

BURABAY NATIONAL PARK. EXPERIMENTS IN TOURISM, NATION-
BUILDING, AND INFORMAL ECONOMY

БҰРАБАЙ ҰЛТТЫҚ ПАРКІ. ТУРИЗМ, ҰЛТ ҚҰРЫЛЫСЫ, ЖӘНЕ
БЕЙРЕСМИ ЭКОНОМИКАДАҒЫ ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТТЕР

НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ПАРК БУРАБАЙ. ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТЫ В ТУРИЗМЕ,
КОНСТРУКЦИИ НАЦИИ, И НЕФОРМАЛЬНОЙ ЭКОНОМИКЕ

by

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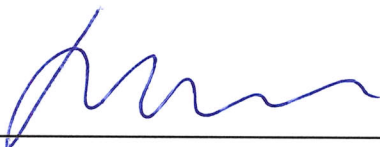
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The 7th of July, 2016



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Abstract

This work analyzes how environment and society interact with each other focusing on the case of Burabay National Park. Based on the field research and numerous interviews, this work demonstrates how seemingly disparate notions of top-down nation-building and tourism development have shaped into a site with unique attributes. One part of the picture is the puzzle of how nation-building process fostered by other variables such as tourism development and environmental awe could give a birth to completely new objects of sacral landscape that operate in terms similar to other famous pilgrimage destinations in the Central Asia. The other part is development of the informal economy and a set of principals according to which the local society has to operate in order to be competitive in the National Park. I believe that the findings of this work could significantly contribute to the as yet very limited literature on tourism development in Kazakhstan as well as provide analysis of an interesting case of a nation-building process.

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Introduction

It was an old car that was noisily accepting commands from the driver following a narrow road around Lake Burabay. Ereke, the driver, was listening to some loud chanson, which was mainly describing a life behind the bars and murmuring the lines under his breath. Having stayed half a year in the dormitory of my university, I wanted to breathe fresh air and to lower the windows to let the fresh breeze come inside. Noticing this action, Ereke turned the volume of the receiver down and said, “Let the holy air inside you, son. This sacred place has it in abundance”.

The first day of my research stay in Burabay National Park set a course for the whole of my work investigating the place that has become one of Kazakhstan’s most visited National Parks. On the day of arrival I had no other plans, but to familiarize myself with the resort. Burabay, known to many by its Russian name, Borovoe, has its peak tourist season starting from mid-July and lasting until mid-August, and is chosen to be a considerably cheaper alternative by many families as a get-away destination for their vacations. Being experienced in the peculiarities of tourism in the region of Central Asia, I knew that one of the fastest ways of blending into the Park was by paying a generous amount of money to a taxi driver who seemed open to dialogue. I explained the purpose of my stay in Burabay and wanted to see the places that a visitor must see. As Ereke later told me, I could not possibly come across a better guide than him, because he was born in the nearby town of Shchuchinsk, a city close to Burabay, and knew everything about the region.

His statement about the place being sacred evoked several contradictions in my conscious attitude to the National Park. In my previous experience, Burabay certainly had features that evoke environmentalism, tourism attraction, consumerism, signs of potential collapse, and the state’s experiment in establishing National Parks. However, Ereke was clearly talking about his

perception of Burabay as a sacred place. What I did not know was the time, when the site acquired this definition. I asked for an explanation of why Burabay is a sacred place and he said that, growing up and spending most of your time in cities, you sometimes fail to see the beauty and awe in simple things. Today's generation does not feel the place - all they need is entertainment. We forgot our history and how much importance Burabay once had. This place was visited by holy khans that ruled our country (*elimiz*) and made us who we are today.

For Ereke, being present at the site influences the quality of his perception of the world and differentiates him from the "others". His identity has a strong link with the Burabay National Park that is perceived as a receiver and a transmitter of the holy aura that was brought by the khans, the ancient rulers of the tribes. It is not really certain if khans had ever visited the site as it is portrayed, but what is more important for my study is when these myths, legend and sentiments about Burabay as a central place in national history began to appear and to be institutionalized. Do people care more about the place and protect it because it is a part of their "imagined community"?

This work is aimed at understanding the changes that were brought by the state and other actors after Kazakhstan's independence. Deliberate policies and rhetoric played an important role in forming what we see today as Burabay. The nation-building process that extended across the variety of realms within the boundaries of Kazakhstan combined with practices of shrine visits and touristic attraction placed the site in an ambivalent, but yet a familiar shape. It is common to find places in the Central Asia having similar features - Sulayman Mountain in Osh, Gur-e-Amir in Samarkand, the shrine of Arslanbob in Kyrgyzstan and the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkistan. However, what distinguishes Burabay from other similar sites is a relatively short time span of its existence as a site of an institutionalized nature and an absence of a clear connection of the site to some person. The recentness of the phenomenon and its traceable background are key factors in understanding the changes and their development. Investigating

behavioral pattern of people purposefully and accidentally connecting with the so-called “holy sites of Burabay” opens up the possibility to see the formation and development of a shrine, which are hardly imaginable without policies and deliberate involvement of the state. Policies were not aiming at creating a site of worship, but they inadvertently gave the site an essence that was employed by a variety of actors and gave it the meaning and functions that it has today. Indeed, the state is not the only actor at Burabay National Park, and there are other groups that directly and indirectly take part in the formation of the popular opinion and practices around the most popular destinations. Socio-economic factors with an ongoing experiment of defining a site of tourism further facilitate these changes and leave a long lasting impact. The rapidly growing tourism industry in Burabay National Park maintained development of the informal economy. At the same time Burabay is an environmental project of the state that is aimed at conserving nature and educating people. This combination of factors influences the state of Burabay and its perception among the visitors.

The case of Burabay National Park is a mixture of the both, a question of a material and a natural space that has a symbolic importance for visitors. Apart from being connected with an identity of some visitors, it is also a great natural resource that the region does not have in abundance. Although it would not be justified to consider Burabay to have a symbolic meaning for the whole population of Kazakhstan at this moment of its short history, I assume this will change if the policies continue operating.

This work opens with a brief introduction of the National Park Burabay and its recent development. The next part describes nation-building and tourism as being a nexus that characterizes the current state of the National Park. Following this description there is a section on the informal economy that has developed over the course of the last decade.

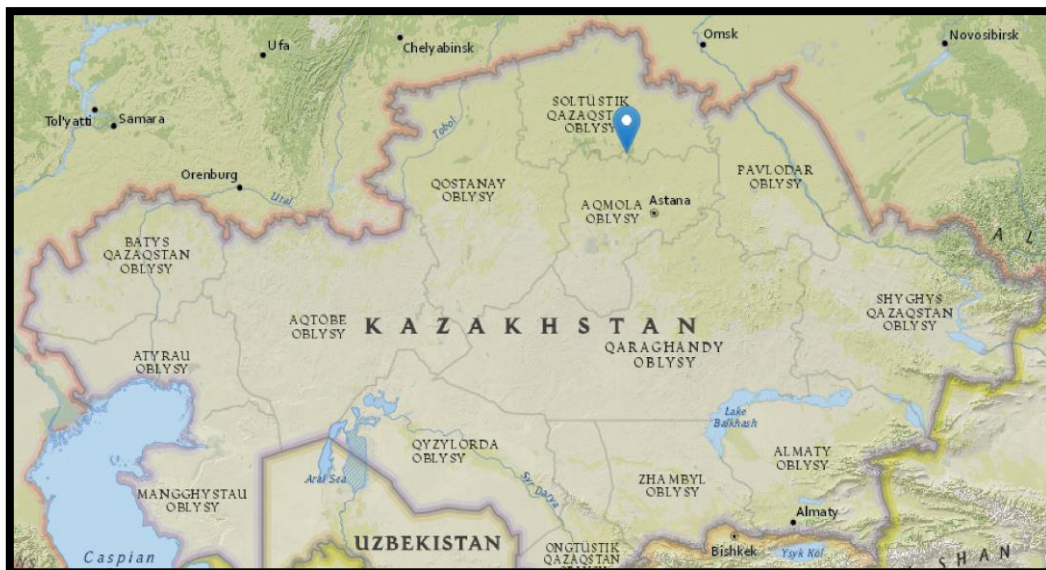


Figure 1: Location of Burabay National Park in relation to Astana on Kazakhstan Map (Marked area represents Burabay), created using National Geographic MapMaker Interactive, <http://mapmaker.nationalgeographic.org/>.

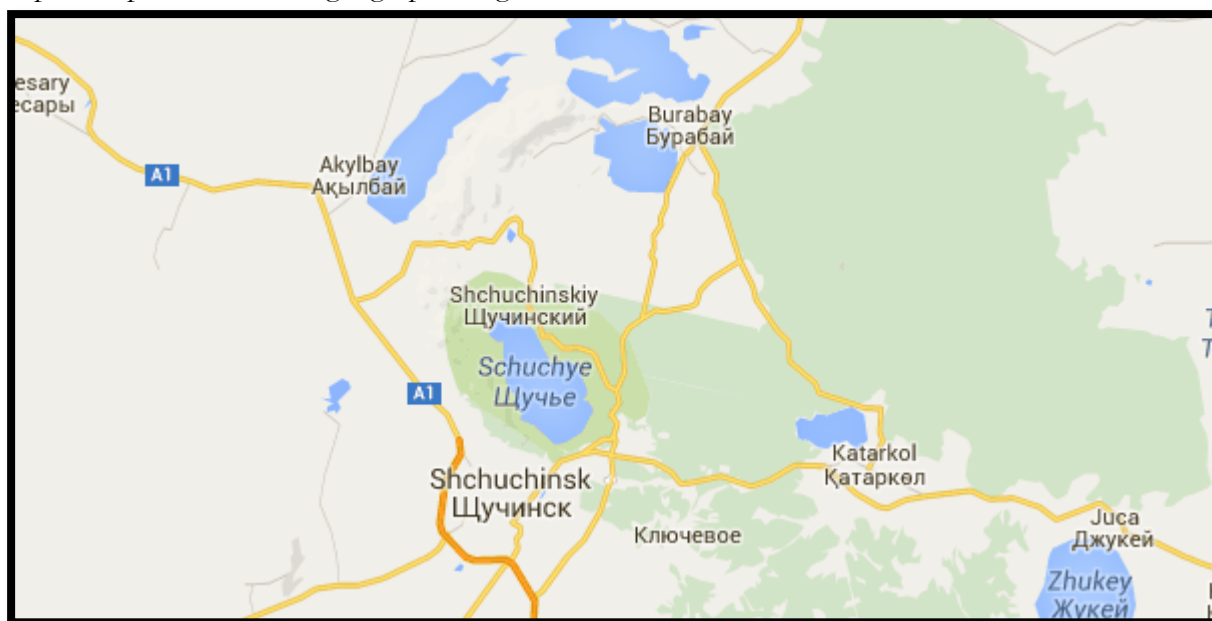


Figure 2: Map of Burabay National Park and adjacent cities, Google Maps. 2016. “Burabay.” Accessed March 29.

Burabay National Park

Burabay is located in northern Kazakhstan at a distance of 250 km from the capital of the country, Astana, and within the boundaries of the National Park there are several smaller towns. The northern part of Kazakhstan is predominantly populated by Russians, but the proportion of Russians is slowly declining as more and more Kazakhs are moving there. There were several

policies by the state to relocate immigrating ethnic Kazakhs or Oralmans to the northern regions.¹ The main city in the boundaries of the National Park bears the same name and is built on the shores of Burabay Lake with 5,800 inhabitants according to the census of 2012. In 1997, the legislative status of Burabay was changed to *prirodno-ozdorovitel'noi lesnoi kompleks*, which is a natural resort that specializes in health treatments. In 2000, Burabay became a National Park which is a status that encompasses all the previous definitions of the region. Burabay is strongly connected with the nearby town of K kshetau, and the name K kshetau is reputed to be named after this natural feature.² Shortly after the establishment of the national park, a law was introduced that allowed gambling industry to be situated only in two cities of Kazakhstan, — Burabay and Qapshagay. In the last five years, Burabay became a resort that has been serving a variety of purposes. There were several events organized in its boundaries, the most important of which was a high level meeting of CIS country leaders. Infrastructure of the resort has also experienced a lot of improvements; it is difficult to find a place in Kazakhstan other than major cities that could match the quality of roads, an indicator that can be used to assess the value of the place.

Reaching Burabay is not a problem for any kind of traveler. The resort has the most progressive transportation system that was introduced in Kazakhstan for the first time in Burabay. In 2009 it was connected with the first of its kind toll highway that linked the resort with the capital. Locomotives and carriages are new and have a broad range of available services inside. Such trains are operated only in a small number of places across the country. These developments reflect the importance of Burabay Park on a national level and the increased the attention it has been receiving. Upon approaching the region by car or by train from the south one could notice how the open steppe is gradually gives way to an increased amount of trees. The train connection does not take a traveler directly to Burabay, but instead it stops at the “*Kurort*

¹ <http://www.pkzsk.info/dlya-pereselencev-i-oralmanov-v-severnom-kazaxstane-postroyat-doma/> and http://www.ratel.kz/raw/oralmanov_poselyat_na_severe_kazahstana/

² Sadvokas, Bibigul' S. "Vosstanovim istoricheskie toponimy." Kokshetau (2014): 34.

