

The Role of Kazakhstani Society in the State Development

An Overview of the Current Situation, Between Governmental Fickleness and Nation Branding Initiatives

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Abstract The following paper focuses on the current role of nation identity development in Kazakhstan in shaping decisions and directions of the government in the state development discourse from a nation branding perspective. After focusing on macro concepts of brand and nation branding in Kazakhstan, an analysis of the structural changes experienced by the country in 2019 is conducted. The main goal of this research is to highlight how local people's nation identity perception can affect government branding projects. While nation branding is becoming a permanent feature of the government discourse, enhancing only the international image, the discrepancy is becoming more visible and local population can be highly affected by this branding strategies.

Keywords Kazakhstan. Nation Brand. Nation Identity. Protests. Eurasia, Nazarbayev. Society.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Nation Branding and Its Features, Image and Identity. – 3 Nation Branding in Kazakhstan. – 4 The Strategy *Kazakhstan 2050* and the Language Reform in Ruhani Zhangyru. – 5 Kazakhstan in 2019. – 6 Identity in Kazakhstan. – 7 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the strategies of the Kazakhstani government in relation to the concept of nation branding in Kazakhstan, with a particular focus on the development of Kazakhstani national identity. A linkage between some major branding initiatives and general popular disagreement is presented; the increasing importance of the role of the society in shaping decisions and sometimes limiting nation branding activities is also discussed.

The Kazakhstani government started promoting the Kazakhstan brand on a global level in the context of the national development strategy Kazakhstan 2050 in 2012,¹ an ambitious state plan aimed at making the country one of the 30 most competitive in the world by 2050. Moreover, Kazakhstan is a pivotal hub in the ambitious Chinese project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), being located in the “heart” of Eurasia. However, the success of the national brand promotion plan seems to have structural limitations. As a matter of fact, branding strategies in the field of tourism, export promotion, investment attraction, or public diplomacy seem to be highly affected by the lack of communication between the government and Kazakhstani society, with a negative repercussion on the overall development plan and the economic diversification projects.

Since 2019, the country has witnessed a number of protests in the main cities (the capital Nur-Sultan and Almaty), due to a lack of trust and communication between people and the authorities. The situation intensified after Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned his presidential role, paving the way for further discussion about the future of Kazakhstan. As stated by political analyst Dosym Satpayev, “Yesterday’s [1st of May] protests in several Kazakh cities once again showed that authorities’ power demonstration is a sign of their weakness. [...] It is time to learn how to communicate with people.”² The resignation of Nazarbayev and the following presidential elections in June became indeed a reason for popular strife, that peaked with about 500 people being arrested on the 9th and 10th of June.³

This study seeks to explore the development of nation branding and national identity in Kazakhstan, arguing that the discrepancy between the brand image projected by the country and the one perceived by local population has become increasingly manifest. Con-

1 For details, see Akorda.kz 2012.

2 For the full text, see Osservatorio Asia Centrale e Caspio (OACC) 2019.

3 For details, see *The New York Times*, 9 June 2019.

sidering the socio-political, cultural and economic changes that have happened in Kazakhstan in the last few years, the main research questions are:

1. What is the significance of nation branding and identity development in Kazakhstan?
2. Have the major challenges that both the government and society have been facing, in particular since March 2019, had an impact on nation branding strategies? And if so, which one?

Firstly, the following section defines the concept of nation branding and the main nation branding strategies and activities in Kazakhstan since its independence from the Soviet Union. Secondly, the article outlines the social and governmental changes that took place, focusing particularly on the events of 2019, and, finally, the article concludes by highlighting the impact of these events on the national brand. Data was collected mostly from scientific articles, websites, newspapers, and academic publications. The analysis on the formation of national identity has been conducted through semi-structured questionnaires in Russian language, collected from the 3rd to the 31st December 2018 in Almaty for a total of 100 surveys completed. The majority of the respondents lived in Almaty (47.4%) or in the Southern region (27.4%). Moreover, 47% of the people who answered were younger than 20 years of age, and 29% between 21 and 25. Concerning the gender divide, 73% of the respondents were women.

There is a wide gap between the brand identity projected by the country and the brand image perceived by the rest of the world in Kazakhstan. While nation promotion has become a permanent feature of government discourse, although enhancing only the international image, the discrepancy became broadly visible. The local population can both affect this image and be highly affected by these branding strategies.

2 Nation Branding and Its Features, Image and Identity

A brand can be described as a name or a distinctive symbol that helps to identify the goods or services of a certain seller and to differentiate them from those of competitors. However, as stated by Keller (2013), a brand is a more complex concept. It allows consumers to gain knowledge about the products, through the creation of a reputation aimed at improving the position in the market.

