



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

## Center for Middle Eastern Studies

### INDEPENDENCE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

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**Learning Objectives:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able to

LO1: Understand the key components of national identity

LO2: Describe the post-Soviet national identity of Kazakhstan

LO3: Research and report on the national identities of other former Soviet republics

#### **\*\*Day 1**

#### ***Introduction: Independence and the creation of national identities and national narratives***

After the Treaty of Paris (1783) ended the Revolutionary War, the United States became independent from Great Britain and set about establishing a new form of government and creating a national identity. Similarly, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, most Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas followed suit. This first wave of independence movements represented myriad experimentations in governments, sometimes with, but mostly without monarchies. It was also a time during which the leaders selected national symbols—flags, seals, etc.—and began the task of writing history and creating national narratives. We are often reminded that “the victors write history,” and in the case of newly independent nations, the history is often rewritten, or at the very least, revised and edited, in order to fit into the image the nation wants to project. This is as true today as it was some 200 years ago.

#### ***When are national identities forged?***

National identities can be forged at different times for different nations and can develop over time. Some nations trace their national identity back for centuries, while others have created, or recreated, theirs in recent decades. Often there is a watershed moment, such as an independence movement, war, or revolution that acts as a catalyst.

#### **Examples:**

- Prior to “nationhood”: Japan, United Kingdom, France, Egypt
- After independence (1800s-present): US, Mexico, Brazil
- After revolutions & wars (1900-present): USSR, China, Turkey

- After decolonization (WWII-present): Nigeria, Rwanda, Bangladesh
- Post-Cold War (1990s-present): Balkans, Central Asia

**Think/Pair/Share in class (see PPT slide 6) or assign as pre-discussion homework assignment (see “What is National Identity” handout, page 10)**

**What is national identity?**

- **Geography-political boundaries, landscape**
- **National Symbols-flag, seals, anthems, etc.**
- **Citizenship-birthright or naturalized**
- **People-ethnicity**
- **Language**
- **Values and Attitudes-religion, governance,**
- **Cultural Habits and Behaviors**
- **Achievements-history, science/tech, literature, sports**

There are many categories-these are based on a British study by the Commission for Racial Equality [http://www.ethnos.co.uk/pdfs/9\\_what\\_is\\_britishness\\_CRE.pdf](http://www.ethnos.co.uk/pdfs/9_what_is_britishness_CRE.pdf)

**\*\*Day 2**

**Discussion related to homework assignment, unless completed in class previous day**

***Background: Central Asia’s Incorporation into Russia & the USSR***

Czar Nicolas I began expanding into Central Asia from 1825 to 1855. This initial expansion included most of the modern nation of Kazakhstan and the North Eastern corner of Uzbekistan

Czar Alexander II continued imperial expansion into Central Asia from 1855 to 1881. By 1881, most of modern Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and southern Kazakhstan were added to the Russian Empire.

