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KAZAKHSTAN IN THE MULTIVERSE OF THE 21ST CENTURY: SIX DILEMMAS TO DRAW ITS FUTURE PATH

Kazakhstan Strategy-2050 outlined an ambitious development plan aimed at bringing the country into the top 30 most developed countries in the world. Nonetheless, certain unresolved issues in public governance, international affairs, economic development, national identity, the rule of law, and the center-periphery dialectic continue to conceal Kazakhstan's future steps. Therefore, this article aims to provide a critical and systemic analysis of the future of Kazakhstan, challenging the linear interpretation often offered in previous studies. Through the lens of a future triangle, this article examines six fundamental dilemmas that will have a significant impact on Kazakhstan's future development. Methodologically, it combines a critical analysis of academic resources with direct observation of local practices to draw a continuity and a transformative scenario for each of the dimensions examined in this text. As the main limit, this approach leads to an oversimplification of the future spectrum because it restricts the analysis to two alternative scenarios, while a much wider set of possibilities could take place. What emerges is a volatile, dynamic, and uncertain framework in which a dominant national narrative may emerge, but several diverse and overlapping plots will continue to characterize Kazakhstan's storyline. Being aware of such "murky areas" is thus a necessary condition for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary Kazakhstan and its still-changing future development plans. As a result, Kazakhstan's future needs to be seen as open and dynamic rather than static and linear: there is no single future that can be predicted in advance, but rather a plethora of diverse scenarios that are more or less plausible. Otherwise, there is a risk of becoming entangled in misleading and inaccurate interpretations. More professional foresight studies about Kazakhstan's future in each of the dimensions addressed here should, therefore, be considered from a research standpoint.

Key words: foresight, future triangle, Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan strategy 2050; multiverse.

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Қазақстан в мультивселенной 21 века: шесть дилемм для определения его будущего пути

Стратегия Казахстана-2050 наметила амбициозный план развития, направленный на вхождение страны в число 30 самых развитых стран мира. Тем не менее, некоторые нерешенные вопросы в области государственного управления, международных отношений, экономического развития, национальной идентичности, верховенства права и диалектики центра и периферии продолжают скрывать дальнейшие шаги Казахстана. Таким образом, эта статья направлена на критический и системный анализ будущего Казахстана, бросая вызов линейной интерпретации, часто предлагаемой в предыдущих исследованиях. Через призму треугольника будущего в этой статье рассматриваются шесть фундаментальных дилемм, которые окажут существенное влияние на будущее развитие Казахстана. Методологически данная статья сочетает в себе критический анализ академических ресурсов с непосредственным наблюдением за местной практикой, чтобы проследить преемственность и трансформационный сценарий для каждого измерения, рассматриваемого в этом тексте. В качестве основного ограничения этот подход приводит к чрезмерному упрощению будущего спектра, поскольку ограничивает анализ двумя альтернативными сценариями, в то время как может иметь место гораздо более широкий набор возможностей. Возникает изменчивая, динамичная и неопределенная структура, в которой может возникнуть доминирующий национальный нарратив, но несколько различных и перекрывающихся сценариев будут продолжать характеризовать сюжетную линию Казахстана. Таким образом, знание таких «темных областей» является необходимым условием для более глубокого понимания исследователями современного Казахстана и его все еще меняющихся планов будущего развития. В результате будущее Казахстана следует рассматривать как открытое и динамичное, а не статичное и линейное: нет единого будущего, которое можно предсказать заранее, а есть множество разнообразных сценариев, более или менее правдоподобных. В противном случае есть риск запутаться в вводящих в заблуждение и неточных толкованиях. Следовательно, с исследовательской точки зрения следует рассматривать более профессиональные форсайт-исследования будущего Казахстана в каждом из рассматриваемых здесь аспектов.

Ключевые слова: форсайт, треугольник будущего, Казахстан, Казахстанская стратегия 2050; мультивселенная.