The concept of nation branding is usually associated with place marketing and country-of origin-effect, as the usage of commercial strategies to promote the image, products and the attractiveness of a country, improving tourism and foreign investments, "nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications tech-

niques to promote a nation's image" (Fan 2006, 6). However, according to Simon Anholt (2007), nation branding has a wider meaning and is linked to the strategic plan of a country aimed at strengthening its connections with the rest of the world. Anholt defines branding as the process of creation and communication of the identity of a country, in order to build and manage its reputation. In other words, the brand of a nation consists of its unique name and the images projected in the imagination of the people both inside and outside the country. It is the process of strategic self-representation which, when effectively structured and managed, can improve the reputation of a country and diminish the gap between the desired image of a nation and reality.

There are substantial differences between a commercial brand and a nation brand. A country can have several images, depending on the audience and the historical-geographical contexts in which they are perceived, "China, for example, could conjure up the following image: largest country with 1.3 billion people, the Great Wall, panda, kung-fu, Made-in-China, etc. Time seems to be an important factor here in determining people's perceptions" (Fan 2006, 8).

It is complex for a government to fully achieve the desired results through branding campaigns, also because rarely the image projected on an international level accurately reflects the real situation of the nation itself. As for the so-called developing states, as in the case of Kazakhstan, socio-economic progress (or decay) is often much faster and more changeable than the image of the state that has been created over time (Anholt 2003).

The effectiveness of the brand depends on a large number of factors, which are mainly related to the quality of the 'product' offered. Among the (few) successful stories, an interesting model is that developed by the ex-Yugoslav countries. As a matter of fact, they managed to find their independence, even culturally, from Belgrade through rather aggressive marketing campaigns right after their secession. Slovenia is a significant example of this development path; the country, with the 'I Feel Slovenia' promotion project, has managed to obtain very positive and encouraging results, linking its nation brand to the concept of national identity and self-identification of local population (Konecnik Ruzzier et al. 2012).

In terms of strategic marketing, nation branding can be used to manipulate the perception of a country to contrast stereotypes that might negatively affect its reputation on an international level. For instance, former Soviet countries started intense branding campaigns after independence, in order to get rid of their bad reputation in Western countries (Szondi 2007). Latvia was one of the first countries to develop a structured strategy of nation promotion; in 1998, the government created a non-profit organization called 'Latvian Institute (LI)' with the goal of promoting and raising awareness about Latvia's culture, history and society abroad.

One of the main problems in obtaining the expected results of a branding campaign is that rarely the image projected on an international level perfectly reflects the actual situation of a country. This is even more relevant for so-called developing countries, like Kazakhstan, where the economic and social progress (or downturns) are usually faster and more changeable than the brand created by that country over time.

In order to become a 'strong' brand, several elements have to cooperate to form the nation brand image and to consolidate the unity of brand identity. However, certain features such as the name of the country cannot be changed and are fundamental in fostering the social cohesion given by national identity. The identity of a national brand can therefore be defined as a set of associations originated through the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses linked to the attributes of the nation (Aaker 1996; Rojas-Méndez 2013). In parallel, every nation has an image, which consists of its perception by the external world. This is formed through interaction between foreign audiences and a country, such as travel, import-export of goods, mass media and social networks, education and exchange students, over which the government has little control.

The concept of nation refers to a social group, a community that possesses unique characteristics, different from other similar groups. Through this feeling of belonging to a nation and, consequently, recognising what is different, individuals can define their own identity. Certain elements among many others play a meaningful role in the identification process, such as religion or language, as means of social communication (Smith 1991).

Rusciano (2003), moreover, states that identity is an artificial construct used by the state to develop its branding strategies. As a matter of fact, "The national identity as a 'granted' identity is not a natural and spontaneous identifier that emerged in any certain period of history. Contrarily, the intervention of the modern state shapes the construction of the national identity as Massimo d'Azeglio claims: "We established Italy and now it is time to create the Italians" (İnaç, Ünal 2013, 225).

National identity plays a fundamental role in creating a sense of affiliation within a specific group and, at the same time, in developing the ability to stand out from others.

In today's globalized world, the mass media contribute enormously, albeit indirectly, to the modelling of identities, through the sharing of common customs and traditions, the language and a shared socio-cultural background. Therefore, national identity is a very dynamic concept, which arises from the continuous exchange between the members of a society that lives in the present and the legacies of tradition.

