

The 'Great Steppe' narrative:  
origins, politics, and aspirations of Eternal Kazakhstan.

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**I. Introduction**

In the last several years, a person living in Kazakhstan is likely to notice more and more of the different manifestations of the Steppe: be that the “Tomiris” 2019 movie, depictions of the Steppe on billboards, or government campaigns featuring “Nur-Sultan - the heart of the Great Steppe.” These kinds of expressions are not solely based on historical facts, but they emphasize, focus, and interpret the ancient past in various, volatile ways. The public narrative and newly constructed modern traditions in Kazakhstan started employing more Steppe-related themes. The Eurasian Steppe is being increasingly portrayed with the epithet “Great” - as the “Great Steppe”, and the Kazakhstani establishment is seeking towards taking ownership over that Steppe. While it is understandable when people tie their identity to the ancient past and the Steppe (an informal memory, invoking myths), since people will always look forward to solidifying their identities and remembering the past in a certain way, it is still unclear what purposes authorities want to satisfy by over-emphasizing, re-creating the Great Steppe in their projects and state ideology. The approaches to the Steppe embodied in government rhetoric have been fluctuating, reflecting changing and often mutually exclusive claims. Purposefully ambiguous, the Great Steppe narrative experiences internal contradictions as well as external. Kazakhstani officials are trying to claim everything that happened and everyone who lived in the Steppe for the history of modern Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has been going through massive changes. Its nation-building processes had to be condensed, accelerated, and enforced from above. What Western states attained in the course of centuries, Kazakhstani authorities had to create in less than three decades. In this paper, I will

explicitly focus on the government narrative: the becoming of the Great Steppe, the connections between modern and ancient Kazakhstan, and national identity based on the Great Steppe ideology.

I will consider the issue from different perspectives. First, I will look at the history of the Steppe on the Kazakhstani territory and how it has been approached through Imperial and Soviet policies. Then I will provide the theoretical framework, specifically the intellectual history, focusing on the ideas that shaped the Steppe. I will then proceed to present the results of my active primary research: the origins of the modern “Great Steppe” narrative by tracking how the Steppe identity became more politicized and frequently mentioned in Nursultan Nazarbayev’s speeches. Based on the ideas presented and formulated by Nazarbayev, there is a noticeable academic reinforcement of the state ideology. Kazakhstani scholars have been inclined to investigate the ancient history of Kazakhs with a great emphasis on the discoveries and major “gifts” of the Great Steppe. The Steppe was assigned a value, owned like a commodity, where contemporary authorities try to re-create their political aspirations. Such narrative building happens out of greater geopolitical anxiety, with the contemporary Kazakhstani government attempting to produce the Steppe as a stand-in for all its mixed identities and aspirations of eternal Kazakhstan.

## **II. Historical context and theoretical framework.**

Historically, the Steppe has always been a source of ambivalence among governing authorities. Sometimes, an uncertain approach to the Steppe happened due to a lack of knowledge of the local processes, other times, Steppe just did not fit in the plans of authorities. Particularly, it meant the adaptation of nomadic pastoralism that was directly linked to the living on the steppe. When the Empire conquered the steppe, it mainly had intentions of re-creating

sedentary, agriculture-based society. When Soviets came to power, they had concerns about the utility of the activities practiced on the land, thinking that it was not acquiring maximum benefit out of the Steppe. Therefore, it was a part of their modernist project to reform the Steppe and integrate it to the Soviet economy.<sup>1</sup> In slightly different ways, both the Russian Imperial and the Soviet authorities tried to transform the Steppe so that it could bring some objective “benefit” in form of agricultural or industrial products. But the impacts of the Steppe policies were not always only direct and material. The history of the Steppe colonization has been argued through the terms of “resettlement”, “spreading out” and “internal colonization,” but rarely in terms of imperialism.<sup>2</sup> The colonization of the Steppe should be measured not only in materialistic gains or losses but also in how the identity of the Steppe people changed, modified, evolved, or devolved. The notion of the Steppe has been central to many national identities in Eurasian states and across the world where the Steppes existed. However, in the case of the Eurasian Steppe, its social meaning has been amplified, evolved and commodified by the Kazakhstani authorities. To understand what role the Steppe plays in the contemporary lives of people, it is essential to track the timeline of what the idea of the Steppe was, how it was depicted and what it became.

Central Asian Steppe, from a geographical perspective, is inexplicable since the Steppe drastically differs across the whole area. Its environmental content is extremely diverse and varies from place to place contrary to the widespread belief of the Steppe being flat and empty, there is no uniform definition of what it is. Geographic literature demonstrates that there are a variety of Steppe compositions: the dry and deserted steppe of Sub-Ural and Turgai Plateau

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron, Sarah. *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence and the Making of the Soviet Kazakhstan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Sunderland, Willard. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. [muse.jhu.edu/book/68243](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68243).

located in Central Kazakhstan, forest steppes of the West Siberian plain and of Northern Kazakhstan as well as humid droughty steppes.<sup>3</sup> Eurasian steppes include Mongolian, Kazakhstani, Russian, and Ukrainian. Although, they are all named steppes, each one of them is very different. In Central Asia, the Steppe was not only seen as the geographical description of the land but with time came to be known as ‘The Great Steppe,’ a name claimed and popularized after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Kazakhstani authorities specifically, demonstrating that the concept of the Steppe was not purely geographical but social to a greater extent as well. The name already highlights the significance and uniqueness attributed to the Steppe in Central Asia, a phenomenon that has been enforced by government, academic scholarship and politicians. Therefore, if the concept of the Steppe is not purely geographical, then there is an assigned social value. Gorshenina argues that the concept of the Central Asian Steppe is rather social and political, since it has acquired an important meaning in the context of territorial integrity and politics.<sup>4</sup> For many local Nomadic people, the Steppe was an essential part of their survival and lifestyle. Livestock was the only source of livelihood, thus constant and calculated movement in the Steppe was a primary necessity for those living in it. The Steppe was also associated with the fluidity of life and its endless territories were praised by Nomadic culture for its own sake. The way living conditions affect the population, in the same way, the Steppe was a part of the local Nomadic identities.

What constitutes the Steppe differs depending on whose perspective it is described from and, more often, what concepts the Steppe includes in itself. For the longest time in ancient

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<sup>3</sup> Rachkovskaya, E.I., Bragina, T.M. (2012). *Steppes of Kazakhstan: Diversity and Present State*. In: Werger, M., van Staalduinen, M. (eds) *Eurasian Steppes. Ecological Problems and Livelihoods in a Changing World. Plant and Vegetation*, vol 6. Springer, Dordrecht. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-3886-7\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-3886-7_3)

<sup>4</sup> Gorshenina, Svetlana M. “Изобретение концепта Средней / Центральной Азии: между наукой и геополитикой.” *Central Asian Program*, 2019.

history, the Steppe was a place of dangerous activities among different societal groups and Nomadic Empires. Herodotus described the Steppe as a place where without proper protection anyone would feel endangered.<sup>5</sup> With time, Imperial authorities, as well as Soviet functionaries, saw the Steppe as a place that needed to be fulfilled<sup>6</sup>; the space that had the potential to benefit the Empire/Soviet government. Therefore, considering the time and the political context, the notion of the Steppe might revolve around different concepts and the spectrum of things that are associated with the Steppe is rather wide.

