

## Between “imagined” and “real” nation-building: identities and nationhood in post-Soviet Central Asia

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Much of the existing literature on nation-building in Central Asia offers a statist top-down approach which focuses on how the nation and nationhood is “imagined” by political elites. In this special issue the contributors provide an analysis which seeks to explore the process of nation-building in Central Asia by addressing the other side of the state-society relationship. The case studies in this collection examine the “grey zone” between “imagined” and “real” differences between state-led policies and discourses related to nationhood and identity and how they are received by different audiences at different levels (regional, national and international). The authors bring to the fore the contested nature of nation-building in Central Asia as well as focusing on new or less conventional analytical tools for the study of nation-building such as cinema, construction projects and elections. This article provides the introduction to the special issue and lays out the contribution the articles make to the existing literature on nation-building in Central Asia. It also sets out the rationale and aims of the collection.

**Keywords:** Central Asia; nation-building; identity

### Introduction

This special issue of *Nationalities Papers* explores the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of nation-building with a particular focus on post-Soviet Central Asia. In spite of a large amount of literature focusing on nation-building, and a growing scholarship on Central Asia, works on the region have been concerned with a statist and topdown approach in the construction of a national identity (Dave 2004; Bremmer and Ray 1997; Ferrando 2008; Cummings 2013; Laruelle 2012). In particular, given the authoritarian and closed nature of the regimes in the region, often nationbuilding policies are linked to the efforts of power concentration and regime-building. However, this top-down perspective often does not take into consideration the other side of the state–society relationship. Most studies concerned with Central Asian nation-building focus mostly on how the nation and national identity is “imagined” by political elites, whether through practical policy or discourse, with little attention paid as to whether this is reflected in the attitudes of the people, and the reception, acceptance, or renegotiation of such nation-building measures by local actors, both ordinary citizens, non-state actors or some other clearly defined

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community (Kevlihan 2013; Ó'Beacháin and Robert 2013, 2015; Menga 2015; Morris 2005; Ventsel 2012).

This special issue is an attempt to comprehensively engage with an approach that views people and non-state actors, both acting and acted by nation-building, so as to compare the way national elites perceive nation-building with the way those supposed to comply with nation-building comprehend it in post-Soviet Central Asia. The definition of nation-building we use here is twofold. On the one hand, it refers to the efforts of the political elites to create, develop, and spread/popularize the idea of the nation and the national community. This is done through political discourses and measures, as well as policies adopted at the central level. On the other hand, nation-building here refers also to the agency of non-state actors such as the people, civil society, companies, and even civil servants when not acting on behalf of state institutions. In our view, nation-building can only be proposed by elites but needs to be accepted (or renegotiated/rejected) by those who have a say in the construction of a national identity and who are an integrated aspect of the nation-building process (Polese 2008, 2011).

By doing this, the main goal of this special issue is to engage with a comparative analysis of nation-building policies, exploring the efforts at the sub-national, national, and international levels in Central Asia. Utilizing scholars from a range of disciplines, and focusing on different countries, the issue will explore the conception, production, implementation, and reception of nation-building policies at multiple levels of the state and region. The articles that comprise this special issue seek to make a contribution to the existing literature on nation-building in Central Asia in three ways: (1) by exploring the gap between how nation-building policies are “imagined” by political elites and how they are received by the different audiences they are aimed at (2) by paying attention to the contested and multi-voiced nature of nation-building discourses and policies and (3) by utilizing less conventional analytical tools to explore the dynamics of nation-building in post-Soviet Central Asia.

### **Central Asia: What nations? What building?**

The Central Asian Republics (CARs) are a relatively recent phenomena in terms of nation-statehood. While many of them had antecedents to some form of statehood (e.g. Kazakh Khanate and Khanate of Bukhara), they did not exist as modern, sovereign, independent states as understood in the typical Westphalian sense until the Soviet national delimitation process of the 1920s established them as distinct national territorial units, albeit with their sovereignty highly circumscribed (Sabot 1995; Roy 2000). Their delimitation as national Soviet Socialist Republics at this time was a product of the paradoxical nature of the USSR. On the one hand, Soviet power was committed to an ethnic particularism which “consistently promoted group rights that did not always coincide with those of the proletariat” (Slezkine 1994, 415) and yet on the other hand, Soviet elites endeavored to integrate national groups into a cohesive *Sovetskii narod* (Soviet People) (Brubaker 1996, 23; Smith 1996). Therefore, as an ethno-federal state, the Soviet authorities took it upon themselves to become “nation-makers” in the region, institutionalizing and ascribing the borders and ethnic categories which became the basis for post-Soviet nation-statehood (Kolstø 2000; Roy 2000). Republican elites’ reliance on Moscow for resources and positions, and the lack of any discernible popular nationalist movements within the region, meant that at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the CARs became somewhat “reluctant” independent states (Merry 2004; Suyarkulova 2011).<sup>1</sup>

