

RENAMING THE PAST: TOPONYMIC CHANGE AND NATION-BUILDING IN RURAL KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the formation of local collective memory through street renaming in rural Kazakhstan since independence. The empirical basis consists of official decisions made by local executive (akimat) and representative (maslikhat) bodies. The aim of the study is to identify the features of the emerging toponymic landscape and its influence on local communities in the context of nation-building. The methodology is based on quantitative and comparative analysis of temporal dynamics, regional distribution, and the structure of old and new place names. The findings reveal a transition from the Soviet ideological canon to a nationally oriented system of symbols: names associated with Soviet figures are most frequently replaced, while new toponyms reflect the Kazakh historical and cultural narrative. The study concludes that street renaming in Kazakhstan constitutes a managed process of symbolic reconfiguration in which rural areas play a key role in consolidating a new national identity.

Keywords: Nation-building, Collective memory, Local communities, National identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Street renaming represents an important area of research on state policy related to the construction of collective memory, the formation of national identity, and nation-building. This article addresses the following research question: how does street renaming in rural Kazakhstan shape local collective memory and contribute to nation-building, and to what extent do the patterns of toponymic change observed at the local level in rural areas diverge from those already documented for capital cities and other major urban centers? In post-Soviet countries, processes of identity formation are accompanied by the rejection of Soviet symbols and the dismantling of the Soviet pantheon. As a result, street names are no longer viewed merely as means of navigation but as significant symbolic resources through which states and societies construct representations of the past, reinforce ideological narratives, and shape collective identity. In this context, toponymy functions as an instrument of symbolic politics, thereby materializing the “official version” of history in everyday space.

These processes become particularly salient during periods of political transformation, when historical narratives are revised and symbolic landscapes are reinterpreted. Under such conditions, street renaming becomes one of the most accessible and effective mechanisms for dismantling the previous ideological order and establishing a new one. Studies of post-socialist and post-colonial societies demonstrate that toponymic changes often accompany nation-building, decommunization, and decolonization, serving as tools for legitimizing political power and constructing national identity.

The post-Soviet space provides a clear example of such transformations. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, newly independent states faced the need to symbolically assert sovereignty and construct their own historical narratives. In this process, urban space, including street-naming systems, became a key arena for ideological and cultural reconfiguration. Kazakhstan, like other post-Soviet states, has implemented renaming policies aimed at reassessing the Soviet legacy and constructing a nationally oriented symbolic space.

In the Kazakh context, toponymic changes have an additional dimension linked to language policy and post-colonial processes. Street renaming is associated not only with decommunization and “derussification” but also with the strengthening of the Kazakh language and cultural symbols (Bekus, 2021; Kudaibergenova, 2016, 2025). This process can also be understood through the concept of “symbolic capital”, whereby the state’s commemorative choices are deployed to build domestic legitimacy and gain international recognition (Bekus, 2021). As a result, a complex model of symbolic transformation emerges, combining elements of historical revision, spatial nationalization, and institutional regulation.

Despite growing scholarly attention, existing studies primarily focus on urban settings, particularly capital cities and major administrative centers. Rural areas, where the logic of toponymic transformation may differ, remain underexplored. Yet it is precisely in these areas that the interaction among state policy, local practices, collective memory, and everyday uses of space becomes most visible.

In this regard, the present study analyzes street renaming in rural Kazakhstan between 2006 and 2025. The empirical dataset includes 8.694 renamed streets in rural settlements.

The aim of the study is to identify the specific features of toponymic practices in rural areas and to assess their role in symbolic politics and national identity formation. The objectives are as follows: (1) to analyze temporal dynamics; (2) to identify regional patterns; (3) to examine the structure of replaced and newly assigned names; and (4) to interpret the findings in the context of local community development and nation-building processes. Based on the quantitative analysis of 8.694 official renaming decisions issued by rural akimats and maslikhats between 2006 and 2025, this paper argues that street renaming in rural Kazakhstan constitutes a managed, top-down process of symbolic reconfiguration that systematically replaces the Soviet ideological canon – including, but not limited to, its explicitly political figures – with a Kazakh-centered historical and cultural narrative, and that this process, while most visible in urban centers in the existing literature, is at least as pronounced, and in some respects more far-reaching, at the rural level.

Particular attention is paid to the transformation of the symbolic landscape through the replacement of street names associated with Soviet and Russian historical, political, and cultural figures with names commemorating Kazakh historical figures. This focus allows the study to capture the shift from a Soviet-centered commemorative framework to a nationally oriented toponymic canon, highlighting the role of renaming as a mechanism of symbolic reorientation and identity construction.

