

THE WEIGHT OF THE STATE IN THE SHAPING OF MENTAL REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD OF KAZAKHSTANI STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Territories rely heavily on spatial representations. They allow to know and to understand space extent and limits but also to construct individual and collective belonging to territories. Representations are partly determined by individual knowledge and practices of space. But they also are collectively elaborated through the assimilation of discourses produced by actors, notably the State.*

This is a study organized by French colleagues, which we supported and helped. and today we will present the results

In the framework of a research project conducted in Kazakhstan in 2018-2020 seeking to address issues on mental representation of regionalization process, we found that the weight of the state in representations of global space was greater there than what we had previously observed in other countries of the world. In this proposal of communication, we will show to what extent the case of Kazakhstan illustrates the weight of ideologies and political discourses in the construction and the structuring of the mental representations of the world space, with regard to the construction of the State itself and its relation to the rest of the world.

The paper is based on the results of a survey conducted in 2018 and 2020 among 540 Kazakh students interviewed in 3 cities: Astana, which has meanwhile become Nursultan, Karaganda and Almaty. This survey focused on spatial representations of world regions based on the realization of a map of world regions.

The analysis of the regions drawn by the students on the world map is characterized by a strong presence of the state, whether it is the Kazakh state or the other states of the world, which are identified much more often

than in previous surveys conducted elsewhere. Kazakhstan itself is identified as a region in its own right, with an explicit discursive and graphic apparatus (hearts drawn on the map) showing the attachment of the students interviewed to their country. Moreover the country is placed at the center of a large Eurasian region and student's discourses insist on the role of the country in the regionalization construction process: beyond the usual centering that can be observed, this Eurasian positioning includes large parts of the government's discourse on the country's regional role.

Almaty and Astana (now Nursultan) are respectively the economic capital (and former political capital) and the political capital of the country. A large industrial center, Karaganda is marked by a strong Soviet heritage. The questionnaire was mainly distributed at three universities - the Kazakh national pedagogical university Abai in Almaty (295 students), the Eurasian national university in Astana (157 students) and the private Bolashak university in Karaganda – and marginally at two other universities in Almaty, the Kazakh national university Al Farabi and Kimep in which the samples collected are small because of the difficulty of maintaining contacts between the two field missions there. The student populations of these universities have varied profiles, from the point of view of their geographical origin, their social class or their ethnic identity: the Kazakh national pedagogical university Abai and the national university of Eurasia recruit students from all over the Kazakhstani territory, with, however, an overrepresentation of students from the northern regions in Astana and an overrepresentation of students from the southern regions in Almaty ; at Bolashak University, students mainly come from the Karaganda region.

Our sample has characteristics that make it impossible to generalize to the entire Kazakhstani population and even the Kazakhstani student population. This is a predominantly female sample (85%). It is also overwhelmingly Kazakh-speaking (85%). This figure exceeds that of the share of Kazakhs in the total population – almost 70% in 2020, according to the National Statistics Agency - but it is closer to the share of Kazakhs in the younger generations. It should also be noted that 64% of them also declare that they speak Russian in their daily lives. They are also mostly people born in Kazakhstan to parents who were themselves born in

Kazakhstan. We can also detect in the sample the presence of some Oralman ("those who return") or Kandasy (those of the same blood), that is to say ethnic Kazakhs who have migrated to Kazakhstan since independence, in particular as part of a repatriation program for co-ethnic minorities from abroad (Mongolia, China, Uzbekistan, etc.). About 5% of the respondents finally declare that they do not hold Kazakhstani citizenship. These are either recently immigrated Kazakhs who are waiting to obtain their Kazakhstani citizenship, or Central Asian students who are studying in Kazakhstan.

The following results are also classic from a theoretical point of view, but to some extent they contradict the empirical results obtained from students from other countries. While the countries of Central Asia were among the countries most rarely included in a region in the Eurobroadmap project, this is not the case for Kazakhstani students who (due to the centralization mentioned above) do not forget themselves, with the exception of 5% of them.

Although the share of Kazakhs has been steadily increasing since the 1970s, Russian-speaking populations still represent a significant part of the population, especially in the northern, central and eastern regions. This diversity, which is also religious, leads Kazakhstan to be thought of as a meeting place between two worlds - Asian and European, Muslim and Christian, but also nomadic and sedentary (Alekseenko, 2016) -, which the students express by cutting their country. This conception is spreading all the more in Kazakhstani society as the national rhetoric promotes the idea that the country is at the "junction" or is a "bridge" between Europe and Asia, just as it resorts to the notion of "Eurasia" (see below). This vision is also reflected on the geopolitical level by Kazakhstan's participation in Asian but also European institutions in various fields (politics, economy, sport, culture, etc.)

