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# Russian minority and the security of the Republic of Kazakhstan

## Introduction

According to the Soviet census of 1989, Russians constituted 37.4% of the population of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (i.e. 6.06 million people), whereas Kazakhs – 40.1% (i.e. 6.49 million). It was neither the highest percentage (in the Latvian SSR 37.96% of the population were of Russian origin) nor numerical (11 million in the Ukrainian SSR) of all the union republics, but it was the only case where the titular nation did not have a significant numerical advantage over a minority.<sup>1</sup>

The effective policy, commonly known by the name of Russification, carried out during the Soviet era, led to a situation in which over 90% of ethnic Kazakhs used Russian as their mother tongue. This gave rise to certain difficulties in using Kazakh culture as a foundation for building statehood and national unity after the collapse of the USSR. Attempts at the so-called “Kazakhisation” of socio-political life met with resistance not only by Russians, but also by Russian-speaking Kazakhs, which led to the inclusion in the 1995 Constitution of a provision that recognised Russian as one of the two official languages of the country. Providing Russians with more favourable living conditions, compared to other countries in the region, where the Russian language had been relegated to the status of the language of inter-ethnic

<sup>1</sup> “Население СССР по данным всесоюзной переписи населения 1989 г.,” Государственный комитет СССР по статистике. Информационно-издательский центр, Москва 1990.

communication, did not prevent the emergence of separatist demands. These demands led to suspicions as to their loyalty to independent Kazakhstan. This conviction was further strengthened after the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, who, after consolidating the Russian diaspora, began to use it as a lobbying group for the Kremlin's policy in post-Soviet countries. Despite maintaining the official position that the Russians are part of the Kazakh nation, efforts have been made for years to limit or eliminate Russian elements from the socio-political life of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

This article seeks to provide an answer to a set of specific research questions. First, it aims to discuss the nature of the dangers of the presence of Russians in the northern part of Kazakhstan for the security of the state. Second, it looks at the impact of the presence of the Russian minority in the Kazakh territories on the evolution of the political and social system of Kazakhstan. Third, it seeks to identify the steps taken by the authorities in Nur-Sultan geared towards limiting Russian influence in the republic. Finding the answers to the above questions has been possible thanks to the analysis of the collected data and press releases, based on the application of the observational method, and by analysing the actions of Kazakhstan's political decision-makers towards the Russian minority until 1991, using the monographic method. The application of these methods has made it possible to look into the research issue in detail and to formulate relevant conclusions based on the method of synthesis and deduction.

## Kazakhstan's dilemmas related to the presence of the Russian minority and its impact on the social and political life of the republic

The relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan since the 1990s, in spite of the official message about friendship and good-neighbourliness, have been epitomised by serious tensions. This has been due to the existence of a large Russian minority in the territory of Kazakhstan.

A sensitive issue in bilateral relations, which recurs quite frequently, is the undermining of the state border between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan. The first claims in this respect were made by then President Boris Yeltsin, at the time when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was dissolved. The decisive factor for the need to revise the border was the fact that the Russians constituted over 60% of the population in the northern *oblasts*, which was complemented by concerns about the free realisation of their own national identity in the Kazakh state.<sup>2</sup> These demands were met with a harsh response from President

<sup>2</sup> A. Chodubski, *Jednostka, naród państwo*, [in:] *Wprowadzenie do nauki o państwie i polityce*, eds. B. Szmulik, M. Żmigrodzki, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010, p. 172.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, who reminded the Kremlin that Kazakhstan, just like Russia, was a nuclear power and would use all the measures available to prevent this scenario. Kazakhstan's concerns about territorial integrity led to major uncertainty as to whether the country's authorities would sign a protocol to the Start-1 treaty, which obliges it to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. Only the re-declaration on the recognition of the borders of the Kazakh SSR as the borders of independent Kazakhstan by Vice President Alexander Ruckoy during a special visit to Almaty prompted Nazarbayev to sign the above-mentioned protocol on 23 May 1992.<sup>3</sup>

The silencing of the debate on the border changes did not rule out the possibility of the Kremlin raising this issue in the future. For this reason, President Nazarbayev initiated actions aimed at eliminating the rather unfavourable attitude of representatives of the titular nation towards the Russian minority in North Kazakhstan.