Thus, the article contributes to the study of local communities by offering a new perspective on how local collective memory influences their development within the broader framework of national identity formation in Kazakhstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary scholarship, street renaming is widely regarded as a key instrument of symbolic politics and is studied at the intersection of research on collective memory, power, and identity. This perspective is grounded in the theoretical premise that memory is not an autonomous category but is activated through institutional and social mechanisms (Assmann & Shortt, 2011). Accordingly, toponymic practices should be understood as the outcome of interactions among actors operating within specific political regimes and cultural contexts (Ruipérez Núñez & Dinas, 2023). In periods of political transformation, these frameworks are redefined, making street renaming a particularly sensitive indicator of shifts in power structures.

Recent research in critical toponymy demonstrates a move away from viewing place names as neutral geographic markers toward interpreting them as instruments for the production of space and power (Azaryahu, 2011; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). From this perspective, toponyms function as elements of the “linguistic landscape” through which the symbolic meaning of public space is constructed (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). As Oto-Peralías (2018) notes, street names in democratic societies operate as a kind of “manifesto” of the city, reflecting dominant social and cultural values. Naming processes thus become an integral part of place-making practices through which place identity is formed (Shields, 2023).

A key analytical concept in this field is that of the “city-text”, according to which urban space is understood as a set of symbolic inscriptions open to interpretation

(Rose-Redwood et al., 2018). In this sense, street names function as “sites of memory” and “frames of memory”, materializing official historical narratives (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989). Research shows that through commemorative practices – such as the selection of names of heroes, events, and symbols – the state embeds a “normative” version of the past into everyday environments (Azaryahu, 1990, 1996; Vlahova-Angelova, 2023). Toponymy thus produces a “map of values” reflecting the ideologies and mythologies underlying a given political order (Kashfi, 2023).

Particular attention in the literature is devoted to renaming dynamics during periods of radical political change. In such contexts, street renaming is interpreted as a “ritual of revolution” symbolically marking a rupture with the previous regime and the establishment of a new one (Azaryahu, 2011). Its significance lies not only in its symbolic content but also in its relative ease of implementation compared to institutional reforms (Azaryahu, 1997). Empirical studies of post-socialist countries confirm that toponymic changes often constitute one of the first steps in transforming public space (Cretan & Matthews, 2016; Light, 2004; Rusu, 2021, 2024), serving to “cleanse” it of previous ideological markers and legitimize new political authority (Rusu, 2024).

Comparative research demonstrates that renaming strategies vary depending on historical and political contexts. The literature typically distinguishes three main approaches: a radical break with the past, preservation of existing toponymy, and selective decommemoration (Azaryahu, 2011). These models are evident across diverse cases, including postcolonial Singapore (Yeoh, 1992, 1996), India (Caiazzo, 2020; Chandrashekar, 2024), Rwanda (Amini Ngabonziza & Rosendal, 2025), and Eastern European countries (Ochman, 2025; Zymovets, 2025). In many cases, renaming processes are closely linked to broader practices of decolonization aimed at reassessing historical legacies and removing symbols of domination (Lindsay & Yoon, 2021).

At the same time, toponymy operates not only at the level of state policy but also within everyday practices. Studies show that street names are embedded in residents’ experiences, shaping spatial knowledge and emotional attachment to place (Dalgıç & Okta, 2023; Gürleyen, 2018). Renaming often encounters the inertia of everyday usage: old names persist in common practice regardless of official changes (Light & Young, 2014). Moreover, over time even ideologically charged toponyms may lose their symbolic significance, becoming neutral reference points (Gaidai et al., 2018; Gnatiuk et al., 2023). This indicates a gap between “top-down” symbolic policies and “bottom-up” everyday practices.

The post-Soviet space constitutes a distinct analytical context in which street renaming is closely linked to nation-building and postcolonial transformation. After the collapse of the USSR, newly independent states faced the challenge of symbolically asserting sovereignty by constructing national narratives through urban space (Bekus & Medeuova, 2017; Diener & Hagen, 2013). In this process, toponymy serves as a tool for legitimizing political authority and representing the “correct” version of the historical past (Zhiyenbayev et al., 2025). However, research shows that national identity formation in post-Soviet states is heterogeneous and characterized by competing discourses (Insebayeva, 2015; Kudaibergenova, 2016; Laruelle, 2016).

In Kazakhstan, street renaming acquires an additional dimension related to language policy and the postcolonial legacy. Historically rooted asymmetries in the use of Russian and Kazakh languages lead to regional differences in the pace and nature of toponymic changes (Fierman, 2005). Renaming functions simultaneously as a tool of decommunization and derussification, involving the replacement of Russian-language names and their adaptation to the Kazakh language (Pitina, 2018). These processes are embedded in the broader context of “Kazakhization”, which scholars interpret in varying ways – from the restoration of national traditions to politically motivated reinterpretations of the past (Dave, 2007; Insebayeva, 2015; Kudaibergenova, 2016).