One of the specificities of the representations of the world of Kazakhstani students is the weight of the states, and in particular the Kazakhstani state. Indeed, although the instructions were clear and widely respected, a significant number of students identified countries as regions of the world. Thus, among the names of regions cited by more than 20% of students, there are 5 names of regions of the world (in descending order of frequency: Africa, Australia, South America, North America, Europe)

and 4 country names (same: Russia, Kazakhstan, China, USA). In addition, country names account for almost half of the toponyms associated with the spatial entities drawn, while continent or macro-region names account for only about a third of the citations. The other types of names (geographical expressions, economic situation or level of development, cultural references, etc.) are marginal (usually less than 2% of names). In addition to Kazakhstan, which is mentioned by more than 35% of students, the countries identified as regions and named in the questionnaire are often countries with a large area (Russia, Canada, China, USA, Brazil, Mongolia). Other much smaller countries are also mentioned, especially in Europe where several students classify territories by distinguishing a region/continent and, within, countries or subregions (document X, Yessimova, Panarin, 2019).

It should be noted that the "Asia" region is named by barely more than 15% of students and that it is fading to a certain extent under the weight of the largest states identified by Kazakhstani students, especially since they are countries bordering / close to Kazakhstan (Russia, China, Mongolia). The low visibility of Asia corroborates what we observed in the Eurobroadmap project, Asia being the most blurred and the least stable of the major regions of the world in the mental representations of students. But, in the case of Kazakhstani students, it is likely that the discretion of Asia reflects less a lack of knowledge or remoteness from the region than the awareness they have of the great diversity of this continent and the overrepresentation of state links in their regionalization of the World.

This weight given to states in the representations of the world can certainly be linked to the recent geohistorical trajectory of Kazakhstan. Since 1991, for the first time, the country has existed as a modern, independent and sovereign state, having been integrated for several centuries into imperial political entities. Since the demise of the USSR, the official discourse has constantly put forward the Kazakhstani nation-state-territory, these three dimensions not being dissociable, in the narrative of national construction. The social sciences have thus been mobilized to produce a rhetoric historicizing, legitimizing and consolidating the nation-state, extending a work begun since the Soviet period (Fourniau, 2019). At the same time, like other Central Asian countries, the state mesh has established itself in territorial practices and

representations, as a result of the "territorial construction of independence" (Thorez, 2007). Concretely, the functionalization of the new borders - recall that Kazakhstan has 12,000 km of continental international borders, of which about 10,500 km appeared on the political map of the world in 1991 and that it shares with Russia the longest continental dyad (6,846 km) - has given substance to the state and national territory, individualizing it in relation to the new neighboring states. This state vision of the world, which applies not only to Kazakhstan, is disseminated in the media, taught in schools and universities. It is therefore not surprising that it is assimilated and reproduced by students of the "Nazarbaev generation" (Laruelle, 2019).

Within the identified states, Kazakhstan, named as such, has a special place. It is only the second most named state, just behind Russia, but next to the toponym "Kazakhstan" there are many references to Kazakh culture, society, history or geography among the names proposed by students. Students thus evoke major historical figures (Kerei Khan and Janibek Khan, the "fathers" of the Kazakh Khanate, Abylai Khan), tribes (Aday, Naiman, Dulat, etc.), as well as famous contemporary figures (the singer Dismash Kudaibergen or the boxer A. Golovkin). In addition, tender words were written and small hearts drawn at the location of the country, testifying to the specific place it occupies in the representations of the world of Kazakhstani students.

Another specificity of Kazakhstani students is the regional positioning of Kazakhstan. The latter illustrates the psychological tendency to center the mental map, but also the influence of the national discourse on the place of Kazakhstan in its regional environment. This is how Kazakhstan not only thought of itself as an interface between Europe and Asia, but also as the "heart of Eurasia", according to the title of a book by the first President of the Republic, N. Nazarbaev, published in 2005. This conception nourishes the Kazakhstani geopolitical doctrine, which places regional integration at the heart of its projects. A concrete realization of this orientation lies, for example, in the country's participation in the Eurasian Economic Union, an entity whose outlines N. Nazarbaev had outlined at the beginning of the 1990s. In Kazakhstan, references to Eurasia are still numerous today, especially through different place names (university, bank, shopping centers, etc.).

The analysis of the maps drawn by Kazakhstani students highlights the influence of this notion in their representations, because the region in which their country is inscribed is less Central Asia than a large Eurasian region. If there is a clear tendency to associate with Kazakhstan the countries considered to be part of Central Asia to constitute the same region (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and even Afghanistan and Pakistan) (or even the XX-green card), the expression "Central Asia" and its close equivalents "Turan", "Turkestan" are used only marginally (11 times for Central Asia). On the contrary, the name "Eurasia" is used by more than 15% of the students surveyed. The boundaries of this region roughly follow the coastline, with some hesitation as to the position of Europe, sometimes separated, sometimes included and presented as a western periphery of a Eurasian continent. This positioning is in total contradiction with the representations of the regions of the world of the students interviewed in the Eurobroadmap research project, where the countries of Central Asia were often forgotten from the map or included as European or Asian peripheries more or less battered by the drawn cut-outs.

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