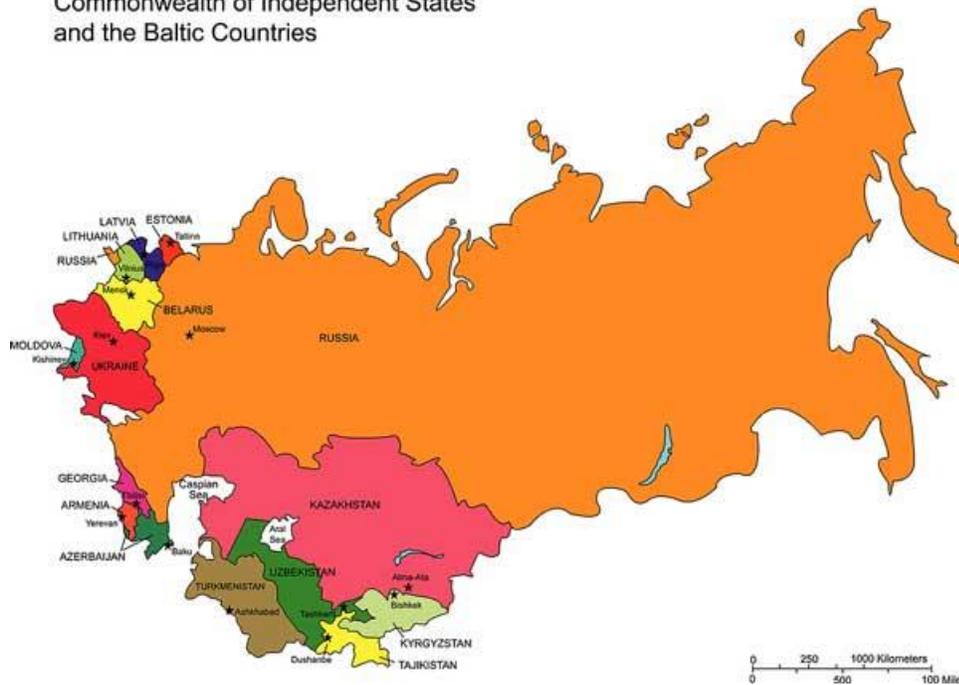
In 1922, Russian colonies in Central Asia became Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) within the USSR.

**Think/Pair/Share**

**What impact did Russian colonization and incorporation in the Soviet Union have on the identity and culture of Central Asia?**



## Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic Countries



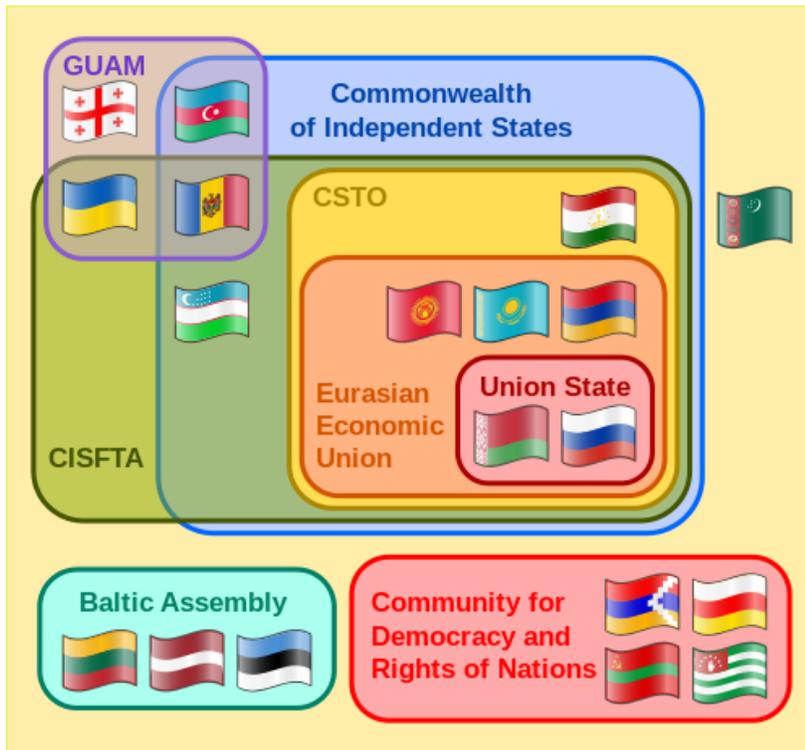
Circa 1993 Image: Bigstock



CIS Flag

### Complicated Relationships

Independent nations formed from the former Soviet Union cultivated different types of relationships based on proximity, economic dependence, culture, shared histories, and future goals. The diagram illustrates the various ways in which former Soviet territories have formed organizations in the years since the collapse of the USSR.