At the same time, existing studies predominantly focus on urban cases, particularly capital cities and major administrative centers, where the state’s symbolic policy is most visible (Bekus & Medeuova, 2017; Zhiyenbayev et al., 2025). This is also true of research focused specifically on Kazakhstan: Kaşıkçı (2019) examines the politics of street renaming in Almaty as an expression of national discourse and collective memory, arguing that the so-called “Kazakhization” of urban toponymy is shaped primarily by the Soviet legacy rather than by an anti-Russian rupture, while Tsyrempilov et al. (2022) analyze the state-led project of mapping Kazakhstan’s “sacred geography”, showing how the selective commemoration of sites and historical figures serves an ethnonationalizing agenda. Both studies, however, concentrate on the country’s largest city or on nationally curated registries of significant sites, leaving the toponymic dynamics of rural settlements largely unaddressed. In contrast, the local level – especially rural areas – remains underexplored. Related strands of scholarship further contextualize this gap: Hofmeister (2025) traces the imperial-era toponymic practices through which Orenburg was symbolically incorporated into the Russian Empire, providing a longer historical perspective on the steppe region’s naming politics that predates the Soviet and post-Soviet periods discussed here; Medeuova and Medeuov (2022) examine “radical memorialization” in Kazakhstan’s cities, showing how competing symbolic capitals emerge alongside the officially sanctioned national canon; and Kurmanov and Abishev (2026) trace how national-patriot discourse has moved from the margins to the mainstream of Kazakhization under the post-Nazarbayev leadership, a shift that plausibly shapes the intensity and pace of local toponymic change documented below. Yet it is precisely in these contexts that alternative naming logics may emerge, based less on national narratives and more on local memory, ethnocultural practices, and everyday interactions. Given that space is produced through social practices and cultural interpretations (Boogaart II, 2001; Ringas et al., 2011), the study of rural toponymy allows for the identification of different mechanisms through which symbolic space is constructed.

Thus, the existing literature demonstrates that street renaming is a complex, multi-level process in which macro-level political strategies intersect with micro-level everyday practices. Despite the substantial body of research, a significant gap remains: insufficient attention has been paid to local contexts, particularly rural ones. This necessitates further analysis aimed at identifying the specific features of toponymic practices beyond major cities and understanding how the state’s symbolic policy is transformed at the level of local communities.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical basis of the study is formed from official regulatory legal acts. The dataset includes all available decisions issued between 1994 and 2025 by the state authorities of the Republic of Kazakhstan (akimats and maslikhats at all administrative levels) concerning the renaming or naming of elements of the street and road network. In total, the dataset comprises 15.623 renaming cases. The use of official legal documents ensures a high level of reliability and allows for the reconstruction of institutional dynamics underlying toponymic change.

To achieve the research objective of analyzing toponymic practices in rural areas, an additional data filtering procedure was conducted. As a result, a subsample of 8.694 cases related to rural settlements was identified. The selection was based on administrative-territorial classification, which made it possible to exclude urban cases and maintain an analytically consistent focus on rural spatial contexts.

From these 8.694 renaming cases, a further filtering process was applied to isolate those associated with proper names (anthroponyms) in the original street names. This stage combined automated keyword extraction with manual verification to ensure accuracy and to eliminate ambiguous or non-personal references. As a result, a dataset of 1.384 personal names of historical figures was compiled. These anthroponyms were subsequently coded into analytical categories, including Soviet political leaders, military figures, cultural and literary figures, scientists, and other public figures. Particular attention was paid to identifying names associated with Soviet and Russian historical, political, and cultural contexts, because these names formed the core of the symbolic layer that was replaced.

A similar coding procedure was applied to newly assigned street names, focusing on proper names. In total, 3.729 new names referring to individuals were identified and included in the analysis. These names were classified into categories such as khans, biys, batyrs, representatives of the national intelligentsia, cultural figures, participants in the national movement, and heroes of the Second World War. This classification enabled a systematic comparison of the structure of the replaced and newly constructed toponymic canons.

Methodologically, the study relies on quantitative analysis complemented by qualitative interpretation within the framework of symbolic politics, memory studies, and critical toponymy. Descriptive statistics were used to identify temporal trends and peak periods of renaming activity, while comparative analysis was applied to examine regional variation and differences between categories of names. In addition, elements of content analysis were employed to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in toponymic choices.

