

THE KAZAKH NEOPATRIMONIAL REGIME: BALANCING UNCERTAINTIES AMONG THE “FAMILY,” OLIGARCHS AND TECHNOCRATS

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Abstract: Kazakhstan’s regime functions through a neopatrimonial/patronal system, which is made up of several concentric circles. This article focuses on the first three circles: the family, the oligarchs, and the technocrats. It argues that patronal practices linking political elites and business interests are key to interpreting the functioning of the Kazakh political system.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the academic literature devoted to the Central Asian political regimes, both in Western and locally-produced works, took the “clan” factor as one of its dominant interpretive prisms.¹

¹ K. Collins. 2006. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; E. Schatz. 2004. *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of “Blood” in Kazakhstan and beyond*. Seattle: University of Washington Press; N. Masanov. 2003. “Kazakhskaja politicheskaja i intellektual’naia elita: klanovaia prinadlezhnost’ i vnutritnicheskoe sopernichestvo.” In S. Panarin, ed., *Evrasiia: liudi i mify*. Moscow: Natalis, 365-380; V. Khyupin. 2000. “Kazakhstanskaia politicheskaja elita: mezhdumodernizatsiei i traibalizmom. Doklad na 2m vsrossiiskom kongresse politologov, Moskva, MGIMO, 22

It assumed that the existence of regional or clan identities impacted political life. This assumption, which had long been present in Soviet academic literature, emerged in the region's media with the great corruption scandals of the Brezhnev years at the beginning of the 1980s, and was heatedly debated in the Soviet press at the onset of perestroika. Western researchers undertaking fieldwork in the 1990s reproduced this prism and contributed indirectly to validating it—the implicit idea was that so-called traditional or archaic elements were halting the birth of modern civic identities and classical political parties based on a shared ideology.

In the case of Kazakhstan, analysts argued that the three hordes, or *juz*, which had historically constituted a supple system of tribal confederations assembled on the basis of a territorial principle,² determined the nature of the country's political life. During the Soviet period, the Great Horde, based in the Almaty region, was assumed to have largely controlled the apparatus of the Communist Party; the Small Horde, whose territory was situated in the west of the country, reportedly had symbolic control over the country's main oil wealth; whereas the Middle Horde, the most Russified, was well represented in intellectual circles and the administrative apparatus.³ In the post-Soviet period, phenomena such as the high turn-over of Kazakh senior officials and President Nursultan Nazarbayev's strategies for nominating cadres were interpreted as being the peak of the clan iceberg, indirectly revealing the precarious and continually renegotiated balance between the hordes.⁴ If these solidarity strategies, which are far more pertinent in rural than urban milieus, and were deeply transformed by the Soviet decades, may have some social influence, in particular on marriage strategies and traditional exchanges of services, their role as drivers of political life has never be convincingly demonstrated.

In the 2000s, new works in political science set out to revamp the analysis of post-Soviet political transformations.⁵ The notion of “patronal

aprelia 2000g.” *Mezhdunarodnyi evraziiskii institut*. April 2000, <http://www.iicas.org/page.php?id=105>.

² Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of “Blood” in Kazakhstan and beyond*; K. Collins. 2004. “The Logic of Clan Politics. Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics* 56: 224-261.

³ N. Masanov, “Kazakhskaiia politicheskaiia i intellektual'naia elita: klanovaiia prinadlezhnost' i vnutritnicheskoe sopernichestvo.”

⁴ R.L. Wolfel. 2002. “North to Astana: Nationalistic Motives for the Movement of the Kazakh(stani) Capital.” *Nationalities Papers* 30: 3: 485-506; J. Murphy. 2006. “Illusory Transition? Elite Reconstitution in Kazakhstan, 1989-2002,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 58: 4: 523-554.

⁵ S.N. Cummings. 2005. *Kazakhstan. Power and the Elite*. London: I.B. Tauris; S.N. Cummings, ed. 2002. *Power and Chance in Central Asia*, London: Routledge; P. Jones Luong, ed. 2003. *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press; P. Jones Luong. 2002. *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia. Power, Perceptions and Pacts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

presidentialism,” applied not only to Putin’s Russia but also to the Central Asian regimes, makes it possible to avoid the cultural pitfall linked to the supposed clan feature of the region.⁶ The notion of neopatrimonialism, often used for the countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, is also relevant. Definitions of neopatrimonial regimes differ depending upon whether they emphasize political elements (patronage, paternalism, arbitrariness, weakness of institutions, and misuse of public office) or economic ones (endemic corruption, the kleptocracy of the established elite, management of national wealth as private property),⁷ and whether they analyze the highest circles of the state (the presidents and their intimates), or more local mechanisms of the state apparatus. In this article, I work with the broad definition of neopatrimonial practices as blurring the boundaries between the political and the economic, the public and the private, the individual and the collective.⁸

The regime established since Kazakhstan’s independence is intrinsically linked with strategies of economic development and is often presented as an archetype of the rentier state.⁹ The recentralization of oil and gas wealth; conflicts around the ownership of the mining sector and the banking industry; and success or failure in increasing living standards as promised by the president to his fellow citizens are key topics the Kazakh authorities use to assert their political legitimacy.¹⁰ Thanks to its economic success, the Kazakh regime has indeed managed to delegitimize its democratic liberal opposition and has established a paternalist state with weak institutions in which justice is not independent and the figure of the president—in power since 1989 and decreed by the parliament as “leader of the nation” in 2010¹¹—dominates public life. Everyday corruption is endemic

⁶ H.E. Hale. 2005. “Regime Cycles. Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia.” *World Politics* 58: 133-165.

⁷ D.D. Bach, and M. Gazibo, eds. 2012. *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond*. London, New York: Routledge; A. Bank, T. Richter. 2010. “Neopatrimonialism in the Middle East and North Africa: Overview, Critique and Alternative Conceptualization.” Paper presented at the workshop “Neopatrimonialism in Various World Regions,” August 23, 2010, Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

⁸ A. Sindzingre. 2010. *The Concept of Neopatrimonialism: Divergences and Convergences with Development Economics*. Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

⁹ A. Franke, A. Gawrich, and G. Alakbarov. 2009. “Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan as Post-Soviet Rentier States: Resource Incomes and Autocracy as a Double ‘Curse’ in Post-Soviet Regimes.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61: 1: 109-140.

¹⁰ On the link between Kazakhstan’s nation-branding and promoting its economic competitiveness, see A. Rustemova. 2011. “Political economy of Central Asia: Initial reflections on the need for a new approach.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2: 1: 30-39. E. Marat. 2009. “Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61: 7: 1123-1136.

¹¹ R. Isaacs. 2010. “Informal politics and the uncertain context of transition: revisiting early stage nondemocratic development in Kazakhstan.” *Democratization* 17: 1: 1-25; R. Isaacs. 2010. “‘Papa’ – Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Na-

(the country is ranked 120th out of 183 by Transparency International¹²), the use of offshore and shell companies to facilitate capital flight is extensive, and, despite large state subsidies, the implementation of decisions, especially provision of public services like education and healthcare, remains weak and inconsistent. The regime functions through a patronal system, which is made up of several concentric circles: the president and his intimates, often defined by local media and analysts as the “family”—a borrowing of the term used to designate the great Italian mafia families; the main oligarchs, whose relations with the political authorities can be either harmonious or conflictual; the technocratic elite (key ministers, governors of both capitals and the regions, heads of the presidential administration, etc.); the regional elite; small and medium-sized businessmen; and, at the lowest level, the local administration.

This patronal system is founded on principles of loyalty to one’s superior, that is, to the one who distributes administrative status and financial resources to his subordinates in accordance with his or her own strategies of promotion. Loyalty broadly prevails over competence and the criteria of clan belonging: established networks are essentially ones of personal loyalty and of belonging to a group that has the same economic interests, a shared past as university classmates or workers who were employed as part of the same staff (*komanda*). References made to traditional solidarity criteria like regional or clan identities represent but one opportunity among many, and are likely of less influence the higher one rises through the echelons of power.¹³ This neopatrimonial system is therefore at once fragile (its balance is precarious, and status and wealth are always liable to being challenged) and flexible (alliances and lines of rupture can rapidly recompose). The idea of an omniscient president who controls the entire hierarchical pyramid belongs to the realm of myth: Nazarbayev is the master builder as much as a hostage of the system that he has created. His role as mediator between groups signifies that he is necessary to the equilibrium of the system, but also indicates that his disappearance from the political scene will not necessarily lead to a fundamental change in the state’s way of functioning.