The political aspect of national identity refers to nation building strategies, such as several activities promulgated by the government

to make the nation more united, loyal and homogeneous. The government takes care of spreading a certain image of the nation, often based on the history and culture of the predominant ethnic group, also through the popularization of symbols and traditions and the use of the educational system and mass media.

There are nations, such as Kazakhstan, in which numerous different ethnic groups coexist; therefore, governments can face the situation by constituting multiple national identities, or by separating the concept of citizenship from the ethnic one. Since national identity lays the foundations of its promotion and development strategies on constituent elements of the nation itself, it represents a cornerstone of branding development: "A deep and authentic nation brand must include the many elements *and expressions of a nation's culture*" (Dinnie 2008, 112; emphasis added).

Unlike commercial brands, nation branding uses identity elements in a wider and more varied way, as the image projected of a country has to be organic and correspond to the real values of a nation. National identity is, therefore, a constituent element of the branding process and at the same time a component of the image, which is why it often represents the starting point for the development of promotional strategies used by many countries.

3 Nation Branding in Kazakhstan

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly formed independent states started a process to establish their identity and role within the world. The process of economic transition, which can be partially considered as still ongoing, consisted of a throwback to the period before Soviet dominance, but at the same time moving forward to a new definition of state identities. While transitioning to a market economy and more democratic systems, a transformation of both the image and identity of the new independent states began (Szondi 2007).

As a consequence of globalization first, but also of the change in the geopolitical stability of the region, the necessity to develop a positive nation image is becoming a priority for those countries. In the Caucasus, both Georgia and Armenia developed nation branding strategies, the former by celebrating the production of wine through Western television and newspapers such as *The Economist*, as Azerbaijan did on CNN, while Armenia focused on its Christian identity, *Noah's route, your route*.⁴

⁴ This slogan refers to Armenia as 'The land of Noah', with reference to the Biblical Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark landed according to the Bible. The mountain, geographically located in Turkey since the Turkish-Armenian war in 1920, is considered

In Central Asia, nation branding is a serious matter (Marat 2009). As a matter of fact, governments are financing publications, research, films and a number of cultural events to be shown in the international arena.⁵ The contents shared regard economic growth, strategic advantages of the region, along with cultural and natural heritage, and reveal the governmental efforts to gain recognition from other countries. However, results do not seem to be as expected, “Partly because the wider international audience is so diverse, the messages produced by Central Asian states are quite haphazard, often lacking a single unifying idea. [...] Therefore, such images of state and nation represent the ideas of the diplomats and the ruling elites, not the collective of people living in their respective countries” (Velikaya 2018).

As for the other post-Soviet countries, also Kazakhstan after independence started a process of rebuilding its own national identity and image at an international level. Nation branding during the years became a basic practice of the political strategy of the country. Kazakhstan distinguished itself from the other states of the region for the fast-paced economic development since the beginning of the 21st Century, due both to its rich natural resources and to its strategic geographical position, “as Kazakhstan accounts for 60 percent of Central Asia’s GDP, it attracts up to a million migrant workers from its poorer neighbours. Its impressive levels of economic growth have been fuelled by Kazakhstan’s vast wealth of hydrocarbon resources and minerals. It boasts the 11th largest oil reserves in the world” (Zogg 2019, 2).

This role as a strategic hub was confirmed by the inclusion of the country in the Chinese project *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which should guarantee growth in the commercial activities with and through Kazakhstan, as it pledged significant investments in infrastructure and logistics, even in less developed areas of the country. The economic transition of Kazakhstan from the Soviet model to a market economy has been described as ‘Frankenstein Syndrome’, referring to the fact that “Kazakhstan’s political and economic system, [...] is a patchwork of different models, including some foreign models that were embedded into our current status” (Satpayev 2016,

as one of the main symbols of Armenian civilization and Christianity. See also: Agadjanian 2016; Cummings 2013; Marat 2009.

5 For instance, Uzbekistan had a poor political image for several years on an international level, in particular during the government of Islam Karimov (1991-2016). Therefore, the government started promoting among the international community a national image, very different from the domestic one. As a matter of fact, the cultural brand of the country is promoted through the organization of frequent cultural events and celebrations, displaying traditional cuisine, handicrafts, and ceramics. In parallel, historic sites and Samarkand are showed in numerous websites and books, in order to promote internationally cultural tourism in the country.

7), such as Norway or Singapore. Despite the growing interest for its new emerging economy, Kazakhstan is still almost unknown by the majority of the Western world, both on a geographic and a cultural level (Zakarijanovna 2015).

