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ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by

Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile, Nicola Mocci

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In continuity with previous years, in 2017 Kazakhstan pursued the stabilisation of its political system while still embracing global trends. Domestically, the leadership attempted to consolidate its institutions, possibly in preparation for President Nursultan Nazarbayev's retirement. A reform of the constitution made over some of the presidential powers to the government and parliament, while leaving the president as the supreme arbiter of the political system. The leadership took significant steps in nation-building, issuing an ambitious plan of «Modernisation of Kazakhstan's Identity» and announcing the adoption of a Latin alphabet for the Kazakh language. The latter might be a step towards more openly ethnic-based nation-building, although previous policies and Nazarbayev's track record of caution indicate a slow and limited progress in that direction. At the same time, these proactive measures demonstrate how the political leadership is trying to adapt to the developments present in Kazakh society, preventing possible challenges to its own power. Internationally, Kazakhstan further consolidated its international position as a reliable, proactive partner for its neighbours and the west. In particular, Kazakhstan's capital Astana hosted the universal exposition (EXPO 2017), whose theme was «Future Energy». It not only showcased the country's support for innovation and green technologies, but also attempted to «brand» Kazakhstan as a developed country. While this entailed a certain feeling of superiority towards its Central Asian neighbours, a spat with Kyrgyzstan in the autumn of 2017 demonstrated that Kazakhstan is still some steps from taking the coveted position as the economic heart of Eurasia.

1. Introduction

In 2017, Kazakhstan continued the process of stabilisation of its political system. In the previous two years, the country had remained stable even in the face of some challenging threats, including a serious economic and fi-

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nancial crisis, popular protests and terrorist attacks.¹ In 2017, more was done to prepare the country for possible future challenges. Leadership succession represented the first challenge – a future event not yet determined, but certainly approaching if considering the age of the President Nursultan Nazarbayev.² The modifications in the country's constitution introduced in 2017, while not very extensive, were aimed at consolidating the president's status and at smoothing the process of succession. The reform slightly corrected the current balance of power, which was heavily skewed in favour of the presidency, by giving more relevance to the government and parliament. While critics considered the reform as merely cosmetic, it may still pave the way for a more substantial transfer of power when Nazarbayev steps down from office. The new system of checks and balances could be effective in preventing instability, and, moreover, could force Nazarbayev's successor to share power with other institutions, possibly opening up the system to wider change.³

The country's social and demographic evolution is spurring the leadership to take a proactive role also in the so-called modernisation of society. The country's «Third Modernisation» had been set as the main goal in the 2017 Presidential Message to the Nation, in January. On that occasion, Nazarbayev had focused on the economic aspects of modernisation – digitalisation, foreign investments, trade and human capital.⁴ In his April article, *Course towards the future: modernisation of Kazakhstan's identity*, the president outlined his vision of an ambitious process of wider social and identity innovation. This, he stated, was necessary to maintain the country's political and economic competitive position. The article called for the citizens of Kazakhstan to be more culturally open, proficient in computer use and foreign languages, pragmatic, patriotic, open-minded as well as strongly focused on knowledge and «evolutionary development».⁵ A central point of the modernisation programme was the adoption of a Latin script for the Kazakh language alphabet.

Finally, measures were taken to stabilise the economy, which was recovering from the crisis of previous years, and to proactively address the

1. Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: Balancing regime stability amidst local and global challenges', *Asia Maior* 2016, pp. 439-61.

2. Nazarbayev was born on 6 July 1940 and consequently was 77 years old at the time of this writing. 'Biography and career of N.A. Nazarbayev', *National Digital History of Kazakhstan* (<http://e-history.kz/en/contents/view/304>).

3. Carina Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan: increasing democracy without political pluralism?', *Constitutionnet*, 28 March 2017.

4. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Послание Президента Республики Казахстан Н.Назарбаева народу Казахстана' (Message of the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan), 31 January 2017 (http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-31-yanvary-a-2017-g).

5. 'Kazakh President lays out principles for modernisation of nation's identity', *Astana Times*, 18 April 2017.

challenges coming from cyber-attacks and «hybrid warfare». A «Cyber Shield» project was launched in 2017, introducing a multi-level approach to information security, involving not only government structures but also the business and research communities as well as citizenship.

Internationally, in 2017 Kazakhstan continued to promote its position as a reliable ally and partner, and to brand itself as a successful country, with a dynamic economy and attractive environment for foreign investments. It did so through the organisation of high profile events, such as EXPO Astana 2017, as well as through the engagement in bi-lateral and multilateral diplomacy.

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. The next three sections are devoted to the main domestic events: the reform of the constitution, the transition of the Kazakh alphabet to a Latin script, and the country's engagement with global economic and internet security trends. A final section is devoted to Kazakhstan's international engagement and is followed by a conclusion.

2. *Proactive institutional consolidation: The constitutional reform*

In December 2016, the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, announced that the national constitution was to be modified.⁶ Accordingly, the president called for the appointment of a working group to prepare a proposal that would modify the distribution of powers between branches of government.⁷ The group, consisting of «representatives of state bodies, deputies, the judicial system, the Kazakhstan Union of Lawyers and academics», examined proposals coming from government institutions, as well as from civil society and academia.⁸ On 25 January 2017, Nazarbayev unveiled the proposed amendments during a much-praised televised address to the nation and announced significant changes in the balance of power between the executive and other branches, mostly in favour of the legislative and judiciary.⁹ The reform was then opened to public discussion

6. He did so during a ceremony for the 25 years of the republic. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan: A Move towards Democratic Transition?' *Review of Central and East European Law*, Vol. 42, 2017, pp. 294-324.