The description of the Steppe varies dramatically depending on the source and the perceptions of who was writing about it. It is a tricky thing to track what exactly is meant in different sources since there are so many different names for the Steppe and its inhabitants. Some sources claimed the Steppe as being the neutral ground between Empires, others have written more extensively depicting different tribes and people on the Steppe. The Central Asian Steppe has been noted in many ancient sources. Some were a result of first-hand experience in the Steppe, but others were only written on accounts of rumors and what has been heard. The oldest and most well-known source, where the Steppe and its inhabitants were mentioned is Herodotus.<sup>7</sup> The Steppe is presented as the arena for political struggles between different Empires. Marco Polo wrote that the region was a place for great politics and conquering game, with no mention of the locals that existed there.<sup>8</sup> The other ancient source that includes a detailed

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<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*. On the Massagetae: book 1, chapter 205 – book 2, chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Sunderland, Willard. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Komroff, *The Travels of Marco Polo [the Venetian]*. Revised from Marden's Translation and Edited with Introduction by Manuel Komroff (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1953).

description of the Steppe is Ahmad Ibn Abdal's traveling journal.<sup>9</sup> Compared to Herodotus, Ibn Abdal provided a more sophisticated depiction of the Steppe showing the complexity of the situation. For him, the Steppe was the Land of Turks which consisted of many different tribes. He describes pre-Islamic times of the Steppe. In a general sense, one can get the impression that the Steppe is a highly dangerous place to be on one's own. There was a constant battle between different tribes and polities. Such an image of the Steppe also persists in Maciej Miechowski's notes on the Steppe.<sup>10</sup> Tatars that lived in the Steppe, in this source, who were depicted as very dangerous almost barbarian groups of people that violently crushed many other Empires and social groups on the Steppe. Tatars were described as robbers and aggressive forces on the territory. But there was a differentiation of groups in his writing: sarmatians, alans, vandals, svevaks. Overall, there has been a depiction of the ancient Steppe as a dangerous, almost anarchic place. The trace of modern romanticization of the ancient Steppe is not feasible in the old sources.

Now, having had a look at the outside perceptions of the Steppe, it is also evident that there are some impressions that were developed from an insider perspective, formed within Central Asia. One of the most prominent Central Asian figures, an inhabitant of the Steppe and philosopher, Abai Kunanbayev, discussed the forms in which human life and the human soul are associated with the nature around it.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is possible to observe how the Steppe formed local human perceptions and mentality. He wrote "You grew up striving for the azure skies. Your soul was proud, willful, carefree and daring, like the green carpet of the ripe harvest,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North.

<sup>10</sup> Maciej Miechowski, *Treatise on the Two Sarmatias, Asian and European*. 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> *Book of words by Abai Kunanbayev*, Abai international club, 2005.



generously covering the face of earth.”<sup>12</sup> The unpredictability of living in the Steppe did not incentivize long-term thinking, people were living only with the present. So, in this sense according to Abai’s writings, the Steppe had an invisible but real and direct connection to the way people behaved in the Steppe.

Proceeding onwards, the colonization of the Steppe was not merely about the official policies and integration of the Steppe into a Russian economy, but it was also about how the poets, bureaucrats and scholars traveled to the Steppe and theorized its benefit to the Russian Empire.<sup>13</sup> Imperial servants developed their own traditions of imagining the steppe. The agents of the Empire claimed the steppe in the name of “science” and “rationality”, willing to copycat the “European style” colonization but in a distinct Russian tradition.<sup>14</sup> “In the middle of the eighteenth century, Russian officials in charge of the southern and eastern frontier districts frequently referred to the neighboring nomadic peoples, the Kazakhs, Kalmyks, and Bashkirs, as "wild, untamed horses," "wild animals," "wild, unruly, and disloyal peoples," whose khans practiced "savage customs." By contrast, the Russian Empire was proudly portrayed by government officials as "the world's respected and glorious state." ”<sup>15</sup> Because Russian Empire saw the Steppe as an “empty space”, they have enforced policies of “internal colonization”, where they started resettling peasants to the Steppe. Moreover, an Imperial and Soviet impression of the Steppe was that it is a space to fill and industrialize for the benefit of the government. Martin McCauley argues that the speed with which Kazakh Steppe was turned into

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Sunderland, Willard. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Brower, Daniel R. and Edward J. Lazzerini. *Russia's Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*. Indiana University Press, June 1997.

wheat-growing fields then impacted the future decisions on the territory, left no other possibilities as to what the Steppe could become.<sup>16</sup> Initially, at the beginning of the 20th century, prime-Minister Stolypin already stated a view that the Steppe is not being utilized to its full extent by Nomads. The existence of such view emerged way before Stolypin's statement, yet the importance is that it became the official stance of the Empire, where Russian Empire started projecting its power through agrarian reforms. Colonization of the Steppe was never a systematic set of policies, but rather reactionary and evolved with time on multiple levels.<sup>17</sup> During Soviet times, the perception of the steppe as a resource used unwisely persisted. Stolypin's impression that the Steppe was Russian Eldorado continued being re-enforced and, as a result, was a base for Khrushchev's campaigns. The Steppe was generally seen as in need of transformation by outside actors. It was also thought that the Steppe was backward and in need of cultivation, a core assumption that served as a basis for the Virgin Lands Campaign during the Soviet Union. In propagandist videos, it is observable that the Slavic settlers are moving to a place that is thought to be completely empty, ignoring the existence of the indigenous population.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, claiming the Steppe by Imperial and Soviet authorities as their property was fairly legitimate, since they have constructed a narrative of the Steppe as an "empty space."

Despite the persistent belief in Steppe as a burden due to its emptiness and the need to civilize its inhabitants, one major theoretical development has been the spread of Eurasianist

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<sup>16</sup>McCauley, Martin. *Khrushchev and the Development of Soviet Agriculture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1976. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-03059-0>.

<sup>17</sup> Sunderland, Willard. *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*.

<sup>18</sup> "Cultivation of the Virgin Lands (1954)." Russian State Film & Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (2000). Seventeen Moments in Soviet History. August 17, 2015. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1954-2/virgin-lands-campaign/virgin-lands-campaign-video/cultivation-of-the-virgin-lands-1954/>;

"Ivan Lukinskii; Ivan Brovkin in the Virgin Lands (1958)." 2015. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History. August 17, 2015. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1954-2/virgin-lands-campaign/virgin-lands-campaign-video/ivan-lukinskii-ivan-brovkin-in-the-virgin-lands-1958/>.

movement. In particular, Gumilev along with Vernadskii and Savitskii disputed the claimed superiority of Russian civilization over the Asian, and also asserted that ecological systems gave its regions' people their individuality, ethnos and behavior. Gumilev proposed the theory of geographical determinism, where human activity, development and societal organization are directly impacted by landscapes and climate.<sup>19</sup> He particularly coined many terms, parts of which he borrowed from geographical sciences and used liberally. For instance, the “ethno-landscape totality” and “geobiocenosis”, where the people adapt under a certain climate, but also where the ethnos acts as a formative agent in changing and creating the environment around them. Gumilev was quite ambivalent in the details of his theories, but, without a doubt, he unintentionally became one of the most popular figures in the Soviet and Kazakhstani scholarship. The echoes or, sometimes, straight borrowing of his terms and theories have been re-applied and extended further by the contemporary scholarship in Kazakhstan, providing a scientific basis for the Great Steppe narrative. The modern romanticization and glorification of the Steppe emerged by virtue of Gumilev's ideas, that were primarily popularized into the mainstream by Nursultan Nazarbayev.

