The Nation through Cultural Artifacts: What Can Renaming Streets Tell Us about Nation-Building in Kazakhstan?

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Abstract. Modern Kazakhstan actively shapes its national identity through changes in the symbols of urban space, including mass renaming of streets. This article analyzes the process of street renaming in the cities of Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2019. The article presents a unique database of 6,832 cases of street renaming. Most of the existing studies studying Kazakhstan on this topic focus on qualitative analysis or the study of individual cities. This paper offers a systematic statistical study of the factors influencing the intensity of renaming using quantitative methods. The results of the study show that street renaming occurs more often in large cities and regional centers. This trend indicates the role of centralized and hierarchical national symbolic policy. Another factor influencing the renaming policy is the ethnic composition of the population. In cities with a high percentage of Slavic population, renaming occurs less frequently, which most likely reflects the cautious behavior of the state in symbolic changes in ethnically mixed regions. In addition, in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan, the active role of local clans in street renaming practices is revealed. In these regions, streets are often named after famous clan representatives, while in the northern and eastern regions, where clan identity is less pronounced, their influence is minimal. The article demonstrates the significance of cultural artifacts, such as toponyms, in the process of nation-building and proposes new research approaches based on quantitative analysis.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, nation-building, symbols, street names, «imagined community", primordialist connections, constructivism

Introduction

Nation-building has been a central research focus in ethnosociology, ethnopolitology, and nationalism studies over the past fifty years. Since the shift from a primordialist to a constructivist paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s, the topic of nation-building has consistently remained one of the most popular areas of research. This shift in interest notably coincided with the rapid disappearance of alternatives to the nation-state. As Andreas Wimmer, a prominent modern scholar of nationalism, illustrates, empires and colonies – the main alternatives to the modern nation-state – declined significantly from the end of World War II to the early 1960s (Wimmer, 2018).
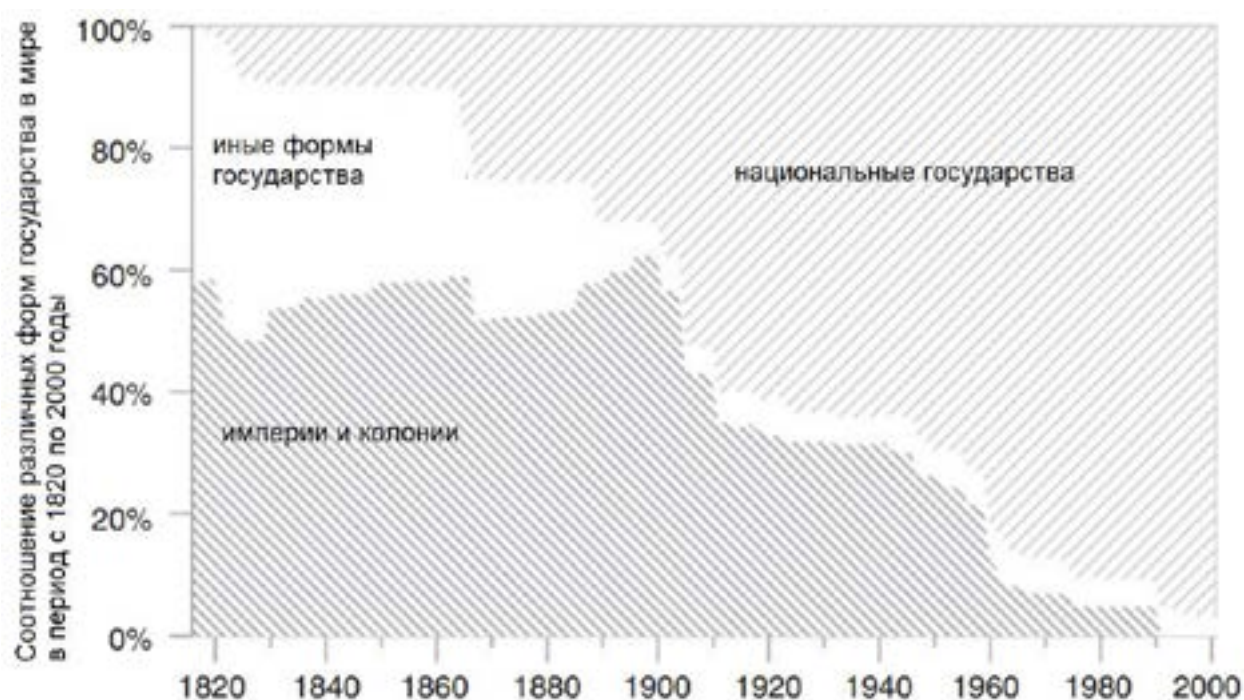