7. European Commission for Democracy through Law, *Comment of the Working Group on the Redistribution of Powers on the Draft Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Opinion No. 882/2017), 24 February 2017 ([http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2017\)017-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2017)017-e)).

8. The working group was established in implementation of Order N. 140 of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 11 January 2017. European Commission for Democracy through Law, 'Comment of the Working Group', p. 1.

9. 'Конституционные реформы поддерживаем' (We support the Constitutional Reform), *Liter.kz*, 27 January 2017.

for a month and successively submitted to parliament, which approved it in its first reading on 3 March and in its second on 6 March. After the approval of the Constitutional Council, which confirmed the compatibility of the proposed amendments with the substance of the current constitution, the law was signed by Nazarbayev and entered into force on 10 March 2017.¹⁰

Constitutional reforms are not a rare occurrence in Kazakhstan. Revisions have succeeded each other since the early 1990s and have resulted in an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the executive: this gave Nazarbayev «the possibility to shift from one constitutional order to another, legitimately replacing bodies that are supposed to check executive powers».¹¹ The first reform, actually resulting in the adoption of a whole new constitution in 1995, saw both the creation of a weak bicameral parliament, which substituted the previously vocal legislature, and the substitution of the Constitutional Court with a new Constitutional Council, which was much more dependent on the executive for its composition and prerogatives than its predecessor.¹² Successive reforms, in 1998, 2007 and 2011, further allowed «the consolidation of an authoritarian regime that places few constraints on the executive power and gives little space for checks and balances».¹³

The reform of 2017 was somehow different, as, at least in theory, it proposed to change the balance of power in favour of parliament and the government. Nazarbayev had initially announced his intention to shift from a presidential form of government to a semi-presidential one.¹⁴ However, partly because such a radical change would have been unconstitutional if not properly sanctioned by a popular referendum, the reform ended up being a lot less extensive than announced, maintaining the current super-presidential system.¹⁵ The reform, however, strengthened the role of both parliament and the government. Parliament was given a more active role in the formation of the government, having to negotiate the structure of the cabinet with the president. Also, the government became accountable to both the president and parliament, and not just the president, as before. Finally, the government was to resign its powers to the Majilis (the lower chamber of parliament) and not to the president. The president, however, still had the power both to decide on important appointments (such as the local governors and ministers of foreign affairs and defence) and on accept-

10. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', p. 315.

13. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'. For details on these reforms, see also Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan'.

14. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'.

15. On the compatibility of the reform with the current Constitution see Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'. For the definition of the Kazakhstani presidency as a super-presidential one, see: Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', p. 311.

ing or declining the government's resignation. The president, moreover, was still able to terminate the powers of the government on his own initiative. Perhaps, the most significant change was the transfer of some presidential prerogatives to the government and parliament. These included the approval and implementation of state programmes and the adoption of a unified system of financing and labour payment for all bodies financed by the state budget of the republic. This partly changed the previous status of the government as a simple implementing body of presidential policies.¹⁶ At the same time, however, the president still had the power to choose to preside over government meetings. While losing the right to legislate by decree, the president retained the right of legislative initiative and the possibility to indicate to parliament which draft laws were to be examined as a matter of priority.¹⁷ With so many powers remaining in the hands of the president, the reform has not achieved the envisaged shift in the balance of powers. Moreover, the reform looks even less significant when it is read in the context of contemporary Kazakhstani politics. More than a shift of the president's position vis-à-vis the legislature, the elimination of the right to legislate by decree could be seen as a consolidation of the role of the presidential party, Nur Otan, as an instrument of implementation of the presidential programme. Over the 10 years of Nur Otan's existence, Nazarbayev has progressively obtained almost-total control of the Majilis, which makes possible for him to effectively implement his legislative agenda in parliament through it, without resorting to legislating by decree.¹⁸

The reform introduced important modifications in the judiciary sector: a slightly stronger Constitutional Council was established, although it remained very much under the influence of the president.¹⁹ The fundamental values of the constitution were also amended: to the unitary and territorial integrity of the state and the form of government, the reform added the independence of the state and the inviolability of the status of Nazarbayev as «the Founder of Independent Kazakhstan, the First President and the Leader of the Nation».²⁰ While deprived of some powers, moreover, the president still remained the head of state and «supreme arbiter» between different branches

16. One, as Kembayev notes, with a «purely administrative character». Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', p. 313

17. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'.

18. Nazarbayev ruled by decree for several months in 1995, before the adoption of the new super-presidentialist constitution. In the opinion of several experts, the creation of a party of power, able to control the legislature and to implement the presidential political agenda, was crucial to stabilise the Kazakhstani political system. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan'; Rico Isaacs, *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan: Between Formal and Informal Politics*, London: Routledge, 2011; Adele Del Sordi, *The Party of Power of Kazakhstan: The origins, resources and regime-supporting functions of Nur Otan*, PhD thesis, IMT Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy, 2012.

19. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', p. 315.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

of powers. As per competences, Nazarbayev was to withdraw from everyday matters to focus «on strategic development planning, representation of the state and foreign affairs, as well as national security and defense».²¹

Altogether, the reform seemed more to confirm Nazarbayev's primary role in the political system, rather than diminishing it. The modifications introduced by the reform were limited, even of «cosmetic nature», as they neither changed the over-centralised nature of political power nor took steps to improve the country's human rights record.²² The lack of political pluralism, moreover, made the changes even less significant.²³ At the same time, the gradual nature of the reform appeared to be coherent with the slow and unique path chosen by Kazakhstan for its democratisation. It may pave the way for a more substantial transfer of powers in the future, especially when Nazarbayev steps down from office. As noted by the constitutional expert Carna Pistan, however weak and introduced only on a constitutional level, «the construction of a system of checks and balances designed to prevent the accumulation of power... could serve as a mechanism to prevent potential political instability», possibly forcing his successor «to share power with other institutions, thus creating, paradoxically, unintended but more amenable conditions for a real transformation of Kazakhstan into a truly pluralistic and democratic order».²⁴

3. The adoption of the Latin alphabet: a step towards the modernisation of national identity and Kazakhisation

The transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin alphabet was listed as the first concrete step to realise the president's programme for the modernisation of society, released in April 2017.²⁵ The National Commission for the Modernization of Society, also created in April, included a group of linguists entrusted with working out a system of transcription.²⁶ One of the official reasons for the reform was globalisation: a Latin alphabet would make it easier for Kazakhstan to integrate into the global digital space, as well as facilitate communication with Kazakh people living abroad.²⁷ A much more important explanation was the promotion of the

21. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'.

22. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', pp. 323-324.

23. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan'.

24. *Ibid.*

25. 'Kazakh President lays out principles for modernisation of nation's identity'.

26. 'Kazakhstan Cheers New Alphabet, Except for All Those Apostrophes', *The New York Times*, 15 January 2018.

27. 'Казахстан: латиница против кириллицы' (Kazakhstan: Latin script vs Cyrillic script), *Deutsche Welle*, 20 February 2018.

Kazakh language and national identity. This was not the first time that a change of script had been on the agenda as the return to a Latin alphabet, which had been briefly in use in the first years of the Soviet Union, was discussed in 1989.²⁸ In 2007, the Ministry of Education conducted a feasibility study and recommended the transition to a Latin alphabet as a measure to reverse Russification and strengthen the Kazakh national identity.²⁹ More concretely, «Strategy Kazakhstan 2050», presented in 2012, fixed the year 2025 as the deadline for passing from a Cyrillic to a Latin script.³⁰ For a long time, however, the authorities moved very slowly in this direction, possibly in consequence of their reluctance to make ethnic nationalism an essential component of Kazakhstan's state-building. As noted by Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, since independence Kazakhstan has been undecided between ethnic and civic nationalism as possible foundations of its state-building. While taking some steps in favour of creating a nation-state based on the Kazakh ethnicity, language and culture, this was always tempered by attempts to create a more civic identity, based on the harmonious co-existence of different ethnic groups – including Russians, Koreans, Tatars, Ukrainians, Polish, Uzbeks and Germans. The main reason for this was the delicate demographic balance at the moment of independence: at that time, ethnic Kazakhs were less than half of the population, while there still remained a significant number of Russians.³¹ The demographic conditions had already started to shift in the 1990s, because of outmigration (many Russians migrated to the Russian Federation), the natural process of ageing of the population and a limited repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs, previously living in China and Mongolia.³² Change, however, was slow and, as mentioned, the building of an ethnic-based Kazakh nation was balanced with the promotion of civic nationalism. The leadership managed to reconcile these two tendencies by delaying and softening the most hardline nationalist policy measures, and by establishing institutions such as the Assembly of Nations in which all local ethnic groups were represented.³³ The adoption of ambivalent policies in support of the Kazakh language was an example

28. 'Казакстан: лагиница против кириллицы'.

29. In a process sometimes referred to as Kazakhisation. Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Rob Kevlihan. 'Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno-nationalist state-building'. *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2013, pp. 337-356.

30. 'Переход на лагиницу: цена вопроса' (Transition to the Latin script: the price of the matter), *Ratel.kz*, 1 November 2017.

31. In 1989, Kazakhs were 40.1% of the total population, while Russians were 37.4%. Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, 2010, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 293

32. Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*, pp. 174-7. For the repatriation of the Kazakh kin diaspora (also known as Oralman), see Alexander C. Diener, 'Kazakhstan's Kin State Diaspora: Settlement Planning and the Oralman Dilemma', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2005, pp. 327-348.

33. Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Rob Kevlihan, 'Threading a needle', p. 335-38.

of this trend.³⁴ While Kazakh was declared the only official language by the constitution of 1993, Russian was acknowledged as a language of «interethnic communication».³⁵ Even when the 1997 Language on Law eliminated this special position, Russian maintained a quasi-official status, as the same law established that it should be used on equal grounds as Kazakh, as the language of state agencies and local self-government administrations. Due to the presence of relevant Russian-language educational institutions and mass media, as well as the reluctance of authorities, the situation did not significantly change in later years.³⁶ However, more recently the situation appears to have changed: recent demographic developments might open the way to bolder Kazakhisation policies in the future. The out-migration of Russians was continuing steadily, although at a slower pace; the Russian and Kazakh populations were taking opposite trajectories, with the Russian population ageing and diminishing over time. At the same time, ethnic Kazakhs became more and more part of the urban population, reversing the demographic balance in previously Russian-majority cities. All these factors, according to the expert Marlene Laruelle, point to a decided shift towards the prevalence of ethnic Kazakhs all over the country, including the northern regions, traditionally hosting a Russian majority.³⁷ While the country was still divided, and the Russian question was still present, Laruelle predicts that it might not be salient in the future. These conditions should favour, in her opinion, a more decidedly ethno-nationalistic state-building, namely a move «from Kazakhstan-ness to Kazakhness».³⁸ It remains to be seen whether the authorities will embrace ethnic nationalist state-building with more decisiveness than they have done so far. The caution demon-

34. *Ibid.*, p. 337. On language policies, see also the articles written by William Fierman, 'Kazakh Language and Prospects for Its Role in Kazakh «Groupness»' *Ab Imperio* 2005, Vol. 2, 2005, pp 393-423; 'Identity, Symbolism and the Politics of Identity in Central Asia'. *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, n. 7, 2009, pp. 1207-1228 and 'Russian in post-Soviet Central Asia: a comparison with the states of the Baltic and South Caucasus', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, n. 6, 2012, pp. 1077-1100.