One element which contributed to the global diffusion of a negative image of the country was the 2006 mockumentary *Borat - Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, which depicted the country and its citizens as primitive communities, degraded and poorly educated. As a consequence, in 2007 the Kazakhstani government created a special department, the *International Information Committee*, to promote the national brand abroad and to increase the country's competitiveness: "the *International Information Committee* is responsible for promoting and strengthening the positive image of our country abroad. In the globalised information world, there is the need to work out new approaches to creating a positive image for a country, which is why many countries are currently 're-branding' themselves to increase their recognisability and attractiveness".⁶ Among the best known examples, Kazakhstan invested to realize the Expo *Future Energy* in Astana in 2017, an international exhibition focused on the themes of sustainability and safe access to energy, and the same year hosted the 28th winter Universiade (an international sports competition for students that takes place every two years) in Almaty.

The most famous promotional campaign carried out by the Committee was certainly 'Kazakhstan - the Heart of Eurasia' a series of informative advertisements distributed on the main western media, which promote not only the strategic position of the country (in the 'heart' of the Eurasian region) at a political and economic level, but also the beautiful natural sceneries and landscapes of the country as a tourism destination (Sengupta 2016, 47-67).

Arguably, Kazakhstan's branding strategies mainly promote culture, in an effort to intensify the positive image of the country abroad. In reality, the results are very different from expectations: in fact, the country is often described in a negative way, underlining the presence of an authoritarian regime hidden behind these strategies, or recalling damaging stereotypes: "the capital city Astana - whose urban development is one of Kazakhstan's main brands - is consistently depicted by Western observers as *Nowheresville*, *Tomorrowland*, or a *Potemkin village*" (Insebayeva 2016, 55).

⁶ For the full text, see Investkz.com 2007.

4 Domestic Society's Response to Nation Branding

From the domestic point of view of nation branding, the goal of consolidating the national unity and identity of Kazakhstani citizens still seems a long way off. There have been numerous criticisms made by the domestic audience, often related to the implementation of projects of nation branding. A significant show of discontent arose during the first days of Tokayev's government, when the capital city was renamed from Astana to Nur-Sultan in honor of the First President. About 20 people were arrested protesting against the decision to rename the capital, while "an online petition launched on the GoPetition platform against the city's fourth name change in less than 60 years has exceeded 42 thousand signatures".⁷

Not only have some of the actions implemented been interpreted as mere propaganda, but also many people have criticized the excessive public resource spending (especially during years of global economic crisis) resulting from the organization of these grandiose commercial operations.

An example of this popular discontent was the petition promoted in 2014 by a group of Almaty residents to obtain the withdrawal of the Kazakh government from the negotiations to host the 2022 winter Olympic games in the former capital, primarily for economic and environmental concerns (Insebayeva 2016). However, the government did not listen to the protests and did not withdraw the bid, which was eventually won by China.

Another example of general discontent for the economic management of the country were the protests that took place between April and May 2016, starting in the city of Atyrau. Citizens protested against the land reform that would have allowed long-term renting of unused lands to foreign entities, "after a quarter-century of pushing a national unity narrative, kicked into higher gear with last year's celebrations of 550 years of Kazakh statehood, it's no surprise that citizens would get riled up about the idea of selling the homeland to foreigners" (Putz 2016).

Although there are no structured and direct connections between the protests and nation branding strategies, it can be said that the intense activity of brand promotion and the inefficiency in involving local population in this process has inevitably contributed to the creation of a tense situation. This disappointment has become manifest with the sudden resignation of Nazarbayev, contributing to weakening the new governmental apparatus, "Under Nazarbayev, the government paid lip service to democratic values and the protection of human rights, while simultaneously clamping down on political and

⁷ For the full text, see Asianews.it 2019.

civil liberties. The regime became increasingly intolerant of challenges not only to its rule, but also to its vision of what Kazakhstan should be and how its people should think. [...] This has created disaffection and prompted protests, which gathered pace after Nazarbayev's resignation" (Lillis 2019, 37-8).

In answering to the first research question of this work, "why is the development of nation branding strategies so meaningful for Kazakhstan?", these promotional campaigns were certainly planned to make a first impressive appearance in the international economic and political arena and to strengthen its country image. Among others, some elements support this statement, such as the spectacularism of the capital city, the advanced technology presented at Expo in 2017, and the promotion strategy to enhance the tourism. All these branding activities have specifically been planned for an international audience.

A brief outline of the development strategy *Kazakhstan 2050*, which has established growth goals not only in terms of promotion abroad, but also internally, involving all the most important aspects of a nation's development, is set out below.