This article is part of a larger project to study the legitimacy mechanisms of the Central Asian regimes. It is based on regular visits to Kazakhstan’s two capitals, Almaty and Astana, as well as to provincial cities. The study revisits Western and local sources and relies on interviews

tion-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10: 435–452.

¹² See Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/country#KAZ> (accessed August 20, 2012).

¹³ The same conclusions are drawn by B. Junisbai, 2010. “A Tale of Two Kazakhstans: Sources of Political Cleavage and Conflict in the Post-Soviet Period.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62: 2: 235-269.

with experts and local actors. It focuses on the first three concentric circles: the family, the oligarchs, and the technocrats, and leaves aside the more peripheral, but just as crucial, circles of the regional elite, small businessmen, and local administration. It argues that patronal practices linking political elites and business interests are key to interpreting the functioning of the Kazakh political system.

Building a Neopatrimonial Empire and the Role of the Family

The 1990s: Privatizations, Political Diversity, and a Multiplicity of Economic Actors

Kazakhstan was the last of the Soviet republics to proclaim its independence, which it did on December 16, 1991, and its president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in office since 1989, was one of the most unhappy to see the disappearance of Soviet institutions, particularly the ruble, which vanished in 1993.¹⁴ At the time, the republic was considered one of the most fragile in Central Asia, both on the political level (with a small population distributed across an immense territory, a high risk of territorial fragmentation due to the large majority of Russian and Slav populations in the northern and western regions, the substantial Uzbek minority in the south, and the capital's isolation from the rest of the country) and on the economic level (extreme dependency on Russia, brutal de-industrialization due to the collapse of the planned economy and the vanishing trade links between the former Soviet republics). To guarantee both his political survival and that of the new state, Nazarbayev rapidly became what theoretician of neopatrimonialism Jean-François Médard has called a "politician entrepreneur," one who concurrently holds political and economic resources and successfully bases his power on symbolic and financial assets.¹⁵

Following the model established by Yeltsin's Russia, Nazarbayev opted for a shock therapy policy designed to accelerate the transition to the market economy. He privatized almost the entire service sector and industrial sphere, with the exception of agriculture, which remained collective or state property until the 2000s.¹⁶ As in Russia, the first groups of wealthy businessmen or oligarchs formed shortly after the fall of the USSR by buying up industries in total collapse at low prices, in particular

¹⁴ R. Pomfret. 1995. *The Economies of Central Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; R. Pomfret. 2006. *The Central Asian Economies Since Independence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Y. Kalyuzhnova. 1998. *The Kazakhstani Economy: Independence and Transition*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

¹⁵ J.-F. Médard. 1990. "L'Etat patrimonialisé." *Politique Africaine* 39: 31.

¹⁶ Pomfret, *The Central Asian Economies Since Independence*.

in the mining sector.¹⁷ They prospered thanks to illegal trafficking, mainly by smuggling metal to China and by reselling basic goods imported from Turkey or Iran, and then later bought in Dubai or China. Kazakhstan also welcomed many foreign investors, in particular in the largely privatized hydrocarbons sector: it was in this era that the largest contracts were signed, including those with Chevron and ExxonMobil to exploit the Tengiz deposit. The country's economy thus fell into the hands of a multitude of actors with divergent interests and political networks, the presidential family being merely one actor among several.

In the second half of the 1990s, the Kazakh system evolved: the second Constitution adopted in 1995 reduced political liberties; opposition parties, whether they were Islamic-nationalist or pro-Russian, were liquidated; the decision-making autonomy of the parliament was restricted while parallel institutions such as the People's Assembly were created to strengthen the president's power to co-opt and weaken elected institutions.¹⁸ Former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, whose National Republican Party had opposed Nazarbayev, was forced into exile. In parallel, the involvement of the presidential family in the country's most profitable economic sectors grew, particularly in the hydrocarbons and construction sectors.

In 1998, the so-called Kazakhgate scandal broke out, implicating in a series of financial misdeeds American operator James Giffen, a close friend of President Nazarbayev who had succeeded during the 1990s in becoming the gatekeeper of the country's oil wealth for the main foreign investors, in particular Chevron, via his company Mercator. According to U.S. prosecutors, Nazarbayev and two of his close senior officials allegedly received hidden payments of about US\$80 million via an opaque system of offshore and shell companies, while Mercator allegedly laundered the money won from brokering international oil deals.¹⁹ Concerned that the scandal would tarnish his international image, the Kazakh president ultimately allowed the money discovered in his Swiss bank accounts to be spent on charitable works, while Giffen himself received only a minimal sentence and even was thanked for services rendered to American interests in the region.²⁰ The transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997 enabled the presidential family to reap substantial revenues in the

¹⁷ A. Peck. 2004. *Economic Development in Kazakhstan: The Role of Large Enterprises and Foreign Investment*. Abingdon: Routledge Curzon.

¹⁸ M. Brill Olcott. 2002. *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse. 2004. *Les Russes du Kazakhstan. Identité nationale et nouveaux Etats dans l'espace post-soviétique*. Paris: Mouton de Larose.

¹⁹ A. Cooley. 2012. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest for Central Asia*. Oxford University Press, 139-140.

²⁰ Ibid.

construction sector.²¹ Turkish and Russian firms invested in both residential and commercial buildings, as well as in building the state architecture of the new capital. The World Bank identified construction as a key sector for elite corruption in Central Asia, as elsewhere in the world: several construction projects with no commercial rationality won authorization with the aim of obtaining kickbacks.²² Nazarbayev's personal fortune remains a matter of conjecture since multiple frontmen and shell company networks conceal its real extent.

The growing role given to the president's daughters and sons-in-law strengthened the close interconnection between domestic political dominance and control over lucrative economic sectors in the second half of the 1990s. The eldest daughter, Dariga, took over the leadership of the Khabar group, which owned more than 80 percent of the country's television and radio channels, as well as several newspapers, while her spouse, Rakhat Aliyev, headed the financial police from 1997 to 1999 and invested in various sectors (the leisure industry and a quasi-monopoly over sugar and vodka sales, among others). The control exerted by the couple was therefore political as much as commercial.²³ The second daughter, Dinara, married one of the most famous oligarchs, Timur Kulibayev, whose father, Askar, had been regional secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party in Atyrau in the 1980s, before becoming governor of this Caspian region in the 1990s. Timur Kulibayev first headed the Altyn-Alma Bank and chaired the Supervisory Board of Almaty Trade and Industry Bank, prior to being appointed to the key post of head of the Directorate for Project Assessment and Negotiating under the Investment Committee of Kazakhstan, which gave him access to foreign investors. In 1997, he changed his focus to the oil sector and became deputy president of the national extraction company, KazakhOil.²⁴ Lastly, the president's youngest daughter, Alia, was briefly married to Aydar Akayev, the son of the Kyrgyz president, in 1998, in the hope of making more official the rapprochement between both republics, but then later married a Kazakh oligarch, Daniar Khasenov.

The 2000s: Centralization Processes, and the Nazarbayev Family as a Key Economic Actor

At the start of the 2000s, the country redefined the relationship between the political authorities and the economy in a manner that was similar

²¹ V. Khlijupin. 1998. *'Bol'shaia sem'ia' Nursultana Nazarbaeva. Politicheskaja elita sovremennogo Kazakhstana*. Moscow: Institut aktual'nykh politicheskikh issledovanii.

²² See the Construction Sector Transparency Initiative, http://www.constructiontransparency.org/the_initiative/the_challenge.cfm (accessed August 20, 2012).

²³ D. Ashimbaev. 2006. *Kto est' kto v Kazakhstane. Biograficheskaja entsiklopediia*. Almaty: Credo.