35. Aziz Burkhanov, 'Kazakhstan's National Identity – Building Policy: Soviet Legacy, State Efforts, and Societal Reactions', *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50, n. 1, 2017, p. 6.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Marlene Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move'. Lecture given at the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies (CERES), Georgetown University, 8 February 2018.

38. Kazakhstanness means the civic-based national identity in a multinational country, whereas Kazakhness implies the national identification based on the feeling of belonging to the Kazakh ethnic group. Marlene Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move'. There are signs that the country might be moving in this direction even more quickly than anticipated by Laruelle: at the beginning of 2018 Nazarbayev announced that the government was going to work exclusively in Kazakh. 'Lost in translation? Kazakh leader bans cabinet from speaking Russian', *Reuters*, 27 February 2018.

strated by the authorities since independence, and the fear of social consequences, might slow down the process very significantly.

The adoption of the Latin script is a step, albeit a small one, in that direction, because it creates further distance with the Russian-speaking world. It is not by chance that its main critics are the Russian nationalists and the Russian Orthodox Church, decrying this as a «sell-out to the west and an attack on Russian culture».³⁹ They are not the only ones to be concerned. Local commentators mention the difficulty of respecting the 2015 deadline, and how authorities may have underestimated the costs of transition.⁴⁰ The intellectuals, moreover, are worried about the country's cultural heritage, which at the moment exists almost exclusively in the Cyrillic script.⁴¹ The majority of the population, however, has been sympathetic to the project. The linguists of the National Commission for the Modernisation of Society issued some proposals in the summer of 2017, which invited the public to submit its feedback.⁴² By the end of September, they received more than 1,600 suggestions and remarks on the project.⁴³ Nazarbayev then took the matter into his own hands by picking one of the options and declaring it adopted by decree on 26 October 2017.⁴⁴

The transcription chosen had the advantage of not requiring extra letters or signs, but was not unproblematic: nine of the sounds of Kazakh were rendered by adding an apostrophe to the corresponding letter, making the written words very hard to read and cumbersome to type.⁴⁵ The lively popular discussion continued online, and resulted, in the following months, in a new plan. On 19 February 2018, Nazarbayev issued a second decree, which amended the October document by adopting a different version of the alphabet, one that uses French-style accents instead of apostrophes.⁴⁶

39. 'Kazakhstan Cheers New Alphabet'.

40. 'Переход на латиницу: цена вопроса'.

41. 'Что известные казахстанские деятели говорили о латинизации казахского алфавита' (What well-known Kazakhstani stakeholders said about the latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet), *Kavavan*, 27 November 2017; Almas Chukin, 'Язык - это наследие, которое при смене алфавита мы теряем' (Language is a heritage we are going to lose through the change of alphabet), *Ratel.kz*, 22 September 2017.

42. 'Казахстанцам предложили направить свои предложения по латинизации в профильные госучреждения' (The Kazakhstanis were offered to send their proposals for latinisation to the relevant state institutions), *Inform.kz*, 12 September 2017.

43. 'Переход на латиницу: Казахстанцы предложили свои варианты нового алфавита' (Transition to the Latin alphabet: the Kazakhstanis advanced their proposals for the new alphabet). *Tengri News*, 29 September 2017.

44. Decree of the President of Kazakhstan N. 569 of 26 October 2017 (http://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/o-perevide-alfavita-kazahskogo-yazyka-s-kirillicy-na-latinskuyu-grafiku).

45. 'Kazakhstan Cheers New Alphabet'.

46. Decree of the President of Kazakhstan N. 637 of 19 February 2018 (http://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/o-vnesenii-izmeneniya-v-ukaz-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-ot-26-oktyabrya-2017-goda-569-o-perevide-alfavita-kazahskogo-yazyka-s-kirillicy).

While still receiving some criticism, the new version was far more welcome than the previous one and seemed likely to be confirmed.

The sudden change of the president's decision, to accommodate what looked like the general wish, could be an example of what Marlene Laruelle defines as Nazarbayev's capacity to get in tune with the population. In this, as in his modernisation programme, the president has demonstrated his ability and willingness to recognise changes in society and to accommodate the new mind-set while avoiding confrontation and disruption. Although orchestrated from the top, Soviet-style, the modernisation project and the alphabet transition were part of his strategy of adjustment to popular values.⁴⁷ Popular consultations, too, were possibly a way to get more feedback from the Kazakhstanis, in a context where elections give no opportunities for making individual preferences heard by the government. It's possible that the authorities resorted to these forms of public consultation to increase their «input legitimacy», creating an appearance of «government responsiveness». Similar to that which had been done in the past through initiatives coordinated by the presidential party Nur Otan, the direct involvement of the population in the decision-making process may serve to create the impression of a higher responsiveness of the regime to the needs of its people.⁴⁸

It remains to be seen whether the Kazakhisation project will be taken on with more decisiveness than in the past. The adoption of the Latin script was undoubtedly a step in that direction. However, with large numbers of Kazakhstanis still using Russian for their media consumption and everyday communications, and the president's track record for caution and protection of the inter-ethnic balance, change might be still be slow or of short duration.⁴⁹

47. Marlene Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move'.

48. Adele Del Sordi, 'Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan', in Joachim Ahrens, Martin Brusis & Martin Schulze Wessel (eds.), *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, pp. 72-96, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

49. In a report written for the Central Asia Data Review, Aminov and his co-authors present various statistics to demonstrate that Russian is still widely used in Kazakhstan. For instance, in 2010 Russian was still widely used for watching TV, reading newspapers and in public places (about 79% of the population of Kazakhstan). The same report also highlights the increasing age of the population strata that use Russian prevalently (aged 45-55 at the time of the survey, these are the people who were educated and began their career in the years of the highest development of socialism in the USSR); conversely, young people seem to use Kazakh more and more frequently, predicting a larger diffusion of Kazakh in the future. K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, & Y. Uulu, 'Language use and language policy in Central Asia', *Central Asia Regional Data Review*, Vol. 2, n. 1, 2010, pp. 2-3.

