

**Imagining the Desirable Homeland:  
Nation-Related Belonging and Social Media Use of Young Kazakhstani Russians**

Inaugural-Dissertation

in der Fakultät Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften

der Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg

vorgelegt von

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Bamberg, den 25. September 2021

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URN: [urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-519010](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-519010)  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-51901>

Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 20.09.2021

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## Acknowledgment

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors Prof. Dr. Kneidinger-Müller and Prof. Dr. Johannes Grotzky, for providing guidance and feedback throughout my research project. Your professional expertise, patience, and valuable advice has helped me to complete this dissertation and find my research style.

I am deeply grateful to The Konrad Adenauer Foundation and its representative office in Kazakhstan, especially to Aliya Mussina, Dr. Gregor Russel, and Amos Helms, for supporting my research. The scholarship allowed me to implement my research idea and improve my academic skills. It has been an honor for me to be a part of the international KAS community.

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to say “thank you” to the following colleagues for their inspiring feedback, and for sharing with me their valuable experiences: Polina Kolozaridi, Leonid Yuldashev and Club for Internet and Society Enthusiasts, Dr. Anna Litvinenko, Prof. Dr. Gerhard Schulze, Anna Novikova, Vanya Solovey, Masha Beketova and the whole of Post Post AG. Besides, I thank all the ‘gatekeepers’ who provided access for my target population, and everyone who agreed to participate in my study.

My sincere thanks go to Alexander Montes de Oca and Karina Pouzankova for supporting me in English academic writing proficiency and Russian-English translation. My heartfelt gratitude is extended to Dr. Andrea Szameitat, and to Olga Siepelmeyer, for helping me not to give up even in difficult times.

A special “thank you” is addressed to all my friends for our exciting discussions and motivation throughout the writing process, especially Mariya Zoryk, Caroline Müller, Dorothea Engelhardt, Nicolai Grossherr and Asya Kenzhgaliyeva. I am blessed to have you all in my life.

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to my parents and my spouse for all the love and encouragement I experienced during the work on this dissertation. Without your understanding and believing in me, I would have never made it.

## Abstract

Recent events, such as the Ukrainian crisis, political protests in Belarus, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's escalation, have clearly demonstrated that the so-called 'national question' has remained an acute issue in the post-Soviet space. Being surrounded by Russia's neo-imperial calls, but also by the dominating titular culture in the country of their current residence, ethnic Russians, and their national belonging arouse the interest of academia.

Simultaneously, the tremendous expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as the popularity of social media in the ex-Soviet republics, opens new opportunities for the conception of a national image, especially for young people. Hence, the studying of ethnic and civic belonging in the post-Soviet context requires an additional technological viewpoint.

While Cyberspace in Kazakhstan remains state-controlled, Russia employs social media to unite its compatriots around the Russian national idea. However, the Internet may also support alternative identity constructions, grassroots movements, and the search for new national belongingness among ethnic minorities. How do young Kazakhstani Russians define their national belonging in the light of their social media usage? Which homeland do they imagine, and which role does Instagram play in this process?

To answer these questions, I conducted explorative research, which was based upon a qualitative content analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with young Kazakhstani Russians and a quantitative content analysis of local Instagram accounts. Interviewing ethnic Russians from big Kazakhstani cities demonstrated that these young people avoid formal national categories and creatively combine their multiple nation-related identities and belongings. Although social media content from Russia is present in their social media feeds, Kazakhstani Russians did not express any particular attachment to their historical "homeland." Instead, they defined themselves as *Kazakhstanis* and advocated for ethnocultural pluralism and innovation inside and beyond Kazakhstan's national borders. Their openness towards global cooperation is also reflected in their use of social media.

At the same time, a close connection to a local space was widely relevant among Kazakhstani Russians. Posting Instagram stories from their everyday life, communicating with local friends, and consuming local news and event announcements, immersed young Kazakhstani Russians into the local city-related environment. Among the whole geographical and

thematic content variety, following one or another urban account was an essential part of Kazakhstani Russians' social media use.

As the Instagram analysis proved, textual and visual content on city-related accounts has blurred the boundaries between different discursive paradigms of national identity existing in Kazakhstan and presented the country in a positive light. In addition to other usage patterns, this provides an opportunity for these young people to construct a particular image of Kazakhstan, which helps them to find their social identity gratification and maintain positive self-esteem. As a result, their sense of belonging to Kazakhstan grows, allowing them to manage their multiple nation-related memberships while creating new categories beyond any formal definitions.



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## Introduction

The question about national identity and the sense of belonging among ethnic minorities and its connection to the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), occupies an important place in current academic discussion. The massive spread of the Internet has opened a lot of opportunities for re-discovering one's identities and social memberships; this can especially matter for young people who are actively forming their personality. While many studies (e.g., Alinejad, 2013; Dekker, Belabas & Scholten, 2015; Sablina, 2021) have considered the identity-shaping role of ICTs in the context of Western societies, the dynamic development of the Russian-speaking digital media networks in the post-Soviet space in the last decade has raised more new questions and has awakened academic interest (e.g., Gorham, Lunde & Paulsen, 2014; Bassin & Suslov, 2016; Gritsenko, Wijermars & Kopotev, 2021).

This issue has become especially important in the light of the Ukrainian Crisis which has been going on since 2014. The armed conflict between pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine sides, and the establishment of the Lugansk and Donetsk separatist republics, have clearly demonstrated that the so-called 'national question' (*nacional'nyj vopros*<sup>1</sup>) in the former Soviet republics appears to be still open. Recent mass protests in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, as well as the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which have all been actively supported by digital technologies, also confirm the need to study social transformations in the region. Thirty years after the Soviet Union collapsed, the search for a nation-related attachment seems to be in an active phase again. It is evident that "ethnic time-bombs" (Tishkov, 1997, p. 34) have gradually begun to explode.

Meanwhile, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a whole generation of ethnic Russians was born and raised outside of Russia. By automatically becoming citizens of the new republics, but also by being part of an ethnic minority group in the new republics, these young people have simultaneously confronted the Soviet national heritage, the nation-building present in the newly established countries and the challenges of the globalized world.

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<sup>1</sup> I used the ISO 9:1995 system for the Russian transliteration in this dissertation.

Being “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), young ethnic Russians have tightly integrated ICTs into their everyday routine.

At the same time, the *Russian World* concept, calling for unification around Russian culture and for the reconstruction of the former imperial glory, has been actively spread online far beyond Russia. In that respect, the legitimacy of the Russian army’s actions in East Ukraine as well as the events of Euromaidan have become central themes for the Russian-language Internet. The highly emotional public resonance around the questions regarding the ‘historical return’ of Crimea, or its ‘occupation’ by the Russian Federation has divided Russian-speaking social media users throughout the post-Soviet space (e.g., Suslov, 2014; Gaufman, 2015; Marchenko & Kurbatov, 2016). Besides Crimea, the relationship between territorial integrity and national borders in the post-Soviet space has remained as a controversial theme. Statements made by the Russian president about “traditional Russian historical territories”, such as the Russia bordering Northern regions of Kazakhstan, which are extensively populated by ethnic Russians, continue instigating online public resonance (Kutubaeva, 2020).

Since the Internet has the capacity to activate long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1998) and a sense of connection with the historical home country among diaspora members (Nedelcu, 2018), such geopolitical circumstances give rise to the question of how does the young generation of ethnic Russians in the “near abroad” define their nation-related identity and belonging in the light of the Ukrainian crisis and massive spreading of networked digital services? Nonetheless, in the words of Skey (2020) “the extent to which practices of ordinary users may be informed by national categories, preferences and sensibilities” is still studied poorly.

In this context, the case of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan is particularly interesting. Making up 20 percent of the whole Kazakhstani population today, over 30 years ago ethnic Russians were the largest ethnic group in Soviet Kazakhstan, outnumbering even the titular ethnic Kazakhs (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 188; Ministry of National Economy of Republic Kazakhstan, 2019). Often being automatically labeled as Russians or Russian speakers in current public and academic discourses, it is not always clear exactly who belongs to this group, and how these people - especially the young generation - characterize themselves in terms of their ethnic and civic identity. While being attracted to their historical home

country (Russia), Kazakhstani Russians also confront the multi-vector national policy of Kazakhstan, which not only supports ethno-cultural diversity and the peaceful coexistence of different peoples in the country, but also promotes the advantageous position of the titular ethnic Kazakhs (Laruelle, 2014). All this can motivate Kazakhstani Russians to reconsider their connection to both Kazakhstan and Russia.

In addition, the rapid development of information and communication technologies in Kazakhstan has contributed to a significant rise in the number of Internet users, mainly among young people. The amount of Internet users increased from 3% in 2005 to 82% in 2019 (The World Bank, 2020a). Simultaneously, along with the media, ICTs has become a massive instrument for building regime loyalty and for spreading state-sponsored information in an authoritarian context (Gunitsky, 2015). The development of ICTs and digital services belong to the strategic plan of the authoritarian government of Kazakhstan, and also leads to massive Internet and social media regulations in the country (Freedom House, 2020).

Besides online search and mail services, social media is especially popular among Kazakhstanis - the number of social media users increased by 26 percent just in 2020 (Kemp, 2020). One of the most popular social media platforms for the past few years remains the Russian platform Vkontakte; the reasons for this popularity, however, may vary among different social groups. While the numerous reports mentioned above provide insights into general usage trends, user-centered studies of Kazakhstani users, which aim at an in-depth investigation of the Internet usage by various social groups, are still rare.

Therefore, the purpose of the current dissertation is to shed light on the link between social media usage and the search for nation-related belongingness in the case of Kazakhstani Russians. Using constructivist lenses and exploratory research designs, I am going to demonstrate what kind of opportunities the use of Vkontakte and Instagram opens for the national self-definition of young Kazakhstani Russians. I argue that the multiple functionalities of social media platforms are able to support young ethnic minorities in managing their identity and belonging, and reconsider their connection to both their historical homeland, as well as the country of their birth and current residence.

Concentrating my attention specifically on young people of Russian origin from big Kazakhstani cities, my research is intended

1. to explore how these young people define themselves in (ethno)national terms;
2. to detect, in this regard, how Kazakhstani Russians evaluate their connection to Kazakhstan and to Russia in the light of the Ukrainian crisis and the spread of the Russian World concept;
3. to discover which social media usage patterns – both in active and passive ways – these young people exemplify, and how they relate to their (ethno)national belongingness;
4. to demonstrate, by the concrete example of urban Instagram accounts, which are popular among young Kazakhstani Russians, how social media use can support a national bottom-up imagination by a concrete ethnic minority group.

In line with these objectives, my empirical research included two steps. The main research step was a qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews with young people between the ages of 18 und 23, who were born and grew up in independent Kazakhstan, and who identify themselves as Russians. Applying this methodological approach allowed me to carry out an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and self-definitions, which are particularly important while discovering nation-related identity and belongingness ‘from below’ (Brekhus, 2008; Knott, 2015a).

Based on the information gained from the interviews, an additional research step in the form of a quantitative analysis of the four most popular Instagram accounts among the interviewees, was integrated into the research’s design. This step made it possible to supplement self-reported information with factual examples of social media content present in Kazakhstani Instagram segments. The additional research step allowed to obtain first insights into the national images on social media, which young Kazakhstani Russians confront on a daily basis. Due to this multiperspective approach, I could identify similarities and differences between personally constructed national identities and belongings, and those which were reflected on popular local social media accounts. However, because of the multimodal character of nation-related belongingness (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2013), an examination of (social) media influences in the sense of media impact research, such as testing causal relationships between media content and users’ attitudes, is beyond the scope of this study.

This dissertation has the following structure: firstly, a theoretical background will be provided (Chapter 1), where I will outline the modern discussion towards a definition of the nation (Chapter 1.1.), and describe relevant types of nationalism, such as civic and ethnic nationalism, banal and everyday nationalism, as well as long distance nationalism (Chapter 1.2.). Before proceeding with basic concepts of belongingness and social identity, the question of whether nationalism and transnationalism can coexist, will be answered in Chapter 1.3. Particular focus on the emergence and activation of nation-related identities and belonging, including the description of (ethno)national attachments among ethnic minorities, and the specificity of belonging to a nation at a young age, will take place in the Chapter 1.4. Followed by the description of the political elite's role in the construction of national identity and belongingness to a concrete state, transnational forms of belonging, such as cosmopolitan, supranational and multinational, will be described there. At the end, nation-related identity and belonging will be considered in the context of the media and ICTs. I will specifically present existing theoretical considerations regarding the role of media information for the construction of a nation-related Self, and also exhibit how networked digital media have changed the social construction of reality and, especially, nation-related belongingness among ethnic minorities and diaspora members. This section will be concluded by analyzing the phenomenon of Internet control and top-down construction of the nation in Cyberspace.

To make the context of the study clear, the thematic background will be given in Chapter 2. Initially, I will present the definition of what it means to be 'Russian'; in this connection I will briefly review how the concept of Russianness evolved historically, since nation building in Russia has specific characteristics that diverge in some ways from the development of nations in Western Europe. Next, I will focus my attention on Kazakhstan, considering the socio-political situation in the country after becoming independent in 1991; in connection with this, I will evaluate the social position of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, and the local development of ICTs and the social media landscape. The thematic background also includes Chapter 2.4., which is dedicated to the Ukraine crisis and its connection to the *Russian World* (*Russkij mir*) concept. In this context is encountered a general description of developments in Ukraine regarding (ethno)national mobilization in the post-Soviet space, in conjunction with a short introduction to salient points of modern Russian

nationalism. Moreover, the Russian diaspora policy, in the light of the *Russian World* concept and its expression on the Russian-speaking Internet, will be addressed here. The position of Kazakhstan regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and its importance for Kazakhstani Russians, will conclude this section.

Finally, Chapter 3 will induct the two-step empirical research, starting with the main qualitative analysis. After presenting the general perspective and research design of the study, I will shift directly to the description of the interviews: research participants, data collection and analysis. The question of what it means to be Russian for young Kazakhstani Russians will be answered in Chapter 3.3., which will be followed by their personal interpretations of ethnic heritage, citizenship and civic belongingness. In Chapter 3.6. I will go into detail regarding social media usage patterns among Kazakhstani Russians, concentrating on the selection of specific social media platforms and their usage reasons, nation-related self-presentation (active social media usage) as well as content consumption (passive social media usage). Before proceeding to a description of the additional quantitative study, I will summarize and discuss results from the interviews in the interim conclusion (Chapter 3.7).

While general trends in social media content consumption among young Kazakhstani Russians are outlined in Chapter 3.6, Chapter 3.8. provides concrete insight into the most popular local Instagram accounts for these individuals. The general description of research methods, such as sampling, data collection and method analysis, will be followed by the presented research results. Firstly, I will introduce each of the selected Instagram accounts regarding its textual and visual content form, overall popularity and content origin. Secondly, I will demonstrate which images of Kazakhstan are presented on these urban Instagram accounts based on state-promoted national paradigms. Finally, the general sentiment of textual and visual Instagram posts of the selected Instagram accounts, will be described. After summarizing the outcome of the additional quantitative research, I will return to the main question of this dissertation and discuss, through the example of young Kazakhstani Russians, how the nation-related identity and belonging relate to social media usage patterns and vice versa.

# **1. Theoretical Background**

## **1.1. Defining the Nation**

The term *nation* as a part of everyday language is widely used. However, terms such as *United Nations*, *national security* or *national interest* in media and public discourses often do not get a special definition or are taken for granted. One can define the ‘nation’ as the state or community of people or both, leading to further confusion and misinterpretation of this term. Meanwhile, today, in the era of the global economy and networked societies, the nation’s category is being reassessed, extended, and supervised on local and global levels (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002; Castells, 2011b). For instance, the success of international corporations, supranational economic and political entities in the last three decades has motivated the revision of boundaries between national and international issues, and this has, in a manner, transformed the meaning of this term. Simultaneously, the right-wing populism, which has been rising across the world in the last few years, has brought the concept of the nation into an anti-globalist exclusivist context, making the situation regarding this concept even more complicated.

The ambiguity related to the term *nation* has also prevailed in the academic field. The elusive nature of *nation* in comparison to the more clearly defined *state* has required different and, in many ways, controversial approaches, which have demonstrated the acute difficulty of an explicit definition of this phenomenon (Miller, 2007). While e.g. USA and Turkey equate nation and citizenship as legal belonging to the state, Russia, Iran and Kazakhstan draw a clean dividing line between these concepts. The situation is also complicated because most studies of nationalism have based their research upon concrete and mostly Western countries, which has led to difficulties in formulating a universal theoretical basis of this concept. Not least of all, the problem of conceptualizing and defining a nation is linked with its strong politicization. Being present in various discourses as the obligatory and indiscriminate ideology of the modern states complicates its clear definition (cf. Pickel, 2013, p. 427-428). Despite all the mentioned difficulties, current social research has systematized the main direction of studying nation and nationalism under the following



umbrella terms: primordialism/perennialism, modernism/constructivism, and ethno-symbolism (e.g., Ichijo & Uzelac, 2005; Anbarani, 2013; Özkirimli, 2017).

### *Primordialism/ perennialism*

Although in the modern social sciences, the general primordialist view on the emergence of the nation has been strongly criticized and even rejected (e.g., Brubaker, 1996; Coakley, 2018; Suny, 2001a), it has still occupied a stable niche in academic discussions. Moreover, it has played an important role in the context of neo-imperialism and nation-building after the passing of the bipolar world in 1991 (see also Chapter 2.4.2).

The fundamental idea of primordialism stems from the “naturalness and/or antiquity” of nations, has presented them as “given” coercive entities based on biological, cultural, and geopolitical characteristics (Özkirimli, 2017, p. 51). In this case, the formation of a nation is connected to the concept of ethnicity or race as an objective “given” community based on common blood ties. Some primordialists, such as Geertz (1963, as cited in Özkirimli, 2017, p. 58) supported only the idea of the “assumed” naturalness of these ties by individuals, emphasizing the role of emotions in an attachment to the group. In addition, perennialists, like Hastings (1997, as cited in Özkirimli, 2017, p. 60), who are often associated with primordialism believe in the historical continuity and geographical ubiquity of nations as ethnicity-based political communities.

Coakley (2018) has raised the issue of terminological difficulties in using primordialism in the academic literature. Criticizing what he sees as the established confusing classification of theories of nationalism, he has advanced the conclusion that the original meaning of primordialism, based on the objective sociobiological origins of a nation, is hard to find. The modern primordialists assert their concepts using subjective or constructivist components, and this violates its original meaning (cf. Coakley, 2018, pp. 338-341). Hence, in its theoretical sense, primordialism is less useful for studying nations and nationalism but might be interesting per se as an object of study.

Nonetheless, the concept of primordialism has been still present in the Russian-speaking political and public discourses (Shnirelman, 2009, pp. 117–120) and its main concepts were also mentioned in the empirical materials of my research. It is essential to note here, though, that primordialism as an analytical category, which considers nations from a

perspective of “objective primordiality” (Coakley, 2018, p. 344) as limited and hardly useful for my research purposes.

### *Modernism/constructivism*

The modernist approach, also known as constructivism, considers nations, in contrast to primordialism, as a modern phenomenon resulting from political, economic, and ideological developments that occurred at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. All exponents of modernism are united by the idea that the concept of nation is a conscious construction, which serves certain political interests of the elites. Thereby, the state bureaucracy played the key role in this process, which makes the nation and the state inseparable from each other. The explanation for that is linked to historical modernization: in industrialization, the old identities like local communes or religions lost their relevance. They were replaced by a new state-controlled entity – the nation. Ethnicity, in turn, is considered not as preexisting for the national entity, but again as a social construction, and therefore, as an instrument for achieving political profit (cf. Larin, 2010, pp. 441-443; Özkirimli, 2017, pp. 81-86).

Gellner's (1983) central idea is that nations are products of nationalism, which makes them an integral part of the modernization process and requirements of the industrial age. Changes in social and economic systems demanded new competencies and skills among the workforce, which can only be achieved through a state-controlled centralized education system. Precisely through education, the political elite expanded the idea of nationalism among the population, thus creating linguistic and cultural uniformity. Although this homogeneous national culture was based on already existing languages and cultural traditions, these were carefully adapted and artificially confined to the current political interests of that time.

Hence, in comparison to other modernists, Gellner (1983) did not support the idea of multiculturalism and emphasized the inherent connection between state boundaries, the nation-building process, and the homogeneity of national culture. He also has noticed that the people's conscious will to create a nation proceeds not from their natural mental setting but depends on modernization circumstances. This broad conceptual approach gives an abstract understanding of the nation but is hardly applied to a specific geographical or historical context. A critical point regarding the concept of Gellner concerns his ignoring of

evidence from the past, which might be reflected in national movements and ethnic conflicts like, e.g., Balkan wars. Unfortunately, Gellner's theory also does not raise supranationalism and the existence of the nation in the process of economic and cultural globalization (cf. Walicki, 1998, p. 617).

Similar to Gellner (1983), Anderson (1983/2006), Deutsch (1966), Hobsbawm (1990/2012) have emphasized the constructivist and modern character of the nation. For example, Deutsch (1966, pp. 96-105) has determined communication to be the key factor in transforming traditional communities to nations. Due to the evolving of a united system of symbols in modernization, firstly, a common national culture, and next, the nation, have appeared. Precisely due to the complementarity of this communication system, which includes not only a language and any medium but also memories and habits, it has been possible for people to unite among themselves and to use the state for the achievement of their national interests.

Unlike Deutsch, Hobsbawm (1990/2012) has suggested that the nation appeared and came to exist according to a top-down process. In the process of nation-building, along with certain economic and technological conditions, "inventing of traditions" is crucial Hobsbawm (1990/2012, p. 92). According to Hobsbawm (1990/2012), establishing a nation is connected to the introduction of particular traditions, which are rather newly constructed or rethought from the past, but both aim to legitimize the political elite. In short, the emerging of a nation demands its "historical association with a current state", which is driven by economic factors, an established elite, and its "capacity for conquest" (cf. Hobsbawm, 1990/2012, pp. 37-38).

Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) has introduced the term 'imagined community' for the nation. Trying to find an appropriate definition for the nation, he has argued the following idea: although most nation members never meet each other, they have a clear vision of their unity. Moreover, this unity is limited by certain borders and only exists within a sovereign state:

"The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations [...] It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of

the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm [...]” (Anderson, 1983/2006, p. 7).

However, the imagined character of nations is not equated to a fictional one. It also does not mean that an imagined community implies less involvement or coherence among its members– “it is a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1983/2006, p. 7). The power of this fraternity is responsible, for example, for the willingness for self-sacrifice in the name of the nation. Discussing the origin of the nation, Anderson (1983/2006, p. 22) has asserted that the nation has come to replace religious groups and hence, became its secular version for the satisfaction of the human demand for sacred knowledge. Thus, nationalism is not a political ideology but rather a cultural appearance.

In addition, nation formation is supported by the development of communication technologies and the system of productive relations, which Anderson (1983/2006, p. 47) has termed as “print capitalism.” The invention of the printing press and, as a result, the distribution of books and other printed media allow for accessible information about the state, its politics, and recognized culture. Thus, they are able to provide opportunities for people to relate themselves to the nation as a whole or, in other words, strengthen their national consciousness. Moreover, through books and newspapers, the national languages became standardized, creating a united linguistic system, analogous to Deutsch’s idea of complementarity. In turn, the standardized languages contribute to the advancement of organized knowledge inside of national borders. In particular, the establishment of bureaucracy and the local publishing industry is responsible for establishing a national movement.

The concept of imagined communities has not lost its relevance today and might also be refined in the modern international context, which provides new opportunities and communication tools for the cross-border imagination of communities (e.g. Eriksen, 2007; Beck, 2011; Kavoura, 2014). In this regard, the concept of imagined communities is central for this dissertation, providing a necessary theoretical basis for the analysis of nation-related belonging in the context of social media usage.

### *Ethno-symbolism*

The core idea of ethno-symbolism is based on the significant role of pre-modern ethnic ties and their symbolic value for the modern nations. Ethno-symbolists led by their main advocate, A. Smith (e.g., 1998, 2005; 2008, 2009), have claimed that modernists have ignored the historical continuity between ancient and modern times, excessively emphasizing the role of the elite in defining the nation and nationalism. At the same time, they have supported the modernist idea of the relevance of transformational processes for nation-building and the constructivist nature of this phenomenon. However, modernity is not the starting point for the phenomenon of the nation. The previous forms of ethnic entities could not disappear without leaving a trace on modern nations' formation. According to Smith (1998), considering nations over *la longue durée*, it becomes obvious that they are not invented. According to Özkirimli (2017, p. 154), this theoretical approach represents a “midway “between primordialism/perennialism and modernism/constructivism.

To highlight the cultural and not biological meaning of ethnic communities, Smith (1998, 2008, 2009) has introduced the term *ethnie*, which is a community associated with a particular territory and sense of solidarity. The characteristic features of *ethnie* are collective memories, myths, and symbols maintained inside an ethnic group from one generation to the next. With time and influences of external factors (geopolitical, social, and cultural), the *ethnie* might become a nation. In this regard, the emotional response to myths and memories matters in the successful transition from the *ethnie* to the nation. Only if the members of an *ethnie* found a common identity within socio-cultural exchanges do they become a nation. Moreover, besides self-definition, myths, and memories, “the creation and spread of a distinctive public culture and [...] the dissemination of public laws and shared customs” are required (Smith, 2005, p. 99).

Therefore, Smith (2005, p. 98) has defined the nation as “a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols, and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs”<sup>2</sup>. Alike Anderson

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<sup>2</sup> There is also an older and more common definition of the nation by A. Smith; “a named human population occupying a historical territory and sharing common myths and memories, a public culture, and common laws and customs for all members” (Smith, 2003, p. 24, cited in Ichijo & Uzelac, 2005, p. 92). However, I prefer to

(1983/2006), Smith (2009) has been convinced that nations, similarly to religions, have a sacred character. This character operates using myths and memories and provides the basis for the persistence of national identities, which are, concurrently, at the service of political interests. The past plays a central role in this process. The reference to the rediscovered traditions and heroes of the past, using Smith's language, of "the 'golden' ages of the nation's history", provides the necessary foundation for the national sense of belonging in the present time (Smith, 2009, p. 36). For example, the idea of sacred territory - the homeland, national destiny through sacrifice, or national holidays. Finally, the central myth of ethnic election, which is adapted to current political needs, underscores the uniqueness of community members. The conductors of such myths and traditions have been intellectuals - poets, musicians, and other artists, who have supported in their creative activities the ethnic symbols, and therefore shaped the national narrative (Smith, 2009, p. 38).

Another point, which has distinguished Smith (1998, 2005, 2009) from the modernists, is that nations appeared *before* nationalism, and not vice versa. Nationalism is described as "an ideological movement to attain and maintain autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members believe it to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'" (Smith, 2009, p. 61). The critical aspect here is the difference between nationalism and "national sentiment" – a sense of belonging to a nation, which does not necessarily occur simultaneously. Thus, the nation and the state are not equivalent. According to Smith (2009) the understanding of the essence of the nation should not be limited to considering the elite-based component of nationalism, but first of all, should include the perception of ordinary people, who are the targets of elite politics. Hence, the cultural and not political elements are brought to the forefront in nation formation.

Despite its criticism, e.g., by Özkirimli (2003), Guibernau (2004) and Maxwell (2020), the concept of ethno-symbolism is becoming increasingly interesting in the light of studying ethnic minorities and diasporas (Abdulkakieva, 2020). Moreover, Smith (2008) has emphasized that the fusion of a sense of belonging with political participation, typical

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use the current one because it emphasizes that the creation of the nation is driven by the active involvement of ordinary people.

for Western democracies, is not the only possible one. According to (Tolz, 2001, pp. 3–6), this approach is useful for analyzing nationalism in the post-Soviet context.

## **1.2. Types of Nationalism**

### **1.2.1. Civic and Ethnic Nationalism**

One of the attempts to understand the phenomenon of the nation was made in defining certain types of nationalism. The most established taxonomy of nationalism is built upon the dichotomy of civic and ethnic nationalism (Maxwell, 2010; Ariely, 2013). Mentioned by Özkirimli (2005, p. 34), Hans Kohn (1944) has originated the use of a civic-ethnic framework in his book *Idea of Nationalism*. He has connected the civic type of nationalism to the Western European political tradition, while ethnic nationalism has been associated by him with the cultural principles of Eastern Europe. In Kohn's (1944) explanation, Western civic nationalism appeared together with the national state and is characteristic of Western Europe's countries. Because the nation-state was absent in Eastern Europe and Asia, Eastern ethnic nationalism expressed itself through kinship ties and status differences. Neumann (1999) has described in his book the link between the Western and the Eastern nation building, and in particular, the role of the "Russian Other" for the Western conceptualization of the nation.

