere even suggested that they would not mind becoming an *Oralaman* given the amount of benefits, financial in particular, the Kazakh diaspora has been receiving upon relocation (Beisembayeva, 2016).

> This discussion on social media led to the Kazakhstani government to reconsider its return policy resulting in temporarily pausing it until the crisis in Zhanaozen could be resolved (Sanghera *et al*., 2012). Nazabayev also suggested that it was necessary to modify the existing migration and settlement repatriation policy to introduce a new model of optimal settlement well understood and accepted by the local population and the *Oralmans* (Satpayev & Umbetalieva, 2015). In response, the Kazakhstan bloggers suggested that the Kazakh authorities need to understand that the return of a large number of *Oralmans* was presenting a threat to political stability, especially given the fact that the majority of the repatriates do not have the qualifications and often Russian or even Kazakh language skills required to find work in Kazakhstan.

The crisis in Zhanaozen highlighted not only the existing socio-economic problems in the country, but also brought to the surface the issues related to the return migration policies. Despite the fact that the Russian population and Russified Kazakhs of the northern regions had earlier on pointed out these issues, it took the crisis in Zhanaozen to bring full attention to the migration policy and its assimilation-related issues of *Oralmans*. Through opposition-supporting media – *Golos Respubliki* newspaper, the Kazakhstani blogosphere and eventually the state-run media, the government officials were forced to acknowledge the existing problem and reassess their migration policy.

However, realizing the importance of the underlying reason behind the return policy in the first place – increasing the Kazakh population, de-Russification of the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan, further spreading of the Kazakh language and culture amongst the population - the policy was brought back in 2013 with further adjustments. Under

the new policy, *Oralmans* were now unable to re-locate to Mangystau region and to Zhanaozen in particular. If they were to do so regardless, they would be stripped ofthe *Oralman* title and lose the associated benefits. *Oralmans* were now instead encouraged to move to the northern, central and eastern parts of the country, traditionally populated by Russians and Russified Kazakhs (Baturin, 2014; Beisembayeva, 2016).

In early 2013, the repatriation program was reopened under the new title of "Business Road Map - 2020" (Government, 2015). On the one hand, the new repatriation program allows for better integration of Oralmans into the Kazakhstan society through providing better education and job opportunities, and improved living conditions. But on the other hand, measures towards a tighter control on *Oralmans* to prevent the possibility of further social unrest were put in place. This indicates that the government learnt a certain lesson from the Zhanaozen crisis and tried to establish preventive measures which included, among other factors, improving the living standards of *Oralmans*.

Conclusions: the continuum of Kazakhstan's identity (re)construction

This discussion of the role of *Oralmans* in Zhanaozen crisis and beyond indicates that the "new" Kazakh national identity has its roots in the "old" Soviet national identity. The Soviet national identity was based on the idea of multiculturalism amongst the fifteen Soviet republics and among different ethnic groups populating these republics. At the same time it clearly favoured the Russian ethnic group and placed it at the top of a hierarchical pyramid of different ethnicities. *Sovetskii chelovek* (Homo Sovieticus) was the desired ideal of the Soviet national identity.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, President Nazarbayev and his associates, who were part of the Kazakh national elite during the Soviet era, applied a very similar approach to building a new national identity in newly independent Kazakhstan. Only this time the national identity has centered around ethnic Kazakhs. To balance the historically developed paradox when the titular ethnic group was in the minority in Kazakhstan, the Kazakh government initiated a new migration policy aiming to bring members of the Kazakh diaspora back to their historical motherland. Hoping for a smooth integration of the new citizens and their positive impact on spreading their "authentic" Kazakhness in the country, the government was faced with a number of challenges. *Oralmans* could not easily fit in the socio-economic structures of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The absence of a well-developed settlement policy contributed further to the growing unhappiness among *Oralmans* whose discontent contributed to the growing dissatisfaction with the economic inequalities among the local population and particularly in comparison to foreign workers in the oil and gas refineries who received higher financial remuneration.

Although the Kazakh government ignored the issues for a long time, Zhanaozen revealed existing socio-economic issues that both *Oralmans* and the local population face. The Zhanaozen crisis and the role of *Oralmans* in this case identified the problem with the re-construction of the Kazakhstan national identity around strengthening Kazakhness or Kazakh nationalism. As Roxanne Doty reminds us, "national identity

is never a finished product; it is always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed" (Brennan & Herzog, 2014) . As the former Soviet Republics are still experiencing the ramifications from the internal migration, border re-drawing and Russification policies the resulting post-Soviet conflicts will be with us for a little longer as the Ukraine case has demonstrated (Korostelina, 2014).

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