The easiest strategy was to carry out an administrative reform, which consisted in joining the *oblasts* dominated by Russians with those where the Kazakh population was higher, which happened in 1997.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the inclusion of the Semipalatinsk Oblast into East Kazakhstan, the share of Russians fell from over 70% to 45%. The addition of a part of the Kokshetau District to North Kazakhstan lowered the ratio of the Russian population from 65% to 49%.<sup>5</sup> The other half of Kokshetau, absorbed by the Akmolin Oblast, brought about an even balance between the Kazakhs and the Russians; a similar situation occurred in the Karaganda Oblast, which had been merged with the Jazkazgan Oblast.<sup>6</sup> The mass emigration of Ruthenians to their homeland, combined with the high birth rate among the representatives of the titular nation, accelerated the pace of change in the ethnic structure. By 2021, the share of Russians in the total population of the northern regions had dropped to around 35%, with the exception of North Kazakhstan, where they accounted for 49.22% of the population.<sup>7</sup>

The second step was aimed at strengthening the ties of the Kazakh people with the northern territories. The implementation of this goal began in the 1990s with the decision to move the capital from Almaty to Akmola and the so-called "Kazakhisation" of street and town names. The translocation of the capital became an

<sup>3</sup> M. Gołąbek, "Kazachstan i Rosja po upadku ZSRS", *Pisma Humanistyczne*, no. 7, 2010, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Е. Садовская, "Перенос столицы из Алма-Аты в Астану и его влияние на миграционные процессы в Казахстане" *Демоскоп Weekly*, № 71/72, 2002, <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2002/071/analit03.php> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>6</sup> С. Панарин, "Русскоязычные у внешних границ России: вызовы и ответы (на примере Казахстана)", *Диаспоры. Независимый научный журнал*. № 2–3, 1999, с. 147–148.

<sup>7</sup> А. Zhanmukanova, "Is Northern Kazakhstan at Risk to Russia?", *The Diplomat*, 23.04.2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/is-northern-kazakhstan-at-risk-to-russia> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

opportunity to raise the importance of these lands in Kazakhstan's state-building process, not only internally, but also internationally. International opinion could recognise the cession of the peripheral area of the state, but not of the capital city. Although 28 years have passed since the decision to relocate the most important urban centre, the authorities keep prolonging the implementation of the financial support program for people interested in settling in the northern areas. This project suffers from an uneven amount of subsidies: the highest grants can be obtained when Russians take actions to support separatism in the post-Soviet area, which is why the most favourable conditions were offered after the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In addition to the above scheme, the state administration bodies have been trying to encourage people to change their permanent place of residence by locating large investment projects in this part of the country, providing new jobs, which acts as an incentive for the inhabitants of the south, where there is still a high level of unemployment.

It should be mentioned that the transfer of the capital has posed a certain threat to the internal stability of the state. It has disrupted the current order in the power structures, where representatives of the South (Elder Zhuz) played a dominant role. Moving the capital to the area of the Middle Zhuz caused the need to admit their representatives to the circle of power as hosts of these lands.<sup>8</sup> Increasing the chances of making a career by Kazakhs from the north has stimulated their interest in raising their qualifications. This allowed for the commencement of the process of restricting representatives of Russian origin in the structures of state administration. Additionally, the expansion of the human resources range limited the influence of family and tribal ties on the positions held.

The "Kazakhisation" of street and place names began right after the collapse of the USSR. It was then that the Russian-sounding names of the cities were removed: for example, Shevchenko was renamed Aktau, Panfilov was renamed Zarkent, and Ust-Kamienogorsk was replaced with Öskemen.<sup>9</sup> This process slowed down after the signing of an agreement on border delimitation in 2005.<sup>10</sup> The fight against Russian nomenclature began again after Putin's statement in 2014, in which the Russian leader questioned the existence of the Kazakh nation before 1991.<sup>11</sup> 2017 can be considered a breakthrough, when the issue of ineffective decommunization

<sup>8</sup> A. Wierzbicki, P. Załęski, *Trybalizm a władza w Azji Centralnej*, Pułtusk: Akademia Humanistyczna imienia Aleksandra Gieysztor, 2008, pp. 245–248.