The concept of civic and ethnic nationalism was refined in the 1990's, primarily regarding the idea of membership in the nation. Civic nationalism was associated with the equality of citizens – members of the nation, sharing the common civic culture even in different ethnocultural traditions, such as native languages. In this case, an important aspect is the voluntary belonging to the nation – as an act of individual will. In this case, the state and the citizenship determine the national identity. In turn, an ethnic nationalism model is grounded upon the distinction between the members of a nation (who are usually part of a national community because of genealogical factors, common descent, and customs) from "Others." Thus, this membership is predefined by birth, not due to personal choice or citizenship (cf. Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013, pp. 338-340). The distinction between "civic/rational/liberal/inclusive" and "ethnic/organic/illiberal/exclusive" has been actively used inside and outside of academic literature and was even ideologically labeled as the

“‘good civic nationalism’ of Western Europe and [the] ‘bad ethnic nationalism’ of Eastern Europe” (Ariely, 2013, p. 123). This normative categorization, arising due to moral bias, brought widespread criticism from the academic community. The civic-ethnic dichotomy was also accused of not being valid because civic nationalism always includes cultural elements equally with ethnic ones (cf. Ariely, 2013, p. 124-125).

In addition, the national belonging *per se* is often directly linked with the fact of being born inside of a certain community, and there is no option for willfully choosing it. Hence, the civic type of nationalism could even be used for describing the decline to willingly belong to a nation, obeying the will of past generations instead. In the end, civic nations could be, in the same manner, as exclusive and xenophobic as ethnic nations might be (cf. Özkirimli, 2005, pp. 24-26).

However, it is important to recognize that civic and ethnic nationalisms fall into the category of Weber’s ideal types and are not detectable in their purest form outside of theoretical works. Moreover, the civic-ethnic types should not be considered mutually exclusive. This has also been proven empirically, e.g., Janmaat (2006) has demonstrated that civic and ethnic elements of nationhood have a non-competitive nature, and there is only a blurred border between these categories.

Although the civic-ethnic typology is limited, using this model of nationalism might be useful for academic comparisons and reducing complexity in demonstrating political processes (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013, p. 338). Ariely (2013) has also demonstrated in his analysis of the European Value Study that the difference in nationhood concepts between the West and the East exists. By combining institutional and public opinion perspectives, he has confirmed that in the East, the policy of citizenship includes more limitations compared to the West. The respondents from Eastern Europe often support ethnic components, while the relation between national identity and the civic view is obvious in the Western European countries.

### **1.2.2. Banal and Everyday Nationalism**

While most of the scholars raise the question – “what” and “when” is the nation, the following typology focuses on the specific questions of “how” and “where” of the nation, turning to its specific, practical, and discursive implementations (Antonsich, 2015, pp. 298-303).



Based upon Hobsbawm's (1990/2012) concept, this perspective on nationalism included the idea "from below" and has examined nationalism on a micro-level, considering peoples' everyday routines. The founder of this academic approach, Michael Billig (1995, p. 41), has asserted the following idea: when "the nation becomes established in its sovereignty", nationalism as an ideology does not manifest itself only on special occasions, like, e.g., political crises, but also becomes a part of the usual social environment. Most researchers on nationalism have been studying 'hot' nationalism<sup>3</sup>, which consists of active struggles for the achievement of independence or, more generally, creating a nation-state. Unlike them, Billig (1995) has called attention to nationalism as a tool for maintaining already existing national communities and their political legitimacy.

In other words, the direct emphasis on nationhood is not the only way to disseminate nationalism among the population. Ordinary unnoticed elements of everyday life, such as the usage of "small words": 'we', 'them', 'here', 'there' or a national flag on top of a public building, build a strong foundation for the sense of national belonging (Billig, 1995, p. 93). When being surrounded by nationhood symbols, for instance, on coins or banknotes, and even an implicit nation-centered discursive practice, people are constantly in contact with their 'own' homeland without being conscious about it. This taken-for-granted process reminds people about their nationhood, which Billig (1995) has called banal nationalism; this allows nations to reproduce themselves successfully. Simultaneously, belonging to a specific nation has become a natural state and an integral part of common sense.

As Anderson (1983/2006), Billig (1995, pp. 94-108) has considered the media and has determined its ability to elicit national feelings. The media discourses maintain a tacit separation between "us" and "them", for example, in splitting rubrics into local and foreign news, which increases the sense of unity among denizens. Equally, sport reportages and even the weather reports might contribute to constructing a "homeland." While reading newspapers or watching TV, ordinary people are reminded of who they are and to which state they belong. The political figures also become providers of banal nationalism due to the media. In their speeches and interviews, they position themselves as representatives of

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<sup>3</sup> Currently, Billig (2017) has refused to use the dichotomy hot/ cold nationalism and suggested replacing it with the more flexible gradations' terms, such as heating and cooling nationalism. In addition, Billig (2017, p. 314) has confirmed that "the heating and cooling of nationalism can occur at the same time in the same place."

the national interest and are reinforcing this idea again with the use of unity-granting phrases ('we', 'our', 'us').

Numerous studies in the last 20 years (e.g., Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000; Skey, 2009; Antonsich, 2016) have used and critically analyzed the concept of banal nationalism in accordance with current world events. This concept set the stage to investigate nationalism from the perspective of the masses, not only as an elite-related top-down phenomenon but also as an establishment of everyday nationalism (Knott, 2015a). There have also been attempts to draw a dividing line between the terms of banal and everyday nationalism. While banal nationalism is rather state-centric and top-down-based, everyday nationalism includes the bottom-up- and human agency-related elements. In addition, everyday nationalism can embrace both banal and 'hot' manifestations (Antonsich, 2016; Skey & Antonsich, 2017, p. 5).

Skey (2009), referring to Brubaker et al. (2006) and criticizing Billig (1995), has highlighted the importance of paying attention to group differences inside of a particular national community and appropriate various discourses in the context of representations of nationalism. Another critical point, which Skey (2009, p. 342) has covered, is the lack of discussion about "the processes of becoming and the relation of power" within the framework of banal nationalism. Using taken-for-granted-logic in the characterization of national belonging (in other words, considering the nation as a "thing" to which all people belong) might hide other relevant aspects, such as a perspective regarding power relations or historical transformations (Skey, 2009, p. 342).

Finally, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) have accentuated the significance of ordinary people's everyday life for the comprehensive understanding of nationalism. In their empirically-based study, they have defined four ways of producing and reproducing nationhood in an everyday context. Firstly, the so-called "talking the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 537) is based on discursive practices, not only as a part of elite settings but also within routine talks. Remarkably, the reproduction of the nation by the elite and by ordinary people can considerably vary.

Likewise, nationhood can not only shape discourses, but the informal talks can also create an understanding of the nation throughout the general population. Secondly, "choosing the nation" supports the idea of the dependency of peoples' decisions on their

national belonging. For instance, choosing marriage partners or friends might happen inside of the nationhood's frame and can, on the one hand, shape peoples' decisions, and on the other hand, the nationhood itself (cf. Fox & Miller-Adriess, 2008, p. 542).

Third, "performing the nation" considers the everyday meaning of national symbols and the ritual acting of them. In particular, nationhood is shaped by national holidays, international sporting competitions, or parades created by elites but are not feasible without co-production and interpretation by the masses. Fourth, "consuming the nation" explores the nation's construction through the prism of the preferences of ordinary people, reflecting upon their daily-based consumption behaviors. According to Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, p. 545), the process of commodification of the nation can embrace and improve the national attitude. Both the products and the people consuming them are becoming national. However, not only by the consumption of national foods, literature or media, is national involvement affirmed, but also by "the consumption of non-national products in nationally discernible ways, which contribute to the emergence of nationally defined communities (of consumers)" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 551).

### **1.2.3. Long-Distance Nationalism**

In the modern global age, the idea of the nation and nationalism adapts itself to new circumstances. According to Anderson (1998, p. 55-78), the development of global capitalism has contributed to the appearance of a new type of nationalism – the long-distance nationalism. Due to voluntary and forced global migration, but also through changes in political structures, e.g., the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has become a common practice for many people to reside outside of their historical homelands. However, the changing of geographical locations does not mean the canceling of basic connections to the 'original' home-country; it might even intensify them. The key role in this intensification Anderson (1998) has attributed to modern communication technologies, which help maintain a connection to the country of origin, its culture, people, and therefore, to an 'imagined' the home-country.

Unlike the classic concept of nationalism, long-distance nationalism expands the nation beyond its national borders. The political interests and the sense of belonging of the dispersed national community remain its concentration on the ancestral home. Often this

belonging is built upon the primordialist idea of a common origin, blood ties” and “genetically based differences” to others (Schiller, 2005, p. 574). Hence, long-distance nationalism might manifest itself in oppositional political struggles on behalf of the homeland from the outside or in separatist actions within the country of residence. At the same time, the active participation in the social and political life of the home-country can also characterize long-distance nationalism. Residing beyond the national borders of their ancestral home, members of the nation keep their connection to it through monitoring of local politics, financially supporting and joining political parties, or through voting. The community of these people might also include even those who had never lived in or had never been a citizen of this homeland (cf. Schiller, 2005, p. 574-579).

Thus, long-distance nationalism is directly linked to diasporic communities. Although the concept of diaspora is often reduced to classic Jewish, Greek or Armenian models, this term can also be used for describing those people, who

“share a feeling of being part of a social ensemble that is neither the mere transposition of a national group outside of its borders, nor the component of a host society, but a sort of third-party actor whose belonging incorporates and transcends the cultural traits of sending and receiving countries” (Lacroix, 2018, p. 174).

In addition, diasporas are not static communities, which are easy to embed in a distinct academic term, but rather include diverse members and have a dynamic character.

Accenting the role of the diaspora in studying nationalism, Lie (2001, p. 359) has criticized the view of the emergence of a diaspora community as being “a dispersal of a marginal minority outside of the national borders.” On examples of Korea and Japan, he has demonstrated that diaspora nationalism<sup>4</sup> might influence the national processes beyond and inside the national borders. However, according to Skrbiš (2001, p. 137), long-distance nationalism appears only within an “effective and functioning framework defined by diaspora community institutions, families and individuals”, which are connected by political, economic, and cultural ideals. Consequently, long-distance nationalism has become a part of both the public and private spheres. While the public dimension contains, for example, protests or public actions featuring famous personalities of a diaspora

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<sup>4</sup> As in this case, long-distance nationalism and diaspora nationalism are often used synonymously.

community, this phenomenon might also manifest itself, e.g., in private friendship and partnership choices.

In general, long-distance nationalism is often coupled with the difficulty to discern and maintain the ethnic dissimilarity of diaspora members in their country of residence. Thus, ethnic identity is a central element of long-distance nationalism. Analyzing the preferences in marriage and relationship partners of the Croatian diaspora in Australia, Skrbiš (2001) has demonstrated that nationalist sentiments play an essential role in decision making and behavior, even in the second generation of diaspora members. There are two factors, which contribute to this. Firstly, due to the strong solidarity inside the diaspora community, certain information, news, ideas, and stereotypes spread among diaspora members. Secondly, the contacts to the homeland are supported by communication technologies, media, and accessible international flights. In the end, the presence of these factors guarantees the success of long-distance nationalism. In light of this, Skrbiš (2001, p. 143) has emphasized that scholars should pay attention to the dualistic character of identity policies, which combine local and global elements.

Following the aforementioned, the concept of long-distance nationalism is closely connected with the process of cross-border interactions, which are typical for the current era of globalization. Thus, the link between opening state borders, the emergence of supranational alliances, and maintaining the nation becomes of particular interest. In the following chapter, I will therefore consider the changing condition for the existence of the nation in the context of growing transnationalism and interconnectivity.

### **1.3. Transnationalism and Cosmopolitanism – Rivals of the Nation?**

Although the nation-centered view has been established as a conceptual frame for most social sciences studies in the last two centuries, the nature of the nation and nationalism has remained contradictory. While the nation-state is mostly presented in the literature as the only possible social organization in modernity, the theoretical, historical, and region-specific attributes confirm the multiplicity and complexity of nations. According to Wimmer and Schiller (2002) there is also the necessity to consider the established ideas according to the new ambivalent social environment.

One of the frameworks, which allows considering the nation and nation-related belonging from a different perspective, is the idea of transnationalism. Transnationalism describes various processes, which are “related to the circulation of people, goods, ideas, and exchanges across national borders”<sup>5</sup> (Mitchell, 2017, p. 6). According to Smith and Guarnizo (1998, p. 4), the following specific factors underpin the occurrence of transnationalism: “the globalization of capitalism with its destabilizing effects on less industrialized countries”, “the technological revolution in the means of transportation and communication”, “global political transformations such as decolonization and the universalization of human rights”, and “the expansion of social networks that facilitate the reproduction of transnational migration, economic organization, and politics.”

Transnational activities arise beyond the logic of the nation’s imagining and can take both physical-real and symbolic forms. As a result, the transnational activities shape new political, economic, and cultural social spaces and more structural social fields, which provide an alternative option to the usual national ones. Some examples of such transnational spaces are social grassroots movements, e.g., Women’s liberation movement or Human Rights movements; of transnational social fields - nongovernmental organizations, e.g., UN or Greenpeace; and supranational cooperation – the most striking example is the European Union, or Eurasian Economic Union, which is also supposed to include some elements of the supranational idea.

Moreover, as Roudometof (2014) has noted, transnational activities can result in the emergence of transnational communities of diaspora members or other cross-border mobility groups. In particular, such a situation can lead to the reinforcement of the cosmopolitan persuasion among populations, which can be defined as “the consciousness of globality and postnational ties; it is a critical and reflexive consciousness of heterogeneity as opposed to the quintessentially modernist spirit of a homogeneous vision of sovereign statehood” (Delanty, 2006, p. 357). Thus, the modern nation-state, being by default involved in these cross-border processes, such as international migration or membership in supranational unions, faces challenges in maintaining and reproducing the sense of the nation in the transnational context. Observing the growing cultural exchanges, the rise of the global economy,

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<sup>5</sup> Such activities can also be defined as ‘postnational’ (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Habermas & Pensky, 2001).

and mobility of people, the following question arises: Is the transnational/cosmopolitan domain replace the national one?

According to Beck (2002, p. 29), the openness of borders does not necessarily “stimulate a feeling of cosmopolitan responsibility” or bring one to the point when all people become cosmopolitans. Moreover, the national and cosmopolitan dimensions coexist and impact each other; they are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the national community becomes a part of the cosmopolitan one. The line between “us” and “them” has been blurring in the face of possible global risks. However, the nation is not disappearing and even remains dominant, but it is being impacted by possible global risks and is thus changing.

The similar idea of the coexistence of transnational/cosmopolitan and national/local elements in the modern world argues for the idea of glocalization (Robertson, 1995; Bauman, 2013; Roudometof, 2014). The term glocalization was introduced in order to confront the common postulation that transnational activities resulted in cultural homogeneity and blurring of boundaries. For example, Roudometof (2014) has noticed the features of globalization, which bring cultural homogeneity across the nation and articulate the common foundations of nationhood. The establishment of these formal foundations is only possible through transnational exchange and cooperation between nation-states. Another example, which Roudometof (2014) has highlighted in this regard, is international sports competitions, such as the World Cup, which promote both worldwide involvement and national exclusiveness. This case demonstrates glocalization, which supports “realizing (and accounting for) the specificity and ‘uniqueness’ of each national experience” in the general process of global homogenization (Roudometof, 2014, p. 25). For Roudometof (2014, p. 28), the modern world is “a world of nations and transnational connections.”

Despite the optimistic assumptions by some scholars (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Sassen, 1996; Habermas & Pensky, 2001), the current political events, such as the rise of right-wing populism worldwide, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, or the annexation of Crimea by Russia, show that national awareness is strong, and becoming more powerful in the context of global interconnectivity (e.g., Harris, 2016; Croucher, 2018; Peters, 2018). Croucher (2018, p. 154) has noticed the growing importance of an ethnic component of nationalism, which from her point of view, is “a refuge and a strategy with coping with the

disruption [of globalization].” Therefore, globalization not only creates conditions for strengthening the need for ethnic belonging but also promotes ethnic mobilization through numerous international organizations and supranational cooperation. For instance, United Nations has introduced the Declaration on the protection of ethnic minorities’ rights. Likewise, the European Union has established general standards for supporting ethnic minorities among EU-states. Moreover, modern technologies, especially social media, are often applied for ethnic networking across state borders (see Chapter 1.5.4.).

In this regard, Brubaker (2010) has paid attention to the changing character of national membership; however, the nation-state model is still central to it. Today nationalism has become less territorial and has attained a transborder character, while ethnic minorities and diaspora are its essential contributors. In the words of Brubaker (2010, p. 78): “State ties to transborder populations and claims of transborder populations on ‘home-land’ states are expanding and strengthening, and both are legitimated by the language of nationalism.”

Similarly, Harris (2016) has assumed the existence of current growing political uncertainties across the world, which lead to the intensification of exclusivist and illiberal nationalism. In particular, he mentioned the growing role of cross-border ethnonational belongingness:

“Ethnicity became a part of international relations through kin states and diasporas. Kin states aim to protect the interest of their diaspora, involving Ethnicity in political processes and international relations. As a result, the concepts of national territory and national citizenship are transforming themselves and becoming fuzzy (e.g., the case of ethnic Russians in Crimea)” (Harris, 2016, p. 246).

On the one hand, the recent Covid-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by a strengthening of national boundaries and existing biases (Bieber, 2020), has also demonstrated the interconnectedness of the modern world and the need for transnational cooperation on the other (Brown & Susskind, 2020). All of that once again demonstrates the relevance of studying and rethinking nationalism in contemporary conditions and from transnational and national perspectives. In the fast-changing networked world, the question of belonging to a nation on the part of ordinary people comes to the foreground. The questions of why people need



to belong to a certain national community and why nation-related identity can become salient for the personality will be considered in the following chapter.

#### **1.4. Nation-Related Belonging and Social Identity: The Basic Concepts**

##### **1.4.1. Belonging as a Need**

While studying nation-related belonging and identity construction and focusing on people as the main actors in these processes, it is crucial to comprehend the psychosocial factors. One of the first, who studied belonging from this perspective, was Maslow (1954). He included in his concept of needs' hierarchy not only basic physiological needs but also social needs, such as the need for being loved and a sense of belonging. Being based on Maslow's approach, numerous studies have confirmed the significant role of social belonging for human behavior and well-being.

For example, using empirical data, Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 505, p. 521) have evaluated the belongingness hypothesis and have concluded that belongingness is "one of humanity's basic concerns" and "a fundamental human motivation." This has evolutionary roots – survival in a group was more comfortable than alone, e.g., external threats might intensify the need for strong bonds. At the same time, belongingness should not be considered only in pragmatic terms. People aim to establish and maintain social bonds independent of external circumstances. These social bonds evoke emotions – positive in successful social attachments and negative if social rejection or exclusion occurs. This general belongingness hypothesis is reflected on the social level, for instance, in membership in an organization, social inclusion/exclusion, religious participation, and national unity.

Moreover, Kitchen, Williams, and Chowhan (2012) have demonstrated in their survey that the regional differences might play an essential role in the cases of belonging to a local community. In Canada, for example, the sense of belonging has varied between rural and urban residences. In the rural areas, the sense of belonging was more vital than in the cities. The definition of local community was also formulated variously among different respondents.

According to Antonsich (2010), belongingness is often associated with a certain space or territory. One can feel the sense of belonging to all - personal apartment, region,

or the home country simultaneously. Territorial belonging can, therefore, include different dimensions. Analyzing the current academic literature about belongingness, Antonsich (2010, p. 646-649) has noted five factors, which promotes the feeling of being attached to a place or “home-feeling.” Firstly, auto-biographical factors are based on personal experiences and childhood memories connected to a certain place. This place is often associated with family members and the feeling of being home. Secondly, relational factors stem from personal and social ties, which go beyond family and close friends. In order to provide the home-feeling, the so-called “weak ties” – irregular connections with strangers from the same public space, need to be regular, significant, and long-lasting. Thirdly, among cultural factors, language, religious traditions, and general cultural attitudes should be mentioned. All of these provide the feeling of intimacy and shape an environment of acceptance and understanding. Next are the economic factors, such as a stable financial situation or successful integration into the labor market, which can also intensify place-belongingness and even improve the connection with a certain place in the future. Finally, legal factors, such as citizenship or resident permits, ensure the required security, which is necessary for the emerging of a sense of belonging.

Aside from belongingness being considered a personal feeling, social factors in the development of a sense of belonging are crucial (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2013). In this context, belonging to a territory becomes coupled with belonging to a group of people; this makes belonging and identity inextricably connected. However, they do not mean the same. Although both terms identity and belonging are interconnected, it is important to reflect upon their differences. According to May (2013, pp. 7-9), unlike belonging, social identity is usually a category-based feature. There is a risk in reducing the complexity of cases to the classic categories already established in social sciences or a specific political discourse.

Another problem is that identity categories often consist of two mutually exclusive dimensions (e.g., Russian vs. Kazakhs). By contrast, when talking about people’s characteristics, a more flexible framework might be needed. In May’s (2013, p. 9) words, “[the heterotopia-based concept of belonging] allows us to retain a complex view of the self as not made up of two-dimensional identity categories but as a fully rounded being who can experience belonging on many different and, at times, contradictory dimensions.”

While belonging to a group is “an inescapable condition of humanity” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 651), empirical studies have proven the appearance of various forms of belonging. Summarizing, Antonsich (2010, p. 653) has declared that the “co-presence of a plurality of forms of belonging, differently imbricated in space and variously constituted in relation to the permeability of their identity boundaries,” is a characteristic of modern societies (p. 653).

Considering current world events, it becomes evident that the global era has brought challenges not only for the national states and the system of international law but also for ordinary people in their attempts to find a position in the modern borderless world. Although globalization opens many possibilities for establishing broader communities (of belonging), one of the strategies for many people across the world remains exclusionary community building and cultural segregation (cf. Croucher, 2018, p. 209). The aspiration to satisfy the need for belonging takes a prominent place in the modern world.

Moreover, discussing the sense of belonging as a fundamental need requires paying attention to circumstances of social and political transformation. It has been 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but its consequences might still be relevant not only for those who have experienced this transformation directly but also for their descendants. Even though they were already born in the new post-Soviet republics, the offspring of non-titular ex-Soviet citizens automatically become ethnic minorities in the newly established independent states. In this regard, they can be compared, to some extent, with the second generation of migrants in Western countries. There is empirical evidence, which has confirmed that the second and third generations of ethnic minorities in the USA and Europe still have strong feelings of belonging to the communities of their origin (e.g., Somerville, 2008; Grasmuck & Hinze, 2016; Kunuroglu et al., 2018).

#### **1.4.2. Social Identity as a Construct**

As has already been mentioned above, belonging to a group of people becomes interwoven with the concept of identity. Being motivated by the need to belong is one reason people become members of various formal and non-formal groups; this inclusion provides them a chance to build a common identity, as Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2011) has noticed.

It is crucial to keep in mind its complexity and multilayered characteristic while defining identity. As Vignoles et al. (2011, p. 2) have formulated,

“identity comprises not only of ‘who you think you are’ (individually or collectively), but also of ‘who you act as being’ in interpersonal and intergroup interactions—and the social recognition or otherwise that these actions receive from other individuals or groups.”

In other words, the definition and evaluation from Others participate in the identity-building process.

Trying to develop a systematic understanding of identity, Vignoles et al. (2011, p. 3-5) have suggested distinguishing between the *personal*, *relational*, and *collective* identities. While the personal identity is based on an individual self-image and is linked with self-esteem, personal goals, and values, relational identity refers to one’s social roles, such as being a parent or an employee, and recognizing by the social environment through interpersonal interactions. Finally, the collective identity arises in group membership as the consequence of one’s identification with groups and their social categories. These groups might differ in their size and organizational structure, e.g., family, working or ethnic groups, and even whole nations. Therefore, identity as a whole consists of co-existing personal evaluations, social roles (which are related to a certain social audience), and membership in various social groups. While being concentrated on collective identities in this dissertation, it needs to be recognized that the personal meanings of different groups’ members might impact collective identities and vice versa.

Although there is a view in academia that identity is an objective phenomenon, (e.g., Waterman, 1984), most of the modern scholars of identity have recognized its constructivist nature (e.g., Wodak, 2009; Castells, 2011a; Vignoles, 2011). While it is a result of a constructive process, identity is not a *tabula rasa*; rather, it is always based on pre-conditions, e.g., ascriptive characteristics or historical context, which are revised and supplemented through every personal biography (cf. Vignoles et al., 2011, pp. 404-405). Hence, identity is neither given nor rigid, and it is typical for it to modify itself through time. However, this liquidity does not imply instability of identity or personal self-concept. In turn, through the dynamics of identity, the human beings’ motivation is promoted. In addition, being constructed does not mean that identity is excluded from the reality: “identities themselves may

be constructed rather than “real,” but the psychological processes and social actions by which people construct, maintain, and defend them are real, as are their consequences” (Vignoles, 2011, p. 405).

Perhaps the main characteristic of identity is that it is built by people themselves and society. Numerous classic studies have demonstrated the importance of social context for the development of personality. For instance, Erikson (1959, pp. 17-45) has highlighted the role of social factors for the development of personality, which begins in early childhood and manifests itself through different phases within an individual’s whole life. To distinguish between the personal *I* and the social *Me*, which both shape one’s personality, has been suggested by Mead (1934). The primary self-awareness (*I*) comes into contact with the social environment through various communication-based practices, and that leads to the appearance of new society-related self-awareness (*Me*). Therefore, not only personal evaluation but also the response of Others helps people to shape their full personas. Goffman (1959) has described the combination of self-image with the public one; because it is typical for people to take control of their impressions on others, the presentation of one’s personality participates in identity construction.

Finally, in the fundamental work “Social construction of reality”, Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggested that identities are central parts of subjective realities and are shaped by social processes defined by social structures. Consequently, the dialectical relation between societies and identity is as follows: “Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men with specific identities” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 194). In addition to the important role of a specific historical era, the everyday context, including interactions within social relations, generates different identity types (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 78, p. 169).

Perhaps the most prominent conceptualization of identity is the social identity theory (SIT). This theory’s core idea is based on the assertion that the self-concept originates through group membership, but only if this membership is recognized and embraced by a person. Following Spears (2011, p. 203-208) as long as a person is aware of his or her belonging to a particular group and has an emotional connection to it, his or her personality, behavior, and values will be prescribed by the shared identity of this group. Furthermore, intergroup relations are needed for the successful building of the Self. Through the group

membership, a clear boundary between one's ingroup and foreign outgroups emerges under the relevant social context.

Accordingly, the role of intergroup relations and social categorization becomes central for social identity. Through classifying people and themselves (social categorization), social identity occurs. As a result, the social identity motivates group members to compare their ingroups with suitable outgroups and, herewith, to keep a positive image of their groups and themselves in relation to Others. Often the discrimination against outgroups guarantees a positive evaluation of an ingroup. In the struggle for the best status on a personal level, other strategies can also be used. In case of negative social evaluation, a member can leave this group and join a group with better evaluation (social mobility); find another outgroup with a comparatively worse image or change the comparison criteria (social creativity); or decide to compete with the relevant outgroup in a non-violent or a violent manner (social competition) (cf. Spears, 2011, p. 207).

In addition, the social comparison can influence not only social but also personal identity. According to self-categorization theory, the development of a total self-concept happens by categorizing different levels of abstraction: interpersonal, intergroup, and superordinate (e.g., all human beings) levels (Turner et al., 1987, pp. 42-55). Likewise, there is not only one universal self-concept but various contexts activating different personalities. In this regard, the aspiration to become a member of a specific group can be motivated not only by the achievement of high self-esteem but also, as recent research has demonstrated, to reduce uncertainty. The uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty is often misused by authoritarian structures and might even eliminate the self-esteem motivation: "although people prefer to identify with high than low-status groups, this preference can disappear under high uncertainty. Where people are self-conceptually uncertain, they are motivated by uncertainty reduction to identify equally with low or high-status groups" (Hogg, 2016, p. 10).

As Spears (2011, pp. 210-214) has summarized, the categorization of themselves and others affirms certain group attributes, which are applied, first, for personal defining, and second, for the perception of both relevant ingroup and outgroup members. Consequently, the comprehension of oneself and other people is reduced to the known group attributes; this is often based upon (self)-stereotyping, rather than on individual characteristics (depersonalization), and this also strengthens the ingroup norms. Usually, people overdraw

their similarities with other ingroup-members while highlighting the differences between them and outgroup-members.

It is also important to notice that the process of (self)-categorization and the salience of identity are dependent on a social context, e.g., relevant differences within and across different categories in a specific social situation. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, all these basic processes can be observed in ethnic and national groups and, hence, are useful for studying national identity and belonging.

The social identity approach has been widely disseminated in academic literature and also have been criticized. For instance, Capozza and Brown (2000) have rightly questioned the division between personal and social identity. For example, Worchel et al. (2000) have demonstrated that low-status members of a dominating group evaluate outgroup members less negatively than the high-status members do. Although the low-status members still identify themselves with their powerful ingroup, they do not aim to raise its current status because this might highlight the status differences inside of the ingroup. The “generic nature of the social identification process” has also been criticized (Capozza & Brown, 2000, p. 184). This process might be more complex and have more variety in it, for instance, in the case of crossed and multiple categorizations, when someone is (self-) categorized as a citizen of a particular country, member of a specific ethnic group, or a resident of a region.

Therefore, identity construction is a complex process in which various factors are involved. Thereon, I will consider the particular case of social identity – the national identity brought in connection with the sense of belonging and national attachment.