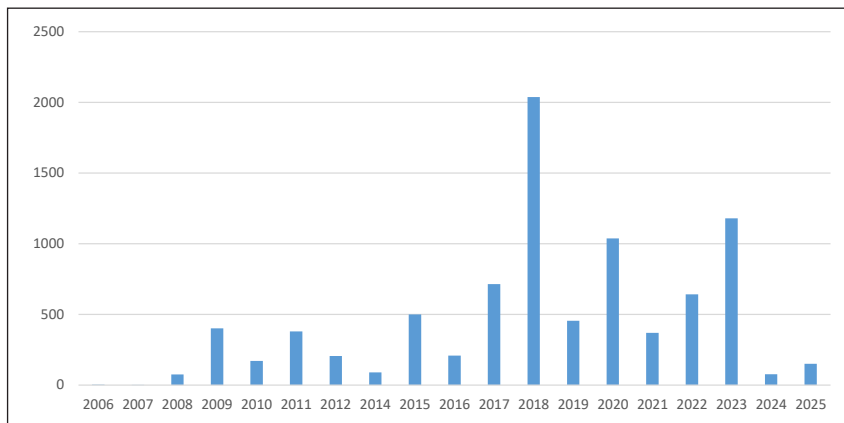
A comparative approach is used to examine temporal dynamics, regional distribution, and the substantive characteristics of both old and new names. This approach makes it possible to trace the shift from a Soviet-centered commemorative framework to a nationally oriented symbolic landscape, as well as to assess the role of local communities and institutional actors in shaping these transformations.

FINDINGS

The analysis of temporal dynamics demonstrates that renaming processes in rural areas are uneven. Between 2006 and 2010, there is a gradual increase in activity (from 2 cases in 2006 to 401 in 2009), followed by fluctuating dynamics. The most significant peak occurs in 2018 (2,037 renamings), with additional notable increases in 2020 (1,037) and 2023 (1,180). In other periods, renaming activity remains at low to moderate levels, suggesting a wave-like pattern in state toponymic policy.

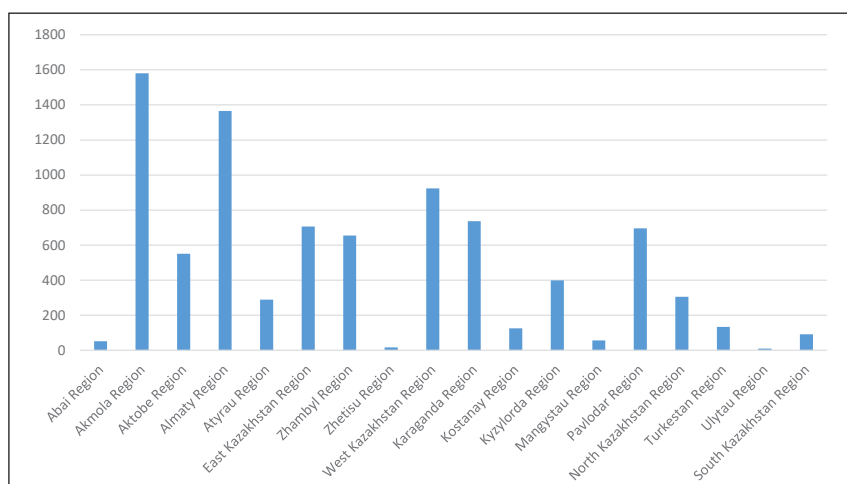
Figure 1

Annual Number of Decisions to Rename Streets in Kazakhstan, 2006–2025



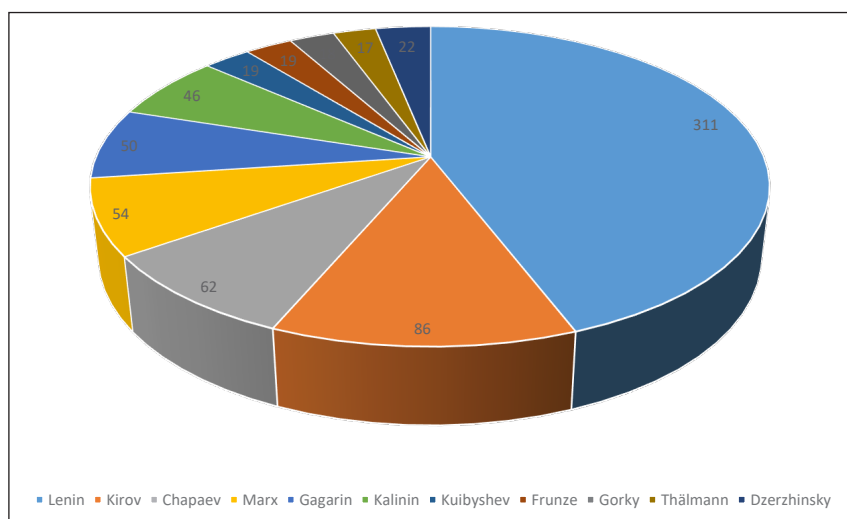
Note: Regional analysis reveals significant differentiation. The highest number of street renamings is recorded in Akmola (1,580), Almaty (1,365), and West Kazakhstan (924) regions.