4. Embracing global trends: the economy and the internet

4.1 Out of the crisis through oil-led growth: a fragile recovery?

In 2017, Kazakhstan's economy started to pick up from the crisis of the previous years. In the first nine months of the year, GDP growth rose by 4.3% year on year, compared to 0.4% registered in 2016 in the same period.⁵⁰ According to observers of the World Bank, the growth was essentially led by the strengthening of the external environment, particularly the increased demand for oil from Russia and the EU. Higher oil prices and the production launch of the Kashagan offshore oil field in the Caspian Sea were the drivers of the recovery of Kazakhstan's oil sector.⁵¹ There were positive effects on the other sectors of the economy, particularly on manufacturing, agriculture, trade, transports, as well as oil-related constructions.⁵² At the same time, increases in public investments, particularly in the shape of subsidies and other forms of support to the population, contributed to heighten the domestic demand for energy and goods.⁵³ The World Bank, however, also underlined elements of fragility in this recovery: the externally-driven growth was still not securing the population from further external shocks, which may result in larger numbers of people falling below the poverty line.⁵⁴ Moreover, the decrease in foreign investments is putting pressure on the national currency, the tenge (whose distinctive symbol, chosen in 2007, is ₸).⁵⁵

In 2017 the authorities worked to consolidate the financial sector, by adjusting the oil fund rule and debt management practices. Under pressure from the tenge depreciation in the previous years, inflation led the authorities to go back on the decision to ease the monetary policy taken at the beginning of 2017.⁵⁶ The local authorities seemed convinced that the current levels of inflation were normal and that the population was starting to regain trust in the local currency, as signalled by the decrease of the bank

50. 'The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil', World Bank Country Economic Update, Fall 2017, p.1.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

52. Catherine Putz, 'Kazakhstan Set for Economic Recovery, But What Next?', *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2017.

53. 'The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil', p. 7.

54. The World Bank report demonstrates that, while falling steadily in the long term, the poverty rate increased in line with external shocks, such as the 2009 global financial crisis and the 2015 economy contraction due to the global lowering of oil prices. 'The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil', p. 7.

55. The tenge had to be devaluated repeatedly in the previous two years. See Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: Balancing Regime Stability Amidst Local And Global Challenges'.

56. 'The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil', p. 9.

deposits in foreign currency in 2017.⁵⁷ More, however, will be required of the authorities to improve the country's dependence from external shocks, for instance by boosting the development of the private sector,⁵⁸ as well as implementing a serious programme for fighting corruption at all levels.⁵⁹

4.2 *The Cyber Shield concept*

In continuity with previous years, the authorities of Kazakhstan have been struggling with the management of their internet sector, trying to balance their growing need for security, particularly in the face of terrorism threats, while at the same time embracing new technologies to boost economic development.⁶⁰ In 2017, the balance seemed to lean towards firmer control: the number of people arrested on charges of extremism and incitement of hatred increased.⁶¹ Moreover, in November 2017, the Majilis adopted amendments to the laws on information and communication, which effectively banned anonymous commenting online: registration and text-message-based identity proof was going to be required. While the requirements were not necessarily problematic, the lack of information regarding the rules created a climate where members of the public can be easily punished for expressing their opinions online.⁶² The local expert Anna Gussarova points at the lack of public information and citizens' education about what constitutes a violation of the Penal Code and the Law on Extremism as possible reasons for the significant increase in the number of arrests on charges of «extremism» in the last few years. According to Gussarova, also the ban on anonymous messages was likely to increase the vulnerability of citizens, especially if not accompanied by proper information.⁶³ Indeed, while the need for more internet security was hardly problematic *per se*, the growing securitisation and the ambiguity that characterised both internet-related legislation and its application were sources of concern amongst local and international critics.⁶⁴

57. 'Экономика Казахстана. Итоги 2017 года' (The Economy of Kazakhstan: results of 2017). *Infombrvo.kz*, 27 December 2017.

58. 'The Economy is Rising: It is Still All About Oil', pp. 15-20.

59. Catherine Putz, 'Kazakhstan Set for Economic Recovery, But What Next?',

60. Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: Balancing Regime Stability Amidst Local And Global Challenges'.

61. As reported by Kazakhstan's information security expert Anna Gussarova, Kazakhstani courts opened 1,039 Article 174 cases in 2017, compared to a total of only 131 in the 2008-2012 period. Anna Gussarova, 'Countering Extremism vs. Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan', *Central Asia Program Fellows*, Paper 201, 2018, p. 3.

62. Anna Gussarova, 'Countering Extremism vs. Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan'.

63. In some cases, the same legislation is used to target political opponents. Anna Gussarova, 'Countering Extremism vs. Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan'.

64. 'Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy. Kazakhstan Profile', *Freedom House*.