In the immediate post-Soviet period, the process of nation-building became one of the fundamental processes, alongside political reform, economic reform, and state-building,

which the region's elites turned their attention to. As a consequence of the very quick consolidation of authoritarianism in the CARs, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, scholarship on the region in the 1990s moved sharply on from any focus on transitology and democratization, and instead zoned in on the nation-building efforts of the region's elites (Akiner 1995, 1997; Akbarzadeh 1996a, 1999; Roy 2000) to invent "new" nations (Kurzman 1999). There was an inherent logic to such a shift. The underlying ethnic diversity of the CARs, itself a consequence of Soviet nation-delimitation, Soviet Nationalities Policy, and forced migrations to the region in the 1930s and 1940s, meant that the attempts by the region's elites to forge and construct a "common-sense of belonging" and "groupness" was central to their maintenance of power and to political stability. Nation-building, therefore, for Central Asian political elites, given this ethnic diversity and the potential multiplicity of nations, was to paraphrase Connor (2005), a process of conjoining the nation with the state. While political leaders in the region had been handed down discreet territorial units from their Soviet masters, these state boundaries did not necessarily correspond with the different ethnic nationalities residing within its borders. The most prescient example was in Kazakhstan where at the time of the collapse of the USSR Kazakhs were in a minority within a "nation-state" where they were the supposed titular ethnic majority.<sup>2</sup> Other examples of distinct ethnic groups finding themselves not in their titular homeland once the Soviet edifice crumbled can be found littered across the Central Asian region, especially in the densely populated Ferghana Valley where there is a large Uzbek population based in Southern Kyrgyzstan, and a sizeable Tajik population located in Uzbekistan (Foltz 1996; Fumagalli 2007).

In the early to mid-1990s, scholars took this ethnic diversity, coupled with a belief that national and ethnic identities had taken hold as strongly in Central Asia as they had in other parts of the USSR, to predict a doom-laden scenario for the region which would result in conflict and violence (see Jones-Luong 2004, for an overview of this literature). Already, nationalism was argued to have failed in Tajikistan (Akbarzadeh 1996b), and the patchwork composition of ethnic and religious identities was compared to a "melting pot, salad bowl – cauldron" which portended a "gathering storm" and an "arc of crisis" (Akiner 1993, 1997; Rumer, 1993). That such dire warnings of national, ethnic, and religious conflicts did not arise (with the exception of civil war in Tajikistan and the outbreak of violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan in 2010), scholarly focus shifted to the strength of sub-national and sub-ethnic identities which pre-dated Soviet and even Russian incursion into the region. It was argued that by 2000, political elites' efforts of engendering national and civic identities were secondary to those of traditional identities, and moreover, it was informal political identities, organizations, and behavior which played a role in determining decision-making and broader state development (Schatz 2004; Collins 2006; Radnitz 2011; Isaacs 2011). The move towards "informality" was part of a broader shift across studies examining the post-Communist space (Morris and Polese 2014, 2015). Nevertheless, questions regarding nation-building and identity did not disappear and scholarly inquiry on questions of nationhood, territorial disputes, and identity politics remained central to understanding the political and social dynamics of the region.

### **Framing nationhood and identities in post-Soviet Central Asia**

Work on nation-building and identities in Central Asia has typically been framed using Rogers Brubaker's concept of "nationalizing states" (Brubaker 1996). A "nationalizing state" is viewed in ethno-cultural terms whereby the titular national majority seeks to reinforce and promote its national identity upon the state, its institutions, symbols, and