Source: Author's calculations based on official renaming decisions

Figure 2*Regional Distribution of Decisions to Rename Streets in Kazakhstan, 2006–2025*

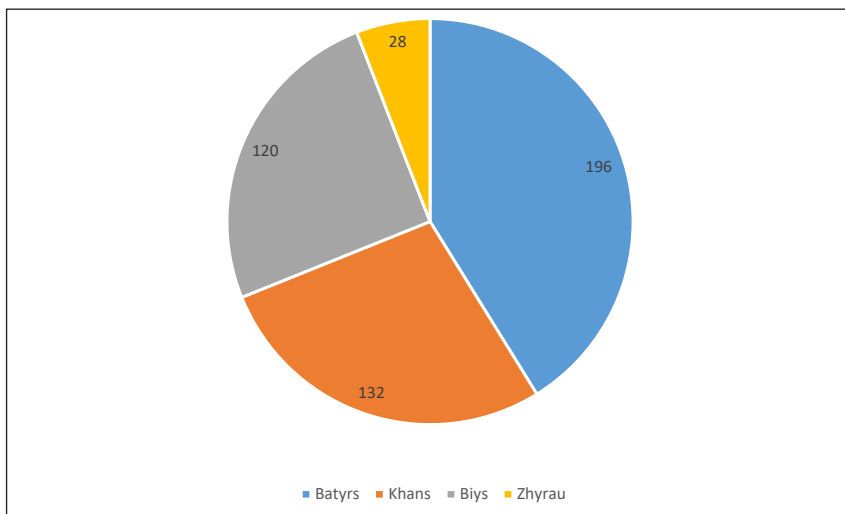
Note: The substantive analysis indicates that a significant share of street renamings is associated with the rejection of Soviet toponymy.

Source: Author's calculations based on official renaming decisions

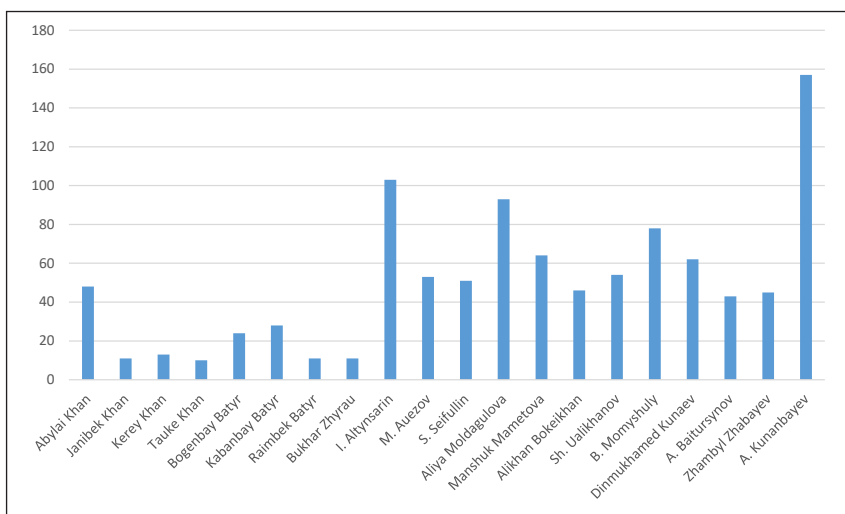
Figure 3*Most frequently replaced Soviet toponyms*

Note: New names reflect a clear orientation toward the national canon.

Source: Author's calculations based on official renaming decisions

Figure 4*Main categories of newly assigned street names*

Source: Author's calculations based on official street renaming decisions

Figure 5*Most common newly assigned street names*

Source: Author's calculations based on official street renaming decisions

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that the renaming of streets named after Soviet figures is uneven and wave-like, with each figure demonstrating its own trajectory of “symbolic displacement”. The data show a gradual increase in renaming activity from the late 2000s, culminating in a sharp peak in 2018 (83 cases), followed by a decline; however, the process does not cease entirely through 2025. This suggests that decommunization is not a one-time event but rather a prolonged process with periodic phases of intensification. At the regional level, the highest intensity of symbolic rejection is observed in the Akmola, East Kazakhstan,

Pavlodar, and North Kazakhstan regions, suggesting that Soviet toponymy is more deeply entrenched in the northern, eastern, and central parts of the country.

Thus, regional analysis reveals a clear spatial pattern: the highest concentration of renamings is found in the northern, eastern, and central regions of Kazakhstan. This may be explained both by the higher density of Soviet-era toponyms and by the demographic and historical-cultural characteristics of these regions. In contrast, southern and western regions exhibit a more selective pattern of renaming, often linked to local historical contexts.