²⁴ D. Kassymova, Z. Kundakbayeva, U. Markus. 2012. *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 164.

to Vladimir Putin's actions in Russia. While the adoption of a market economy remained unchallenged, critics blasted the privatizations that took place immediately following the Soviet collapse. According to this new view of Kazakhstan's recent history, shock therapy weakened the authority of the state and its ability to command its own resources; stimulated political chaos by giving rise to a class of cosmopolitan oligarchs with nothing but contempt for national interests and ready to invest their fortunes in opposing the established authorities; and handing foreign investors overly favorable conditions, thus enabling "foreign interests" to influence local political life. This narrative about both state weakness and the collusion between internal and external enemies signaled Kazakhstan's entry into a phase which has often been qualified either as a return to "state capitalism" or as "resource nationalism."²⁵ The state dramatically changed its role in the hydrocarbons sector.²⁶ In 2001, it created a single company to transport hydrocarbons, Trans Neft i Gaz (TNG), itself the result of a merger between KazTransGas and KazTransOil; in 2002 KazakhOil and TNG merged to give rise to the state-run company KazMunayGas; and in 2004, the authorities appropriated the right to preempt all oil and gas projects.²⁷ Today, the shares of new consortiums must be 50 percent owned by KazMunayGas, and the government uses fiscal threats or the failure to respect environmental legislation to renegotiate better terms for existing contracts.²⁸

The political will to re-nationalize and re-concentrate economic assets is intrinsically linked with domestic political evolutions. While in Russia Putin used his first mandate to put recalcitrant oligarchs back into line, in Kazakhstan the sudden move into opposition by a part of the elite organized around the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party surprised the authorities, who were used to fighting against opponents outside the elite, such as Islamic-nationalists, Russians, and pro-Western liberal groups. Created at the end of 2001, Choice gathered members of the government, elected leaders, as well as businessmen concerned about Nazarbayev's and his family's growing stranglehold on the country's wealth.²⁹ The

²⁵ P. Domjan, M. Stone. 2010. "A Comparative Study of Resource Nationalism in Russia and Kazakhstan 2004–2008." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62:1: 35-62; R. Kennedy, A. Nurmakov. 2010. "Resource Nationalism Trends in Kazakhstan, 2004–2009." *RUSSCASP*, April; P. Jones Luong. 2010. "Beyond 'Resource Nationalism'? Implications of State Ownership in Kazakhstan's Petroleum Sector." *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 98.

²⁶ W. Ostrowski. 2010. *Politics and Oil in Kazakhstan*. London: Routledge, especially the chapter "Strengthening the informal ties. The Kazakhization of the oil industry," 61-80.

²⁷ M. Brill Olcott. 2007. "Kazmunaigaz: Kazakhstan's National Oil and Gas Company." *The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy Report*.

²⁸ P. Jones Luong, E. Weinthal. 2010. *Oil is not a curse. Ownership Structure and Institutions in Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ B. Junisbai, A. Junisbai. 2005. "The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan: A Case Study in

movement was led by Pavlodar governor Galymzhan Zhakyanov, Vice-Prime Minister Uraz Dzhandosov, and Temir Bank Director and former Minister of Industry and Commerce Mukhtar Abliyazov. In January 2002, Abliyazov and Zhakyanov were charged with a variety of crimes and imprisoned for a few months, though they were eventually released under international pressure and after publically apologizing.

After dealing with Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, the authorities became aware that the oligarchs possess enough revenues to guarantee them political autonomy, which, a decade after independence, could be used against the president as the strong man of the country and against his family as an economic actor. The first decade of the 2000s was therefore marked by two interrelated phenomena: the control of all potential dissent from within the elite, and the reinforcement of the presidential family's stranglehold over the country's assets. Several experiments were attempted. Like Yeltsin, Nazarbayev had not really invested any energy into constituting a presidential party, but, taking Putin's United Russia as a model, he understood the benefit of having a more stable political structure. Since then, the presidential party Nur Otan represents the interests of "Ak-Orda," the presidential palace in Astana, synonym of the presidential circles as a political actor.³⁰ As in Russia, the few attempts to constitute regime-friendly alternative liberal parties failed. The Asar party, first created with the aim of rallying young elites loyal to the president under the leadership of his daughter Dariga,³¹ was eventually forced to merge with Nur Otan. The effort to establish a democratic facade³² while shoring up authoritarian practices resulted in Kazakhstan becoming a one-party regime; between 2007 and 2012 Nur Otan was the only party with parliamentary representation.³³ This situation harmed the democratic branding that Kazakhstan has tried to sell to the international community, in particular during its chairmanship of the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010, and forced it to water down legislation so that two pseudo-opposition parties could gain seats in parliament

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³⁰ A. Clive Bowyer. 2008. *Parliament and Political Parties in Kazakhstan*. Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, April.

³¹ B. Dave. 2005. "Kazakhstan's 2004 Parliamentary Elections. Managing Loyalty and Support for the Regime." *Problems of Post-Communism* 52: 1: 3-14.

³² S. Roberts. 2012. "Doing the Democracy Dance in Kazakhstan: Democracy Development as Cultural Encounter." *Slavic Review* 71: 2: 308-330.

³³ The president's party, Nur-Otan, received about 88 percent of the vote and won all of the available seats. None of the six other parties contesting the election reached the 7 percent threshold to win seats

during the 2012 elections.³⁴

As in Russia, and following a long-standing Soviet tradition, control of both politics and the economy have been re-concentrated around security services: Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB), the Customs Committee, the fiscal police, border guards, the security service of the presidency, etc. The president's first son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev, for instance, climbed the career ladder of the KNB and the presidential security service between 1999 and 2002. The presidential family also diversified its takeover of profitable economic sectors. The mining sector, which has become more attractive in the 2000s thanks to the rise in world prices of minerals like copper and zinc, has been re-appropriated by the presidential family via Nazarbayev's brother, Bolat. The family also entered the gold sector thanks to its close links with the Asaubayev family, who owned KazakhGold until 2009. Lastly, similar to the entire former Soviet Union, sport clubs, which are important places for all sorts of trafficking and make it possible to monitor circles of young supporters, are in the hands of the highest figures of state. Timur Kulibayev, for example, not only heads the Kazakhstan Boxing Federation, but is also a member of the Executive Committee of the National Olympic Council.

The Fall of the "First Son-in-Law," An Example of the Uncertainty of Gains

The balance of power in Kazakhstan is in large part founded on the relationship between the presidential family and the oligarchic groups. But the separation between these two circles, however, as shown by the president's two sons-in-law, straddles both these worlds. While Aliyev has become an oligarch mainly thanks to his marriage to the president's eldest daughter, Kulibayev's economic base, at least at the start, was more autonomous from his presidential spouse, since it was built on his family ties and solidly rooted in western Kazakhstan. Moreover, the presidential family does not necessarily constitute a united group that displays systematic solidarity against other politico-economic actors, and is not without internal divisions. If, for a time, Aliyev was presented as the businessman of the family, his fall left the way open for Dinara Nazarbayeva and her husband Timur Kulibayev, today reported by *Forbes* to each have a net worth of more than US\$1 billion, mostly but not only through their joint control of the country's third-largest bank, Halyk Bank.³⁵

³⁴ "OBSE: Vybory v Kazkhstane daleki ot demokrati." *BBC*, January 12, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2012/01/120116_kazakhstan_elections_osce.shtml (accessed August 20, 2012); International Partnership for Human Rights. 2012. "A Sobering Reality: Fundamental Freedoms in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Twenty Years after the Soviet Collapse." Brussels. March.

³⁵ "The Billionaires Burned By WikiLeaks." *Forbes*, February 12, 2010, <http://www.forbes.com>.