Borovoe station that is located in the outskirts of Shchuchinsk. From there one faces an option of travelling to the main city of the Burabay National Park bearing the same name by taxi or by bus. It takes approximately 30 minutes to reach Burabay city through the pine forest along the road. While travelling from the city train station to the Burabay National Park one can observe many elite hotels that are located in the middle of the forest or on the shores of lake. Most of them have casinos inside and are popular among the business elite from Astana. It is the one place in northern Kazakhstan where one can legally operate casino and participate in its activities. Some of the workers in the casinos are travelling as far as from Astana. These lucrative jobs are also a source of income for locals. Upon approaching the city, the traveler passes the lake that is the most popular destination and reason why people visit Burabay. Its shoreline that can accommodate tourists comprises one fourth of the whole lake. The road from Shchuchinsk to Burabay passes along the shore and given the natural boundaries and obstacles there are no places for parking cars. The absence of parking forces people to drive in the forest and damage its natural habitat. Burabay city is located in the northern part of the National Park and is surrounded by mountains. There is a legend that pictures Aldar Kose, one of the prominent fairytale characters, who is extremely clever and tricky, having a conversation with God. His character could be described as positive, the one which fights injustice and is usually seen in clash against rich. He complains to God that he gave endless steppe to Kazakhs without any shade in it, for which God took out the last piece of treasures from his bag and threw it in the steppe forming Burabay.

Environmental movements on the territory of modern Kazakhstan are mostly remembered through such movements as Nevada Semipalatinsk, an activist movement opposing nuclear testing led by Oljas Suleimenov, or the movement led by Mukhtar Shakhanov to counteract the desiccation of the Aral Sea. Some of the important characteristics of these movements are the condition and time of their emergence. Certainly, the movements were not only about natural disaster prevention; they were highly politicized and played an important

representative role during Glasnost. After their rise, and in some cases, after reaching their goals, these environmental movements experienced a decrease in momentum and support among people.³ However, in recent years, environmentalism is an important point in the agenda of the state.

Environmentalism is presented as an important feature of a modern and a democratic state. Kazakhstan striving for the international recognition and democratization of its institutions is bound to pay attention to developments in the fields of environment. The most recent program initiated by President Nazarbayev – Kazakhstan 2050 – is an example of such an initiative. After a short survey of the “Ecology” section, one may notice a list of “green” actions to be taken by different institutions on various levels.⁴ Those include planting trees, signing memorandums on cooperation in environmental actions on different levels of the country, and new decrees or laws. Urban space is also being modified by environmental activism. Tree planting campaigns, allocations of areas for national companies to plant, and litter collection are some of these. Among some actions taken one may observe a rise of billboards and urban initiatives such as calls for sorting rubbish and delivering them to special places for recycling.

One of such policies promoting institutions for protecting nature in Kazakhstan involves establishment of National Parks. National Parks in Kazakhstan are somewhat recent phenomena, the first one – Baianaul National Park – was established in 1985. During the Soviet period most of today’s National Parks were categorized as *zapovedniki* – an area where restriction were imposed on certain human activities. Although legal definitions have been changing recently, no significant differences were there because majority of the practices of Soviet era were transferred to the current definition of Burabay. Throughout the period of Kazakhstan’s independence most of the parks went through institutional transformations and today there are 12 National Parks in

³ Luong, Pauline Jones, and Erika Weintal. “The NGO paradox: democratic goals and non-democratic outcomes in Kazakhstan.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 7 (1999): 1269.

⁴ “Ecology.” *Strategiia Kazakhstan 2050*. Accessed January 13, 2016.
<http://strategy2050.kz/en/news/category/125/>.

Kazakhstan. Burabay is one of the National Parks with a longer history. Burabay is the only National Park among the 12 which is not controlled by the forestry committee of Kazakhstan. Instead it is under direct control of the Committee on Presidential Affairs. The Committee of Presidential Affairs of Kazakhstan is a governmental organization that is essential in supplementing current head of the state in his needs during his trips and maintaining his household, so to say. For example, it controls administrative buildings in the country, residences of the head of the state, his means of transportation, medical centers that are only accessible to the president, and Burabay National Park. It is notable that Burabay is the only place of nature in this list and that is most certainly connected with the fact that this particular National Park is 200 km away from the capital. This implies a different power structure projected by the state on the National Park and, I believe, presents particular interest for this study. Another point, which is frequently used in touristic brochures, is the social discourse around Burabay that refers to it as Kazakhstan's Switzerland. This comparison appeals to have something of wide renown. It is important to note that this comparison is not a modern invention. It was already referred to in this way in one of the Soviet tourist brochures dating back to 1973.⁵ Today, there is a hardly one touristic description of Burabay that does not make this comparison.

Defining concepts

Scholarly works on space and attitudes towards it have gone through a series of serious debates over the last centuries. These debates are illustrated in the introduction of the work of Phillip Wegner, *Spatial Criticism: Critical Geography, Space, Place and Textuality*, where he indicates a presence of a dominant assumption of space to be seen as "an empty container, of very little interest in and of itself". By following citation of Michel Foucault "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile..." Phillip Wegner calls for attention to be paid to space as a living object. He further describes recent debates over space and refers to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, another thinker, who greatly contributed into the revitalization of

⁵ Zheleznikov I and Romashkin I. "Shchuchinskii." Kurorty Kazakhstana, 1973.

investigations of space, and his rejection of the perception of space as “a preexisting void, endowed with formal properties alone... a container waiting to be filled by a content- i.e. matter, or bodies”.⁶ Thus, space in a capitalist world should not be seen as a separate entity from the actions happening inside of the space.

One of such spaces that a community comes across and interacts with is the natural environment. One may argue that it is not entirely correct to approach an environmental space as a pure receiver. In fact, the natural environment can also become an actor. The critical issue what is believed to be behind the particular space. For example, a stone lying in the middle of the steppe may not bring any sense of importance to a passerby; but the same stone lying in a place that is related to one’s identity or faith may be a receiver of a different treatment especially when nurtured by deliberate attempts to construct a touristic space.⁷ Another way of looking at natural space is to investigate various behavioral patterns that the natural space may enforce on a person. This behavior can be traced in sacred sites of the Central Asia and pilgrimage activities connected to them.⁸ In my opinion, disruption in the usual behavior of a person depending on his or her background may be visible when one goes through a space change. One who gets out of the urban surroundings and human planned environment and comes into a natural environment is likely to feel the difference. The same can be said about a rural dweller, the human made space imposes its limits and expectations in the form of roads, pathways, bridges, signs, street lamps, etc. The natural environment acts upon a person by imposing some rules, modes of behavior, awe, or a consumerist approach depending on the background of variables, such as culture, education and so on. The practices that the natural space imposes do not necessarily have to be self-defining or based on a common sense; on the contrary they can be artificially created and

⁶ Wegner, Phillip E. “Spatial criticism: Critical geography, space, place and textuality.” *Introducing criticism at the 21st century* (2002): 179.

⁷ Coakley, Liam. “‘Sea, Sail, Steam and Emigration’: The imagining of a heritage tourist town in the Republic of Ireland.” *Geography* (2007): 15.

⁸ Abashin, Sergei. “The logic of Islamic practice: a religious conflict in Central Asia.” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 270.

advertised. Some of these examples can be observed in the pilgrimage sites across the Central Asian region.

Usually it is difficult to track these changes because of the time constraint that plays a significant role in keeping the sources of the practices remembered. When the space was created recently, and recently vary in different cases, it might pose complications in assessing, if the new space will attract and *keep* practices, traditions and other space connected rituals that are going to be transferred among visitors. This is due to the fact that the rituals are novel and may not have penetrated layers of the society that it has importance to. On the other hand when the practices around the specific natural space have been there for an extended period of time, they are usually easy to spot. There is a complication here however in tracing the origins. One of such examples is the Pisa tower in Italy. It is impossible to imagine and see the surroundings of the tower without tourists and visitors trying to support the tilting tower.⁹ Why would we care about it? The focus of this work is an example when the natural space and its pre-transformation conditions have not yet been transformed and forgotten completely. Burabay has been a tourist attraction for more than a century and the changing political and social background of the region influenced its development and its shape today. Some of its traditions that can be observed originated not long ago and the reasons why they did are traced in this work. Observations proved that Burabay is a complex set of various areas that entail specific meanings to its visitors.

One of the very vivid instances of the usage of the natural space as a material benefit involves measures taken to acquire the maximum of the resources out of a certain area of a natural space by extraction mode of usage. The controversy such an action usually has is that in many cases a power which is planning to extract these resources does not count other beneficiaries of the space, who are involved directly or indirectly. Resources could be defined in many ways, for example, valuable minerals, flora, fauna, production of commodities via nature,

⁹ Otero-Pailos, Jorge. "Ritual Cleaning." *Perspecta* 43 (2010): 134.

etc. One of the most resonant examples in the last half a century was the dam projects in India. The Indian government had been criticized by various actors in their intention to tame natural space forgot about other people who have rights for the very same space.¹⁰ Another, closer example to the region is the Kashagan offshore oil field. There are many examples of social activists suggesting that power structures in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in their pursuit of benefits that the site will bring are playing a very risky game where small mistakes may result in gigantic ecological catastrophes.¹¹ Here we may observe a clear contestation over a space. Even the very fact of continuation of the oil field exploitations despite the social opposition may tell certain characteristics of the state, as an example reflecting the development of the institutions of democracy versus institutions of authoritarian power.

The material benefits offered by Burabay National Park are pretty obvious and have a lot to do with peculiarities of the region it is located in. First of all, it is geographically close to one of the main financial and social hubs of the country – Astana. This proximity may not be good for Burabay National Park because it attracts much more attention than it can afford. Even though the area of Burabay is vast, most of the travelers stay and use a single city in the Park with the same name. The high concentration of people burdens the infrastructure of the city and forces its surroundings to accommodate, producing signs of human-nature interaction, such as overloaded sewers, rubbish and deforestation in the popular destinations on the shore of the lake. Another problem for Burabay is that it is an only meaningful destination where one could possibly expect a proper or at least minimal level of touristic benefits. There are other touristic destinations around Astana, but it is difficult to reach, find an accommodation or arrange other leisure activities there. Limitations in alternatives with an easy access to Burabay National Park make it a

¹⁰ Kothari, Ashish, and Rajiv Bhartari. “Narmada Valley Project: Development or Destruction?” *Economic and Political Weekly* (1984): 907.

¹¹ For example “Aidan Karibzhanov: «Kashagan – eto plata za nezavisimost'»” forbes.kz. accessed February 20, 2015, http://forbes.kz/process/education/aydan_karibzhanov_kashagan_eto_plata_za_nezavisimost or “Pochemu ia protiv Kashagana. Chast' 1.” forbes.kz. accessed January 30, 2015, http://forbes.kz/process/pochemu_ya_protiv_kashagana_chast_1. Headlines are translated as “Kashagan – a price for independence” and “Why I am against Kashagan?” respectively.

natural choice that many make. Apart from the popularity, the economy of Kazakhstan plays a significant role as well. After the colossal devaluations of tenge, Kazakhstani currency, most people who do not earn their salaries in a foreign currency lost their purchasing power. This is the case for neighboring Russia, whose ruble collapsed after international sanctions and low oil prices. This means that the middle class that could afford travels abroad to such more or less affordable destinations like Turkey or Malaysia shrank and they are going to be looking for less pricy substitutions. It is safe to claim that the tourist flow to the Park is not going to lessen, and could well increase. Burabay is going to rise in importance and attract more investments with the upcoming EXPO-2017 in Astana, an international exhibition that is being used to improve the image of Kazakhstan on the international arena and at least 15% of visitors are going to be foreigners.¹²

For the imagined benefits I refer to the example of Pierre Nora and his concept of *lieux de memoire* or sites of memory.¹³ This is where a state in the process of nation building enhances a space in the form of a physical or abstract object with a meaning it should bring to mind for a certain group of people, thus uniting them in what Anderson calls an “imagined community”. In this process a space becomes the bearer of a symbolic meaning to a group of people. In some cases indeed the references of the state may rely on historical evidence (or what has been chosen to remember), in others purely fictional elements may be involved. Nevertheless, in many cases both of these may have a good chance to become a part of a nation’s identity after some time. The example of Þingvellir described in the articles of Gudmundur Halfdanarson and Simon Halink illustrates the process of recognition of an Icelander of this space of nature as a bearer of “Icelandic identity” from the moment of it being commemorated as one.¹⁴ Burabay has several

¹² “Astana ozhidaet na EKSP0-2017 svyshe 2 mln posetitelei.” Novosti Kazakhstan. Accessed March 23, 2016. <http://newkaz.ru/economy/20150731/9313531.html>. Headline is translated as “Astana is expecting over 2 million visitors for EXPO-2017”

¹³ Nora, Pierre. "Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 8.

¹⁴ Hálfðanarson, Guðmundur. “Þingvellir: An Icelandic “Lieu de Mémoire”.” *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 (2000): 4-29. and Halink, Simon. “The Icelandic mythscape: sagas, landscapes and national identity.” *National Identities* 16, no. 3 (2014): 209-223.

popular destinations for tourists that have a clear nationalist agenda. Moreover most of these places were created during the period of independence when the question of nation-building was acute. After 10-15 years of their creation, pre- or early independence initial names and stories were changed into ones talking about links of nature with Kazakh identity. These stories and legends are essential in understanding how local actors want to portray Burabay. The ongoing nation-building process, that arguably could be said to be working in some sense, actively employing stories with popular discourse around ancestors and their effort in establishment of an independent state of Kazakhstan. The most important part is that these stories are rooting in the conscious of the local people and visitors, thus making the tourism industry an important element in this process.