[Euler diagram](#) showing the relationships among various supranational organizations in the territory of the former Soviet Union

**Think/Pair/Share (PPT slide 13)**

**How might these relationships be tied to history? National identity? Proximity to Russia?**

**\*\*Day 3**

**Case Study: Kazakhstan (PPT slides 14-16)**

Kazakhstan presents an interesting case study. Occupying the Russian borderlands of Central Asia, it is situated between Russia, China, and Islamic South Asia (Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). Historically it was predominantly populated by Muslim, Turkic-speaking peoples; before being colonized by Russia, then incorporated into the USSR over the course of more than 150 years.

Kazakhstan became independent in December 1991. Its first, and only president is Nursultan Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev rose up through the ranks in the USSR, becoming First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR in 1989, then assuming the presidency upon Kazakhstan's independence from the USSR.

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, slightly smaller than Argentina, but with a population of 18 million, is much less densely populated. The official languages are Kazakh and Russian; however, the goal is to be a trilingual nation (Kazakh, Russian, and English) by 2050.

### **Kazakhstan-Steppe & Nomads (PPT slides 17-18)**

A recurring theme in Kazakhstan is “many peoples, one nation.” Historically, the steppe was home to many nomadic peoples, including Kazakhs. Colonization by Russians and deportations of people from throughout the Soviet domain to the Karlag (Gulag), infused Kazakhstan with diverse peoples. Even today, 117 languages are spoken in Kazakhstan. This acknowledgement of diversity and the strategic location of Kazakhstan have led the government to allow for ethnic minorities to establish schools in their own languages, however, at this time, the highly competitive college entrance exams are only given in Russian or Kazakh. Nazarbayev University was established as an English language university in the capital, where English fluency is a requirement. Establishing a goal of trilingualism by 2050 also illustrates the government’s focus on globalization and pursuing a multivector foreign policy. While neither neutral or non-aligned, Kazakhstan seeks to conduct foreign policy independently. To date it has hosted diplomatic summits for the region and adjacent nations.

The trilingual policy has been most successfully implemented in downtown Astana, where new signage has all three languages. In other areas, bilingual Kazakh/Russian signs are sometimes joined by an English sign.

The capital, Astana, is one of few purposefully built capital cities. Like Washington, DC, Brasilia, and Canberra, it did not emerge organically as the seat of government. Moving the capital from Almaty, in the southern mountains, to the northern steppe signifies the new direction of independent Kazakhstan; security was another factor. A tour of the city presents Kazakhs and visitors alike with a vision of the past, present, and future of the nation.

For example, Bayterek Tower (Бәйтерек) links the pre-Russian past with the post-Soviet future of Kazakhstan. According to folklore, a mythical bird of happiness laid its egg between the branches of a poplar tree, the tree of life. The tower symbolizes the poplar and golden egg: the happiness of independent Kazakhstan. Inside the golden sphere, visitors can place their hand in the imprint of the First President’s hand and make a wish. The center of the government can be seen between two golden towers, as can various other monumental buildings, glistening in the sun.

### **National Symbols (PPT slide 19)**

The symbols of Kazakhstan link directly to the nomadic life on the steppe. Throughout the capital and elsewhere, statues and images of nomads and Kazakh warriors can be found, often on horseback. Yurts (юрта), the traditional homes of Central Asian nomads, are not confined to the open steppe, but are incorporated into permanent building designs, market tents, and the like. Spheres, like the one atop Bayterek Tower can be found everywhere, symbolizing the sun, eggs, kurt (Курт), tribes (many people, one nation), etc. Kurt (Курт) is a hard, chalky cheese, a staple of nomadic Kazakh’s diets and at the same time a symbol of Kazakh hospitality.

### **Reviving Traditions (PPT slides 20-22)**

Since independence, the government has invested in reviving and preserving national traditions, such as eagle hunting. Vladimir Zemblevskiy (PPT slide 20) with his golden eagle Saddaq, has 40 years of falconry experience. Through government investment, he can train others in the sport and gives demonstrations to tourists in the steppe.