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21 ғасырдағы көпқырлы қазақстан: оның болашақ жолын анықтау үшін алты дилемма

«Қазақстан-2050» Стратегиясы елдің әлемдегі ең дамыған 30 елдің қатарына кіруіне бағытталған өршіл даму жоспарын белгіледі. Әйтсе де, мемлекеттік басқару, Халықаралық қатынастар, экономикалық даму, ұлттық бірегейлік, құқық үстемдігі және орталық пен периферия диалектикасы саласындағы кейбір шешілмеген мәселелер Қазақстанның одан арғы қадамдарын жасыруды жалғастыруда. Осылайша, бұл мақала алдыңғы зерттеулерде жиі ұсынылған сызықтық интерпретацияға қарсы келе отырып, Қазақстанның болашағын сыни және жүйелі талдауға бағытталған. Болашақ үшбұрышының призмасы арқылы бұл мақалада Қазақстанның болашақ дамуына елеулі әсер ететін алты іргелі дилемма қарастырылады. Әдістемелік тұрғыдан алғанда, бұл мақала осы мәтінде қарастырылған әрбір өлшем үшін сабақтастық пен трансформациялық сценарийді қадағалау үшін академиялық ресурстарды сыни талдауды жергілікті тәжірибені тікелей бақылаумен біріктіреді. Негізгі шектеу ретінде бұл тәсіл болашақ спектрдің тым жеңілдетілуіне әкеледі, өйткені ол талдауды екі балама сценариймен шектейді, бұл ретте мүмкіндіктердің әлдеқайда кең жиынтығы орын алуы мүмкін. Өзгермелі, серпінді және белгісіз құрылым пайда болады, онда үстем ұлттық нарративпайда болуы мүмкін, бірақ бірнеше айқын және бір-біріне сәйкес келетін сценарийлер Қазақстанның сюжеттік желісін сипаттауды жалғасырады. Осылайша, мұндай «қараңғы аймақтарды» білу зерттеушілердің қазіргі Қазақстанды және оның әлі де өзгеріп отыратын болашақ даму жоспарларын тереңірек түсінуі үшін қажетті шарт болып табылады. Нәтижесінде, Қазақстанның болашағы статикалық және сызықтық емес, ашық және серпінді ретінде қарастырылуы керек: алдын ала болжауға болатын бірде-бір болашақ жоқ, бірақ азды-көпті болжамды әртүрлі сценарийлер бар. Әйтпесе, жаңылыстыратын және дұрыс емес түсіндірмелерде шатасу қаупі бар. Сондықтан, зерттеушілік тұрғыдан алғанда, Қазақстанның болашағына қатысты кәсіби форсайттық зерттеулер осында қарастырылатын аспектілердің арқайсысында қарастырылуы керек.

Түйін сөздер: форсайт, болашақ үшбұрышы, Қазақстан, Қазақстан стратегиясы -2050; көпәлемді.

Introduction

Most of the analyses related to Kazakhstan offer a linear interpretation of its prospective future. Following the idea of the "Mangilik Yel" (the eternal country with the great future), the forthcoming steps of Kazakhstan seem to be already fixed along a predetermined path, which will lead the country to happiness and prosperity. To a large extent, such a path is codified in the Kazakhstan Strategy 2050 (2012), a document that defines the long-term way of socio-economic development of sovereign Kazakhstan. And yet, the contemporary world is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Therefore, although a thoughtful strategy can guide decision-makers toward the established goals, a system thinking approach is also necessary to anticipate possible transformations and unexpected changes.

This article aims to raise some critical reflections about the future of Kazakhstan on the base of a combination of direct observations – as a result of 8 years of research experience in Kazakhstan – and a comprehensive assessment of the available academic literature. Such reflections do not intend, and neither pretend, to predict the future of this country. Instead, they are instrumentally used to show how versatile and dynamic such a future can be: ‘discussing what “could happen” or “might happen” involves making predictions that are conditional, contingent, chancy, or multiple.’ (Bell 2007, 103) Following such an approach, the author intends to reject a linear

interpretation of the future of Kazakhstan, viewing it as a risky and misleading practice. In contrast, he recommends a complex system analysis where the prospect of Kazakhstan is still mostly to be defined.