practices, at the expense of national minorities. Or at the very least, there is an attempt to assimilate other ethnic minorities to the institutions, symbols, and practices of the titular majority. Initially, therefore, scholars used the concept of “nationalizing states” to examine elite-led efforts to promote the titular ethnic majority through policies and practices such as state semiotics and the promotion of particular historical figures and myths (i.e. Manas in Kyrgyzstan), the privileging of the titular nationality in the written constitution (Bohr 1998), privatization and land reform (Bohr 1998; Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev 2014), language laws (Dave 2007; Ferrando 2011), the manipulation of census data (Dave 2004; Ferrando 2008), and the re-writing of history textbooks (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010). At the same time, great emphasis was placed on the division between the development of ethnic and civic states and identities in the region. Given the diverse and multi-ethnic composition of the CARs, it is no surprise that scholars turned to Hans Kohn’s distinction between ethnic and civic national identity (Kohn 1944). Indeed, the dual policy of promoting both civic and ethnic identity in Kazakhstan has received much attention (Sarsembayev 1999; Surucu 2002; Ó’Beacháin and Kevlihan 2013). While the civic–ethnic distinction has also been examined in relation to the management of ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan (Baruch Wachtel 2013), there have also been studies that observe how civic and ethnic categories play out in language policy across the region too (Ferrando 2011). Without a doubt, there are drawbacks to framing the Central Asian nation-building process in relation to the ethnic–civic dichotomy. Kuzio has suggested that all states (civic included) possess ethnic cores, and therefore the dichotomy tends to become laden with normativity implying as it does that “civic” represents the good Western form of nationalism, and “ethnic” the bad Eastern type of nationalism (Kuzio 2001, 136–137). Moreover, the fixation on the ethnic–civic dichotomy overlooks the multiplicity of nationalism(s) and identities in the Central Asian region especially in relation to transnationalism and the cross-cutting nature of identity (Radnitz 2005; Isaacs 2015; Laruelle 2015).

Another body of scholarly work has focused less on the actual nationalizing policies and practices of governing elites, and instead has explored how nation-states have discursively and symbolically constructed nationhood in Central Asia. It has been noted by Sally Cummings that the lack of nationalist independent movements in the region prior to the dissolution of the USSR, left post-Soviet elites scrambling around to establish “internally invented signs of national certainty” (Cummings 2009, 1083). For example, scholars have pointed to the process of governmentality related to the role of mass spectacles and public celebrations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, illustrating how they are used by political elites to signify a common sense of belonging among peoples, and represent an effort to foster a sense of connection between state and society (Adams and Rustemova 2009, 1250; Adams 2010). It demonstrates the importance of studying performance and culture as an expression of national identity, perhaps illustrating how national identity (and thus nations) is reproduced through banal rituals and practices (Bilig 1995; Adams 2010). Others have pointed to the role played by monuments, commemoration, and the re-interpretation of collective memory in Turkmenistan as a way to unite disparate and inimical sub-national communities (Denison 2009, 1167). While others have looked beyond the national level and examined how Central Asian states “brand” themselves for an international audience (Marat 2009). All of these examples portend to how symbols and discursive narratives are used to aid regime legitimation (Matveeva 2009). Without recourse to a genuine democratic plebiscite, Central Asian regimes have often resorted to grandiose public events, discourses, and symbols to justify their rule and the centrality of their leadership to state sovereignty, prosperity, and survival.

The above literature share two common features when it comes to analyzing nationhood, national-building, and identity politics in Central Asia. Firstly, as hinted to earlier, given the authoritarian and closed nature of the regimes in the region, often nation-building policies are linked to efforts of power concentration and regime-building. The case of Turkmenistan is perhaps the most obvious example of this whereby the development of a discourse regarding a common sense of belonging was framed using the personality cult of President Niyazov in the first instance and then his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (Horák 2005, 2015; Polese and Horák 2015). While there is nothing problematic about such a focus, indeed it is to be expected given the authoritarian nature of the regimes, it does portend to a top-down perspective on nation-building in the region which does not account for the other side of the state–society relationship. Secondly, as a consequence of a top-down perspective, most emphasis in studies of Central Asian nation-building is on how the nation and national identity is “imagined” by political elites, whether through practical policy or discourse. There has been little emphasis hitherto on how such policies are practiced or received for “real” by citizens and various state actors.