5 The Strategy Kazakhstan 2050 and the Language Reform in Rukhani Zhangyru

The Kazakhstani government started promoting the brand *Kazakhstan* systematically in the context of its development strategy *Kazakhstan 2050*. Among its main goals, the ambitions of diversifying their economic portfolio, improving domestic economic development and opening the country to sustainable energy sources stand out. The strategy was presented in 2012 by the president Nursultan Nazarbayev. One of the main characteristics of this plan is that it clearly defines the new international markets to be approached by the country: "Currently ranked as the 51st most competitive country in the world, Kazakhstan, according to Nazarbayev, should be ranked among the 30 most advanced nations by 2050. To do so, Kazakhstan will need to integrate its economy into the global and regional environments by capitalizing on its transit potential and bolstering information technology capabilities".⁸

As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan is the richest and most dynamic post-Soviet country in Central Asia, with an economy strongly dependent on natural resources. Since the price of oil is extremely volatile, one of the main goals of the strategy is to diversify the internal

⁸ For the full text, see the website of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (kazhembus.com) 2012.

production of the country. Moreover, thanks to this plan, the country jumped from 53rd to 36th in 2018 in the *Doing Business* ranking of the World Bank, even though oil & gas still represent the main economic markers of the country.

Kazakhstan has been improving its competitiveness mostly on an international level, promoting several activities in the economic and political area. However, it seems that the government has not invested enough in the domestic sphere, not even in activities aimed at shaping national identity, such as those planned in 'Rukhani Zhangyru' (2017) and its continuation 'The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe', two development programs outlined by former President Nazarbayev for the modernization of Kazakhstan with a focus on national origins, traditions and identity. Concerning national identity, it is stated that "Preserving the inner core of national identity while changing only some of its characteristics is significant and a number of archaic habits should be left behind for successful implementation of spiritual revival" (Gaur 2018).

In particular, the development of the national identity in Kazakhstan is still a rather complex issue today. The adjective 'multicultural' is well suited to the population living in the country, a real melting pot of ethnic groups made up of almost 140 different nationalities who coexist in an atmosphere of relative tolerance. Originally, the Kazakh population was born at the crossroads of at least three nomadic ethnic groups that populated the great steppes of Central Asia and shared part of the Islamic and Turkish cultural heritage, also on a linguistic level. At independence, ethnic Kazakhs represented a minority of the population, behind Russians. At the same time, the development process of the national identity was structured through the opposition of two concepts, 'Kazakh', that is an individual of Kazakh ethnicity, and 'Kazakhstanets', a person of Kazakhstani citizenship, regardless of ethnicity.

As the proportion of ethnic Kazakhs grew steadily in the decades after independence, Nazarbayev proposed a reform of the state language alphabet, moving from the use of Cyrillic to Latin alphabet through the decree 'On the translation of the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin graphics'⁹ by the year 2025. Public opinion has been very divided about the possible reasons behind this decision. The former president's official statement concerns the desire to modernize the country, making it more competitive in the world arena also through a latinisation of the alphabet. Language is recognized as a fundamental tool in the process of establishing the national identity (Fishman 1999), as an element transversely present in the cultural, political and social life of a nation, which allows the creation of a com-

⁹ For details, see Akorda.kz 2017.

munity through the transfer of its history and traditions from generation to generation. As a matter of fact, it is possible to note that in recent years the country has increasingly entered the international arena, and has been included in the Chinese project *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI); in parallel, in recent years has started an unofficial movement, which uses Latin characters for writing Kazakh words. Numerous brands and businesses have word for word transliterated their name to make it appeared more modern and western, even without a standardized version of the alphabet (Yergaliyeva 2018).

This strategy can also be read as an attempt to create a homogeneous social and national identity. Kazakhstan, in particular during the first independence period, based its nation building policies around three elements: language, nation and territory. These practices have shown a strong link with the process of identity constitution developed by the Soviet regime, which provided for the creation of a single supra-ethnic 'Soviet identity'. Similarly, Nazarbayev attempted to strengthen the role of the Kazakh language, as a symbol of the unity of the people in the country (Burkhanov 2017). This initiative was also interpreted as a personal branding technique by Nazarbayev, capable of consolidating his role in connection with the formation of the national identity. Language reforms are a powerful tool in the national identity building process and could have a major impact in shaping his role as *Father of the Nation*.