The analysis of individual figures indicates that renaming processes in Kazakhstan are differentiated, depending both on the symbolic status of a given figure and on regional specificities. At the same time, the overall trajectory points to the gradual displacement of the Soviet symbolic canon and its replacement with nationally oriented narratives, a process particularly evident in rural areas as spaces of active identity reconfiguration.

The analysis of new street names demonstrates that the formation of the post-Soviet toponymic space in Kazakhstan is no less complex and differentiated than the rejection of Soviet symbols. Unlike decommunization, which exhibits pronounced peaks, the assignment of new names exhibits a more stable, cumulative pattern, reflecting the institutionalization of a national symbolic canon.

Comparative analysis shows that the peak in the assignment of new names, as in the case of decommunization, occurred in 2017–2018, indicating that the dismantling of the old symbolic space and the construction of a new one occurred concurrently. However, whereas the rejection of Soviet names declined after the peak, the assignment of new names has remained more stable, particularly in the case of names associated with key national figures.

Thus, the analysis of new names suggests the formation of a hierarchically structured national toponymic canon, consisting of several key groups: state figures (Abylai Khan), representatives of the intellectual and cultural figures (Auezov, Altynsarin), leaders of the national movement (Bokeikhan, Baitursynov), heroes (Moldagulova, Momyshuly), and symbolic figures of nationwide significance (Abai). Taken together, these findings indicate a transition from the deconstruction of the Soviet symbolic space to its deliberate replacement by a system of nationally oriented meanings, particularly pronounced in rural Kazakhstan.

The findings indicate the following:

First, the large-scale replacement of Soviet toponyms points to the systemic nature of decommunization and derussification, consistent with interpretations of renaming as a “ritual of revolution” and a tool for breaking with the previous regime (Azaryahu, 2011; Light, 2004). The prevalence of references to figures such as Lenin, Kirov, and Chapaev in the replaced names reflect the targeted deconstruction of the Soviet symbolic landscape.

Second, the structure of new names reveals a clear strategy for constructing national identity through toponymy. The emphasis on biys, khans, and batyrs reflects a turn toward pre-modern and early modern historical narratives, aligning with arguments about the “nationalization” of space and the formation of a historical canon (Bekus & Medeuova, 2017; Zhiyenbayev et al., 2025). At the same time, the inclusion of cultural and even Soviet-era figures (e.g.,

Auezov, Seifullin) indicates a selective rather than radical reinterpretation of the past.

Third, the temporal dynamics (particularly the 2018 peak) may reflect institutional or political impulses that intensify renaming processes, thereby suggesting the dependence of toponymic policy on political cycles and administrative decisions. Two specific inflection points deserve closer attention. The rise in activity around 2014–2015 coincides with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the subsequent public debate in Kazakhstan over Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity and historical statehood vis-à-vis Russia; this period is documented elsewhere as one in which Kazakhstani authorities intensified symbolic assertions of national territoriality in response to external challenges to the country’s sovereignty (Tsyrempilov et al., 2022). The much sharper 2018 peak, by contrast, is more plausibly linked to a domestic institutional driver: the Rukhani Zhangyru (“Modernization of Spirituality”) program launched by President Nazarbayev in April 2017, which explicitly tasked regional akimats with identifying and commemorating historically and nationally significant figures and sites, and whose implementation accelerated markedly through 2018 (Tsyrempilov et al., 2022). While the available dataset cannot establish a causal link with certainty, the close temporal correspondence between these events and the observed peaks suggests that rural toponymic policy, far from being autonomous, is closely synchronized with both regional geopolitical pressures and centrally coordinated ideological campaigns.

Fourth, regional differences point to the uneven implementation of state policy. High activity in certain regions may be associated with administrative initiative, demographic structure, or levels of urbanization, while lower activity elsewhere may reflect greater persistence of local practices and lower engagement with centralized symbolic transformations. The demographic dimension merits particular attention: the regions showing the highest intensity of rejection of Soviet names (Akmola, East Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, and North Kazakhstan) are also among those that historically had, and in several cases still retain, comparatively large proportions of ethnic Russians and other Russian-speaking residents, whose relative demographic weight has declined markedly since independence (Dave, 2007; Fierman, 2005). Whether this decline drives or local renaming activity, serves as a permissive condition that removes local resistance to such activity, or is largely coincidental cannot be determined from the present dataset, but the overlap is suggestive and points to demographic change as a factor warranting further empirical investigation.