The Nomad Games, held each year in one of the Central Asian nations, gives Kazakhs the opportunity to demonstrate skills once needed for survival on the steppe. Competitors from throughout the world compete in games of strength, precision, endurance, heritage, and intellect, dressed in traditional garb. Kokpar (көкпар), the Kazakh version of Kok Boru is the most popular event at the nomad games. Like polo, horse-mounted players attempt to advance a headless goat carcass towards the opposing team's goal. Kazakhstan is attempting to use dummy goats to make the game more palatable and control costs, as the traditional is to slaughter a goat for each game. Another tradition is Kyz Kuu (кыз қуу), an equestrian game during which a woman gallops past a man on horseback and he pursues her, trying to catch up and kiss her. If she reaches the finish line first, she turns around and chases him back.

Images of the nomadic lifestyle and traditions can be seen throughout modern Kazakhstan, with chocolate bars wrapped in scenes from the steppe. However, while urban Kazakhs may nod to their history and show pride in their heritage, they aren't living in the past.

#### **Think/Pair/Share (PPT slide 23)**

**What role does the preservation of nomadic heritage and revival of pre-Soviet traditions play in forging Kazakhstan's national identity?**

**What examples of heritage preservation have you seen in the US or other countries?**

### **\*\*Day 4**

#### **Language in Kazakhstan (PPT slide 24)**

Language in Kazakhstan is complicated. Kazakh and Russian are the official languages, but with over 130 ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan and 117 languages spoken, language is closely tied to ethnic identity, status, and class. The concept of "many peoples, one nation" is an attempt to overcome ethnic divisions and respect diversity, but the reality is that as of Feb 2018, all government business is conducted in Kazakh, although Russian translation is available, and English is being promoted as a third national language.

#### **How did Kazakhstan become such a multicultural, multilingual country?**

Under Stalin's rule (1928-1953), the USSR implemented a policy of dekulakization (раскулачивание). Kulaks, or wealthy peasants, had their lands confiscated and were executed, imprisoned, used as forced labor within their own districts or deported to gulags in Siberia, the

Urals, or Kazakhstan. The Karlag (gulag in Karaganda) was established in 1931. In addition to kulaks, entire nationalities in the newly annexed territories, including Poles, Germans, Estonians, and Ukrainians, were forced to migrate. In 1937, Koreans were deported to the Kazakh SSR and Uzbek SSR.

In addition to Soviet citizens who were deported, many scientists and government officials were sent to Kazakhstan. The Russian nuclear program, including test sites, was located in northern Kazakhstan and in 1955 the USSR Space Program founded the Baikonur Cosmodrome. Baikonur is still leased to the Russian space program.

After dekulakization, some deportees (or their descendants) were repatriated, but most remained in Kazakhstan. While some retained their native language, most learned Russian as a second language. With so many Russian speakers and desiring to maintain good relations with Russia after independence, Kazakh and Russian were both included as official languages for the nation in article 7 of the constitution.

Education in minority languages permitted, however, there are limits to pursuing higher education for those who are not fluent in one of the official languages, as college entrance exams are only administered in Kazakh or Russian.

**Think/Pair/Share (slide 26)**

**How many languages do you speak fluently?**

**How long would it take for you to become fluent in another language?**

**Is the goal of a trilingual Kazakhstan attainable by 2050? Why or why not?**

**Writing Kazakh (PPT slide 28)**

Prior to the conversion to Islam, it is believed that the Kazakh language used a runic script like that used by other Turkic-language speakers. Arabic script was probably used to write the Kazakh language beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with evidence indicating that by circa 920 until 1929, Kazakh was written using Arabic script.

Latin script was used between 1928 and 1940, when Stalin imposed Cyrillic script on the Central Asian republics. Kazakh used Cyrillic script, with additional letters to represent Kazakh sounds not found in Russian: Ү Ө Ә Ғ Қ Ұ

In Oct 2017, the nation began transitioning to the Latin alphabet. The goal is to be fully transitioned by 2025. In Feb 2018, the President issued a decree requiring all government business to be conducted in Kazakh, with translators if needed. It is estimated that 97% of all Kazakhstanis are fluent in Russian. And while other central Asian countries transitioned to the Latin alphabet immediately following independence, Kazakhstan was a relatively late adopter.

