

Towards a new national identity

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JONATHAN AITKEN is a former Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister. He is the author of twelve books including an award winning biography of Richard Nixon. His last biography, *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*, has been published in seven international editions. His latest book *Kazakhstan: Surprises and Stereotypes – After 20 Years of Independence* is being published in December 2011. His next book to be published by Bloomsbury in 2013 will be a biography of Margaret Thatcher.

Writing about contemporary Kazakhstan is like making a journey into unexplored territory, for it is one of the least known yet most surprising nations of the post Soviet world. It may be a timely moment to offer a portrait of this new country as it passes the historical milestone of its 20th anniversary as an independent state.

Today the international community takes Kazakhstan seriously because of its growing economic importance. Yet even now most westerners know little or nothing about its history, culture, character and future potential. Nevertheless there is a growing understanding that a new powerhouse is coming of age on the Steppes. At this strategic crossroads where Chinese, Russian, Central Asian and Western civilizations converge, Kazakhstan has arrived as a stable and significant nation state.

One sign of the changing times is that international recognition of Kazakhstan is rising. From its hosting of the OSCE summit to the performances of its acclaimed orchestras and musicians, the country is making its mark on the world stage. Its economic power to move

oil markets, stock markets, grain markets and the world uranium market is well known to global traders. Kazakhstanis themselves are becoming more confident as they travel and study abroad in large numbers. This is a nation on the move.

Kazakhstan's governance and politics are interesting too, although you would never guess it from the lazy reporting of too much of the world's media. This author has been able to report from the country's darkest corners, such as prisons and security services; on its brightest scholars and students; on its cultural show pieces of theatre, ballet and music; from its rural auls; its intellectual schools; its richest industries; its liveliest young entrepreneurs; its two greatest cities and in interviews with its most prominent public figures. At the end of such a writer's journey I have no complaints about lack of access or openness. As a result, my forthcoming book contains some criticisms, some compliments and, I hope, many fresh insights. The most intriguing discovery is the emergence of a new national identity.

Portraying the national identity at the time of Kazakhstan's 20th anniversary is challenging because the picture is not static. So much in the country is developing and changing fast. Yet for all its growing wealth, the nation's most important resource is its people. They are a combination of the talented and the traditional, full of futuristic ambition yet with deep roots in their ancestry and culture. Defining these roots is difficult because they are a fusion of ancient Steppe values; Turkic-Islamic heritage; and the testing experiences of Soviet colonisation. To understand Kazakhstan's past and potential, three themes are surprisingly important: Suffering, Survival and Success.

National character can be strengthened in adversity. By



Symbol of the new Kazakhstan: the President's Palace in Astana

this measure the resilience of the Kazakhstani people was tested to the full by the tragic sagas of their 20th century sufferings. The first of these tragedies was the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Uprooted from their ancestral lands by the revolutionary ending of the Russian empire, 1.5 million Kazakh nomads fled with their herds of sheep and cattle into China and Mongolia in the early 1920s.

The second tragedy was the Communist policy of agricultural collectivisation which had a devastating effect on the remaining nomads and their livestock. Between 1930 and 1933 over 3 million Kazakhs died of starvation as they were forced off their traditional pastures and into the disastrous experiment of Soviet-directed collective farms.

Accompanying collectivisation came the reign of terror and repression ordered by Josef Stalin. He subjugated the Kazakhs with ruthless brutality. At least 300,000 of them were executed or died between 1937-1954. These losses were accompanied by deportations into Kazakhstan of 500,000 victims of Stalin's purges from other parts of the Soviet Union. Many of these deportees were prisoners incarcerated in a network of sinister penal camps – The Gulag. An extra dimension to the sorrows of 20th century Kazakhstan was added by the realization that its northern territory became the principal location, after Siberia, for these prisons.

Whether they were locked up in the Gulag or dumped into collective farms, this compulsory migration of multi-ethnic foreigners diluted the indigenous Kazakh people still further. In addition to Stalin's deportees, when Nikita Khrushchev ruled the Soviet Union 1.5 million workers were moved to another disastrous agricultural experiment on Kazakh soil – the Virgin Lands Scheme. By this time the Kazakhs had become an oppressed minority in their own country, almost losing their way of life. Reduced to a rump of 37 per cent of the population their nationhood was steadily suppressed by their Soviet occupiers – for example, by 1961 the capital city of Almaty was allowed only one Kazakh language high school.