#### **1.4.3. National Identity and Why Belonging to the Nation Matters**

While the main concepts on nationalism have already been discussed in Chapter 1.2, I will now provide a detailed consideration into belonging to a nation as an imagined community and the motivation to identify with it. As previously mentioned, the nation is one form of a collective entity to which different people belong and construct their identities upon. In the words of Tyrrell (1996, p. 234): “With nationalism, relations that were once local and inter-personal have become intergroup, and this intergroup context has become fundamental. If there is no ‘them’, there is no ‘us’.” Discussing the theoretical idea of the nation, Tyrrell (1996) has encouraged the consideration of affiliation with the nation not only as an

imminent product of modernization or ethnic ties but as a psychological intergroup phenomenon. Belonging to the nation as an ingroup makes national loyalty possible: as long as the personal self-esteem is related to group membership – and this group is a nation, people can consider other nations as outgroups without knowing anything about their members. Hence, their behavior will aim to benefit their ingroup, while in some cases, to others' detriment. A considerable number of authors has followed the social identity perspective in the study of national belonging (e.g., Hagendoorn, Linssen, & Tumanov, 2001; Leyens et al., 2003; Tsukamoto, Enright, & Karasawa, 2013).

In their study, Leyens et al. (2003) have raised the question of whether ingroup favoritism is always accompanied by outgroup disparagement through the nation's example. They have observed that people endow their ingroups with human nature, while outgroups seem to be less human in their eyes. Thus, secondary emotions such as love, or contempt are primarily associated with ingroup members and only reluctantly with outgroup members. Scholars have considered the process of infra-humanization as an implicit form, which can manifest itself in open hostility to other nations. In this case, being a part of the nation appears as an ingroup projection - "similarity, rather than equality or fraternity, is their motto. Differences and blends within the same community are their enemies" (Leyens et al., 2003, p. 713). While the ingroup is endowed with human essence, the outgroup is often not able to share it. The differences in language, culture, race, etc., emphasize the differences and make members of other nations less human in the eyes of radical nationalists.

Moreover, as Tsukamoto et al. (2013) have demonstrated, the rigid negative reception towards an outgroup is characteristic not only for these people, who strongly associate themselves with their nation but, in some conditions, also for those who have a low level of national identity. The authors have been able to verify how artificially activated essentialism – the naturally given characteristics of an ethnonational group – can stimulate the interethnic bias among people with low nationalism. In summary, the authors state that "even without strong ideological intentions to maintain ingroup superiority, the propensity toward an intuitive biological explanation of intergroup differences can potentially cause inter-ethnic conflict" (Tsukamoto et al., 2013, p. 518).



Besides an open intergroup conflict, intergroup relations relate to the subtle biases supported by context-specific prejudices and stereotypes<sup>6</sup>. Although unconscious “awkward social interactions, embarrassing slips of the tongue, unchecked assumptions” seem harmless at first glance, they might lead to exclusion, while the blatant bias can promote “extreme forms of discrimination” (Fiske, 2002, p. 124, p. 127). However, it is important to mention that interethnic bias occurs only if people consider themselves and others primarily as members of a certain ethnic group or a nation (“salience of social category”) (Turner et al., 1987, pp. 117–119).

Furthermore, negative stereotypes can presage perceived intergroup threats at the individual and group levels (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). For these threats to occur, context plays a defining role. For instance, having an intergroup threat is more typical for ethnic groups with less power than high power groups. Intergroup threats can have various consequences: cognitive (e.g., an easier justification of violence against the outgroup), affective (e.g., fear, anxiety, anger), and behavioral (e.g., aggression). At the same time, some positive outcome is possible. For example, Dovidio et al. (2004) have noticed that threats can promote a more positive perception of sub-groups inside a large group (e.g., Americans). If the large group faces a threat, the prejudices about sub-groups who are considered outgroup members (e.g., African Americans versus European Americans) may not be salient anymore. Instead, all members of the large group can unite around a common threat.

Besides that, the research has confirmed that outgroup favoritism also exists. Dasgupta (2004) has paid attention to social hierarchies’ role in an intergroup context, which can be more significant than group interests. Using system justification theory by Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004, as cited in Dasgupta, 2004, p. 148), the author has explained that disadvantaged groups tend to have ingroup favoritism to protect their positive self-esteem. However, at the same time, members of low-status groups prefer to preserve the current social structure, which is often reflected in the mainstream culture. This can lead to the “implicit liking” of an outgroup, instead of their group (Dasgupta, 2004, p.148). Although

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<sup>6</sup> Following Dovidio et al. (2010, p. 7), I define prejudices as “an individual-level attitude (whether subjectively positive or negative) toward groups and their members that creates or maintains hierarchical status relations between groups.” For the stereotypes, I use the definition by Dovidio et al. (2010, p. 8), which describes stereotypes as “associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members that shape how people think about and respond to the group.”

this might cause specific behavioral patterns, the implicit bias can lead to negative behaviors, e.g., discrimination, only in some cases.

Basing their approach on the idea of collective identity, David and Bar-Tal (2009) have suggested distinguishing between the micro-and the macrolevel of (ethno)national identity. On the micro personal level, the self-categorization takes place, and such issues as the importance of belonging and attachment to the nation, become central. Besides that, identities are flexible and continuously changeable over time, there is no universal rule on how people define themselves in the sense of belonging – various personal and collective experiences can impact this process. For instance, identifying with the nation in the case of ethnic minorities, which often has a hyphenated form, can differ from the majority population. Moreover, emotional and motivational aspects participate in the process of identification with the nation on a micro-level. A certain emotional attachment to a nation, together with pragmatic factors, e.g., the satisfaction of the basic need for belonging or achievement of positive self-esteem through this membership, form the basis of personal, national identity. In turn, at the collective macro level, the awareness of a common identity among society members is characteristic. In this regard, authors have defined generic features, which are integral parts of national identification in its collectivistic sense:

- *A sense of common fate* –as “the feelings of mutual dependence that prevail among members” (David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 362).
- *The perception of the uniqueness of the collective and its distinction from other collectives* –this uniqueness contains the satisfaction of two needs—inclusion and differentiation—simultaneously and has a dynamic character, which depends on the context.
- *Coordinated activity of the collective’s members* - based on the abilities to formulate shared goals and to achieve them.
- *The commonality of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values*- are reflected in the national culture and are adapted by the members of a nation.
- *Concern for the welfare of the collective and mobilization and sacrifice for its sake* - various behavior patterns, incl. Self-sacrifice, motivated by the need to protect common beliefs and properties.

- *Continuity and consecutiveness in the dimension of time* – based on a reflection of the past, a realization of the present, and a definition of the shared future (cf. David & Bar-Tal, 2009, pp. 361-366).

David and Bar-Tal (2009, pp. 367-369) have also mentioned some particular features, which play an essential role in the construction of national identities:

- Territory;
- Culture and language;
- Collective memory;
- Additional shared societal beliefs.

While examining national identity construction, it becomes clear that national identity on both the micro-and the macro-levels requires an emotional involvement from people. Feeling like a member of a nation might result in the emergence of various emotional patterns. I will consider some of the relevant ones in detail below.

#### *National attachment*

Belonging to a nation and positive identification with it are often connected to the appearance of affective attachment to the home country. The national attachment can, however, manifest itself in various ways. One of the most favorable outcomes is *patriotism*, which is usually associated with a positive evaluation of a nation and entails a “binding affection between a person and his/her group and the land” and “the desire to belong” to a certain nation (Bar-Tal, 1993, p. 48). Thus, for the emergence of patriotic feelings, a sense of belonging and emotional connection with the nation’s members are required. In some cases, these feelings can receive a behavioral expression (active patriotism), e.g., sacrificing one’s life in the name of the homeland, while in other cases, patriotic beliefs remain at the cognitive level (passive patriotism) (cf. Bar-Tal, 1993, p. 49).

Despite its widespread adoption, patriotism is a complex and somewhat ambiguous phenomenon. Trying to analyze it deeply, Staub (1997) has distinguished between *blind* and *constructive* patriotism as a possible expression of national attachment. For him, blind patriotism “can be led by their attachment and desire to belong, positively value and uncritically support any action of their group”, while constructive patriotism is characterized by “balancing attachment to and consideration for the wellbeing of one’s own group with an

inclusive orientation to human beings, with respect for the rights and welfare of all people” (Staub, 1997, p. 214).

Basing their study on the concept of blind and constructive patriotism, Schatz, Staub, and Lavine (1999) have empirically tested the idea that these types of patriotism have entirely different natures. Although both blind and constructive patriotism can be manifestations of the same national attachment, they are built upon different categories: blind patriotism upon “unconditional positive evaluation and unquestioning allegiance” and constructive patriotism upon “critical loyalty and a desire for positive change” (Schatz et al., 1999, p. 162). Moreover, blind patriotism was associated with less involvement in political events, exclusionist ideas, and concern for national values and wellbeing, other countries may threaten that. In their turn, political engagement and interest in political and civic activism have been linked with constructive patriotism. In addition, Finell and Zogmaister (2015) have discovered that people who lean toward blind patriotism will instead use polarized symbols – symbols, which accentuate the differences and threats posed by Others, in describing their nation. Constructive patriotism has related to non-polarized symbols, and due to that, the nation can be described without the idea of threat or confrontation while retaining its uniqueness.

In comparison to constructive patriotism associated with positive ingroup evaluation, blind patriotism<sup>7</sup> combines ingroup favoritism and intergroup differentiation. Combining these two leads to the intergroup disbalance – an outgroup is derogated, while the superiority of an ingroup is maintained. As a result, blind patriotism or, in other words, (radical) nationalism can be a basis for ethnocentrism, social exclusion, racism, and other group-specific discrimination forms (Huddy, 2016). In its turn, experienced discrimination can strengthen ethnic identity among outgroup members (Hansen & Hesli, 2009).

In general, symbolism is an essential basis for the emergence of patriotism. National symbols, such as a national flag or anthem, can also induce patriotic feelings, often accompanied by a sense of national pride (Kneidinger, 2013, pp. 83–84). National pride as an affective reaction appears in the context of national achievements, e.g., in victory in a war or the Olympic Games. In this regard, international sports events can nowadays be an

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<sup>7</sup> Along with the term *blind patriotism*, the term *nationalism* or *radical nationalism* is often used for describing destructive forms of national attachment in academic literature.

important source of national pride. The analysis by Meier and Mutz (2018) has shown that people in non-democratic regimes have shown the same level of pride regarding general national achievements in sports as in democratic ones. However, in non-democratic regimes people demonstrated a significantly greater national pride feelings in case of victories in an international context.

Besides that, other sources of national pride, such as the internal care of citizens, country's current and past achievements, external power towards other nations, can also impact the feeling of national pride, as Meulders, de Boeck, and Realo (2009) have suggested. Comparing different countries, they have observed that pride in the social security system and current achievements, e.g., achievements in politics, economy, science, etc., are typical for West-European countries. In the ex-Warsaw-Pact states, including Russia, people were prouder of past achievements, and "possibly due to the recent decline in military forces after the 'cold war'" had lower levels of pride in political and economic influence (Meulders et al., 2009, p. 18). Nonetheless, following the current world's events (e.g., Ukraine conflict, Syrian war, and again the tense relationship between the West and the East), there are reasons to assume that these indicators in Russia's case might have changed. One particular view of young Kazakhstani Russians on Russia's external power will be reviewed in the empirical part of this dissertation.

At the same time, national membership can stimulate negative feelings, such as national shame or national guilt (Kneidinger, 2013, pp. 83–84). One of the possible contexts for the emergence of these feelings can be, for example, negative behavior by compatriots. As Lickel et al. (2005) have noted, one's collective guilt is reliant upon the intensity of personal interrelations and the will to control comembers' negative actions. In this context, the group image is less important. In turn, group-related shame is linked to the common social identity and can have a negative impact on one's self-esteem.

Summarizing the most important studies about collective negative feelings, Páez et al. (2006) have considered shame and guilt regarding adverse past events. Interestingly, even if people did not personally take part in negative historical events, e.g., Germans who were born after the Second World War, they are still able to feel guilt and shame over the Holocaust and apply different strategies to rework these collective experiences. However, as Kasamara, Sorokina, and Maximenkova (2018) have demonstrated on the example of Russian students, national shame about past events appears rather seldom in the post-Soviet

context. Also, Malešević (2011, p. 279) has noted, that the feeling of national pride or shame is not equal either to the national attachment or to identification with the nation: “because pride and shame are variable, changeable and contextual emotions that convey temporary expressions of feelings, they are not reliable indicators of the long-term processes that involve the construction and reproduction of nationness.”

#### *National vs. ethnic attachment*

Attachment to the whole nation and attachment to a particular ethnic group should be considered while talking about multiethnic societies. Sidanius et al. (1997) have asserted a difference in the relationship between ethnic and national attachment. With the example of Afro- and Euro-Americans, they could prove that the first group evidenced less patriotism but more ethnic attachment than the second one. However, this was not the case among Latino-Americans, which leads one to assume that discrepancies depend upon the specific ethnic group. They have also found out that deeply orthodox Jews were less attached to Israel than non-religious ones.

In this regard, Chryssochoou and Lyons (2011) have highlighted that contextual factors are central for investigating the relationship between national and ethnic identities. A research framework can also be crucial for that. They have suggested that adequate results can be achieved by observing “different ways people represent the relationship between identities for themselves, the ideological beliefs they have, and psychological distance from the superordinate group” (Chryssochoou & Lyons, 2011, p. 79). According to authors, in subjective representations, the following outputs are possible: 1) hyphenated identities, 2) assimilation or separation, 3) cultural ambidextrousness, and 4) integrated biculturalism. Moreover, Ideological beliefs include positive answers to questions, why minority members should have an attachment to the nation and whether they can develop themselves as nation members without canceling their ethnic Self-concept or not. Finally, psychological distance is defined as a “recognition of others as part of the self” (Chryssochoou & Lyons, 2011, p. 81). This inclusion of nation members in the Self is an essential factor for the attachment between the group and the individual levels of one’s personality, according to authors. Moreover, as they have demonstrated, identification with the nation-state among ethnic

minorities can promote their political participation, as long as they have confidence in the state institutions.

Investigating national identity in the post-Soviet context, Hansen and Hesli (2009) have suggested to study national identity through the lens of attachment to ethnic in- and outgroups and distinguish not only between civic and ethnic but also add hybrid and atomized national identities to this classification. While civic national identity is characterized by weak attachment to one's ethnic group and a high level of tolerance towards ethnic minorities, ethnic national identity bases itself on the superiority of one's ethnic group, its culture and traditions, supported by ethnic outgroup intolerance. In the case of hybrid national identity, the role of the ethnic ingroup is still central, although the heterogeneity of society, in particular minority rights, are recognized. As authors have underlined, atomized identity is typical, especially for post-communist societies, where people are not able to influence political decisions. Often it results in a negative relation towards both ethnic ingroup and outgroup minorities.

Ehala (2015) has also analyzed different types of collective identities in the post-Soviet region. The author has paid attention to the difference between ethnic and ethnic national identity, which are often confused in studying national identification. While ethnic identity is based on blood ties, language, and shared history, ethnic national identity includes the concept of sovereignty. In the words of Ehala (2015, p. 179) "ethnic national identity is essentially an ethnic identity which, in addition to ethnic core values, has the core value of sovereignty." Moreover, sovereignty must not be considered the only value of this identity, but it finds peoples' support. In their turn, national civic identity has sovereignty and state territory as their main components without any ethnic characteristics.

Besides ethnic, ethnic, national, and civic national identities, Ehala (2015) has also highlighted imperial identities and linguistic identities typical for the post-Soviet space. According to the author, imperial identity is "one version of national identities", but its main value is superiority instead of sovereignty (Ehala, 2015, p. 181). Language serves as a central sign of membership recognition and as a tool of acculturation (see also Chapter 2.2) that has often resulted in the monolingualism of Russian-Speakers in the former Soviet republics. Besides the idea of the homeland, state borders, integrity, and extension also belong to the core elements of imperial identities. Simultaneously, imperial settings can lead to the

emergence of linguistic identities, as, e.g., in the case of deported peoples, who lost their native language through Soviet forced assimilation. Although titular nations in Central Asia have retained their ethnic traditions, they have developed a positive emotional connection to the Russian language, which had a higher status than local languages in the Soviet Union. However, identifying with the Russian language does not necessarily mean wholly support for imperial politics and values (cf. Ehala, 2015, pp. 182-184).

Furthermore, as post-Soviet examples have shown, all these collective identities can blur. In terms of sign identity theory, such identities, which have low density and small distance<sup>8</sup>, will become blurred. For example, imperial identities, being dense, are resistant towards blurring. In turn, linguistic identities are not far from ethnic identities, and that contributes to their blurring. One reason for this is that the social signs of identities are permanently changing, similar to the meaning of words evolving in the colonial language (cf. Ehala, 2015, pp. 186-189).

All of that has once again demonstrated that studying the interface between ethnic and national attachment is coupled with very context-specific circumstances and characteristics of each nation and each ethnic group's internal make-up. This was one reason why I have decided to consider a specific category of young people living in big cities of Kazakhstan who identify themselves as (ethnic) Russians.

### *Nation-related belonging and adolescence*

Although the questions of *who I am* and *where I belong* follow people throughout their lives, the most crucial time in laying the foundation for group identity building is during adolescence<sup>9</sup> (Erentaite et al., 2018; Erikson, 1959; French, et al., 2006; Tarrant et al., 2001). As Tarrant et al. (2001) have presented, the common practice among adolescents is to use social comparison based on various positive and negative items to maintain a positive social identity. Discrimination has often served as a reaction to the potential threat to their positive

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<sup>8</sup> Density denotes the general complexity of signals and meanings, which includes collective identity. Distance stands for the "extent to which any two identities share core values and how close these identities are in terms of signals" (Ehala, 2015, p. 187).

<sup>9</sup> I agree with Sawyer et. al. (2018) that in current social reality the age of adolescence does not include only the phase between 10-19 years of age but should even be prolonged to 10-24.



identity from an outgroup, whereas the tendency of ingroup favoritism was evident (Tarrant et al., 2001, p. 603).

Often a certain nation becomes an ingroup for adolescents. Thoughts about nation-related belonging are often connected to the symbolic events, which happen in adolescence, such as obtaining the first identity document or doing their military duty. Considering a concrete case of ethnic identity among adolescents, French et al. (2006) and Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin (2006) have emphasized the role of social context, which surrounds young people. French (2006) has studied a relation between the school environment and ethnic status. Comparing ethnic homogeneous and heterogeneous school contexts, they have considered the motivation for exploration an ethnic belonging and more relevant group-esteem among Latino, African, and European Americans in the schools with a high level of ethnic diversity. Especially in the case of negative intergroup contacts, one's will to explore their group membership was growing. Also, as the research has shown, Afro-American students from ethnic homogeneous schools display a low group-esteem in comparison to other groups. The general negative image of this ethnic group in society stimulated them to distance themselves from their ingroup, demonstrating an example of social mobility.

Furthermore, as Umaña-Taylor et al. (2006) have proven, the family's role can be critical for the ethnic identity formation of young ethnic minorities. Studying general ethnic identity mostly amongst various representatives of young Asian Americans, they have also remarked that the impact of specific features, e.g., place of parents' births or schools' ethnic composition, can be significant for the ethnic identity construction; however, it might differ between varying cultural traditions. The study by Eisikovits (2014), for example, has shown that second-generation young females of Russian descent in Israel refer more to the ethnic culture of their parents than of the host society.

According to Sabatier (2008, p. 201), "attachment to the parental culture was a strong predictor of both ethnic affirmation and exploration." His research has shown that second-generational immigrants' national identity can likewise be strengthened in the family context. The parents' adolescence can be involved in national identification and have positive assertion toward their national ingroup. Besides, he has discovered that personal contacts of young ethnic minorities with their ethnic majority peers can lead to a positive connection with the whole nation, yet a negative one with one's ethnic group. At the same time, experiencing discrimination as an adolescent can, on the one hand, motivate an interest

to explore ethnic belonging and, on the other hand, provoke the distancing from the nation as a whole<sup>10</sup> (Sabatier, 2008, pp.199-201).

Moreover, the national identity formation among ethnic minority youth has some specific peculiarities. First of all, in comparison to their ethnic majority peers, the identity management of ethnic minority adolescents is usually more intense. Apart from exploring their basic belonging and general normative framework, ethnic minority young people perform “acculturative tasks” (Erentaite et al., 2018, p. 325). Second of all, national identification and minority status do not necessarily have negative outcomes for young people. Although there is academic evidence that “non-integrated ethnic and national identities” can have negative consequences for educational and career opportunities of young ethnic minorities, other factors, such as their general relation to their ethnic minority group in the society or level of integration into the nation as a whole, can change the situation (cf. Erentaite et al., 2018, p. 328). Additionally, strong ethnic or national identity among minorities can have a protective function for their wellbeing when they have experienced discrimination. Finally, young people of ethnic minorities tend to create rather hyphenated or “third way” identity forms (Erentaite et al., 2018, p. 330). Ethnic minority adolescents can simultaneously have a sense of belonging to various groups, including their ethnic group, nation-states, where they live, and supra-national or transnational communities. The creation of new forms of identity beyond the classic categories is also an everyday praxis in this regard. As a result, these flexible identities of young ethnic minorities allow them to switch between identities and use the most advantageous memberships depending on the context (cf. Erentaite et al., 2018, pp. 330-335).

Taking a look at the post-Soviet context, Tartakovsky (2011) has shown that relationships with one’s peers are connected to the national identity of Russian and Ukrainian high-school adolescents. Social support, which is provided through positive relationships with peers, is a relevant factor for more vital identification with the nation. As Tartakovsky (2011, p. 241) has formulated, “in a sense, for high-school adolescents, their friends are their country.” Moreover, ethnic majority adolescents have demonstrated a more positive evaluation of their country and had a stronger sense of belonging to it than ethnic minority

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<sup>10</sup> As I will demonstrate in the next chapters, media and Internet usage can also play an important role in this process.

ones. Tartakovsky (2011) has linked this result to the consequences of experienced discrimination. The study by Omelchenko et al. (2015) has also proved these results, displaying at the same time that young ethnic minorities have stronger identification with supranational, ethnic, and religious communities instead of the nation.

In summary of this chapter, it is necessary to highlight once again that there are many context-related factors, which pertain to the development of nation-related belonging, especially in adolescence and among young ethnic minorities. Besides the socio-psychological dimension, there are also political and legal issues that can impact the sense of belonging and are essential for studying national identity and belonging. The role that political authority and state institutionalization play in the nation-related belonging will be presented in the following chapter.

#### **1.4.4. Nation-State and Politics of Belonging**

As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 1.2.2, nation-building and national identity construction consist of both bottom-up and top-down elements. The political elite plays one of the central roles in establishing a common national consciousness and motivating people to decide in favor of the national community. In many cases, it can lead to the origin of the sense of belonging to a certain nation-state or to its particular cultural or territorial components. As has already been demonstrated, e.g., by Laitin (1998) and Blum (2007), this is especially relevant to societies with authoritarian hierarchies and lack of civic activities.

Castells (2011a, p. 7) has argued that “social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationship.” In this regard, he has suggested the distinction between legitimizing, resistance, and project identities. Legitimizing identity is associated with institutional domination towards members of a society, whereas resistance and project identities are reactions to those devalued by the dominant structure. While resistance identity is based on the values as opposed to the mainstream ones, within the scope of project identity, people create a new type of their identity, attempting, at the same time, to create a new dominant social structure.

To spread the legitimizing identity inside a nation-state, the politics of belonging, which are used by authorities, come into action (e.g., Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This approach is especially claimed in the context of nation-building and aims to satisfy the

specific interests of a political group. Dividing between dominant national “us” and both internal and external “them”, authority emphasizes national membership and ownership of a particular territory. The politics of identity are often related to the process of top-down categorization. While its members usually define a group, categories, being constructed for political interests, exist without any acknowledgment of them, while at the same time becoming a part of common sense and a marker of identity (cf. Jenkins, 2014, pp. 82–84).

According to Mansbach and Rhodes (2007), politics of belonging might have different origins, depending on foreign and domestic political circumstances. They have suggested following ‘markers’ of national identity construction and inclusion, which are also used in combination with the state apparatus: blood, language, culture, confession, and citizenship. However, it is often unclear how effective these markers are, since “the extent to which official categorizations shape self-understandings, the extent to which the population-categories constituted by states or political entrepreneurs approximate real ‘groups’ - these are open questions that can only be addressed empirically” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 27).

Verdugo and Milne (2016) have also emphasized the role of political power in national identity construction on both the collective and individual levels. “Politics influence the social demography, composition, and disruption of achieved and ascribed statuses, such as ethnicity, race, social class, or religious groups” (Verdugo & Milne, 2016, p. 7). Social demography, such as changes in the population size and structure, can lead to a new constellation regarding the dominant culture, and the state languages can matter in this respect. Similarly, because of a negative economic situation, the national identity can become weaker. Financial difficulties are usually accompanied by the questioning of membership necessity in the nation (Verdugo & Milne, 2016, pp. 10-12).

Although one might have thought that strong ethnicity-related identification is associated rather with authoritarian than democratic values, according to Hansen and Hesli (2009), it is not the case. When studying Ukrainians’ national identity, they observed that political involvement can be coupled with positive attachment to the nation in its ethnic sense, as long as ethnic minorities’ rights are recognized. In particular, the spreading of hybrid identities might positively impact the general development of democracy in the region. Nonetheless, as the authors have emphasized, atomized identity, which manifests itself

in the lack of trust and alienation between citizens and the nation-state, is still a significant problem in the post-Soviet space (cf. Hansen & Hesli, 2009, pp. 20-22).

The politics of identity have an especially vast impact on ethnic minorities that are at risk of becoming ‘internal others’ due to specific state politics. Government policy uses a legal framework for defining the social positions of minorities and their rights. Some state politics, such as multiculturalism, promote successful social inclusion and even support minorities exercising their tradition and preserving their languages. In other cases, e.g., in the melting pot strategy, social inclusion can be established through the low-rooted limitation of ethnic differences. In turn, the group-dominance perspective allows one power group to have supremacy over minorities and obtain all privileges regarding material and symbolic resources. Thereby, ethnic minorities are practically restricted in their civil rights and, hence, are excluded from society (cf. Sidanius et al., 1997, pp. 129–131).

In order to intensify group-dominance beyond the state borders, diaspora politics - as a set of politics, which aims the activation of connection with a ‘homeland’ might also be employed by the state authority (Adamson, 2016, p. 291). Territoriality and state borders are losing their primary significance, allowing politics of belonging to spread beyond the nation-state and become not only national but also a transnational issue. As Adamson (2016, p. 291-292) has argued: “Diasporic networks that connect populations across different nation-states can be used to facilitate the cross-border transfer of resources, skills, ideas, and influence. Being positioned in such advantageous ways gives them political power.” Diaspora politics based on the example of Russia will be described in Chapter 2.4.3.

Today, diasporas are involved in their historical home country’s politics, in the politics of the country of their residence, and international actors. Diaspora is often considered as a group, which can represent and support certain political interests abroad. It is important to mention, though, that diaspora members do not necessarily adapt to this kind of diasporic identity and may not be willing to serve the homeland’s interests, associating themselves with the host land (cf. Adamson, 2016, pp. 296-297).

Regarding this point, citizenship as a formal status of (political) belonging to a nation-state becomes crucial. In addition, to confer a recognized membership, citizenship provides rights and responsibilities for a nation-state. There are various options of how to become a member of a nation-state – in some countries, being born inside a state’s border provides the right to

citizenship (*jus soli*), whereas, in other territories, it plays a less important role, while citizenship of parents becomes essential (*jus sanguinis*). It is also possible to change one's original citizenship to a different, probably more attractive one, as long as one accepts the norms and traditions existing in this nation-state. At any rate, the acquisition of citizenship is also a symbolic procedure, which aside from the formal membership, affords an acknowledgment by the state (cf. Beaman, 2016, pp. 850–852).

In other words, the formal legal equality among citizens does not guarantee the factual one. Although citizenship offers connectedness – “participation in societal organizations or social networks”, it is also not necessarily linked with emotional attachment and, as a result, with the sense of belonging (Crisp, 2010, p. 124). Even in France, where the *jus soli* principle is practiced, colonial history is reflected in the modern social structure; for example, Maghrébin immigrants and their children, who hold French citizenship, are not necessarily considered French (cf. Beaman, 2016, p. 854).

Citizenship is a special issue also in the post-Soviet area. According to Brubaker (1992), through the politicization of ethnicity in the Soviet Union's successor states, citizenship has become, in a way, an artificial symbolic project, which has denied a factual sense of belonging to permanent residents of ethnic minorities. Especially in the Baltic states, this has resulted in the emergence of a status demarcation line between the titular population, who automatically become recognized citizens, and other ‘minorized’ ethnic groups, such as ethnic Russians. However, even when successor states have been able to provide ethnic Russians their new citizenship, as it was, e.g., in Kazakhstan, “terms of membership for national minorities and the organization of public life” started to define the factual social status of ethnic Russians (cf. Brubaker, 1992, p. 289; see also Chapter 2.3.1).

Thus, analyzing the role of politics of belonging, the retrospective context should be taken into account. Like Smith (1998, 2009), Castells (2011a) has highlighted the role of history in constructing nation-related belongingness. In his opinion, it might be counterproductive to reduce the construction of national identity only “to a particular historical period and the exclusive workings of the modern nation-state” (Castells, 2011a, p. 34). In this regard, he has referenced Rubert de Ventos' (1994, as cited in Castells, 2011a, p. 34) series of factors for the emergence of national identity, which is closely related to different historical periods: *primary factors*: e.g., ethnicity, territory, language, religion; *generative factors*:

information and communication technologies, development of industrial infrastructure and political organization; *induced factors*: expansion of bureaucratic procedures, incl. establishment of the national education system; and *reactive factors*: “that is the defense of identities oppressed and interests subdued by a dominant social group or institutional apparatus, triggering the search for alternative identities in the collective memory of people” (Castells, 2011a, p. 34).