Finally, the distinctive character of rural areas is evident in the coexistence of two trends. On the one hand, the national canon is reproduced through the naming of streets after historical figures. On the other hand, a significant share of objects named for the first time indicates a process of “primary” formation of the toponymic space, where state policy functions not only as a mechanism of replacement but also as a tool for creating a symbolic landscape “from scratch”. This distinguishes rural areas from urban settings, where renaming is more often associated with the replacement of existing names.

Comparative Analysis of Old and New Toponyms

The comparative analysis shows that street renaming in Kazakhstan is not merely the mechanical replacement of one name with another but a systemic trans-

formation of symbolic space, characterized by the simultaneous “dismantling” of the Soviet canon and the “construction” of a national one.

The structure of rejected names reveals a clear hierarchy of Soviet symbols. The largest number of renamings is associated with V. Lenin (311 cases), confirming his central position in the Soviet ideological system. Other frequently rejected names include those commemorating S. Kirov (86), V. Chapaev (62), K. Marx (54), and Y. Gagarin (50), reflecting the diversity of the symbolic repertoire—from party leaders and revolutionaries to military heroes and figures associated with scientific and technological achievement. At the same time, a considerable number of renamings involve less “central” figures (Kalinin, Frunze, Kuibyshev, Thälmann, etc.), indicating how deeply Soviet toponymy permeated everyday spaces, including rural areas.

It is important to note that the rejected names include those commemorating not only ideologically charged figures but also prominent figures in Russian and world culture (Pushkin, Lermontov, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gogol) and figures in science and technology. This suggests that renaming extends beyond decommunization in the narrow sense and affects a broader domain of symbolic heritage associated with both the Soviet and imperial periods, thus constituting not only a “post-Soviet” but also, to some extent, a “post-colonial” model of toponymic transformation. This finding should nonetheless be interpreted with some caution and set against the urban evidence available in the literature. Kaşıkçı (2019) shows that in Almaty, the country’s largest city, non-political Russian cultural figures such as Pushkin and Gogol were, with very few exceptions, deliberately left untouched even as Soviet names with political and ideological associations were extensively replaced, suggesting that decommunization there did not extend to a broader derussification of the urban toponymic canon. The presence of Pushkin, Lermontov, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Gogol among the rejected names in the rural dataset therefore points to a possible divergence between urban and rural renaming logics rather than confirming a uniform, nationwide derussification trend; because the politically and ideologically charged names in the dataset greatly outnumber these cultural cases, a more cautious reading is that decommunization remains the dominant logic overall, while the renaming of non-political Russian cultural figures constitutes a secondary, but non-trivial, derussifying tendency that appears more pronounced in rural areas than in the capital.

In contrast, the structure of new names demonstrates a clear orientation toward the national historical and cultural canon. The largest categories include batyrs (196 cases), khans (132), and biys (120), reflecting the priority given to Kazakh society’s heroic and political traditions and its traditional legal heritage. Within these groups, key figures such as Abylai Khan, Kazybek Bi, Tole Bi, and Aiteke Bi form the “core” of historical memory transmitted through toponymy.

National intellectuals and cultural figures play a significant role: Ybyrai Altynsarin (103), Mukhtar Auezov (53), Saken Seifullin (51), as well as Abai Kunanbayev (157), who emerges as the most prominent figure in the new toponymic space. This indicates that, alongside the political and historical narrative, a cultural and humanitarian dimension of national identity is actively being constructed.

A distinct group consists of heroes and participants in World War II, notably Aliya Moldagulova (93), Manshuk Mametova (64), Baurzhan Momyshuly (78),

Rakhimzhan Koshkarbayev, among others. Their strong presence in toponymy highlights the importance of the heroic narrative as a unifying element of national memory and indicates that these individuals are comparable in significance to traditional historical figures.

Particular attention should be given to the inclusion of representatives of the national movement and the political elite of the twentieth century (Alikhan Bokeikhan, Akhmet Baitursynov, Mustafa Shokay); this inclusion reflects a more advanced stage of historical reinterpretation associated with the rehabilitation of previously marginalized or suppressed figures. At the same time, the inclusion of selected Soviet-era figures (e.g., Dinmukhamed Kunaev) indicates a selective approach to historical heritage, whereby aspects of the Soviet experience are reinterpreted and incorporated into the national canon.

The comparison of old and new names reveals several key patterns. First, there is a transition from an international and ideologically unified symbolic space to a nationally oriented and culturally differentiated one. While Soviet toponymy was dominated by figures of significance throughout the Soviet Union, the new system is built around national heroes, intellectuals, and historical figures.

Second, there is a shift from political-ideological figures toward cultural-historical and heroic images. However, the political dimension does not disappear; rather, it is transformed and reappears in the figures of khans and leaders of the national movement, but within a national rather than a supranational discourse.