In the first half of the 2000s, the Kazakh press regularly described the growing rivalry between Aliyev and Kulibayev.³⁶ Whereas the latter acted discretely in public and tried not to appear as the president's heir apparent, the former did not hide his political ambitions and sought to control key positions within the administrative apparatus and media resources. Aliyev's fall from grace, one of the most widely covered and politically scandalous episodes in the history of independent Kazakhstan, resulted from the emerging rivalry within the presidential family. For the first time, the Nazarbayev regime seemed to be imperiled and took seriously the risk represented by Aliyev's dissidence. The latter went through a first period of disgrace in 2001, ending with his dismissal from the state security services and his subsequent nomination to the head of the Olympic Committee of Kazakhstan. In 2002, he managed to regain the spotlight as ambassador to Austria and Kazakhstan's representative at the OSCE, and then, in 2005, he rejoined the leading circle after becoming the vice-minister of foreign affairs.³⁷

At the start of 2007, the first son-in-law underwent a fall both rapid and complete. Accused by the Kazakh Supreme Court of being involved in the assassination of three members of Nurbank, one of Kazakhstan's largest banks of which he was a principal shareholder, he was stripped of his diplomatic immunity. In order to avoid the international arrest warrant put out on him, he sought refuge in Vienna where the Austrian authorities refused to extradite him to Kazakhstan.³⁸ Several of his close associates, including the secretary of Kazakhstan's Security Council and the vice-minister of justice, were arrested; his wife divorced him; and he was accused of kidnapping, insider trading, money laundering, and murder, and sentenced in absentia to life in prison. His economic empire collapsed rapidly and was in large part carved up. Since his Austrian exile, Aliyev has tried, without much success, to influence Kazakh political life by threatening to reveal state secrets.³⁹ Dariga also can no longer pursue her ambitions: she and her son Nurali Aliyev officially lost their status as shareholders of Nurbank, and her fiefdom, the media holding Khabar, was renationalized. Aliyev's disgrace was confirmation that the gains he

com/sites/clareoconnor/2010/12/02/the-billionaires-burned-by-wikileaks/ (accessed August 20, 2012); "Za chto Kulibaev pereplatil printsu?" *Respublika*. February 15, 2010, <http://respublika-kz.info/news/society/7622/> (accessed August 20, 2012).

³⁶ Olcott, *Unfulfilled Promise*, 228.

³⁷ Ashimbaev, *Kto est' kto v Kazakhstane. Biograficheskaia entsiklopediia*.

³⁸ "Aliev, Rakhat," *Lenta.ru*, <http://lenta.ru/lib/14170921/full.htm> (accessed August 20, 2012); "Rakhat Aliyev searching for ways to flee to United States," *Tengri News*. June 29, 2012, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/crime/11146/> (accessed August 20, 2012).

³⁹ See his book, R. Aliyev. 2009. *The Godfather-in-law: Eine Dokumentation*. Vienna: Ibera Verlag.

had made had not been guaranteed for life and were always liable to be renegotiated by force.⁴⁰

Samruk-Kazyna and the State Capitalism Model

Kazakhstan has followed Russia's model of creating large state corporations for the purpose of regrouping sectoral assets, and forcing private companies to sell some of their shares to the state in order to join these consortiums. In 2008, the government decided, upon presidential decree, to merge the country's two main funds, both created two years before: Samruk, which was modeled on Singapore's Temasek Holdings with the official aim of making the large state companies autonomous from the administrative apparatus and reducing their corruption; and the Kazyna Sustainable Development Fund, created to implement industrial policy, rationalize the use of funds focused on economic diversification, finance infrastructure projects and provide support for small and medium enterprises, and facilitate investments.⁴¹ The acknowledged objective of this merger was to reinforce the role of the state in the economy by combining control over assets with more investment power. Today the Samruk-Kazyna fund holds full or partial ownership stakes in more than 400 subsidiary companies, national institutes, and legal entities, with a total value of US\$78 billion in assets, or almost 60 percent of Kazakhstan's GDP.⁴² It includes energy giant KazMunayGas, uranium miner and nuclear agency Kazatomprom, the Kazakhstan Development Bank, the Kazakhstan Electricity Grid Operating Company (KEGOC), the national rail company Temir Zholy, the national air company Air Astana, the commercial fleet Kazmortransflot, the main thermohydraulic power station AES-Ekibastuz, the pharmaceutical holding SK-Pharmaceuticals, and so on.

There are virtually no key sectors of the economy in which the fund does not intervene. Through its investments, it has a large stake in oil and gas, electric power, metals, mining, chemicals, communications, transportation, financial development, corporate banking, and real estate. In the context of the global financial crisis, the stabilization and recovery of the financial sector became one of its essential missions. In 2009, Samruk-Kazyna acted as a crisis manager on behalf of the government,

⁴⁰ See the chapter on Kazakhstan in S. Stewart, M. Klein, A. Schmitz and H.-H. Schröder, eds. 2012. *Presidents, Oligarchs and Bureaucrats; Forms of Rule in the Post-Soviet Space*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁴¹ D. M. Kemme. 2011. *Sovereign Wealth Fund Issues and The National Fund(s) of Kazakhstan*, University of Memphis, December 15, <https://umdrive.memphis.edu/g-fcbe/www/docs/faculty/Kemme%20NFs%20of%20KZ%20Edited%2012-15-2011.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴² "Informatsionno-analiticheskii portal AO 'Fond Natsional' nogo blagosostoianiiia Samruk-Kazyna." <http://sk.kz/page/kratko-o-fonde> (accessed August 20, 2012).

implementing the anti-crisis program's joint action plans in order to mitigate the impact of the crisis.⁴³ Another core goal of the fund is to bolster investments. To turn it into an efficient portfolio manager, it has participated in the financing of 157 major industrial projects, such as the Atyrau oil refinery, the Balkhash power station, and the construction of the Zhertygen-Korgas railway to the border with China. The holding's 2009 investments represented US\$109 billion and, in 2010, Samruk-Kazyna made 93 percent of all investments in Kazakhstan's energy sector.⁴⁴

The largest scandal to have emerged from the recentralization strategy orchestrated through Samruk-Kazyna hit the nuclear sector. Over the course of the 2000s, the national company Kazatomprom—involved in both the extraction of uranium and the development of Kazakhstan's civil nuclear strategy—succeeded in becoming one of the most efficient enterprises in the country, with growing international visibility. In 2009, its director and the architect of its success, Mukhtar Dzhakishev, was suddenly arrested and accused of dispossessing the country of close to 60 percent of its uranium deposits via dubious contracts with several companies, both foreign and domestic.⁴⁵ However it appears highly unlikely that Dzhakishev had been able to misappropriate such a massive amount of state goods without the go-ahead of higher-placed figures, as all the contracts signed by Kazatomprom were validated by his supervisory ministry, and the presidential administration. According to numerous local experts, this arrest concealed financial malpractices that occurred with the nod of the president or his close associates for a period of several years by using the former director of Kazatomprom as a scapegoat.⁴⁶ It also enabled Samruk-Kazyna to incorporate Kazatomprom and therefore to reinforce the presidential control over uranium, which has become an increasingly profitable market since Kazakhstan's elevation into the world's primacy producer.⁴⁷

⁴³ "Samruk-Kazyna: Reload." *Kazakhstan International Business Magazine* 6, 2009, <http://www.investkz.com/en/journals/65/552.html> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴⁴ "Kazakhstan Business Forum." <http://kbf.co/materials/kbf-2010/sponsors/about-samruk-kazyna/>; "Gov't Reviews Annual Report by Samruk Kazyna National Welfare Fund," <http://portal.mfa.kz/portal/page/portal/mfa/resources/Pictures/Astana%20Calling%20PDF%202011/Astana%20Calling%20012511.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴⁵ "Byvshii glava Kazatomproma Mukhtar Dzhakishev poluchil 14 let tiur'my." *CentrAsia*, March 12, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1268408100> (accessed August 20, 2012); J. Lillis. 2009. "Kazakhstan: Business Climate Grows Gloomy Amid Arbitrary Arrest Controversy." *Eurasianet*. June 9, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav061009.shtml> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴⁶ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts working in private expertise firms, Almaty September 29, 2010.

⁴⁷ "Record year for Kazakh uranium." World Nuclear Association, February 1, 2011, http://www.world-nuclear-news.org/C-Record_year_for_Kazakh_uranium-0102117.html (accessed August 20, 2012).