As a result, the concept of “multiverse” – a theoretical reality that includes a possibly infinite number of parallel universes – is applied in this article to interpretatively assess the ongoing tensions over a series of key themes that might significantly affect the development of Kazakhstan. In other terms, the idea is that Kazakhstan has still to make its choices in certain critical dimensions. The result of these choices is by no means taken for granted. However, such choices will then determine Kazakhstan’s transitional path toward its future. Indeed, the relevance of this study lies in its capacity to explore Kazakhstan from a broad and systemic perspective, thus opening up to Kazakh policymakers the possibility of alternative futures.

Material and Methods

On the whole, this study identifies six fundamental areas with a direct impact on the future path of Kazakhstan: 1. Public governance; 2. Foreign affairs; 3. Economic development; 4. National identity; 5. Normative system; 6. Socio-spatial dialectic. The dilemmas over each of these areas are analyzed through the mean of a future triangle, a method created by professor Sohail Inayatullah (2007) for mapping imagined future scenarios (Figure 1).

A future triangle is a tool based on three dimensions: a pull dimension which, acting like a magnet, draws the path toward the realization of certain imagined scenarios; a push dimension, which drives the realization of certain scenarios based on current trends and dynamics; and a weight dimension, which constrains the realization of certain futures due to the legacy of the past. In foresight studies, it is primarily used to identify plausible futures through a comprehensive assessment of multiple drivers of change.

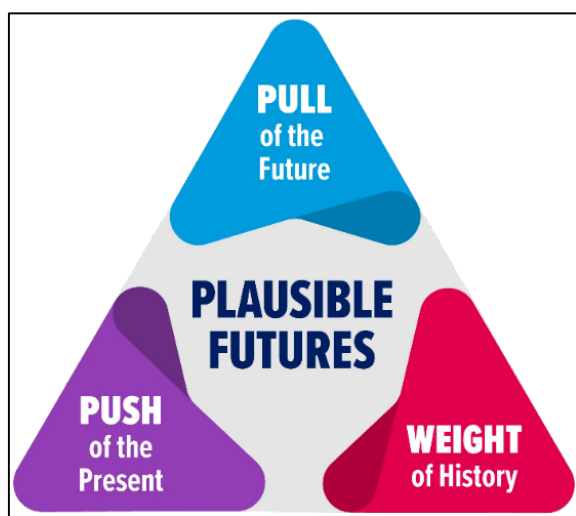


Figure 1 - Future Triangle. Source:

<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/futures-thinking-now-drivers-change-futures-triangle/> (accessed 25/11/2022)

The six fundamental areas mentioned above are here examined on the basis of two imaginary futures: a continuation scenario, which is designed to preserve the contemporary features of Kazakhstan vs. a transformative scenario, which is built considering some of the most recent transformative trends in Kazakhstan specifically selected through a pattern recognition approach. In turn, each interpretation of the future path of Kazakhstan is constructed by combining the critical reflections of the author with those expressed by other researchers in this field. In this regard, the material used in the elaboration of this article includes academic articles, scientific books, and argumentative statements offered by multiple experts on diverse online platforms.

As the main limit, this approach leads to an oversimplification of the future spectrum because it restricts the analysis to two alternative scenarios, while a much wider set of possibilities could take place. As suggested by Miller (2006, 94), ‘what is likely to happen tends to obscure things that may

be unlikely but still possible and potentially more desirable.’ Nonetheless, this approach has the value to offer a preliminary view of the diverse paths that Kazakhstan could take with its forthcoming steps by showing ‘what images of the future are possible and which are likely to become reality’. (Inayatullah 2013, 42) Indeed, the reader has the opportunity to understand how, from a systemic perspective, a network of critical decisions might drastically affect the future orientation of Kazakhstan from a political, social, economic, and cultural perspective.