### **The aims of this collection**

Given the voluminous literature on nation-building in Central Asia, the reader would be forgiven for asking what the purchase is in a special issue on the theme. We would proffer that given the on-going and dynamic nature of nation-building and identity, in all kinds of contexts and geographic regions, and given the complex genealogical and Soviet legacies to identity and nationhood in Central Asia, returning to a discussion on the forms, tensions, and problems inherent to nation-building in the region is never an exercise in lost time. Nonetheless, in this special issue, we would suggest that the authors are making a contribution in three distinct ways. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the special issue explores the process of nation-building in Central Asia by analyzing the “gray zone” between “imagined” and “real” differences between state-led policies and discourses related to nationhood and identity and how they are received by different audiences. The point, therefore, is not just to have a top-down perspective, although admittedly that remains important, but to examine how such policies and discourses work and operate in practice. This can involve examining the micro-level practice of nation-building alongside the macro-level. What are the responses of local or even international audiences to state-led attempts to imagine the “nation” through some distinct policy or broader discursive strategy? Can informal resistance to state-led nationalizing agendas act to modify or even nullify particular imaginaries of the nation? While nation-building policies related to language, citizenship, etc., are adopted at the parliamentary level, implementation does not always follow. For example, some scholars have already moved to analyzing the attitude of linguistic minorities towards state-led language instructions (although not in relation to the Central Asian region) (Polese and Wylegala 2008; Kulyk 2011). In this special issue, contributors explore micro-level responses in a more systematic way, highlighting the agency and voices of citizens and/or actors other than state elites. Secondly, and related to the latter point, the contributions in this special issue seek to bring to the fore the contested nature of nation-building in Central Asia. It is contested not just in relation to titular majorities and ethnic minorities, perhaps the most common observation concerning the conflictual dynamics inherent to nation-building and assimilation processes, but also it is contested within the titular majority itself and by actors external to the state. While the ruling regimes in the region may possess the resources to make the most forceful case with regard to their “imaginary” of the nation, it is important not to lose sight of the marginalized and alternative

conceptualizations of nationhood, and the inherent tensions which are a product of these conflicting interpretations of identity. Thirdly, some of the articles seek to analyze the process of nation-building in Central Asia by utilizing some “new” or rather less conventional analytical tools such as elections, cinema, dam construction, and personality cults. So rather than focusing on more conventional analytical tools such as language policy, the aim of the special issue is to focus on alternative sites where we can observe tensions and fissures associated with nationhood and identity in post-Soviet Central Asia. Some scholars have begun to analyze these understudied elements in recent years (Polese 2009, 2013; Isaacs and Polese 2015).

All of the articles in this special issue engage with one or more of these three key themes. The first two contributions both focus on Kazakhstan and cut across all three categories. Adrien Fauve utilizes monumentalization as an analytical tool to explore the nationalization of public spaces and how state-led public planning projects are in fact “fuzzy” processes which give rise to contested narratives about national identity. By using monuments in this way, Fauve is able to unpack the power relations between different actors in the process of nationalistic “city-making” and how micro-level politics relate to macro-level nation-building policy. In particular, the argument put forward is that monuments which are initially aimed to symbolically represent and shape national identity through urban spaces are actually a “resource” for local political actors in a broader clientelist political system. Monuments are a site of power contestation as local *Akims* (Mayors) compete over the responsibility to enact the president’s vision of nationhood symbolically through the use of monuments. However, what this article neatly captures is the “gray zone” between “imagined” and “real” nation-building. While the Nazarbayev regime, through local *Akims*, possesses an “imagined” vision of nationhood and identity which it would like symbolically represented through monuments dedicated to figures throughout history (e.g. Zhanybek and Kerey Khan), the interpretation and meaning of those monuments are actually shaped by local actors (architects and sculptors). It is these actors who possess the agency to “perform” nationhood and identity, and this can contrast and compete with the original intentions of the state-led vision. Therefore, what the article highlights is the way in which the political economy of nationalistic symbols in public spaces is not evidence of a unified nationalistic agenda, but rather an example of how nation-building can be an erratic and contingent process susceptible to the influence and agency of local actors.

The second contribution by Rico Isaacs also explores the contested nature of nation-building in Kazakhstan. Using contemporary Kazakh cinema as an analytical lens, like Fauve, Isaacs demonstrates how initial state-led visions of nationhood, premised on both an ethno-centric and a “civic” interpretation of Kazakhstan nationhood, which are realized through state-produced films (using Kazakhfilm Studios) such as *Nomad* (2005), *Myn Bala* (2011), and *A Gift for Stalin* (2008), are confronted by alternative discourses and narratives within Kazakh cinema which depict a different imaginary of the nation. One discourse asserts a more philosophical and religious interpretation of Kazakh nationhood using the Turkic–Mongol religion of Tengrism, while another narrative strand focuses on the lived socio-economic day-to-day practices of what it means to be a national of Kazakhstan and their struggles with corruption and bureaucracy, and the difficult moral choices of contemporary life. What the analysis of contemporary Kazakh cinema indicates is the fluid and contested nature of nationalizing discourses within the titular ethnic majority. It illustrates that narratives pertaining to nationhood are not just bifurcated along civic and ethnic lines. It also reveals that the authoritarian state in Kazakhstan does not possess a monopoly on the cultural production and performance of national identity. Most importantly, however, the

article argues that through the discourse concerning the socio-economic challenges of contemporary Kazakh life, cinema has become one of the few remaining sites left for dissent and critique against the political system. Furthermore, this demonstrates the fluid nature of this contestation of national narrative, as often some of the films which offer a critical imaginary of the Kazakh nation are actually produced by the state-funded Kazakhfilm Studios.