Today the new names are widely used by tourists and by the locals. Most of the legends and popular discourse in Burabay has a story to tell about interaction of the nature with Kazakhs and how it had been changing through time. These events proved to be long lasting in many scenarios, some of which are illustrated in the works of describing Canada and Switzerland.¹⁵ Legends and stories could be classified according to the time range they are describing. Most of them are undefined and talk about a time span when the Steppes were inhabited by khans. Others are describing the times of Jungar invasions and how this region was a center of formation of the Kazakh khanate. These popular legends and stories that are connected to the most visited sites across Burabay are one of the main ways of establishing a connection between nature of the National Park to the identity of Kazakhs and their history. It is hardly possible to find a tourist destination in Burabay National Park that is not at least remotely connected to the Kazakh identity.

These imagined benefits are represented in Burabay through various state led revitalizations of the relevance of the site to the identity of a Kazakh. Some literary works of

¹⁵ Kaufmann, Eric, and Oliver Zimmer. "In search of the authentic nation: landscape and national identity in Canada and Switzerland." *Nations and Nationalism* 4, no. 4 (1998): 504.

Säken Seifullin, who in the early 20th century wrote poems about the region, play an important role, since most of the Russian names that existed during the Tsarist and early Soviet era were replaced by the ones used in his works. His collection of poems on Kökshetau links the important historical figures of Abylaikhan and his circles.¹⁶ For instance, Seifullin in one of the short poems describes the name of the location – Burabay – as deriving from *Bura*, a sacred camel which inhabited this place and which later was slain by Abylaikhan on one of his hunts. Almost all of the destinations and given names heavily rely on the background suggested by Seifullin. In its own turn, Seifullin was not the first one to come up with the names, probably his personality and his works were important steps in popularizing them in the Soviet context. The earliest mentions of Burabay legends that were documented are mainly in the sources associated with Shokan Ualikhanov and Birzhan Sal. Shokan Ualikhanov is believed to have collected over ten versions of the legends during his ethnographic trips to the Kökshetau region. However, these works were not as accessible to the wider audience and the popularity did not stay the same. The next section describes how objects of nation-building have acquired a new meaning with a heightened popularity of the Burabay National Park.

Nation-building and Throne of Abylaikhan

Kazakhstan was the last state from the Soviet Bloc to declare its independence in 1991 and even in doing so it may not necessarily have been motivated by profound ideas of separation. This explains why the dissolution of Soviet Union left many local elites in confusion.¹⁷ Since then different level country officials had been constructing a new identity for Kazakhstani citizens. These practices were done through terminating and renaming the Soviet practices and proposing a new discourse that was primarily aimed at revitalizing convenient parts of Kazakh history. However, revitalization was influenced by a heavy nationalistic message. The Kazakhstani government paid a special attention to the multicultural composition of the country, trying not to

¹⁶ Seifullin, Säken. “*Tau ishinde*”. Biblioteka Olzhasa, 2012.

¹⁷ Dave, Bhavna. *Kazakhstan-Ethnicity, Language and Power*. (Routledge, 2007), 8.

marginalize any ethnic group living within its boundaries. Especially this rhetoric of an ethnically inclusive country strengthened after Ukrainian crisis that started in 2013. The nation-building process extended across variety of realms of human interaction and dictated social changes across the country. Practices that were forgotten or eradicated during the Soviet rule were brought to life. Holidays that are considered to be closer to the Turkic identity such as Ramadan or Nauryz became themes of cultural discourse. Kazakh language policies in education and the workplace were at the forefront of the social and media discussions when they were announced. Social interactions and traditions gained increasing momentum with a rising economic welfare of the masses. Some of the practices like elaborate wedding ceremonies or bride abduction were further facilitated and in some cases led to a high level of opposition of culture versus human rights.¹⁸ One could argue that any new practice that was in one way or another connected to the “forgotten history and culture” of Kazakhs had a priority and a high chance to be adopted by the masses.

High level officials and policy makers were remnants of Soviet rule and in many cases were Party officials prior the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev was the First Secretary of Communist Party prior the collapse. This indirectly may explain why many of the practices on the governmental level essentially stayed the same. Mass demonstrations, parades, human mobilizations to make an impression of popularity, tools of political influence and control, and citizen participation – all of these had their slogans changed but most certainly were reminiscent of the socialist past.¹⁹ One of the tools of political influence that did not lose its popularity until today was conveying a political message through banners and monuments. These monuments are also part of commemorative intentions

¹⁸ Werner, Cynthia. “Bride abduction in post-Soviet Central Asia: marking a shift towards patriarchy through local discourses of shame and tradition.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 2 (2009): 315.

¹⁹ Adams, Laura L. Introduction to *The spectacular state: Culture and national identity in Uzbekistan*, 1-19. Duke University Press, 2010.

as they are conveying a message to the public.²⁰ Banners with party slogans, president's speeches, extracts from the Constitution, thankful words of ordinary citizens and other mass opinion forming messages were on display from the main squares of the urban centers to the smallest villages on the margins of civilization. In most of the cases the banners are low quality and cheap looking objects that fit in the urban landscape. Monuments, in their turn vary according to the funds that were provided and used by the city municipality. Both of these tools of political influence could be found in Burabay and most certainly are playing a central role in imagining the National Park to be an important brick in the nation-building process.

The location of Burabay enforces some historical connections to the identity of a Kazakh that Akmola region has in abundance. During my trip to another city in the region - Kökshetau I visited local museums that were focused on reconstructing past of the region and of the city. Museums had special exhibitions that did not have a date of expiry and were solely dedicated to the historical figure of Abylaikhan. In one of the main chambers there was a wall size painting that was picturing the historically important moment of Abylaikhan uniting the three Hordes in the place that closely resembles to Burabay. Abylaikhan is one of the khans who most certainly stands out because of his popularity that became apparent after the years of independence and the rhetoric used around his role in the history of Kazakhstan. One of his main achievements is that he was able to unite three Hordes in the face of the threat from Jungar tribes that had an uneasy relationship with tribes living in the territory of the modern Kazakhstan. Abylaikhan was a leader of the Middle horde and is believed to have maintained international relations with China and Tsarist Russia on equal terms. His progressive diplomacy became a hot topic in independent Kazakhstan because of the dominant positions of the neighbors of Kazakhstan. In many cases in official state discourse he is positioned as symbol of resistance and glory. There were several movies that were shot by the order of the Ministry of Culture that depict Abylaikhan and his

²⁰ Ricketts, Shannon. "Cultural Selection and National Identity: Establishing Historic Sites in a National Framework, 1920-1939." *The Public Historian* 18, no. 3 (1996): 25.

rule.²¹ Other signs of his importance for a Kazakh identity could be observed when we analyze streets named after him. Azaryahu argued in his work that street names could be perceived as tools by which political consciousness and identity could be imposed.²² In the case of Kazakhstan, the number of streets named after Abylaikhan by far exceeds streets named by any other khan, in addition the question of location is a key in this discussion, where Abylaikhan streets are usually more centrally located. In Astana for example, Abylaikhan Street proceeds into Kenesary Street, another key who mobilized tribes to resist Tsarist invasion of the Steppe, figure whose importance has been raised in the post-Soviet context.²³ It is worth noting that Burabay's main street bears the name of Kenesary, too.

Walking on the main street of Burabay you can hear voices of taxi drivers calling out for personal tours that go through the area and the main attraction is *Poliana Abylaikhana*, or Abylaikhan's Meadow. This place is located in the western part of the resort and accommodates several objects that constitute an architectural ensemble of buildings and monuments that are considered to be linked to his personality in one way or another. The location itself is an area surrounded by pine trees and in the center there is a monument that was built in 1991 for the 280th anniversary of Abylaikhan. However, this place was not called so during its entire existence. Locals, whom I interviewed, recalled that despite the fact that the meadow started receiving a deliberate care from the local municipality and started being addressed as *Poliana Abylaikhana*, up until the end of the 2000s this place was called by its old name, *Iasnaia Poliana* or Clear Meadow. Deliberate state-led actions that were taken in rethinking the area fostered the changes in naming and people started participating in the process of redefinition. The area

²¹ See "The Nomad", a movie that pictures an early adulthood of Abylaikhan and other Kazakh key historical figures. Government of Kazakhstan invested US \$34 million into the production of the movie and argued to be one of the projects of Kazakhstan to present itself on the international arena (http://forbes.kz/process/expertise/krizis_kadra).

²² Azaryahu, Maoz. "Street names and political identity: the case of East Berlin." *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 4 (1986): 581 and Rose-Redwood, Reuben S. "From number to name: symbolic capital, places of memory and the politics of street renaming in New York City." *Social & Cultural Geography* 9, no. 4 (2008): 432.

²³ An interesting connection could be made by comparing old Soviet street names and their new counterparts. For example, street named after Abylaikhan in Almaty that connects train station with the center of the city was formerly called Communist avenue (*Kommunisticheskii prospekt*)

around the monument is occupied by petty traders, who offer a variety of services that are common for a tourist destination such as taking photos in traditional clothes holding eagles or in an attire of Abylaikhan that was used on a previous currency note with his image. On the opposite side of the monument there is a museum and a restaurant. The museum has as its theme the personality of Abylaikhan and demonstrates various moments from his life. Most notably there is a picturesque model that depicts the moment when he united all three Hordes and was proclaimed to be a ruler of all the tribes. The process of unification and of him becoming a khan of three Hordes is pictured to have taken place at the exact location of *Poliana Abylaikhana*. This is one of the ways of connecting the site with Abylaikhan. Outside of the museum there are obelisks with different inscriptions and famous words about Abylaikhan, but not all of them are solely dedicated to his personality. One of the obelisks depicts an eagle that has two wings, one of them being Abylaikhan and the other being the current President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. It is a message that clearly connects today's head of the state with the person whose accomplishments are highly praised. However, the main attraction of the site that has also acquired a complex meaning throughout the independence years is located to the opposite side of the meadow, a stone that is reputed to be the throne of Abylaikhan when he was visiting this site.

Throne of Abylaikhan consists of two stones that are enclosed in a fence with a pathway around it. The first and significantly bigger stone is the one that is supposed to be the throne itself, the other one is a stone that is far less but is closer to the fences, thus allows people to touch it. Unfortunately for the tourists and visitors who are not familiar with the area, the monument does not have any signs or other objects to identify the place and give it definition. Knowledge of place is transferred by the references of the locals that advice the location to be visited, by guides that are assisting bigger groups in travelling around Burabay, by participating to the rituals that are being done whenever one visits during the daytime in summer, and the most importantly by the practices of visiting sacred objects or landscapes in different parts of Central Asia. One must go through the set of rituals that are important in order to establish a connection

with the holy site that closely resemble those practiced at famous pilgrimage sites across the Central Asia.²⁴ Here the accepted ritual is to walk seven circles around the stone, which in some ways is similar to the rituals during the Hajj in Mecca. After walking one must stand in the queue to touch the smaller stone and make a wish. Physical interaction with the lesser stone is one of the key actions in the quest of authentic experience or act of faithfulness. Thus, there is a long queue that is waiting to touch the stone and make a wish. Most of the visitors are Kazakhs and a few are Russians. As some of my Russian interviewees told me, Abylaikhan and his personality did not bring any sentiments to them. Moreover, there was an attempt to renaming Shchuchinsk to Abylaikhan in 2013 that brought fierce discussions in the public sphere. Although it was a suggestion from one of the history professors in Kazakhstan, the local population went so far as to collect petitions calling for the city not to be renamed.



Figure 3: “*Throne of Abylaikhan*”. Photo by the author.

The Throne of Abylaikhan has a lot of coins that are lying in the area encircled by the fence, which also reflects the action of visitors throwing coins inside. During the summer Burabay’s popularity rises and it attracts residents from the towns close by. Most of these visitors are

²⁴ Muminov, Ashirbek, “Sacred Places in Central Asia: Attempts at their Historical and Theological Interpretation,” *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang* (2013): 28.

looking for water to swim in, forests to walk in and others. However, during one of my visits to the site I came across a group of northerners who were in an organized tour of the holy sites of the central Kazakhstan.²⁵ The main destination as I was told was Burabay, due to its strong links to holy people and holy places. It was organized by a tour agency and was including the routes that the agency came up with. After performing usual rituals around the site they took a seat in the forest and started reciting lines from Qur'an and were praying in a Muslim manner. When I asked one of the group members what they were doing, they responded that they consider themselves to be Muslims and have an obligation to recite holy lines for the spirit of Abylaikhan. I shortly interviewed some of the participants and the main quest was to understand how the figure of Abylaikhan became a saint. They agreed that Abylaikhan has done a lot for Kazakhs and it is important for today's generation to pay their dues for his actions of defending Kazakh people from the foreign intruders. This represents a performance that has been used and chosen as a way to pay necessary tributes to the sacral figure. If one continues walking further into the forest and follows the pathways left by the previous walkers, eventually he is going to reach an almost vertical mountainous area where the sight of Burabay National Park and its lake are going to be accompanied by the wishing trees. Practice of wishing trees next to the holy sites in the Central Asian region is far from being novel or unique. Many destinations that have and do not have a clear resemblance to holy figures usually are accompanied by these signs of participation. Wishing trees in Burabay are not limited only to *Poliana Abylaikhana*, they could be found in many other destinations in the National Park that hardly have sacred meaning, such as peaks of the mountains, trees that are located along popular trails and places with a difficult access. These practices are not novel and have existed even in the Soviet period.²⁶ It is argued that trees and their branches in the proximity to the pilgrimage sites can serve as "extensions of sacredness".²⁷

²⁵ I refer to the group as Northerners as a way to describe their itinerary and cities they were living in.