### **III. Instances of the commodification of the Steppe.**

#### **A. Nazarbayev's rhetorical legacy.**

##### *i. On the margins of the Soviet years.*

In the discussion of the Great Steppe narrative from the 90s and onward, it would be useful to look at the main actor responsible for re-enforcing that ideology since the collapse of the Soviet Union. To claim that the Great Steppe narrative is the brainchild exclusively of Nursultan Nazarbayev is an over-statement. Yet, he was the one who effectively started the

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<sup>19</sup> Bassin, Mark. *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia*. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt18kr63n>.

process of turning the Steppe into an ideological commodity as a part of the national identity of Kazakhstanis. The Great Steppe narrative has evolved through time, becoming popularized in the Independent era of Kazakhstan. The contents and phrasing of the Great Steppe narrative were not always fixed, but rather constructed through time to accommodate new needs. The early speeches of Nazarbayev demonstrate indecisiveness and tension during attempts at defining the Great Steppe narrative. He claimed the complete ownership for ethnic Kazakhs, yet was hesitant to accommodate nationalist rhetoric and instead, chose to resort to exclusive-inclusive balance in the Steppe. That is to say, on one hand, Kazakhs were the original owners of the Steppe, but it became to be home to many ethnicities according to Nazarbayev.

The final years of the Soviet Union were already unstable with national elements becoming more significant and visible, thus, there used to be not much appeal to the Great Steppe narrative for the sake of preserving a somewhat communist, Soviet archetype. Nazarbayev carefully raised issues of the status of the Kazakh language and traditions, yet he actively avoided confrontation and accusations of nationalism. In fact, in his rhetoric, he tried to be somewhat ethno-neutral, primarily referring to Perestroika and how it will change stereotypes about socialism.<sup>20</sup> Ethno-neutral not meaning that he did not speak of the national struggle at all, but rather he spoke of the national histories in ambiguous terms without calling for any action. Moreover, he condemned the active nationalization of the youth in Kazakhstan, claiming them to be harmful destructive elements. On September 19th, 1989, Nazarbayev gives a speech at a Central Committee Plenum of CPSU (ЦК КПСС). In the discussion of the events in Zhana Ozen, which were labeled as an inter-ethnic struggle, spilled into a massive unrest, Nazarbayev

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<sup>20</sup> Журнал «Дружба народов» № 9. Москва, 1987.

gave a speech titled “About National Policies of the Party in Modern Times” (О национальной политике партии в современных условиях):

“...: кто же извинится перед казахским народом за то, что его родина была насильно превращена в филиалы ГУЛАГа? Кто принесёт извинения миллионам принудительно переселённых, *вынужденным искать в наших степях кров для себя и своих детей?* Казахский народ, свято чтящий вековые традиции гостеприимства, сделал все, чтобы эти обездоленные сталинщиной люди, в том числе чеченцы и ингуши, обрели в Казахстане вторую родину. ...”<sup>21</sup>

This short excerpt is representative of a tendency expressed by Nazarbayev that the ownership over the Steppe has always been assigned to ethnic Kazakhs, and those who currently reside in it of non-Kazakh ethnicity cannot claim a Steppe as fully theirs.

Yet, having mentioned the exclusive ownership over the Steppe and how many other nationalities were forced to move, Nazarbayev then went on to describe that all of “us” (meaning people that live on the territory of Kazakhstan) were united against one common enemy - “threat of nationalist bureaucracy”, he reiterates that social problems should not receive a nationalist coloring.<sup>22</sup> The events of the 18th century and the colonization of the Steppe, Nazarbayev describes as “Казахский народ обратился к помощи России, связал с ней свою судьбу в XVIII веке, когда над ним нависла угроза полного уничтожения.”<sup>23</sup> He points out the atrocities of Imperial policies, yet once again emphasizes the historical bond with the Russians that should not be destroyed because of the “rival elements” that seed nationalistic moods.

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<sup>21</sup> Назарбаев, Нурсулган А. *Избранные речи Том I 1989 – 1991: Выступление на Пленуме ЦК КПСС г. Москва 19 сентября 1989 год*, Астана 2009, ИД «Сарыарка», ISBN 9965-536-87-2, 133. Italics by me.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 138.

Nazarbayev presents contradicting claims: on one side, he invokes the steppe; but on the other, he offers the modifiers lest one be accused of nationalism.

Overall, in the first printed collection of Nazarbayev's speeches, the dearth of references to the Steppe and its "supposed" significance or to Kazakhs stands out. In this short yet eventful period between his appointment as the first Kazakh Party Secretary and the collapse of the USSR, Nazarbayev primarily tried to juggle between emerging issues of national elements and denying any conflicts based on factors of ethnicity. Frequently, he mentions how the Communist Party is the only force that could unite the people, while those who argue for "prioritizing nationality" are the ones who want to divide the people within and scapegoat one nation for all the problems.<sup>24</sup> The most interesting aspect of these speeches is that there is not a single mention of the Great Steppe narrative just yet. That is to say, that the "Greatness" of the Steppe was not yet claimed, not overemphasizing the national and ethnic narratives over the Soviet ones. That tendency changed a lot during the Independent Kazakhstani governance. Moreover, the contradictions in the Steppe discourse of the earlier periods reflect the political challenges faced by Nazarbayev: where he had to balance the odds of unifying a nation around the new ideology and ethicizing the new politics. In that sense, the discussion of the Steppe as original home of Kazakhs, but accommodative of many ethnoses, demonstrates the tension between civic identity and ethnic markers. The Steppe in the early speeches of Nazarbayev is a stand-in for those tensions.