Samruk-Kazyna, indeed a symbol of Kazakh state capitalism, is also the instrument of the family's stranglehold over the country's economy, which has been personalized with the career path followed by Kulibayev. At the end of the 1990s, the president's second son-in-law presided over Transport Nefti i Gaza, and then became vice-president of KazMunayGas between 2002 and 2005. In 2008 he was named CEO and a member of the board of directors of Samruk-Kazyna; in 2009 he joined the Council of Directors of KazMunayGas, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy and Samruk-Energo, and assumed the presidency of KazEnergy, an association grouping together the major oil and gas companies that also serves as an interface to foreign companies such as Lukoil, TengizChevroil and BP. At the end of 2011, after some months as chairman of the Samruk-Kazyna board of directors, the highest position of his career and a possible platform leading to the presidency, Kulibayev was forced to resign because of the oil sector workers' riots in Zhanaozen.⁴⁸ However, he has continued on as chairman of the Kazakhstan National Committee of the World Petroleum Council, and his career is probably far from over, especially given the presidential family's control over the state holding.

Negotiating Oligarchic Autonomies in the Face of Patronal Presidentialism

The relations between the presidential family and oligarchic groups are key elements of the patronal functioning of the Kazakh regime. Local oligarchs made their fortunes during the savage privatization of the early 1990s, when they were the managers of the main privatization funds; or later with the emergence of new economic and financial riches, such as in the banking sector.⁴⁹ The oil sector largely returned back under state control at the end of the 1990s-early 2000s, but, as in Russia, the mining industries remained in the hands of private actors. The banking sector constituted a second space of autonomy for oligarchs, but this was greatly reduced during the 2008 crisis, which forced most of the large banks to request public funds. As in Russia, returning the mining sector to state control could constitute the last great act of the "patrimonialization" currently underway in Kazakhstan.

The oligarchs all have close relations with the decision-making circles and with the family's intimates. They are unable to function without garnering support in the highest circles; however, they also play on specific strategies of cooperation and competition with the economic ambitions of the family, and can rapidly lose control of this balancing act. Two periods of tension between the family and the oligarchs marred the last decade:

⁴⁸ "Nazarbaev uvolil ziatia iz-za pogromov v Zhanaozene." *Lenta.ru*, December 26, 2012, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/12/26/soninlaw/> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁴⁹ B. Dave. 2007. *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power*. London: Routledge, 145.

the first one between 2002 and 2005, which followed the economic recentralization carried out by Nazarbayev, and the second during the 2008 economic crisis. Today, in addition to the fortunes belonging to members of the presidential family, three large autonomous oligarchic fortunes are listed in the *Forbes* ranking of billionaires: Vladimir Kim at Kazakhmys, Adilzhan Ibragimov at the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation (ENRC), and Nurzhan Subkhanberdin at Kazkommertsbank. Some fortunes are not considered “Kazakh” if the nationality of their owner is not, as is the case with Alexander Mashkevich, also at ENRC.⁵⁰

Successes and Failures of Oligarchic Dissidence: Subkhanberdin and Abliyazov

Mukhtar Abliyazov and Nurzhan Subkhanberdin provide two diverging examples of failure and success in competing with the presidential family. At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, some oligarchs progressively lost control of the oil and gas sectors in favor of state companies. They became concerned by Nazarbayev’s attempts to establish a Putin-style “power vertical” in the other profitable economic sectors, in particular in metallurgy, finance, and banking. Two groups of oligarchs contested this presidential take-over, but were dismantled between 2002 and 2005. The first oligarchic group, headed by Mukhtar Abliyazov, who controlled the transport, telecommunications, and mass consumption industries, was carved up during the campaign against Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. After having established the Astana Holding, involved in multiple sectors, Abliyazov acquired in 1998, with a consortium of Kazakh investors, the TuranAlem bank, which was later to become BTA. A former director of KEGOC, he was appointed minister for energy, industry, and commerce. As leader of Democratic Choice, he was sentenced to six years in prison in 2002, and seems to have been subject to torture, beatings, and other ill-treatment in prison.⁵¹ He moved first to Moscow to rebuild his business and in 2005 took up the position of chairman of the board of directors of BTA Bank, on the condition, however, of renouncing his political career. The second group, led by Zamanbek Nurkadilov, who controlled sectors of construction and agriculture, also fell apart after its leader’s mysterious assassination in 2005, a few weeks after he said he would speak publicly about high-level corruption by foreign oil companies during contract talks with Nazarbayev in the early 1990s.⁵²

⁵⁰ See www.forbes.com/billionaires.

⁵¹ T. Bukkvol. 2004. “Astana’s privatized independence: private and national interests in the foreign policy of Nursultan Nazarbayev.” *Nationalities Papers* 32: 3: 631-650; Kjærnet, Satpaev, Torjesen. “Big Business and High-level Politics in Kazakhstan: An Everlasting Symbiosis?”

⁵² “Mysterious death of Zamanbek Nurkadilov, ex-official who ended up in the opposition to President Nursultan Nazarbayev.” *Ferganews*, November 14, 2011, <http://enews.ferganan->

Among the examples of well-managed opposition, the case of Subkhanberdin is probably the most revealing. The main figure of the Kazakh banking oligarchy, he controlled Kazkommertsbank, Kazakhstan's largest private bank and the fourth-largest in the Commonwealth of Independent States in terms of assets after Sberbank, Gazprombank, and Vneshtorgbank. The bank became quickly involved in multiple profitable activities, such as pension funds, insurance companies, and investment companies, and opened several branches in Kyrgyzstan and Russia.⁵³ The career of Subkhanberdin, nicknamed the "Kazakh Khodorkovsky" by local media, nonetheless reveals how difficult it is to transform economic success into political gain.

In the 1990s Subkhanberdin allied with Timur Kulibayev to wrest control of national companies like KazakhOil, KazTransOil, Kazakhtelecom, Temir Zholy, and Air Kazakhstan. However, when Nazarbayev, worried by Kazhegeldin's powerful networks, decided to reassume control over a part of the economy, Kazkommertsbank was obliged to cede several companies and the alliance between Subkhanberdin and Kulibayev ended. The former wanted to remain in the private sector by controlling the banking domain, whereas the latter sought a takeover of the oil sector, which meant remaining dependent on state interests and large public companies. In 2001, Subkhanberdin sided with the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, but the ensuing political repression against the movement's leaders pushed him publicly to withdraw his support for the opposition and abandon all political ambitions. After these two defeats, the young banker lost influence within the presidential administration: one of his close associates, Altynbek Sarsenbayev, leader of Naghyz Ak-Jol, was assassinated in 2006, and one of his mentors, Uraz Dzhandosov, former director of the National Bank of Kazakhstan and former vice-prime minister, also went over to the opposition.⁵⁴

However, despite these difficulties, Subkhanberdin continues to enjoy support among the "president's men," his main supporter being Sauat Mynbayev, a financial specialist close to the state leader. Yet several local observers consider that the oligarch is well aware of the precariousness of his own status, hence his commitment to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's having shares of Kazkommertsbank's

ews.com/article.php?id=1133 (accessed August 20, 2012); "Kazakhstan: Opposition Figure Murdered At Home." <https://metaleaks.net/data/Wikileaks-cablegate/05ALMATY4144.pdf> (no longer available on August 20, 2012).

⁵³ "Kazkommertsbank builds disaster recovery distributed IT-infrastructure based on IBM Power Systems." *Kase.kz*, April 20, 2011, http://www.kase.kz/files/emitters/KKGB/kkgb_reliz_200411_e.pdf (accessed on August 20, 2012); see also the bank's official website: <http://en.kkb.kz/>.