²⁶ Lymer, Kenneth. "Rags and rock art: the landscapes of holy site pilgrimage in the Republic of Kazakhstan." *World archaeology* 36, no. 1 (2004): 162.

²⁷ Montgomery, David W. "The Diversity of Everyday Religious." *Everyday life in Central Asia: Past and present* (2007): 363.

Tying a cloth is practice to establish a connection with a perceived holy site but at the same time is a part of a suggestive behavior when one faces these practices. In other interpretations tying rags to the wishing trees is seen as a way “how a local community conceives and interacts with the tangible and intangible worlds around it”.²⁸

Coming down from the hill I look for a rest under the scarce shades of the pines around the throne. Number of visitors has not decreased, now there is a foreign delegation that is accompanied by a young interpreter Nurgul, who is a recent graduate of one of the universities in Malaysia. It is a common sight to encounter foreigners in Burabay, most of them are guests that are working or being invited to Astana to participate in various international events and the scarcity of touristic destinations around the city pushes them to take a route that is best suited to do so. For example, it was announced in April of 2016 that there are over nine thousand one year working permits issued by the government of Kazakhstan to the foreign citizens, and approximately 60-70% of them are involved in construction.²⁹ Sitting under the shades of the pine trees I look around to see if anything has changed in the last hours and see two ladies wearing traditional Islamic hijabs and leaning against the trees. After a while I realize that those two ladies are members of the group that is visiting Burabay on their path of establishing connection with the holy sites around the Northern Kazakhstan. During a short conversation due the fact that they did not feel comfortable with me interrupting their meditations, they told that everything around such an important place of *Poliana Abylaikbana* is saturated with a holy aura that one could get an access to it even through seemingly ordinary objects like trees. One of the ladies was having troubles with her health and she set off for this trip hoping that the holy places and people could satisfy her needs and wishes. They continued their rituals as I left and I

²⁸ Lymer, Kenneth. “Rags and rock art: the landscapes of holy site pilgrimage in the Republic of Kazakhstan.” *World archaeology* 36, no. 1 (2004): 160.

²⁹ “About 9 Thousand Permits Have Been Issued to Foreign Workers in Astana.” Official Site of Akimat of Astana. Accessed 29 May, 2016. <http://astana.gov.kz/en/modules/material/10318>

proceeded to my vehicle and left the site that has so many to tell but is comparably young in its existence.



Figure 4: “*Poliana Abylaikhana* and ‘Trees’”. Photo by the author.

Studies of Islam in the post-Soviet Kazakhstan was one of the popular fields. However, this did not mean that the quality of the works and researches were nearly as high. Many "fundamental" foreign works on Islam in Central Asia in the early post-Soviet period were heavily criticized for having basic problems with interpretation and misconceptions. These criticisms also attracted attention of foreign scholars to consult with the existing Soviet Islamology but in many cases lack of linguistic skills was a significant obstacle.³⁰ The other concern for using communist works was the belief that Soviet academia could have been influenced by the state propaganda and perception of Islam that in its turn could have had portrayed Islam in a specific manner.³¹ One of the most popular fields of research concerning Islam in post-Soviet period was of political science and international relations. Central Asian

³⁰ See AbuKhalil, Asad. “Islam and the Study of Central Asia: A Critique of the Western Scholarly Literature.” *The Arab Studies Journal* (1996): 115-129 and DeWeese, Devin. “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's Islam in the Soviet Union.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 298-330 for their substantial criticisms of the existing scholar material on the state of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia.

³¹ Khalid, Adeb. *Islam after communism: religion and politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2008), 4.

states being left to rule themselves after a 70-year long communist suppression of Islam was seen by scholars and area specialists as a justification to a possible instability to the region and geopolitical interests. In many cases Islam was perceived opposing to the Soviet rule that was waiting for its chance to unleash its power and influence.³² After dissolution of Soviet Union previously closed borders of the Central Asian states were open to the new actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other wider Muslim world. Each of these actors had their interests and popular methods to gain power in religious affairs in the Central Asia through funding and facilitating religious activities throughout the region.³³ At first welcome, later some of these efforts were seen as foreign interventions to the affairs of the newly independent states and were closed. For example in the case of Uzbekistan most of the religious campaigns were terminated and some of them even declared to having a threat of terrorism. As the events in Andijan massacre in 2005 has shown that even today this discourse of terrorism is used to purge political activists and influence the popular image of political power contesters.

Majority of Kazakhstani Muslims are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School which is an official state school of thought.³⁴ Other schools of Islam are less popular among the society and are often negatively influenced by the states campaigns in defining “acceptable” Islam.³⁵ Although Islam as a general phenomenon is beyond exploration of this work, an aspect of Islam – pilgrimages to the shrines in the Central Asia is a useful tool to investigate the phenomenon of *Poliana Abylaikhana* in Burabay.³⁶ Pilgrimage in Central Asia and in some locations specifically is often considered to be a part of everyday life existence. Apart from having an important role in

³² Ibid., 84-85.

³³ Rashid, Ahmed. “The fires of faith in Central Asia.” *World Policy Journal* 18, no. 1 (2001): 48.

³⁴ “Terminologicheskii slovar’: Khanafitskii mazkhab.” Kazakhstan 2050, Our Power. Accessed 30 May, 2016. <https://strategy2050.kz/ru/news/10605> in Russian

³⁵ Gunn, T. Jeremy. “Shaping an Islamic identity: religion, Islamism, and the state in Central Asia.” *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 405-407.

³⁶ “Normative” Islam rejects pilgrimage to the objects or saints except some of the religious institutions like Kaaba in Mecca, but the “popular” or “regional” Islam asserts that activities of pilgrims and their beliefs should be treated in relation to Islam.

society's perception of self it also extends beyond artificial boundaries of the states.³⁷ Shrine visiting practice often bears very similar features and associated actions but at the same time is difficult to summarize and classify into a single system.³⁸ Despite being similar in many aspects the role that they play in the perception of the holy landscape may vary from place to place. For example, Arslan Bob one of the popular pilgrimage destinations in Kyrgyzstan is argued to be strongly connected to the environmentalist ideas of the locals, a connection that is rarely found in other regions.³⁹ In many cases sacred places of natural formation have a history that extends prior Islam arriving in the Central Asia.⁴⁰ The fact that pilgrimage sites often come with such interwoven actions that are present in the narrative of a community sometimes is perceived without a clear-cut association with Islam and its practices.⁴¹ Often, Islam has a strong synonymous meaning to the culture and traditions across the Central Asian region.⁴² Muminov, one of the prominent scholars of Islam in the region, suggested a typology to distinguish the figures behind the holy places and holy figures buried in a *mazar*⁴³ (sacred place of worshipping in Central Asia).⁴⁴ This typology offers eight categories, seven of which are by definition figures having a strong link to Islam and the last one is an ambiguous "new generation" of saints. Case of "new generation" saints can partly be applied to the case of Burabay. The main difference is that the proposed typology covers figures that have a clear connection to Islam or has a holy aura

³⁷ Gunn, T. Jeremy. "Shaping an Islamic identity: religion, Islamism, and the state in Central Asia." *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 391.

³⁸ Abashin, Sergey, "Mazar of Boboi-ob: Typical and Untypical Features of Holy Places in Central Asia," *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang* (2013): 92.

³⁹ Webster, Jennifer. "Bountiful Forest: The Fruits of Heaven at Arslanbob Ata" (paper presented at the conference "The Social History and Anthropogenic Landscape of the Syr Darya River Basin: Exploring an Environmental Archive", Tashkent, Uzbekistan, April 18-19, 2016)

⁴⁰ Muminov, Ashirbek, "Sacred Places in Central Asia: Attempts at their Historical and Theological Interpretation," *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang* (2013): 28.

⁴¹ Louw, Maria Elisabeth. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. (Routledge, 2007), 84. The author describes an ethnographic account where the interviewee is participating in shrine visits because "she just did what she had seen her parents and grandparents do".

⁴² Khalid, Adeeb. "A secular Islam: nation, state, and religion in Uzbekistan." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 04 (2003): 591.

⁴³ Online dictionary Merriam-Webster defines *mazar* to be "a Muslim shrine or enshrined tomb". However, *mazar* is also used in a variety of different contexts. For example, Central Asians refer to graveyards as *mazars* in some cases and buried people are not considered being saint and most certainly are not worshipped.

⁴⁴ Muminov, Ashirbek, "Sviatye mesta v Tsentral'noi Azii (Vzaimodeistvie obshcheislamskikh i mestnykh elementov)," *Maiak Vostoka* No.1-2 (1996): 14-15.

that had developed over centuries. The case of khan becoming a saint should not be seen in a vacuum, but rather as a complex result of several major discourses, policies and practices in the Kazakhstani society.

Post-Soviet sentiments for Kazakhstan's role in the international arena brought up several historical figures such as Abylaikhan or Kenesary khan in a new light. Kenesary is glorified by the state for his attempts at resisting the Tsarist invasion of the steppe. These specific two figures are mostly used and known for their actions in the times that played a significant role in the imagination that is being widely used in the nation-building process of Kazakhstan. Abylaikhan's popularity ensured his place among the row of images on the walls of government buildings among the other great men of the country. He was portrayed in one of the currencies of independent Kazakhstan and despite the absence of this currency today the legacy of his portrayal persists. Despite the fact that Abylaikhan is distinct among the myriad of ancient rulers, the holy aura around his personality may be questionable in a broader picture of Kazakhstan as a country. People across Kazakhstan do not use his personality so as to make wishes in other daily encounters. These practices have a characteristic to be strictly regional, it is only in Burabay and specifically in *Poliana Abylaikhana* that people approach and perceive his personality along other holy figures. This locality of the phenomenon of Abylaikhan perfectly fits into another *mazar* typology suggested by Muminov who argues that *mazars* can be grouped as being well-known across the Central Asia, across a local area, and within a small community.⁴⁵ It is true that *Throne of Abylaikhan* is not a tomb of Abylaikhan (which is located in Turkestan) but the characteristics seem to extend beyond a confined definition suggested above and could be applied in a wider sense.

Shape shift of the location was heavily influenced by the state led projects that affected the perception of the environmental space and changed its value; specifically it added a new

⁴⁵ Muminov, Ashirbek, "Sviatye mesta v Tsentral'noi Azii (Vzaimodeistvie obshcheislamskikh i mestnykh elementov)," *Maiak Vostoka* No.1-2 (1996): 15.

feature that establishes connections with an identity of a visitor. Architectural development of the site and an aggressive revitalization of historical events no longer posed the meadow as a site of one's environmental awe. *Poliana Abylaikhana* today is a destination that brings different connections and thoughts than for a visitor 20 years ago. Discourse around his personality was heavily used by the locals and touristic agencies so as to attract visitors but at the same time it gained a life through rituals and practices of pilgrimage. Concluding above, these major influences are almost “common sense” shrine pilgrimage activities that are not always connected to Islam, nation-building project that significantly glorified the figure of Abylaikhan, local efforts in institutionalizing the environmental space with a clear connection to Abylaikhan, and facilitation of all of the above by a rapid development of tourism industry in the Burabay National Park that includes exploitation of this image by the tour makers. *Poliana Abylaikhana* is a vivid example of the transformations and variations of the shrine visitation processes that given the background do not need centuries to involve people in participation. I argue that this is not a unique process and could be replicated by focused actions and religious background is not always a chain that is needed to link a certain figure to a sacral landscape.

Lieux de memoire and possible impacts of nation-building in a long term

The nation-building process that has been going on in Kazakhstan extends across multiple realms. Although it is problematic to claim that this process is only of a conscious one and deliberately undertaken by policy makers, some of the attempts leave a long lasting mark on a society. Attempts to revitalize history in favor of the Kazakh identity and glorifying ancestors can be observed in various state led projects such as commemorations, renaming streets and cities and other similar activities. Mostly these actions are not guided by a single standing, purposefully built nation-building committee that is aimed on facilitating its agenda at any cost. In fact — and this is a key in this discussion — public discourse that is formed by participation of different kinds of people whose voices are heard and who can kindle a debate within society are essential bodies to feed these beginnings. Usually these are local and sometimes foreign politicians, public

figures and various experts. My assumption is that post-Soviet legacy of labeling Soviet led projects on people of Central Asia as inherently undermining its “true” ethnic identity is sometimes overused and exaggerated. This exaggeration is helpful to justify laws, social norms and projects that may be contradictory to the human rights or underrepresented groups of people. This creates a clash where one who is opposing these initiatives is going to attract negative light of not belonging to or not valuing Kazakh identity and culture. It is difficult to delineate how nationalism and its peculiarities take up an aggressive stance but certainly this rhetoric is fueled in a newly independent country and naturally spread across different social spheres, thus making its effect to be felt on a country scale.

The city of Burabay like others of the same size has many means for the transmission of the nationalistic ideas. This is not to claim that all of them are aggressive and only aimed at elevating Kazakh identity among others, but they most certainly avoid making tensions. These mediums exist in Burabay not because bodies who decided to erect them had a purposefully built idea of nation construction. In a sense it has become a usual practice and a public space without these elements of imposition and propaganda is not seen as “normal” and one may face difficulties in finding a city that does not have these signs. It could be argued that these mediums are there as signs of usual practice, that administration of the cities should undertake in order to show their work. Abovementioned facilities and objects that are supposed to have a certain message are easily found in Burabay, and the biggest one is *Poliana Abylaikhana*. Built to commemorate the 280th anniversary of Abylaikhan, *Poliana Abylaikhana* is by far the most popular touristic destination with only possible exception being the shores of the lake. It attracts hundreds of people every day and involves them in the practices that are associated with the destination. These practices often represent rituals performed at the sacral places around the region and impose a complex priority and power structure. However, popularity is difficult to be only addressed to the persona of Abylaikhan *per se*. Burabay National Park is absent when it comes to the genuine touristic destinations, the few except *Poliana Abylaikabana* are city center

with a primitive amusement park, a nature museum with zoo, another Abylaikhan museum, and *Jumbaktas*, a stone formation in the middle of the Burabay Lake. In a way limitations of touristic development push people to interact with a clear cut nationalistic project of asserting undeniable connection of Abylaikhan to the region and supposedly Kazakhs. This message is not exclusive to Burabay, very similar activities and objects are present in neighboring city of K kshetau too.