In general, as Ahonen (2001) has investigated, collective memory can become a powerful tool for politics of belonging. With the exception of alternative channels, the school history curriculum is used by governments to interpret historical events in their interest and disseminate this knowledge among students. A new interpretation of history is an aspect of nation-building, which is widespread in transition periods, e.g., among countries newly achieved independence from the colonial power, or the disintegration of political unions. Although rewriting of past events aims at national unity, social exclusion can also take a place. In the words of Ahonen (2001, p. 190), “as history is used for identity building, any grand narrative diffused through a school curriculum tends to reinforce a uniform identity. Those with no place or role in the grand narrative will be excluded from the historical community.”

Considering current world affairs, the position of the nation-state in the world arena also appears to be substantial for the construction of national cohesion and a common collective identity. Notably, the process of nation branding as “country’s whole image on the international stage, covering political, economic and cultural dimensions” attracts academic attention (Fan, 2010, p. 98). Trying to systematize the terminological variety, Fan (2010) distinguished between several interpretational levels, where national brand is presented: 1) as graphic symbol or slogan; 2) as an “umbrella” brand for various local brands, e.g., in case of tourism; 3) as the general reputation of a country; 4) as the competitiveness of a nation; 5) as an instrument of soft power; 6) as a link to national identity.

Aronczyk (2008, p. 42) has noticed that „nation branding allows national governments to manage better and control the image they project to the world, and to attract the “right” kinds of investment, tourism, trade, and talent [...]” Hence, the main purpose of nation branding is to find a specific position on the global competitive level and create a positive image, which is supposed to support the economic and socio-cultural interests of a

nation-state. To achieve these political goals, diverse formal and non-formal media channels are usually employed by the government. As I will demonstrate later, (social) media can also be employed to implement a national brand.

#### **1.4.5. Transnational Forms of Belonging in a Global World**

As I have already shown, globalization did not eliminate nationalism or national identity; however, it can modify them. Considering 63 countries, Ariely (2012, p. 464) has made a conclusion that “countries level of globalization” has a certain impact on perceived national identity. On the one hand, globalization provides cross-border unification of informational, cultural, and people flows. As a result, everyone becomes involved in global events, and for some people, it might be a reason to support cosmopolitanism, having a sense of belonging to the world as a whole. On the other hand, the continual intercourse with other cultures through globalization can strengthen the nation-related sense of belonging. Which option takes over in every concrete case depends on various factors. People with cross-border experiences or social connections are more likely to adopt cosmopolitan attitudes; however, other factors like, e.g., age, socio-political and economic context might change this tendency. The results have also shown that a high level of globalization can lead to less patriotism and willingness to fight for the country. Also, the ethnic component of national identity becomes weak – due to globalization, ethnicity is losing its position as a central condition for being a part of a national community. However, this tendency has not manifested itself in the case of nation-related identification and nationalism, i.e., identification with the nation and “view of their country as better than other countries” (nationalism) staying on the same level even in the global context (Ariely, 2012, p. 476).

Simultaneously, globalization can promote the spread of cosmopolitan identities. Interconnectivity and international mobility provide an optimal condition for people to become ‘citizens of the world’ (Delanty, 2006; Pichler, 2011; Watson, 2018). In a cross-national comparative study, Pichler (2011) has proven that cosmopolitan identities manifest more strongly in less-globalized regions than in the First World. The author has suggested an explanation for that: “global identities provide a more meaningful expression of self and belonging in an internally and externally poorly functioning state upon which the concepts of nationality were quite recently superimposed” (Pichler, 2011, p. 38). In turn, social



globalization, such as tourism, foreign residence, information flow, the number of McDonald's restaurants or Ikea stores, negatively correlated with belonging to the global community (cf. Pichler, 2011, p. 39).

The results by Schueth and O'Loughlin (2008) have also supported the idea that people from the Post-Soviet space tend to identify themselves with the world as a whole more often than in other regions. The authors have suggested that cosmopolitanism might be an expression of the unwillingness to identify with a national group "due to failures of governance and drawn to identification with a world in pursuit of greater liberty or opportunity" (Schueth & O'Loughlin, 2008, p. 939).

Cosmopolitan identities, and talking more widely transnational identities, are becoming especially considerable in ethnic minorities and diaspora communities. Reviewing the current literature about second-generation migrants, Reynolds and Zontini (2016, p. 381-383) have noticed that transnational identities are usually connected with the first-generation migrants, while young people from the second-generation have stronger connections to their parents' homeland. The authors have also concluded that the aspiration to transnationalism is commonly linked to the difficulties in becoming a part of a host society. However, the situation is more complicated. They have advocated for transnational identities to be considered as heterogeneous and context-depending phenomena. In this regard, studying transnational identities among young ethnic minorities of the second generation is needed (cf. Reynolds & Zontini, 2016, p. 384).

An example of such cross-border identity construction has been provided by Darieva (2011). She has based her research on the idea of *diasporic cosmopolitanism*, which she defines as "a kind of simultaneity of ethnic and cultural parochial closure, as well as openness to the world and global issues, that goes beyond identification with, and social relations based on, a national project and ethnic neighborhood" (Darieva, 2011, p. 491). Analyzing second- and third-generation Armenians in the USA, she has observed that ethnic and global factors coexist in the context of symbolic homecoming. The concept of homecoming is widespread in the diaspora and is linked with the nostalgia to the (imagined) motherland, supported by experienced discrimination or exclusion from the host society. Through their experience in developmental and environmental projects related to Armenia, on the one hand, they spread the idea of human rights and democratic values; but on the other hand,

young Armenian Americans are strengthening their symbolic ties to the historical motherland. Similar results were described by Eisikovits (2014), who has investigated second-generation female ethnic Russians in Israel. Her respondents have demonstrated a close connection with Russian culture and a lack of participation in Israeli society.

Observing the modern world, it becomes evident that current social settings contribute to ongoing identity management and, as a result, to the emerging of new hybrid or hyphenated forms of belonging. One of these examples of such identities can be the identification with more than one country, known as *multinational identities*<sup>11</sup>. They can emerge even without physical cross-border mobility; it is already enough to be socially and economically involved in cross-border processes. In this regard, Watson (2018, p. 3) has cited Levitt's (2001) research, which has proven the impact of social, economic, and technological connectedness on adopting new cultural norms. Thus, having a connection to a particular nation might occur even without visiting it. Watson (2018) has also emphasized that dual citizenship, which is often used as an indicator for transnational/multinational identity, does not necessarily confirm the genuine sense of belonging to more than one nation and identification with them.

Another example, which should be mentioned in the context of transnational forms of belongings, are *supranational identities*. For instance, Agirdag, Phalet, and Van Houtte (2016) have paid attention to the problem of second-generation migrants in Europe, which despite their local citizenship, are still not considered as "real" natives. Comparing native Belgian with Turkish immigrant pupils, the authors have proven that non-native peoples have expressed more attachment to Europe than to the host country. However, as the results have confirmed, European identity has potentially become a common identity for both groups in ethnically mixed settings.

The supranational identity played an important role also in the Soviet Union (see Chapter 2.2). Considering the post-Soviet space, one finds supranational institutions, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), potentially creating a basis for supranational identities. Some authors (e.g., Laruelle, 2014; Roberts & Moshes, 2016), have hypothesized that there are only limited chances for

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<sup>11</sup> In comparison to Watson (2018) I use the term *transnationalism* as a general umbrella term, which includes various global belonging forms, such as cosmopolitan, supranational or multinational.

the Eurasian concept to forge a common identity or a sense of belonging in the region. However, whether the Eurasian or post-Soviet identity finds an emotional echo in the hearts of young ethnic minorities or not still remains unclear.

In his exploration of transnational collective identities, Pries (2013, p. 22) has also concluded that globalization supports an expansion of “as-well-as” rather than “either-or” identities. He has paid attention to the geospatial aspect of collective identities in the global era and has defined several ideal types of collective identities depending on their spatial connections. For example, national identities can be associated with an integral/inherent geographic territory, while transnational ones exist across geographic territories. This territorial distance and inability to be spatially close to other members of transnational groups can be a substantial challenge for transnational identity construction. In addition, although the transnational identity is meant to be universal and beyond any geographical centralization, it is connected to modern Western values, such as the idea of human rights. In the end, Pries (2012, p. 37) has claimed that “all geographic and social spaces converge towards a co-presence of divergent collective identities, and these will increasingly refer to an imagined but multi-faceted and contested global identity.”

When discussing territoriality and non-territoriality of transnational identities, the importance of urban spaces attracts scholars’ attention. For example, Sevincer, Varnum, and Kitayama (2017, p. 1054) have focused their research on modern cosmopolitan cities – “urban areas that provide manifold economic opportunities and whose cultures emphasize diversity, creativity, and egalitarianism.” Analyzing American cities, the authors have concluded that cosmopolitan cities, e.g., New York or San Francisco are more attractive for people who are more independent, open to new experiences, and support liberal political values. As a result, modern cities are becoming spatially anchored spaces of transnationalism and diversity, which does not necessarily fit the general national trend (Sevincer et al., 2017, pp. 1066-1069). A similar tendency can be observed in the post-Soviet space. Modern big cities in the region have become “global urban areas” (Anokhin et al., 2017, p. 251). Considering the current capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan<sup>12</sup>, it seems that this city combines local and global trends and considerably differs from rural regions (cf. Laszczkowski, 2016, p. 12).

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<sup>12</sup> The capital of Kazakhstan was officially renamed from Astana to Nur-Sultan in 2019.

The interconnectivity of the modern world and transnational activities of people are possible, in particular due to the spread of ICTs (information and communication technologies). Media messages from all over the world – not only as texts but also in various multi-media formats - are available for everyone nowadays. But does this cross-border informational accessibility have the potential for strengthening local and/or transnational belongings and identities? Which role do political circumstances of a country play in that respect? And why is it important to take into account that social media usage differs across the world? These are the questions that I will take into consideration in the following chapter.

## **1.5. Nation-Related Belonging in the Technology-Mediated World**

### **1.5.1. Media and the Construction of the Social Reality**

Numerous sociological and media studies have dedicated the role of mass media in the construction of social reality (e.g., Adoni & Mane, 1984; Gamson et al., 1992; Couldry & Hepp, 2018). As a basis for their theoretical approach, many of them have taken the idea from Berger and Luckmann (1991), who have suggested analyzing reality through the lens of knowledge. Without a doubt, the role in the dissemination of knowledge in an everyday routine is defined by the ubiquitous media. According to Adoni and Mane (1984), being a part of *symbolic social reality*, media content represents the objective world, and through that, shapes the different symbolic systems. These symbolic systems, together with objective facts, are embedded in *subjective social reality*, which directly forms our self-image, including personal values, worldview, and behavior. It also “ensures the existence of objective reality and the meaningfulness of its symbolic expressions” (Adoni & Mane, 1984, p. 326). As Adoni and Mane (1984) have described, the purpose of various media and sociological studies has been to investigate the connections between symbolic and objective, or symbolic and subjective social realities. However, the authors have argued in favor of a holistic approach, which analyses all three realities by examining media content, perception of people, and objective circumstances (including legal and political framework) (cf. Adoni & Mane, 1984, p. 337).

While analyzing media images and their multimedia nature, Gamson et al. (1992) have paid special attention to different contextual factors, which might impact media’s role

in the construction of social reality. These factors include economic issues, such as increasing profits and attracting advertisers from media organizations, which inevitably affects media content. Sponsoring media content presents only fragmented information; in the words of Gamson et al. (1992, p. 378), “advertisers shy away from sponsoring material that is disturbing-since such material interferes with the buying mood they wish to maintain.” Moreover, media messages are often ambiguous; they are embracing different meanings at the same time and depend on the local and global socio-political situation.

Gamson et al. (1992) have also described fragmentation, which allows a more general view of media coverage as a whole. The large quantity of available media messages, which new ones are replacing, can result in a “fragmented sense of reality” (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 386). Herewith, the complexity of current power relations and political actions can remain *under the hood*, which can deprive people of evaluating social events comprehensively.

Discussing the role of media in the construction of social reality, the agenda-setting effect should be mentioned. Originally introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), they have demonstrated the agenda-setting effect, using the example of the media consumption of American voters. Topics presented in the news media, or in other words, media agendas were considered by media recipients as more important than other possible subjects. This effect was confirmed and developed in numerous further studies (e.g., Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004; Larcinese, Puglisi, & Snyder, 2011), which has made this approach one of the most prominent in the field of media and communication research.

In their research, Wanta et al. (2004, p. 369) have studied how the mention of foreign nations in news coverage is related to the “affective evaluation of countries” by news recipients, using the theory of second-level agenda-setting<sup>13</sup>. Their survey results have demonstrated a correlation between media coverage and individual interests in the mentioned countries. Moreover, if a country was negatively presented in television news, the probability that this country would be rated more negatively among respondents was increasing. The

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<sup>13</sup> While the first-level agenda setting provides a general view on object salience, the second-level agenda setting takes into consideration media coverage of the attributes of these objects (cf. Wanta et al., 2004, p. 367-368). It allows considering of what is salient for people, depending on their media consumption, and how exactly they evaluate that, what is salient for them. Often the second-level agenda setting is associated with framing research.

same tendency has been identified for neutral information about countries. Nonetheless, behind the general trend, variations have been noticed. Thus, positive media images did not automatically mean a positive evaluation among recipients.

Therefore, it should be made clear that the relationship between media and their recipients goes beyond the simple stimulus-response model. Not only media effects, but also bottom-up contributions of their audiences, matter in the social reality construction. For example, according to the uses and gratification model, media consumers select certain media in accordance with their relevant needs that might considerably impact which information they will finally confront (cf. Lin, 1993, p. 226). As I will show below, in the era of networked digital media, the role of the audience or, more specifically, users, is of particular importance.

Revising the agenda-setting model, McCombs (2005) has also underlined that media agenda setting is linked with social context and specifically with the need for orientation. In the case of high uncertainty, the necessity for orientation grows, increasing the importance of media messages. In addition, “personal involvement and effort to attend to the message” (McCombs, 2005, p. 548), as well as the existing knowledge, can intensify the agenda-setting effect of the media. And these are only a few examples, which demonstrate that various circumstances should be taken into account in the agenda-setting process. In other words, if media coverage includes particular information, it does not necessarily become relevant for media recipients.

Along with media agenda-setting, a news framing effect is often discussed in academic literature. For example, Scheufele (1999) has emphasized the importance of a multi-level character of the framing effect; the media offers certain meanings (media level), which people use for the construction of their social reality (recipient level). In this regard, he has distinguished between media and individual frames. Media frames, which can mostly be found in news formats, organize the meaning of events in a storyline and give them a certain semantic direction. Further, these certain meanings are formed through the selection of some elements of social reality as well as by underlining their salience. As a result, this can impact the interpretation of news by media recipients. In turn, individual frames are people’s convictions and beliefs, which support them by the processing of media messages (cf. Scheufele, 1999, pp. 106-109).

Analyzing *Time* magazine's visual content, Rosas-Moreno, Harp, and Bachmann (2013) have identified four war frames, which represent fundamentally different ideas but are based upon common stereotypes. In particular, the frame 'Us' versus 'Them' contains a clear separation between *them* - the hidden enemies with different religions (Iraqis), and *us*, whose mission has been, supposedly, to fight the enemies (Americans). Hence, media framing can offer a foundation for collective identity construction. As the authors have formulated, "the media routinely contributes to people's notions of national identity and further feed those notions during cross-national conflicts, often with much of a home-side type of reporting" (Rosas-Moreno et al., 2013, p. 14). Today such an effect receives new forms due to the development of visual social media platforms, such as Instagram, which allows the processing of photos for everyone (e.g., Hochman & Manovich, 2013).

### **1.5.2. Social Construction of Reality in the Age of Deep Mediatization**

Although media formats have changed significantly in the last 20 years, the question regarding the interplay between media and social reality construction, in particular, nation-related belonging, has remained relevant. The permanent technological development and its result – the emergence of new media formats – have been raising new questions for scholars. For instance, Couldry and Hepp (2018) have considered the concept of the social construction of reality, taking into account changing digital media technologies. With the advent of the Internet and especially social media platforms, the classic role of media and communication practices has been changed fundamentally. Currently, everyday life is largely entwined with media usage; Couldry and Hepp (2018, p. 114) have called this process of *deep mediatization*. According to them, the media cannot be considered single actors without their social context anymore. The mediatization as a "process of change in how social processes go on through media and are articulated together in ever more complex organizational patterns" (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 81) is a universal phenomenon, which can manifest itself in Western and non-Western societies. However, its social consequences might differ, depending on the cultural context.

Couldry and Hepp (2018) have illustrated media transformation, defining four historical waves: *mechanization*, *electrification*, *digitalization*, and *datafication*. Like Gutenberg's printing machine or the invention of television, information and communication

technologies (ICTs), associated primarily with Internet-supported devices, have hugely expanded communication opportunities and changed social orders. Besides the large-scale technical shift of media production, such as hypertextual interconnectivity, the digital revolution has supported the individual adjustment of mass media usage to concrete personal requirements. Audiences have got a chance to become active co-creators of media content, while media organizations have maintained their power by producing content (cf. Couldry & Hepp, 2018, pp. 116-124). Even though digitalization did not replace printed books, television, or radio – previous media forms were successfully integrated into the new digital reality, using the authors’ language, “deep technical interrelatedness of the increasing variety of different devices” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 117). This deep mediatization makes it necessary to consider not only media usage as everyday practice *per se* but also the relationship between various media.

Finally, datafication, in a broad sense “gathering, sorting, collecting, evaluating and acting upon data” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 254), has become a relevant part of social knowledge. Henceforth, the social reality is interpreted not only by individuals themselves or social institutions but also by automated data, such as search engine machines or social media feeds. While human cognitive abilities to process giant data sets are significantly limited, computer algorithms have succeeded in that and can, therefore, impact the construction of social reality. Automatized data-based systems have become a part of people’s everyday routine and participate in categorization. Therefore, they shape such sorts of meanings, which are limited by existing computer design systems and software. As a result, according to Couldry and Hepp (2018, pp. 168-201), people’s comprehension of their personality, but also space, time, social order, and belongingness are being transformed. In sum, although technological opportunities for spreading information have been changing dramatically in the last 30 years, and the media logic has been fundamentally transforming<sup>14</sup>, the so-called ‘new media’ or ‘networked digital media’<sup>15</sup> continue to take, even if not a central, then an important part in the construction of social reality.

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<sup>14</sup> Here I mean, in particular, the replacement of the media model one-to-many by the model many-to-many and transition from audiences to users or prosumers (e.g., Meikle & Young, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Current literature provides multiple meanings for the term *new media*. I prefer to use the term *networked digital media* (e.g., Meikle & Young, 2011) instead of *new media*. Moreover, I do not use the term *networked digital media* and the term *social media* synonymously. In this dissertation, I apply the term *networked digital media* as an umbrella term for describing the whole variety of Internet-based content products, such as social



One decade ago, most studies were actively distinguishing between “old media” (broadcasting, print media, and TV) and Internet-based “new media”, as Lister et al. (2008, p. 45) have noted. Today the situation looks different. As was mentioned above, despite some apprehension that the new media will replace the traditional media (e.g., Kayany & Yelsma, 2000; Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004), traditional mass media has been rather successfully integrated with the rules of the digital world, than completely disappeared (e.g., Balbi, 2015; Jenkins, 2006). As Balbi (2015, p. 16) has noticed, “old and new media overcome their differences to achieve a kind of synthesis with characteristics that are difficult to distinguish from the original ones.”

In particular, this process is supported by technically-conditioned *media convergence* (Meikle & Young, 2011). Modern multifunctional devices, such as smartphones and tablets, and advanced web applications, such as Google or Facebook, allow to combine simultaneous usage of multiple media formats and promote media multitasking (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). However, according to Jenkins (2006, p. 16, p. 243),

“Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. (...) [It] represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, towards the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward even more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.”

As van Dijck and Poell (2015) have observed, the European public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, as well as the BBC, has often employed *Facebook* and *YouTube* to establish direct contact in order to attract younger audiences, as well as to draw attention to their content. Moreover, information posted on social media has become a source for traditional media content. For example, Paulussen and Harder (2014)

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media/social networks platforms, blogs, podcasts, instant messaging, virtual reality, etc. The term *social media* will be used hereinafter exclusively to refer to websites and mobile applications, which definitely include the following functions: personalized newsfeed, an opportunity to create a personal profile and establish social connections, as well as produce and share multimedia content (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)

have proven that social media has become a common information source for Belgian newspapers and can potentially lead to a diversity of opinions in newspaper content.

Simultaneously, it confirms that agenda-setting operates differently today. Because Cyberspace has offered anyone the option to create multimedia content inside networked digital media, a wide variety of cross-platform information flows on the Internet have arisen. Subsequently, intermedia agenda-setting, especially regarding the spread of news, takes place in this context (cf. Vonbun, Königslöw, & Schoenbach, 2016).

In this regard, the importance of visual content should be mentioned. Looking at Instagram as an example, Borges-Rey (2015) has demonstrated that social media functionality can blur the differences between professional and amateur visual news presentations, which co-exist on social media platforms. As the author explains, because of the paradoxical convergence of the two types of photojournalism, “Instagram may have the potential to influence public subjectivity in the establishment of new aesthetic and discursive conventions that could be stored in future social imaginaries” (Borges-Rey, 2015, p. 588).

In addition, Wohn and Bowe (2014) have considered this media change from a network’s perspective<sup>16</sup>. They use the term “crystallization” as a metaphor for describing the transformation of the classic agenda-setting approach into the networked-based agenda-setting; different media sources, which are concentrated inside of networked digital media, “are like small molecules, and [...] similar molecules cluster together to form reality “crystals” in an individual’s mind“(Wohn & Bowe, 2014, p. 262). In other words, personal online networks, such as Facebook, support the construction of subjective reality, especially on social media platforms with different types of media and personal information. To circumvent numerous information, personal (online) relationships become a “neo-agenda-setter” for the social media users, shaping various social realities among users (Wohn & Bowe, 2014, p. 262). As a result, the different reality “crystals” contribute to the phenomena known as an “echo chamber”<sup>17</sup> and improve fragmentation in the perception of social reality.

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<sup>16</sup> The network agenda setting is also known as third level agenda setting (e.g., McCombs et.al. 2014).

<sup>17</sup> *Echo chamber* (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), also known as *filter bubble* (Pariser, 2011) are terms to describe a tendency within social media to spread and follow only this kind of information, which supports certain beliefs and values. According to this idea, people shape their informational landscape on social media, using sources they agree with and confirm the norms of the groups of their belonging. At the same time, they avoid such information, which conflicts with their opinions. Automatic algorithms can also improve this effect (see Chapter 1.5.6).

However, as Dubois and Blank (2018) have proven, certain media usage habits (e.g., usage of diverse media channels or platforms) or an interest in a special topic (e.g., political interest in the case of news consumption) can significantly limit the echo chamber effect. Also, contextual factors, such as the national media law framework or the level of media freedom, can play a role in spreading the echo chamber effect.

The idea of “crystallization” is also intertwined with the concept of *polymedia*, which claims that selection of modern media is based on social relationships rather than on technical features or other factors (Madianou & Miller, 2013). In the words of the authors, “polymedia is ultimately about a new set of social relations of technology, rather than merely a technological development of increased convergence” (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 171). Thus, polymedia motivates the consideration of networked digital media, not particularly, but as a media environment, making a cross-platform analysis central to this issue. As the authors have also made obvious, the concrete social norms and local cultural patterns are often reflected in the Internet usage patterns. That means, it is hardly possible to consider the Internet and networked digital media, as a homogeneous phenomenon across the world. Therefore, it is reasonable to study certain social groups, such as Kazakhstani Russians individually.

### **1.5.3. Networked Digital Media and Networked Sociability**

When media technologies and information spreading become ubiquities and co-create social reality, networked digital media also become involved in the process of identity building and the search for belongingness. Social media should be particularly important to consider, as it allows the consumption of information and its creation and sharing of information throughout the network. Social media has provided a unique chance for self-exposure, especially for younger users in their search for personalities and collective identities and participation in the process of socialization. For Couldry and Hepp (2018, p. 319), media has become a “part of the resources of the self”, including recourses for self-narration, self-representation, and self-maintenance. There are numerous empirical studies, which have investigated the role of networked digital media, and especially social media platforms, as a tool for self-narration and self-representation (e.g., Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015; Devito, Birnholtz, & Hancock, 2017).

Papacharissi (2011) has analyzed a *Networked Self*, which allows one to consider self-presentation through texts or visual content on social media. The social connectivity of networked digital media comes into the foreground in this case. Social media ‘friends’ can motivate users to reflect upon their personal and collective identities and offers the opportunity to reach various communities, even those that are not easily reachable in the offline space. At the same time, social media can support social segregation from other communities because social interaction has become a part of private space. In the words of the author:

“This private sphere of social interaction or rhetorically established by the individual by utilizing existing and imagined geographies of place. (...) These *privée* spaces are socially enabled via networked technologies, and social network sites afford this form of networked, mobile, and flexible sociality” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 306).

Another important point mentioned by Papacharissi (2011) is that social media usage allows people to rethink their sense of place. Due to the spread of social media, a new type of sociability- *networked* sociability has emerged. It has included mixed cross-border practices, places, and audiences, but instead of ruining people’s sense of place, it can “afford sense of place reflexively” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 317). While the sense of place evolves by being based on a certain sense of identity, social media platforms offer an option “to edit, or redact, one’s own multiple self-performance” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 317) and provide a sense of place.

This potential of social media can be beneficial for young people in the search for their Selves. Michikyan et al., (2015) have studied the contribution of Facebook usage for self-exploration and self-presentation among young people. Although most social media platforms, including Facebook, enable multiple opportunities to create fictional identities, young participants reported using them only in limited amounts, preferring to present their real selves. Moreover, if they were using false presentations on Facebook, their motivation was self-exploration and not deception or impression, as the authors have presumed. In addition, privacy settings, such as private profiles, which can be accessed only by friends, or public ones, which everyone can see, could be elements of online self-presenting. In general, online-self management is similar to the same process outside of Cyberspace, providing additional support for self-development. However, online and offline identities and their presentations are not necessarily congruent and differ among specific social groups. Modern

photo- and video sharing platforms, such as Instagram offer various functionalities for a visual self-management and allow “the presentation of idealized online selves” (Harris & Bardey, 2019, p. 9).

Numerous studies have also empirically confirmed that networked digital media can be an appropriate tool for creating and maintaining (online) communities (e.g., Komito, 2011; Kavoura & Borges, 2016; Klein & Muis, 2019). As Parks (2011, p. 105) has suggested, “MySpace and other SNSs [social networking sites] such as Facebook are not communities in any singular sense, but rather function as social venues in which many different communities may form.” While geographic proximity has no longer been an essential feature for the communities in Cyberspace, such elements as various interaction forms between members, shared rituals, a sense of belonging, and emotional attainment have become crucial. In particular, social media offers different options for establishing connections and communities– from a personal message to public sharing and commenting within online groups. However, as Parks (2011, p. 118) has proven, many users had the only few or did not have any social media ‘friends’ at all, which has raised additional questions about the role of social media for (online) community building.

At the same time Chiu, Cheung, and Lee (2008), have explored why people use Facebook and have found out that the presence of other users is one of the central motivations to join Facebook. Furthermore, when Facebook users identify that their Facebook communities share similar values with them, there is a high possibility that they will use Facebook more intensively. Nevertheless, if Facebook users have joined too many communities, it can be challenging for them to develop a sense of belonging to a specific group.

From the perspective of social identity theory (SIT), social media can also provide a space for creating and revising in- and outgroup relations (Harwood, 1999; Joyce & Harwood, 2020). As Harwood (1999, p. 130) has demonstrated with the example of television, media can be used in obtaining social identities or making them more positive (social identity gratification). His research has provided evidence for a link between media experiences and social identification. In particular, media choice might reinforce a sense of belonging and play an essential role in the self-concept in general. Barker (2009) has proven that social identity gratification is also one of the motivational factors for social media usage among young people. Moreover, as a study by Joyce and Harwood (2020) demonstrated, if

media consumers are motivated to seek group enhancement, they will choose content that includes positive intergroup comparisons, and if not, they will avoid such content. Also, the stereotypical presentation of an outgroup-member does not necessarily make media more attractive to their audiences (cf. Joyce & Harwood, 2020, pp. 82-85).

A similar idea has been described by Slater (2007), who used the term “Reinforcing Spirals” to illustrate the interrelationship between the selection of media content and its possible outcomes. While preferring certain media content is dependent on elements of social identity, this media content will improve “salience of accessibility of that social identity and influence of values and attitudes associated with that identity in assessments and decisions, at least briefly, after such media exposure” (Slater, 2007, p. 291). In other words, media choice can reinforce social identity, which, in turn, can impact media preferences. As a result, a specific agenda can be set and maintained inside a concrete group, and interest-groups can especially exploit such a setting.