In Kazakhstan, the process of establishing national identity appears to be already very dynamic and characterized by unpredictability, which "is also highly relevant to the cultural and political complexities of Kazakhstan, which is often deemed in the literature to be Janus-faced, as it works to simultaneously promote multiculturalism and a more homogenizing 'kazakhization' of society" (Zabortseva 2016, 25). The Kazakhstani government failed to develop a dialogue with its citizens and an adequate strategy to sustain a national identity development policy. Therefore, it is possible to state that the inconsistency of the propaganda surrounding national identity has led to a fragmentation of the identity of the Kazakhstani population, which might have a serious impact on the competitive activities of Kazakhstan on the international market, since it lacks a real correspondence between the projected image of the country abroad and reality.

These reforms are not only aimed at consolidating national unity, but also at personally glorifying the head of government,¹⁰ and they have certainly had an impact on society. Specifically, for the purpos-

10 As a matter of fact, Nazarbayev has named himself 'Leader of the Nation' through the constitutional act 'On First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - the Leader of the Nation' on June the 14th, 2010. For the full text, see the website of the Information and legal system of normative legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan (adilet.zan.kz 2010).

es of this paper, the current development situation of the identity formation process in Kazakhstan will be analysed, highlighting how the disunity and sometimes ambiguity of the objectives of these government strategies have led to a fragmentation of opinions, with consequences also in relations with the government apparatus that implemented such strategies.

6 Identity in Kazakhstan

The concept of national identity, in the context of processes such as ‘slowbalization’,¹¹ is once again becoming a central definition within the nation building strategies of many countries. In fact, unlike family descent, which are innate and exclusive of the individual, belonging to a specific nation is not defined in a natural way at the time of birth, but is an artificial identity construct that sees its origin contextually with the birth of the modern state.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Nineties, several post-Soviet countries had to start a series of activities aimed at creating an identity for their own country other than the previous Soviet identity, which had dominated in terms of propaganda during the last century, in an effort to unify the country, while causing the quasi-annihilation of any national uniqueness (Burkhanov 2017).

Nazarbayev has carried out numerous activities related to the practices implemented by the Soviet regime in the field of civil identity, institutionalizing the symbolic unity of the people, the territory and the Kazakh language, depriving the concept of any ethnic connotation with the aim of stimulating the pride of all the peoples of the country. With the aim of investigating the issue of Kazakh national identity in greater depth, a questionnaire was developed in the MA thesis *Nation Branding in Kazakhstan* (Bortolotti 2019) to understand the popular perception of Kazakhstani national identity and its most representative elements. After a series of general questions, the 100 participants in the interview were asked about what meaning they attributed to the fact of being ‘Kazakh’ (67% of the questionnaire participants were of Kazakh ethnicity) or ‘Kazakhstanets’ (the necessary requirement to participate in the survey was in fact to have Kazakhstani citizenship).

The majority of the answers collected could be categorized as patriotic (such as, for example, ‘Being proud of one’s homeland’ or ‘Loving one’s own people and country’), thus indicating that the very

11 This term, mixing the words ‘slow’ and ‘globalisation’, indicates “a continued integration of the global economy via trade, financial and other flows but albeit at a significantly slower pace” (Kupelian 2020, 1).

meaning of being a citizen of Kazakhstan is a matter of respect and pride towards the country and civil society. Similarly, many have also provided answers regarding the importance of traditions and knowledge of national culture and language, elements consistent with the concept of patriotism and a source of pride in their origins. Again, according to this line of thought, some have also indicated behavioral characteristics and ways of being typical of the population, such as friendliness, generosity and hospitality. It is also very interesting to note that some respondents highlighted the difference between the term 'Kazakh' and 'Kazakhstanets', without however indicating a hierarchy between the two definitions.

The last question of the questionnaire also tackles the issue of identity. In fact, respondents were asked what identity represented them most between European, Asian or Eurasian. The answers, in this case, are very uneven. In fact, 20.4% said they identify more with the former, while the majority equally divide the Asian identity (31.2%) and the Eurasian identity (31.2%). European identity, being a concept linked to factors such as music or cooking, is easy to understand in light of the fact that many of these elements are widespread globally, especially among young people and in large cities (almost 50% of the respondents comes from Almaty and are under twenty years of age). In the same way, the Asian identity structure can also be read in terms of cultural soft power, strengthened by geographical proximity and therefore by a predominance in the market of final products, which are purchased daily by the Kazakh population. The Eurasian identity can be read in light of the Eurasian theories actively promoted by Nazarbayev and in relation to Kazakhstan's strategic geographical position of 'bridge' between Asia and Europe.

