

**THE NAZARBAYEV GENERATION:
YOUTH IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *The Nazarbayev Generation, Youth in Kazakhstan*. Lexington Books, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London, 2019. pp. 331.

In the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan faced a number of social problems, particularly with regard to national historical consciousness, language, identity, and some demographic issues inherited from the periods of rule by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. To overcome these problems, the Kazakhstani leadership has initiated numerous projects and action plans in addition to the legal and institutional regulations. At the same time, Kazakhstan has recorded considerable achievements in the economy, and also the reconstruction of the country. Since 2002, GDP per capita has risen six-fold, and as a result, today, Kazakhstan has taken place in the upper-middle-income group of state. However, it should be noted that compared to the years of the 2000s, there are still a number of significant economic and social issues that should be taken into consideration.

Before proceeding with the book review, it is useful to highlight two major issues related to research on Kazakhstan. Firstly, there are not enough academic studies about the social change and transformation process experienced by Kazakhstan, and secondly, it can be said that most of the studies—particularly those of western origin—do not adequately consider the heritage from previous periods including the Kazakh Khanate and the Tsarist and Soviet periods that have had an immense impact on today's Kazakhstan.

The book edited by Marlene Laruelle is structured into four main parts comprising a total of fifteen chapters written by seventeen authors. Those four main parts are “Kazakhstani Youth and National Identity,” “Youth Voices on Moral Changes,” “Globalization And Cultural Blending,” and “Youth Activism.” Within the given framework, this book aims to examine “the Nazarbayev Generation” with several methods and perspectives, seeking answers to the questions “Who are they? What do they think and wish for? What are their social and cultural practices and behaviors?” and finally, in light of the answers to these questions, “Who is going to shape the future of Kazakhstan?”

Part I is devoted to studying the Kazakhstani youth and national identity with the findings of a number of quantitative and qualitative field studies. In chapter one,

Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbay, drawing on field research conducted in 2012, critically seek the answer of “Are Youth Different,” and state that the Nazarbayev Generation is attitudinally different from the previous generation. The second chapter focuses on youth perceptions in connection with national identity. Applying two different surveys (conducted in 2005 and 2016), policy documents, and media discourses, Burkhanov states that, although there are several state projects and instruments which aim to strengthen national identity, the Kazakhstani youth tend to follow their own paths, instead of reacting to external intervention. Additionally, he considers the media discourse and asserts that media has a significant impact on identity construction. Following a brief theoretical and methodological introduction, chapter three seeks to find out how the Kazakhstani youth perceive their national identity. In this regard, a number of factors (variables) such as language, religion, education, and ethnic identity were examined in a broad sense. Among these, ethnic identity (Kazakh ethnicity) is the most salient, and has a primary influence on national identity. Some shortcomings should be mentioned in this chapter: firstly, the author’s statement that “Most citizens of Kazakhstan identify themselves with the Muslim tradition, but in reality, people can be atheists” (p. 77) sounds rather assertive and controversial. If this statement is a finding of the research which is not explicit in the text, it should have supported by statistics. Another problematic approach is to throw all religions and beliefs in the same pot when measuring religiosity, since the dimensions of religiosity scales naturally vary from religion to religion. Chapter four, with a couple of striking concepts used mostly by a patriotic circle in literature, provides a striking analysis of the relationship between ethnicity and national identity. At the beginning of the 2010s, several critical literary works began to draw particularly on Chingis Aitmatov’s “mankurt” motif. Through the books such as *Mankurt-stan* (A. Tokish) and *Mankurts in the Megapolis* (G. Mukazhanova) discussion spread widely, especially on social media, on “nagyz Qazaq” (a real Qazaq who speaks in Kazakh, and maintains traditional values) and “shala or asphalt Qazaq” (a half or hybrid Qazaq who speaks Russian, and does not adhere to traditions). Nevertheless, it is not easy to determine the framework of the concepts—mankurt, shala, and nagyz—since Russian is still the most prevalent language, and the perception of ethnicity is complex and vague.

