

EDITORIAL NOTE: KAZAKSTAN AT THE CROSSROADS—FROM SILK ROAD TO OIL ROUTE

This issue of *Nationalities Papers* focuses on Kazakstan. It is part of a series of special issues devoted to the problematics of post-Soviet and post-communist countries that were part of the Soviet imperium until 1989–1991. The focus is on the first years of independence and the trials of nation building and state (re)construction. Before this there have been the following special issues: Spring 1992 (Estonia), Spring 1995 (Slovenia), and Spring 1998 (Moldova); a related issue, Autumn 1997, dealt with the breakup of Yugoslavia. The regional foci, so far, have been the Baltic, the Balkans, and the Black Sea area. Now, *Nationalities Papers* turns its attention to a Central Asian country. Together, the special issues afford an opportunity for detailed comparison, always a useful tool for understanding the complexities of the interacting socio-political processes operating in what once was the Soviet sphere.

For centuries a network of trade routes across the wide expanse that is Kazakstan today bound Asia and Europe together. Thriving overland caravan routes kept Central Asia at the center of Eurasian commerce. However, its economic and, hence, geopolitical significance steadily declined in the fifteenth century with the rise of oversea routes linking Christendom with the markets of the East. The transoceanic sailing ship increasingly left Central Asia on the periphery of international trade. Nomadic and semi-nomadic powers that once held sway over the territory of Kazakstan were replaced by expansionist sedentary empires; henceforth Russia and China competed for control of the Eurasian heartland. By the eighteenth century Russia and then the Soviet Union prevailed, till 1991 and the surprising collapse of the Soviet Union. Out of the ruins emerged fifteen independent republics, five in Central Asia, the largest being Kazakstan.

Kazakstan's appearance on the political map coincided with an international scramble for influence on the Caspian littoral states, all of which possessed important oil and gas reserves. Overnight, Kazakstan became the object of intense interest on the part of the energy-consuming industrial nations. As in the days of the ancient Silk Road, the routing of oil and gas today has become a grave concern to producing, transit, and consuming countries alike. The location of pipelines—east, west, or south, whether through China, Russia, Turkey, or Iran—is of crucial concern to those charting world economic growth, which relies on a steady supply of relatively inexpensive oil and natural gas.

Kazakstan's internal stability and foreign policy are of equal concern. The alliances the new republic forges abroad; its possible continued dependence on

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Russia; commitment to the rule of contract law; adherence to the spirit of the new constitution; the effectiveness of ethnic policies and the state of ethnic relations (harmony or conflict) between Kazaks and Russians; the location and significance of the new capital; the reliability of presidential politics—all impinge on Kazakstan's success or failure as a modern state. Each of these topics rest on questions and issues that are posed and probed by the authors of this collection of essays. Underlying them all is the pervasive ethnic question—whether a workable coexistence between Kazaks and Russians in Kazakstan can be sustained.

The authors' conclusions are by no means definitive. The purpose of this issue is to help focus the reader on the essential problems of contemporary Kazakstan as it seeks to forge its own future, even as it searches for its own past. The transition from the Soviet unitary/colonial system to a new regional arrangement and international alignment is by no means complete. That will be years in the making. This present issue hopes to serve as an interim assessment, with the usual expectation that the various analyses will stand the test of time, as have those in previous special issues of *Nationalities Papers*. Its quality is in large measure due to the efforts of the three guest editors, David Crowe, Zhanylzhhan Dzhunusova, and Steven Sabol, to whom we are grateful for bringing this project to timely completion. They were ably assisted by Rebecca Wendelken.

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