

IRSTI 11.01.65

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2021-4-36-43>

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The 550th anniversary of the foundation of Kazakhstan's statehood in 2015 an assessment from a neutral Central European country*

Abstract. A crucial aspect of the «politics of history» and «politics of memory» of all post-Soviet republics is the relationship to statehood. This article examines, from the perspective of a Central European observer, the commemorations held in Kazakhstan in 2015 on the occasion of the creation of the Kazakh Khanate, which is assumed to have taken place in 1465.

Until recently, the history of the Kazakh Khanate was actually not an object of Eurasian research in the countries of Western Europe, although it contained many historical events and facts that influenced the history of the development of regional states and peoples.

The starting point for this analysis are statements by politicians from Russia, whose importance for present-day Kazakhstan can hardly be underestimated not only in the areas of politics, economics, security, media, culture, etc., but also represents an important point of reference in questions of «history policy».

Questions of the evolution of Kazakhstan's statehood and Kazakh ethnogenesis naturally enjoy much more attention among Kazakhstan's historians since 1991 than they did in Soviet times. In the present context, such topics are by no means «only» of historiographic importance, but also of eminent current political significance. Strengthening the statehood of today's Kazakhstan as well as the faith of its citizens of all nationalities in it could contribute to counteracting possible territorial claims by individual neighbouring states. However, it is difficult to judge from the outside what influence the 2015 celebrations had on Kazakhstan's politics and multi-ethnic society or to what extent they were able to leave lasting traces precisely there.

Keywords: History, statehood, Kazakhs, Kazakh Khanate, Kazakhstan, Central Asia

Introduction

The celebrations on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the foundation of Kazakhstan's statehood had a certain piquancy: many Kazakhs, but also some foreign observers, perceived them as a reaction of the official Kazakhstan to a statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to which the Kazakhs never had their own state until the collapse of the USSR. In 2015, Anna Sazonova, a student at the Moscow-based Russian University of Friendship of Peoples, had expressed her concern about the [alleged or actual, M.M.] rise of nationalist sentiments in the south of Kazakhstan and asked Putin to confirm or deny the possibility of a repeat of a «Ukrainian scenario» (meaning the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich in Kyiv in 2014) in Kazakhstan. In his answer to this question, the Russian President paid a peculiar compliment to the then President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, by declaring him practically the founder of Kazakhstan's statehood: Nazarbaev had «accomplished a unique thing: he created a state on a territory where no state had ever existed before. In this sense, he is a unique man for the post-Soviet space – and also for Kazakhstan.» [1]. With these words, Putin probably wanted to express his appreciation for Nazarbaev in general and for his reputation for attaching the greatest importance to particularly close relations with Russia in particular. And Kazakhstan's leader was considered the initiator of an Eurasian Union on the territory of the former USSR, which he first presented at Moscow State University in 1994. And Putin emphasised in 2014

at a youth camp at Lake Seliger in Russia's Tver region that Kazakhstan is «the closest strategic ally and partner to us» [2]. Kazakhstan supported most of Moscow's efforts towards «integration» in the post-Soviet space at the political, economic, military, etc. levels. At first glance, it is all the more astonishing that such good neighbourly and alliance relations have not prevented Putin from negating the long history of Kazakh statehood.

The public reaction in Kazakhstan to the Russian President's statement was mostly negative. And two activists, Mukhtar Tayzhan and Galym Ageleuov, sent him books about the history of Kazakhstan, including one from 1943 (i.e. the Stalin era), which were supposed to prove a long history of Kazakh statehood. Such volumes were also sent to Nazarbaev himself, who had declared in July 2011 that the Kazakhs had «never had their own state and state borders» and had never established a capital on their own initiative; however, he later apparently reversed his opinion (Although there could necessarily be no question of fixed and unambiguous borders of the steppe empires of Central Asia, Turkistan (in the south of present-day Kazakhstan) is considered to be the capital of the Kazakh Khanate from the 16th century onwards; cf. *Turkestan – stolitsa... (2015)*). – Tayzhan's and Ageleuov's actions were probably intended primarily to attract the attention of the media, as they could hardly have expected a positive reaction from the two Presidents to whom the gifts were addressed.

Materials and research methods

This article sheds light on a complex of questions that are equally important for current politics as well as research into the history of Kazakhstan. This does not require a complex method, but primarily a conscientious review, summary and evaluation of academic literature as well as reports in the quality press and the reflection of impressions gained during personal visits to Kazakhstan. In this way, certain questions are answered, but in turn new ones are raised (cf. the Conclusions).