Fig. 1. The Proportion of Various Forms of Government Worldwide from 1820 to 2000.
Source: Andreas Wimmer [1]

Unlike primordialists, constructivists view the nation as a project rather than a given. This perspective is more productive, as it allows us to trace the evolution of nation formation and subsequent development, rather than accepting it as an essentialist phenomenon. Although constructivists lack a strong consensus on what precisely underpins the initial formation of a nation, they generally place significant emphasis on symbolic elements. Viewing the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2020) highlights the special significance of the symbolic field, where key processes of identity formation, belonging, cohesion, and unity take place. In this context, cultural artifacts – such as street names – play an essential role in creating and reinforcing the "imagined community," making symbols (e.g., the names of national heroes commemorated in street names) an integral part of daily life. The level of public interaction

with this symbolic space is thus much more intentional than with most other cultural artifacts in urban spaces, such as monuments and statues.

The high frequency of interaction with newly named streets and avenues significantly accelerates the process of gradual adaptation to these names, moving from mere recognition to eventual acceptance. However, it is important to understand that this process is not always smooth and can sometimes encounter considerable resistance. For instance, older generations in Almaty often prefer using former street names in everyday conversation, such as when arranging to meet at a café on Furmanova Street. It would be hard to imagine anyone in modern Astana suggesting a meeting on Marx Street. Yet, one of the authors of this article recalls a childhood memory of an elderly Kazakh woman expressing frustration at the renaming of a central street. She questioned how the name of a "scientist" (Marx) could be replaced by that of a "bandit" (Kenesary). Today, it is unlikely to encounter such strong objections in Astana, as these new names have been in place long enough to become part of daily life. Individual and collective stories have developed, linking the geographical locations with their new names in people's minds. In other words, a process of recognition and familiarity with the new names has taken root.

In this paper, we analyze street name changes using statistical methods, which enable us to identify points of tension in the renaming process and assess how various social factors influence the likelihood of renaming. To achieve this, we compiled a database of all street renamings in Kazakhstani cities from 1991 to 2019, encompassing 6,832 name changes.

The contribution of this work to nation-building research is as follows. First, the study of national state formation has traditionally been the domain of qualitative historical research. Foundational works on nationalism and nation-state formation were authored either by historians (Hobsbawm, 2012; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012), or by scholars from other social and humanities disciplines with a strong emphasis on historical methods (Gellner, 2015; Mann, 2005). In Kazakhstan, research in this field has followed a similar pattern, with few quantitative studies conducted, despite some exceptions (e.g., Burkhanov, 2017). This work aims to bring quantitative analysis methods to the study of nation-building, offering a fresh perspective that we believe will enrich this research area.

Secondly, this study is based on a unique database that includes the history of 6,832 city street renamings from 1991 to 2019. By introducing this new dataset, we open up fresh possibilities for research in this area. Previous studies on street renaming have typically been case studies focusing on a single city (Kaşikçi, 2019), whereas the scale of our database allows for a broader analysis and the ability to address additional research questions.