This idea can also be observed in the context of current digital media services. Networked digital media offers both – the space of communication (with ingroup-members) and a large variety of content (associated with intergroup relations). In addition, this type of media is creating optimal conditions for “‘mediatized collectives’, [...] whose forms of meaningful belonging are, in part, constructed through the use of media” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 350). In this regard, Chan (2014, p. 230) has suggested three consequences of “socially motivated media use”: 1) categorization as an ingroup-member, 2) positive evaluation of the ingroup, and 3) maintenance of positive self-esteem. His research on Facebook use has also shown the following features: for such people, who have a strong identification with their ingroup, Facebook can serve as a tool for supporting their social identification. Moreover, they tend to have stronger motivation to take part in collective actions associated with this group. Depending on the context, however, social media use can support the perceived outgroup threat, which, in turn, promotes selective avoidance and polarization in society (cf. Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017, pp. 125-127).

The importance of the role played by different usage patterns and contextual factors for identity construction and the sense of belonging was highlighted by Miller et.al. (2016). As he and his team have demonstrated, despite the general assumption for which purposes social media is used, social media platforms and their usage can differ significantly,

according to countries and their local cultures. Moreover, networked digital media's functionality and interfaces are constantly changing, making a consistent investigation of them an almost impossible task. Therefore, they have suggested applying a cross-platform perspective, considering the content *per se* and not a particular platform. Although social media contributes to these dramatic changes, such as "death of distance", they reflect local social practices (cf. Miller et al., 2016, p. 205-208). Even more, as the author has formulated:

"[...] by now, it is evident that there is no such distinction – the online is just as real as the offline. Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate" (Miller et al., 2016, p. 7).

Thus, social media usage is interrelated with offline reality; social media can impact the world and vice versa. Because of that, it is essential to study these phenomena in their relation to each other. Furthermore, social media is not able to change the "authentic humanity" of people (Miller et al., 2016, p. 8). Even if technologies develop and offer new opportunities for sociality, according to (Miller et al., 2016, p. 8), this just manifests basic people's ability to create and use various tools.

Although social media is supposed to be *social* and serve as a tool for self-narration, e.g., through active participation in content production or self-presentation (e.g., by creating profiles and interactions with other users), people are not necessarily using the given patterns. They are able to adapt these digital services to their individual needs. One example is that for most of the registered users, social media is associated with passive content consumption rather than active posting. This phenomenon, known as the "90-9-1 rule", represents the following: 90% of all social media users are so-called "lurkers", i.e., they do not contribute to the production of content, 9% of users contribute from time to time, and only 1% create content regularly, generating 90% of all postings (Nielsen, 2006).

However, these absolute numbers can differ depending on the various characteristics of a particular online community and the established usage patterns of its members. Different settings of online groups and social media platforms make it hardly possible to clearly and unambiguously define the phenomenon of online lurkers. Because of that, Sun, Rau, and Ma (2014, p. 111) have suggested using "different lurker criteria for different types of

communities<sup>18</sup>.” For example, *online community factors*, such as group identity, usability, pro-sharing norm, reciprocity, and reputation, can impact online behavior. If users of a certain online group have an emotional connection to each other and share similar values, there is a high probability that they are participating actively in the online discussions. A similar effect has established community norms, which motivates users to share their knowledge with other members, and the reputation of a community, improving one’s social status. It is also evident that without an intuitive interface or a reduced quantity of community members’ responses, the tendency to be a lurker will increase. Similarly, *individual factors*, such as personal characteristics, self-efficacy, desires, and needs, can determine usage patterns. Finally, *commitment factors* and *quality requirement factors*, which must also be considered in this regard. If an online space does not support its users’ trust, there is a high chance of them becoming lurkers (cf. Sun et al., 2014).

These results have emphasized once more the necessity to consider networked digital media as a multifaceted phenomenon, locating a focus on the usage patterns rather than on the apparent standard functionality of online services. While for some users, modern media technologies are serving as a tool for self-presentation and self-disclosure through active posting, other users (lurkers) can use them only as an information source. In the light of this, the importance of automatized processes in content selection should be mentioned. As noticed above, automatized data has become an equal contributor to the information landscape, especially on social media. For many people, an algorithmic recommendation is more substantive than a recommendation by journalists or experts (cf. Thurman et al., 2019, p. 459).

One of the most discussed cases in academic literature is related to an algorithm behind Facebook’s newsfeed (DeVito, 2017; Tufekci, 2015; Usher-Layser, 2016). An algorithm, which has remained invisible for most users, can, to a large extent, determine what will be shown in one’s Facebook newsfeed. Based on numerous factors, Facebook’s algorithm can predict what is most interesting for a specific user and what can be skipped in their newsfeed (Tufekci, 2015, p. 216). In the end, it provides optimal conditions for an echo chamber and content manipulation. However, as Usher-Layser (2016) has noticed, in

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<sup>18</sup> The authors have based their analysis on the online communities inside networked digital media and online learning courses.



this sense, Facebook does not significantly differ from traditional media because people usually consume information that fits their interest in any case.

In order to understand the ‘black box’ of the Facebook algorithm, DeVito (2017) has analyzed official documents related to the shaping of the Facebook newsfeed (e.g., Facebook’s patent filings or Facebook’s Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filing from its initial public offering) and has identified nine Newsfeed values. Among these are the following features: post clicks, post shares, account relationship, content quality, age of a post, content type - network and post ‘likes’, friend relationship, and status updates have become the most critical factors, according to the investigation. The power of networks, typical for modern media, is, therefore, noticeable even in the context of algorithms. Nonetheless, the changing character of algorithms based on the “personalized machine learning model” should be taken into account when considering the importance of automatized processes for identity construction (cf. DeVito, 2017, pp.764-768).

#### **1.5.4. Nation-Related Belonging in the Context of Deep Mediatization**

After presenting the significance of modern media for the construction of reality and, in particular, social identity, I would like to draw my attention directly to the interaction of nation-related belonging and the mass use of digital content technologies. The Internet was originally conceived as a worldwide network, which, as some authors suggested (e.g., Peritt, 1998; Sassen, 1998), supposed to erase national differences over time; however, instead, it has begun to reinforce them. On the one hand, the Internet provides access to a plethora of information and people from all over the world. On the other hand, Cyberspace has become a part of national policy and local cultural practices. In particular, social media platforms vividly support this global-local tendency (cf. Kneidinger, 2013, p. 317).

For example, Schwartz and Halegoua (2015) have introduced the idea of “the spatial Self” on social media, which allows us to analyze the role of geo-located data for identity construction. Alongside textual and visual content, today’s modern technologies offer to see and share location-based information. Hence, the authors have assumed that this might motivate social media users to reflect upon their local belongingness and generally support the importance of spaces and places for their sense of belonging. The place-related information, which users within social media present, can help reconstruct the meaning of place. As I

will describe below, this connection to the home as a physical place especially matters for ethnic minorities and diaspora members.

In addition, as already previously mentioned, social media has become a source of local and global information, which can set an agenda and frame specific meanings. This particular process Anderson (1983/2006) has connected with the emergence of the nation as an “imagined community” by the example of newspapers (see Chapter 1.1). One’s continuous involvement in information flows through widespread mobile Internet, and mobile devices have made this process even easier. Being one of the people’s regular everyday activity - ca. 144 minutes in 2019 (Statista, 2020) - social media usage, among other things, can supposedly promote the spread of banal nationalism. While Billig (1995) analyzed daily newspapers, Szulc (2017) has discussed how nations are reproducing themselves on the Internet. He has suggested the following examples of banal nationalism online: “1) categorizations of news pieces and hyperlinks by countries, 2) casual uses of country maps and 3) subtle integrations of national symbols or colors into website logos” (Szulc, 2017, p. 58). In addition, Szulc (2017) has paid attention to the language issue relating to Internet content. Although the Internet was, for a long time, connected to the English language, today, it is no longer the case. The rapid dissemination of local languages online and local Top-Level Domains (TLDs) (e.g., .kz for Kazakhstan or .ru for Russia<sup>19</sup>) has supported the nation-related perspective Internet, especially among nations, which are in the process of consolidating their sovereignty. This connection between TLDs and nationalism has been empirically proved by Shklovski and Struthers (2010, p. 126), who have confirmed that Kazakhstan’s Internet segment *Kaznet* has become “a focal point for the creation of the imagined community of the nation in the digital world” for Kazakhstani users. This tendency has been evident, especially among ethnic Kazakhs, while regardless of the ethnic identity of Internet users, the domain extension .kz has been described in nationalistic terms. In their narratives, the Internet had clear national borders that drew an analogy to the geographical location.

Criticizing the technological determinism, Szulc (2017, p. 66) has also argued that, not only digital media or “the elites”, who control them, reproduce banal nationalism, “but also the citizenry themselves remind themselves and each other of this national place” in

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<sup>19</sup> Additionally to the Latin domain .ru, in the year 2009 the Cyrillic domain .рф [rf] was introduced in Russia (Bigg, 2010), which also demonstrates a symbolic importance of TLDs.

the Cyberspace. The content selection by users is central in this regard – as long as people prefer their local sources and online communities over the global ones, it gives a reason to assume an interrelation between a sense of nation-related belonging and the (social) media usage.

When taking a closer look at this possible interrelation, it can be useful to consider the civic and ethnic components of online nationalism separately. After the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, many academic papers have been devoted to social media’s role in civic awareness and collective action. For example, Khondker (2011) has compared the impact of social media on revolutionary movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, etc., to the “print capitalism” of Anderson (1983/2006). Hence, Facebook and Twitter played a crucial role in promoting political events and establishing a sense of belonging to the national community in its civic sense.

Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos (2012) have also supported this view, using the bottom-up perspective. According to them, besides being a space for cyberactivism, the Internet gives a chance for ordinary people to express themselves regarding the social transformations in both online and offline ways, e.g., using trending hashtags on Twitter and organizing protests in offline public spaces. Through gained access to various alternative information sources on social media, Facebook users began to question the official state discourse and, as a result, rethink their national attachment. Not least, due to social media, and especially visual “citizen journalism”, civic activists from the whole Arab world could establish a collaboration network and make their domestic events visible to the public worldwide (cf. Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012, pp. 17-18).

To describe this tendency towards civic activities, Ratto and Boler (2014) have used the term “do-it-yourself (DIY) citizenship”, which is based on a critical reconsideration of conventional social processes and is closely connected to the use of networked digital media. Referring to Hartley (1999) and his idea of “semiotic self-determination<sup>20</sup>”, the authors consider participants of the Arab Spring protests as “DIY citizens”, because these protestors,

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<sup>20</sup> According to Hartley (1999, p. 178, as cited in Ratto & Boler, 2014, p. 11), “‘Citizenship’ is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice, which people can make for themselves. Further, they can change a given identity, or move into or out of a repertoire of identities. And although no one is ‘sovereign’ in the sense that they can command others, there’s an increasing emphasis on self-determination as the foundation of citizenship.”

by means of digital technologies, have called into question the state-provided top-down identities (Ratto & Boler, 2014, p. 179). Due to the dissemination of networked digital media, they got a chance to redefine established social practices, changing the usual concept of citizenship *per se*. For Ratto and Boler (2014), this is why the critical rethinking of the government-defined concept of citizenship. In their opinion, “DIY citizenship potentially invites us to consider how and when individuals and communities participate in shaping, changing, and reconstructing Selves, worlds, and environments in creative ways that challenge the status quo and normative understandings of ‘how things must be’” (Ratto & Boler, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, Mainsah (2017, p. 1), has supported this idea and related social media usage to the “everyday creative act.” Social media has become a space where new symbols are created, and new rhetoric and civic practices are tested. Besides, social media platforms can serve to generate new public memories, which can counter institutionalized ones.

White and McAllister (2014) have demonstrated this creative process of citizenship construction through the example of a post-Soviet regime. Using the instance of the oppositional protests in Russia in 2011, they have underscored the crucial role of the Internet and Facebook in particular, for organizing anti-regime demonstrations and supporting unity among the oppositional youth. The Russian opposition agreed to use the global social media platform Facebook to avoid monitoring by the state officials, although the local one, V Kontakte, was more popular at that moment in Russia. Similarly, Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, & Torchinsky (2021) have demonstrated that besides organized oppositional activism on the Russian Internet (RuNet), “non-contentious” online activism, which is related to everyday issues, such as environmental topics or LGBT rights, take place. Although these issues are not directly connected to politics, they “may become politicized when people start to view them as examples of bad governance” (Lonkila et. al., 2021, p. 149).

However, according to Khondker (2011), the conventional media was no less important for the social mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa region; although Facebook became a communication tool for networking, it also allowed the fast dissemination of news, which were particularly produced by television and newspapers. Finally, without the “presence of revolutionary conditions”, social media *per se* could hardly improve people’s solidarity against the established regime (Khondker, 2011, p. 678).

Fuchs (2017, p. 261) has also criticized the idea that considers social media platforms as a main driving force for social mobilization, arguing for the one-sided character of technological determinism:

“The media – social media, the Internet and all other media – are contradictory because we live in a contradictory society. As a consequence, their effects are contradictory. They can dampen/forestall or amplify/advance protest or have not much effect at all [...] The media are not the only factors that influence the conditions of protest – they stand in contradictory relations with politics and ideology/culture that also influence the conditions of protest.”

This critique by Fuchs (2017) has also found empirical proof. For instance, Chiweshe (2017) has demonstrated a rather anti-mobilizing social media character by the Zimbabwean youth. Besides the young urban population, which is actively involved in the country’s political life, the scholar has found out that most of his respondents had less contact with political information and believed that “Facebook is for fun and not serious things like politics” (Chiweshe, 2017, p. 144). Furthermore, those young people who confirmed their involvement in the political events considered the ‘clicking’ and ‘liking’ of politics-related accounts on Facebook as their personal, civic engagement. The author has assumed that this online behavior can be connected to the fear of being politically persecuted by the state officials, emphasizing, thus, the key role of contextual factors in the link between social media usage and the genesis of civic awareness.

One can also find many examples of ethnic nationalism, which can become visible and discussed in social media, and therefore, more salient. Investigating the ethno-nationalist sentiment in Sri Lanka, Ivarsson (2019) has noticed that Facebook has contributed to establishing an ethno-nationalist campaign, *SinhaLe*, as part of the everyday life of young people. The author has concluded that the spread of ethno-nationalist ideas on Facebook happens not only through the content, which is ‘liked’ and shared by young Sri-Lankans, but also because of the opportunities, which social media platforms provide for the consolidation of like-minded people. The study has also supported the idea that social media can disseminate everyday nationalism (from below), especially in young people (cf. Ivarsson, 2019, pp. 156-157).

Kulyk (2018) has specified the importance of linguistic factors for the social media usage relating to the post-Soviet region. His investigation has shown that writing posts in the Russian language does not necessarily serve as a manifestation of a Russian-speaking identity; even more, many of those who wrote Facebook posts in Russian at the same time highlighted their identification with the Ukrainian language and did not see any connection between certain language use and their social identity. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Crisis has, to some extent, exacerbated the situation. After the beginning of hostilities in the East of the country, some activists, using social media, started to call for the Ukrainian language, which found resonance among some Ukrainians. Using Russian - “the occupier’s language” was criticized by commentators, but simultaneously has activated Ukrainian defenders of the Russian language, who have claimed to be patriots and were “referring to the freedom of language choice in a democratic society” (Kulyk, 2018, p. 78).

Language and religious affiliation supported by social media usage can make inter-group differences more visible and reinforce the nation-related sense of belonging. Considering the role of Facebook in the spread of islamophobia, Oboler (2016) has concluded that social media can contribute to the normalization of Anti-Muslim hate within society. In the textual and visual content, Muslims have been presented as “a security threat or threat for public safety”, a cultural threat, an economic threat, or a threat of violence and genocide (Oboler, 2016, p. 47). In sum, expressed in the form of hate speeches, these threats have been invoked to exclude Muslims from the society, demonizing and dehumanizing them *vis-à-vis* Christian Americans. This example demonstrates once again how social media can support intergroup bias.

Besides the destructive examples, other forms of religious attachment on social media exist. As Suslov (2016a, p. 7) has noticed, networked digital media today performs the following functions: first, it allows religious institutions to spread spiritual information; second, social media has become a place for “self-cultivation and obtaining religious experience” (p. 7), and third, it is likely to improve a sense of their group membership. Considering that the Russian Orthodox Church is a “state-shaping religion,” it directly connects with state politics, the first aspect can be essential from the politics of belonging perspective (Suslov, 2016a, p. 2). The second aspect is equally noteworthy because the “orthodox religion serves as a synonym for the Russian national self-identification” (Suslov, 2016a, p. 2).

### **1.5.5. Social Media as a Space for Ethnic Minorities**

As I have already noted in previous chapters, mediated communication and especially multimedia capabilities of the Internet have provided numerous opportunities for maintaining social connections within their ethnic minority's communities. As a result, these social connections might strengthen group belongingness inside of the communities. In particular, according to Eriksen (2007), the Internet has played an important role for the nations, which are dispersed over different territories in response to political circumstances. In his words, "chatrooms, newsgroups, and blogs mime direct interaction and can, given some time, create a sense of familiarity and intimacy among regular users which bears some resemblance to real-life interaction", and support the establishment of "virtual communities" (Eriksen, 2007, p. 10).

A search for one's ingroup is specifically relevant for those people, who feel excluded for one reason or another; this can be particularly observed among ethnic minorities (e.g., Gonzales, 2017). In this case, social media can be employed to satisfy the need for belonging. For example, Gonzales (2017) has demonstrated that ethnic minorities prefer to establish and maintain their social networks online. Due to a lack of chances in finding access to specific people in the offline world, using web-mediated communication is associated by disadvantaged groups with "an increase in individual and community well-being" (Gonzales, 2017, p. 480).

Dekker, Belabas, and Scholten (2015) have provided a concrete example in this regard. Trying to understand how social media promotes inter-and intra-ethnic contacts, the authors have investigated the social media use of second-generation migrant youth in Rotterdam. The authors have emphasized that the social media capacity to strengthen connections among ethnic group members with a lack of interethnic interactions can result in ethnic polarization and even interethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, social media "can give a voice to ethnic minority groups, thus performing a central integrative function", and improve inter-ethnic contacts outside of Cyberspace (Dekker et al., 2015, p. 455).

Furthermore, social media can support ethnic minorities in their construction of 'home'. In her ethnographic research, Alinejad (2013) has shown that second-generation Iranian Americans have constructed the home's idea according to different categories: parental houses, certain locations in their city of residence, and some places in Iran. Contacts

with parents through Facebook in Iranian Americans have helped young migrants create a domestic space, based on a close social relationship. Local events reflected in and spread through social media have motivated ethnic Iranians to reflect on their sense of place and belonging to a city. At the same time, Iranian pop culture, which exists online, has provided insights into modern Iran's life "through the eyes of their youthful counterparts living there" (Alinejad, 2013, p. 110). Therefore, alongside parental memories and telephone calls with relatives in Iran, this mediated experience can promote an emotional connection to Iran as a supplemental home. Nonetheless, the Internet usage is hardly able to change radically the already existing ideas about belonging to a certain place and is a rather integral part of the multifarious process of locating a home.

Another aspect, which should be mentioned in respect to ethnic minorities and their social media usage, is the opportunity for self-presentation and, as its result, reflection upon their factual and potential belonging. For instance, Mainsah (2011) has paid attention to the self-presentation of young minorities with the example of immigrants to Norway between 16 and 20 years of age. According to the author, social media offers an appropriate environment for identity construction, especially among ethnic minorities, who face a huge range of identification options and must constantly and autonomously manage their identities and decide what to belong to. For example, the ethnic origin was mentioned in self-introductory messages and "serves as a potent symbol of [...] cultural identity" (Mainsah, 2011, p. 186). Visual elements, such as a profile photo and other pictures used in personal profiles, also included content related to the home country. Simultaneously, the Internet is a space for power relationships, which shapes a certain public discourse and supports prescribed identities. The relevance of official assertion in which a distinct separation between majority Norwegian ('We') and ethnic minorities ('They') was reflected in profiles of Norwegian immigrants.

Besides providing self-presentation opportunities, social media has become an important information source for ethnic minorities and migrants. As Siapera (2016) has proven, ethnic minority group members view online news more often than the majority groups. Simultaneously, ethnic minorities prefer to follow these kinds of news, including members of their ethnic group. As a result, they tend to consume diaspora media content within Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. that can promote diasporic identities. For example, "diasporic news practices that feedback to the homeland" (Siapera, 2016, p. 42) can



support the feeling of being involved in the internal policies of the home country. At the same time, the engagement in the political and cultural life of the host country can also take place due to following so-called “bridge bloggers,” who “are familiar with the cultures they are bridging and offer information, explanations, guidance, and news one culture to another” (Siapera, 2016, p. 43). Depending on the context, though, other ingroups, e.g., political or cultural, in a broad sense can become more salient, reducing the significance of an ethnic community and influencing the news consumption.

In addition, Robbins and Aksoy (2003) have demonstrated that having access to satellite television - and that means consuming information produced in the historical motherland- did not only make the Turkish diaspora in Western Europe more connected to their home country, but even more critical towards traditions, and support the rejection of the conservative direction in Turkish politics. Considering that both official media and ordinary people can actively spread their content on social media, this case can apply to the consumption of information on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

In Nedelcu’s (2018) opinion, the Internet might intensify both of the following: a strong connection between diaspora members and their country of origin, but also a re-imagination of the homeland and their roles regarding it. In the words of the author, “[...] discussion forums, social networks, instant communication software, and so on, are the communication tools that contribute to a continuous renewal of the cultural and political landmarks of the diaspora’s imaginary” (Nedelcu, 2018, p. 244). Compared to the time before the Internet, the identification is now based not upon nostalgia but hyphenated identities. The concept of territory has also been changing in this regard. On the one hand, due to Cyberspace, territory lost its significance for diasporic communities. At the same time, the Internet and social media, in particular, have offered a space where ethnic minorities could first unite and position themselves, and second, integrate their multiple identities and senses of belonging with each other. The Internet provides a chance for diaspora members to strengthen pre-existing ties to their historical home country, involve themselves with the homeland/host-land politics, re-construct identities, and spread ethnic culture. All of that transforms diaspora into *digital diaspora*.

Although some studies (e.g., Sobré-Denton, 2016, Verboord, 2017) have suggested that the Internet, and social media, in particular, have improved transnational communities and cosmopolitanism, this tendency is rather weak in the contexts of ethnic minorities and

diasporas. Despite the view that diaspora communities and their online activities can be considered attributes of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism in general, the nation's concept remains dominant for them. As Nedelcu (2018, p. 248) has formulated:

“Although digital diasporas deploy and act transnationally through global deterritorialized mechanisms, diasporas do not claim ‘a global consciousness’ but are strongly guided by a national centrality. Nor do they struggle to defend the global spread of universalistic norms, as cosmopolitans do.”

Sometimes this “national centrality” (Nedelcu 2018, p. 248) takes radical forms. Conversi (2012) has investigated the differences between stateless and state-related diasporas regarding long-distance nationalism and ethnonational mobilization. Considering social media as “the leading tool with which to reinforce diasporic as well as local networks” (Conversi, 2012, p. 1360), he has argued that Internet users can promote destructive forms of nationalism, i.e., support extremist networks and stimulate conflicts between host society and a historical home-country. The author has explained this tendency with the vulnerable position of diaspora members in the host societies and their “fear of marginalization”, which motivates them to construct their social reality in lopsided extremists’ terms (“we vs. them”). However, for Conversi (2012, p. p. 1372), the Internet *per se* is not the source of radical nationalism among diasporas, but such factors as a “failed intergroup communication [...]”, the absence of comprehensive cultural policies and, increasingly, the state promotion of ethnic and patriotic chauvinism.”

Studying the national belonging of Ukrainian diaspora in Europe and the USA, Kozachenko (2018) has collected evidence that social media supports diaspora members in reusing their identities and disseminating their cultural patterns. Especially after the Euro-maidan events, social media has become a space where usual identities were rethought and “re-imagined” due to established Ukrainian communities and newly emerged nation-related online initiatives. Compared to the established diaspora groups, the “new” communities have not primarily associated their national belonging with the Ukrainian language. Instead, they have considered language as a pragmatic tool for communication, rather than an exclusive factor for “those who have come from Ukraine and those who identify themselves with Ukraine”, e.g., Jewish people or Crimean Tatars (Kozachenko, 2018, p. 100). Referring to Herrmann and Brewer (2004), Kozachenko (2018, p. 101) has compared this feature with

the “Matryoshka doll”, composed of one major identity (Ukrainian language) and many smaller identities inside of it (such as Russian language and the local language of the host society). Paradoxically social media helped to strengthen the constructive patriotism based on ethnolinguistic diversity and regional convergence among the Ukrainian diasporas.

These results demonstrate that the re-imagination of the nation in the diaspora context might differ from the mainstream in-country processes. The Ukraine crisis has had not only a separating but also a unifying outcome for certain diaspora communities outside of the home country. Finally, the study has illustrated the role of virtual communities, which, when using Facebook services, could create a space for rethinking traditionalist discourses and use the conflict situation as an opportunity for establishing new outlooks. All of this supports the interest in investigating social media’s role regarding other diasporas and ethnic minorities, such as Kazakhstani Russians.

#### **1.5.6. Internet Control and Top-Down Nationalism Online**

It must be acknowledged that today Internet regulation is gaining momentum and is becoming a new norm worldwide. Among other things, this regulation might have an impact on the conceptualization of the nation in its local and transnational context, and, as a result, its adoption by ordinary people. Particularly in authoritarian countries, this regulation takes on radical forms of control, like, e.g., in China or Russia, and becomes a modern repressive tool (cf. Rød & Weidmann, 2015, p. 347). However, as I have repeatedly noted before, the Internet can hardly be placed in a procrustean bed of universal tendencies. In the words of Morozov (2012, p. 320):

“[...] the Internet is poised to produce different policy outcomes in different environments and that a policymaker’s chief objective is not to produce a thorough philosophical account of the Internet’s impact on society at large but, rather, to make the Internet an ally in achieving specific policy objectives.”

Hence, when people are using the World Wide Web - actively or as lurkers –they automatically become part of the state-controlled Cyberspace and face its features and limitations. In such countries, where the government controls most aspects of social life, the top-down perspective should be taken into account while studying mediated construction of reality

and Internet usage patterns (cf. Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 423; Zhong, Wang, & Huang, 2017).

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the Internet can serve as a tool for social mobilization and improve civic awareness, i.e., individual perception of the national community as a political unit. However, in authoritarian regimes this Internet's potential is often considered a threat to the regime's stability. Simultaneously, being a powerful mass communication channel, the Internet can be used in the interest of the government, namely as an instrument for spreading regime-confirmed information. In this regard, Internet-based services are similar to traditional media. The state institutions apply different forms of Internet control to secure the ruling regime and increase the dissemination of state-sponsored messages. Finally, the Internet might provide a unique opportunity for authoritarians to gain access to and to monitor undesirable opposition activists, as well as overall public sentiment. This leads to the fact that the Internet penetration rate is usually higher in countries with stronger Internet regulation. Moreover, it calls into question the well-known assumption, which associates Internet expansion with strengthening democracy (cf. Rød & Weidmann, 2015, pp. 344-348).

To adapt the Internet to their interests, state officials use different strategies of Internet regulation. For example, Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) have defined three generations of Cyberspace control in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes. First-generation controls are expressed by the direct blocking of access to certain web services, similar to China's control patterns. Being in a situation where telecommunication companies are state-owned, the security forces can easily apply specific software for filtering such websites and applications, which are unsuitable for the government's ambitions. Within the second generation, the government creates "a legal and normative environment and technical capabilities that enable state actors to deny access to information resources as and when needed, while reducing the possibility of blowback or discovery" (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010, p. 24). Namely, laws and amendments to laws that prescribe the legal responsibility to the Internet users, both private and commercial, can be created, and as a result, enhance the ability of the state to control Internet content by introducing legal penalties. Finally, the third-generation controls include state efforts to compete within the Internet with other agenda setters, using "effective counterinformation campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents" (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010, p. 27). Through that, authority can easily monitor

Internet users and identify common usage patterns as well as spread loyalty to regime information online among specific target groups. Some examples of the Internet control generations from Kazakhstan, I will provide in Chapter 2.3.3.

Table 1: Three generations of the Internet control by Deibert & Rohozinski (2010)

First generation of the Internet control	Second generation of the Internet control	Third generation of the Internet control
direct blocking of the Internet access and/or certain websites	legal and normative environment, which limits access to online information resources	counterinformation campaigns and setting a state-sponsored agenda online

While the direct blocking of the Internet is possible to circumvent, using, e.g., Tor network (e.g., Jardine, 2018), it can be more challenging to resist the third generation of Internet control methods. That is why the (authoritarian) governments employ “cyber troops”, which are systematically commenting on social media, creating the regime-approved content, and, if needed, apply harassment for politically “unwanted” social groups and individuals (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017, p. 9).