Part II focuses on youth perspectives on moral changes. Chapter five, through several interviews and participated observation, provides an analysis of western-educated youth on the issue of nationalism. Defined as pro-Western, young people construct and share a cosmopolitan and global identity and sense of belonging, while on the other hand, somehow, keep adherence to Kazakh culture and traditions. Using the data of two qualitative studies applied to students of two different universities, chapter six shows the perception and attitudes of the youth towards modern conservatism and core liberal values. The findings indicate that young people make a distinction between the concepts of democracy and liberalism, which the former is perceived more positively than the latter. Chapter seven focuses on analyzing the cultural space of youth’s self-identification. Based on a survey (450 respondents) conducted in three big cities (Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent) in 2014, using questions such as “Please draw a circle around those nationalities, a member of which you would not choose as president of Kazakhstan: Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tatar, Uyghur, Korean,” which might be considered inadequate in terms of context and methodology.

Part III deals with the issues of cultural globalization, popular music and cinema, young returnees from the United States, and hipsters of Almaty within the “cultural blending.” Chapter eight delves into the Kazakhstani youth’s consumption of global culture through the survey. The findings suggest the internet, social networks, and mass media have an influence on gender construction and gender equity. By giving a brief historical background and theoretical framework, chapter nine looks at Kazakh popular music such as the Q-pop (Kazakh pop) band Ninety-One and hip-hop artist Scriptonite that has been gaining popularity among young people since the beginning of the 2010s. It can be inferred that Kazakh popular music has become an important platform for the youth where they can express themselves, and also criticize some social norms and practices. Chapter ten analyzes Kazakh cinema by focusing on several movies such as *The Tale of a Pink Bunny*, *The Sky of My Childhood*, and *The Sixth Post* in order to show their position in the process of identity construction. The chapter concludes with the assumption that there is continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods of Kazakh cinema, which are partially compatible in terms of modern values. Chapter eleven, by using findings of 92 semi-structured personal interviews conducted in 2011, deals with experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of young returnees who studied or lived in the US for a while. As a result, the author of the chapter claims that returnees are the main carrier and mediator of the process of globalization, and also are the pioneer of individualism and entrepreneurship, while at the same time, questioning social norms. Finally, it should be noted that this chapter with the same title was previously published in another book edited by Marlene Laruelle (*Kazakhstan in the Making* (Lexington, 2016)). By using Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity,” chapter twelve analyses one of the most interesting subjects of the book, “the Almaty hipster” based on only ten interviews from Almaty. It is asserted that the Almaty hipster emerged as part of “cafe culture” among young urbanites who share liberal values, and are shaped by the process of globalization.

Part IV examines youth activism in the sphere of social media, contemporary art, and sexuality education. In a brief but satisfying assessment on the social structure of Kazakhstani youth, chapter thirteen focuses on the social media run by young people, and its relationship with politics and society. Kosnazarov, by analyzing the content of four social media platforms, “Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali,” “Jurttyñ Balasy,” “Le Shapalaque Comics,” and “SaveKokZhailau,” where young people share their messages, and also show their reactions on some issues such as soft politics, corruption, urban transportation intergenerational differences, and critiques of some Soviet-style practices that still continue. Chapter fourteen evaluates the role of contemporary art in Kazakhstani society. According to the author of the chapter, contemporary art plays a significant role in Kazakhstan where the social institutions are still being built up. Chapter fifteen dwells on the implementation of youth sexuality education in Kazakhstan by giving some remarkable data about the current situation, and comparing it with other countries.

Summing up, one can say that this Marlene Laruelle’s collection indeed manages to present various valuable issues and perspectives in connection with Kazakhstani youth. The collection, therefore, will appeal to scholars particularly interested in the society and social structure of Kazakhstan as well

as those generally interested in Central Asia. However, there are some serious shortcomings in the edition to be considered. First, some chapters were mainly conducted with a limited number of respondents, and also limited to cities such as Almaty and Astana (chapter 12). Second, it should also be noted that there are some weaknesses in the use of research techniques and methods (chapter 7-11-12). Another shortcoming of the collection is that there is carelessness with using some concepts such as “minorities” that are highly controversial in terms of international law and history (chapter 3). Finally, it is not understandable why in such a broad collection, education, one of the most important social institutions, was not examined separately, since it has been most apparent characteristics of the “the Nazarbayev generation” by some outstanding institutions and tools such as Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), National Schools of Physics and Math, Nazarbayev University, and Bolashak scholars.