*ii. The coming of independence.*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communist ideology, there was a renewed responsibility and necessity for new forms of state-building. In his first attempts at

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 138.

nation-building Nazarbayev promptly resorted to ethnocentricity. The first noticeable difference from the previous speeches is the change in the depiction of the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. If before he used to say that fellow Russians helped out Kazakhs in troubling times, after the collapse of the Union, he starts resorting to new rhetoric where he argues:

“... Однако в XVIII-XIX веках, несмотря на мужество своих сыновей, наш народ *лишился* свободы и независимости. ...”, “...Конечно, быть чьим-то подданным - не благо. Колониализм царской России ни в чем не уступал, если не превосходил другие колониальные режимы. *Безбрежная наша степь оказалась собственностью империи.*”<sup>25</sup>

In 1992 at the 1<sup>st</sup> World Kurultai of Kazakhs, Nazarbayev explicitly stated that the Steppe was Kazakh. At the same time, he argued that the Steppe was always the destination of exile, meaning the Steppe was illegitimately used and became Empire’s property abandoning its original owners. He points out that “not of their own free will, and even more so without taking into account the opinion of the Kazakh people, Koreans, Volga Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Meskhetian Turks, representatives of other nationalities were resettled to the Steppe.”<sup>26</sup> All mentions of the Steppe were tied to Kazakh ethnicity right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. More and more frequently in his speeches Nazarbayev touched on fundamentalist elements: the Great Kazakh Steppe, Zhety Zhargy and mentions of notable Kazakh Khans and biis (Tole bi, Kazybek bi, Aityke bi).<sup>27</sup>

“На протяжении XX века Казахстан становился ареной не только экономических экспериментов, но и территорией едва *ли* не самого крупного в истории этнического переселения. Долгое время в этническом отношении Степь была

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<sup>25</sup> Назарбаев, Нурсулган А. *Избранные речи Том 2 1991 – 1995*, Астана 2009, ИД «Сарыарка», ISBN 9965-536-88-0, 155. Italics by me.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 340.

однородной, и только в уходящем столетии ситуация резко изменилась: одна за другой сюда накатывали многотысячные волны переселенцев. При этом устойчивость развития Казахстана вождей тоталитаризма совершенно не интересовала - превыше всего были имперские интересы сверхдержавы.”<sup>28</sup>

With years Nazarbayev’s claims about the Kazakhness of the Steppe were becoming only more explicit. We could observe the first traces of the Uly Dala formulation, the moment when the Steppe claimed its Greatness in Nazarbayev’s rhetoric. According to his rhetoric, there was the nation’s Golden Age prior to its colonization, when the Steppe then became inundated with the wave of settlers (other non-Kazakh ethnoses), but that the Steppe so graciously accepted and accommodated. He kept on accusing the Communist party leaders to be “leaders of totalitarianism.” The default assumption that the Steppe was Kazakh is still present in first President’s speeches. Nazarbayev in 1996 in his speech at the first celebration of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan said “Kazakhstan protected the exclusive interests of Kazakhs, since there were no other ethnic groups on its territory at that time. [*Presumably, he meant before colonization and pereselenie*] But after the lapse of time, the Great Steppe began to receive representatives of other peoples.”<sup>29</sup> However, there is a slight change in the rhetoric. If different ethnicities were sent to the Steppe without the consent of the locals, now the Steppe was portrayed as welcoming and accepting of different nationalities.

*iii. The testament to Eurasianism.*

In a span of almost 10 years from 1989 to 1998, Nazarbayev’s rhetoric changed drastically. Without the Soviet ideological and cultural base, he needed to fill the gaps in his

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<sup>28</sup> Назарбаев, Нурсултан А. *Избранные речи Том 3 1995 – 1998*, Астана 2009, ИД «Сарыарка», ISBN 9965-536-89-9, 445.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.



speeches, time and time again teaching and revising the History of Kazakhstan and the Great Steppe. During the Soviet times, his rhetoric had a cosmopolitan basis, where he claimed the generic principles and importance of being Soviet and upholding to the highest communist moral principles. During the course of collapse, however, he no longer had that leverage and needed to find out about other narratives, discourses that he could refer to in his speeches. Nevertheless, compared with the time right after the collapse, Nazarbayev scaled back from ethnocentric rhetoric creating an additional and more inclusive interpretation of the Great Steppe as years of his presidency passed and evolved. That said, in the collection of Nazarbayev's addressed to the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan in the last ten years, there was only one mention of the Steppe. It appeared in the context of deportations of ethnicities to the region. Nevertheless, Nazarbayev continued, the people were able to acquire a conscious identity of Kazakhstani citizenship. This recollection of Nazarbayev speeches in the Assembly once again mentioned the underlying assumption that the Steppe was historically populated by Kazakhs and even if there were representatives of other nationalities, they are only here because they were deported like "cattle in freight cars, tearing them away from their native land, transferring entire nations in a span of twenty-four hours".<sup>30</sup>

In the book boldly entitled "heart of Eurasia", Nazarbayev wrote about the creation of the capital city, its history, timeline, and aesthetic. In the chapter "The Philosophy of the Capital city", Nazarbayev writes "I began to understand that the steppe with its unlimited expanses and unlimited horizons gives real freedom and a sense of the fullness of space."<sup>31</sup> This piece of writing is a testament to the romanticization of the Steppe. It echoes the modern slogan, which

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<sup>30</sup> Назарбаев, Нурсултан А. 10 лет Ассамблея Народов Казахстана. «Елорда», Астана 2005, pp. 300.

<sup>31</sup> Назарбаев, Нурсултан А. *В Сердце Евразии*, 2016, 14-15.

came later, “Nur-Sultan – the Heart of the Great Steppe.” We could see the clear implications of the theory of Eurasianism, where the landscapes and ecology are approached as living organism and are assigned particular importance in the ethnogenesis of the nation. Once again, Nazarbayev claims the ownership over the Steppe for the history of Kazakhstan, arguing that the people and cultures of the Steppe (Andronov culture, the Saks, Bozok) directly relate to the modern history of Kazakhstan. Such approach to the Steppe goes back to the ideas constructed by Gumilev, the innate connection between an ethnogenesis and the environment and ecology around them.<sup>32</sup> The tendency of both Nazarbayev and Gumilev was to explicitly demonstrate how the Steppe and its inhabitants impacted the rest of the world with their positive contribution to the progress, and disputed the old beliefs of the Steppe as an “empty” or “backward” spaces. Describing the early middle ages, the term “Kazakh Steppe” is used interchangeably with the history of the Steppe by Nazarbayev.

*iv. Eternal Kazakhstan.*

In 2018, there is another significant contribution made by Nazarbayev to the rhetoric of the Great Steppe is an article named “Seven Facets of the Great Steppe.” (“Семь граней Великой Степи”)<sup>33</sup> It is also the last piece of his thoughts that he shared right before announcing his resignation as a President. The article extensively highlights the pre-Mongol era and lists all the achievements of the Steppe. The former President claims that “our ancestors” have offered the world many essential discoveries. The fact that the article claims that “the greatness of the

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<sup>32</sup> Bassin, Mark. *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia.*

<sup>33</sup> Akorda.kz. “Статья Главы государства ‘Семь граней Великой степи’ — Официальный сайт Президента Республики Казахстан,” 2018. [https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda\\_news/press\\_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-sem-granei-velikoi-stepi](https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-sem-granei-velikoi-stepi).

state matches its territory” brings very patriotic tendencies to the audience. At the same time, there is no claiming of exclusivity over the Steppe. The Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, a government institution whose leading position used to be taken by Nursultan Nazarbayev, argues that the Steppe was home for many ethnicities and that, historically, they were able to live in peace with each other. On the other hand, the Kazakhstani authorities claim ownership over the people and events of the Steppe through enforcing particular interpretations of history.