Cai Wilkinson addresses the inherent tension between how the international community “imagines” Kyrgyzstan’s nation statehood and how it is understood and practiced by local actors in the country. Wilkinson uses the framing of local responses to the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC) (an international independent commission) into the 2010 violence which took place in the Southern city of Osh as a means to address this tension. Introducing the “international” into an analysis of nation-building provides an important insight into how external actors can often seek to enforce a particular imagination of nationhood which does not resonate in practice on the ground with local actors who, as the case of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates here, often see it as a threat to their sovereignty. The article elucidates how the tensions between these two understandings of Kyrgyzstan’s nationhood play out. While the KIC understood the violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in Osh as a consequence of a rampant ethno-nationalism, the response to the KIC report from the Kyrgyz was that Uzbeks were forgetting “their” place within the “common home” and threatening the country’s statehood. The notion of the “common home” had been put forward as a rhetorical concept by political elites as a way of answering the issue of ethnic minority rights in the “Kyrgyz Republic.” Nonetheless, as the article argues, the corrupt and Kleptocratic nature of both the Akaev and Bakiev regimes meant that stated claims regarding civic statehood lacked credibility to many Kyrgyz citizens because the regimes were viewed as being unable to abide by the moral standards they set for everyone else. Tensions in Osh, therefore, are arguably a product of poor governance, asset stripping, and an ever deteriorating socio-economic climate. Thus, Wilkinson demonstrates how local reactions to the KIC report, which sought to lay blame on the violence in Osh on a developing ethno-nationalism, were riddled with consternation and condemnation. The KIC report only sought to exacerbate tensions between contradictory norms as they are imagined by different constituent communities: the international community and their “imagination” of a “civic” Kyrgyzstan nation-state, and the lived practice of the nation-state by local Kyrgyz political actors.

The fourth contribution to the special issue by Sara Jackson explores the case of contested nation-building in Mongolia through the development of the Oyu Tolgoi copper–gold mine. While Mongolia is not typically perceived as being part of contemporary “Central Asia,” we would argue that the country does possess shared cultural and historical legacies with the five CARs. While not an actual republic in the Soviet Union, Mongolia, as a People’s Republic, had very close bi-lateral ties with the USSR both ideologically and economically. Moreover, as the article shows, the mining sector in Mongolia, which has become a site for national contestation, was initially developed through cooperation, support, and financing from the USSR. The contestation of the national *telos* related to the Oyu Tolgoi copper–gold mine is a further example of how external non-state actors can attempt to influence the conceptualization of a state’s national identity. The international companies involved in the financing and production of the mine are promoting its development as a project which will produce a confident, prosperous, and unified nation. However, the response from local Mongolian political actors sits in tension with this vision of a potential path of national development, and there are concerns that foreign investment will be compromised by corruption, lead to stagnation in the non-mining economy, and impact negatively on the environment. As such, this represents an

entirely different *telos* of national development. What this contribution neatly illustrates are the tensions which can arrive when external actors, in this case a transnational company, explicitly engage in nation-building. Moreover, it goes to the heart of tensions related to global investment in extractive industries and often the lack of voice and agency given to domestic actors as part of the process.

Abel Polese and Slavomir Horák's contribution uses the concept of personality cults as a way to explore how nation-building and identity formation in Turkmenistan have been intrinsically linked to the consolidation of both post-Soviet presidents' power (Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbunaguly Berdimuhamedow). By analyzing the overlaps and differences between the two presidents' personality cults, the article demonstrates how nation-building is an "unintended effect" of the construction of power. A byproduct of both presidents' glorification and deification of their leadership was a constituted set of markers of Turkmen national identity. Nevertheless, what is particularly arresting with regard to the Turkmen case is that while on the one hand the personality cults are used to construct an official narrative regarding nationhood, symbolized and reflected through the individual presidents, and their centrality to the independence and prosperity of the nation, in doing so there is a de-ethnicization taking place. In the case of Turkmenistan, this includes not just a de-ethnicization in relation to Turkmen and other ethnic identities, but also a de-rendering of sub-ethnic (tribal and clan) identities too. What Polese and Horák argue is that in contrast to the construction of national identity and nationhood through symbols with the past, a tribe or an ethnic group, the production of Turkmen symbols and their perpetuation are mostly associated with the present and the future and revolve around the figure of the president. What the article exemplifies, perhaps in a rather novel way, is the embodied and constituted relationship which can exist between personality cults and nation-building.

