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What Europe can learn from Kazakhstan

The EU must cultivate inclusive forms of identity to stop foreign meddling in narrative building over its diverse population

Why do some identity-related disputes remain contained, while others escalate into violent conflict? Research shows that violence is far more likely when local actors believe they can rely on external support. Intervention changes the equation as it encourages actors to radicalise rather than compromise. This dynamic is clearly evident during the Cold War, when superpower rivalries and the broader competitive global environment fuelled proxy wars across the globe, not only by supplying arms to local conflicts, but also by influencing how domestic groups defined their political and social identities. Similar patterns emerged after 1991: separatist agitation flared in Crimea, Donbas, Estonia and Kazakhstan until Yeltsin opted for restraint. In contrast, in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, decisive external intervention escalated conflicts into violence.

Against this backdrop, the targeting of ethnic identities with disinformation to spark domestic destabilisation and division, and the weaponisation of ethnic groups to justify invasion, are hardly new phenomena. However, the war in Ukraine has once again brought these practices to light. In this context, Kazakhstan, with its sizeable Russian-speaking population and close structural ties to Moscow, is particularly vulnerable. The intensifying geopolitical polarisation following the invasion affects countries with limited room for manoeuvre within a simplistic global binary, such as Kazakhstan. These developments are important not only for Central Asia, but also for the internal vulnerabilities of Europe's own multi-ethnic societies.

Adjusting to circumstances

When Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the majority of its population were non-Kazakh, with Russians forming the largest minority group. Pursuing an explicitly ethnic-nationalist course under such

circumstances would have risked domestic instability and damaged relations with Russia. Instead, the leadership promoted the concept of a civic 'Kazakhstani' identity, which was enshrined in legal and institutional frameworks and combined inclusive nation-building with the state's firm control over sensitive identity debates. This approach enabled Kazakhstan to avoid the violent ethnic conflicts that erupted in other parts of the post-Soviet region.

Language policy was at the heart of this balancing act. Although Kazakh was enshrined as the state language, Russian retained equal constitutional standing and continued to dominate much of public and cultural life. In an attempt to prevent ethnic polarisation, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's first head of state and chief architect of its post-independence trajectory, banned political parties based on ethnicity, religion or gender in 2002.

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However, the demographics soon began to shift. By the late 1990s, the Kazakhs had regained majority status, a development that was reinforced by the return of almost one million Kazakhs from abroad. By 2016, they accounted for two-thirds of the population, with figures in some regions exceeding 95 per cent. These changes gradually lent momentum to calls for 'Kazakhisation', particularly with regard to language policy, even though Russian continued to dominate many areas of politics, the media and society.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a decisive event that accelerated an emerging trend that was already underway. Debates about identity, which were once confined to small circles of Kazakh-speaking intellectuals, entered the public sphere. Among younger generations in particular, language came to embody sovereignty and security. Russian-speaking Kazakhs began deliberately switching to Kazakh, enrolling in language courses and consuming Kazakh-language media. These dynamics were further amplified by social media, artistic and literary productions, podcasts and TEDx Talks on decolonisation, and a landmark seven-volume reassessment of Kazakhstan's history, produced by over 300 scholars. All of these factors brought this debate into the public sphere.

The state has capitalised on this momentum. Since 2024, applicants for citizenship have been required to demonstrate proficiency in the Kazakh language. The government's Concept of Language Policy Development

(2023–2029) sets out ambitious targets for the use and spread of the Kazakh language in society. A new Law on Mass Media aims to increase Kazakh-language media consumption to 55 per cent by 2025 and 60 per cent by 2027. Language, which was once used as a delicate balancing instrument, is now being securitised as part of a broader strategy to consolidate sovereignty and reduce Russian influence.

The need for an inclusive identity

Yet the authorities remain cautious. They are acutely aware of the risks of external manipulation, particularly from Russia, and of the potential alienation of Russian-speaking citizens. Roskomnadzor, Russia's media regulator, has already demanded that Kazakhstani outlets remove part of Russian-language content, while Russian propaganda seeks to sway domestic opinion. The state has set precedents to deter overtly pro-Russian activity: in 2022, a couple in northern Kazakhstan were convicted of separatism; Russian artists who supported the war in Ukraine were banned from performing; and in 2023, a parliamentarian lost his seat after making pro-Russian statements. Nevertheless, the government avoids taking steps that might enable Moscow to allege discrimination against Russian speakers. The line between channelling what is necessary to avoid appearing vulnerable to outsiders and becoming restrictive of the right to self-determination and freedom of speech is very thin.

Of course, the use of ethnic groups to spark domestic destabilisation or to justify larger-scale intervention is not a new phenomenon, nor is it confined to Russia. Throughout modern history, great powers have repeatedly exploited divisions of identity, from the 'Irish' and 'Polish' issues in Europe to the 'Eastern Question' concerning the Ottoman Empire.

More recent examples can be seen in Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen and Somalia. Israel's current exploitation of tensions between the transitional government and the Druze in Syria, rooted in grievances over limited inclusion in state-building, illustrates the well-worn pretext of 'protecting' minority rights as a justification for military intervention. What marks the present moment is not the emergence of ethnic instrumentalisation itself, but its renewed visibility and sharpened strategic salience. This resurgence is being intensified by intensified geopolitical rivalries in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as by the capacity of digital media and social platforms to amplify identity-based narratives with unprecedented speed and reach.

From a geopolitical perspective, framing global affairs increasingly narrowly through the lens of a binary great-power dynamic risks fuelling polarisation abroad while, at the same time, undermining cohesion at home.

So, what does this mean for Europe? The lesson is clear. European societies have become increasingly multi-ethnic, yet the rise of right-wing politics – now firmly entrenched even within mainstream parties – reveals a persistent refusal to accept pluralism. This creates vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit through propaganda or covert support. Social psychological research shows that in-group bias is commonplace and does not generate violence in itself; it becomes dangerous only when coupled with structural inequality and exclusion. Across Europe, however, nationalist and right-wing populist forces are gaining traction with such exclusionary policies, particularly against refugees and migrants, as evidenced also by last year's European Parliament elections.

Therefore, Europe must prioritise resilience by cultivating inclusive forms of identity and consolidating international norms of non-intervention. From a geopolitical perspective, framing global affairs increasingly narrowly through the lens of a binary great-power dynamic risks fuelling polarisation abroad while, at the same time, undermining cohesion at home.

Kazakhstan offers a telling illustration of this dilemma. Even if its government wished to distance itself more decisively from Russia, deep structural dependencies would prevent a radical realignment. Pressuring Kazakhstan into making stark choices would not only destabilise the country itself, but also regional security more broadly. Europe should heed this lesson and resist the temptation to push other states into similarly perilous positions. At the same time, it must be aware of how polarisation and nationalism exacerbate its own societal vulnerabilities.



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