<sup>9</sup> M. Gołębek, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> W. Baluk, "Polityka bezpieczeństwa Republiki Kazachstanu", *Wschodnioznawstwo. Badania Wschodnie. Polityka Wewnętrzna i Międzynarodowa*, no. 8, 2008, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> Д. Каликулов, "В Казахстане озадачены словами Путина о русском мире", BBC Russian, 2.09.2014, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/09/140901\\_kazakhstan\\_putin](https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/09/140901_kazakhstan_putin) [accessed: 22.02.2022].

of the nomenclature in the northern areas was raised.<sup>12</sup> This has become a catalyst for the replacement of old plates with new ones, on which only the entries in Kazakh and English are placed.<sup>13</sup> The opposition of the Russians led to the suspension of public consultations on the new street names. Currently, they are designated top-down. The greatest difficulties occur with changing the names of Petropavl and Pavlodar.<sup>14</sup> For Russians, the preservation of these names has a symbolic dimension and fuels their views on the connection of these lands with Russia. For the Kazakhs, on the other hand, it is a symbol of the lack of shedding the Russian yoke. There are also visible actions in the sphere of historical policy. Kazakhstan, conducting archaeological excavations as part of the state program called “Medeni mura”, tried to find evidence that the Kazakh ethnos was present in these lands long before the Russian settlement.<sup>15</sup>

The third bone of contention concerned the status of the Russian language. A balanced fight against Russian has continued since Putin became president, a key figure in the world of politics who uses the Russian minority and the Russian language as a soft power to put pressure on the leaders of the former Soviet republics. This is confirmed by the Concepts of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation of July 15, 2008 and January 12, 2013, which referred to the consolidation of the diaspora and the protection of their interests in the country of residence.<sup>16</sup> The concept of November 30, 2016 was expanded to include efforts to strengthen the position of the Russian language and the Russian mass media in the world.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian-Kazakh clashes are also discernible in confessional matters. The consolidation of the diaspora was achieved mainly by uniting the Russian minority around the Orthodox religion. Until 2004, the existence of the structures of the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan did not raise any concerns. The threat arose when

<sup>12</sup> “В Казахстане 352 улицы все еще носят имя Ленина”, Закон, 9.01.2017, <https://www.zakon.kz/4838277-v-kazakhstanec-352-ulicy-vse-eshhe.html> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>13</sup> Т. Назарук, “Только на казахском и английском – управление по развитию языков не видит нарушения закона в табличках с QR кодом в Костане”, Наша Газета, 24.09.2018, <https://www.ng.kz/modules/news/article.php?storyid=3238> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>14</sup> “Переименование Павлодара и Петропавловска – попытка дерусификации или возвращение к истокам?”, 29.12.2020, <https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/analytics/19205-pereimenovanie-pavlodara-i-petro-pavlovsk-a-popytka-derusifikatsii-ili-vo-zvrashchenie-k-istokam> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>15</sup> N. Nazarbayev, *Era niepodległości*, transl. by G. Palacz, A. Palacz, Warszawa: Andrzej Palacz, 2018, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации от 15 июля 2008 года”, 15.07.2008, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785> [accessed: 22.02.2022]; “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации от 12 февраля 2013 г.”, Генеральное консульство Российской Федерации в Кракове, 12.02.2013, <https://krakow.mid.ru/konceptcia-vnesnej-politiki-rossijskoj-federacii> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>17</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.11.2016 г. № 640 Об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации.