Grounding one’s identity to different locations is a common practice in many societies. French historian Pierre Nora introduced a concept of *lieux de memoire* that was later used a specific term to describe a link between an object of history and a society to which it belongs. For him, *lieux de memoire* “are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it”.⁴⁶ Its origination lies in the fact that there is “no spontaneous memory and we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations... because such activities no longer occur naturally”.⁴⁷ This concept has been applied to various cases, including Kenya and the state-led commemorations of the 1994 genocide, and defining  ingvellir as being part of Icelandic identity.⁴⁸ These examples share some similarities despite being distanced from each other in time and space. In many cases this connection is framed in terms of nature representing a characteristic of a nation that is indirectly useful in analyzing the case of Burabay National Park. However, nature sometimes was also part of a tragedy that was deeply incrustrated in the consciousness of a society through commemorations and monuments. This concept has an increasing potential to root in Burabay and represent a location that is going to have an important meaning to the Kazakhs in case of continuation of policies and high popularity of the site.

Linking certain historical figures to the location of Burabay National Park was present during the Soviet era. Legends and stories of S ken Seifullin and Birzhan Sal were the key

⁴⁶ Nora, Pierre. “Between memory and history: Les lieux de m moire.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Meierhenrich, Jens. “The transformation of lieux de m moire: The Nyabarongo River in Rwanda, 1992–2009.” *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 5 (2009): 13-19 and H lfdanarson, Gu mundur. “ ingvellir: An Icelandic “Lieu de M moire”.” *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 (2000): 4-29.

resources in this endeavor. Although these legends were used among the visitors and locals, they played a less significant role of what they do today in terms of popularity and touristic discourse formation. Introducing these legends and tracing their origins could be a very interesting project but for the scope and the purpose of this study I believe it is not the roots but the current perception that plays the essential role in Burabay today. Institutionalization of nature as a National Park and embroidering it with stories and legends bounded with a nationalistic message in the times of a nation-building process in Kazakhstan has a strong impact on the perception of space. Environmental beauty and awe does its part of work too. An unusual scenery and nature that is unique and limited to the majority of population paints Burabay National Park as being exceptional. Introduction and promotion of a nationalistic background of Burabay through asserting perception of space glorifying Kazakh identity and figures important in the historiography invoked several long term results. Continuation of practices of connection and promotion of the site as a bearer of Kazakh identity, history and a importance in becoming independent fueled by popular discourses of glory of ancestors has a likelihood of making Burabay a site of history. In a way Burabay and stories around it describes *lieux de memoire* in this particular environmental space, indicating what state and related actors has chosen to remember and commemorate. On a long term I assume that Burabay will have a strong message and a background of being a place that has an importance to the Kazakh identity. Although it is fair to say that *Poliana Abylaikhana* and stories around it is a result of a touristic behavior and has little to do with real events, as Graburn argues reality of event does not always play a key role and could be invented for the consumption of tourists.⁴⁹ Thus, *Poliana Abylaikhana* is a result of a tourism industry exploiting nationalistic images and messages conveyed through natural space by the state.

Foremost the biggest uniqueness of Burabay National Park and the process taking place inside is its recentness. It had been only a decade as it turned into an environmental site with a

⁴⁹ Graburn, Nelson H. "Arts of the Fourth World." *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader* (2009): 412.

clear touristic and nationalistic background and it is striking how many locals that have called the very same place differently twenty years ago are now taking part in this process. At the same time nationalistic message that was not present in the late Soviet period and was not as influential as it is today. Deliberate policies and actions taken by the different scale administrations increased the importance of this feature of Burabay National Park turning an environmental space into a space with a Kazakh identity relation. It took approximately 10 years and an aggressive state scale nation-building process that led the new names and stories to be employed by the population living within the space. These stories and legends are participants as well in the perception of the site and as the example with Ereke has shown some part of the society accept the familiarity of its message. Without any doubts Burabay National Park is going to continue attracting visitors and the stories and legends that were described by Säken Seifullin are going to be playing a crucial role. Touristic definition of the site is employing these legends and is transforming the site with a clear connection to the identity and history of Kazakhs. In the age of continuous nationalistic clashes on the international area and Kazakhstan's aspirations to assert itself guarantees survival of these discourses and ideas about Burabay. As it continues, the site will be perceived as a transmitter of history and greatness of the ancestors and the discourses of holy air that could "only" be found in Burabay are going to prevail. The following section describes tourism development in National Park and investigates how it had been affected by the scarcity of local facilities.

Tourism and Informal Economy in Burabay

Norms of interaction

It was a hot summer day and I was having my lunch in one of the populous cafes in the center of Burabay. Opposite me was sitting Zhanar, a 52-year-old woman that makes her living by renting houses during the tourist seasons. It was difficult to make an appointment with her because of her chaotic working schedule that starts in the morning and finishes in the late

evening at the same spot in the center of the city. Her main “specialization” is renting cottages to the visitors. She occupies one of the rooms in her cottages with her husband and lives there side by side with her customers. Cottages are rented in a variety of forms, sometimes a group rents the whole place, sometimes it is the rooms or floors that are rented and given to different groups at the same time and rarely but rooms separately are also in need. She does not own these properties, and evasively tells that a businessman from Astana owns them. Zhanar wears a light tunic, a wide hat that protects from sun and is extremely tanned, but as she laughingly explains that is not because of her pleasant time on the shores of Burabay Lake.

This section is aimed at explaining and describing Burabay National Park and its essential touristic definition to the reader. To do so, I rely on my personal experience during research trip to Burabay in July of 2015. Most of the information was gathered through more than 40 interviews of people representing variety of social and economic groups at the site. Participant observation was another technique that was used in comprehending nexus between the tourist industry, social life and environmental space in Burabay. I perceive tourism industry to be one of the key players in defining the image and social interactions among people. The fact that these types of activities are shaping everyday life of people of Burabay elevates the importance of picturing how this is taking place. The influx of visitors to the National Park in search of a place that could meet their holiday making needs pushed Burabay to develop its coping techniques that were undertaken by interest groups and in the first place locals. These techniques mostly include enlarging existing houses and building up new spaces that could be used to rent to the visitors. Majority of population of Burabay is involved in touristic definition of the National Park and adjusting its existence to the new norms it brought. For example, old apartment houses in the center of the city may cost as much as they are in any other major cities in the country. They will not reach the prices in Almaty and Astana but the difference is very small. Prices for food also skyrocketed as more and more people decided to spend their holidays in summer. Price fluctuations for food are present and they are cheaper except the most popular summer period.

Rental business in Burabay mainly uses three ways of connecting with potential customers. The first one is through various agencies in and outside of Burabay that find an available accommodation for an extra price for their services. This option is not quite popular because of the specificity of travelling to Burabay. People who choose to use services of agencies outside of Burabay usually look for above average priced hotels that are not popular on a mass scale. The other reason resonates with a specificity of renting business during the most popular summer season. Sudden increases in visitors apply new rules of renting and booking agreements, which sometimes may mean missing profitable opportunities. One could argue that an agreement secures the spot and the renters have fewer troubles, but during the summer season there are no problems with amount of tourists looking for a place to stay. Agencies in Burabay have proven to be less efficient several years ago, when the administration of the Park decided to eliminate petty trade and rental services and locate them all in a single place. Travelers did not bother with visiting the place but instead used assistants of the agents to catch the customer even before visiting the center where competition could have taken a complicated form.

The second way is using internet platforms that are quite popular, but one usually faces a problem of outdated prices, non-functioning numbers and irrelevant photos that are used to disorient customers before their arrival. When a customer comes to the place that he was intending to rent and sees that the place is different from the one that was on the pictures online, they have a choice of accepting and staying or leaving the option and looking for another with luggage and no knowledge of the site, in addition sometimes they are asked to pay a fee for not using their booking in case they do so. Another solution for this problematic situation is when the agent offers other places to stay in exchange for the fault, usually belonging to the same person, thus contributing to the practices of irresponsible bookings. Needless to say that the estate rents do not have a feature of online bookings, this feature is only available to some of the hotels that are on the fancy side of the available hotel grid. Booking a place with a rental agent, however, does not necessarily mean that the customer has secured a place to stay, moreover

agents do not accept bookings during July and August that are more than 3 days ahead, except deals that are extraordinarily long and profitable such as 3 weeks or more. There are some cases when people who book accommodation do not comply with their part of an agreement and rent other houses in the resort when they find a better option or see that the prices they were talking about are higher than the similar properties. However, this is rare in comparison with what Zhanar have explained. Short-term agreements on rent behavior is fostered with the fact that the real estate renting market is so vibrant during the season that booking a house a week ahead leaves your hands tied in case there is a good offer on the same object. “But the prices are same, aren’t they,” I ask. Zhanar does not answer immediately but then explains that when they face people who are desperately looking for a house to stay, prices they pronounce vary according to the value estimates of the customer. If customers are driving a fine car and in a big and noisy group, usually groups of students or colleagues, they can afford prices above the average that they would pay for staying in the same level apartments or cottages. The same price fluctuations apply when renting network figures out that the amount of places to rent is coming to an end, and there are almost no available places to stay in the city. This predatory behavior and a willingness to mobilize resources in extracting maximum profit out of the interaction with tourists have a significant backlash on a long-term basis.⁵⁰ Renting networks are going to be described later in the work and are essential part of working in service providing industry in Burabay.

The third option is a *piatak*, or a spot where groups of people gather. In the post-Soviet space *piatachoks* play an important role of a static point where people belonging to a same group gather. Usually it refers to servicemen, like taxi drivers’ hub, or hub where drunks or other members of a society gather, place where a bus stops and so on. One of the main characteristics of *piatachok* is that people know about existence of such spaces on an almost natural level and usually seek for these when they are faced with a need of a special service that these places could provide. In the case of Burabay *piatachok* is a heart of a whole rental business in the town.

⁵⁰ Cohen, Erik. “The sociology of tourism: approaches, issues, and findings.” *Annual review of sociology* (1984): 380.

Piatachok is located in the end of a main and a narrow street of Burabay that has no convenient parking spots along it, but the end of the street has a wider segment and has a parking spot, making it a naturally attractive choice. It has three benches and a police booth, and serves as a location for over 25 women that are offering any kinds of property one wants for a short rent. The job of the ladies at the site is to wait until a customer arrives and try to outbid the offers that their competitors make. When a visitor approaches he is immediately encircled by these ladies that listen to his requirements and then they offer places. This work is strictly gender segregated; only ladies are working in it. This is not to say that men are not involved in the rental business, but their participation in standing in the area of *piatachok* is by far limited in comparison. Although *piatachok* is a heart of business it does not offer any conveniences for the people who are using its boundaries on a regular basis. Apart from three benches that are not enough for all the ladies that are working there, there is not a single source of shade that they can hide themselves in during extremely hot days of summer. Zhanar is a part of this business and, as she jokes, her tan skin is an *izlishki professii*, or a surplus of the job.

After our lunch Zhanar introduces me to her friend Sveta that does exactly the same job. Several days later Sveta agreed to have me by her side during one of her working days. Sveta is a light-haired, 47 years old energetic lady of a Slavic descent. She has a strong voice that she often uses to softly intimidate her collocutors and as I noticed certainly makes her statements heard. She is from Shchuchinsk and has lived there since the moment she was born. Sveta's occupation is the main source of income in her family, which consists of her student daughter and her husband who is working as a bus driver in Shchuchinsk. Her involvement in the tourist business was an inevitable result of a well-paid job scarcity in the region; however she is not satisfied with summer being a main source of the family's well-being until the next touristic season. Of course Burabay attracts visitors during other seasons too, but the ever growing supply base for the places to stay in the face of local residents and investors that are erecting budget hotels are complicating her job. Our day starts from having a breakfast in one of the cheap cafes around

piatachok, she knows most of the people working in the places nearby because provision of apartments is not limited to the renters. Usually, budget cafes have signs on their doors stating that there are places available to stay. She explains that it's rarely a case that a café has its own place to promote, often they have an agreement with the ladies from *piatachok* to have a sign for which they give a part for the successful deals originated from their help. Guests start arriving between 10 and midday. Since the people who rent property are either looking for a space where they will have more freedom in terms of activities and space or are looking for ways to decrease the price of the travel, assumption is that this arrival is dictated by the time needed to come for visitors from the major cities nearby like Astana. I accompany her while she joins the crowd and notice questionable looks at Sveta, for which she immediately replies that I am not looking for a house. Networking among the ladies is a significant part of their work. Person that was a part of a successful deal has a right to its part of the pie. Thus, the renters are interested in having connections with people that have distinct house types from their own. It is rare that a lady rents a variety of houses. Sveta rents five apartments in the old Soviet style block houses; she only owns one of them, other ones belong to the owners that do not have time to do the renting business themselves. The practices are quite same people who approach the ladies tell their needs and after several offers they leave *piatachok* to have a look at the place. Sometimes these visits to the rented properties are not free, although the price is symbolic, up to 1000 KZT, the main purpose is not spend much time away from *piatachok*.