Nazarbayev’s impact on the Great Steppe narrative is a multifaceted one. It combined incompatible and, sometimes, contradictory ideas. The mystical perspective on Kazakhstan’s history and its connections to the pre-Mongolian era were not only expressed rhetorically but were then supported by scholarly articles and acquired material, tangible dimensions in government projects.

#### **B. Academic Projects and implementation of Nazarbayev’s ideas into academia.**

The rise of Nazarbayev’s “Great Steppe” narrative brought into relief the need for academic backup. Similarly to the situation in the Soviet Union, academia in Kazakhstan has been used as a tool for offering a plausible justification of ideology, an effective mechanism of regime legitimation as well as serving the purpose of more discreet articulation of state ideas. They appeal to history, anthropology, and geography as their ethos, presenting their narratives as unquestionable facts. This claim has been supported through the production of scholarly articles and books on the Great Steppe, which have depicted the core ideas of the narrative in different directions. Overall, Kazakhstani scholarship on the Steppe resorts to the Great Steppe as the producer and perpetuator of non-material, spiritual products, like Kazakh national mentality, Kazakh statehood and even civilization. All of these features are also overwhelmingly linked to the contemporary Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani citizens.

The core arguments of those scholars echo those of Nazarbayev, yet they approach the Great Steppe narrative differently. Instead of the emotional, nationalistic appeal (which is still present, but to a much lesser degree in scholarship than in Nazarbayev's speeches), they use academic theories and science. One of the most popular approaches is geographical determinism. Altay Orazbayeva's book "Формула Государственности Казах" (Formula of Kazakh statehood) is a great example of academic work that perfectly suits and perpetuates the official narratives. The author presented globalization as a threat to national and cultural identity pointing to the need of guarding the living historical memory.<sup>34</sup> She proceeded to argue how the genesis of Kazakh governance was rooted in the Saks, Huns, Uysuns with references to the Kazakh Khans. Kazakh statehood, according to Orazbayeva, was a combination of the nomadic phenomenon, Turkic, Mongolian and Kazakh Khanate cultures.<sup>35</sup> The following excerpt demonstrates the main idea of the book:

“На самом деле пятивековая вежа Казахского ханства, бесценное духовное и материальное наследие трехтысячелетней *цивилизации кочевников евразийских степей*, история более двадцати государств и государственных образований, Великий Шёлковый Путь, войны и сражения, ... - все это служит вечным контекстом современной формы казахстанской государственности и ее идеологии.”<sup>36</sup>

The author regarded the modern, contemporary Kazakhstani government as the continuation of the ancient traditions, and cultures despite the menacing globalization discourse. She presented that the distinctness of the contemporary Kazakhstani statehood and its ideology was retained despite the influences of greater civilizations. There was hardly any sufficient link provided by

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<sup>34</sup> Оразбаева, Алтайы И. *Формула Государственности Казах*. Москва Press-Book.ru 2017. ISBN 978-5-9500612-3-3, pp. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.,15-16.

the author on how the Kazakh khanate and the Silk Road managed to provide context for today's Kazakhstan. Yet, the author attempted to argue on how nature directly contributed to the government citing F.Braudel "geohistory", F. Ratzel's "anthropogeography" and R.Kjellen's conception of a government as a geographical organism, where the territory is its body.<sup>37</sup> The author used other scholarly works arguing for geographical determinism, in order to demonstrate how the states of the East proceeded along a different trajectory of development. She argued that the presence of mostly Steppe fertile zones in the East forced people to gather and merge for agricultural efforts, which resulted in a collective culture, unlike the market-private property-individualism of the West.<sup>38</sup> According to Orazbayeva, Central Asia was a holistic civilization that at different times was under different influences. "..., государственность кочевников евразийских степей проявлялась в многовековой межцивилизационной динамике, ключевой характеристикой которой была ее обращённость внутрь."<sup>39</sup> Thus, despite being under different influences, the Eurasian nomads managed to preserve their own civilization and culture. "..., государство есть результат западной и восточной цивилизаций, когда как применительность к истории Великой степи - *Ұлы Дала* государственность (а не государство) является основной (а не результатом) цивилизационного процесса."<sup>40</sup> Here the author mentioned a difference between a government and a statehood. She argued that in comparison to the traditional becoming of the state a public-political power, the statehood in the case of Kazakhstan was a uniting social and organizational force, without the presence of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 46-51.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 60.

concrete institutions. Particularly, she used “особая форма этносоциального и этнотерриториального объединения” for defining the Kazakh statehood.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, the author proceeds to depict the uniqueness of the Eurasian nomadism, with its combination of the foresty and dry steppe, Caspian seashores, and mountains of Alatau. Orazbaeyva presented a variety of claims, the core of which is the fact that the Steppe was seen as the producer of the statehood. S

The geographical determinism, mentioned in the previous scholarship, could be traced in another piece of national writing entitled “the Kazakhs Children of the Steppes” by Chokan and Murat Laumilins. The authors’ book began by showing how Kazakhstan combines both European and Asian cultures, placing it at the “heart of Eurasia”. Similarly to Orazbayeva, Laumulins also highlight the unique combination of different cultures that are associated with the national character, “a fusion of Turkic-Islamic culture, steppe traditions and post-Soviet mentality.”<sup>42</sup> Authors argue that the nomadic culture and features have persisted even till this day, that they are still feasible in the modern Kazakhstan. “Even today, the descendants of the nomads, who settled in the towns and cities in their third and fourth generations, yearn for the limitless space of the steppe.”<sup>43</sup> Authors continue to depict the importance of limitless space and nomadic culture for modern Kazakhstanis by saying “If one looks into the eyes of modern Kazakhs, one will still see the desire for limitless space.”<sup>44</sup> The persistent claim throughout this book is that authors keep using the term “Kazakhs” even when describing the events that happened deep in history, what one usually considers the pre-Kazakh ancient.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>42</sup> Laumulins Chokan and Murat Laumilin. *The Kazakhs Children of the Steppes*. Global Oriental LTD, Chapter 1. 2009. ISBN 978-1-905246-99-1

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

“It was here that great hordes of warring nomadic tribes were born and grew in strength; it was from here that they stormed the Great Wall of China and the city fortifications of Byzantium, Rome, Baghdad and Damascus. At different times the terrified residents of countries where they settled gave them different names: Saks, Huns, Turks, Kipchaks, Oguz and Tatars, but modern-day Kazakhs see them all as their anthropological ancestors.” “A new nation, the Turkic people, formed many states in the center of Eurasia, many great steppe confederations and empires from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries. These khaganates and hordes had different names, but *the Kazakh steppe was always there, in the centre of their territory.*”<sup>45</sup>

Although the space of the Steppe was limitless and free, authors also argued that it was not anarchic, but politically engaging and active. The major difference between Laumilins’ and Orazbayeva’s books is the exclusivity of ownership. While Laumilins explicitly claimed that the Great Steppe was Kazakh, Orazbayeva portrayed it more subtly, arguing for the existing diversity and fusion of different nomadic tribes. There was also a gap in Orazbayeva’s book, where the author completely skipped over the periods of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union; while Laumilins either mentioned the “post-Soviet” Kazakhstani mentality or the how the Kazakhs were historically able to overcome challenges posed by Imperial and Soviet authorities. “The history of the resettlement and movement [*within the Steppe*] of the Kazakh clan families from their native steppes is worthy of comparison with the biblical Exodus.”<sup>46</sup> The Steppe factor also contributed to the “eternal” presence of Kazakhs in Xinjiang and Siberia, because according to Laumilins, the nomadic feature of the Kazakhs demonstrated their constant movements throughout territories that are not a part of modern Kazakhstan. When it comes to similarities between authors, both Laumilins and Orazbayeva seem to highlight the achievements of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 39.