Finally, we shift the research focus beyond the classical studies of nation and nationalism. The citation lists of prominent Kazakhstani scholars in these fields typically end with the works of Rogers Brubaker, whose seminal contributions were written in the 1990s and 2000s (Brubaker, 1996; Brubaker, 1999). In contrast, more recent literature from the last ten to fifteen years—such as the works of Milonas or Wimmer—remains largely underrepresented (Mylonas, 2023). This study is one of the first in Kazakhstani nation-building research to engage with contemporary literature, thereby aligning it with current leading research.

Through quantitative (statistical) data analysis, this study reveals the patterns underlying street name changes, specifically identifying factors that correlate with these changes. The

structure of the article is as follows. First, the methodological foundation of the study is presented, detailing the database and analytical methods used. This is followed by a section outlining the study's main findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the results and discusses prospects for future research.

Literature review

In modern studies of nation and nationalism, the constructivist approach prevails. The idea of primordialism that nations have a "natural" origin is more often found in nationalist rhetoric than in the works of scientists. However, there are representatives of modern primordialists who speak not about the "natural" origin of the nation, but rather about the deep emotional perception of connections and attachments to the ethnic group and nation (Edward Shils, Clifford Geertz).

Partially primordialist ideas (as well as the ideas of constructivism) are embodied in ethnosymbolism. A. D. Smith, one of the representatives of this direction, emphasizes the importance of symbols, myths, and collective memory, arguing that modern nations have deep roots – they are built on the basis of previously existing communities that can go deep into history (Smith, 2009).

In contrast to the primordialist and ethnosymbolist tradition, there are modernist, instrumentalist and constructivist approaches. The most famous representatives (E. Gellner, E. Hobsbawm and B. Anderson) emphasize the constructed, invented "imaginary" nature of the nation.

Modern constructivists such as R. Brubaker, C. Calhoun, M. Billig, H. Mylonas, and A. Wimmer continue the ideas of classical constructivism. R. Brubaker suggests considering the nation not as a category of analysis, but rather as a category of practice. Based on the analysis of the post-Soviet space, he examines how nations and nationalism were "reformatted" after the collapse of the USSR (Brubaker, 1996; Brubaker, 1999). C. Calhoun examines how nationalism is associated with democracy, modernization, and identity. Emphasizes the role of public institutions - education, the public sphere in the formation of the nation as a social project (Calhoun, 2007). M. Billig in his work "Banal Nationalism" points out how nationalism is present in everyday life: in the language of the media, symbols, calendars, political and sports events (Billig, 1995). The nation constantly reproduces itself in banal nationalism. H. Mylonas explores various forms of nationalism, analyzing communities, narratives, and identities (Mylonas, 2023). A. Wimmer, using quantitative data, proves the artificial nature of the nation, studies the formation of nations in terms of networks of power and conflict (Wimmer, 2018).

Researchers of nationalism and nation-building in Kazakhstan largely continue the traditions of constructivism. The processes of nation-building in independent Kazakhstan are studied by S. Spehr and N. Kassenova (Spehr and Kassenova, 2012); E. Schatz (Schatz, 2000). Marlene Laruelle points out how three discursive paradigms of state identity are formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union: Kazakhness, Kazakhstaniness and transnationalism (Laruelle, 2015).

How do "imaginary" and "real" identities associated with state policy and the discourse of national identity interact in the countries of Central Asia? This question is raised by Rico

Isaacs and Abel Polese (Isaacs and Polese, 2017). The authors highlight the contested nature of state-building in Central Asia and focus on new or less traditional analytical tools for studying state-building, such as cinema, construction projects, and elections. The processes of forming an "imagined community" through cinema, street names, and the erection of monuments are studied by R. Isaacs (Isaacs, 2022), M. H. Kaşikçi (Kaşikçi, 2019), and A. Fauve (Fauve, 2015). S. Insebayeva and N. Insebayeva emphasize the role of the national anthem and national currency as key symbols linking symbolic politics with the formation of national identity (Insebayeva and Insebayeva, 2019).