President Putin took part in the sessions of the Holy Synod and announced the need for the church to cooperate with the authorities, which meant that it would actually be subordinate to the Kremlin's policy.<sup>18</sup> The new patriarch Kirill does not conceal his close relationship with President Putin. Kazakhstan, seeing this as a serious threat, took steps to weaken the influence of the Russian authorities on the clergy working in dioceses located in Kazakhstan, and thus on the Russian minority. Due to the limited number of Russian political organisations, the church has become a politicised place, with a significant power not only over practicing Russians, but over the minority as a whole. The first attempt was to make it difficult to register Orthodoxy as one of the confessions after the changes to the legislation in 2007. This idea failed due to strong pressure from Russia. The second attempt was made in 2012, when the interest in autocephaly grew among the political elite of Kazakhstan.<sup>19</sup> It rose after realising the role played by the church in the actions against Ukraine in 2014. The consideration of such a scenario may be confirmed by the statement of the Kazakh foreign minister in 2018, who supported the resolution of the crisis related to the autocephaly of the Ukrainian church in favour of preserving peace as soon as possible.<sup>20</sup> It was also in Nur-Sultan's interest to try to get the Russian Orthodox Church to recognise these changes. Acceptance of such a state of affairs would constitute a consent to take such measures in Kazakhstan that would make it possible to subordinate the church to state policy and end the perception of this confession as an uncertain element, controlled by a superior centre located in Moscow. However, it is extremely difficult, because the Russian Orthodox Church takes the position that the territory of the former USSR constitutes one undivided canonical territory.<sup>21</sup> Dependence on Moscow is confirmed by the expectation of instructions from the Orthodox community ordinary at the outbreak of the January protests in Kazakhstan. The Church backed Tokayev's actions only four days after the introduction of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation troops (January 10), while the Grand Mufti, dependent on the power of Nur-Sultan, did so on January 5.<sup>22</sup> This raises concerns that if Kazakhstan adopts a col-

<sup>18</sup> J. Sobczak, Wpływ Rosyjskiej Cerkwi Prawosławnej na politykę międzynarodową Federacji Rosyjskiej, [in:] *Z badań nad historią i współczesnością Rosji, Azji Centralnej i Kaukazu*, eds. T. Bodio, J. Marszałek-Kawa, Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2017, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> "Православные Казахстана не думают об отделении от МП РПЦ", Total Media Qazaqstan, 15.05.2012, [https://total.kz/ru/news/politika/pravoslavnye\\_kazakhstan\\_a\\_ne\\_dumay](https://total.kz/ru/news/politika/pravoslavnye_kazakhstan_a_ne_dumay) [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>20</sup> "МИД: Казахстан заинтересован в урегулировании церковной ситуации на Украине", РИА Новости, 18.10.2018, <https://ria.ru/20181018/1531006054.html> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>21</sup> J. Sobczak, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> "Глава православной церкви в Казахстане выступил с обращением к гражданам", РИА Новости, 10.01.2022, <https://ria.ru/20220110/mitropolit-1767196127.html> [accessed: 22.02.2022]; "Верховный муфтий Казахстана обратился к гражданам на фоне протестов", <https://ria.ru/20220110/mufti-1767196127.html> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

lision course with regard to the Russian Federation, the Orthodox clergy operating among the Russian minority will denounce their obedience to the local authorities. Therefore, the creation of an autocephalous church, like in Ukraine, would be the safest solution.

Another threat is the strengthening of the importance of the Russian media, which are extremely popular in Kazakhstan due to the free use of the Russian language by the majority of the citizens. For many years, the leading message of the Kazakh state media was similar to that of the Russian one. Serious contradictions emerged during the Maidan period in Kiev. Both televisions described these events as an attempted coup and the overthrow of the legal government. However, they became convinced of their strong influence on social opinion in Kazakhstan when, thanks to the media, the Russians built parties supporting membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, despite their initial aversion to such an idea. Problems arose when Russian television began to portray separatism as the will of local Russians to secede.<sup>23</sup> Kazakhstan could also be affected by this scenario. It was then that the reflection on the degree of resemblance to Ukraine and the level of dependence on Moscow began.<sup>24</sup> It was noted that Moscow began to be interested not only in the Russian population, but also in Russian-speaking citizens.<sup>25</sup> In order to strengthen its security, Kazakhstan had to take steps to oust the Russian language from the public domain.<sup>26</sup>

One of the solutions was to intensify work on the education system in three languages: Kazakh, English, and Russian.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the main focus of the authorities is to promote the idea of conducting education in two languages: Kazakh, and English. This is confirmed by the training of teachers to teach subjects such as physics, chemistry, biology and computer science in English, whereas until now they were conducted mainly in Russian.<sup>28</sup> These changes are explained by the desire to include Kazakh specialists in the world of vocabulary used at the global level, as well

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стов в стране”, 5.01.2022, Sputnik, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20220105/Verkhovnyy-muftiy-Kazakhstana-obratilsya-k-grazhdanam-na-fone-protestov-v-strane-19053667.html> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>23</sup> E. Kołodziej, “Peryferie w Centrum? Miejsce Azji Centralnej w globalnej architekturze bezpieczeństwa”, *Rocznik Strategiczny*, t. 20, 2014/2015, p. 382.