“Steppe Empires” and “Steppe Armies”, which primarily mark the pre-Mongolian era. Those claims resonate with Nazarbayev’s last article on the achievements of the Great Steppe and its contributions to world development. The obsession to highlight the contribution of Kazakhs to the global progress and civilizations even prior to the existence of Kazakhs as an ethnos or a nation is feasible in all pieces of writing covered so far. Therefore, it is a two-way street: on one side, there is an internally developed and retained culture and statehood of Kazakhs; and its significance to the world on the other. Yet, they did not mention how the Kazakh civilization or culture might have been assimilated or changed through time, desiring to keep the perception of the ancient solid Kazakhstani civilization.

The concept of the Great Steppe is then also emphasized through the significance of it to the regional geopolitical development, apart from the global human progress. Yet the direction with which it is expressed changes in different works. The following example is how Nazira Nurtazina presented the Steppe as a center of Turkic integration:

“Это связано не только с тем, что исторически Казахстан с его огромной территорией и такими регионами, как древние степи Дешт-и-Кыпчак (позже Сары Арка), Семиречье, Туркестан, Мангыстау и др. – всегда выступал особо значимым центром тюркского культурогенеза и политогенеза, но и тем обстоятельством, что именно Казахстан выступает сегодня лидером тюркской Центральной Азии, инициатором и активным сторонником тюркской интеграции в мире.”<sup>47</sup>

These ideas coincide with Nazarbayev’s own vision of Kazakhstan, where the Steppe was central to other major Asian civilizations and, in fact, is its significant contributor. In such view, the notion of Turks, Saks, Huns and others were not only directly related to the modern Kazakh, but they were continuations of each other according to authors. Another moment is that Nurtazina

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<sup>47</sup> Нуртазина, Нургуль Д. *История тюркской цивилизации. Учебное пособие*. Казахский Национальный Университет имени Аль-Фараби, Алматы 2015, pp. 6.



and other scholars, once again, highlight the vast territories that were supposedly claimed and always have been by Kazakhs of the Steppe. Authors attempted several ways of proving “the Greatness” of the Steppe. The reiterated correlation of the size of the Steppe territories was somehow meant to prove a point of the “Greatness” of the Steppe, yet such greatness was not defined purely by the scale of the Steppe, but more so by the inhabitants and achievements of the Steppe.

Some scholarship addressed the instrumentality of the Steppe, where nomadism was portrayed as one of the most functional pre-industrial systems of governance and living. “В силу ряда объективных причин именно анализ культурно-бытовых реалий кочевников-казахов, как нам представляется, является тем ключом, с помощью которого может быть обеспечено познание и всестороннее исследование механизма функционирования системы “общество – природа.”<sup>48</sup> In simpler terms, there is an urge to prove that there was long-lasting utility from the nomadic and the Steppe civilization. Masanov also presented arguments regarding whether the kochevnik-kirghyz (nomad-Kirgiz) was an obedient, passive consumer of the products of the Steppe. His argumentation suggested that the nomads of the Steppe were “a vivid example of the of the adaptability of a person in his economic activity to natural conditions in general, as well as to those changes in these conditions that occur as a result of the impact of human activity on them.”<sup>49</sup> The author was attempting at portraying the Nomads as active agents of influencing and contributing to the civilization and culture of the Steppe, not just consumers of whatever civilization and cultures coincided with the territories of the Steppe. He argued that

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<sup>48</sup> Масанов, Нурбулат Эдигеевич. *Кочевая цивилизация казахов: основы жизнедеятельности кочевнического общества*. 2-е расширенное и дополненное издание. Алматы 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

it was necessary to reject “geographical nihilism”, where Soviet scholars completely ignored the influence of the Steppe or any other natural landscape on the development and cultures of people. Yet, the same author proposes that almost all Kazakhstani scholars are trying to acquire the status of a “Great civilization” for the Kazakh Steppe and its nomadic past.<sup>50</sup> Masanov et al. argued that there was a need to de-mystify history, yet in the “Кочевая цивилизация казахов” he did exactly the same thing that he opposed. It is observable how the same author who wanted an objective new way of approaching the study of the Steppe (and History of Kazakhstan as a whole), ended up replacing some Soviet ideologies with others yet retaining the same levels of mystifying history. Such tendency is not only unique to Masanov, but is spread among many.

Regardless of the intentions with which the authors depict the Steppe (pre-Mongol, Turkic or Eurasian center), there is one major commonality in the abovementioned pieces of academic production. The Great Steppe was used as a means of producing something: whether that is Kazakh governance, Turkic cultural genesis or even modern Kazakh mentality and institutions. The Kazakhs were portrayed as the successors of the civilizations of Eurasian nomads.<sup>51</sup> The use of “civiliziography”, one of the many unusual portmanteau terms used, was supposed to emancipate the Kazakhs from its Soviet and Imperial past. For Orazbayeva, the Steppe was as a producer of contemporary culture, identity, and politics. Another common tendency among these books was a complete abandonment of the impacts of the Imperial or Soviet governance, perceiving their effects and policies on the Steppe as non-existent or

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<sup>50</sup> Масано, Нурболат Э., Абылхожин Жулдузбек Б., Ерофеева Ирина В. Научное знание и мифотворчество в современной историографии Казахстана. Алматы 2007, “Дайк-Пресс.” ISBN 9965-798-35-4.

<sup>51</sup> Оразбаева, Алтайы И. *Цивилизация кочевников евразийских степей*. Институт востоковедения имени Р.Б. Сулейменова Министерства образования и науки Республики Казахстан, Алматы «Дайк-Пресс» 2005.

illegitimate. Too often, the authors completely skip on the Imperial and Soviet Kazakhstan, yet making direct relevance and association of ancient Central Asia and modern Kazakhstan. These authors might claim that they reject Imperial and Soviet traditions of studying the Steppe, nevertheless, they keep embracing other Soviet theories, like Eurasianism.

Overall, scholars in Kazakhstan do not explicitly refer to or cite Nazarbayev's rhetoric, yet they instrumentalize history and geography to explain the core of Nazarbayev's premises. They depict the "greatness" of the Steppe by trying to referring to its historical by-products, meaning the governance and cultural or geopolitical genesis. A special place in their academic works is taken by Eurasianist figures like Gumilev and his like. The second more contested feature of academic works is the fact that scholars do not agree on the terminology. Some use "Kazakh", "Eurasian" or "Turkic" in relation to acknowledging ownership of the Steppe. Yet what is undisputable is that all these names, civilizations always linked back to the modern Kazakhs and the centrality of the distinct Steppe culture and features was present despite the ubiquitous globalized nature of the Steppe.