The people of Kazakhstan are very proud of their values and traditions, which found a fertile ground for development in Eurasian doctrine,¹² combining Asian and European culture in a peaceful, stable and multi-ethnic growth model. The current internal fragmentation of the population with respect to identification in an identity category of belonging can be interpreted as a sign of the structural weakness of the domestic nation building strategy. The relatively unstable foundations of this strategy can potentially lead to a failure in the manoeuvres aimed at putting Kazakhstan in competition with the international market, lacking a concrete correspondence be-

12 Concerning Eurasianism, since the early 1990s Nazarbayev has repeatedly attempted to create and promote his Eurasian doctrine, focused on the strategic geographical location of the country and on the Eurasian Economic Union, founded in 2015, "Kazakhstan's Eurasianism is promulgated as an official ideology by the top leadership of the country and the focus was to build peace, solidarity and unity among peoples on the basis of morality, spirituality, cultural and historical interactions of peoples of different ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds" (Mostafa 2013, 164).

tween the homogeneous image projected by the government towards the rest of the world and reality.

7 Kazakhstan in 2019

Kazakhstan is characterized by a fragile institutional and social system, with a weak parliament and widespread corruption. “Not one Kazakh election has ever been judged free and fair by international observers, corruption is rife, and police brutality is commonplace. No credible political opposition exists, and civil society is stymied” (Tynan 2019). As a matter of fact, the main goal of Nazarbayev’s strategies has always concerned the economic aspects and stability more than even wealth distribution or internal political reforms. As a result, power has accumulated within selected elites, “Power structures in Kazakhstan are cliquish and hierarchal. Connections count in what is essentially a one-party administration. Family, business, and regional relationships define the breadth and scope of influence” (Tynan 2019). At the same time, even if this pattern has contributed to consolidating poverty, especially in small villages, it is the most relatively stable country in the Central Asian region, with a position of mediator between the major international players, such as Russia, China, the European Union and the USA.

Kazakhstan was experiencing structural changes during 2019. The presidential elections, held on the 9th of June, were characterized by widespread protests against injustice, lack of transparency and government corruption; protests were restrained by limiting internet access, arresting thousands of people and detaining journalists.

As a result, government image among local people was seriously damaged, explicitly showing the undemocratic nature of the state ruling powers, “the government had been facing mounting concerns from vocalized public assemblies on issues related to the provision of adequate housing, higher wages, and increased social benefits” (Sullivan 2019). Over the last few years, several social protests have started, against the government’s refusal to make changes and reforms; this process intensified after the resignation of Nazarbayev in March 2019, when the number of protests in the main cities started growing due to a lack of trust and communication between the people and the authorities.

The complexity of the political situation encouraged the government to hold elections as soon as possible and restabilize the relationship between the authorities and society, to restore the ‘balance of power’ in the country, preserving the foundations of the Nazarbayev system but still undermining many citizens’ confidence in the power structures of the country. Tokayev is the chosen successor of Nazarbayev, even though “the line of command still leads directly to Nazarbayev, and his ability to pull the strings of personal-

ly approved ministers and officials in key positions is undiminished” (Tynan 2019), a fact confirmed also because he still bears the title of *Elbasy*, that is the leader of the nation.

Tokayev, soon after being elected, declared that “[the] world is changing rapidly and unfortunately, we are facing new challenges ahead. We must confirm the continuity, predictability and stability of our domestic and foreign policy”.¹³ One of the key words in this context and in his first declarations was ‘continuity’. This term can be interpreted in two very different ways, on the one hand as the willingness of the authorities to preserve the situation as it is, avoiding changes or reforms, on the other as the prosecution of the multi-vector foreign policy supported by Nazarbayev.

As far as internal politics are concerned, since his resignation Nazarbayev has continued to act as a powerful supra-system player, invested with the role of keeper of the national *status quo*. In parallel, Tokayev is maintaining a policy that can be defined as ‘stability for stagnation’, meaning that any variation is considered negative and not changing is preferable to instability. However, this position is very distant from what Kazakhstani society requests. As a matter of fact, citizens are looking forward to the promotion of a policy of ‘stability for development’. This high need for change has been clearly shown in social media and so-called ‘online’ activities, especially in Almaty and Astana (Nur-Sultan). However, this emerging social explosion has so far been only local, not really structured or politically organic. This fact shows the absence of clear ideological niches among the majority of the population, which usually express an almost total political apathy. Moreover, the high level of corruption has fostered a growing crisis of confidence among authorities in a huge part of society.

However, there is no social basis for the development of an independent civil society. The active population, representing the majority of the middle class, expresses itself on social networks, seeking changes in the social, economic and environmental spheres. On the other hand ‘the many’ are passive mostly because they do not feel they have enough economic stability, “also in the post-Soviet era, people prefer to rely on private social networks and family ties rather than on civic engagement and the involvement in public associations to address their concerns” (Pierobon 2016, 218).