**Think/Pair/Share (PPT slide 32)**

**What does the Latinization of Kazakh (the change from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet) signify in terms of Kazakhstan's national identity?**

## Why is this change so important?

**\*\*Day 5**

**Wrap-up (PPT slide 33)**

### Project presentations

«We need to look into the past in order to understand the present and foresee the future»

N.A.Nazarbayev

The foundation of Kazakhstan's national identity is drawn from the nomads of the steppe in the form of the preservation of Kazakh traditions, incorporation of folklore into the national narrative, and the aesthetics.

The impact of the colonial and Soviet periods informs the present and future of the nation. Culturally, nearly everyone speaks the Russian language and deportee populations and their descendents form a significant minority population (nearly 37% of all Kazakhstanis are not ethnic Kazakhs). The resulting multilingualism and multiculturalism have led the nation to accept diversity and, at least outwardly, promote tolerance. The concept of "one people, one nation" is evidence of the relationship to the distant and recent past. Physically, Kazakhstan bears the scars of the Soviet gulags and nuclear test sites. It continues to play a critical role in both the Russian and international space programs. Emotionally, the historical trauma of genocide, forced migrations, occupation, and repression has also shaped the national identity.

The goals and aspirations of the First President of Kazakhstan continue to shape the country's national identity. The people aspire to greatness, to promote Kazakhstan's position in the global economy, world politics, and transform what was once a Soviet backwater to the powerhouse of Central Asia.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### What is "National Identity"?

*Prepare for the class discussion by answering the following questions:*

How do you define being "American"?

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What makes up the national identity of the United States?

- Geography:
- Symbols:
  
- Citizenship:
- People:
- Language(s):
- Values and Attitudes:
  
- Cultural Habits and Behaviors:
  
- Achievements:

Which of these factors is most important to being "American"? Why?

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**Research Activity: Creating National Identities in the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia (*Option 2: also include former Soviet Socialist Republics*)**

**(Applicable courses: Western Civ 2, Modern World History, World Regional Geography)**

Assign students, individually, in pairs or groups of 3-4, depending on class size, to research one of the following former Soviet Socialist Republics:

- **Kazakh (Kazakhstan)\***
- **Kyrgyz (Kyrgyzstan)**
- **Tajik (Tajikistan)**
- **Turkmen (Turkmenistan)**
- **Uzbek (Uzbekistan)**
- *Ukrainian (Ukraine)*
- *Belarusian (Belarus)*
- *Georgian (Georgia)*
- *Azerbaijani (Azerbaijan)*
- *Lithuanian (Lithuania)*
- *Moldovan (Moldova)*
- *Latvian (Latvia)*
- *Armenian (Armenia)*
- *Estonian (Estonia)*

*\*Omit if the case study was used in the lesson as an example*

**Research Questions:**

What are the nation's symbols? Why were they chosen? What do they represent in the nation's past, present, or future?

What languages are spoken in the nation? Is there an official language?

What can you tell about the nation's relationship to Russia? Western Europe? Asia? North America? The Middle East? Africa? Latin America?

***Project Options:*** Write a paper, create a class presentation, take notes and share with the class or in groups

## Notes on Modifying Assignments:

Both activities can be modified for other courses, time periods, and regions.

- A. Using Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as case studies, compare the process of nation building and creation of national identities for African nations (Modern World History), the former British colonies (Modern British History, Modern World History, Western Civ 2), Latin American Nations (Modern Latin America), etc.

- B. Substitute any nationality for “American” in *What is “National Identity”?* activity.