⁵⁴ See "Subkhanberdin Nurzhan Sal'kenovich." *Biografiia.kz*, <http://biografiia.kz/famous/626> (accessed August 20, 2012)

capital, which in principle guarantees some protection for his financial empire.⁵⁵ In 2007, Subkhanberdin increased his shares in the capital of Kazkommertsbank by buying some of those owned by Central Asian Industrial Investments, an offshore company based in the Dutch Antilles that is controlled by several Kazakh bankers. His official renunciation of all political ambition has not prevented him from issuing a veiled denunciation of the economic recentralization of the 2000s and implying that it would serve the direct interests of some members of the presidential family (he aimed his remarks at Rakhat Aliyev).⁵⁶ He has complained about the declining investment climate, and pushed for more autonomy in the private sector and for reforms for a greater separation of powers. Subkhanberdin framed his complaints as ethnic discontent insofar as he denounced the rise to power of “non-Kazakh oligarchs,” criticizing them for their alleged cosmopolitanism: according to his assertions, their non-Kazakh identities made them likely to divert funds via offshore companies, a practice that is in fact employed by a variety of players and which bears no relation whatsoever to identity issues.⁵⁷

A second phase of competition between presidential circles and oligarchic groups opened with the 2008 economic and financial crisis. Between 2005 and 2008, the BTA bank grew rapidly, becoming one of the country’s largest, though this growth was founded on hedge funds and risky credits. When it defaulted, owing more than US\$10 billion to the Royal Bank of Scotland, Barclays, and others, Ablyazov was accused of mismanagement and money laundering a total of about US\$4 billion.⁵⁸ He then sought exile in the United Kingdom on the grounds that he faced politically motivated charges. He was sentenced in absentia for lying about his personal fortune by the British courts and placed under an international arrest warrant at the start of 2012.⁵⁹ In early 2009, Samruk-Kazyna was obliged to inject substantial funds into BTA and became its majority

⁵⁵ “EBRR priobrel 15% golosuiushchikh aktsii Kazkommertsbanka.” *Kazakhstan Today*, June 7, 2003, <http://news.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=170656> (accessed August 20, 2012). Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 27, 2010.

⁵⁶ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 27, 2010.

⁵⁷ On this nationalist narrative, see N. Amrekulov, “Stepnoe gosudarstvo (chast’ 1).” *Zona.kz*, no date, http://www.zonakz.net/blogs/user/amrekulov_nurlan/10490.html?mode=reply (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁵⁸ “BTA Bank nachinaet protseduru privilecheniia k otvetstvennosti Mukhtara Abliazova v Vysokom Sude Anglii za neuvazhenie k sudu.” *Kase.kz*, May 18, 2011, http://www.kase.kz/files/emitters/BTAS/btas_reliz_180511.pdf (accessed August 20, 2012); E. Larson, “BTA Bank Can Continue \$4 Billion Ablyazov Case, Judge Rules.” *Bloomberg*, May 10, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-10/bta-bank-wins-u-k-dismissal-of-ablyazov-s-conspiracy-claims.html> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁵⁹ R. Neate. 2012. “Arrest warrant for Kazakh billionaire accused of one of world’s biggest frauds.” *The Guardian*, February 16, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/feb/16/arrest-warrant-kazakh-billionaire-mukhtar-ablyazov> (accessed August 20, 2012).

shareholder. Though the bank was in significant difficulty, its renationalization, as well as the partial one of Subkhanberdin's Kazkommertsbank and of Alliance Bank, has been the subject of many virulent debates, since it enables the state to gain a stranglehold over a large part of the promising banking sector. The Abylazov affair might have been merely an example of a Kazakh bank failing spectacularly, but it took a political turn not only because Abylazov sought political exile in London, but also because the accusation against him in Kazakhstan portrayed him as having betrayed the president's trust for a second time.⁶⁰

Oligarchic Circles in Partnership with the Patrimonial Empire: Kim and Mashkevich

The relationship between the presidential family and the oligarchic circles is not only one of confrontation; on the contrary, confrontation has hitherto remained the exception. Two oligarchs symbolize this alliance of interests and the difficulty involved in assigning oligarchs an autonomous status from political power *per se*, whether in terms of politics or control over their commercial empires: Vladimir Kim and Alexander Mashkevich.

Kim is today considered Kazakhstan's leading and richest businessman. He controls close to half of the assets of Kazakhmys, Kazakhstan's main copper producer, tenth largest in the world for the production of cathode copper and fifth for the production of silver. Since 2004, Bolat Nazarbayev, the brother of the president, has been on the company's board of directors. The copper holding is regularly criticized for its lack of transparency, even though it has been listed at the London Stock Exchange since 2005.⁶¹ Kim is regarded as being part of Nazarbayev's inner circle, and Kazakhmys' Board of Directors was chaired by Vladimir Ni, who was often presented as the president's personal treasurer and secret advisor until his death in 2010. Kazakhmys allegedly represents the interests of several members of the presidential family and finances a large share of Nur Otan's campaigns.⁶²

Mashkevich is also one of Kazakhstan's principal businessmen. He built his empire during the first privatizations with two close associates, Patokh Chodiev, of Belgian nationality, and Alizhan Ibragimov, a Uzbek originally from Kyrgyzstan and citizen of Kazakhstan. The trio heads

⁶⁰ M. Assenova, "Abylazov Sentenced to Prison in UK for Contempt of Court." *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 9: 40, February 27, 2012; K. Dowell, "BTA v Abylazov: the secret billionaire." *The Lawyer*, February 6, 2012, <http://www.thelawyer.com/bta-v-abylazov-the-secret-billionaire/1011246.article> (accessed August 20, 2012); "The case of Mukhtar Abylazov: changing the status quo." *The Kazakhstan Insider* 5, February 2012: 5-6.

⁶¹ Global Witness. 2010. *Risky Business, Kazakhstan, Kazakhmys Plc and the London Stock Exchange*. July, 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*

an industrial group commonly referred to as the Eurasian Group. The Eurasian National Resources Corporation (ENRC) controls about one third of the Kazakh economy, and dominates many strategic sectors such as metallurgy, coal, mines, and some financial institutions grouped around the Eurasian Bank. It gathers together the companies controlled by the three men, including Alferon Management, the Group's main company, based in London, which owns several mines in various countries around the world (Sub-Saharan Africa, Indonesia, Kosovo and Russia), as well as Kazchrome, Aluminum of Kazakhstan, the mining and industrial complexes Zhairam and Sokolov Sarbai Mining Production Association (SSGPO), Eurasian Energy Company and ENRC Marketing.⁶³ Like Vladimir Kim, the Eurasian trio decided to avoid a confrontation with the family by orienting its activities around specific sectors. Thus, during the re-concentration of the hydrocarbon sector around KazMunayGas, Mashkevich gave up the shares in the gas sector he had acquired in the early 1990s, including those in Intergas Central Asia, in order not to compete with the presidential family.

One of the distinguishing features of the Kazakhmys' and the Eurasian group's oligarchs is that they are ethnic minorities. Without Kazakh ethnic legitimacy, they cannot exhibit political ambitions to rival the established elite, and are unable to run for high elective offices. They have all played the internationalist card: Vladimir Kim, like Vladimir Ni, represent the Korean minority, whose cultural organizations they finance, whereas Alexander Mashkevich, who has Israeli nationality, serves as a central intermediary for business with Israel, and also presided over the Eurasian Jewish Congress, one of the five branches of the World Jewish Congress.⁶⁴ Nazarbayev wields the brand of non-Kazakh oligarchs on the international scene as an example of the success of interethnic cohabitation in the country, and on the domestic scene as a counterweight to the other oligarchs who might be tempted to convert their financial wealth into political tools. The non-Kazakh origins of these oligarchs have thus attracted criticism from rival groups, poised to play the national card. Nurzhan Subkhanberdin was one of the first to insist on the necessity to "Kazakhify" the country's economy and exclude from it businessmen belonging to the national minorities. The argument has little relationship with reality, since both Kazakhmys and the Eurasian Group also represent

⁶³ See the company's official website: <http://www.enrc.com>.