Literature Review.

There are no long-term comprehensive and systemic studies of Kazakhstan's future in the academic literature, such as the one proposed in this article. Nonetheless, there are several useful resources related to the topics under consideration. The book “Theorizing Central Asian Politics. The State, Ideology, and Power” by Isaacs and Frigerio (2019), for example, provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for addressing aspects such as governance, legitimacy, and identity. Anceschi’s book “Analysing Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy. Regime neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbayev era” (2020) allows the reader to understand the clash of interests over the Eurasianism narrative. The report of Lim et al. (2021) “Renewable Energy Market in Kazakhstan: Potential, Challenges, and Prospects” identifies both opportunities and weaknesses of the green transition in Kazakhstan. Koch’s article “The ‘heart’ of Eurasia? Kazakhstan's centrally located capital city” (2013) retraces the logic of moving the capital from Almaty to Astana. Therefore, there is an abundance of reliable and valuable studies on the cultural, economic, political, and social dimensions of Kazakhstan.

Results and Discussion

The first key dimension that might significantly affect the future of Kazakhstan concerns public governance. Precisely, the dilemma is related to how the President of Kazakhstan will govern the country. On one side, it is possible that the future President of Kazakhstan – whoever is going to cover such a position in the next 30 years – will preserve an authoritative leadership approach; on the other side, there might be a transition to a reformer, who will rule the country following more liberal-democratic principles. The analysis of these

two scenarios through the future triangle brings to the attention diverse points to ponder.

Since its independence, Kazakhstan embraced a highly centralized and hierarchical political system to construct its path of development as a sovereign state. The fear of instability pushed the population of Kazakhstan to largely rely on the president as the key figure aimed to guide them out of chaos. In the process of transition from the Soviet system to a post-Soviet one, former president Nursultan Nazarbayev acted as an authoritative leader that unanimously dictated the political agenda and then tried to implement it with the support of the security apparatus and the business elites. Following a free-trade approach, emphasis was given to stability and growth in comparison to freedom and democratization. Such imbalance toward social services and economic development compared to political and civil rights is still rooted in Kazakh society. (Primiano and Kudebayeva 2020) Moreover, over thirty years after independence, the president is still the most trusted figure in the country: a study conducted in June 2022 showed that 83% of interviewees expressed a generally positive attitude toward President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. (<https://el.kz/en/83-of-kazakhstanis-trust-president-social-survey-43484/>) Notwithstanding the transfer of power from Nazarbayev to Tokayev raised some expectations in terms of political reforms, the political approach of the president did not significantly change up to now. On one side, the myth of the strong charismatic leader guiding the country in dangerous times is still part of Kazakh culture. On the other side, the lack of concrete political alternatives, as shown in the elections of November 2022, tends to consolidate the authoritative leadership of the president. As stated by Kudaibergenova (2019, 146), the legitimation of the political elite – the president *in primis* – does not derive much from the results of the elections, but mostly from the public appeal to certain fundamental discourses such as ‘stability, sacredness, and the development of the nation.’ As a result, the president acts as a Machiavellian prince, who is both ‘a fox... and a lion when required.’ (Frigerio and Kassenova 2013, 133) According to Godwin (2022), such a situation is not going to change in the next future. In his view, an “authoritarian modernization” process would be plausibly maintained as the leading approach (at least) under the whole patronage of president Tokayev.