<sup>24</sup> E. Kołodziej, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>25</sup> M. Karolak-Michalska, “O polityce Rosji wobec swoich rodaków żyjących na obszarze postradzieckim”, *Studia Gdańskie. Wizja i rzeczywistość*, vol. 13, 2016, p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> С. Мисецкий, “Казахстанская модель национальной политики”, *Всходнознавство*, no. 7, 2013, p. 150.

<sup>27</sup> L. Masalska, Społeczne i kulturowe aspekty statusu języka rosyjskiego w państwach Azji Centralnej, [in:] *Z badań nad historią i współczesnością Rosji, Azji Centralnej i Kaukazu*, eds. T. Boddio, J. Marszałek-Kawa, Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2017, p. 195.

<sup>28</sup> Управление образования Акмолинской области, Трехязычие как один из приоритетов современного образования, 8.01.2021, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/aqmolaedu/press/news/details/144657?lang=ru> [accessed: 22 February 2022].

as the 2017 declaration of transition to the Latin alphabet, effective in 2025.<sup>29</sup> Despite being bi-lingual, Russian was given a key role: it was to be an incentive for ethnic Russians to send their children to institutions offering teaching in three languages. The authorities hope that by teaching the young generation of Russians the language of the titular nation, they will be able to systematically limit the use of Russian and thus eliminate the need for Putin to protect this language. This is supported by the fact that every third inhabitant is under 14 years of age and is obliged to learn the Kazakh language.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the number of people learning in Russian decreased from 2.22 million in 2000 to 690 thousand in 2016. According to government statements, by 2025 there will be a complete transition to teaching in the Kazakh language. Such aspirations are confirmed by the words of President Tokayev, who speaks about the need to learn the Kazakh language by everyone who links their future with Kazakhstan and the aspiration to make Kazakh the language of inter-ethnic communication.<sup>31</sup> Proposing radical solutions shows how great a threat the Kazakh authorities perceive in the continued popularity of the Russian language in the socio-political life of the republic. The harsh rhetoric is related to the criticism of the Kremlin, which is effectively counteracted by the theory that the Russians are part of the Kazakh nation, and not a separate national group.<sup>32</sup>

The fear of Russians being disloyal has forced them to take steps to limit the freedom to establish political and social organisations, the participation of their members in the process of exercising power, and the broadest possible control over their activities. This affected not only representatives of the ethnic minority, but also ethnic Kazakhs.

Blocking the creation of political parties representing the interests of the Russian minority generates the problem of their lack of representation in power structures. Especially that this grouping would have no problems with winning the seats of deputies at the 5% threshold, taking into account the size of the minority – 18.42% of the republic's population.<sup>33</sup> The authorities justify this by trying to block the formation of nationalist groups. This is not the best line of argument, as it is used by the Kremlin as a weapon to influence the shape of Kazakhstan's political scene.

<sup>29</sup> Указ Президента Республики Казахстан от 26 октября 2017 года № 569. О переводе алфавита казахского языка с кириллицы на латинскую графику.

<sup>30</sup> Э. Сулейменова, “Очерк языковой политики и языковой ситуации в Казахстане”, *Russian Language Journal*, vol. 59, issue 1, 2009, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> “Нужно превратить казахский язык в язык межнационального общения – власти РК”, *EurAsia Daily*, 7.09.2020, <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/09/07/nuzhno-prevratit-kazahskiy-yazyk-v-yazyk-mezhnacionalnogo-obshcheniya-vlasti-rk> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

<sup>32</sup> Г. Ергалиев, “Русские – это часть нашего народа”, *Zona KZ*, 22.06.2020, <https://zonakz.net/2020/06/22/russkie-eto-chast-nashego-naroda> [accessed: 22.02.2022]; N. Nazarbayev, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> *Численность населения Республики Казахстан по отдельным этносам на начало 2021 года*, Комитет по статистике Министерства национальной экономики Республики Казахстан.