Most researchers studying nation-building and nationalism in Kazakhstan use qualitative data. One of the studies that uses quantitative analysis is the study by D. Sharipova, A. Burkhanov and A. Alpeissova (e.g., Burkhanov, 2017). The researcher uses original data, builds regression models, analyzing which variables influence the formation of different types of nationalism: civic and ethnic.

This study also utilizes quantitative data. However, these are not survey data, but observations of street renamings starting from 1991. The author concludes that the process of street renaming in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that combines centralized governance, ethnodemographic characteristics, and cultural-identification practices of various regions.

Data and Method

This study is based on a unique database encompassing the renaming of 6,832 streets across Kazakhstani cities from 1991 to 2019. The database includes renamings in 37 cities of independent Kazakhstan, comprising 3 cities of republican significance, 17 regional centers (14 during part of the period covered by the database), and 17 smaller towns (or 20 cities if Zhezkazgan, Konaev, and Semey are excluded from regional centers). The database has some limitations. First, it is not comprehensive; while it includes all major cities (those with at least regional center status), smaller towns are not fully represented. For instance, the database lacks information on smaller towns in the Aktobe region, such as Shalkar and Khromtau. Nevertheless, from the perspective of external validity, the database remains reliable, as it covers more than 90% of cases when considering streets as the unit of analysis. According to statistical guidelines, when using non-systematic sampling methods, such as the main array method, it is necessary to collect data on at least two-thirds of cases. In this instance, the proportion is well above this threshold.

Figure 2 illustrates the geographic distribution of these renamings across administrative-territorial units. As shown, the scale of renaming is highly uneven.

Fig. 2. Number of Street Renamings by Geographic Region.

Source: Renaming Database

In this context, a statistical analysis of influencing factors was conducted using correlation coefficients, specifically the Pearson correlation. For this analysis, the number of streets renamings in each locality was log-transformed using a decimal logarithm. Logarithmic transformation is a standard methodological approach to address data with high irregularity. For example, the number of renamings ranges from 1,767 in Shymkent to just one in Aktau, creating a large disparity that could potentially skew Pearson correlation results and lead to inaccurate estimates. After log transformation, the scale of variation narrows, with the values now spanning a single order (e.g., 3.25 for Shymkent and 0 for Aktau). It is worth noting that logarithmic transformation did not amplify but reduced the observed statistical effect, weakening the correlation strength and decreasing significance (though the results remained robust and statistically significant – see Table 1). Thus, while performing the analysis without logarithmic transformation might have demonstrated stronger effects, the transformation was applied to adhere to methodological rigor.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation between City Status and the Number of Street Renamings (with and without Logarithmic Transformation)

		Number of Renamings *(without Logarithmic Transformation)*	Number of Renamings *(with Logarithmic Transformation)*
Status of Administrative-Territorial Unit	Correlation: Significance:	0,67*** 0,000006	0,632*** 0,00003

Results

The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 2 and reveal the following pattern. The majority of street renamings occurred in cities of republican significance and regional centers, as indicated by a strong positive correlation (0.632***). This correlation shows a clear trend: most renamings take place first in cities of republican significance, followed by regional centers, and lastly in smaller towns.

Based on this, it can be concluded that efforts to reshape the symbolic space are conducted hierarchically and are largely centrally managed. The central elite is primarily interested in renaming within the major (or "main") cities of the country, with significantly less focus on smaller towns. A high proportion of renamings in smaller towns would indicate the presence of influential local elites, while a lower proportion suggests the passivity of local elites (or perhaps even their absence). At the very least, local elites appear to have little interest in transforming the symbolic space by incorporating the names of notable ancestors into street names.

Table 2. Main Factors Correlating with a High Proportion of Street Renaming

		Status of Administrative-Territorial Unit	The Proportion of the Russian Population
Number of Renamings	Correlation: Significance:	0,632*** 0,00003	−0,57*** 0,0002

Another significant correlation is with the proportion of the Russian (Slavic) population. In cities with a higher proportion of this ethnic group, the degree of renaming is lower, as indicated by a negative correlation coefficient. Although this coefficient is smaller than that associated with city status, it remains strong and statistically significant.