The starting point for this analysis are statements by politicians from Russia, whose importance for present-day Kazakhstan can hardly be underestimated not only in the areas of politics, economics, security, media, culture, etc., but also represents an important point of reference in questions of «history policy». Then the focus lies essentially on the question of how politics and people in Kazakhstan have reacted concretely to Russian statements about the statehood of the Kazakhs.

The author originates from Central Europe and thus almost inevitably adopts a certain perspective, which may or may not be correct – but perhaps it is also interesting for researchers and observers in Kazakhstan itself, because they thus learn something about the way they are perceived abroad. However, it must be taken into account that the author has been dealing with the former Soviet Union for three decades; of course, he has no intention of looking at things from the perspective of journalists (even if they are very experienced on the international level) who write about Central Asia today after having published about South America yesterday and will report about Africa tomorrow (which is not to be denounced in itself, because it is part of the profession of journalists who specialise in foreign policy and international relations).

Analysis

Kazakh statehood in the mirror of Russian history policy. Many Kazakhs saw in Putin's words not only a discourtesy and condescending attitude towards their history, but also an allusion to territorial claims against Kazakhstan (if the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia are not denied the right to independence altogether; thus, the ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – who was born and grew up in Soviet Kazakhstan's capital Alma-Ata, now Almaty – demanded their annexation to Russia as a «Central Asian Federal District» [3]): Putin's statements were often viewed against the backdrop of his annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in March 2014 and the violent uprising of Russian and pro-Russian forces shortly afterwards in the eastern Ukrainian Donbass [4], since the ideological basis and justification for the action towards Ukraine ultimately went back to a denial of

the existence of an independent Ukrainian nation (according to the official Russian position, Russians and Ukrainians are «one people» [5]) and its right to statehood on the part of broad circles in Russian society and political class.

Although no one has yet claimed that Kazakhs and Russians are «one people», somehow similar theories about Kazakhstan had also been voiced not only in post-Soviet times but even before the collapse of the USSR in December 1991. Thus, in «Rebuilding Russia», an essay first published in the USSR in September 1990 and subsequently quoted countless times, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said about Kazakhstan: «Its present huge territory was allotted to it by the Communists without sense or reason, as it happened: Where herds of cattle roamed in the course of a year, there was Kazakhstan.» [6]. Such contemptuous and historically questionable statements by the Soviet dissident writer and 1970 Nobel Prize winner for literature were followed by countless open claims to Kazakhstan's northern regions (where still many ethnic Russians live) in politics, science, culture and the media of post-Soviet Russia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan and its Embassy in Moscow repeatedly felt compelled to oppose this. And it was revealing in this context that Kazakhstan was hardly ever supported by Western states.

The search for the origins of statehood. Unlike the republics on the western and south-western periphery of the Soviet Union, there had been no really politically influential independence movements either in Kazakhstan or in other Central Asian Soviet republics, and Nazarbaev in 1990-1991 was an important supporter of maintaining the USSR or a reformed Union [7]. But with the decisions to officially dissolve the Soviet Union in December 1991 [8], independence virtually fell into the laps of the Union republics of Central Asia.

A monument in the centre of Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan bears the following quotation by Nazarbaev: «The restoration of independence is the rightful compensation for the sacrifices made by our ancestors in the centuries-long struggle for freedom».



Figure 1. A monument with Nazarbaev's quotation in Nur-Sultan

Thus, according to Nazarbaev, the disintegration of the USSR led to the «restoration» – and not a (first-time) «attainment» – of Kazakhstan's independence, which clearly alludes to the Kazakh Khanate. It is, however, not referred to here, not to mention a time when it was founded and existed.

Questions of the evolution of Kazakhstan's statehood and Kazakh ethnogenesis naturally enjoy much more attention among Kazakhstan's historians since 1991 than they did in Soviet times [9]. As in most post-Soviet republics, historiography in Kazakhstan reveals tendencies that boomed in Europe in the period between the World Wars, such as a particular interest in the historical foundations of the

respective nation-state. The search of the political elites for origins of their own people that are as far back as possible and a glorification of earlier state foundations while presenting the foundation of the nation state as a supposed «final goal of history» of their own people is also not something that would be typical of the post-Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan. The «process of disenchanting the national past» is still to come for the former Soviet republics, if it will arrive at all in the foreseeable future: Only a few historians in the post-Soviet republics think about «destroying historical myths», which in Western Europe has been one of the «most important fields of work in international historical research since the 20th century»[10].