*All students might be assigned the same nationality, such as “Mexican” in a Mexico history class, or different nationalities can be randomly assigned if covering the Balkans, Latin America, Revolutions of 1848, etc.*

- C. Compare and contrast two countries that achieved independence during different time periods:

Examples: United States and Kazakhstan

Mexico and Uzbekistan

Argentina and Ghana

Brazil and India

- D. Focus on national symbols: What does the flag symbolize? What does the seal say about the nation?

- E. In US history, students can consider national and state, regional, or personal identities:

What does it mean to be an Arizonan? Texan? New Yorker? New Englander? Mid-Westerner? Southerner? Mexican American? African American? Arab American? WASP? LGBTQ? Democrat? Republican?

What values unite us? What values or practices make us unique?

- F. In the case study, food, religion, music, mainstream sports, and other cultural categories were not presented in depth. Have students research other aspects of Kazakh identity. <https://E-history.kz/en> is a good starting point.

## **Selected Resources:**

### **Websites**

Histories of Central Asia. <http://academics.hamilton.edu/central-asian-history>

National Digital History of Kazakhstan. <https://e-history.kz/en>

Official Site of the President of Kazakhstan. <http://www.akorda.kz/en>

World Fact Book: Kazakhstan. CIA.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>

World Nomad Games. <http://worldnomadgames.com/en>

### **Books**

Dzhelbuldin, Yerkebulan and Dana Jeteyeva. *Traditions and Customs of Kazaks*. AuthorHouseUK. 2014.  
ISBN-13: 978-1496980687

Frankopan, Peter. *The Silk Roads: A New World History*. Vintage. 2017.  
ISBN-13: 978-1101912379

Hiro, Dilip. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. The Overlook Press. 2011.  
ISBN-13: 978-1590203330

Khalid, Adeb. *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. UC Press. 2014.  
ISBN-13: 978-0520282155

### **Articles**

Chapel, Amos. "Kyrgyzstan's Hills Come Alive with the Sound of Nomads." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Library*. 4 Sept. 2018.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/nomad-games-kick-off-in-mountain-venue-in-kyrgyzstan/29469831.html>

Kuandyk, Abira. "Scholar Examines Resurgence of Kokpar in Kazakhstan, Central

Asia." *Astana Times*. 24 Aug. 2018.

<https://astanatimes.com/2018/08/scholar-examines-resurgence-of-kokpar-in-kazakhstan-central-asia/>

Linn, Andrew. "Kazakhstan in changing it's alphabet-here's why." *The*

*Conversation*. 21 Nov 2017.

<https://theconversation.com/kazakhstan-is-changing-its-alphabet-heres-why-87466>

Pangalos, Philip. "Falconry: A Very Ancient Tradition in Kazakhstan." *Euro News*. 6

Sept. 2018.

<https://www.euronews.com/2018/09/06/falconry-a-very-ancient-tradition-in-kazakhstan>

Trotsenko, Petr. "The Rites Stuff: A Dungan Wedding in Kazakhstan." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Library*. 7 Sept. 2018.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-dungan-wedding/29477524.html>

### **Videos**

"Kiss Chase on Horseback - Kyz Kuu - Kazakhstan Traditional Festival for New Year." 22 Mar. 2009.

<https://youtu.be/rQzu--jBWE>

Pugh, Daniel. "Orienting Kazakhstan: Education Reform and the Third Modernization." *YouTube*.

[https://youtu.be/KyG\\_eP7qanI](https://youtu.be/KyG_eP7qanI)

### **Blog Posts**

Assema001. "Why Don't Kazakhs Speak in Kazakh as the Native Language?" *NU*

*Writers Guild*. 3 Feb. 2017.

<https://nuwritersguild.wordpress.com/2017/02/03/why-kazakhs-dont-speak-in-kazakh-as-the-native-language/>

Zoe. "Kurt: Anatomy of a Food." *Kasha*. 9 Feb. 2018.

<http://kashablog.com/2018/02/09/anatomy-food-kurt/>