Gunitsky (2015) has focused his attention specifically on the control practices of the third generation on social media, naming them social media co-optation and detecting their four mechanisms for the strengthening and maintaining of the current regime: 1) counter-mobilization, 2) discourse framing, 3) preference divulgence, and 4) elite coordination. Within *counter-mobilization*, the government uses social media to spread pro-regime propaganda for the broad masses due to calls for patriotism and mobilizing existing regime supporters. This mechanism serves as the basis for *discourse framing*, which, in its turn, “goes beyond brute-force censoring to choreograph and channel the bounds of acceptable deliberation” (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 45). It can be implemented in the following manner: the anti-regime messages on social media are not filtered but are still used for demonstrating that state officials are involved in citizens’ claims. Discourse framing can also accentuate the intergroup bias and construct an external threat to arouse national sentiment. According to the author, social media co-optation is obviously more successful “in states lacking strong

civil societies, during times of “normal” politics, and in regimes that possess some degree of functional institutionalization and popular legitimacy” (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 50).

In this regard, Howard and Woolley (2016) have called for attention to the issue of algorithms and automation. As they have demonstrated, using political bots – “the algorithms that operate over social media, written to learn from and mimic real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of social media and device networks” (Howard & Woolley, 2016, p. 4885), state officials can easily achieve their political goals. For example, due to these automated scripts, the government can artificially expand the number of followers on a government’s social media accounts or politicians’ profiles. The pro-regime content can receive a viral character because of mass reposting by bots; attacking social media profiles of opposition movements or leaders can be implemented more efficiently. However, using the authors’ terminology, “computational propaganda” is highly context-specific (cf. Howard & Woolley, 2016, p. 4885).

In summary, the consequences of Internet control can vary. On the one hand, Internet censorship can improve the inventiveness of social media users in authoritarian states and support social activism, and thus, more awareness regarding state-citizen relations. For example, as Poell (2014) has noticed, such activism can manifest itself in creating symbolic languages and pseudonyms to discuss controversial topics online and in using Internet filtering circumvention tools (e.g., virtual private network -VPN) to access blocked web services. These strategies can also help find and unite ingroup members worldwide, which is especially crucial for ethnic minorities and diasporas. As Adamson (2016, p. 297) has noted, describing diaspora politics in the digital age:

“Although states and other actors will have the motivation to continue to shape and harness the power of diasporas, the real impact of diaspora politics may ultimately be as a harbinger of new forms of global identity politics—politics that are shaped by but also transcend the limits and institutions of states.”

On the other hand, Ognyanova (2010) has reviewed an oppositional tendency, which includes reinforcing existing information culture and self-censorship. In her opinion, Internet usage in authoritarian countries “reflect[s] the pattern of traditional media consumption” (Ognyanova, 2010, p. 10), which are connected to the general political and cultural traditions. As she has demonstrated by Russia’s example, the Internet is not necessarily

considered a public space, which provides numerous information. It allows expressing a personal opinion. Instead, technology has become a part of the ordinary and socially accepted logic that offers a chance for withholding information from the citizens by the state or the availability of certain facts only to a privileged group. This adaptation of existing patterns can also be found within local online communities, which are established around exclusivity and intolerance.

Furthermore, online self-censorship occurs in such socio-political circumstances, especially when a restrictive Internet regulation is enshrined in legislation (Gueorguiev, Shao, & Crabtree, 2017; Ong, 2019). As a result, social media users do not publicly express their (political) thoughts and hence, do not take advantage of the full potential of social media regarding self-narration and self-presentation. Even *lurkers* are concerned by self-censorship, because of the limitations on citizen journalism, the variety of social media landscapes is circumscribed.

Everything described above gives a reason to assume that not only social media users by themselves received a chance to construct their social identity, but the (authoritarian) state participates in the shaping of collective identities online. At the same time, many questions remain open, such as how exactly nation-related identities are constructed in the post-Soviet space, especially in the time of political tensions and fast technological changes. Which mechanism do the home country and the host state apply to employ the diasporic potential for their interests, and how do digital natives of diaspora react to them? In the following chapter, I will depict the socio-political background, which is relevant for the Kazakhstani Russians. I believe that providing a general historical introduction as well as reporting the status quo can support an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors. And as I have recurrently underlined, context is one of the most crucial aspects of studying nation-related belongingness related to Internet-based technologies.

## **2. Thematic Background**

### **2.1. Who Are (Ethnic) Russians?**

In line with numerous Russian-born and Russian-speaking emigrants in the Western countries, which have been actively studied in the last decade (e.g., Belousova, 2012; Vorobyeva, Aleshkovski, & Grebenyuk, 2018; Sablina, 2021), about 25 million ethnic Russians remained residents of former Soviet republics (FSR) and have lived under the modified socio-political conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Diamant, 2017). In addition, 10.6 million Russians citizens live in other countries (Ritzer & Dean, 2019, p. 200). However, is it possible to claim that ethnic Russians outside of Russia form a Russian diasporic community?

According to Safran (1991, p. 83) an ethnic community can be called *diaspora* if their members: a) have been relocated from a native to a 'peripheral' or foreign region; b) have a collective memory or common myths regarding their home-country; c) feel in the position of insularity and do not have the feeling of acceptance by the host community and d) finally, even from outside stay connected to their country of origin through a commitment to its political affairs. Considering these attributes and applying them to the community of ethnic Russians, it becomes clear that the term 'diaspora' in its traditional sense can hardly be used in the case of all ethnic Russians who are permanently living outside of Russia. In comparison to Russia's mass emigration, ethnic Russians in FSR did not leave their native land, state borders were, instead, redefined, and they found themselves inside of new countries. The various socio-cultural and political differences between the far and the near abroad, can also change the homogeneity of the Russian communities. It can be assumed that ethnic Russians, depending on their state of residence, deal with their collective memory in several ways and have constructed different common myths. The insularity is, again, not necessarily a typical scenario for all Russians abroad. Besides that, ethnic Russians, both far and near abroad, are poorly involved in the political processes of the Russian Federation and do not have any kind of common political project for Russian domestic policy (cf. Suslov, 2017, p. 9).



On the other hand, while focusing only on ethnic Russians in the near abroad, it becomes obvious that the Russians in FSR share some similarities, such as traumatic experiences and a forced minority's status with other classic diasporic communities. From this perspective, they might be qualified as "real" diasporas (Münz & Ohliger, 2003, pp. 4–5). Saunders (2006, p. 53) has even used the term "imperial diaspora" for Russians in the near abroad, comparing them with Germans in Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires and with European settlers in South Afrika, in particular *pieds noirs* in Algeria. Moreover, as I have distinctively described in Chapter 1.5.4, ICTs can contribute, among other things, to the transformation of traditional forms of the diaspora community. Hence, Russians outside of their home country, being active Internet users, can build digital diasporas based on transnational ties (cf. Saunders, 2006, pp.61-62).

Another point regarding this terminological issue is that very often in public discourse; the term *Russian* has become synonymous with the *Russian-speaker* or *Russophone*. On the one hand, this situation has internal historical roots – the registration of ethnic belonging in the early Soviet Union was inconsistent. As a result, many Soviet citizens were registered with inaccurate ethnic origins (Baiburin, 2012, p. 66). Moreover, in mixed Soviet families, which consisted of Russian and other non-titular ethnic groups, children usually chose the Russian nationality (Poppe & Hagendoorn, 2001, p. 59). This led to a blurring of the line between various ethnic cultures and the Russian identity's universalism.

On the other hand, the splicing of terms *Russian* and *Russian-speaker* can be connected to the current construction of Russianness. Depending on the context, many different Russian-speaking ethnic groups claim to belong to the 'Russian diaspora'. However, as Kaprāns & Mieriņa (2019) have demonstrated on the Latvian example, the category *Russophone* is not universal. It can include different groups of people- those who tend to identify themselves with Russia – especially among older generations and less educated *Russophones*, but also those, who associate themselves with Latvia or the European Union.

Despite an important role of the language in the Russian diaspora (Laitin, 1998), the language does not automatically become a synonym to ethnicity. According to Cheskin and Kachuyevski (2019), some previous studies (e.g., Barrington, 2001, as cited in Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019, p. 4), as well as the transformed symbolic meaning of the Russian language in Ukraine, demonstrated the ambiguity of the term *Russian-speaker*. Moreover, in

the Kazakhstani context, the category of Russian-speakers contains numerous ethnic groups, including the Russian-speaking titular population. Therefore, compiling all these groups under one umbrella category of ‘Russian-speakers’ may interfere with establishing possible distinctions between them. Hence, in this dissertation, I will differentiate ethnic Russians from all Russophones while focusing on people who identify themselves as (ethnic) Russians.

Without a doubt, the category of (ethnic) Russian is complicated; it is “based on multiple, multi-layered, overlapping or embedded national, ethnic, civic or supra-national categories” (Poppe & Hagendoorn, 2001, p. 59). In this regard, historical events have played an important role in its formation. Therefore, to better understand what it means today to be Russian, it is essential to review the historical and socio-political contexts, which have shaped this category.

## **2.2. Russian Nation: the History of Formation**

In the post-socialist world, the construction of new collective identities remains one of the main state issues today. On the one hand, the historical memory and its political interpretation have become an indispensable element of state policy (see Chapter 2.4.3). On the other hand, for many post-Soviet people, the appearance of a new socio-political system has raised a lifelong search of their new social roles and appropriate positions inside of society. As Isaacs (2018, p. 14) rightly remarked in the case of Kazakhstan, the “understanding post-Soviet national building in Kazakhstan cannot be achieved without taking account of the influence of Soviet Era nation-building.” Similarly, Kuzio (2019) has drawn many parallels between Tsarist/Soviet and modern nationalism and the echo of the past in the modern national identity building among Russian-speakers. Finally, Blackburn (2019, p. 230) has provided evidence of a stable presence of “‘cultural colonial’ habitus of the Soviet period” among the young Russian-speaking population of Kazakhstan. Therefore, it seems crucial to me to describe the situation through the concept of nation and ethnicity before the emergence of independent post-Soviet republics in their present form.

### *Tsarist Russia*

Before Modern times, the basic consolidation factors for Russians were religion and the ruling dynasty, while in Tsarist Russia, “love of fatherland” (*ljubov' k otečestvu*) appeared as an additional significant to that time element of Russian national awareness (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 51). Considering the Romanov dynasty’s foreign origin beginning from Catherine The Great ruling over the multi-ethnic Russian Empire, the spread of a civic state ideology was convenient for the political circumstances. In early Tsarist Russia, the concept of a nation was based on social class characteristics rather than on ethnic diversity. The core idea of Russianness, otherwise, included loyalty to the tsarist authorities and Orthodox faith of the peasantry, while ethnicity and geography did not play an important role (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, pp. 51-53). Orthodoxy opposed to Catholicism and Protestantism from the Western border and the Islam from the East, was the main factor for consolidating both the peasantry and the aristocracy during the entire imperial age. The superiority of Orthodoxy manifested itself, for instance, in “Russian missionaries” and in providing education to indigenous peoples, which was based on Orthodox values (Ubiria, 2016, p. 54).

In general, the Russian nation-building was interwoven with Russia’s autocratical and imperial logic of the late-tsarist era. This is obvious, among other things, through elite-peasants polarization and the subordinate position of indigenous non-Russian populations, who resided in the Russian Empire’s territory (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, pp. 51-55). In the late tsarist era, disciplines such as ethnography and linguistics originated, which were associated with a rising interest in the study of non-Russian minorities. Here it is important to note that during this period, ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, as well as some russified non-Slavic elites such as Tatars, were considered by the imperial authority as integral parts of the Russian nation (Plokhy, 2017, p. IX).

Moreover, the tsarist government removed non-Slavic peasants and nomads, also called *inorodcy*, from this category. Russian aristocrats felt cultural and material superiority over colonized ethnic groups of southeastern regions, which was compensation for their feeling of inferiority with western European Empires. The Tsarist government established “civilizing missions” for instilling the Russian cultural tradition to indigenous population considered to be primitive (Suny, 2001b, p. 62). Even during the Imperial era, the indigenous elites were labeled “second-class citizens” (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 53).

At the end of the 19th century, because of internal migration, starting with the acquisition of new territories, the number of contacts between the Russian and the non-Russian population in the southeastern areas of the Russian Empire was growing. In the 1890s, hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian peasants, motivated by growing poverty in the European part of Imperial Russia, moved to northern Central Asia (Ubiria, 2016, p. 59). Hence, through popular culture and everyday interactions, racial consciousness “based on highly ambiguous but easily perceptible differences such as physiognomy, customs, language, and shared history” contributed to the strengthening of hierarchical order and occurrence of social boundaries within the vast multi-ethnic state (Avrutin, 2007, p. 39). Together with an aggressive imperial policy starting at the end of the 19th century and aiming to suppress the national awareness of the non-Russian population, this bonding process led to tensions between the non-Russians and the Imperial ruling elite. In the end, due to the existence of minorities in the Russian Empire, on one side, and Western aliens on the other, the concept of Russianness was officially narrowed (cf. Geraci, 2009, p. 6).

According to Tishkov (2009, p. 263), specifically during the Russian imperial era, the rudiments of the Russian national idea in the modern sense as territorially and economically determined, as well as centered around the Russian language and culture, had already appeared. However, these contradictions were founded, firstly on discrimination and unequal relations between metropole and periphery, and secondly, on resistance and strengthening of nationalism of non-Russian ethnic groups. This denied the Russian Empire the ability to create a common multi-ethnic nation based not only on economic and legal unity but also on common national awareness (cf. Suny, 2001b, p. 69). One of the consequences of the failed Tsarist policy was the revolutionary ideology of the Bolsheviks and the new Soviet era’s occurrence, which I intend to demonstrate next.

### *Post-revolutionary national concept*

After the October revolution of 1917 in Russia, the ‘imperial’ distinction between nations was replaced with an opposite idea of proletarian internationalism. The Marxist ideologist Vladimir Lenin formulated three principles addressing the ‘national question’. Firstly, the right of nations for self-determination should save them from “Great-Russian chauvinism” – any manifestations of the superiority of ethnic Russians, albeit this process primarily

served the interests of the class struggle. The Bolsheviks leader considered self-determination as the first step towards voluntary renunciation of national belonging and the spreading of internationalism instead. Secondly, the international equalization, which was in opposition to Russian imperial hegemony, implied the political and legal parity between non-Russians and Russians. Lastly, territorial autonomy and federalism meant creating national-cultural autonomies, which would connect, and in the end, create a multinational state (cf. Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 68-70).

According to Ubiria (2016), the national-territorial delimitation in Central Asia often had a chaotic character and ignored ethnocultural features of indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, the revisionist approach's followers have highlighted that setting the national borders was supported by ethnographic research<sup>21</sup> and was efficient for preventing conflict between numerous local communities of native populations. In any case, the Soviet Territorial Commission aimed to create new republics along the line, primarily, of the ethnonational principle. It is important to notice, that indigenous people in Central Asia were familiar with tribal belonging more so than with the ethnonational categories of the Soviet administration and could hardly affiliate themselves exclusively according to the new Soviet national constructs. For example, belonging to the Kazakh or Uzbek ethnonational communities from the Soviet view was often grounded only on the nomad-settled principle of ignoring other significant categories (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 99-115).

It is not surprising that in comparison to the Imperial census of 1897, which included 146 languages<sup>22</sup> in the Russian Empire, the first Soviet census of 1926 registered 190 various collective identities. Looking ahead, Soviet ethnic engineering, through the aggregation of "smaller" identities into new categories, resulted in only 99 ethnic groups in the census of 1937. For example, Kirgiz people were transformed into Kazakhs, while non-Kazakhs long-term residents were associated primarily with their ethnonational belonging and, hence, their titular republics (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 142-143).

Apart from those defined as Western nationalities: Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, and Armenians, all others were declared "culturally backward" eastern nations (Martin, 2001, p. 56). People practicing nomadism were especially considered as

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<sup>21</sup> A critical view towards the Soviet ethnography Van Meurs (2000) has provided.

<sup>22</sup> The Tsarist census was based on language, religion and social class.

“backward in comparison to “cultured” mostly Slavic settlers (cf. Tishkov, 1997, p. 105) Despite the strive of the internationalist community of Soviet people, the differences between Russians and non-Russians were distinct. Through the new national policy, at the end of the 1920s, the privilege of the native population in Central Asian titular republics, on the one hand, and the presence of Slavic settlers, on the other hand, led to ethnic conflicts. Ethnic bias was present inside new republics. The territorial component in Soviet nation creation emphasized a titular population’s priority with the simultaneous emergence of “unwanted” national minorities as (Martin, 2001, p. 58, p. 139). The supranational idea of a Soviet community was not able to balance this ethnic segregation.

### *Soviet national policy*

In 1930s, Stalin replaced the Marxist international idea of nation with the concept of the acquired fatherland, while trying to shape the Soviet patriotism. Meanwhile, for Stalin, different nations formed the community of Soviet people, but only the Russians were esteemed to have the leading role in it (cf. Plokhy, 2017, p. 245-247). Gradually Russians became “the most Soviet nation” (Plokhy, 2017, p. 251), being “first among equals and the leaders among the foremost” (Plokhy, 2017, p. 255). In order to strengthen Russian national pride, Stalin revised even the meaning of tsarist Russia. Using cinema and other instruments of Soviet propaganda, the most successful characters of the Imperial era, like, e.g., Peter the First, were selected for demonstration of Russian power and historical state achievements. While Great-Russian chauvinism was considered by the Soviet administration no longer a threat for the Soviet state model, the so-called *local nationalism* of non-Russians became an attempt for separation and isolation from the Soviet center (cf. Plokhy, 2017, pp. 251-258).

The dominance of Russians chiefly influenced the language policy. For instance, in Central Asia, the local languages took on the Cyrillic alphabet instead of the Latin one. Thereby, the Stalinist government aimed to promote the Russian language within the titular nations, on the one hand, while on the other, distinguishing the Soviet Union from the adverse capitalistic states. This Cyrillization also set the scene for the following domination of the Russian language in the titular republics, while the distribution of native languages was no longer a primary goal of the Soviet administration (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 155-156).

Subsequently, an obligatory study of the Russian language was introduced in all non-Russian schools (cf. Martin 2001, p. 457).

Instead of class identity, ethnicity had become the defining factor of national differentiation in that time. The ethnonational identity or *nacional'nost'* became one of the most important legal and social categories mentioned in all identification documents, including the Soviet passports, marriage certificates, residence permits, and even library cards, etc. *Nacional'nost'* was a primordialist biological characteristic – it was attached to children according to parents' ethnonational identity without the right to modify or abandon it. As a result, the ethnonational differences inside of the Soviet nation also permeated in most important areas of socio-political life (cf. Ubiria 2016, pp.135-136).

Although religion was losing its position in the collective identity construction of Soviet people, in anticipation of the Second World War, Soviet authorities changed the attitude towards the religions. Religion blended in with ethnic belonging and became an additional demarcation line between Soviet nations (cf. Tishkov 1997, p. 105). Regardless of this trend, scientific atheism promoted through mass media, education, and mass culture continued depreciating religious values. Nonetheless, the atheist ideology led to the increase of rapprochement between the Central Asian Muslim population and European nationalities of the Soviet Union, both inside and outside of titular republics.

In the 1930s, an active improvement of the economic sector began in the country's peripheral regions. The industrialization and collectivization programs offered new opportunities for Soviet people from the European part of the Soviet Union, many of whom were sent to Central Asia and, in particular, to Kazakhstan, to develop the industry. In addition, the Soviet administration once again used the territory of Kazakhstan for *dekulakization* by deporting Russian and Ukrainian *kulaks*<sup>23</sup> there. Besides starvation in 1932-1933 and mass emigration of the local population to China, these factors resulted in the prevalence of ethnic Russians over titular Kazakhs in the republic (cf. Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 185-202).

World War II caused an additional flow of immigrants to Central Asia from the Slavic republics occupied by Nazi Germany. The latest immigration wave exclusively to Kazakhstan related to the Virgin Lands campaign in the 1950s. Yet, most Russians and Ukrainians came to North Kazakhstan at the behest of the Soviet center to increase grain

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<sup>23</sup> Independent wealthy farmers, who were considered by Bolsheviks as 'class enemies'.

production. After all, in 1959, the Slavic and European population of Kazakh SSR reached 60 percent. Considering the non-Slavic, but non-titular populations such as Tatars, Koreans, and Uighurs, the Kazakhs were an ethnic minority in Soviet Kazakhstan (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 209-215).

At the same time, the concept of *Friendship of the Peoples* was actively spread across the country by the Soviet center. According to Martin (2001), using the socialist idea of international proletarian unity, Stalin aimed to accomplish the solid unity of the Soviet nations, which should prevent possible separatist movements. Concurrently, the “Great Russian culture”, as mentioned earlier, received an ‘above-national’ status that factually associated it with the whole Soviet culture. In the strict primordial sense, Russians became ‘elder brothers’ that were helping non-Russians find their ways to the common communistic future. All USSR peoples were required to express their gratitude to the Great Russian nation by supporting Russian culture. The Russian language got a prestigious status as a common language for all Soviet people (cf. Martin, 2001, pp. 432-461). The adjustment of native cultures to the state-defined standards like, e.g., the creation of Central Asia’s official cultures, and allowed the Soviet government to demonstrate the successful intercultural harmony and interethnic collaboration of Soviet nations. Across the entire Soviet Union, there was a top-down organization of cultural events starring national artists from different Soviet republics. Through broad media coverage of these events, the concept of *Friendship of the Peoples* was supposed to build a new element in the national self-awareness of Soviet peoples.

Simultaneously, the idea of cosmopolitanism in the early Stalinist period arose. For instance, Clark (2011) described the cosmopolitan character of the Soviet culture. Being closely connected with the European and US-American cultural elite, many of the Soviet cultural workers, such as Sergej Tret’jakov or Sergej Ajzenštajn, created an image of the Soviet Union and, above all, its capital, Moscow, as a place for intercultural intellectual exchange with a desire for a new international standard. This “transnational fraternity of leftist intellectuals” (Clark, 2011, p. 350), along with increasing nationalism, was firmly established in the public life of the new country, and with time became an inseparable part of Soviet patriotism of that time.



Despite the Soviet idea of federalism, it was, *de facto*, a centralized state. The newly established Soviet republics, with their titular nations, were rather more dependent on Moscow than were autonomous (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 97). Therefore, Russians represented a dominant status among other Soviet citizens, which led to the intensifying of ethnic disparity. The cultural and linguistic intergroup bias penetrated almost all realms of social life. Moreover, the new mixed ethno-landscape like, e.g., in Kazakhstan, left a deep trauma in the collective awareness of native and non-indigenous populations and posed “ethnic time-bombs” for the next decades (Tishkov 1997, p. 33).

### *Post-Stalin time and the end of the Soviet Empire*

After Stalin’s death, the Soviet republics received more economical and political autonomy, but the Soviet central authorities still suppressed the national movements. Although not as explicit as before, the policy of russification was a part of Soviet policy until the 1980s. Simultaneously, the primary identity of the whole Soviet population, regardless of the *nationalist*, supposedly embodied a supranational self-association with the Soviet Union. In the Soviet logic, this supranational category did not eliminate national stratification but rather cohabited with emphasized national differences in the local and global contexts.

At first glance, the political organizations in the Soviet republics still followed the principle of indigenization. For example, the Union-republics were usually headed by representatives of titular nationalities. However, this local Soviet administration was dependent on the Russian centric Central Committee of the Communist Party. For instance, that can be observed in the common practice of Moscow appointing the second Secretary of a Republic’s Communist Party, and in most cases, this person was an ethnic Russian (cf. Ubiria 2016, p. 97).

Meanwhile, Russians outside of the RSFSR were not described as a *national minority* but were actively supported by Moscow. In addition, many Russian immigrants in titular republics possessed higher qualifications than native people, and due to this, had access to better job positions. Since the 1960s, many of these Russians (outside of the RSFSR) resided in cities, e.g., they were 73% of the population of the capital of the Kazakh SSR Almaty in the year 1969 (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 189). As a result, the Russian and Slavic

populations in the Soviet republics belonged to a professional elite and had a high social status in general.

Concurrently, linguistic russification continued to take place. The Russian language was dominant in public communication. The local population often chose Russian not only as an education and professional language but also as their everyday language. However, the percentage of Slavic peoples residing in Kazakhstan who had Kazakh language knowledge was extremely limited. Moreover, geographical clustering appeared regarding the ethnic structure: in the northern regions of KazSSR bordering Russia, lived mostly people of Slavic nationalities, while the South of the country remained traditionally more 'Kazakh speaking' (cf. Ubiria, 2016, p. 212).

Impacted by the factors mentioned above since the 1970s, local nationalism was expanding. This had the effect of changing the superior position of Russians outside of the RSFSR. In the words of Chinn and Kaiser (1996, p. 74) "Russians [were a] hegemonic nation in the country as a whole, but [...] titular nations [were] dominant in their own home republics." The Soviet government's political focus was redirected to the titular nations and their claims, expressed through ethnonational movement, which spanned many Soviet republics, such as riots in the capital of Kazakhstan in 1986 (cf. Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 189-192).

The long-term attempts of the Soviet government to develop a single community of the Soviet people failed. A certain social and cultural homogeneity between all Soviet people existed, but at the same time, the obvious cultural and economic differences persisted. After introducing the Glasnost (*openness*) policy in the late 1980s, national mobilization was beginning to grow in strength, and violent inter-ethnic conflicts engulfed many Soviet republics. However, compared to the classic doctrine of nationalism, national movements in the Soviet republics were transnational because they took place under the common institutional, political, and cultural settings and were by default interconnected with each other (cf. Beissinger, 2009, pp. 335-339).

Simultaneously, the disconnectedness of the Russian national identity from the state was obvious. Despite their superior position in the Soviet Union, many Russians did not come to the defense of the Soviet Empire and even opposed it. According to Beissinger (2009), the Russian national movement was incoherent in comparison to those of other

Soviet national groups. For example, Russian liberals supported the anti-colonial sentiment of non-Russians and saw Russian self-determination as a necessary step in developing democracy. Simultaneously, some of the Russian conservative-nationalists considered Russian sovereignty in terms of discrimination and victimization of Russians by the communist regime, while others stood up for the protection of the Soviet Communist party.

Summarizing this chapter, during the Soviet epoch, the development of Russianness based itself exclusively on a primordialist understanding of the concept of nation. This understanding differed considerably from the nation-building process in the countries of Western Europe or North America. Both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union established and maintained Russians' superiority regarding the local indigenous populations. This was accompanied by a doctrine of Russianness in official opposition against the Western socio-political values. The consequences of these political circumstances for ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan I will present in following chapter.

### **2.3. Kazakhstan: Development of a Sovereign State**

#### **2.3.1. National Policy and Social Transformation Since 1991**

In the following chapter I will concentrate my attention on the formation of Kazakhstan as an independent state. Many political decisions and laws of that time have shaped the socio-political landscape of the country, which has affected different ethno-national groups, and, in particular, Kazakhstani Russians.

In the referendum on Preservation of the Soviet Union from 1991, 94% of KazSSR's citizens voted for the continued existence of the USSR (Tishkov, 1997, p. 51). Despite the riots in 1986 and the demographic rise of the titular population, at the end of the Soviet epoch, Kazakhstan was one of the most Sovietized republics. Not coincidentally, being the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR, Nursultan Nazarbayev tried to keep a close political cooperation between Soviet republics and independent Kazakhstan, which was, in the end, the last republic to proclaim its independence (cf. Tishkov, 1997, p. 49-52).

Nevertheless, since 1989 the ethno-nationalist idea has appeared on the political agenda. According to Chinn and Kaiser (1996), the changing of the Law on Languages in

1989 granted the Kazakh language the status of a state language, while the Russian language became the language of international, aka interethnic communication. The Kazakh language was introduced as an obligatory subject in all educational institutions and became an essential condition for working in the governmental sector. In the Declaration of Sovereignty from 1990, the “strengthening of the national dignity of the Kazakh nation” as well as the “development of [its] distinctive culture, traditions, and language” were mentioned (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996, p. 197).

After the proclamation of independence, the Soviet political elite was replaced by a new one. This new elite consisted of ex-Soviet bureaucrats, but mostly ethnically homogeneous ethnic Kazakhs who started reviving traditional patterns like, e.g., kinship-based networks (cf. Akçali 2003, p. 423). In the year 1995, two-thirds of the Kazakhstani Parliament members were ethnic Kazakhs (cf. Hagendoorn, Linssen & Tumanov, 2001, p. 76).

Simultaneously, the newly independent state-oriented themselves by the national state models of Western Europe implied the unity of nation and state. In the logic of that time, the fall of communism made the Western political system the only option for the new nations. In this regard, together with other former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan should have become a presidential republic based on principles of Western democracy and liberal capitalism. Becoming a new state on the global stage, Kazakhstan presented itself as a “Eurasian country which would play an important role in East-West and North-South cooperation” (Kazahstanskaja Pravda, 1992, as cited in Abazov, 1999, p. 21). Kazakhstan’s rich natural resources, such as oil and gas, certainly aroused economic interest and investments from the USA and Europe. Additionally, Kazakhstan’s renunciation of its nuclear arsenal was primarily benefiting the Western countries, setting the scene for their further cooperation with the newly sovereign country (cf. Abazov, 1999, p. 21).

Besides giving titular language the status of the state language, Russian names for cities, streets, buildings, etc., were changed to new titular-related ones. The newly created state symbols emphasized the ethnic traditions of Central Asian countries. For example, Kazakhstan’s national flag featured symbols of the nomad lifestyle – an eagle under the sun, as well as traditional ornaments, and the state emblem represented elements of Kazakh ethnic culture – mythic horses and the upper part of a *yurt*<sup>24</sup> (cf. Akçali, 2003, pp. 415-416).