Third, a hierarchical structure of the new toponymic canon is emerging, with a discernible “core” (Abai, Abylai Khan, Altynsarin), a “middle tier” (Auezov, Seifullin, Bokeikhan, Momysuly), and more local or specialized figures. This structure indicates the institutionalization of symbolic policy and its gradual spatial consolidation.

Finally, an important feature is that the rejection and replacement processes occur simultaneously: the periods during which Soviet names are removed most intensively coincide with those during which new names are actively assigned. This confirms that the transformation is not spontaneous but rather a managed and purposeful process of reconfiguring the toponymic landscape.

Thus, the comparative analysis demonstrates that street renaming in Kazakhstan represents a complex, multi-level process of symbolic reconfiguration, involving both the rejection of previous ideological frameworks and the construction of a new national narrative. This transformation is particularly evident in rural areas, where toponymy becomes an important instrument for embedding new identity and historical memory in everyday spatial practices.

CONCLUSION

The analysis yields several interrelated conclusions that contribute to a broader understanding of symbolic politics and spatial transformation in post-Soviet contexts.

First, street renaming in rural Kazakhstan is large-scale and systemic, accounting for more than half of all recorded cases and showing sustained activity throughout the period under study. This indicates that toponymic transformation is not episodic but rather constitutes a consistent and institutionalized process embedded in state policy and administrative practice.

Second, the findings reveal a clear strategic orientation of toponymic policy toward the dismantling of Soviet symbolic heritage and the parallel construction of a nationally grounded historical narrative. The replacement of Soviet-era names with references to key figures in Kazakh history, culture, and political tradition reflect a deliberate effort to reconfigure symbolic space in line with the priorities of nation-building and the consolidation of national identity.

Third, the processes of renaming are marked by pronounced temporal and regional unevenness. The presence of distinct peaks, particularly in the late 2010s, suggests the influence of political cycles and institutional initiatives, while regional variation points to the role of local administrative capacity, demographic composition, and historically rooted patterns of symbolic representation. This unevenness highlights the interaction between centralized policy directives and localized modes of implementation.

Fourth, rural areas emerge as a specific and analytically significant arena for the implementation of toponymic policy. In contrast to urban contexts, where renaming often involves the replacement of existing names, rural territories are characterized by two simultaneous processes: the replacement of existing names and the primary naming of previously unnamed objects. This dual dynamic enhances the role of the state not only as an agent of symbolic replacement but also as a creator of the symbolic landscape “from scratch”, thereby deepening its influence on everyday spatial practices and representations.

Fifth, the comparative analysis of old and new toponyms demonstrates a shift from an ideologically unified and internationalist symbolic framework toward a nationally oriented and hierarchically structured canon. This transformation involves both the dismantling of the Soviet ideological canon and the selective incorporation of historical, cultural, and even certain Soviet-era figures into a reinterpreted national narrative, reflecting a nuanced and non-linear approach to the past.

Finally, the results confirm that toponymy in Kazakhstan functions as a significant instrument through which collective memory is materialized and negotiated at the local level. Through the renaming and naming of streets, local communities become embedded in broader processes of nation-building, while also reproducing and adapting symbolic meanings within their own spatial contexts. At the same time, rural areas constitute a distinct level of analysis that warrants further in-depth and comparative research, particularly with regard to the interaction between state-driven policies and grassroots perceptions of symbolic change.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature on symbolic politics, critical toponymy, and post-Soviet nation-building in several ways. First, drawing on 15,623 official acts of renaming, the study documents the systematic, wave-like displacement of the Soviet commemorative canon in rural settlements and extends decommunization research beyond its predominant focus on capital-city cases (Azaryahu, 2011; Kaşıkçı, 2019; Light, 2004) to encompass local government decision-making. Second, the analysis speaks directly to debates on “Kazakhization” as a selective, Soviet-inflected rather than wholly anti-Soviet or anti-Russian project (Kaşıkçı, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2016, 2025): the rural data confirm the selective retention of certain Soviet-era Kazakh figures alongside the wholesale rejection of explicitly political ones, while also revealing a rural

derussification trend that extends to non-political Russian cultural names and has not been documented in the urban literature. Third, by linking the observed peaks in renaming activity to the Rukhani Zhangyru program and situating them within the broader context of Kazakhstan's symbolic and territorial sovereignty (Tsyrempilov et al., 2022), the study reinforces the argument that Kazakhstani toponymic policy operates as a means of building symbolic capital both domestically and internationally (Bekus, 2021). Future research building on this rural dataset could productively combine it with demographic and survey data to test more directly the extent to which renaming intensity tracks the changing ethnic composition of local communities, and could extend the comparative lens to national-patriotic discourse in the post-Nazarbayev period (Kurmanov & Abishev, 2026).

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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