The most important innovation in 2017, the introduction of the «Cyber Shield» information security programme, was in part trying to address these issues, by adding a dimension of public education. Nazarbayev had announced the concept in his January Message to the Nation.⁶⁵ At the end of October, an action plan was approved, with the goal of implementing the project by 2022.⁶⁶ The document provided a comprehensive overview of the areas of state policy that were required to build a system to mitigate and prevent cyber-attacks and threats from hybrid warfare.⁶⁷ The initiative stemmed from the awareness that the increasing use of new technologies for economic diversification and information brings with it new challenges, particularly higher vulnerability to cyber-attacks.⁶⁸ Nazarbayev himself emphasised how this is a matter of «national security», and that new wars do not use only «aircraft or tanks».⁶⁹ The relevance of internet-based connections for extremist and terrorist cells in the west of the country also constituted a powerful drive for increased information security.⁷⁰

The Cyber-Shield concept was innovative and different from what had ever previously been done in Kazakhstan, in that it involves multiple actors and stakeholders; namely not only the government but also companies, the research community and citizens. In her analysis of the original document, internet expert Gussarova found that it aimed at reaching several main objectives. The first was the gradual development of locally-produced software, which would decrease the reliance on foreign security products; the second was an increase of international cooperation, both at the multilateral and bilateral levels – particularly with Russia; the third was the creation of new institutions, such as the Council for Cybersecurity and a National Coordination Centre for Information Security; and finally, a programme for improving citizens' knowledge of information security practices, both at the everyday level (programmes for school children and office workers) and at the specialised level (increase of scholarships for students of IT-related subjects).⁷¹

65. Nursultan Nazarbayev, 'Послание Президента Республики Казахстан Н.Назарбаева народу Казахстана'.

66. The implementation of the "Cyber Shield" is expected to happen in two phases, in the years 2017-2018 and 2019-2020. Farkhad Sharip, 'Encroaching Extremism in West Kazakhstan: A Challenge for «Cyber Shields»', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, n. 112, 14 September 2017.

67. Anna Gussarova, 'Kazakhstan Launches «Cyber Shield» Concept', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14 n. 150, 20 November 2017.

68. Anna Gussarova, 'Kazakhstan Adapts to the Cyber Age', *per Concordiam* 7, n. 2, 2016, pp. 34-39.

69. Anna Gussarova, 'Kazakhstan Launches 'Cyber Shield'.

70. Farkhad Sharip, 'Encroaching Extremism in West Kazakhstan: A Challenge for «Cyber Shield»'.

71. Anna Gussarova, 'Kazakhstan Launches 'Cyber Shield'.

The Cyber-Shield project places Kazakhstan more firmly among those countries who advocate for a national approach of internet management and control: Nazarbayev was one of the early leaders to talk of «electronic sovereignty», and the push towards locally-produced internet security software confirmed this trend.⁷² At the same time, the plan of enhancing cooperation with international organisations seemed to leave the door open for dialogue. The project also confirmed the authorities' preference for securitising the internet, where control and security are chosen over the free expression of opinions online.

The country was certainly in need of making the internet a safer place, especially with the increasing use of e-commerce and raising digitalisation of citizens' private information through the e.government platform.⁷³ However, the methods used, and the high numbers of citizens ending up unwittingly committing internet crimes or being punished for their political activity, signalled the need for security to be prioritised with respect to individual freedoms.

5. The international outlook: yet another year of high-profile international engagement

5.1 EXPO 2017 Astana

The international exhibition EXPO 2017 was arguably the Kazakhstani diplomacy's biggest achievement of 2017. Held in the country's capital Astana between June and September, the specialised exhibition – a smaller event than World EXPO – focused on the theme of sustainable and renewable energy sources under the slogan of «Future Energy». International exhibitions are an effective showcase of a country's potential regarding organisational and financial capacity, and are said to be an effective tool of «nation branding».⁷⁴

EXPO Astana 2017 can be seen as one of Kazakhstan's attempts to brand itself as a successful country, offering a favourable environment for investments, gaining a more relevant international position and emerging

72. *Ibid.*

73. Anna Gussarova, 'Kazakhstan Adapts to the Cyber Age'.

74. Nation branding can be defined as a set of political moves by state officials to secure power in comparison to other states. See Asli İğsiz, 'From Alliance of Civilizations to Branding the Nation: Turkish Studies, Image Wars and Politics of Comparison in an Age of Neoliberalism', *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2014, pp. 689-704. The Bureau of International Exhibitions openly defines the EXPO as a «tool for nation branding and development». 'What is an EXPO?', *Bureau International des Expositions Website* (<http://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/expos/about-expos/what-is-an-expo>).

as a fashionable travel destination.⁷⁵ In the words of Nazarbayev, «Astana EXPO-2017 for Kazakhstan is an important image-building project».⁷⁶

The process can be recognised as being present in the discourse of Kazakhstani officials. The authorities tried to brand Kazakhstan as a global actor in the field of sustainable and renewable sources of energy. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan's reliance on green energy is still negligible,⁷⁷ EXPO 2017 Astana was presented as a unique platform for other countries to learn each other's best practices. Akhmetzhan Yessimov, Chairman of the Astana EXPO 2017 National Company's Management Board, while in Washington DC for a promotional visit in the spring of 2017, declared that «Kazakhstan, however far away it might seem, will bring together the world's latest best practices. These practices will inevitably facilitate progress and it can be said that they are aimed at the future rather than [merely] being today's developments».⁷⁸ The Kazakhstani leadership also used the EXPO to confirm its image as a reliable economic partner and political ally.

The event served as a platform for other diplomatic commitments and as an example of Kazakhstan's engagement in global markets and multilateral relations. The EXPO infrastructure was built with the goal of hosting the Astana International Financial Centre, established in 2015, which is supposed to operate exclusively in English and under a special legal regime with the purpose of attracting foreign investment.⁷⁹ The exhibition itself was the occasion for bilateral meetings with foreign leaders, for the signature of new trade agreements, and provided the venue for the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (on which more below). Finally, EXPO served, as intended by the leadership, to place Kazakhstan more firmly in the group of developed countries, distancing it from the still developing world.