Sveta receives a call, after a short conversation she pulls me out of the crowd and tells me to follow her. We walk towards the gates of the protected area of the National Park, a place where a tourists needs to pay approximately a fee of 200 KZT to enter. She explains me that there are two entrances to the city, the most popular is the one from South that ends with the familiar *piatachok*. The other one, however, is from the northern part of the city, the one that one needs to enter from the other gates of the National Park on the West. It is less popular because only car owners or tourists that are hiring special bus use it. Sveta has a husband of her best

friend working at the gates and he informs her if there are travelers that are coming through these gates and looking for a place to stay. We are waiting along the road and Sveta is holding her small banner that announces that she provides a house rental service. After 15 minutes a car with Russian plates stops by our side and asks if my companion is Sveta. Tourists from Russia are looking for a cottage that can accommodate two families and at the same time is not going to be expensive. Sveta tells that she has two options that are located in a 10 minute walk from *piatachok*. As the potential customers agree to check the options out, Sveta starts calling to Zhanar telling her that we are coming. We drive to the property and while we were passing *piatachok* by, travelers ask if these people are also renting houses. Sveta answers affirmatively and assures that they will face difficulties finding a better option than hers. Our group approaches the cottage along its owner. Sveta and Zhanar greet each other and have a short conversation. After a while tourists are satisfied with the place and ask if there is a possibility to have a *mangal* equipment for barbecue. Guests are told that *mangal* is going to be there by the evening. Of course no papers or any other documents are signed, everything holds on agreement between the parties. After a deal we walk back chatting, businesswomen tell me that being extremely flexible and quick is a vital part of their job. They explained that when they face a situation where they know someone has an empty place to rent and tourists are looking for a similar place, it is a common sense to operate in such a manner. Everyone who took part in the deal are going to get their respective share, Svetlana explains that even if the profit that was initially made decreased because of sharing, in a long-term healthy relationship with the guard at the other side of the Park and Zhanar brings more money and makes her life easier. We could not rent any more places that day and decided to have a lunch some other day.

Tourists in Burabay do not necessarily have to face the difficulties of renting properties; the other option is to stay in hotels or sanatoriums. The main difference between them is the services they provide their customers with, sanatoriums are mostly aimed at people who have health problems and are accessible by getting a *putiovka*, or direction from the doctors, while

hotels are open to anyone with necessary financial background. Sanatoriums are usually located in the boundaries of the National Park and have an easy access to the Lake. Usually they have a space near the building of sanatorium that is fenced and only accessible for the visitors. Hotels on the other hand represent a variety that goes beyond a financial realm. It could generally be said that fancier hotels are the ones that usually are not located in the boundaries of the city. This makes them to be detached from the booming tourism industry in the city. Most of them are on their way to Burabay and have their exclusive part of forest and privacy. Some like Rixos represent a hotel that has a political meaning and often hosts high level officials when they are taken outside of Astana. Usually a night in the basic rooms costs the same as renting a cottage in the boundaries of the city, and more. Kazakhstan has a law that prohibits buildings and maintaining casino outside of two special zones, Kapchagai, a water reserve to the north of Almaty, and Burabay, thus, making the National Park a bearer of a gambling industry. Although, gambling already imposes some limits to the participation, it is still is an important feature of Burabay. Reputation and a prestige questions for hotels leave less opportunities for a questionable behavior, or at least this behavior is not public.

It is difficult to judge about the numeric representation of the popularity among booking ways because there are no bodies that track these economic activities and judging by petty traders and estate rental business informal economy makes up a significant proportion of the economy of the Burabay National Park. Overwhelming majority of inhabitants of Burabay makes their living through the touristic definition of the place. Every district and every neighborhood has cottages, houses, rooms, shelters to rent; in some cases people rent equipment for one's leisure such as equipment for barbecue or saunas. Waitresses are often coming from the villages of the region to work during summer season. Petty traders and other servicemen mostly consist of students coming from the northern part of the country. The informal sector of Burabay is experiencing a growth because of its potential and willingness of people to participate in this process. However, the state is not involved in training people on the matters of tourism

development is not making any efforts in registering the sector of informal economy, thus losing profits and being a reason why this sector is flourishing. It has been argued that control over informal sector increases quality of tourism industry and participation from the local population.⁵¹ Practice of involving locals in the tourism industry and training them to be more efficient in their participation has been experienced in other touristic destinations, and argued that this involvement of the state has a positive impact on the nature usage and relevant practices.⁵²

Main street of Burabay that is close to *piatachok* is always crowded by people. Along the narrow street there are young guys renting mopeds, motorbikes, bikes, ATV's and other vehicles for leisure transportation. Their popularity has fallen after the economic hardships that hit Russia and Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, they are parked and often one can see how they contribute to the emergency cases with other transport. Across the street there are several shops and a supermarket that provide the city with necessary goods. Several tourists complained about an absence of pork-free meat, however the situation has gradually improved in the last years because of influx of people from the other regions of Kazakhstan that are looking for meat that was brought to the shop by Muslim procedures. Cafés and restaurants are located along the main street; they vary according their cuisine and prices. This variation, however, does not limit their noise production in the evening. Given that most of them work until a late night, overly sensitive people may face a problem of loud music that may disturb people's sleep. As a reader can infer, Burabay's main street is a chaos.

Among this chaos there are several lots under sun protecting umbrellas that are accompanied by mid-age ladies. Burabay National Park is stretched on an area of 129,565 hectares and some places of touristic value are not easily accessible, this is complicated by the

⁵¹ Timothy, Dallen J., and Geoffrey Wall. "Selling to tourists: Indonesian street vendors." *Annals of Tourism research* 24, no. 2 (1997): 337.

⁵² Timothy, Dallen J. "Participatory planning A view of tourism in Indonesia." *Annals of tourism research* 26, no. 2 (1999): 383.

Park rules that forbid free roaming around the Park without permission. Obtaining one is not difficult, but it requires some paper work to be done and since most of the visitors do not want to spend their time doing it, tourist agencies embarked the wave by getting permissions for group travels. However, they faced a problem that visitors were not interested in their services and at some point in time their popularity was low. In order to increase it major agencies hired people from the local or labor migrant population to sell their tours on the streets of Burabay. Similar behavior can be observed in the major destinations around Issyk Kul during summer. Numbers of stalls, however, do not represent the actual number of the agencies that organize tours. Insufficient amount of people that are willing to take the tours and a fairly short touristic season of Burabay naturally limited the amount of the companies to a handful one. Tours around the region are executed on a scheduled basis and the minimum amount of people for an each tour is needed to set up one. However, when the amount of people that is need is not enough, collaborations becomes important and two or three tours gather people from the other ones and organize a single one. One of stalls is managed by Marina, a 35-year-old divorced woman. She is from Makinsk, a city that is 65 km away from Burabay, but has spent most of her last three summers in Burabay. For Marina as for many others, Burabay in the first place is a source of income in the touristic season. Smaller cities that are far from the centers have difficulties with employment and they are one of the reasons of labor migration. She considers herself to be lucky because of the available accommodation in Burabay that significantly makes her life easier. Marina is living in one of the rooms that her relatives are renting to the tourists and is not charged. Majority of the privately owned houses in the city had been modified to accommodate tourists and provide their owners with an income.

Marina's job is to collect people for the tours and organize them. What makes her different from her colleagues is that she is also a guide that works for the local museum, one of the most popular buildings in the city. The nature of her job forces her to interact with people on a daily basis and as our conversation proceeded I realize that she is not particularly happy with

the tourism in the resort. Although her financial stability depends on people who are visiting the site and are willing to spend their money, she is not happy about the nature management that is all around Burabay. Marina emotionally argues that the tourism that endangers the resort is not a good one. During her tours she faces people that are not interested in the nature conservation, the main interest is to take a photo and leave a mark of being there. Of course, she says, there are people who understand the value of nature and how much of a treasure it is, but there are not a lot of them. Mostly, she explains, it is possible to judge a person and his nature attitudes by the way he speaks and interacts with nature. If a person is a clearly *derevnia* or a villager, it is my responsibility to look after each their step. Unfortunately, she explains we cannot watch everyone, and there are people who know nothing but to harm the nature.

Marina often uses ethnic divisions in describing attitudes of visitors to the nature of Burabay. She recalls her personal experiences of taking big groups of people to the nature and conducting tours. During these tours groups that were ethnically Russian or Slavic descent had a careful approach to the nature and showed readiness to follow the laws of the Park. According to Marina, people of Slavic descents are mostly the only group that seeks for tours and participates in them. In contrast, Kazakh people are taking tours less often in comparison to the other Slavic group. Their interaction with nature is also frequently alarming her as a tour guide. This ethnic division is a result of a mass scale tourism that forces locals to create an “ethnic typology” and may not always represent a clear picture.⁵³ Ethnic division was also present when I was participating in rental business experiment with Zhanar and Svetlana. As Svetlana explained, Russians know how to entertain themselves without harming the nature.

Although Burabay had been a resort for over a century it took around ten years after independence to get its popularity rising once again. Mass scale resort visits echoed with increasing welfare of the state and its citizens, turning Burabay in one of the centers of summer

⁵³ Pi-Sunyer, Oriol. “Through native eyes: Tourists and tourism in a Catalan maritime community.” *Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism*(1977): 155.

holiday making of the Central and Northern Kazakhstan. Steady inflow of tourists to Burabay increased amount of private investments made into touristic infrastructure, but their aim was to make the most in limited amount of time. In a state with high levels of corruption like Kazakhstan many buildings and permits were manipulated and affected by those who were in power.⁵⁴ However, Burabay being a realm that is directly controlled from the administration of president also implies that major acts also required a great deal of political power and influence within elite circles of Kazakhstan. State's reaction to the increasing touristic popularity of Burabay was rather slow. Administration of Burabay had certainly been working on conserving the nature and keeping the boundaries of the National Park secure, but overwhelming amounts of people visiting the site opened up a need in policy making to suit its new definition of popular tourism. It has been argued that increased amount of tourists and increasing impact of their activities to the environmental space should not only be seen as negative. Overuse of natural space could attract and force government and administration of the Part to come up with viable and more efficient policies and laws, thus acting as a way of enforcing actions.⁵⁵ This could also be said about monuments or other objects of particular touristic interest that may be a reason why administration for the environmental space and is argued to be the "central to the achievement of sustainable development".⁵⁶ However, visitors not only were not looking for a pristine nature to roam around but also brought their perceptions of touristic behavior and expectations with themselves. At the time when state and official bodies were not able to meet these needs, locals and entrepreneurs seized the perfect opportunity to use this market to offer substitutions and generate income. Accommodation industry felt the biggest impact made by this lack of supply.

⁵⁴ "Kurortnaia zona Shchuchinska - Borovogo zhivet po svoim zakonam" Zakon.kz. 2007. Accessed February 23, 2016. <http://www.zakon.kz/100135-kurortnaja-zona-shhuchinska-borovogo.html>. Headline is translated as "Shchuchinsk-Borovoe resort is living by its own rules".

⁵⁵ Deacon, Janette. "Rock art conservation and tourism." *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 13, no. 4 (2006): 383.

⁵⁶ De Carlo, Manuela, and Paola Dubini. "Integrating heritage management and tourism at Italian cultural destinations." *International Journal of Arts Management* (2010): 31.

Generally speaking Burabay could not provide cheap alternatives for travelers to stay in. Sanatoriums by definition were not aimed at hosting visitors whose foremost priority was entertainment. Presence of a rather strict discipline, mandatory health procedures, distant locations from the city center and limits in amount of beds did not make sanatoriums a preference. Hotels were targeting a specific group of visitors who relatively had a better financial situation. Increasing amount of travelers introduced an audience that was looking for a cheap place to stay and easy access to the city center. This was the point when players like Zhanar and Sveta made use of. I do not argue that *piatachok* is a strictly recent phenomenon, I am pretty sure that this type of services existed prior popular Burabay. However, a mass scale practice of renting houses to the tourists could only be possible with numbers of people who were in need of such alternatives and absence of regulations on a legal basis that allowed or prohibited this type of activities. Petty trading was heavily affected by the weak regulations and absent entry requirements into the industry. Mostly youngsters coming from the neighboring villages spend their summers offering tourists drinks, snacks, entertainment facilities, equipment rental and guiding services. For many of them this meant a short distance labor migration, because in any case their villages lack adequate employment opportunities and Burabay is a solution. Aggressive business techniques mixed with patronage of local elites left no chance for the state to have a leading role in defining the rules of the game. Administration of the resort was incapable of regulating chaotic representation of tourism in Burabay and unofficially left it to its own.

Official discourse of Burabay states that it is aimed at educating people on the questions of environment protection and sustainable co-existence. However, it is missing a touristic definition in its legislative and definitive acts that Burabay as a whole has embraced in recent years. It is plausible to argue that the region with an intense touristic popularity is bound to face challenges that most certainly will be different from the other regions of the same country. Especially when the environmental space is burdened with heavily opposing objectives of conservation versus development and faces high participation from the local population some of

the characteristics of the space could be in danger. An idea of introducing legislation that is specific to the touristic site has been discussed before and it could be a solution to the Burabay's challenges.⁵⁷ Touristic definition today has become a major part of Burabay that cannot be ignored and is shaping the current state of it. The domain of National Park is fenced and its administration is working in conservation efforts, but increasing magnitudes of touristic behavior is overlapping these efforts. This contact is tilting towards tourism industry because of profits that it has. Although tourism in Burabay is a source of an income for the locals involved in the industry it may be in a point where a certain group perceives increasing popularity of resort as a negative feature despite meaning loses in profits. These visions were mostly articulated during the interviews with an uncontrolled human activity that leads to the destruction of available resources. Visible degradation of nature and a coastal line with particularly unwelcome destructive behavior of tourists was the reason why attitudes towards the visitors were not positive.⁵⁸ Administration of Burabay, however, has plans to invest into new destinations within the National park to lessen the concentration of people in one area that is being negatively affected by overpopulation. Similar plans were in the agenda of the tourism development department of Burabay in 2007 but until now most of the plans were not brought to life.