Under the pretext of fighting nationalism, the Russians are blocking the registration of political groups demanding the “Kazakhstanisation” of the republic’s social and political life and legislative changes in the language. An example of this is the Halyk-Ruha party, which has been awaiting registration since 2008, despite fulfilling all formal obligations.<sup>34</sup>

The real reason for blocking the uprising of the Russian party in Kazakhstan is the fear that, after entering parliament, this formation could become a tool in the hands of the Kremlin to put pressure on Kazakhstan. This thinking is correct, but blocking the participation of Russians in the political life of the state generates a feeling that the state treats them as strangers, which does not create in them the need to identify with it.<sup>35</sup> Similar feelings about alienation are experienced by Kazakhs who are unable to elect the heads of local executive authorities. This mechanism was blocked in the 1990s for fear that in larger urban centres in the northern districts, the seat of the *akim* would go to the representatives of the Russian minority. They could conduct activities aimed at strengthening the ties of the oblasts they manage with the Russian Federation, thus increasing the threat of secession. Over the years, the exclusion of not only Russians, but also Kazakhs from the decision-making process, generated an increase in antagonism between the society and the authorities. This phenomenon was used by Russia to strengthen its role as a guarantor of the stability of the existing regime. In order to alleviate this state of affairs, President Tokayev decided in 2021 to hold general elections of *akims* only in smaller county towns and in rural areas.<sup>36</sup> Taking over only these units was due to the inability to take over the positions by the Russians, because they live mainly in large cities. The January events forced the announcement of a declaration on holding *akim* elections in 2023 in county towns and large cities, excluding the capital and Almaty. This gives the Russians a chance to take over the office of the *akim* in the cities of Pavlodar and Petropavl, i.e. two major urban areas located near the Russian border.

On the other hand, social organisations were subjected major centralisation. Cossack groups posed a particular threat to internal security due to their military service in the Russian army. It is during this period that the authorities in Nur-Sultan lose control over them. The neutralizing action was to limit the possibility of establishing new organisations, apart from those associated in the Association of Russian, Slavic and Cossack organisations or in the Union of Cossack Societies

<sup>34</sup> “Объединение русских в Казахстане считает, что создание партии ‘Халык Рухы’ противоречит политике межнационального согласия”, [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=30103623](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30103623) [22.02.2022].

<sup>35</sup> A. Wierzbicki, “Stratyfikacja etnospołeczna w Azji Centralnej i jej wyzwania dla etnopolityki (na przykładzie Kazachstanu)”, *Politeja*, no. 5, 2014, p. 318.

<sup>36</sup> “Около 800 сельских акимов выберут в Казахстане”, *Forbes KZ*, 11.02.2021, [https://forbes.kz/news/2021/02/11/newsid\\_243725](https://forbes.kz/news/2021/02/11/newsid_243725) [accessed: 22.02.2022].

of Kazakhstan.<sup>37</sup> In order not to be accused by the Kremlin of nationalism, this decision had to be made also against Kazakh associations. While in the case of Kazakh organisations, which did not have foreign support, such solutions proved successful, in the case of Russian organisations there were obstacles to surveillance of their activities as a whole, as they maintained contacts with their counterparts in Russia. In order to minimize the creation of new channels of communication with Russia, difficulties were introduced in the registration of new social organisations. In this case, the Kazakhs who were once again deprived of their right to freedom of association as part of the fight against Russian influence were again affected.

## Conclusions

The existence of such a large Russian minority in Kazakhstan poses a threat to the security of the state. According to the research findings based on the questions posed at the outset of this paper, the Russian minority itself expresses little interest in joining the northern *oblasts* with the Russian Federation. This does not change the fact that it is the Kremlin's tool for putting pressure on the authorities in Nur-Sultan. Despite not showing any attempts to separate, it is disturbing that Russia supports such actions. This is confirmed by the fact that members of the Russian minority place the letters Z or V on their cars as a symbol of support for the "special operation". Not only the authorities, but also the Kazakh public see a certain danger in this, which is why they are forcing them to download these symbols from their vehicles.