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<sup>24</sup> A traditional dwelling of Central Asia’s nomads.

Nonetheless, as Abashin (2012) has noticed, modernization and focus on the future matter more for the Kazakh political elite than traditionalism and old historical eras. This is what differentiates Kazakhstan from Russia, aiming at the revival of former imperial greatness (see Chapter 2.4.2).

The first Kazakhstani constitution from 1993 defined Kazakhstan as a “democratic, secular and unitary state” arising as a “form of statehood of the self-determined Kazakh nation” (Kembayev, 2012, p. 434). At the same time, in 1995 Nursultan Nazaebayev initiated the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, which included representatives of all ethnic groups of Kazakhstan, and appointed himself to its Chairman (Kembayev 2012, p. 436). Here it is important to note that later on, the Assembly of the Peoples<sup>25</sup> engaged almost exclusively with “folkloristic activities”, rather than with political participation and economic issues regarding ethnic minorities in the country; this has led to their political marginalization (Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2014, p. 33). However, as Rees and Williams (2017, p. 822) have noticed, the Assembly of the Peoples, to a certain extent, promoted “internationally accepted normative ideals of multiculturalism and interethnic unity”, and that has supported the general liberalization of identity in the country.

Simultaneously, the President has personified the state’s central political function both within and outside of the country as the “symbol and guarantor of the unity of the people and the state power” (Kembayev 2012, p. 443-444). Moreover, Nazarbayev, proclaimed as *leader of the nation*<sup>26</sup>, became the symbol of a modern, forward-looking nation and a fast-growing state economy<sup>27</sup> (cf. Laruelle, 2014, p. 14).

Besides that, the new constitution from the year 2015 embodied the civic-national idea rather than the ethnonational one. Firstly, it was addressed to ‘the people of Kazakhstan’ and prohibited “social, racial, national, religious, class and tribal enmity” as well as racial and ethnic superiority (Narottum, 2006, p. 54). Secondly, the state institutions permitted using the Russian language under equal terms as that of the state Kazakh language. In addition,

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<sup>25</sup> Since 2007 this organization was renamed from *Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan (Assambleja narodov Kazahstana)* to *Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (Assambleja naroda Kazahstana)*.

<sup>26</sup> The official title *Elbasy* (from Kazakh: leader of the nation) was endowed to Nazarbayev through Parliament voting in year 2010 (Nurshayeva, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> During working on the current dissertation, Nursultan Nazarbayev left the post of the president in the year 2019, but informally he still remains a symbol of successful Kazakhstan and remains to be actively involved in the political life of the country (Roth, 2019).

all citizens of Kazakhstan received the constitutional right to use their native language and culture, as well as freely decide about the language of communication, education, instruction, etc. (cf. Narottum, 2006, p. 54).

Thus, the discrepancy between the political-legal framework and the official discourse is markedly visible. Ethnic and civic nationalism have coexisted in the new republic (Akçali, 2003; Laruelle, 2014). One ethnic group became a superior status, while the supra-national integration of the other citizens was declared a strategic priority by the state. Nonetheless, only the cultural aspects of the ethnonational identity of the non-titular populations were accepted by the government, but its politicization was strongly inhibited (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996; Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2014).

Analyzing the discursive paradigm of state identity in Kazakhstan, Laruelle (2014) has identified three main top-down directions of the current national policy. Thus, Kazakhstan is presented in official discourse, firstly, as a “historical accomplishment” of the Kazakh nation – *Kazakhness paradigm*; secondly, as a multiethnic state, which has become a home for different ethnic groups living there – *Kazakhstanness paradigm*, and, finally as a modern, globalized country, which operates under international trends – *Transnational paradigm*.

According to Laruelle (2014), the idea of Kazakhness is based on an ethnonational approach, which appears in official texts, presidential speeches, and symbolic manifestations, such as state symbols, the architecture of the capital Astana, or state-sponsored cinema. For example, the book *V potoke istorii [In the stream of history]* written by Nazarbayev, but also some official state documents, emphasized the crucial importance of Kazakh identity in the ethnonational sense for the nation-building process. The active mentioning of the nomad past, kazakhifying city, and street names, ethnic Kazakh repatriation, promotion of Kazakh language as well as Islam as a part of traditional Kazakh culture shape this paradigm today (cf. Laruelle, 2014, p. 2-3).

In turn, the Kazakhstanness paradigm reflects the civic perspective of multi-nationalism. It relates not only to the Soviet tradition of ethnocultural pluralism but also to the concept of Eurasianism. On the one hand, Kazakhstan is presented as a common home for 130 ethnic groups, though thanks to the underlined “hospitality” of ethnic Kazakhs. On the other hand, the role of a “meeting point of Russian/European, Asian/Chinese, and Islamic

civilizations” (Laruelle, 2014, p. 9) is prescribed by this concept to Kazakhstan. Specifically, at the initiative of Nazarbayev, Eurasianism was implemented in regional integration, first as a Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and later as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Finally, the Transnational paradigm (which has been recently promoted in both internal and foreign policy) is based on the idea of changing world order. Within this paradigm, Kazakhstan must be successfully involved in international affairs and participate in global cooperation. The Transnational paradigm is reflected inter alia in Strategy 2050 – a political action document up to the year 2050 and has a strong symbolic value. For instance, Kazakhstan invests in sport, research, educational programs, and international events, such as World Expo 2017. The Transnational paradigm is often coupled with the personality of President Nursultan Nazarbayev (cf. Laruelle, 2014, pp. 12-13).

All the political and economic changes caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union also led to considerable changes in society’s post-Soviet Kazakhstan structure. The first decade of independence can be characterized by the increase of both the in- and out-migration rates, as well as the rural-to-urban migration in the country. Sponsored by the state<sup>28</sup>, the returning of ethnic Kazakhs to the already sovereign Kazakhstan from near- and far abroad induced a mass arrival of so-called *oralmans*<sup>29</sup> who left Kazakhstan in Tsarist or early Soviet time to their “ancestral” homeland. Despite the state efforts in creating a common ethnically based community of Kazakh people, further repatriates’ integration was challenging. Furthermore, the emigrants from conflict regions, for instance, the Nagorno-Karabakh Region, Tajikistan, or Chechnya, sought refuge in the cities of Kazakhstan (cf. Kendirbaeva, 1997, p. 749-751).

Social inequality in the post-Soviet transitional period in Kazakhstan appeared not only in the context of the general population and ethnic migrants but also in the local rural-urban settings. System rearrangements and economic insecurity motivated rural people, mostly ethnic Kazakhs, to move into the cities. Considering former villagers as “morally

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<sup>28</sup> Laruelle (2014) has considered ethnic repatriation as one of the socio-political dimensions where Kazakhization occurs.

<sup>29</sup> The term *oralman* (from Kazakh: returning person) - originally introduced as a legal term for defining ethnic migrants. Later the usage of this term was adapted by the political elite and the general public (Bonnenfant, 2012, p. 42).

immature and professionally underqualified” (Yessenova, 2005, p. 665), the city population reproduced, and as such, the Soviet center/periphery model. This tendency still exists today (cf. Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 75). The fundamental cultural and social differentiation, as well as regional features, have created a distinct distance between ethnic Kazakhs from cities and those from villages. Thus, the rural migrants were not on par with common Kazakh-speaking *oralmans*, belonged *a priori* to the category of Others. This also contributed to the division inside the Kazakhstani society (cf. Yessenova, 2005, p. 670).

Finally, the out-migration of non-Kazakhs, mostly Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans, has reached mass levels. Not only was the growing ethnic Kazakh nationalism a reason for them leaving Kazakhstan, but also the ecological degradation and the general financial difficulties of post-Soviet times, including growing unemployment, low wages, and generally poor quality of life (cf. Kendirbaeva, 1997, p. 747).

However, after the first independent decade, the economic development of Kazakhstan started to accelerate. Today Kazakhstan is often referred to as one of the most dynamic economies in the post-Soviet space. The country’s economy, which has been mostly dependent upon the development of oil and gas industries, has demonstrated a considerable growth rate in the last ten years. This positive economic environment has offered diverse opportunities for all ethnic groups to create their prosperity. As Spehr and Kassenova (2012) has concluded, the rise of the financial wealth of the Kazakhstani population also promotes national identification with the state in its civic sense. However, the current situation regarding national belonging in Kazakhstan seems to be more complicated.

Considering the transitional period from the Soviet republic to the sovereign state, Kazakhstan has developed a “hybrid state identity” (Laruelle, 2014, p.1). Such hybridity, or even a contradiction, is also evident from a bottom-up perspective. Analyzing the current grassroots of nationalism, Sharipova, Burkhanov, and Alpeissova (2017, p. 223) have proved that national belonging in Kazakhstan “although still based on ethnicity, is gradually changing towards citizenship-based civic identity.” While gender, age, education, or residence are not significant for civic nationalism, trust in political institutions and co-ethnics is essential for it. At the same time, Rees and Burkhanov (2018) have demonstrated that being Kazakhstani in the civic sense is situational and is linked to a concrete local territory.



Besides that, in comparison to other social groups, young ethnic Kazakhs have highlighted the personal importance of ethnic nationalism.

### **2.3.2. Russians as New Minority of Kazakhstan**

As I have already mentioned above, the term *Russian* is ambiguous, also in the Republic of Kazakhstan. For example, in Kazakhstan's nationalist discourse, *Russians* are labeled as all non-Muslim and non-Kazakh people (Laitin, 1998, p. 283). However, the official state discourse of Kazakhstan, as well as the below-mentioned statistical data, are based upon the Soviet Union's passport-category of *nacional'nost'*.

The emergence of sovereign Kazakhstan caused, among other things, fundamental modifications in the social status of its population. The Law on Citizenship in Kazakhstan, adopted in 1992, made it possible to automatically confer the Kazakhstan's citizenship to all permanent residents of that time. In addition, the Law did not allow dual citizenship for the non-titular population<sup>30</sup>. Accompanied by a difficult economic situation and the state's orientation on titular ethno-nationalist discourse, this issue left Russians with the option to adapt to the new circumstances or leave the country of their residence (Tishkov, 1997, pp. 116-134).

Until 2006, Russian policy ignored the ethnic Russians' problem of the 'near abroad' and has not offered any special support for these ethnic Russians, who decided to move to their historical homeland in the 1990s (see Chapter 2.4.3). Nevertheless, ethnic Russians were actively leaving Kazakhstan. As a result, after the first post-Soviet decade, the ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan has been reduced in contrast to the same period in 1989–from 6.1 to 4.5 million in 1999 (Alekseenko, 2000, p. 3). Russians from Kazakhstan constituted 38.8% of all migrants moving to Russia between 1989 and 2002 (Petrov, 2009, p. 53). According to some Russian and Kazakhstani scholars, the main reasons for this emigration related to the “felt threat for ethnic identity” (cf. Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007, p. 263).

The mass repatriation of ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan can also be considered an outcome of weak political unity. Being the second-largest ethnic group in Kazakhstan, Russians could not mobilize toward secession from Kazakhstan or strengthen their political

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<sup>30</sup> According to the current legislation of Kazakhstan, it has been still forbidden for citizens to have dual citizenship (The Law on Citizenship in Kazakhstan, 2021).

participation in the country's local politics. The internal contradictions inside and between the Russian Associations and political movements in Kazakhstan and the growing authoritarianism in the country were the main obstacles on the way to political representation of ethnic Russians in the sovereign state. Moreover, the Russian Associations, which were initially supporting the Russian unity surplus and advocating for the Kazakh-Russian status equality in Kazakhstan, shifted their function into emigration to Russia with the increasing flow of repatriates (cf. Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007, pp. 83-101).

The ethnic Russians who decided to stay in Kazakhstan<sup>31</sup> faced other difficulties. Despite being the biggest ethnic group, they did not receive any special status and are seen as equal to other ethnic groups, which inhabit Kazakhstan's territory. In this regard, Russians in Kazakhstan, similar to other post-Soviet states, automatically received the status of ethnic minorities (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007). This new status replaced the Russians' dominant position of being 'the first among equals' and resulted in an identity crisis and the necessity to find their niche in the new socio-political system.

Thus, it is not surprising that most Russians, regardless of their location, continued to perceive the Soviet Union and not Russia as their motherland after the Soviet period (cf. Poppe & Hagendoorn, 2001, p. 58). In the survey conducted in 1995-1996, Poppe and Hagendoorn (2001) have provided evidence for the existing variety of Russian identities in post-Soviet republics. Most Russians from Kazakhstan identified themselves either as Soviet people – "Soviets" or as citizens of the republic – "republicans." Thereby, only 9% of Russians in selected countries claimed to be "primarily Russian", and 15% identified themselves as "primarily titular." While being "Soviet" in the selected countries was more typical for people in their mid-40s, university students demonstrated so-called "marginal" identification, considering themselves neither as Russian, titular, Soviet, nor citizens of titular republics. In addition, people with higher education also portrayed themselves in most cases as "marginals" or "republicans" (cf. Poppe & Hagendoorn, 2001, p. 61-68).

Analyzing ethnic Russians in the context of intergroup relations with the titular population, Hagendoorn, Linssen, and Tumanov (2001) have proven the perceived competition

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<sup>31</sup> In the year 2019 ca. 3.5 Million of officially registered ethnic Russians have been residence of Kazakhstan (Ministry of National Economy of Republic Kazakhstan, 2019). In the year 2013 ca. 18% of them are between 20 and 24 years of age (Statistical Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2013).

between both groups, which might strengthen national identification and negative inter-group polarization. Ethnic Russians have considered themselves “culturally superior”, being less numerous and being political underlings to the titular population (Hagendoorn et al., 2001, p. 215). This superiority of Russians has correlated with having negative stereotypes towards titular groups and maintaining social distance from them but remarkably has not eliminated having a civic attachment to the republics of residence. In addition, Barrington, Herron, and Silver (2002) have proven that many ethnic Russians born in Kazakhstan consider their country of birth, not Russia, as their homeland (*Rodina*), which demonstrates a deep connection to the country of residence.

Nevertheless, ethnic differentiation still plays one of Kazakhstan’s central roles. Burkhanov and Sharipova (2014, p. 31) reported that 74% of young people from Kazakhstan between ages 18 and 21 have preferred to keep ethnicity in their IDs and passports. For most young people, ethnicity has been the core of their identity. The authors have also suggested that people would more likely prioritize ethnic over civic identity. Simultaneously, another survey on intergroup relationships in Kazakhstan has demonstrated that Russians have differentiated themselves mainly from other (non-titular) ethnic groups while highlighting their perceived similarities to Kazakhs (Faranda & Nolle, 2010).

Similarly, Kolstø (2011), revising studies on the national identity of ethnic Russians residing in FSR, has claimed that their ethnic affiliation to Russia has subsided with time. These ethnic Russians, who did not leave new independent states in the 1990s or early 2000s, could obviously adapt to newly independent republics’ new circumstances and accept their position of being national minorities. As Senggirbay (2019) has discussed, the new generation of Kazakhstani Russians, in the face of the growing part of Kazakh-phones in the country, accepts the usage of both Russian and Kazakh languages. Following the results of a survey among ethnic Russians from different Kazakhstan regions, the author concluded that Kazakhstani Russians have been familiar with ethnic Kazakh culture and have even been practicing some traditional Kazakh ceremonies. Besides that, local Kazakhstani media consumption has contributed to the successful integration of young ethnic Russians with ethnic Kazakhs. Also, the Russian language does not constitute a close connection to Russia (cf. Senggirbay, 2019, pp. 84-86).

In contrast to that, the study on post-independent identities of Kazakhstan's Russian-speaking minorities by Blackburn (2019) has provided the following results: the Soviet imperial image is still presented even among the young Kazakhstani Russian-speaking population. Although the young people were born after the resolution of the Soviet Union, there is still "a continuity with how the past is imagined, as well as the sense of alliance between 'progressive' Kazakhs and 'civilizing' Russians" (Blackburn, 2019, p. 230). In other words, young Russian-speaking people in Kazakhstan, similarly to their parents, associate themselves with a 'higher culture', while the Kazakh-speaking population is often stigmatized as uneducated and automatically belonging to their outgroup. The author has concluded that the modern post-Soviet environment, which consists of both local authoritarian and global neoliberal principles, is paradoxically able to reinforce old Soviet attitudes.

Likewise, Jašina-Schäfer (2019) has demonstrated that young Kazakhstani Russophones have constructed the concept of homeland (Rodina) differently – as a place where they were born, as an imagined place; and as a place that provides financial security. This vague understanding of homeland, which combines internal and external politics, leads to the appearance of complicated multilevel Self-concepts of Kazakhstani Russian-speakers. Imagining the homeland makes it possible for Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan to handle their "feelings of 'insiderness' and outsidership" in places Russian speakers inhabit" (Jašina-Schäfer, 2019, p. 115). In this regard, financial difficulties may activate their motivation to leave Kazakhstan and search for a new homeland, particularly in Russia.

At the same time, Saunders (2006) has noticed that both civic and ethnic national identities of Russians from Kazakhstan are declining. By comparing Kazakhstani Russians, who were regular Internet users, and non-Internet users, he has shown that those who used the Internet regularly described themselves in global terms and were therefore "denationalized digerati" – global opinion leaders beyond any national borders (Saunders, 2006, p. 45). In summary, it is possible to argue that the acculturation of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan has been challenging. The number of ethnic Russians, who said they understood spoken Kazakh, increased from 15% in 1999 to 25.3% in 2010. However, only 8.8% could read, and 6.3% write in Kazakh (Vihalemm & Kaplan, 2017, p. 183). The Russian language still played a central role for the Russians in the post-Soviet area. Despite common concerns in the 1990s that Central Asia's republics will ban the usage of the Russian language, this

region still represents a part of “Russian cultural and linguistic space”, and most probably, this issue will continue to be relevant. Remarkably, Kazakhstan’s language situation is still acceptable for the Russian-speaking population compared to the Baltic region (cf. Kosmarskaya, 2014, p. 23-24).

Nevertheless, the Kazakh language usage is also growing exponentially in the cities, while in comparison to the Soviet era, Russian is losing its dominant position in Kazakhstan (Sabitova & Alishariyeva, 2015). Even though 55.6% of Russians have agreed that every citizen of Kazakhstan should know the Kazakh language, Russophones and ethnic Russians consider the extension of Kazakh language usage as “a threat [...] to their status and role in the country” (Sharipova et al., 2017, p. 209, p. 214). Although the “nationalist tendencies and linguistic assimilation pressures” of ethnic Russians (Sabitova & Alishariyeva, 2015, p. 214), the situation is more complicated. Presently, ethnic Russians still constitute the biggest group of external migration from Kazakhstan - during the period from 2010 to 2015, 121,290 ethnic Russians accounted for 44.5% of the whole external migration rate (Simakova, 2016, p. 104).

However, according to a survey conducted by Simakova (2016), 60% of her ethnic Russian respondents do not plan to emigrate at all. Moreover, among those who have already decided to leave Kazakhstan, 34% did not determine a specific time for their emigration. Finally, the study has argued that 73% of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan are not at risk to emigrate (Simakova, 2016, pp. 105-106). At the same time, as Kirmse (2013, p. 208) has demonstrated, many young people from Central Asia regardless of their ethnic identity, seek a better future in other countries, such as Russia, South Korea, Turkey or the USA. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the demographical situation will support the reduction of Kazakhstani Russians in the future, since the titular population, unlike the Slavic minorities, demonstrates a continuing growth (cf. Laruelle, Royce, & Beysembayev, 2019, pp. 218-219).

Ethnic Russians and other ethnic minorities of Kazakhstan can find their social and economic niches, despite the nationalizing discourse and trend of indigenization in the republic. Although ethnic Russians are underrepresented in the public service and state administration system, they are mostly working in the business and IT sectors. Being employed in these sectors allows them to remain relatively high in their socio-economic status.

Despite that, only 68 % of ethnic Russians, compared to 93.9% of Kazakhs, have agreed that “Kazakhstan is better than other countries” (Sharipova et al., 2017, p. 214).

In general, the intergroup bias between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians persists. Aside from the language, religion has again become an additional demarcation line between Russians and the titular population. As I have already noted, Islam has gained popularity, but Russian Orthodoxy has also increased its importance in Kazakhstan (cf. Vihalemm & Kaplan, 2017, p. 183). Meanwhile, the symbolic meaning of the Russian Orthodox Church is not limited by its spiritual component but is also proclaimed as a consolidating factor for ethnic Russians. The folklorized religious practices based on past traditions have asserted, yet again, the exclusivity of Russians, as in the previous Imperial and Soviet eras (cf. Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007, pp. 193-202).

In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian Associations in Kazakhstan have supported the idea of ethnic exclusiveness. While the Kazakh nationalists have described the interface between Kazakhstan and Russia through the last century in colonial terms, the Russian civil activists have focused on the “rehabilitation of the Imperial past” and Russians’ contribution to the general development of Kazakhstan (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2007, 2007, p. 176). Both Imperial and Soviet Russia are presented only in the “beneficial effect of Russian domination“ in the country (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2007, p. 176). The same tendency is noticeable in the official and media discourse of the Russian Federation, while Russian media remains popular in Kazakhstan (see Chapter 2.4.4).

Considering the intergroup differences between Kazakhstani Russians and titular Kazakhs, it should be taken into account that both groups are diverse and often comprised of multiple characteristics. For example, Russian-speaking Kazakhs from the cities – often called in literature as *Mankurty* (e.g., Laitin, 1998, p. 135), will probably have more resemblance to Kazakhstani Russians than to exclusively Kazakh-speaking repatriates. Some authors (e.g., Jašina-Schäfer, 2019; Senggirbay, 2019) have also emphasized the significance of the long-term closeness of Russians to Kazakhs and Kazakhstan as a whole, despite massive co-option campaigns of Russia toward its compatriots in the light of Russian-Ukrainian conflict (see Chapter 2.4.3).

### **2.3.3. The Development of the Internet and Social Media in Kazakhstan**

#### *The Kazakhstani version of deep mediatization*

Due to the special focus of this dissertation, which considers nation-related belonging in connection to social media usage, I believe it is essential to describe the current situation concerning the diffusion of the Internet, general Internet usage and the media situation in Kazakhstan. Moreover, as I have already mentioned in Chapter 1.5.1, legal and political circumstances regarding the Internet and media regulation, are central for studying the mediated construction of social reality.

In academic literature, the problem of the digital divide or the digital gap as a difference in access and usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) between developed and developing countries, as well as between various characteristics like income, education, age, ethnicity, or gender, has often been mentioned (e.g., Robinson et al., 2015; van Dijk, 2017). However, considering the current difference between developed and developing states regarding physical access to ICTs, the global digital divide has been reduced (cf. van Dijk, 2017, p. 6). The example of Kazakhstan can validate this trend. In the World Bank's report (2020b), Kazakhstan is classed as a country with an upper-middle-income economy, which distinguishes it from developed countries. At the same time, the digital technology development in the country has demonstrated a fast and steady growth rate. For example, the Internet penetration rate in Kazakhstan has drastically grown from 3% in 2005 to 82% in 2019 (The World Bank, 2020a).

The government has primarily sustained such a rapid spread of the Internet in Kazakhstan. According to the report by United Nations (2019), digitalization and development of the ICT sector have become one of Kazakhstan's priorities in the last 15 years. For example, in 2013, the program "Information Kazakhstan – 2020" was announced and aimed at spreading Internet usage and public access to Internet services. In addition, introduced in 2017, the program 'Digital Kazakhstan' was intended to improve the digital economy as well as the digital literacy of the population. Such an active governmental promotion of ICT resulted in the fact that Kazakhstan becomes not only a regional leader of the ICT infrastructure and popularity of the Internet service but also received a substantial rating (6,79)

and 52<sup>nd</sup> place among 193 countries in the ICT Development Index 2017 (cf. UN ESCAP, 2019, pp. 15–40).

The ICT infrastructure improvement has led to an intensive use of the mobile Internet. 87,3% of the population currently have access to 3G Internet, and the number of mobile Internet users continues to grow; only between 2019 and 2020 this number increased by 14% and complied 27.6% (UN ESCAP, 2019, p. 16-19). Even more impressive is that social media usage occurs exclusively through mobile Internet and, therefore, on mobile devices<sup>32</sup>. Only 25% of all Web traffic was shared through mobile phones, while the usage of laptops and desktops in this regard had been rising (Freedom House, 2019). Its affordable price also causes the mass spread of the mobile Internet in Kazakhstan – a mobile subscription with 8 or 10 GB Internet traffic costs around 4,00-4,50 EUR (Freedom House, 2019).

Such fast Internet development led to an abrupt spread of Internet products and services, both in the state and private sectors. For example, the state has implemented E-government, which provides online-based public services and some forms of dialogue between government and citizens while maintaining the current political elite (Maerz, 2016). As a result, Kazakhstan was put in 39th place in the United Nations E-government Development Index 2018 and entered the top ten countries for E-government in Asia (UN (United Nations)), 2018).

In 2017, more than 120 thousand domain names were registered in the Kazakhstani Internet segment, including .kz and .kaz domain names (Galiev, 2018a). A significant development is evident, particularly in the local e-commerce sector. However, as Shavkat Sabirov (the head of the Internet Association of Kazakhstan) has emphasized, the Kazakhstani sector of the Internet is heterogeneous; there is a “KazNet of two big cities, Astana and Almaty” and a “KazNet of other Kazakhstani regions” as well as Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking KazNet (Galiev, 2018b).

Besides that, Kazakhstani users have been actively using foreign Internet resources – among the top five most popular sites, only one Kazakhstani portal can be found – *nur.kz*; the rest are American websites *google.com* and *youtube.com* as well as Russian portal *mail.ru* and the Russian social network *vk.com*. The Internet preferences of Kazakhstanis

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<sup>32</sup> As I will demonstrate later, this tendency was also confirmed in my research.



users correspond, in general, to the world trend, which includes *google.com*, *youtube.com*, and other social media services. Similarly, the most popular mobile messenger WhatsApp is also the most used in Kazakhstan (cf. Kemp, 2020). Besides that, Kazakhstanis have been actively using the Russian section of the Internet - *RuNet* (see Chapter 2.4.4).

51% or 9,5 Million of the Kazakhstani population are currently social media users, while only 3.10 Million (17%) were using social media in the year 2017 (cf. Kemp, 2020). The most popular social media in Kazakhstan has remained the Russian social network *Vkontakte* (*vk.com*) as well as the photo and video-sharing social network *Instagram*. (Toktarkyzy, 2020). Both social media platforms are trendy among young people between 18 to 24 years of age. In turn, only 13,2% in 2016 of this age group have been using Facebook (Brand Analytics, 2016, p. 10).

Despite the spread of the Internet in Kazakhstan, traditional media remains popular as well. For instance, seven of the ten most popular *YouTube* channels are TV broadcasting channels (Socialbakers, 2020). The number of virtual followers on social media accounts of print newspapers and magazines has also reached hundreds of thousands. From the perspective of their social media penetration, Kazakhstan's traditional media are also in line with global trends (see Chapter 1.5.3). Thus, even if young people avoid watching TV and reading print media, they will probably touch upon traditional media content on social media.

Kazakhstan's media system is usually associated with state censorship and limited freedom of expression (e.g., Rollberg & Laruelle, 2015). According to the organization Reporters Without Borders, all oppositional newspapers were banned in 2013, while critical journalists are under state control (Reporters without borders, 2020). In particular, the new media law from the year 2017 has restricted journalism by introducing a ban on "disclosing information comprising state secrets" – a vague limitation without any concrete examples. Such legislation with unclear formulations has become an additional element of media control (Keller, 2019). According to Nazarbetova, Shaukenova and Eschmet (2016, p. 195), the legal framework for the mass media in Kazakhstan does not correspond to general democratic norms, while the media market is non-transparent and is highly dependent on the state. As a result, media in Kazakhstan have limited access to information and have little influence on the political decision-making process in the country (cf. Nazarbetova et.al. 2016, p. 195).

From the perspective of Rollberg and Laruelle (2015, p. 230), shaping national media policies to avoid foreign media agendas and for “reinforcing the authoritarian status quo”, is characteristic of media development in Central Asian republics in the last years. However, despite government’s efforts to promote domestic media, Russian media still dominates in the media landscape of Kazakhstan, according to the authors. There are multiple reasons for that: from the improved quality of Russian official media in comparison to Kazakhstani state-sponsored content, to the general popularity of Russian mass culture (e.g. literature, bloggers or pop music). It is notable that the trust towards Russian media is significantly higher among ethnic Russians in comparison to other ethnic groups (cf. Laruelle et al. 2019, p. 227).

#### *Internet regulation and its consequences for the social media landscape*

The gained popularity of the Internet has also led to the tightening of Internet regulations. The contradiction between active promoting and strict control confirms the Janus-faced character of the Internet policy in Kazakhstan. In the report *Freedom of the Net 2020*, the Internet Freedom Score of Kazakhstan has been labeled as “not free” regarding obstacles of access, limits on content, and violations of user rights (Freedom House, 2020). Thus, using Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) concept, which I have described in Chapter 1.5.4, the example of Kazakhstan confirms the presence of all three generations of Cyberspace control simultaneously.