### **C. Tangible manifestation of the Great Steppe narrative.**

The rhetorical and academic sources constitute only one dimension of the Great Steppe narrative. There are also physical and visible projects that materialize the narrative. First and foremost, it is worth looking at the generic government project which is named "Рухани жаңғыру". Its alleged/official objective is to modernize the civic society and set future-oriented goals for the Kazakhstani people. While there are practical projects that include the translation of books to the Kazakh language, restoration of important monuments, and improving education levels among the population through various programs, there are also segments of the project that do not have direct relations to the "modernizing" of Kazakhstani civic society. Several

instances of that are “Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan”, “Museum of ancient art and technology of the Great Steppe” sub-projects and more generic project “National Spiritual revival” (“Ұлттық рухани жаңғыру”).<sup>52</sup>

Starting from the latter and the biggest share of a government project, according to the official reporting on the “National Spiritual revival” from the year of 2021, goal number one is the “development of Kazakhstani national identity and intellectual potential.”<sup>53</sup> There are several directions within the project. The first one targets the “popularization of values «Рухани жаңғыру» and development of government language.” The second direction has more relevance to this paper, it is named “Ел Рухы.” (“The national spirit/morale”) It involved projects that were supposed to renew the ancient cities of Turkestan: Sauran, Otyrar, Sarayshik and etc.<sup>54</sup> The “National Spiritual revival” involves a wide range of policies. Starting from financial and bank policies all the way to cultural, historic ones. Their primary goal is to raise levels of patriotism among Kazakhstanis, which is done by resorting back to the ancient legacy. Various tools were involved in the materialization of the Great Steppe narrative, including the production of film and music products. As an example, the plot of the film “Awakening of sleeping beauty” («Пробуждение спящей красавицы»), released on screens in 2019, demonstrates the history of Mangystau, the importance of geology and how the Kazakh Steppe became the gates to Central

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<sup>52</sup> Gov.kz, 2022. “Рухани жаңғыру.” *Министерство информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан*. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/activities/1080?lang=ru>

<sup>53</sup> Gov.kz. Ежегодный отчет Министерства информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан по реализации национального проекта «Ұлттық рухани жаңғыру» за 2021 год.” 28 февраля 2022. *Министерство информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан*. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/275250?directionId=1080&lang=ru>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 25.

Asia, where Peter I planned his famous political plans.<sup>55</sup> Another project involved the creative community of the Almaty region, where many painters and artists were sponsored to draw murals as a part of the special project of Elbasy named “Great names of the Great Steppe”. (“Великие имена Великой степи”)<sup>56</sup> Other examples include the revival of ancient traditions and legends, for instance, the sponsoring of a dancing ensemble that depicts the image of Princess Tomiris and her battle with Persian king Cyrus in the Kazakh Steppe<sup>57</sup>, and the construction of rocky trope as a part of “evolutionary, not revolutionary Kazakhstan” project that depicts 13 architectural works (Saryyukskaya serpent from Kazakh myths, Tengri Kunbasty, Kokbori, guards of the Great Steppe and others).<sup>58</sup>

The national museum of Republic of Kazakhstan, located in the capital, opened the whole section devoted to the Great Steppe, as a part of the National Spiritual Revival. In the description of that section, the Museum writes “both the Botai culture, which tamed horses, and the Andronovo and Begazy-Dandybay cultures, which turned ancient Kazakhstan into the largest centre of metallurgy of that period, made their contribution to world history and culture.”<sup>59</sup> The expositions of the Golden Man and old artifacts which belonged to Saks is supposed to tie modern Kazakhstan with its ancient roots. There is even a term “ancient Kazakhstan” where everything that happened on the Steppe is now claimed for the history of Kazakhstan. Prior to

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<sup>55</sup> Gov.kz. “Сборник успешных проектов программы «Рухани жаңғыру» за 2020 год”. *Министерство информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан*. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/112680?lang=ru> , pp. 97.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 126.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 135.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 143

<sup>59</sup> RUH.kz. “МУЗЕЙ ДРЕВНЕГО ИСКУССТВА И ТЕХНОЛОГИЙ ВЕЛИКОЙ СТЕПИ.” 10 декабря 2021. <https://ruh.kz/ru/2021/12/10/muzej-drevnego-iskusstva-i-tehnologij-velikoj-stepi/>.

that, museums used to depict the culture of Saks, Huns and other ancient people under their own names, the major difference has been that now these ancient cultures are presented as a part of the ancient Kazakhstan, which signals the greater and more explicit instrumentalization of the Steppe.

Furthermore, there is an urge for international appeal and promotion of tourism through such projects. For instance, the “Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan” involves creating students' and tourists' guides for the study of the region and its historical legacy. Meetings and lectures on the topic of "sacred places - spiritual shields" and "properties of the Kazakh consciousness" were organized as a part of the project.<sup>60</sup> On one hand, they are designed to enforce national self-consciousness, on another, to commercialize it to attract tourists and improve its international reputation.

Similar tendencies are seen in the historical project “Bozok”. It is a construction of an open-air national park where one could visit archaeological sites of an ancient city. Nazarbayev’s words are the first thing one sees when visiting their website, says “Bozok is the direct ancestor of Akmolisk, and its last predecessor is the capital of modern Kazakhstan.”<sup>61</sup> This project serves as a pre-requisite and a justification for the most recent government campaign. Since 2018, when the capital of Kazakhstan hit its 20 year anniversary, the government started displaying banners and filming short videos with the slogan “Astana (now Nur-Sultan) – the heart of the Great Steppe.” The capital of Kazakhstan, in a moderate way, is the actualization and fulfillment of the

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<sup>60</sup> RUH.kz, “Сакральная география Казахстана.” 10 января 2021. <https://ruh.kz/ru/2021/12/10/sakralnaya-geografiya-kazahstana/>.

<sup>61</sup> Bozok.kz. *Древнее городище бозок.* <https://bozok.kz/>.

Great Steppe narrative, that combines the historical depth and political aspirations of Independent Kazakhstan.

All these projects were created with the purpose of modernizing the civil and ethnic consciousness, yet all of them revive the most ancient myths and legends and materialize them by creating films, monuments and architecture. These are visible manifestations of the Great Steppe narrative. The future-oriented rhetoric, that was laid out by First President, is now tightly interconnected with the ancient past. While the academic pieces of writing very subtly referred to the ideas touched upon Nazarbayev, the public projects are explicitly referring to the articles and narratives mentioned and produced by Nazarbayev. These physical (museums, archaeological sites, monuments) and cultural (films, songs, dance ensembles) objects are created and enforced to not only internalize the Great Steppe narrative in Kazakhstan but also project its geopolitical importance internationally. The 2019 report on the “National Spiritual Revival” demonstrates examples of how the Kazakhstani government is attempting at creating authority in the region as “successors of the Great Steppe.”<sup>62</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2019, Kazakhstan took part in the exhibition “legacy of the Great Steppe”, which consisted of three parts. First, there was an exposition of the “Golden Man” from Issyk, Sarmatian soldiers from “Aral Tobe” Korgan and etc. Then, there was an exhibition “Turkestan – a shrine of the Turkic world” («Туркестан – святыня тюркского мира»), and lastly, the “pearls of Kazakhstan” by Kazakh tourism.<sup>63</sup> In May of 2019, Kurmangazy Kazakh National orchestra performed the “Melody of the Great Steppe” on the stages of the musical theatre “Helikon-Opera” in Moscow and the Mikhailovsky Theater in St.