Memory of the Kazakh Khanate. Historically, 1465 is not a completely undisputed year for the emergence of the Kazakh Khanate. Kazakh historians also have different opinions on the question of which institutionalised rule in late medieval or early modern Central Asia can or should be regarded as the «first Kazakh state» and which event, when (and where), marks its founding; some even place the emergence of the Kazakh Khanate in the 16th century. However, an anthology published by the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan in 1993 with contributions from historians, political scientists and archaeologists explicitly referred to 1465 as the year of origin of Kazakh territoriality [11], and this was the narrative on which Kazakhstan's leadership based its 2015 celebrations. Referring to the military leader and historian Muhammad Haidar Duġlat (1499?-1551), it says that in the process of the disintegration of the Golden Horde, Giray and Janibeg founded the Kazakh Khanate on the banks of the Chu River in 1465; Giray became the first Khan [12]. Accounts published outside Kazakhstan usually deal with these processes in only a few phrases, and the Kazakh Ulus that emerged is frequently described as «fragile» [13].

Tauke (1680-1718) is considered the last Khan of the united Kazakh Khanate, which faced numerous hostile neighbours. The most dangerous were the Dzungars, who repeatedly advanced from the east and tried to provide themselves with pastures and cattle herds at the expense of the Kazakhs. After Tauke's death, his Khanate split into three parts («Zhuz»; from the Kazakh word for «hundred»), namely the «Senior Zhuz» (encompassing areas in the south and southeast of present-day Kazakhstan, in the northwest of present-day China and parts of Uzbekistan), the «Middle Zhuz» (central and eastern Kazakhstan) and the «Junior Zhuz» (western Kazakhstan), each headed by its own Khan.

In 1730, under pressure from the ongoing Dzungarian threat, Abu Khair (1710-48), Khan of the «Junior Zhuz», turned to the Russian Tsarina Anna Ioannovna with a request to be accepted as a subject. The following year, Abū Khair and most of the elders of the «Junior Zhuz» swore allegiance to the Tsarina. The events of that time are still regarded in Russian historiography as the beginning of a «voluntary annexation movement of the Kazakhs to Russia». The Tsarist Empire, however, never thought of giving the Kazakhs real military support against the Dzungars, but preferred to concern itself with a fundamental transformation of the Kazakh social and economic order in the service of its own interests, specifically: the integration of the nomads into its ruling structures, which then dragged on until the 1850s [14].

Results

On November 27, 2014 the Government of Kazakhstan issued the decree «On the Creation of a Republican Commission for the Preparation and Implementation of the 550th Anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate in 2015». Deputy Prime Minister Berdybek Saparbaev chaired this commission. This was followed on December 31, 2014 by the Government decree «On the preparation and implementation of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate in 2015» with 103 items. All regions (*oblystar*) of the country had to contribute to the celebrations, which culminated in September and October 2015 and featured numerous activities (although barely noticed outside Kazakhstan) – conferences, among others, with foreign participation (Special attention was paid to the «mappa mundi» by the Venetian monk Fra Mauro (1400?-1464), which was created around 1460 and contains over 3,000 entries. On this map of the world, Central Asia is by no means regarded solely as a steppe and/or desert. Numerous towns and villages are recorded (although not always in their correct places);

cf. *Sagyndykova 2015; Abazov 2015*), theatre performances and shows, a twenty-part television show and other television and cinema films, the re-enactment of historical events (such as the Battle of Orbulak, in which the Kazakhs defeated the vastly superior Dzungars in 1643), expeditions, the publication of reference works and other books on the history of Kazakhstan, poetry readings, horse races, etc., as well as the restoration and erection of monuments. For example, on October 8, 2015 Nazarbaev unveiled a monument to Giray and Janibeg in the old southern Kazakh town of Taraz in the Zhambyl region, through which the Chu flows [15].

Conclusion

Even 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor states in Central Asia still do not enjoy the interest in politics and social science in Western Europe that they actually deserve. Here, an Austrian political scientist has at least attempted to draw attention to one aspect of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history, the origins of which admittedly go far back into the past of the entire region. Questions of statehood and its development (both past and future) are, on the one hand, of central importance for practically any kind of serious politics (of course, not only in the post-Soviet space) and, on the other hand, at the focus of the author's scholarly interest. There is no doubt that terms such as «state» and «statehood» meant something different in Central Asia (with its partly nomadic peoples) in the early modern period and subsequently than in Central and Western Europe.

It is not insignificant that there is a Wikipedia article about the celebrations of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate (however, only in Kazakh and Russian). Their aim was obviously to convey and/or strengthen a positive attitude, especially among ethnic Kazakhs (since hardly any Slavs lived in the region in the 15th and 16th centuries) not only towards the history of autochthonous statehood but also and especially towards present-day Kazakhstan. It is difficult to judge from the outside what influence the celebrations had on Kazakhstan's politics and multi-ethnic society or to what extent they were able to leave lasting traces precisely there. But this would be, from the point of view of historical science as well as the authorities, a question worth investigating further.