Younger generations, corresponding to 51% of the total population (18 million), are divided into different groups, with different levels of education, opportunities and goals. This situation clearly reflects the social pyramid of Kazakhstan. They do not have any memory of the Soviet Union, since they have only lived under the “reign” of Nazarbayev. However, even if the ‘Nazarbayev generation’ has been ex-

¹³ For details, see: Akorda.kz, 2 September 2019.

periencing increasing restrictions on media, religion and public expression, they feel they are living in a comparatively free country, especially in comparison with the other post-soviet countries in Central Asia. Moreover, Nazarbayev intensively promoted both Kazakh nationalism and the multi-ethnic composition of society. As a consequence, the strategy of the First President contributed to raising a number of identity question among younger Kazakhstani generations.

8 Conclusions

This paper has explored the relation between the development of national identity and self-promotion strategies of the government in Kazakhstan, considering the relatively active role of new generations in the sociopolitical life of the country.

Nation branding strategies and national identity have been chosen as the keys to understanding the new dynamics between Kazakhstani government and society. As a matter of fact, the nation branding strategies of promotion implemented by the government have led to the establishment of a narrative that is quite distant from reality. In parallel, identity issues are inevitably linked to the sense of disappointment, which is spreading especially among the youth, “Citizens’ perception about their own country is reflected into the country’s image both internally and externally. [...] if a country’s citizens do not believe in the power of their country, then they will not be able to persuade others to believe. To build a strong country brand, first it must be crept in the minds of citizens, otherwise any attempt at branding the country will result in failure” (Andrei 2017, 510).

Since 1991, Nazarbayev had consolidated his power and built a strong cult of personality. His resignation was certainly unexpected, but at the same time it did not break the legacy of his personal cult, and certainly he has not been replaced in this sense by the less charismatic Tokayev. In parallel, the dialogue between citizens and the government was becoming harsher, “frustrations have been bolstered by perceptions that crucial national decisions are being made without the general population being consulted”.¹⁴

The sudden resignation of Nazarbayev provided the opportunity to start pro-democratic protests against the government, that ended in dozens of people being arrested because of the very restrictive law on public assembly. It can be noted that since 2018, the number of spontaneous protests increased, also because several opposition parties ceased to exist.¹⁵

¹⁴ For the full text, see Eurasianet.org 2019.

¹⁵ For details, see Cabar.asia 2019.

The concept of ‘identity fragmentation’ reflects the shortcomings of government promotional activities, which have always excluded citizens and failed to consolidate in a structured way. As a matter of fact, significant actions such as the transition to the Latin alphabet or Expo in 2017 have had more positive resonance in the international community, exacerbating the tension within local society.

Kazakhstan is striving to increase its competitiveness in the international arena, strengthening its state reputation and promoting its economic and political interests through a series of activities of different natures (culture, sport, politics), while leaving the domestic sphere in the background, especially as regards the question of the constitution of identity. However, since this is a fundamental aspect, in order to make effective the efforts implemented in the field of nation branding, it is necessary in the near future for Kazakhstan to establish a direct dialogue with its citizens, developing more appropriate strategies and supporting a national identity implementation policy, which would be both structured and comprehensible for citizens, also at the level of linguistic decrees and propaganda.

It seems, therefore, that the government has not invested that much in the domestic sphere, including activities aimed at shaping national identity. The Kazakhstani government has failed in developing a dialogue with its citizens and an adequate strategy to sustain a national identity development policy. The general inconsistency of the propaganda about national identity has led to a fragmentation of the identity of the Kazakhstani population. This may have a serious impact on the future competitive activities of Kazakhstan on the international market, since a real correspondence between the projected image of the country abroad and reality is lacking, “By ceding the presidency, Mr. Nazarbayev also deftly stepped out of the firing line at a time of irksome civil unrest”.¹⁶ The intensification of the protests might also be linked to the rough narrative of Kazakhstani nation brand and identity, which became more evident with the resignation of Nazarbayev.

In conclusion, branding strategies are a tool used by Kazakhstan’s government, albeit not fully effectively, not only to create a more consistent image of the country on an international level, but also domestically. In order to reach this goal, it is necessary that the government starts including the concept of a shared national identity as an integral part of the governmental nation branding plan, narrowing the gap between the image projected by the elites and the way it is perceived by society.

¹⁶ For the full text, see *The New York Times*, 22 March 2019.

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