

# Kazakhstan – first among equals

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I have recently returned from a fascinating conference on Central Asian Republics at Ditchley Park. I am not a professional conference attendee but I found this one particularly valuable and I trust I did not exceed my brief in promoting Kazakhstan.

Essentially what I sought to convey was that the rest of the world has increasingly grasped how important Kazakhstan was and that within those Central Asian republics Kazakhstan was the first among equals. It was not seeking to bully its neighbours nor dominate them but it was undoubtedly showing how a Central Asian Republic could, in short measure become a global player. Nothing seemed to me to demonstrate that more than Kazakhstan's chairmanship in 2010 of OSCE. It seized by the throat an organisation that might have been fading and set within it a vitality that restored it. I was not wholly confident that the slower paced adjoining states would applaud Kazakhstan's pre-eminence but that is the reality of President Nazarbayev's skilled international actions.

In the early part of 2011 I was invited to be an international observer at the elections of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. This role I readily accepted and was awarded Certificate No.1 by the Chairman of the Electoral Commission. I chose to go to Karaganda which those who know the work of Solzhehnitsyn will recall was, in Soviet times, the largest Gulag in the Soviet Union. What Solzhehnitsyn does not record is that the local population of Kazakhs did their utmost to ameliorate the privations of those sent there without trial or due process of law. In any event, in 2011 it is a thriving, bustling town and I was not conscious of any fear or trepidation in anyone's eyes as they performed their democratic duty of voting. Turnout was high but not loopy. No boxes recorded 104%, for example, of the relevant electorate. The police presence was low and the only incident of intimidation I encountered was of a wife on her husband. He wanted to stay at home and have a glass of whisky. She would not permit him to have this until he had voted!

In my long time in politics I have been in countless polling stations and can smell, at a 100 paces, if anything untoward is happening. Once in the glens of Angus I uncovered that with so few of the electorate looking in, the officials and the party representatives had resorted to playing Bridge!

I sat in the corner of a Polling Station in Karaganda having arrived unannounced until all had forgotten that I was there and watched. There was no intimidation, no harassment nor any other form of discreet pressure on the voters. Indeed some of the practices such as clear perspex ballot boxes could well be adopted in the United Kingdom.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has not taken small timorous steps towards democracy but is taking giant strides in the right direction. The lessons that President Nazarbayev consistently urges, that economic development and prosperity should go hand in hand with the reach towards democracy, seem to me to be well-understood now. And what I admire is that in reaching for these important goals he has not neglected the great culture of his nation. Sadly that cannot be said of everywhere on the globe.

The British Kazakh Society was set up to further improve relations between the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan. It has as its Patrons President Nazarbayev and HRH Prince Andrew. We have had impressive events at St James Palace to celebrate our existence but we are not just in being for formal occasions, or to support major exhibitions or conferences, important as these are. We seek also to foster the best of relations with individual British and Kazakh citizens. Easiest to reach have been Kazakh students studying here in the United Kingdom (probably about 11,000) or at universities in Kazakhstan but there is still much to do. Those students have voracious appetites not only for food but for learning and cultural activities. That bodes well for the future but we would also like to heighten our impact before these young people become the leaders of tomorrow.

I am always quietly astonished by the regard in which Sir Winston Churchill is held in Kazakhstan. For one like me in the United Kingdom who would not be free without his indomitable spirit, he is of course a person to be venerated. Less obvious is that high regard across the political spectrum in which he is held in Kazakhstan. There is in Kazakhstan a strong cultural emphasis on the "strong man" and he fits that description. President Nazarbayev has not been slow to seize on that chance not only to form a distinctive nation but to put it at the forefront of the Central Asian economies. The rest of the world would be wrong to underestimate what has been achieved in 20 years. ■