Nevertheless, there are some pushing and pulling factors that could favor the affirmation of a president acting as a democratic reformer in the

long term. First, the January 2022 crisis represented an unprecedented event for Kazakhstan and determined the real beginning of a post-Nazarbayev era. People in the streets requested a revision of the whole political system and demanded a stronger engagement of civil society in the political process. The fact that such an event was largely exploited by criminal and subversive groups, however, undermined the storyline of protestors. As a result, contrary to common expectations, the level of activism in Kazakhstan declined after January. Still, the seed of democratic reform was planted in society and some structural changes (e.g. simplified registration of political parties, redistribution of powers to local institutions, and direct election of village akims) got promoted by president Tokayev. Second, Western states have some expectations for Kazakhstan. Mainly, if Kazakhstan wants to emerge as the leading country of Central Asia it will have to necessarily work on “hot topics” like, for example, stability, transparency, and social justice. While some of these changes are achievable within the framework of an “authoritarian modernization”, others require a step forward in the recognition of liberal democratic principles. Third, even if stability remains the most demanded feature, Kazakh citizens demand a more open dialogue with the government. In this regard, the level of satisfaction declined from 61% in December 2020 to 45% in August 2022. (The World Bank 2022) Even if the idea of a future fully-democratic Kazakhstan is not so intrinsically appealing among Kazakh youths (Junisbai and Junisbai 2019), an instrumental transition toward democracy is viewed positively as long as it can bring socio-economic benefits to the population. (Primiano and Kudebayeva 2020)

The second key dimension is related to foreign affairs. Recent international events are pushing Kazakhstan to take a critical choice: should the country maintain – or even further strengthen – its tie with Russia in continuation with its former policy or should it prioritize a new multi-vector policy in which it will take distance – a complete rupture is implausible – from the former key ally?

Although Kazakhstan has regularly claimed the intention to follow a multi-vector foreign policy to establish cordial relations with all countries, its historical, economic, and political ties with the Russian Federation partially constrained the realization of such a plan. Ideologically, Kazakhstan embraced a neo-Eurasianism narrative to place itself at the center of the international arena instead of its periphery. (Anceschi 2020) In such a discourse, the relationship with Russia is a critical

point. Kazakhstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization as well as one of the founders of the Eurasian Economic Union. Indeed, there is a strict connection between Kazakhstan and Russia in the area of security – a reason why Russian troops responded to the appeal of Tokayev during the unrest of January 2022 – and economic development – most of the oil extracted in Kazakhstan transit to Russia before reaching its final destination. Furthermore, despite having been independent for more than 30 years, Kazakhstan is still finding it difficult to break free of its Soviet legacy. (Caron 2019) Even from a long-term perspective, it is difficult to imagine that Russia might abandon its “near-abroad” policy – the establishment and maintenance of a strategic “good neighbor” zone around Russia’s borders – any time soon, unless major (highly implausible) changes will firstly occur (e.g. abandonment of Russian nationalistic perspective, an in-depth transformation of the political system, bankruptcy, etc.). Therefore, the tie between Kazakhstan and Russia seems almost unbreakable.

And yet, something is changing. There are multiple signs that Kazakhstan is considering the implementation of a new multi-vector policy. In 2021 the Kazakh government announced the gradual transition of the Kazakh language from Cyrillic to a Latin-based alphabet. Even if such a policy was primarily aimed to spread the learning of the Kazakh language within the country, it was also the first sign of detachment from Russia. But it is after the blasting of the Ukrainian-Russian war that the situation significantly changed. The Republic of Kazakhstan remained mostly neutral in the UNGA votes about the Russian-Ukrainian war (e.g. in the resolution of October 12th that condemned Russia’s illegal so-called referendums in the four regions of Ukraine and in the resolution of November 14th, which called Russia to pay Ukraine reparations). This is a relevant perspective shift compared to the official approach of Kazakhstan after the referendum in Crimea. In 2014, the Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the referendum in Crimea was a free expression of the will of the population (inform.kz 2014), while in 2022 Kazakh President Tokayev denied acknowledging the takeover of Crimea and the “quasi-republics” of Lugansk and Donetsk to safeguard Ukraine’s territorial integrity. (Rozanskij 2022) Moreover, most of the Kazakh population openly declares to be pro-Ukraine. And again, Kazakhstan is signing a number of new