Tourism and informal economy in everyday life Burabay

In a recent publication by the UN World Tourism Organization it has been estimated that international tourist arrivals grew by 4.4 per cent in 2015 worldwide, and that it was the sixth consecutive year of above-average growth by approximately 4%, starting from post-crisis 2010. In the same report it had been stated that increasing numbers of tourist arrivals are contributing to the emergence of new jobs in non-industrial areas that are essential to the populations

⁵⁷ Tosun, Cevat. "Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries." *Tourism management* 21, no. 6 (2000): 626.

⁵⁸ There are many examples of destructive impact of tourism on Burabay National Park. Some of them <http://boora.info/ekologiya-borovogo-ne-vyiderzhit-megakurortnyih-ambitsiy/> and <http://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2015/02/25/57824>

inhabiting them.⁵⁹ Using extensive quantitative data the World Travel & Tourism Council states that tourism in 2015 accounted for 1 in 11 jobs on the planet and constituted 9.8 per cent of world GDP; it forecasts 3.3 per cent growth of the industry in 2016.⁶⁰ Developing and developed economies cannot ignore possible currency inflows where the competition often takes an unexpected shape. It is argued that although tourists seek and enjoy developed infrastructure, the “gaze” factor and a quest for authenticity could give a significant boost to tourist numbers, thus making countries with weak developments in the tourism sector competitive.⁶¹ Alongside the positive effects brought by tourism there are issues that cause concern, such as supporting tourism growth, tourism oriented policies, and investment into human resource development, maintaining sustainable development, and weak nature conservational efforts. One example of how tourism has changed the society and lifestyle of people could be observed in the rise of urban tourism in Havana, starting from 1989. One could argue that an example from 20 years ago may not represent the touristic reality of today due to the different economic, political and touristic situation of the “host” and “guest” countries, but in my opinion the essence and striking magnitude of the social change caused by tourism in Cuba at that time sheds light on and is applicable to many cases across the globe today. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left Cuba in deep economic crisis, and the extremely effective measures taken by the Cuban government to establishing and promote tourism policies secured a rapid increase of Foreign Direct Investment into the country and resulted in a tripling of international tourist arrival between 1995 and 2002, or US\$ 510.3 million gross income of tourist sector in 2002 alone.⁶² However, the promotion of tourism and a dire economic situation that preceded it led to the substantial growth of an

⁵⁹ “UNWTO World Tourism Barometer.” UN World Tourism Organization. Accessed May 28, 2016. http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_barom16_01_january_excerpt.pdf

⁶⁰ “The Economic Impact of Travel & Tourism: 2016 Annual Update – Summary.” World Travel and Tourism Council. Accessed May 28, 2016. http://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic%20impact%20research/2016%20documents/economic%20impact%20summary%202016_a4%20web.pdf

⁶¹ Volkman, Toby Alice. “Visions and revisions: Toraja culture and the tourist gaze.” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 91.

⁶² Colantonio, Andrea, and Robert B. Potter. “The rise of urban tourism in Havana since 1989.” *Geography* (2006): 26.

informal economy.⁶³ In many cases people had strong incentives to redesign their houses and empty rooms in ways that conflicted with their own interests in order to participate in the room rental business. Tourism is a key sector in many economies but it certainly requires long term policies that would not only be aimed at attracting visitors but also sustaining the area with a minimal negative impact to the locals.

Post-independence tourism in Kazakhstan was heavily influenced by the remnants of international tourism in Soviet Union. Although domestic tourism in Soviet Union was popular, scarce international tourism was strictly operated by Intourist, an organization that regulated approved routes and took measures to keep international visitors on a limited track.⁶⁴ Tourism in the Soviet Union was part of a socialist project to increase the loyalty of the citizens to the regime, and was an inseparable part of state propaganda.⁶⁵ Many labor unions across the Soviet Union perceived mass tourism to be an effective tool in enlightenment of masses of the political message.⁶⁶ However, *turizm* in the early Soviet Union had “a broad and a narrow definition” of “purposeful travelling for pleasure, enlightenment, and excitement”.⁶⁷ Many images of “proper Soviet” tourists were portrayed in the periodicals that contrasted Soviet tourists with those from the supposed bourgeoisie, where the latter aimed at “running away from the parasitic lifestyle” and the former is using tourism “to discover his land and culture”.⁶⁸ In different periods of the Soviet rule tourism had an increasing variety of state definitions and policies. For example, in the early Socialist period when tourism had just started its development, trade unions were the key institutions that planned and sustained leisure activities of the workers and laid the foundations

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ “Tips for Travelers to the USSR”. Department of State. Accessed May 29, 2016. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002978538f;view=1up;seq=2> :3.

⁶⁵ Christian Noack, “Coping with the Tourist: Planned and ‘Wild’ Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*, ed. Gorsuch, Anne E., and Diane Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 282.

⁶⁶ Igor’ Orlov and Elena Jurchikova, *Massovyi Turizm v Stalinskoj Povsednevnosti* (Rossiiskaia Politicheskaia Entsiklopediia, 2010), 42.

⁶⁷ Koenker, Diane P. “Travel to Work, Travel to Play: On Russian Tourism, Travel, and Leisure.” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 4 (2003): 658.

⁶⁸ Igor’ Orlov and Elena Jurchikova, *Massovyi Turizm v Stalinskoj Povsednevnosti* (Rossiiskaia Politicheskaia Entsiklopediia, 2010), 43.

of the so-called “bonus” systems for workers that provided vouchers to travel to the state owned resorts. The bonus system operated throughout Socialist rule, and the criteria behind it were to allow the hardworking builders of socialism to “repair” themselves in the resorts of the country.⁶⁹ Shortly after WWII state officials declared tourism to be an important branch of state development and lobbied for the development of the tourist infrastructure throughout the country.⁷⁰ Although, resorts were present in almost every Soviet republic, the most popular ones were located on the shores of Black sea and had a tremendous popularity and prestige. The post war period was an important benchmark in studies of tourism in the Soviet Union.⁷¹ It has been argued that the late Stalin era used tourism as means to reward its citizens and engage them in the “ritual of reassurance” of the salubrious Socialist system after the difficult postwar years.⁷² The 1960s experienced the upheavals of tourism, and was the period when tourism acquired features of a mass activity and the number of domestic and international tourists steadily increased.⁷³ However, there were many accounts in the press that were criticizing the most popular local tourist facilities not coping to the European standards.⁷⁴ Despite significant expansions of the tourist facilities across the Soviet Union it still experienced shortages of the places for all those who wanted to travel domestically. The scarcity and inaccessibility of resorts facilitated self-organized tourists or *dikiĭ turizm* (wild tourism) that did not use vouchers to travel to the resorts. The 1960’s and 1970’s experienced rise in the numbers of “wild tourists”.⁷⁵ Touristic facilities in Soviet Union significantly differed from what is expected today in many resorts across the world

⁶⁹ Koenker, Diane P. “Whose Right to Rest? Contesting the Family Vacation in the Postwar Soviet Union.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 02 (2009): 401.

⁷⁰ Shawn Salmon, “Marketing Socialism: Inturist in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*, ed. Gorsuch, Anne E., and Diane Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 190.

⁷¹ Igor’ Orlov and Elena Jurchikova, *Massovyi Turizm v Stalinskoĭ Povednevnosti* (Rossiiskaia Politicheskaia Entsiklopediia, 2010), 151.

⁷² Gorsuch, Anne E. *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 48.

⁷³ Christian Noack, “Coping with the Tourist: Planned and ‘Wild’ Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*, ed. Gorsuch, Anne E., and Diane Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 281.

⁷⁴ Gorsuch, Anne E. *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

⁷⁵ Gorsuch, Anne E. ““There’s No Place like Home”: Soviet Tourism in Late Stalinism.” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 4 (2003): 770.

and usually placed an emphasis on health procedures like dietary food or mass physical activities. Soviet health and tourism authorities resisted to the popular demand of Soviet citizens to travel to the resorts with their families because of a therapeutic purpose of Soviet vacation, where a family could have been a burden.⁷⁶ Until the 1970s it was nearly impossible to get a travel voucher for members of a family to stay together at the same resort, and even after this, when the attitudes of the tourist planners had changed, capacity and logistical issues were the main constraints. In the rare cases when it happened, as it is argued by Koenker, facilities were not oriented towards providing services for couples, and families stayed separated.⁷⁷ This gave rise to the popular “*kurortnii roman*” or “resort affair” that was pretty popular in media in the Soviet period and still echoes long after the dissolution of Soviet Union. After many complaints in press and claims that visiting a resort with family members was overall better to the mental and physical health of the workers, the tourism administration introduced family tours.⁷⁸ Despite a strong concentration of the popular resorts in the Black Sea region it is reasonable to assume that these practices had uniformity across the Soviet Union that left no resort without popular tourism influence.

Post-Soviet tourism in Kazakhstan forced Kazakhstani officialdom to make considerable efforts in order to develop international tourist hosting facilities and regulations. In the first decade after dissolution foreign tourists still had a few international standard tourist facilities and were forced to go through the scrutiny of acquiring visas, and only in 2001 did the government introduce an experimental policy of allowing major tour operators to issue tourist visas on arrival at the airport.⁷⁹ As one of the few works on tourism in Kazakhstan in post-independence period states, most foreign tourists to Kazakhstan were offered Silk Road tours, adventure tours, and

⁷⁶ Koenker, Diane P. “Whose Right to Rest? Contesting the Family Vacation in the Postwar Soviet Union.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 02 (2009): 402.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁷⁹ Werner, Cynthia. “The new silk road: Mediators and tourism development in Central Asia.” *Ethnology* (2003): 154.

nature tours that mainly operated in the southeastern provinces of the country.⁸⁰ In a sense tourism relied on existing locations and in other cases was fostered by romantic quest for authenticity, and it was almost non-existent in the northern parts of Kazakhstan. A study conducted by a research team in assessing tour operators and quality of their work found that although the number of tour operators significantly increased, and the coverage of their functions improved, very little had been done to bring these operators to international standards.⁸¹ However, even after two decades of post-Soviet development the research base for tourism in Kazakhstan remains scanty.⁸² According to the statistics provided by the department of tourism of Kazakhstan the amount of tourists arriving to Kazakhstan and travelling domestically insignificantly (<2%) increased in 2015 compared to previous year making it in total 6430,2 thousand and 4137,4 thousand people respectively.⁸³

Its international image is important for any soft authoritarian government, and Kazakhstan, which has been striving to gain international recognition with its accomplishments, is particularly sensitive to any matters that can stain its image. Although authoritarian states are more or less proficient at forming and controlling the discursive field inside their country, it is nearly impossible to do the same in the international arena.⁸⁴ The phenomenon of Borat, a supposed comedy movie that pictured fictional Kazakhstan through eyes of a local journalist, was an important source of tourists and international attention even though the government of Kazakhstan was hostile to the movie and its narrative at first. The image-making and branding of Burabay as a progressive example of a tourist destination that can offer an international level of service are crucial features in the governmental discourse around Burabay. It is often considered

⁸⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁸¹ Smagulova, Assel, Maganat Shegebayev, Vladimir Garkavenko, and Mehraz Boolaky. "Ethical practices & social responsibility of Kazakhstani tourism business: A pilot study in the tour operator sector." *Central Asia Business Journal* 2, no. November (2009): 19.

⁸² Ibid., 21.

⁸³ "Osnovnye statisticheskie pokazateli razvitiia turistskoi otrasli RK," Ministry for investment and development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Tourism Industry Department, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://dep-turizm.mid.gov.kz/ru/pages/osnovnye-statisticheskie-pokazateli-razvitiya-turistskoy-otrasli-rk>

⁸⁴ Schatz, Edward. "Transnational image making and soft authoritarian Kazakhstan." *Slavic Review* (2008): 61.

as having significant historical and environmental value, and the innovative policies of the state regarding Burabay are making its role unique. However, these policies are not always reaching their official aims of sustainable development of the tourism industry, and instead are facilitating the development of informal economies through local risk-taking entrepreneurs.

There is no definition of the informal economy that encompasses all of the increasing variety of processes, economic domains, and situations it covers. In many cases it varies depending on what is being researched and what kind of techniques are being used in the methodology. However, one of the key differences of the informal economy appears when seen in comparison to the formal one. I use the definition given by Castells and Portes, which states that the informal economy should firstly be seen as a process and has the central feature of not being regulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated.⁸⁵ The informal economy does not necessarily mean that groups participating in such an untaxed system are doing so because of their weak or irregular financial situation - and moreover Portes has argued that many organizations operating within formal boundaries are often also profiting from the informal economy.⁸⁶ For example, a construction group may be hiring informal workers so as to reduce its expenditure. The informal economy exists universally, and features three most common aspects: “(1) the systemic connection with the formal economy, (2) the special characteristics of labor employed in informal activities, and (3) government’s attitude toward the nonregulated sector”.⁸⁷ Although the informal economy may

⁸⁵ Castells, Manuel, and Alejandro Portes. “World underneath: The origins, dynamics, and effects of the informal economy.” *The informal economy: Studies in advanced and less developed countries* (1989): 11-12.