Filippo Menga (2015) also utilizes a novel conceptual tool as a lens to explore processes and discourses of nation-building in Tajikistan. Using the construction of the Rogun dam in Tajikistan as an analytical lens, the article demonstrates how large-scale construction projects can overlap with the state-led process of nation-building and national identity formation. In the case of Tajikistan, as the article illustrates, the Rogun dam has become a powerful national symbol central to the proposed developmental trajectory of the nation put forward by political elites, and thus is central to the legitimization of the Rahmon regime. Moreover, and perhaps more interestingly, the dam has become the site whereby international tensions and rivalries with neighboring Uzbekistan are being played out. The Uzbek opposition to the construction of the dam concerns the impact it will have on their cotton irrigation systems, and naturally this is in tension with how the dam is observed as a symbol of national identity in Tajikistan. What this demonstrates is the gap between how the dam is "imagined" as a national symbol in Tajikistan and how it is received and understood as a threat to national interests in Uzbekistan. However, the opposition from Uzbek elites only acts to solidify and legitimize the dam as a symbolic representation for national unity (something which is important given the fractured nature of Tajikistan's recent post-Soviet past). Therefore, like the personality cult in Turkmenistan, what Rogun represents is how nation-building can be an effect of a project which is initially conceived for some other purpose. The dam now means much more than its initial intention of providing energy security. Its appropriation by political elites for power legitimizing purposes means that it has taken on a much wider significance as a national symbol and a source of national pride in Tajikistan.

The final contribution to this special issue moves beyond a single case study and takes a comparative perspective across the five CARs and explores the relationship between elections and nation-building in the region. Donnacha Ó'Beacháin and Robert Kevlihan make



the argument that elections are essential for the construction of the modern nation-state, and that their use in the case of the post-Soviet Central Asian states is inextricably tied to the concentration of presidential political power and political stability. In most of the CARs, democracy is “imagined” in the sense that elections do not represent a genuine, fair, and transparent democratic process, but rather a façade for domestic and international legitimization. However, what is most fascinating about the relationship between elections and nation-building in Central Asia, as argued by the authors, is how in those countries where reasonably free and fair elections took place in the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, those elections led to increased instability and state fragmentation in both cases. Therefore, what Ó’Beacháin and Kevlihan highlight is how potentially a virtual or “imagined” democracy, which in effect is a tool for regime legitimation, is more important for nation-building purposes than a more open and fair electoral process. The authors address this issue by examining how elections are controlled by the authoritarian leaders in the region, how the “nation” has been invoked as part of a nationalizing discourse during, and outside of, election periods, and by assessing democratic politics in the region and its relationship to political instability. The article demonstrates the important role of electoral politics, and its associated symbols, rhetoric, and rituals, for the process of nation-building and authoritarian state-building.

The relationship, therefore, between authoritarianism, national cohesion, and stability is an important set of linkages to consider when thinking about the future of the region. Ó’Beacháin and Kevlihan leave us with a vital question to reflect upon. To what extent have all these nationalizing efforts by political elites over the last 25 years succeeded in establishing a “common-sense of belonging” that would not be eroded or lead to violence and chaos by any further transitions or efforts of political reform? Perhaps, a tentative answer could be observed in relation to this special issue’s focus on the contestation central to nation-building processes in the region. Many of the contributions demonstrate that there are multiple conceptualizations of national identity and that all kinds of actors have agency in shaping understandings and meanings given to nationhood. While this could portend to a darkening cloud of trouble, should the authoritarian veil be removed from the region, it could also equally provide the basis for the plurality of voices and agents which are required for thriving and engaging democratic politics in the region.

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### Notes

1. The five CARs, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, were the last five of the Soviet republics to officially declare independence with Kazakhstan only formally severing ties to the old Soviet institutional order as late as 16 December 1991.
2. According to the last Soviet census undertaken in 1989, only 40% of the Kazakh SSR population was Kazakh, while 37% were Russian.

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