⁶⁴ L. Galili. "A Kazakh oligarch trying to be a Jewish tycoon." *Haaretz*. October 28, 2002, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/a-kazakh-oligarch-trying-to-be-a-jewish-tycoon-1.30063> (accessed August 20, 2012); *Euro-Asian Jewish Yearbook, 2008-2009*. Moscow, 2009, http://photo-en.eajc.org/data/image/books/18/0/180_d.pdf#page=8; "Billionaire Mashkevich quits Euro-Asian Jewish Congress presidency." *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. June 27, 2011, <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/06/27/3088321/billionaire-jewish-leader-resigns>.

the interests of the Kazakh elite: Kazakhmys has support from elites in Dzhezkazgan, where the company is headquartered; whereas Mashkevich has an important ethnically-Kazakh support network within the presidential apparatus.⁶⁵

The Technocratic Circles: Actors and Objects

The technocratic circles also constitute key actors of the patronal regime in Kazakhstan: senior officials have direct access to the president, control the administrative cogs allotting public resources to various sectors, and run the crucial function of nominating cadres and regulating the turnover of key positions, both in Astana and Almaty as well as in the regions. The oligarchic groups cannot do without support in the upper administration: their ability to maintain their commercial empires is directly linked with their fostering administrative networks to guarantee themselves access to the president or his intimates, and regulations that favor their businesses. In return, the senior officials enjoy financial privileges, both official (status as members of corporate boards) and unofficial (bribes, positions for the spouses or children), and can obtain posts in the private sector when they are ready to leave public service. Some figures, however, seem to maintain their legitimacy in the system without having openly visible connections with business circles. This is the case, for example, with Marat Tazhin, former vice-president of the presidential administration, and minister of foreign affairs between 2007 and 2009, whose influence is concentrated in the sector of foreign policy and ideology. Relations between the family, the oligarchs, and the technocrats can take diverse forms: that of a strategic alliance between them, or that of a rivalry between competing interest groups.

The “Holy Alliance:” the Kulibayev-Masimov-Marchenko Trio

Karim Masimov, prime minister of Kazakhstan since 2007, the longest serving Kazakh prime minister to date, is the very embodiment of the alliance between the family, the oligarchs, and the technocrats. He enjoys President Nazarbayev’s continually renewed support, since the president sees him as a competent and respected politician who has the advantage of not being able to compete with him on the symbolic level—Masimov is of Uyghur origin, and thus lacks legitimacy to aspire to the highest state office. Moreover, he has major networks focused on China; indeed, he speaks Chinese, has been the representative of the minister of foreign affairs in Urumqi, and headed Kazakhstan’s commercial house in Hong Kong.⁶⁶ He played a key role in the recentralization of state-run corporations carried

⁶⁵ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 29, 2010.

⁶⁶ See <http://en.government.kz/structure/government>.

out under the leadership of Samruk-Kazyna and nominates officials faithful to the president's interests for key positions in the holding.

But Masimov's influence within the state apparatus can, above all, be explained by his closeness with Timur Kulibayev and his links with Grigori Marchenko, the director of the National Bank of Kazakhstan, a position he has occupied since 1999 (albeit with a different status). Marchenko is a key technocratic figure in Kazakhstan, a symbol of balanced state budgets and the success of the national banking system. His position as the head of the National Bank offers opportunities for significant leverage in terms of financing large national companies. What is more, he is linked directly to the Russian and international banking communities on which Kazakhstan is heavily dependent. He also ensures that international financial standards are at least nominally followed. However, Marchenko is not an easily controllable figure. He has repeatedly stressed the need to diversify the Kazakh economy in order to avoid "Dutch disease" and has harshly condemned the corruption of senior legal officials.⁶⁷ He has criticized the lack of government reforms, claiming it has become increasingly difficult to implement them, and has stated that Kazakhstan needs to be more liberal than Russia in order to attract foreign investors who might first look toward Moscow. Moreover, he has been very critical of the Chinese presence in the national energy sector.⁶⁸ Today, the so-called Masimov-Kulibayev-Marchenko trio controls most of the country's key economic sectors, especially the large national companies, through their joint control of Samruk-Kazyna, but they face discrete rivalry from other technocratic groups, which desire to prevent them from taking over all the various instruments of power—financial, administrative, and decision-making.

Representing Oligarchies in the Top Administrative Echelons: Bulat Utemuratov and Nurtay Abykayev

Since the 1990s, two circles of senior officials have been in competition with one another as the representatives of differing, sometimes contradictory interests—the circle of Bulat Utemuratov and that of Nurtay Abykaev. Abykaev is one of the oldest (he was born in 1947) members of the high-level Kazakh technocratic circles, linked to Komsomol activity during the Soviet period. Considered the *éminence grise* of President Nazarbayev, for a longtime he remained head of the presidential administration, i.e., the "number two" of the state apparatus, since he was in charge of nominating cadres, and the make-up of the president's cabinet, and enjoyed privileged relations with foreign investors. He has also occupied

⁶⁷ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁶⁸ N. Kenzheev. "Grigorii Marchenko nadeialsia na 2012 god." *Respublika*, June 10, 2011, <http://comment-respublika.info/comment/showtopic/9316> (accessed August 20, 2012).

the positions of chairman of the Senate, Kazakhstan's ambassador to Russia, deputy foreign minister and, in 2010, was employed as head of the National Security Committee. He is usually viewed as a representative of the "Russian lobby" thanks to his networks in the Kremlin, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and the institutions of the CIS and Eurasian Economic Community.⁶⁹

Utemuratov had a lengthy stint as the secretary of the National Security Council and is often described in some specialized media as "Nazarbayev's personal cashier." He is also a seasoned businessman, who started his career at the end of perestroika before joining the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, a strategic location for the establishment of networks with foreign investors. In 1999, he was appointed as presidential adviser on matters of foreign economic relations. He then invested in various investment funds and became the principal shareholder of Verny Capital, which has shares in the gold extraction firm Altyntau Gold, and in Kazzinc, a major and fully integrated zinc producer with considerable copper, precious metals, and lead holdings. Verny Capital is said to have sold its shares in both companies to Glencore in 2012 for about US\$5 billion.⁷⁰ Utemuratov had stayed out of the media spotlight until, in 2008, he emerged as one of Kazakhstan's wealthiest men.⁷¹

The competition between these two networks is structured around the mining sector. Utemuratov's relations in this sector rival those of Mashkevich, whose ENRC also works in African markets, the stomping grounds of Glencore; as well as those of Kazakhmys, which competes with Kazzinc for zinc and copper production. In publicly formulating this competition, Utemuratov played the card of Kazakh nationalism, and hoped to assemble under his leadership Kazakh oligarchs opposed to the predominant role of non-Kazakhs. This alliance included Mukhtar Ablyazov before he fell into disgrace—whereupon Utemuratov then bought out much of his business and communications empire—and Nurzhan Subkhanberdin. Nurtay Abykayev, on the other hand, supports the activities of both Mashkevich at ENRC and of Kim at Kazakhmys, as well as the relations of both oligarchs with their counterparts in Russia.⁷²

⁶⁹ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁷⁰ K. Silverstein. "A Giant Among Giants." *Foreign Policy*. May-June 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/23/a_giant_among_giants?page=0,5 (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁷¹ "Bulat Utemuratov stanet samym bogatym chelovekom Kazakhstana posle vykhoda na birzhu Glencore." *Tengri News*. May 11, 2011, http://tengrinews.kz/private_finance/187294/ (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁷² Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

The Generational Change

These different constellations of technocratic power contributed to state stability, but also to political immobilism: the same persons have held sway over key positions since the end of the 1980s, and often have friendships or intimate relations dating from Soviet times.⁷³ But those loyal to Nazarbayev since the perestroika era are about to exit the political scene and be replaced by the new generation trained since independence. Changes in the state apparatus balance of power and the birth of new technocratic cultures—helped by those who were trained abroad for instance—may impact the larger political culture and ways of reacting to demands coming from society.⁷⁴

Abykayev and Utemuratov represent the Soviet generation, as does Imangali Tasmagambetov, the former first secretary of the Atyrau Komsomol. Tasmagambetov has occupied many key positions, including prime minister in 2002, state secretary in 2003, head of the Presidential Administration, and since 2008 has run the Astana City Council, a central site of power.⁷⁵ This is also the case with Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, who has often remained in the president's shadow, but has been considered one of his most loyal lieutenants since the 1990s, as he was mayor of Astana from the time it was made the capital in 1997, and thereafter headed the presidential administration. He was made vice-president of the presidential party Nur Otan prior to being named ambassador to Russia and then defense minister.⁷⁶ This generation thus commonly combines positions linked with Russia (embassy or ministries linked to defense and to security), the function of *akim* (governor) of the country's two large cities, Almaty and Astana, and the management of cadres through the presidential administration.