intergovernmental agreements with both China and the EU that touch on several key aspects such as infrastructural development, agricultural trade, and energetic cooperation. Therefore, in a long-term perspective, Kazakhstan could push forward its ambitious plan to act as a bridge between East and West. (Yermekbayev, Sarybayev and Suriguga 2022) At the same time, the idea to strengthen the connection with the Turkic world is also becoming popular among the Kazakh elites as it came out during the meeting of the Council of Heads of States of the Organization of Turkic States Summit held on November 11th, 2022. This perspective is in accordance with Kazakhstan’s ambitious plans to further extend its cooperation with neighboring states through mechanisms of regional cooperation. (Shkurkin et al. 2016) So, the future of the strategic alliances of Kazakhstan is extremely blurred right now.

The third key dilemma is associated with the mechanisms of economic development. Kazakhstan’s economy is traditionally connected with fossil fuels. However, the public narrative points toward the need to introduce diversification and transit toward a green economy.

As mentioned above, Kazakhstan’s economic stability was viewed as the goal number one in the period post-independence. Such stability was achieved, on one side, through an opening to privatization within a highly centralized economic system and, on the other, through extensive exploitation of fossil fuels. Kazakhstan is in the world’s top 20th largest oil-producing country and the top 10th largest coal-producing country. (IEA 2020) As a result, Kazakhstan’s economy became shackled to its dependence on fossil fuels: they count alone for approximately 55% of Kazakh industrial production and 67% of Kazakh exportations. Indeed, fossil fuels played, play, and will plausibly play a central role in the process of economic development of Kazakhstan notwithstanding the planned transition – Kazakhstan strategy 2050 – toward renewables. It should be added that, to date, green energies count only for around 3% of the energy mix in Kazakhstan and there are still several barriers (e.g. fragmented legislation, investment risks, uncompetitive tariffs, monetary devaluation, reserve power issues, etc.) constraining the development of the green sector. (Karatayev et al. 2016; Lim et al. 2021)

However, it is also undeniable that ‘there is a discernible political move towards promoting

sustainable policy and investments.’ (MacGregor 2017, 210) First, international attention toward sustainability is quite well received in Kazakhstan and the sustainability principle is one of the pillars of Kazakh strategy 2050. Second, some legislative reforms are pushing toward the embracement of a green economy. For example, the new Environmental Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, adopted in 2021, significantly enhances environmental protection and introduces an ecosystem approach principle. Third, from 2011 to 2020, the number of operating renewable energy power plants grew from 23 to 111. (Lim et al. 2021) This does not mean that the situation is idyllic: there are still high levels of energy loss in industrial and domestic consumption, and the incentives for those investing in green energy are too low. Therefore, ‘while Kazakhstan recognizes the need to transition to a green economy and sustainable growth, promoting the implementation of renewable energy projects and energy-saving technologies, currently implemented policies are not yet sufficient to meet its targets.’ (The World Bank 2018, 29) But the point is that economic diversification is viewed now as a top priority for the Kazakh government and the energy transition process – as a step-by-step progression more than a sudden revolution – might speed up by following international trends.

The fourth dilemma is about national identity. Since its independence, Kazakhstan has struggled to promote a shared identity valid for all its citizens. Some people supported the creation of a nation-state based on an ethnocentric ideology – Kazakhstan as the land of Kazakhs. Other people recommended the formation of a cosmopolitan state grounded on a multicultural society – Kazakhstan as the place of Kazakhstanians. Diverse factors make the resolution of this dilemma still unclear.

The narrative on multicultural society has been primarily supported by the Kazakh government in the first phase post-independence. To a large extent, embracing multiculturalism was a condition to foster a peaceful transition to sovereignty without suddenly rupturing with the Soviet past and causing social turmoil. On diverse occasions, the first president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev reiterated the goal to achieve interethnic harmony, peace, and stability. (Bashmakov, Maslov and Tulebaev 2020) The formation of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (1995) was one of the main institutional pillars through which the Kazakh government tried to promote such a logic. Today, this discourse seems still extensively supported by