This was one of Nazarbayev's long-term goals and one of the pillars of the regime's domestic legitimation.⁸⁰ In his speech in Washington DC,

75. On Kazakhstan's nation branding see: Adrien Fauve, 'Global Astana: nation branding as a legitimization tool for authoritarian regimes', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, n. 1, 2015, pp. 110-124; Adele Del Sordi & Emanuela Dalmasso, 'The Relation Between External and Internal Authoritarian Legitimation: The Religious Foreign policy of Morocco and Kazakhstan', *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, forthcoming in 2018.

76. 'Nazarbayev on why Kazakhstan decided to host Astana EXPO-2017', *Kabar*, 18 June 2017.

77. Paolo Sorbello, 'EXPO Astana: Behind the Glitz. An expensive billboard for Kazakhstan's slow transition to clean energy', *The Diplomat*, 1 August 2017.

78. Shai Baitel, 'Kazakhstan's EXPO 2017 - A Country Shows Leadership', *The Huffington Post*, without date.

79. Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan', p. 303.

80. E.g.: Diana Kudaibergenova, 'The ideology of development and legitimation: beyond «Kazakhstan 2030»', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2015, pp. 440-455; Adele Del Sordi, 'Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan'.

Yessimov repeatedly remarked on the difference between Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian countries. He declared that:

Kazakhstan is a leader in our region, in Central Asia, and these are not just words. It is reflected in indicators, such as the GDP and GDP per capita. For instance, the budget or GDP of Almaty – where I served as mayor for seven years – alone are larger than those of all other republics of Central Asia put together, except for Uzbekistan. It equals 80 percent of the GDP of Uzbekistan, the population of which totals almost 30 million people, while the number of residents amounts to a mere 2 million people.⁸¹

On the same occasion, Nazarbayev added that: «certainly, while things are not perfect in Kazakhstan [...] it is, on the whole, doing pretty well for itself and certainly much better than its other Central Asian neighbors».⁸²

With some exceptions, these efforts to promote the country's image were positively received by the international community, and the international praise has been relayed to the domestic discourse, possibly with the goal of boosting externally-based domestic legitimation.⁸³

5.2 *Diplomatic successes and regional issues*

The leadership of Kazakhstan is known for its proactive engagement in diplomatic processes and international organisations. Defined as «the most proactive and innovative former Soviet republic in the sphere of international cooperation», Kazakhstan has for years made a constant effort to establish the country as a «reliable and constructive international actor».⁸⁴ In 2017, these efforts were crowned by the beginning of the long-coveted term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council

81. Shai Baitel, 'Kazakhstan's EXPO 2017 - A Country Shows Leadership'.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Adele Del Sordi, 'In the Hall of Mirrors: EXPO 2017 Astana as a Case Study of Global Authoritarian Legitimation'. Paper prepared for the panel «How do authoritarian regimes deal with the quest of legitimacy?», American Political Science Association Conference, 30 August – 4 September 2017. See also: Adele Del Sordi & Emanuela Dalmasso, 'The Relation Between External and Internal Authoritarian Legitimation: The Religious Foreign policy of Morocco and Kazakhstan'; and Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: Balancing Regime Stability Amidst Local And Global Challenges'.

84. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies Programme, Washington DC-Stockholm*, 2015, p. 7; Adele Del Sordi, 'Kazakhstan 2015-2016: Balancing Regime Stability Amidst Local And Global Challenges', pp. 455-60.

(UNSC). Kazakhstan had submitted to a «gruelling six-year campaign» to obtain the role, with the goal of confirming its willingness to play a constructive role in international affairs.⁸⁵ In January 2017, President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressed the UNSC and set the priorities of Kazakhstan's two-year term as a member. These included: 1) achieving a world free of nuclear weapons; 2) eliminating the threat of a global war and reaching the settlement of local conflicts; 3) promoting the interests of Central Asia while strengthening regional security and cooperation; 4) countering terrorism; 5) promoting peace and security in Africa; 6) ensuring an inextricable link between security and sustainable development; 7) adapting the Security Council and the entire UN system to the threats and challenges of the 21st century.⁸⁶

Another success of the Kazakhstani diplomacy was the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), held in Astana in June 2017. On that occasion, the organisation welcomed two new full members, India and Pakistan, which had previously participated in the SCO as observers. The event was defined as «a truly historic event that has opened a new page in the organisation's history».⁸⁷ Besides the enlargement, particularly significant in terms of population, the event was relevant because it reaffirmed the priorities of the organisation – regional stability and cooperation in various sectors, including energy, trade, and security.⁸⁸ Among these areas of international cooperation, security remains the most important. A new SCO Convention on Countering Extremism was signed in Astana on 9 June 2017. In the words of its proponents, it «will help consolidate the international legal framework to confront new challenges and threats».⁸⁹ Consistent with its image as indefatigable mediator, in the

85. Johan Engvall & Svante E. Cornell, 'Asserting Statehood', p. 61. 'In Historic Win, Kazakhstan Elected to UN Security Council for 2017-2018', *The Astana Times*, 28 June 2016, also published in the website of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington.

86. Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Policy Address to the Security Council of the United Nations: Kazakhstan's Concept And Vision for Sustaining Global Partnerships for a Secure, Just and Prosperous World*, 1 January 2017 (<https://www.kazakhembus.com/kazakhstan-president-unscc-nursultan-nazarbayev>).

87. 'SCO Astana summit: Historic decisions, new prospects', *SCO Official Website*, 12 June 2017 (<http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20170612/296163.html>).

88. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, *The Astana declaration of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, Astana, 9 June 2017 (eng.sectsc.org/load/297146).