In our view, this finding suggests a more conservative approach by the state in shaping the symbolic space in cities with a high proportion of Slavic residents. Different levels of tribal activism among various Kazakh groups also influence this trend. According to a 2016 sociological study, "in a regional context, it is clear that Kazakhs living in the Western, Central, and Southern regions of the country place great importance on clan affiliation" (Zhusupova a, 2016; Zhusupova b, 2016). Conversely, for Kazakhs in Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan, regions where the Slavic population is also more concentrated, tribal activism is less pronounced, involving fewer clan gatherings and activities related to Kazakh genealogies.

In certain regions, some tribal associations, organized as public funds, make significant efforts to unite clan members through various means, such as holding clan congresses, writing and publishing books, erecting monuments, and renaming streets to honor notable clan figures. Such associations can heavily influence the street-renaming process. In Northern and Eastern regions, where interest in clan affiliation is lower, tribal activism is also less prominent.

The findings of the 2016 sociological survey are indirectly supported by data from the Kazakh Genealogy Forum, www.tumalas.kz, which lists experts on shezhire.

Information about the forum moderators is provided in the table below:

Table 3. Information about the forum moderators

№	Geography of Main Residence	Number of Moderators	Percentage of Total
1	Southern Kazakhstan (Senior (Uly) Zhuz and Konyrat and Sunak tribes)	31	33,3 %
2	Northern, Central, and Eastern Kazakhstan (Middle Zhuz without Konyrat tribe)	17	18,3 %
3	Western Kazakhstan (Junior Zhuz)	41	44,1 %
4	The Rest (Families living in different regions of Kazakhstan, general affairs editor)	4	4,3 %
	Total	93	100 %

Here, we observe that there are fewer representatives from the clans of Northern, Central, and Eastern Kazakhstan, despite the broad geographic scope.

Consequently, it can be said that the relatively lower importance of tribal activism in Northern, Central, and Eastern Kazakhstan reduces the impact of this factor on street renaming in these regions.

Conclusion

An analysis of renamed streets in Kazakhstan (1991 to 2019) revealed that the process of symbolic construction of urban space is carried out mainly in a centralized and hierarchical manner. A strong positive correlation between the administrative status of the city and the number of renamings shows that street names are most often changed in cities of republican significance and regional centers. This fact indicates the active role of central elites in the formation of the national symbolic space, while in small towns, such activity is significantly lower, which may indicate a weak influence or low interest of local elites.

The ethnic composition of the population is another factor that affects the intensity of renaming. If there is a certain proportion of Russian-speaking (Slavic) population, then the frequency of renaming is lower. This fact probably reflects a more cautious attitude of the state to national policy in such regions.

Also, regional differences in the tribal activity of Kazakhs play an important role. In regions with a strong interest in shezhire (Western, Southern, and partly Central Kazakhstan), clans have a significant impact on the symbolic renaming of streets. The name changes are often associated with famous representatives of local clans. On the contrary, in Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan, where interest in clan identity is weaker, the influence of such factors is minimal. In summary, the results emphasize the complex process of street renaming in modern Kazakhstan, which combines state, centralized management, ethnodemographic features, and cultural-identification practices of various regions of the country.

Authors' contribution: In writing the article "The Nation through Cultural Artifacts: What Can Renaming Streets Tell Us about Nation-Building in Kazakhstan?" the author substantiated the concept of the study, formulated the main idea, and research objectives. The author also conducted a literature review on this topic. In planning the study, the author collected and analyzed primary data on street renaming. The author agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work, proper investigation, and resolution of questions related to the reliability of the data or the integrity of all parts of the article.

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Мәдени жәдігерлер арқылы ұлтты тану: Қазақстандағы көше атауларын өзгерту ұлт қалыптастыру үдерісі туралы не айта алады?