a part of the Kazakh population, in particular by the intelligentsia who live in most international cities of Kazakhstan (Almaty and Astana). Among the main factors that keep pushing toward multiculturalism, there are, *inter alia*, demographic data (around 16-18% of the population in Kazakhstan is ethnically Russian), image-branding policies (Kazakhstan is commonly characterized as the land of 100 ethnic groups), and cultural components (promoting an open and cosmopolitan society as a symbol of the welcoming attitude of Kazakh people). Indeed, in terms of its social and cultural makeup, Kazakhstan can be considered a cosmopolitan society, as it is home to a mix of different ethnicities and cultures, and has a history of openness and tolerance towards diversity.

Nevertheless, according to Rees and Williams (2017), the adoption of a supra-ethnic identity at the citizen level in Kazakhstan is still hampered by considerable obstacles. One of them is the spreading of an ethnocentric ideology by nationalists who consider sovereignty and identity as two faces of the same coin. Certain circumstances like, for example, the publicly promoted identity policy (e.g. the preservation of an individual’s ethnic background indication in the national ID cards), language policy (such as the above-mentioned language reform and the requirement for all those who want to participate in the political activity at the national level to fluently speak in the Kazakh language), and citizenship policy (for example, the banning of dual citizenship notwithstanding a significant increase of mixed marriages) seem to point toward a future affirmation of this nationalistic view. (Aitymbetov, Toktarov, and Ormakhanova 2015; Burkhanov 2017) These are just some of the most notorious initiatives taken by the government to build a national identity centered on Kazakh ethnic traditions and customs. Such a choice, beyond an identity-building purpose, follows also an instrumental logic: ‘non-democratic regimes can use the power of emotional discourses, including patriotism and nationalism to build more support for their policies and their regimes.’ (Kudaibergenova 2019, 145) But the dilemma between the promotion of a cosmopolitan society against the development of a Kazakh ethnocentric state remains a hot topic of discussion for the future of Kazakhstan.

The fifth dilemma is related to the foundation of a normative system in Kazakhstan. For a while, public institutions are conveying about the formation of a state of law that would increase the efficiency of public administration and break down systemic corruption. However, customary

practices still play a vital role in Kazakhstan and it is hard to eradicate them from society.

Traditions and habits are an important component of Kazakh culture. Several ancient rituals (e.g. *tusaukeser*, *syrga salu*, and *sundet toi*) are still commonly practiced nowadays by the Kazakh population. Such practices shaped an authentic “Kazakh way” of life even within the rigorous and homogenous Soviet system. Nowadays, customary practices and informal institutions still play a significant role by producing widely accepted patterns of behavior that, in turn, shape social interactions, decision-making processes, and relationships within the community. For example, describing the conditions of driving in Kazakhstan, Frigerio (2019, 293) states that ‘in Almaty, drivers display a seemingly anarchical behaviour in defiance of the official rules which is at the same time actually regulated by local (ir)rationalities and dynamic power relations that combine in the formation of unwritten evolutionary norms.’ In other terms, driving according to the official rules will not preventively allow avoiding car accidents as well as driving according to local customs. This state of affairs influences diverse spheres of the country's political, economic, and social system.

Still, as part of the process of modernization, the Kazakh government is trying to constrain such informal rules through the affirmation of a cohesive and transparent state of law system. The development of effective institutional mechanisms would provide Kazakhstan with a number of advantages such as a decrease in systemic corruption, an increase in foreign direct investments, and an improvement in the effectiveness of the public sector. The pulling factor is that the creation of transparent and clear rules would contribute to Kazakhstan's inclusion among the top 30 most developed countries of the world. For such a reason, the Kazakh government has been particularly active in this regard in the last decades. Among the initiative taken, it has reformed criminal law and promoted the digitalization of numerous public services to combat corruption and increase the efficiency of the public apparatus. (Sharyazdanova and Butterfield 2020; Siubayeva et al. 2021) Despite the outstanding results obtained so far, a more extensive set of steps is necessary: certain practices are so deeply embedded in society that eradicating them is going to be a long and complex journey.