Using them as a pressure force is associated with inhibiting the process of evolution of Kazakhstan's political and social system. Fearing the strengthening of this group, the authorities limited the possibility of establishing social organisations, including those of a political nature. As a result of these actions, ethnic Kazakhs who did not have the opportunity to associate became a group of victims. In addition, the need to constantly see whether the Russians recognize that the Russian minority is under pressure from nationalists makes it impossible to build the idea of national unity based on the leadership of Kazakh culture. On the other hand, it is necessary to strengthen internal security, which makes the security system still fragile. The decision to create three oblasts (Žetysu, Abay, Ulytaic) proves that as the share of Russians in the population structure of the northern *oblasts* declines, the authorities are ready to unblock decentralisation. The best example of this is the

<sup>37</sup> "ОЮЛ 'Ассоциация русских, славянских и казачьих организаций Казахстана'", Ассамблея народа Казахстана, <https://assembly.kz/ru/struktury-ank/etnokulturnye-obedineniya/respublikanskiye-eko/assotsiatsiya-russkikh-slavyanskikh-i-kazachikh-organizatsiy-kazakhstan> [accessed: 22.02.2022]; "Казачество в современной истории Казахстана", <https://articlekz.com/article/5944> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

creation of the Abaya Oblast, which overlaps with the former Semipalatinsk Oblast, which was dominated by inhabitants of Russian origin at the time of the collapse of the USSR.

Despite numerous difficulties, the authorities keep taking measures to limit Russian influence by removing the Russian language from common use, reforming the education system, fighting for changes in the names of cities and streets, and limiting the role of the Russian media. This is supported by demographic changes: in fact, about 30,000 Russians leave Kazakhstan every year, and another as many die. Thirty years ago, they accounted for almost 37.4% of the population, and in 2021 – merely 8.42%. This ratio is still high, but according to demographic forecasts, in 2030 they will constitute about 5% of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan.<sup>38</sup> This means that within a decade the Kremlin's main argument about the large number of ethnic Russians and the need to protect their interests will disappear. There remains an excuse to intervene to protect the Russian-speakers. It will remain valid for several decades to come, as the process of ousting the Russian language will take much longer than the natural disappearance of the representatives of the Russian minority. This mechanism may be used at a time when the political courses of Moscow and Nur-Sultan significantly diverged, but its effects would be catastrophic – the Russian Federation would lose its second most important ally, right after Belarus.

The alliance with Russia gives Kazakhstan a chance to carry out effective de-Russification without the perturbations and consequences that have hit Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine. The fact that most of the changes do not have to be implemented at the state level is in favour of Kazakhstan, as they occur spontaneously in society, which Moscow decision-makers are also fully aware of. Hence, in the coming years, there should be an automatic discharge of the threat resulting from the presence of Russians in the republic and the widespread use of Russian. This poses a challenge for the state administration, which will have to develop a line of argument that will convince the Kremlin of the actions aimed at maintaining the current *status quo* in this area, while carrying out actions that will put an end to the old order.

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<sup>38</sup> Д. Науханов, "К 2030 году русских в стране практически не останется – политолог", 365 Info, 27.10.2020, <https://365info.kz/2020/10/k-2030-godu-russkih-v-strane-prakticheski-ne-ostanetsya-politolog> [accessed: 22.02.2022].

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### *Russian minority and the security of the Republic of Kazakhstan*

#### *Abstract*

This article examines the dangers posed by the presence of a large Russian minority in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The detailed analysis of the situation in the period from 1991 to 2021 has made it possible to identify not only the dangers, but also the ways in which the Kremlin takes advantage of this issue to exert major pressure on Kazakhstan's political decision makers to promote Russia's vital interests. The paper looks at the measures taken by the authorities in Nur-Sultan, the main purpose of which is to limit Russian influence in the republic, as well as the negative impact of the adopted mechanisms on the growth of participation of ethnic Kazakhs in the socio-political life of the state.

Key words: Russian minority, danger, counteraction, Republic of Kazakhstan, Russian Federation