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**2015 жылы Қазақ мемлекеттігінің негізі қаланғанының 550 жылдығы аталып өтті:
бейтарап орталықеуропалық ел тарапынан берілген баға**

Аннотация. Посткеңестік кеңістіктегі барлық республикалардың «тарихтағы саясат» пен «жад саясатының» аса маңызды қыры – мемлекеттілікке деген көзқарас. Бұл мақалада Қазақ хандығының құрылуына (зерттеушілердің пікірінше шамамен 1465 жылы негізі қаланған) байланысты 2015 жылы Қазақстанда өткізілген атаулы іс-шаралар орталықеуропалық бақылаушының көзқарасы тұрғысынан қарастырылады.

Қазақ хандығының тарихы Батыс Еуропа елдерінде жүргізілген еуразиялық зерттеулерде бұл күнге дейін арнайы нысан болған жоқ, яғни сирек көңіл бөлініп келді. Дейтұрғанмен, мұнда аймақтық мемлекеттер мен халықтардың даму тарихына әсер еткен көптеген тарихи оқиғалар мен фактілер өте көп болғаны анық. Талдау жүргізуге негіз болған ресейлік саясаткерлердің мәлімдемелері қазіргі Қазақстан үшін тек саясат, экономика, қауіпсіздік, БАҚ, мәдениет және т.б. салалардағы маңыздылығымен ғана емес, сондай-ақ «тарих саясаты» мәселелері бойынша да өзекті бола бермек.

Мақалада кеңес дәуіріне қарағанда, 1991 жылдан кейін Қазақстан тарихшылары қазақ мемлекеттілігінің дамуы мен қазақ этногенезі мәселелеріне әлдеқайда көп назар аударғаны айтылады. Қазіргі геосаяси жағдай контекстіндегі мұндай тақырыптар тек тарихнамалық қана емес, сонымен қатар өткір саяси маңызға ие. Мақала авторы бүгінгі Қазақстанның мемлекеттілігін, сондай-ақ оған осы елде өмір сүріп жатқан барлық ұлттың азаматтарының сенімін нығайту жекелеген көрші мемлекеттер тарапынан ықтимал аумақтық талаптарға қарсы іс-қимыл жасауға септігін тигізе алар еді. Дегенмен, 2015 жылы өткізілген салтанатты мерейтойдың Қазақстан саясаты мен полиэтностық қоғамына қалай әсер еткенін және осы контексте қаншалықты дәрежеде із қалдырғанын сырттай бағалау да оңай емес.

Кілт сөздер: тарих, мемлекеттілік, қазақтар, Қазақ хандығы, Қазақстан, Орталық Азия.

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**Празднование 550-летия основания государственности в Казахстане в 2015 году:
оценка со стороны нейтральной центральноевропейской страны**

Аннотация. Важнейшим аспектом «исторической политики» и «политики памяти» всех постсоветских республик является отношение к государственности. В данной статье с точки зрения центральноевропейского наблюдателя рассматриваются памятные мероприятия, проведенные в Казахстане в 2015 году по случаю создания Казахского ханства (возникшего, по предположению исследователей, в 1465 году).

До недавнего времени история Казахского ханства фактически не была объектом евразийских исследований в странах Западной Европы, хотя в ней было много исторических событий и фактов, оказавших влияние на историю развития региональных государств и народов.

Отправной точкой для этого анализа являются заявления политиков из России, значение которых для современного Казахстана трудно недооценить не только в области политики, экономики, безопасности, СМИ, культуры и т.д., но и представляют собой важную точку отсчета в вопросах «исторической политики».

В статье отмечается, что по сравнению с советским временем, с обретением в 1991 г. суверенитета казахстанские историки достаточно глубоко изучают вопросы эволюции государственности в Казахстане и казахского этногенеза, которые в контексте современных геополитических проблем имеют не «только лишь» историографическое, но и важное политическое значение. Автор статьи считает, что укрепление государственности современного Казахстана, а также вера в нее всех народов, проживающих в этой стране, могли бы способствовать противодействию возможным территориальным претензиям со стороны отдельных соседних государств. И все же нелегко судить со стороны о том, какое влияние оказали торжества 2015 года на казахстанскую политику и полиэтничное общество, или в какой степени они оказались способны оставить неизгладимые следы именно в данном контексте.

Ключевые слова: История, государственность, казахи, Казахское ханство, Казахстан, Центральная Азия

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