Аңдатпа. Қазақстан посткеңестік кезеңде символдық қала кеңістігін қайта құру, соның ішінде көше атауларын жаппай ауыстыру арқылы өзінің ұлттық бірегейлігін белсенді түрде қалыптастыруда. Бұл мақалада 1991–2019 жылдар аралығында қазақ қалаларындағы көше атауларын өзгерту үдерісі сандық әдістерді қолдану арқылы, атауларды өзгертуге қатысты 6 832 жағдайды қамтитын бірегей дерекқор негізінде талданады. Сапалық талдауға немесе жекелеген қалаларды зерттеуге бағытталған қазіргі зерттеулердің көпшілігінен айырмашылығы, бұл зерттеу атауларды өзгерту қарқындылығына әсер ететін факторлардың жүйелі статистикалық талдауын ұсынады. Зерттеу нәтижелері атауларды өзгерту ең көп орын алған қалалар – республикалық маңызы бар қалалар мен облыс орталықтары екенін көрсетті. Бұл өз кезегінде мемлекеттік рәміздік саясаттың орталықтандырылған әрі иерархиялық сипатын айғақтайды. Этикалық құрам да маңызды фактор болып табылады: славян халқының жоғары үлесі бар қалаларда көше атаулары сирек өзгереді, бұл этникалық құрамы аралас өңірлердегі символдық трансформацияға қатысты мемлекеттің сақтық саясатымен түсіндірілуі мүмкін. Сонымен қатар, елдің оңтүстік және батыс өңірлерінде көрнекті ру өкілдерінің құрметіне көше атауларын өзгерту кезінде тайпалық бірлестіктер белсенді рөл атқаратыны анықталды. Ал рулық ерекшеліктер

азырақ байқалатын солтүстік және шығыс аймақтарда мұндай ықпал әлдеқайда төмен. Мақалада топонимдер сынды мәдени жәдігерлердің мемлекет құру үдерісіндегі маңыздылығы көрсетіліп, оны сандық әдістер арқылы зерттеудің жаңа тәсілдері ұсынылады.

Негізгі ұғымдар: ұлт, ұлтшылдық, ұлт-құрылыс, рәміздер, көше атаулары, «елестетілген қауымдастық», примордиалистік байланыстар, конструктивизм

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Нация через культурные артефакты: что переименование улиц может рассказать нам о формировании нации в Казахстане?

Аннотация. Современный Казахстан активно формирует национальную идентичность посредством изменений символов городского пространства, в том числе массовое переименование улиц. В данной статье проводится анализ процесса переименования улиц в городах Казахстана в период с 1991 по 2019 годы. В статье представлена уникальная база данных по 6 832 случаям переименований. Большинство существующих исследований, изучающих Казахстан по данной тематике, сосредоточены на качественном анализе или на изучении отдельных городов. Данная работа предлагает систематическое статистическое исследование факторов, влияющих на интенсивность переименований с использованием количественных методов. Результаты исследования показывают, что чаще переименования улиц происходят в городах республиканского значения и региональных центрах. Данный тренд свидетельствует о централизованном и иерархическом характере национальной символической политики. Еще один фактор, влияющий на политику переименования, - этнический состав населения. В городах с высоким процентом славянского населения переименования происходят реже, что скорее всего иллюстрирует осторожную политику государства в отношении символических изменений в этнически смешанных регионах. Кроме того, в южных и западных регионах Казахстана в практиках переименования улиц выявлена активная роль родоплеменных объединений. В данных регионах часто улицы называются в честь выдающихся представителей родов, тогда как в северных и восточных областях, где родовая идентичность выражена слабее, их влияние минимально. Статья демонстрирует значимость культурных артефактов, таких, как топонимы, в процессе нациостроительства и предлагает новые исследовательские подходы на основе количественного анализа.

Ключевые слова: нация, национализм, строительство наций, символы, название улицы, «воображаемое сообщество», примордиалисткие связи, конструктивизм.

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