A new generation of technocrats, less linked with the Soviet past, is today in the process of climbing the upper echelons of the administration. This is the case with Kayrat Kelimbetov, who was trained in Kazakhstan's most prominent post-independence institutions of higher learning, such as KIMEP, and received his degree from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Close to Abykayev, he made the error of giving his support to the opposition party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan before retracting his endorsement. He has served as the minister of economic development and trade, the CEO of Samruk-Kazyna,

⁷³ APN. 2005. *Gruppy vliania vo vlastno-politicheskoi sisteme Respublike Kazakhstan*. <http://www.apn.kz/publications/article80.htm> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁷⁴ On the relationship between elite structure and the concept of political transition, see J. Murphy. 2006. "Illusory Transition? Elite Reconstitution in Kazakhstan, 1989 – 2002." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58: 4: 523-554.

⁷⁵ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁷⁶ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 28, 2010.

head of the Presidential Administration, and was appointed deputy prime minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the start of 2012.⁷⁷ Kelimbetov is seen as a direct rival of the Kulibayev-Masimov-Marchenko trio, since he competes with the president's second son-in-law and the prime minister for control of Samruk-Kazyna on behalf of the president himself.⁷⁸

Kelimbetov has also played the card of denouncing the “non-patriotic” decisions of some Kazakh oligarchs investing abroad, and has renewed ties with the groups of so-called southerners.⁷⁹ The latter group unites Umirzak Shukeyev, the former mayor of Astana and then the vice-prime minister; Sarybay Kalmurzayev, who heads the financial police and thus is in charge of the fight against corruption; General Kozy-Korpesh Kazbuzov, who leads the Customs Committee; and Sat Tokpakhbayev, the former director of the KNB and former minister of defense. Kelimbetov is also close to Nurlan Balgimbayev, one of Kazakhstan's “oil kings,” a consultant for Chevron, director of KazakhOil, and prime minister from 1997 to 1999. In 2007 Balgimbayev was named presidential adviser for energy issues and in 2009 special representative for Caspian development. He now presides over the energy construction projects of KazMunayGas, including the Karachaganak refinery, offshore Caspian projects, the modernization of the Pavlodar refinery, and the Uralsk gas station.⁸⁰ The balancing game between the Kulibayev-Masimov-Marchenko trio and its competitors is therefore cultivated and probably fuelled directly by President Nazarbayev himself.

Nazarbayev uses the new generation to show the old guard that he still has the ability to alter the existing balance of power among the elite. The most revealing example is that of Darkhan Kaletayev's dazzling career. Both young (born in 1972) and of liberal orientation, Kaletayev was first appointed to the vice presidency of the Presidential Administration, then to that of the presidential party Nur-Otan, before he ended up assuming the leadership of Samruk-Kazyna in 2009.⁸¹ This generational change will probably become a key driver in renegotiating the patronal system in Kazakhstan in the years to come. Like the older generation, young technocrats will remain unavoidable “go-betweens” between private interests and the political leadership, and help to defuse potential clashes among the elite, but they will probably also try to take into consideration accountability claims coming from Kazakhstan's society.

⁷⁷ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁷⁸ E. Mazhitova. “U sviazki Kulibaev - Masimov est' shansy.” *Respublika*. November 27, 2009, <http://www.respublika-kz.info/news/politics/6518/>; A. Saparova. “Sliianie i sliv. Metod Kelimbetova.” *CentrAsia*, September 1, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1283489700> (accessed August 20, 2012).

⁷⁹ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁸⁰ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 26, 2010.

⁸¹ Anonymous interviews with Kazakh experts, Almaty, September 28, 2010.

Conclusions

At the economic level, neopatrimonial practices do not necessarily work against the country's development, at least not against increases in citizens' living standards: in Ivory Coast, the massive enrichment of the ruling class in the 1970s occurred without growth ending, just as has happened in Kazakhstan. However, economic growth and long-term development are not corollaries: an enduring reversal in raw material exports to the world market can engender an economic crisis with high political risks.⁸² Indeed, neopatrimonialism wagers on the exploitation of resources for export, and therefore constitutes an increased risk of Dutch disease⁸³ to the extent that the elite promote the lucrative exploitation of raw materials and neglect other domains, in particular those, more competitive, of innovation and cutting-edge technology, which require extensive infrastructure investments with no immediate return on investment. For two decades now, the Kazakh leadership has not taken up opportunities for economic reform unless they conform to its pre-established interests. Kazakhstan's successful economic path has "purchased" popular support for the regime, and we may seriously question whether patronal practices would have been able to secure political legitimacy in the absence of resource wealth.⁸⁴

At the political level, the reinforcement of neopatrimonial mechanisms in Kazakhstan ran parallel to a rising authoritarianism. Like in Russia, Kazakhstan's population remained largely depoliticized. The leaders' kleptocracy has been the butt of disillusioned mockery, which reveals the very widespread notion that private greed obviously trumps public interests. The idea of a common public space—a *res publica*—for which one may justifiably fight and demand a better distribution of wealth is shared by few, since the state is not considered an instrument of fair redistribution. In addition, apart from the small, and often discredited, opposition groups, the only visibility the "opposition" has had is that of groups like Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, whose leaders seemed to be more interested in asset redistribution than promoting democracy. However, as a hybrid regime, the Kazakh neopatrimonial system also allows for innovation: over the course of many years, the presidential party Nur Otan has become an important and noted place of passage for those looking for a technocratic career. This was not previously the case, and it seems to confirm the indirect institutionalization of parties as one of the

⁸² R. Pomfret. 2005. "Kazakhstan's Economy since Independence: Does the Oil Boom Offer a Second Chance for Sustainable Development?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 57: 6: 859-876.

⁸³ B. Egert, C.S. Leonard. 2007. "Dutch Disease Scare in Kazakhstan: Is It Real?" *The Michigan University William Davidson Institute Working Paper*, no. 866, March.

⁸⁴ A. Kendall-Taylor. 2012. "Purchasing Power: Oil, Elections and Regime Durability in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan." *Europe-Asia Studies* 64: 4: 737-760.

centers of power.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the products of the Nazarbayev regime, the new middle-classes of civil servants and private actors, tend to be increasingly demanding public accountability and good governance mechanisms from inside the system.

One of Kazakhstan's main issues for the decade ahead is therefore to manage the long-term sustainability of this neopatrimonial regime with an ageing president whose legitimacy could become contestable. As in all regimes based on practices of monopolizing wealth, the degree of institutionalization is too weak to enable the regime's beneficiaries to consider their gains secured and legally protected. The prospect of a political succession at the highest levels of state, even if it can be managed without apparent conflict, as in Turkmenistan in 2006 upon the death of Saparmurat Niyazow, potentially opens the way to challenge the wealth distribution among competing groups. That challenge, even if it is only potential and may not materialize, may have implications for the whole decision-making chain, since all actors will take this risk into consideration in elaborating their strategies of political and material survival.

Patronal practices are a way of managing uncertainties in weakly institutionalized systems, and this uncertainty increases when the leader is obliged to leave the scene because of his age. However, Nazarbayev's exit from Kazakhstan's leadership does not mean that the regime will drastically evolve, even if the second president will have to build another type of legitimacy than that of the "father of independence." Some formal evolutions—growing mechanisms of institutionalization, the weight of the presidential administration and of the presidential party, and a more ideologically-polarized young generation—signal potential room for changing formal behaviors. However, the authorities have refined their persuasion strategies in a more proactive way, helping to ensure a longer regime survival.⁸⁶

But change can also come from external, society-based pressure. Social protests contesting working conditions (salaries, environmental risks, pensions) began in the mid-2000s, but the 2008 economic crisis and the media visibility accorded to the riots in Zhanaozen in December 2011 gave them a long-term impact on public opinion which has taken the political authorities by surprise. Some parts of the elite could therefore decide to base their career strategies on political change and hope to arouse new features of popular support that would challenge the current regime.

⁸⁵ See Erica Marat's article in this special issue, and the similar conclusions it draws on the situation in Kyrgyzstan.

⁸⁶ E. Schatz, E. Maltseva. 2012. "Kazakhstan's Authoritarian 'Persuasion,'" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28: 1: 45-65.