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<sup>62</sup> Gov.kz. “Аналитический доклад по итогам реализации программы “Рухани жаңғыру””. *Министерство информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан*, 5 января 2021. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/111436?lang=ru>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 155.

Petersburg, Russia. Not only they are trying to acquire regional influence, they are also performing an exhibition named "Historical and cultural image of the Great Steppe" in Poland, Hungary<sup>64</sup> with a planned symposium in Northern Kazakhstan named "Botai – culture of the Great Steppe"<sup>65</sup> with participants from Germany, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The terms "Eurasian Steppe", "Kazakh Steppe" and "Turkic Steppe" are interchangeable, depending on who is the event or production is performed for. The special role is allocated to Turkestan, with its commercialized national objects that emerged in the last three years. There is a tendency to demonstrate how the Steppe enters the global cultural sphere, where projects like "National Spiritual revival" attempt at demonstrating how the ancient technologies (polymetal technologies, equestrian culture, weaving technologies, and its nomadism)<sup>66</sup> contributed to the global development and was a pre-condition of all modern technologies. The constructed perception of the Steppe is exclusive, because it mainly refers to Kazakh people and Kazakh culture, but also inclusive because it refers to Eurasian nomads and the Turkic world. The Steppe is used as a figure and means to construct political, cultural, and archaeological phenomena of the existence of eternal, "ancient" Kazakhstan. The recurring attempts at producing projects and content related to the Great Steppe narrative should be considered in the geopolitical context.

#### **IV. Conclusion.**

Nazarbayev's rhetorical legacy, the modern academic scholarship that focuses on the past through the prism of the nation and tangible projects of the Great Steppe narrative all have internal contradictions and commonalities. The Great Steppe narrative was not the first time

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 225.



authorities attempted to commodify and revive national identity. Prior to that, there has been an attempt at creating a narrative related to the ancient cities of the Nomads. The focus of such narrative has been on Southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye, which was argued to be where agricultural oases meet with the nomadic steppe.<sup>67</sup> Particularly, one of the most prominent scholars on urban nomadic centres, Ваипаков, argues “такое положение издревле определяло своеобразие развития культуры. Здесь в контактной зоне земледелия и скотоводства наиболее отчетливо проявляются взаимодействия земледельцев и скотоводов, оседлости и кочевничества, города и степи.” The author primarily argues that urban culture existed in the sixth and second half of the ninth centuries in Southern parts of modern Kazakhstan. Yet, the problem that surfaced was the claiming of cities by Russians as the achievements of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.<sup>68</sup> Urbanization, industrialization, and the ‘civilizing’ of the Nomadic population is widely claimed by Russian historians to be the achievements of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. For instance, they say that the historical names of all major cities in Kazakhstan were always Russians and, therefore, emerged as a result of the active steppe colonization with nothing on the Steppe prior to it. Such claims have a potential for bigger geopolitical implications, that Kazakhstani authorities are actively trying to dispute through the Great Steppe narrative.

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<sup>67</sup> Байпаков, Карл. М. *Древняя и средневековая урбанизация Казахстана*. Министерство образования и науки Республики Казахстан, Институт археологии им. А.Х.Маргулана, Казахстанское археологическое общество. Алматы 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Newsfront.ru. “Запад провоцирует, казахи отвечают: русские построили города в Казахстане,” November 10, 2018. [https://news-front.info/2018/11/10/kazahskij-aktivist-ya-russkij-vse-goroda-na-territorii-kazahstana-osnovany-russkimi/?utm\\_source=google.com&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=google.com&utm\\_referrer=google.com](https://news-front.info/2018/11/10/kazahskij-aktivist-ya-russkij-vse-goroda-na-territorii-kazahstana-osnovany-russkimi/?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com); Александр Гришин. “Как в Казахстане появились жузы, русские и кто построил его города и заводы.” *Кр.ру. Комсомольская правда* — КР.Ru, January 9, 2022. <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27348.3/4529247/>.

Furthermore, the solution that the Kazakhstani authorities made use of was to reject old (colonial) schools of thought, materialist thinking and instead prioritize spiritual values, such as statehood and communal, cultural values. That is to say, even without the physical and feasible evidence of the existence of Kazakh people on the Steppe, contemporary government could always claim the grassroots of Kazakh statehood and values. Such claims for the eternal existence of Kazakh spirituality, institutions and statehood have three core beliefs. Firstly, it highlights that contemporary Kazakhstan has roots going back to centuries before, even in the pre-Kazakh times, unifying the “original owners” of the Steppe and the late comers. Secondly, this narrative that embodies “Eternal Kazakhstan” grants legitimacy to the modern state to govern, exist and stand its ground against external territorial challenges. Thirdly, the rhetoric of ancient Kazakhstan is also unifying outside the country. Depending on to whom and when the narrative is presented, ancient, eternal Kazakhstan might become a “heart” of Eurasia, or of Turkic or pre-Mongolic world. The purposeful vagueness of the definitions and the absence of mutual exclusivity proved to be beneficial for the authorities in building foreign, regional politics through the prism of Kazakhstan-centricity.

Lastly, as much as the Kazakhstani authority (both prominent politicians and scholarship) claim the rejection of materialism in re-claiming the history of Kazakhstan, they still face the challenge of proving and embodying it. They started digging various archeological sites, creating museums, and filming Steppe-romanticizing media in order to prove that the non-material components still had a real impact on the country. This internal tension of non-material values and material means as the evidence demonstrates their need to satisfy various, indefinite purposes. The same applies to the ethnocentric but regional place of ancient Kazakhstan, which is not only a part of the major civilizations but also an active contributor to the best of the

worlds. “The Great Steppe” narrative represents Kazakhstan’s attempt to construct an ancient and globalized image of the country, with an appeal that reaches both domestic and international audiences. That is not to say that the ways in which it is done are identical, but rather that the government is opportunistic when it comes to narrowing down a narrative depending on who it targets. The vision of the Steppe was not only geography based, but rather it was mostly about the people in it. The significance of the Great Steppe narrative is how the instrumentalization and search for Kazakhstani historical depth was a reaction of the government to geopolitical concerns. The embodiment of the Steppe as one of the commodities of national identity demonstrates the tension between combining the incompatible. The attempts to Kazakhify the Steppe and yet to pose it as a home for plethora of ethnicities demonstrates the very tension that is currently in the core of modern nationalism in Kazakhstan. As any nation-building process in the post-Soviet, the Great Steppe ideology is a rather reactionary constantly involving narrative. The history of its articulation and fluctuating ethnonationalism instrumentalizes the Steppe as a stand in for all the various ideas of Kazakhstan as a nation.

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