The sixth dilemma concerns the socio-spatial dialectic of the center/periphery dichotomy. Enhancing the center is the strategy used by Kazakhstan to brand itself in the international arena. This strategy leads to the formation of a new image of power in Astana as well as maniacal attention toward the city center in Almaty. However, the average living circumstances in the periphery are very different from those in the center. To reduce such a socio-economic gap, the Kazakh government has repeatedly claimed the intention of upgrading the areas outside the edge. Still, the dualism between the center and periphery remains largely unsolved.

Up to now, enhancing the center has been one of the main strategies used by Kazakhstan to brand itself in the international arena. The government has promoted an image of power by keep enhancing the symbolic value of the center. This approach has been followed both in the development of the urban setting – e.g. the continued reconstruction of the central area of Almaty compared to the abandoned peripheral zones – as well as in the foundation of a national strategic perspective – e.g. the transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana. About this last point, Akulov (2019, 191) affirms that, for the Kazakh authorities, ‘the new capital represents a veritable lived Utopia, an oasis and a ‘perfect isle’ in the middle of an untamed steppe’. Indeed, the relocation of the capital to Astana has to be viewed from a spatial imaginary perspective: it is not only the geographical center of Kazakhstan but also the center of gravity of political, social, economic, and cultural relations. (Koch 2013) Following this logic, the center is the locomotive that will bring Kazakhstan to the ambitious list of the top 30 most developed countries of the world.

However, numerous studies draw attention to the stark socioeconomic divide that such a strategy creates in Kazakhstan. They reveal a conspicuous income inequality (Shahbaz, Bhattacharya, and Mahalik 2017), educational disparities (Kopeyeva 2020), health inequity (Spankulova, Karatayeva, and Clarke 2020), and diverse living standards between urban and rural populations. (Shedenova and Beimisheva 2013) As a result, there is nowadays a growing demand from NGOs and CSOs operating in Kazakhstan to reduce the gap between center and periphery and work on a better redistribution of social welfare. To such an aim, three vital factors are: to recalibrate the center-periphery narrative, to support widespread

implementation of the sustainable development goals in the whole of Kazakhstan, and to foster the enforcement of a just city model. Some studies (Turysbekova and Omurzakova 2021) suggest that the socio-economic development in Kazakhstan's different regions is progressively improving and the government has recently expressed its intention to invest KZT 143 billion for the development of rural areas. (inform.kz 2023) Nevertheless, the gap remains still extraordinarily huge, and, indeed, the dilemma between center-periphery will keep its criticality in the years to come.

Conclusions

Associating a country's future development with the concept of the multiverse is both fascinating and terrifying. It's fascinating because it demonstrates how limitless the prospect of opportunities is in the long run, and it reveals how much today's choices may affect - positively or negatively - the conditions of tomorrow. Indeed, a country's future path can be built to a large extent by assembling carefully selected pieces. However, it is also frightening because there is no single future that can be predicted in advance, but rather a plethora of diverse scenarios that are more or less

plausible. As a result, any forecast for the future must take into account the fact that we live in a VUCA world.

As this article has demonstrated, the six crucial aspects of the Kazakh system that are examined in this text (public governance, foreign affairs, economic development, national identity, normative system, and socio-spatial dialectic) continue to be the subject of several tensions. As a result, Kazakhstan's future needs to be seen as open and dynamic rather than static and linear. Extreme caution is, therefore, needed while making any prediction regarding the future of this country. Otherwise, there is a risk of becoming entangled in misleading and inaccurate interpretations.

More professional foresight studies about Kazakhstan's future in each of the dimensions addressed here should be considered from a research standpoint. It would be interesting, for instance, to go beyond the overly constrained limit of the two scenarios used in this study to figure out, on the one hand, the multitude of diverse scenarios that could occur between now and 2050, and, on the other hand, to define a desirable scenario on which the Kazakh government could focus its attention.

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