89. The Astana Declaration confirmed that the priorities of the SCO are «to counter common security challenges and threats, deepen dialogue and cooperation to ensure comprehensive security, primarily in fighting terrorism, including cyber-terrorism, separatism, extremism, cross-border organised crime, illicit drug trafficking, and to strengthen international information security and emergency response». *The Astana declaration of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, p. 1.

autumn of 2017 Kazakhstan also hosted negotiations between parties involved in the Syrian conflict. The seventh round of the Astana Process on Syria resulted in the adoption of a Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey regarding the issues of a comprehensive settlement.⁹⁰

In spite of its successes at managing international relations, Kazakhstan experienced considerable difficulties in its neighbourhood. In the autumn of 2017, Kazakhstan and neighbouring Kyrgyzstan had heated exchanges and proceeded to increase the control at their borders, endangering the working of the already fragile Eurasian Economic Union. The diplomatic rift started in September: a visit to Astana of the opposition candidate to the upcoming presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan gave way to speculations about Kazakhstan's attempt at influencing the outcome of the electoral process. Almazbek Atambayev, the then-president of Kyrgyzstan, was very vocal about Kazakhstan's lack of appreciation of democratic practices.⁹¹ The rift developed in the temporary closure of borders, on Kazakhstan's side under the pretext of controlling the flow of contraband goods from China and of mistrusting the standards of Kyrgyzstan's veterinary and sanitary controls.⁹² While relations between the two countries had improved by the end of the year, the issues at the basis of the diplomatic rift remain unresolved.⁹³

Most importantly, the event questioned the ability of Kazakhstan to play the wished-for role of being the economic heart of Eurasia: even if in a superior position in terms of trade and economic power, Kazakhstan discovered that its influence on Kyrgyzstan, and by extension on the region, was limited.⁹⁴ From this perspective, the superiority of Kazakhstan over its Central Asian neighbours, so assiduously projected at the international level in connection with EXPO 2017, appeared doubtful.

6. Conclusions

This essay argues that Kazakhstan engaged in a proactive stabilisation of its political system in 2017. In an economic situation more developed than in previous years but still susceptible to external shocks, Kazakhstan's

90. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *The statement on the outcomes of the seventh round of the Astana Process on Syria*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 31 October 2017 (<http://mfa.kz/en/content-view/obitogah-sedmogo-raunda-astaninskogo-processa-po-sirii-2>).

91. Ian Bremmer, 'Q&A: Kyrgyzstan's President on Democracy, Islam, and Being Friends with Putin', *Time.com*, 9 October 2017.

92. Andrew Witthoef, 'Kazakhstan's Border Spat With Kyrgyzstan: More Than Just a Speed Bump', *The Diplomat*, 13 December 2017.

93. Catherine Putz, 'Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan Make Up, Move Forward', *The Diplomat*, 5 December 2017.

94. Andrew Witthoef, 'Kazakhstan's Border Spat With Kyrgyzstan: More Than Just a Speed Bump'.

authorities tried to prevent, and prepare for, possible future challenges. Leadership succession was definitely the most important of these challenges – a future event not yet determined, but certainly increasingly near, in consideration of the age of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, and somehow foreshadowed by the succession in Uzbekistan in 2016. The modifications in the country's constitution introduced in 2017 aimed at consolidating the president's status and at smoothing the process of succession. The reform marginally corrected the current balance of powers, heavily skewed in favour of the presidency, by giving more relevance to the government and parliament. While critics considered the reform as merely cosmetic, it may still pave the way for a more substantial transfer of powers when Nazarbayev steps down from office. The new system of checks and balances could be effective in preventing instability, and, moreover, could force Nazarbayev's successor to share power with other institutions, even opening up the system to wider change.⁹⁵

The leadership has taken a proactive role also in the so-called modernisation of society, most likely as a result of societal and demographic changes. In April 2017, Nazarbayev issued the article *Course towards the future: modernisation of Kazakhstan's identity*, in which he set out an ambitious plan for the modernisation of Kazakhstan's identity and society. In it, he called the citizens of Kazakhstan to be more culturally open, proficient in computer use and foreign languages, pragmatic, patriotic, open-minded as well as strongly focused on knowledge and «evolutionary development».⁹⁶ The adoption of a Latin script for the Kazakh language was a central point of the modernisation programme. Long discussed but always delayed for fear of disrupting the delicate ethnic balance in the country, the adoption of a Latin script implied a step away from the Russian-speaking world and might be the first of several policies aiming at building a national identity based on Kazakh ethnicity.⁹⁷ It remains to be seen, however, how long it will take to achieve the full Kazakhisation of the country.

Finally, measures have been taken to proactively address the challenges coming from cyber-attacks and «hybrid warfare». The «Cyber Shield» project introduced a promising multi-level approach to information security, involving not only government structures but also the business and research communities as well as citizenship. However, it did not do much to correct the current securitising approach, privileging the protection of security and national interests rather than the guarantee of individual freedoms.

Internationally, in 2017 Kazakhstan continued to promote its position as a reliable international ally and partner and to brand itself as a successful

95. Carna Pistan, 'Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan: increasing democracy without political pluralism?'.

96. 'Kazakh President lays out principles for modernisation of nation's identity'.

97. Marlene Laruelle, 'Kazakhstan's Nationhood: Politics and Society on the Move'.

country, with a dynamic economy and attractive environment for foreign investments. It did so through the organisation of high profile events, such as EXPO Astana 2017, and through the engagement in bi-lateral and multi-lateral diplomacy. The attempt to use EXPO to «brand» Kazakhstan as a developed country implied Kazakhstan's superiority towards its Central Asian neighbours. This image was somehow contradicted later in the year, when a diplomatic rift with Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that Kazakhstan was still some way from taking the coveted position as the economic heart of Eurasia.