Perhaps the most terrifying exploitation of Kazakhstan during the Soviet era was the use of the Semipalatinsk region as a nuclear weapons testing site. Between 1949 and 1989 tests took place there at the rate of one every three weeks. In those four decades there were 752 nuclear explosions in Kazakhstan - 114 of them in the atmosphere or at ground level with no protection for the domestic population. The regularity and radioactivity of these tests had appalling consequences for the national environment and for the health of the local people. As a result, a climate of fear and revulsion spread across the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan when the secrets of Moscow's nuclear testing program began to leak out through deformed births, increased cancer rates, crops disease

and other horrors. The mental and physical scars of these radiation effects are still felt deep in the heart of Kazakh society today.

Understanding the ordeals of the country's 20th century past provides a clearer perspective of its 21st century future. For Kazakhstanis are tough, stoical people well schooled in surviving the climatic extremes of the steppes and the political extremism of colonial occupiers. Despite many efforts to obliterate them, Kazakhstan's language, poetry, music and national character were well preserved in times of suffering and are now flourishing in times of success.

This spirit of survival was needed after the Soviets departed in 1991. Independence in the ruins of the collapsed super power was initially more painful than joyful. The country was left bankrupt and dysfunctional. It had no currency, rampant inflation, inadequate food production and useless factories. Pensions and salaries could not be paid by the government. Families went hungry. The country teetered on the brink of economic and political chaos. But during the first few years of self government its people discovered moral as well as material assets which enabled them to pull through the many crises they had to endure.

The first of these moral assets was tolerance. Kazakhstan is a country made up of 138 nationalities and ethnic groups. The parents and grandparents of today's society were thrown together in adversity. The rising generation of their descendants have learned to live together in prosperity. This national chemistry

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Image of traditional Kazakhstan: hunting on horseback



of flexibility and tolerance is a miraculous successor to the previous era of oppression. Kazakhstan has become the melting pot of Asia as its sorrows fade into memories. It is a young country whose 16 million people have an average age of 31. Their eyes are fixed optimistically on the future with a second moral quality underpinning their tolerance. It is their trust – in each other and their leadership.

Building a new country is exhilarating as it becomes successful. Trust grows as results are achieved. Twenty years ago Kazakhstan was an impoverished and backward Central Asian state. Today it is the powerhouse of the region, rising in economic performance and international respect.

Since independence Kazakhstan's GDP per capita has risen twelvefold and exceeds \$9,000 – a level of prosperity roughly equivalent to Malaysia's. It is climbing so much faster than in most other emerging economies that the GDP per capita figure is forecast to reach \$28,000 by 2020. A remarkable achievement.

The current rate of unemployment, now 5.6 per cent, is falling and is lower than in the United States, Britain, France and Germany. Perhaps the most hopeful sign of all is the arrival of a young and ambitious middle class. Too many of them seem to prefer a safe career in government to an entrepreneurial career in business but that also is changing.

Economic statistics tell only one part of the story. As the title of my book suggests, Kazakhstan is full of surprises. Its people are warm, hospitable, good humoured, open-minded, cultured, fond of telling

stories, frequently musical, splendidly convivial and full of laughter and joie de vivre. They are an attractive nationality whose qualities range from physical beauty to Steppes-centered romanticism.

Western democracies have a tendency to be cynical and mistrustful towards political leaders. Kazakhstani public opinion takes the opposite tack. This is partly because of traditional respect for seniority and hierarchy, and partly because the people genuinely trust their President. They look on him as the founding father of their nation and refer to him, affectionately, as Papa.

The trust and the affection have grown because President Nursultan Nazarbayev has delivered. Kazakhstan, at its present level of development, would not have survived without his leadership through the years of turbulence. My previous book *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan* (Continuum 2009) tells his story. Yet even since this biography was written the country has leapt out of recession and into international prominence. These achievements were made possible by a rising tide of competence and confidence at all levels.

My book tries to analyse the spirit and identity of the country as it reaches the 20th anniversary of its independence. A good starting point for this analysis is the surprisingly creative tension between New Kazakhstan and Old Kazakhstan. E

The above extract is based on Jonathan Aitken's new book, *Kazakhstan: Surprises and Stereotypes After 20 Years of Independence* (Continuum) which is being published in December. Jonathan Aitken is also the author of *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan* (Continuum 2009).

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Modern Kazakhstan:
Astana at night