

**Diana T. Kudaibergenova.** *Toward Nationalizing Regimes: Conceptualizing Power and Identity in the Post-Soviet Realm (Central Eurasia in Context)*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. 240 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4617-5.



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## Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Realm

Diana T. Kudaibergenova's *Toward Nationalizing Regimes: Conceptualizing Power and Identity in the Post-Soviet Realm* is a study of power relations and nation-building processes in post-Soviet states. Kudaibergenova is concerned with the construction of dominant discourses, the individuals who are privy to this process, and the impact of these individuals on political development. Kudaibergenova utilizes what she terms a framework of "nationalizing regimes," which refers to the importance of political elites within post-Soviet states in curating a particular national discourse as the legitimizing means to utilize institutions, both formally and informally, as a method to "regulate ... the actions and behaviors of participating and ruling power elites," as well as responses from broader society (p. 176).

Political elites engaged in post-Soviet nation-building processes were initially concerned with "ascribing history, territory, and culture to the dominant ethnic group[s] and [rooted the achieve-

ments of these ethnic groups] as far back in history as possible" (p. 37). By centering the evolving hegemonic narratives of newly independent states on "titular" ethnic groups--Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Latvians in Latvia--elites discursively placed sizeable groups of national minorities "outside of the nation" despite their presence within the territorial bounds of the state (p. 18). The exclusionary nature of nationalizing regimes toward those constructed as national minorities is an issue particularly suited for Kudaibergenova's examples of Kazakhstan and Latvia, as both states had considerable Russian populations--identifying as such either through their ethnic or linguistic identity--with numbers rivaling the titular ethnic groups directly after these states' independence in 1991. The selection of Kazakhstan and Latvia as the focus of this work also allows Kudaibergenova to contrast post-Soviet states that have taken notably divergent paths of political development, analyzing the nation-building process in a nondemocrat-

ic and democratic context respectively. However, despite their outward structural differences, Kudaibergenova contends that both states are “hybrid” regimes in which there are varying degrees of plurality in regard to “views and identities but [ultimately] an exclusivist monopoly over decision making in nation-building, citizenship, and access to elections” (p. 47).

Throughout *Toward Nationalizing Regimes*, Kudaibergenova argues that Latvia’s democracy is an “ethnic electoral democracy,” in that, despite freedom of the press and nominally open elections, the state’s sizeable Russian minority is largely excluded from political participation (p. 176). Policies including *jus sanguinis* citizenship rights, language requirements for citizenship and employment, and the deprivation of “political rights for noncitizens, most of whom were ethnic Russians and so-called Russian-speaking communities,” allows the Latvian power elite to restrict who has access to the political process (p. 29). Restricting the ability of minority ethnic groups to engage with the elite selection process of elections was seen as a necessary tool to safeguard the state from non-Latvians, legitimized by claims of “perceived legal and historical injustices” done to Latvia by the Soviet Union throughout the twentieth century (p. 61). Additionally, institutional strategies, such as coalition building within the parliament, act as a further detriment to those who would seek to gain political power while not properly engaging with the hegemonic national discourse. In chapter 3, Kudaibergenova focuses on the electoral history of Latvia’s Harmony party, a centrist party committed to supporting multiculturalism while presenting itself as neither explicitly pro-Russian nor pro-Latvian. After receiving a plurality of votes in the 2011 parliamentary election, Harmony was subsequently obstructed from forming a government by a coalition of pro-Latvian parties. This alliance, composed of parties that normally opposed each other, was able to find common interest in restricting the success of a party that deviated from the “previously estab-

lished political consensus on Latvian nation-building,” highlighting the importance of adherence to the national discourse in the space of political power contestation (p. 116).

In the case of Kazakhstan, the nationalizing process is largely dominated by ex-president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Elite selection in Kazakhstan is an unambiguously closed process, despite formal proclamations of democratization. The stability of power elites is entirely contingent on their loyalty to Nazarbayev, who has had “full control over decision making on national discourses and major state-building programs” (p. 41). Kudaibergenova contends throughout the book that Nazarbayev’s premier place in the Kazakh nationalizing regime extends past his resignation as president in 2019. The focus on individuals within the state apparatus is indicative of the nation-building process in Kazakhstan, where the power elite have discursively positioned themselves as the curators of a state which has been founded upon a “living body of institutions” and from which the wider populace is separated and subsequently beholden to (p. 41). However, unlike the case of Latvia, Kazakh political society does not deprive its minority populations of political rights afforded to the titular ethnic groups. Rather, elite selection and political competition are largely closed to Kazakh citizenry regardless of their national belonging.

The ultimate consequence of these nationalizing regimes’ policies is the continual decline of political participation due to feelings of disenfranchisement among both minority populations and titular ethnic groups. In Latvia, this is embodied in a vast out-migration, distrust toward the state apparatus, and weak engagement in the political process, whereas in Kazakhstan this has largely depoliticized citizens to the issue of nation-building in favor of material issues, such as “economic prosperity and stability” (p. 173). Particularly in chapter 5, Kudaibergenova is thorough in utilizing sociological data on a range of issues, including individuals’ belief in their ability to affect govern-

ment policy, opinions on citizenship rights, and personal investment in politics, in order to present her argument. This data is often organized to present the variance in the responses of minority populations compared to titular ethnic groups. Some of the data from Latvia is notably more comprehensive than the data presented in the sections regarding Kazakhstan, although Kudaibergenova directly addresses the reason for this, mentioning that it is largely due to a lack of “a coherent set of barometers and archives of available data in this regard,” and that this is an issue intrinsic to carrying out sociological work in Central Asia more broadly, an issue that is not the case in the Baltics (p. 182). Reflecting the importance that she ascribes to political elites in the process of nationalizing regimes, Kudaibergenova conducted interviews with various Kazakh and Latvian politicians, often interjecting transcribed excerpts throughout the text. The breadth and quality of these interviews proves invaluable to Kudaibergenova’s argument and allows her to present an exhaustive understanding of post-Soviet nation-building.

*Toward Nationalizing Regimes* is an incredibly comprehensive study of post-Soviet nation-building, and the need for work such as that which Kudaibergenova has produced here cannot be understated. Through her use of nationalizing regimes as a framework, Kudaibergenova provides an analysis of post-Soviet states that problematizes the elementary labeling of states as “democratic” or “authoritarian.” She presents a clear demonstration of the bounds of legitimation and stability in both Kazakhstan and Latvia, and her work elucidates the nature of governance in the post-Soviet sphere more broadly. Kudaibergenova’s comprehensive thematic elements—the construction of discourse, elite power contestation, and issues of nationhood and national belonging—additionally solidify *Toward Nationalizing Regimes*’s relevancy for scholars whose work is outside of the post-Soviet sphere.

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