⁸⁶ Castells, Manuel, and Alejandro Portes. “World underneath: The origins, dynamics, and effects of the informal economy.” *The informal economy: Studies in advanced and less developed countries* (1989): 31 and Webb, Justin W., Laszlo Tihanyi, R. Duane Ireland, and David G. Sirmon. “You say illegal, I say legitimate: Entrepreneurship in the informal economy.” *Academy of Management Review* 34, no. 3 (2009): 496.

⁸⁷ Castells, Manuel, and Alejandro Portes. “World underneath: The origins, dynamics, and effects of the informal economy.” *The informal economy: Studies in advanced and less developed countries* (1989): 26.

sound like it has a negative connotation and impact, this form of economy has a tremendous impact on society and often is a necessity to the existence of a social order.⁸⁸

It is vital to understand how actors within informal economy make their decisions. One of the key elements is to comprehend the dichotomy of legality and legitimacy in an informal economy. Legality is acting in the given area in a way that is allowed by the social managing institutions. Legitimacy in its own turn is more of a social construct that changes across society. One of the key works that I am using to describe the situation in Burabay claims that the informal economy is a mix of both, illegality with legitimacy.⁸⁹ Although any member of society may recognize a particular activity to be illegal, the question of legitimacy is often what is left to decide and may vary in every situation. Software piracy is a good example of illegal actions and popular support that perceives it as legitimate. Given that in many cases the first reason why people decide to participate in informal economic activities is the lower price, benefits often outweigh risks.⁹⁰ The informal economy is mostly illegal and that forces it to operate outside of formal institutions. This limits its presence in network formation and increases the importance of social networks among similar informal entrepreneurs.⁹¹ This has already been partially described with the examples of Zhanar and Sveta – local entrepreneurs in the informal housing market. Their network reliance is a key instrument in many other informal activities across the globe too. Entrepreneurs in the informal economies are able to function and exploit opportunities usually because of existing imperfections in law enforcement.⁹²

Law enforcement and policies of Burabay are quite unique when considered across Kazakhstan. The desire of the state to present Burabay as a resort meeting international

⁸⁸ Gaughan, Joseph P., and Louis A. Ferman. "Toward an understanding of the informal economy." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1987): 25.

⁸⁹ Webb, Justin W., Laszlo Tihanyi, R. Duane Ireland, and David G. Sirmon. "You say illegal, I say legitimate: Entrepreneurship in the informal economy." *Academy of Management Review* 34, no. 3 (2009): 496.

⁹⁰ Smith, James D. "Measuring the informal economy." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 493, no. 1 (1987): 94.

⁹¹ Zimmer, Catherine. "Entrepreneurship through social networks." *The art and science of entrepreneurship*. Ballinger, Cambridge, MA (1986): 12-13.

⁹² Webb, Justin W., Laszlo Tihanyi, R. Duane Ireland, and David G. Sirmon. "You say illegal, I say legitimate: Entrepreneurship in the informal economy." *Academy of Management Review* 34, no. 3 (2009): 500.

requirements has also led to the application of different policies within the boundaries of the resort. The most recent, and I would say the most important, is that transforming Burabay into a special economic zone. This legal document was accepted in the early 2008 and transformed Burabay National Park into an economic zone with unique legal definitions that separated it from any other resorts for the next ten years. There are ten regions of economic and strategic importance that have the status of a special economic zone, but Burabay is the only one that has a touristic dimension. The list includes three petrochemical facilities, the special Astana city building zone, two metallurgical zones, the zone of innovations in Almaty, textile facilities in Shymkent, and Khorgos customs on the Chinese border. Almost all of these facilities represent the main sectors of export of Kazakhstan. A special economic zone is a territory within boundaries of Kazakhstan that has a special legislation and is aimed at aiding priority tasks in the development of Kazakhstan.⁹³ This special legislation includes exemption from some taxes, facilitating and progressive custom laws, the free usage of land up to 10 years that also can be used by locals, and simplified foreign labor hiring laws.⁹⁴ The legal statement of Burabay sets up its aims at creating a tourist hub that can meet the expectations of local and international tourists, protecting environment and sustainable development of the site.⁹⁵ Another relevant legal act affecting Burabay was taken in early 2007.⁹⁶ It states that Burabay National Park is an environmental zone, and introduced strict regulations on what is allowed to be built in the National Park and what is not. These prohibitions are mostly related to the facilities that can significantly harm environmental balance of the National Park and have a visible impact like mining and hydro usage. The other part of the document states that the land in the National park

⁹³ Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan № 469-IV of 21 July, 2011 «On Special Economic Zones in the Republic of Kazakhstan».

⁹⁴ “Kazakhstan: Spetsial’nye ekonomicheskie zony,” Invest in Kazakhstan, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://invest.gov.kz/uploads/files/2016/01/26/ekonomicheskiy-zony-respubliki-kazahstan-2013.pdf>

⁹⁵ “O proekte Ukaza Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan ‘O sozdanii spetsial’noi ekonomicheskoi zony’ Burabai,” Legal information system of Regulatory Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P080000002>.

⁹⁶ “Ob ustanovlenii okhranoi zony Gosudarstvennogo Natsional’nogo prirodnoogo parka ‘Burabai’,” Legal information system of Regulatory Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V07B0003217>.

should be used in favour of nature making it the foremost priority.⁹⁷ If we analyze other documents that set up goals for tourism in the region for previous years, it is visible that attracting investments and investors was the key issue that addressed.

Tourism in Kazakhstan is a relatively small industry and is attracting the attention of policy makers in Astana. Their main aim is to increase investments in the area and develop legal, economic and social issues for the people who want to invest in tourism. Burabay's definition of being a special economic zone is set to expire by the end of 2017. After the recent collapse of the oil prices, the state is mobilizing its officials to think of new ways of attracting investment to the country. Most of the tourism sites in Kazakhstan are suffering from insufficient funding and poor management. Hence, the idea of travelling within the country also has a little prestige in comparison among society and elites are choosing options abroad rather than local opportunities. Problems in the economy and the devaluation of the tenge are going to limit the amount of resources people are willing to spend on the leisure abroad, and will lead them to look for local substitutes. However, local service does not match to any standards and the prices in the resorts like Burabay are often higher than prices in the Turkish Riviera. This disparity between the price and the quality of services in Burabay is raised every year before the season starts. The explanation that is given to the citizens that are dissatisfied with the prices is that due to the region and climate Burabay has a very short touristic season that attracts large numbers. In order to make a profit, the local tourism infrastructure has to maintain a balance of prices with the actual expenditure throughout the year. Taking into consideration that in the other seasons Burabay is not as visited as it is in summer and most of the touristic infrastructure is idle this practice is going to persist.⁹⁸ However, this takes time, and winters in Northern Kazakhstan are not known to be pleasant in any sense. During my interview with one of the department heads in

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Interview with former mayor of the city <http://thenews.kz/2010/07/30/464378.html>

the administration of Burabay National Park, he explained that apart from conservational efforts they are taking a new route of attracting other actors to the site.⁹⁹

Internal tourism in Kazakhstan operates mostly around pilgrimage sites and water-related natural objects such as lakes or rivers. One of the key problems of Burabay as a tourism destination is that it was not initially conceived as a mass scale tourist resort. During Soviet times most of its visitors came to use its medical facilities, and it was primarily a sanatorium resort.¹⁰⁰ Because of this there is a high concentration of tourism around a limited number of natural sites, the Burabay Lake being the most important one. The administration of the resort has acknowledged that its utmost first priority now is to solve issues with water treatment, prolong the tourist season and spread tourist activities across the region and other lakes. The boundaries of the National Park host other lakes that are less visited because of the logistical problems. There is only one road around Burabay, and bus connections are few. In addition to that, the smaller lakes do not have the same scenery of Burabay Lake that is a key in understanding the value of nature among the visitors. Burabay Lake does not have any signs of being located in the middle of the steppe, but the others are in the steppe. This factor of the touristic gaze may influence decision-making, and may not attract people to visit the other parts of Burabay. In order to alleviate the concentration of tourists in Burabay, the administration of the resort has to take measures to ensure the investors that their projects of building touristic facilities in other region of the National Park would be profitable.

Some of the aims of the National Park policies like infrastructure development set by the government indeed fostered development, and more tourists are visiting the National Park. However, one of the biggest faults was that the local and regional administration paid too much attention to attracting more visitors without considering its impact on the site. Most of the current policies of the special economic zone are aimed at improving the infrastructure and

⁹⁹ Interview conducted during the field trip in July 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Kosovich, Pavel. *Burabai-Borovoie. Khronika dvukh stoletii* (Tsentri Aziatskoie knizhnoie izdatel'stvo, 2012), 59-60.

bringing investors into the scene. Infrastructure does not necessarily mean cheap alternatives for the housing issue. Weak enforcement and the absence of legal substitutions for the services provided by the entrepreneurs are guaranteeing its survival and development. As was suggested for other similar but yet smaller locations, “municipal authorities, the tourism industry and urban communities (should) themselves (be) involved as stakeholders in assessing the social and economic effects of various scales and types of urban tourism development in the city”.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The relationship between nature and government is a complex matter that extends over a wide range of realms. Although nature is usually seen as an object that is heavily influenced by a government and its priorities, sometimes this pattern experiences anomalies and interaction may bring unusual results. Burabay National Park is certainly a natural space where these anomalies could be traced. The Kazakhstani government is deliberately attracting attention to the resort in compliance with its touristic developmental projects. These projects represent the image that policy makers want to acquire through its interference with Burabay. Presence and in some cases absence of specific goals in the agenda of the state and specificities of the policies raise social and economic issues in the National Park that shapes everyday life of people at the site. Conservation efforts fenced an area and expected an attentive mode of behavior towards nature through following the guidelines and limiting space. Developmental agenda mobilized players with an intention of turning Burabay into a world class resort with a subtle political and brand creation meanings behind them. Nation-building process of the state gave a rise to the model behavior to the administrative actors, who in their turn consciously and subconsciously projected them to their attempts of building a unique environmental space. However, the social part of the grand project of Burabay was left unattended and by gaining its momentum from the abovementioned efforts turned social interaction within the National Park into a separate player. Representation of

¹⁰¹ Colantonio, Andrea, and Robert B. Potter. “The rise of urban tourism in Havana since 1989.” *Geography* (2006): 32.

the social powers was mainly held through people who used Burabay to accomplish their goals of providing touristic services. The space that initially was planned to play a key role in the educating people on environmental issues and nature conservation was threatened by the absence of policies that would comply with the intentions. The rising touristic popularity of the National Park brought up another, publicly supported agenda of resource extraction from the same space through touristic activities. People around and within the region seized an opportunity to enrich themselves that brought conservation and developmental agendas in a conflict. Although this conflict does not necessarily have to take place, absence of the state participation in wide range touristic development left key issues of overall development on its own.

This work aimed at describing peculiarities of the brand new environmental project of the state that given an authoritarian nature of state, received a prioritized approach from the officials. I illustrated how the state perceives a task of building a resort with an environmental agenda. Although the state is not a single body that we could address, policy makers play a key role in this attempt. A resort that is aimed at educating people on nature conservation has to take social and economic background of the place into account. Locals that are struggling to survive tend to put their personal needs above any environmental conservation ideas.¹⁰² Their foremost biggest priority is to make ends meet and it is seen to me being as overly optimistic to expect an unforced compliance with ideas of the National Park. Competitive business making on a limited space threatens the natural balance of the site. Linking the space to the national identity of the biggest group of visitors does not always bring a positive impact. However, at this point in time I am not sure if the nationalistic idea behind the resort is going to receive the same treatment of indifference towards nature in future. This is reasoned by the relative recentness of the phenomena and a weak social discourse around the resort being a part of Kazakh identity and thus needing a special act of protection and care. Opposition of development and conservation

¹⁰² Norton, Presley. "Archaeological rescue and conservation in the North Andean area." *Archaeological Heritage Management in the Modern World* (1989): 144.

priorities is naturally going to tilt to the prior one when it is left for people to decide. The tourism industry is involving more and more people from the region itself and their economic stability depends on the tourism at the site. These involvements are not only operated within legal economic boundaries and form an informal sector that is affecting the lifestyles of the local people.

Solution of the clash is primarily seen to me as being highly dependent on the nature of the state interaction with the environmental space. It is vital to build policies that may be exclusive to the region defining norms of interaction. Imposition and coercive attempts are more promising because development and conservation dichotomy is inherently unbalanced when economic situation of local people is dire. This work has shed light on how state can act in a complex natural environment and what kind of consequences it may bring to the people interacting with Burabay. Information gathered here could be useful in any other attempts of defining environmental boundaries with another definition like tourism. Although at this stage Kazakhstan is not running new projects in transforming environmental space into tourism areas, recent discourses of investment in tourism could facilitate new attempts at redefining nature.

This work brought more questions that it had answered. There is a rich ground for future investigations of the complex relationship between nature and society in Kazakhstani context. Some of them are identifying historical roots behind the particular sites like Burabay National Park that require far bigger archival work that had been undertaken in this thesis. Tourism development and how it influences perception of a site in a wider context, relationship between nation-building and informal economy, conflicting agendas of development and conservation efforts, and role of Kazakh writers and poets in the perception of the natural landscape are some of this non-exhaustive list.

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