Since the largest telecommunication company in Kazakhstan *Kazakhtelecom* has strong ties to the government, and dominates the Kazakhstani ICTs market, direct censorship of the Internet has taken place during the last years. For instance, several online “materials” include critical and oppositional content, which are permanently blocked in Kazakhstan; the temporary inaccessibility of news websites, social media, and instant messengers is commonly applied during political protests in the country. Moreover, the most popular platforms such as *YouTube*, *Instagram*, or *Vkontakte* were obliged to remove anti-regime content due to the complaint of the Ministry of Information and Communication of Kazakhstan (cf. Freedom House, 2019; Freedom House, 2020).

At the same time, legal restrictions have been employed: since 2009, all websites, including accounts on social media, have attached the status of the media outlets (Keller,

2019). That means that everyone who has a website, or a personal social media account has liability for the content posted on their profiles. However, the law does not specify whether this applies to content published only by the website/social media profile owner or other users as well. The criminal code of the Republic of Kazakhstan is an additional tool for Internet control in this regard. For example, Article 274, “Deliberate propagation of false information” and Article 174, “Discord” on social, national, racial, clan or religious grounds or on the grounds of birth” includes vague terminology and has been used for restriction of critical information online. Both articles provide a custodial sentence, which has led to the imprisonment of some Kazakhstani bloggers. The new media law from 2017 has also introduced obligatory user identification in anonymous posting on the Internet (cf. Keller, 2019).

Finally, social media cooptation has also been used by the Kazakhstani government. In particular, the Freedom House reports (2020) about state-sponsored commenters and bloggers who were supposed to portray Kazakhstan as a successful country on social media. Furthermore, all the civil servants and public officials have to follow specific guidelines, which restrict the spreading of any negative information related to the state or adding of ‘friends’ who might impact the image of state institutions negatively (Amnesty International, 2017). In general, as Anceschi (2015) has noticed, the government tried to switch users’ attention from political information to de-politicized offers on social media; such a strategy has already proven to be effective in the Soviet era. In the words of the author, “the great majority of local users came to see the Internet as an essentially lowbrow medium and approached social media – and Twitter in particular – as PR instruments rather than avenues for intellectual engagement or more meaningful exchanges” (Anceschi, 2015, p. 294). The efforts of the government, in this regard, have especially been directed towards young social media users. As Lewis (2016) has proven on the example of the protest in Zhanaozen, the state discourse was successfully reproduced within the blogosphere and social media and, even more, was internalized not only by state-promoted bloggers but also by the regime-critical Kazakhstanis.

As a result, Internet control might affect which information people consume and post on social media. Nevertheless, despite the strict Internet control and growing self-censorship of Internet users, social media remains an ‘island of liberty’. In their study, Bekmagambetov et al. (2018) have proven, based on Kazakhstani college students’

example, that social media usage decries the trust in the political institution since they could find critical state information on social media platforms. This effect was even more vital when social media usage included exchanging information, which contains criticism towards the government. In the end, according to the authors, facing such criticizing information can encourage the protest behavior of young social media users.

Likewise, Kosnazarov (2019) has argued that the young generation of Kazakhstani citizens faces, among other things, the grassroots of political content on social media. Analyzing particular Instagram accounts and *YouTube* channels (e.g., *Justtyn Balasy*, *Le Shapalaque Comics*, *Za nami Uzhe Vyekhali*), the author has illustrated social media content, which young Kazakhstani people have created. This content has provided an opportunity to “practice civic activism and increase their followers’ awareness of many political issues in Kazakhstan” (Kosnazarov, 2019, p. 256). Following social media trends and presenting socio-political information in a format familiar for young people (e.g., using pictures and video, humor and hashtag campaigns), these accounts and channels have reflected upon the Kazakhstani society and criticized the political decisions of the government. Establishing an interactive dialogue with the followers in comments and emphasizing an essential role of ordinary citizens in the country’s development, these social media initiatives have received tens of thousands of young followers. What is notable is that all of the provided examples are Russian-speaking and have a cross-border character. For instance, the hashtag campaign *#SaveKokZhailau*, which intended to demonstrate a protest against the development of a ski resort in the mountains near Almaty, has resulted in a series of street actions, which were organized in the USA and Europe by Kazakhstani students. Similarly, Kalkamanova (2020, p. 440) has proven, using an example of Kazakhstan, that the Internet and social media can support political mobilization in an authoritarian context and are, hence, “extremely important alternative channel of information.”

Kudaibergenova (2019) has also confirmed social media’s potential in providing an alternative view on established traditional values. Based on the example of Kazakhstan and Russian online discourse regarding bodily expressions, which might be a part of national identity, the author has shown that Instagram accounts represent both the conservative national shame and “‘appropriate behaviour’ collectively imagined in the name of the nation” as well as global liberal perceptions (Kudaibergenova, 2019, p. 365). As a result, social media offers multiple understandings of norms and encourages the resistance of traditional

values. This resistance can, in turn, transform itself from a specific body-related topic to general civil activism. In this regard, as the author has formulated, “it is important not to overlook the role social media plays in shaping the diverse discourses of the ever atomizing and compartmentalizing notion of ‘communities’ within state or social categories” (Kudai-bergenova 2019, p. 376).

## **2.4. The Ukrainian Crisis and the *Russian World***

### **2.4.1. The Ukrainian Crisis as a Milestone of a New Era**

The Ukrainian crisis started in 2014, and it has become an important event, which has uncovered new facets in the development of nationalism and national belonging in the post-Soviet region. Euromaidan has demonstrated that the formation of national identity is still in an active phase, and the outcomes of Soviet national politics are felt in the ex-Soviet republics today. The constructed division between pro-Western Ukrainian speaking Ukrainians and pro-Russian Ukrainian Russophones has resulted in a deep political and cultural crisis (e.g., Zhurzhenko, 2014). As Kulyk (2016) has proved, the crisis has reinforced national belonging based on alienation from Russia; however, this has not meant that Ukrainian citizens have automatically associated Russian state policy with Russian people. Although the current national identity in Ukraine includes a substantial ethnic component, the civic perspective has also taken its unique place. For example, the Ukrainian language’s relevance coexists with continuing usage of the Russian language among the Ukrainian population. These changes came in relation to national belonging and provoked focus on other post-Soviet countries, such as Kazakhstan.

Moreover, starting locally, this conflict has spread far beyond the national borders and impacted the global system of international relations and foreign policies. Ojala and Pantti (2017, p. 42) have presented the local confrontation between Ukraine and Russia as a “new cold war.” It has become a severe challenge to West-East cooperation. The crisis’s expanded ideological and geopolitical elements have revived the opposition between liberal democracy founded upon pluralism and supremacy of law and control-based conservative authoritarianism (cf. Alcaro, 2015, p. 72).

At the same time, the confrontation in Ukraine has contributed to the enhancement of the Eurasian cooperation and, in particular, to the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. Based on economic cooperation, this form of regional collaboration is closely connected with Russocentrism, and the Soviet axiom, which considers Russians being ‘first among equals’ (see Chapter 2.2). Despite the entitled equality of all union members and particular effort to promote a supranational Eurasian identity among young people, the official Russia-centered view on this union, along with strong ethnonational awareness, have made it difficult to strengthen supranational awareness (cf. Linde, 2016, p. 164).

On the contrary, as many scholars have noted (e.g., Kolstø, 2016; Bassin & Suslov, 2016), the concept of Russianness in its ethnonational sense has experienced its resurgence through the Ukrainian crisis. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 1.4.3, the growth of nationalism during a conflict is common. More interesting to consider is that this trend has spread far beyond Ukraine and Russia’s national borders. In this regard, the annexation of Crimea and military actions in the East-Ukraine became a Pandora’s box, which has brought to the current agenda a new perspective on the complexity and ambiguity of post-Soviet nationalism. While Barrington et al. (2002) have rejected the suggestion that ethnic Russians in the near abroad would support Russian political intervention in countries of their residence, in the current circumstances, it does not seem undeniable.

In a modern global world, diaspora involvement in historical homeland conflicts has become a regular occurrence. Looking at the example of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel, Fialkova and Yelenevskaia (2015) have demonstrated that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has become widespread among Israeli Russophones and resulted in the split of their identity. Being based upon pro-Russian vs. pro-Ukrainian opposition, this split has incorporated vital aspects. For instance, those who support Ukraine inside of Russian-speaking community of Israel are not necessarily only emigrants from Ukraine or people with any connection to the Ukrainian culture. Even more, those who have criticized the Ukrainian government, in particular, have a strong connection to Ukraine and the Ukrainian language. Finally, critics of Ukraine do not automatically stand for the Russian policy. Thus, the Russia-Ukraine conflict’s role seems to be more complex and can be seen as an explicit contradiction between Ukrainian Maidan and Russian Antimaidan supporters, and as such, requires additional investigation (cf. Fialkova & Yelenevskaia, 2015, pp. 120-126).

Aside from the aforementioned, the Ukrainian crisis's economic and socio-political consequences, such as European sanctions towards Russia, have also been visible in the near abroad (e.g., Schenkkan, 2015). Being closely connected with Russia, the economy of Kazakhstan has been exposed to a crisis. The devaluation of the Kazakh national currency *tenge* in 2015, for example, has caused some anxiety among the Kazakhstani population and, at the same time, a government call for patriotic consumption (Schenkkan, 2015, p. 4).

#### **2.4.2. Russian Nationalism Today**

Studying minority nationalism, according to Brubaker (1996) (e.g., Kolstø, 2016), should include the observations from three perspectives: newly nationalizing states, national minorities, and external 'homeland' to which they belong by being Russians. Supporting and following this idea in this dissertation, I will consider current trends in Russian nationalism in the light of the Ukrainian crisis and, in particular, the Russian policy regarding so-called *compatriots* – ethnic Russians living outside of Russia.

Considering modern Russian nationalism, the central role of the past comes to the foreground (e.g., Kolstø, 2016). Being a modern imagined community, using the terminology of Smith (1998, p. 46), the Russian nation is founded foremost on a "powerful myth of a presumed common ancestry and shared historical memories." In this regard, trying to understand the contemporary nation-building in Russia and its resonance among the population makes it unavoidable to face past events and their present interpretation.

As was presented in Chapter 2.2, Russian nationalism has been historically based upon ethnic homogeneity and state superiority. It seems that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, similarly to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, has confirmed this usual trend in a current fundamentally different socio-political context. Russia's Crimea invasion has become the heyday of new Russian nationalism based upon Soviet imperial nationalism and the roots of Russian cultural traditionalism. As Kolstø (2016, p. 6) has neatly worded:

"the annexation of Crimea allowed Putin to ride two horses: since the population of the peninsula is primarily ethnic Russians, it was possible to present this act both as an ingathering of Russian lands in a strong Russian state and as a defense of ethnic Russians abroad."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a civic understanding of nationalism gained prominence in Russia. However, with time, this trend lost its significance in both state and grassroots discourses; as Kolstø (2016) has noticed, in the last 15 years, the ethnocentric view of the nation has become increasingly popular. The Kremlin position located Russian people in its ethnic sense and their culture in the middle of nationality policy, which was also supported by the broader Russian public. One of its implications is evident through the growing ethnocentric sentiments and xenophobic incidents. The domestic antagonism between titular Russians and non-Russian groups widely spread among different Russian Federation regions (Yudina, 2018).

The Euromaidan has become an additional occasion for the Russian government to reinforce the ethnicization as a foundation for patriotism and love for the homeland. As Goode (2018) has presented, the Kremlin's efforts in forging national unity through patriotism have yielded results, and, at the same time, supported the rise of the ethnic sentiment among Russians, not only in a top-down but also in a bottom-up manner. For an average Russian citizen, embracing the dominating ethnicity is nothing more than an appropriate tactic to overcome the complexity of state-nation relationships (cf. Goode, 2018, p. 275).

In the light of both growing ethnicization and the tension between Russia and Ukraine, the intergroup bias between Russians and Ukrainians as well as their supporters abroad has increased in scale. Riabchuk (2016) cited numerous examples of the resurrection of Soviet stereotypes, which have penetrated the modern cultural and political discourses. For instance, bringing Russian troops into Eastern Ukraine was deemed a response towards the "local 'anti-fascist' uprising" organized by the "'fascist junta,' with its rabid nationalism, anti-Semitism, and Russophobia" (Riabchuk, 2016, p. 81). A simplistic division based on the principle of *you're either with us, or against us* has come into central focus. At the same time, the idea of "wonderful Slavonic people", which proclaims fraternity and union, disappeared in the face of the rising "rather-or" confrontation (Riabchuk, 2016, p. 82).

The Russian state's promotion of the national sentiment has been founded upon the mythologization of the past and, in particular, the resurrection of the previous glory. Today this approach is adopted not only in Russia, but it is also a common tendency that has spread across countries in their search for orientation in a global, rapidly changing world. (Bauman, 2017, p. 5) has used the term *retrotopia* to define such a turn towards "the



lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future.” In this regard, the annexation of Crimea was paraded by the Russian government as “historical injustice needed correction” (Becker, 2018, p. 51). Being a factual historical location of Russian Imperial’s battles, the Peninsula itself and its capital Sevastopol have been presented by the governmental elite as part of victorious Russian history and unique cultural heritage.

While the Western countries have considered the situation with Crimea as an act of aggression, in the Russian domestic policy, it looked like a peaceful return of historical sites and former Russian power (Becker, 2018). According to Laruelle (2018, pp. 73-75), the official response of ethnic Russians outside of Russia to this neo-imperial return was in some cases positive.

Another example of mythmaking in Russia Laruelle (2016) has provided. The almost forgotten idea of *Novorossiya*<sup>33</sup> came to its revival in 2014. The military operation in Eastern Ukraine was associated by some Russian nationalists, on one side, with confirmation of the great power in opposition to the West. Alternatively, other Russian nationalists have linked *Novorossiya* with the Russian Orthodoxy in the sense of conservative Christian values and, hence, with nostalgia for Tsarist Russia. Even the Russian Neo-Nazi groups have employed Eastern Ukrainian events to prepare “an overthrow of the regimes in power across Europe” (Laruelle, 2016, p. 72). Overlapping themselves to some extent, all these myths regarding *Novorossiya* have led to the blurring of Russia’s territorial and imaginary boundaries.

Besides the political discourse, a nostalgic view of the past has been replicating in the standard model. The national brand identity expanded not only to media content and social network platforms, which I will discuss in more detail later but also in the graphic design of consumer goods (Roberts, 2014). and popular culture in general (Saunders, 2016).

Thus, the situation around the Euromaidan and Russian nationalism seems to be complicated and has multiple consequences for the concept of Russianness. Except for the growing ethnonational sentiment, the Ukrainian events *per se* have created controversy in understanding Russian nationalism and even a split inside Russian society. Although pro-

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<sup>33</sup> The term included different ex-Soviet regions through the years, but in the current sense, which has been used in the political discourse of the Russian Federation to *Novorossiya* belong Ukrainian regions: Kharkiv, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa (Putin, 2014, as cited in Laruelle, 2016, p. 57).

Kremlin nationalists have supported the anti-Ukrainian position, the Russian opposition nationalists have openly sympathized with the Euromaidan movement (Horvath, 2015, pp. 829-830). The national sentiment of the multi-ethnic Russian state has once again proven itself to be fragmented and controversial. This characteristic of Russian national identity has been illustrated by Kuzio (2016, p. 3-4) when dividing it into five approaches:

- *A union identity* - Russians as an imperial people, is based upon Soviet nationalism and is currently reflected in the modern concept of Eurasianism.
- *The Russian nation incorporating all three eastern Slavic peoples* – Russians and Ukrainians share the same origin and cultural tradition, is located inside of the common cultural space known as the *Russian world* (*Russkii mir*).
- *The Russian nation as a community of Russian speakers* – Russians and Russophones are used in this case synonymously.
- *The Russian nation defined racially* – Russians as a unique race premised on anti-Semitic roots.
- *A civic Russian national identity grounded in the Russian Federation* – Russians in a civic sense (*rossijane*) as citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnonational belonging.

#### **2.4.3. Russian Diaspora Policy and the Concept of the *Russian World***

After the USSR's dissolution, post-Soviet republics have been promoting the dominant role of the titular (ethno)nation and potentially could alienate ethnic minorities (see Chapter 2.3.1). Simultaneously, this alienation has motivated minorities to pay closer attention to the status of the historical kin state, which is supposed to protect their compatriots from the oppressions of their new homelands becoming more salient (Brubaker, 1996). Although this idea was suggested by Brubaker (1996) over 20 years ago, considering the Russian geopolitical ambitions today, it now looks more relevant than ever.

Since the Ukrainian crisis, using terminology given by Laruelle (2015, p. 95), the difference between the “territorial body” and “cultural body” of the Russian nation was officially recognized by the Russian government. The idea of a “divided nation” and protection of Russian minorities abroad has become a “discursive repertoire” of Russia's

foreign policy in recent times (Laruelle, 2015, p. 95). Starting in the early 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power, the importance of the Russian diaspora has been gradually increasing and becoming subsequently institutionalized. The establishment of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in 2007 and federal agency *Rossotrudnichestvo* in 2008, which have both served to support ethnic Russians abroad, as well as popularization of Russian culture globally, have finally confirmed the strategic status of the Russian diaspora issue for Russia (cf. Laruelle, 2015, pp. 94-96). Similarly, Gasimov (2012, p. 80) has considered *Russkiy Mir* Foundation as „cultural policy project launched and developed "from above" by Russia's power and cultural elites („von oben“ lanciertes und entwickeltes kulturpolitisches Projekt der Macht- und Kultureliten Russlands).

Being described by the Russian government as a cultural institute, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, in Pieper's (2018) view, should also be understood as “a medium of Russian foreign (cultural) policy to create transnational links between ‘the homeland’ and Russian language-speakers abroad” (Pieper, 2018, p. 8). In turn, this link might affect the sense of belonging of ethnic Russians who are living abroad. The government established the ‘Russian Department for relations with compatriots abroad’ and Coordination Councils of Russian diasporas to promote this issue as a component of Russian Foreign affairs. Such recognition of ethnic Russians outside of Russia has contrasted the Russian Federation's previous position in the 90s, which can be characterized by the Russian government's missing interest towards the ethnic Russians abroad or by considering them as an encumbrance (cf. Pieper, 2018, pp. 15-17).

According to the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, compatriots (*sootečestvenniki*)<sup>34</sup> have been mentioned concerning the strategic interests of the Russian Federation. As a result, compatriots should be under the superior protection of their historical homeland (Sencerman, 2018). The term *compatriot*, however, has been used to refer to absolutely heterogenic groups, such as 1) Russian Federation citizens living abroad, 2) ex-Soviet citizens living abroad, 3) descendants of both first groups of people, or 4) even foreign citizens “who [...] as a rule, belong to the nations, historically dwelling on the

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<sup>34</sup> Along with the term compatriots in the Russian political discourse, this group is also referred to as ‘ethnic Russians’ (*russkie*), ‘Russian speakers’ (*russkoiazychnye*), ‘cultural Russians’ (*rossiiane*), ‘countrymen abroad’ (*zarubezhnye sootechestvenniki*) or ‘fellow tribesmen’ (*soplemenniki*) (Pieper, 2018, p. 761).

territory of the Russian Federation and who have freely chosen to enter in spiritual, cultural, and legal relationship with the Russian Federation” (Suslov, 2017, p. 24). The Russian language has been considered in this regard as a nexus for compatriots, shaping a basis for the *Russian World* (*Russkij mir*) community as a “Slavophile antipode” to the pro-European Westernizers (Pieper, 2018, p. 8). Simultaneously, Uzbeks or Kirghiz, who would be technically compatriots, but represent one of the largest groups of working migrants in Russia, have been excluded from this category (cf. Suslov, 2017, p. 24).

The Russian government has actively employed the compatriots’ rhetoric and the idea of the *Russian World* during the annexation of Crimea and military conflict in East Ukraine. According to Pieper (2018), the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was explained first by Kremlin in terms of linguistic discrimination of Ukrainian Russophones by the Ukrainian government. As Suslov (2017, p. 27) has noted, the compatriots in the ‘near abroad’ have been considered as “an integral part of Russia proper, temporarily separated from it by the evil will of Russia’s Western enemies.”

Simultaneous with the rising importance of the Russian diaspora, international relationships with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is closely related to both the Russian ethnic culture and Kremlin, have been growing. For the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian crisis has become relevant in the light of the split between the Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. As Suslov (2016b, p. 133) has formulated, “the concept of *Holy Rus*’ became a sophisticated adaptation of the *Russian World* concept to the church’s intellectual tradition.

Thus, the *Russian World* narrative can be essential for the perception of national belonging among ethnic Russians abroad. For instance, (Feklyunina, 2016, pp. 783–785) has analyzed the concept concerning collective identities in the post-Soviet space and has defined its four characteristics:

- The *Russian World* has been presented as a “naturally existing civilizational community”, which provides cultural identity markers, such as the Russian language, Russian Orthodoxy, and Russian culture in general, rather than exclusively ethnic ones (Feklyunina, 2016, pp. 783).

- The *Russian World* identity has been based upon the common past that includes the myth of common origin, shared history, mentality, and the spiritual closeness of Russian people. Within this view, the Russian imperial power is incontestable.
- Similarly, the concept connotes a hierarchical relationship between Russia and other related communities outside of the Russian Federation. However, it is somewhat inconsistent because the definition is highly vague. At one glance, the *Russian World* is understood as a multinational space with a “multi-faced culture,” but at the same time “belonging to the ‘Russian World’ implied identification with Russia” (Feklyunina, 2016, pp. 784).
- The collective identity related to the *Russian World* has been associated with the Russian state’s discrepancy toward Western countries. In particular, this “civilizational uniqueness” has been explained in terms of Orthodox Christianity; while other Christian nations are losing the Christian values, the “standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia” preside inside the *Russian World* (Feklyunina, 2016, pp. 785).

Despite the Russian government’s efforts in popularizing the concept; however, according to Feklyunina (2016), it can be perceived ambiguously among the target population. Studying the Ukraine case, she has found that the *Russian World* identity has been accepted only by ethnic Russians and Russophones of the South-East of Ukraine. In other regions, they have associated themselves more with independent Ukraine as well as with Ukraine as Europe. Similarly, Fabrykant (2019), who studied Belarusian nationalism, has proven that the *Russian World* concept can even have an anti-Russian effect.

Furthermore, Knott (2015b) has criticized the top-down perspective on the relationships between ethnic Russians abroad and their kin state, concentrating on Russia’s soft power while ignoring ordinary people’s perception and co-optation. In her research of young people in Moldova and Crimea, she has focused on the meaning of ethnonational belonging in a bottom-up sense by using the everyday nationalism approach. Knott (2015b) has shown that people in both countries usually described themselves in cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and political terms while demonstrating hyphenated identities (Russian-Ukrainian or Romanian-Moldovan) and questioning the meaning of their ethnonational belonging. As the author has formulated, “there was a schism between those who problematized being

Russian abroad (Discriminated Russians), those who did not (Ethnic Russians), and those who refused to identify as ethnically Russian (Political Ukrainians)” (Knott, 2015b, p. 853). Hence, both the identification with Russia and the country of residence were present among ethnic Russians in Crimea. This confirms the need to analyze the “within-group dynamics for diaspora communities” (Knott, 2015b, p. 854).

#### **2.4.4. Russianness on the RuNet**

Today, when the Internet has become fragmented and, at the same time, has confidently entered people’s daily routine, focusing on local Internet spaces seems to be especially relevant for studying nationalism. In particular, the Russian sector of the Internet, also known as RuNet, has attracted the attention of researchers, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (e.g., Bassin & Suslov, 2016; Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2017; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky, 2020). Practically, the RuNet is not only the Internet space of Russia, but the entire Russian-speaking section of the global Cyberspace.

As Asmolov and Kolozaridi (2017) have described in their historiographical research, RuNet has evolved significantly over the past 20 years. Starting as a small online community of scientists and programmers in the mid-90s, following a decade, this Russian-speaking Internet grew to a significant alternative media space; it became a platform for social and political mobilization. With a growing number of Internet users in the post-Soviet world, the Russian-speaking blogosphere gained popularity. It provided an opportunity to create a new public sphere based upon the freedom of speech and was free from censorship. Similarly, going forward in its diffusion, the RuNet turned into a space of the grassroots socio-political initiatives, which aimed to monitor local problems, such as environmental issues or corruption (cf. Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2017, pp. 71-76).

Moreover, Russian-speaking social media (e.g., Vkontakte and the Russian segment of Facebook) started to be used for organizing political protests in Moscow in 2011 and for observing Russian elections. In this regard, such political activism went beyond online space and set a new agenda, which was contradictory to state-controlled media. Government response did not take long to arrive, and since 2011, the government has been tightening Internet regulations. Oppositional media projects were blocked, while the state-promoted media content spread across the RuNet, turning the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet

into Kremlin's sovereign project (cf. Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2017, p. 76-78). In this regard, Uffelmann (2014, p. 266) has even named the RuNet as a "Russian Cyber Empire."

However, this transformation also triggered a wave of resistance among RuNet users. Using *YouTube*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook* instead of their Russian equivalents, the online activists (e.g., Aleksej Naval'nyj and his *YouTube*-campaign) have maintained the initial concept of the RuNet as a space of free expression (e.g., Bassin & Suslov, 2016; Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2017; Lonkila et al., 2020). Moreover, according to Orlova (2018, p. 184-187), unlike the official discourse, the discourse of Russian opposition is often based upon calls for political transparency, anti-corruption initiatives and democratic values in general.

There is no wonder, that being mostly state-controlled, the Russian-speaking Internet became one of the battlefields during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Numerous authors (e.g., Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Kuzio, 2019) have emphasized the central role of informational technologies during the Ukrainian crisis and have described it as "information warfare." Following this idea, the Russian government has actively employed media and Internet regulations to promote the official rhetoric inside and outside the country. For example, state-sponsored media projects *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* have been established by the state mainly to spread state-confirmed information among foreign audiences through traditional broadcasting and networked digital media (cf. Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015, pp. 42-44).

As Jaitner and Mattsson (2015 p. 42) have noticed, the RuNet and, in particular social media, have become "an integral part of the Russian media landscape." Since the national borders among Russian-speaking users did not exist in the RuNet, this space has become a fertile ground for spreading information, such as the status of the Russian language or oppressions of the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine or Crimea. In general, as Kuzio (2019, p. 488) has noticed, such an "information weapon" is not a new phenomenon but rather a well-known political tool from the Soviet era, which has proven to be even more effective in the context of deep mediatization.

According to Shakrai (2015, p. 48), the Russian information campaign during the Ukrainian crisis has been formed on "enemy-or-friend-thinking", and aimed at the rise of national sentiment among Russians while improving regime support. "The [medial] evilization of Russias' Others", such as "Ukrainian fascists" or Western countries that use "double

standards,” has allowed the Russian regime, in a short time, to unite the population through ingroup favoritism (Shakrai, 2015, p. 48).

Gaufman (2015) has also proven empirically that the Russian official discourse regarding the conflict in Ukraine has been present in both traditional and social media. Analyzing Russian state television, Russian-speaking *Twitter*, the Russian social network platform *Vkontakte*, and the Russian blog platform *Živoj Žurnal*, the author has illustrated the central role of the Russian collective memory in media images of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The Great Patriotic War has been a highly significant and emotional episode of Russian history that has embodied the post-Soviet population’s national identity and has been effectively employed by the Kremlin during the Ukrainian crisis<sup>35</sup>. The term ‘fascism,’ which is historically associated with the enemy, has been regularly mentioned in Russian media coverage for describing Euromaidan during conflict escalations. In social media, this linguistics-based media framing has been supported by visual content, which has included symbols of Nazi Germany, such as the swastika and the St. George’s ribbon as pro-Russian resistance to it.

As Kozachenko (2019) has argued, the collective memory of the Soviet past is deeply rooted in the family experiences of post-Soviet people. Their fear of losing the nation-making myth of the Great Victory in World War II has motivated many of them to support the Anti-Maidan movement. As a result, such a “memory war” has not only inflamed the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine but also reactivated the importance of the Soviet period and Russia’s image as a “new iteration of the USSR” (Kozachenko, 2019, p. 8). Similarly, the ‘return’ of the Crimea Peninsula became one of the prevalent topics in Russian-speaking social media; in particular, the slogan ‘Crimea is ours’ has often been used on the Internet and has contributed to the reevaluation of the categories ‘we’ and ‘they’ (Suslov, 2014).

However, the counteraction to the Russian propagandistic content has also taken place. For instance, Marchenko and Kurbatov (2016, p. 226) have analyzed Facebook as “the most powerful platform for sharing information since the beginning of the Euromaidan

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<sup>35</sup> The massive spread of the state-confirm textual and visual content within social media has been ensured not only by regime supporters and state-sponsored media but also by the hired content producers, known as ‘trolls’, to deliver ‘correct’ information and comments even on the grassroots level (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015; Gaufman, 2015).



protests.” As authors have demonstrated with an example of prominent Ukrainian newsmakers, the “enemy” construction as a negative and dangerous “Other”, was a counterreaction to the Kremlin’s propaganda. Facebook posts of Ukrainian bloggers highlighted Ukrainian Army successes while accusing, derogating, and demonizing the Russian state and its supporters. As a result, Facebook has become a space for shaping and escalating intergroup conflicts between Ukraine/Ukrainians and Russia/Russians on the rhetorical level. Similar results Simons (2016) has provided, who has studied Anti-Euromaidan and Pro-Euromaidan online communities on Facebook. Sharing highly emotional content, both types of communities have contributed to forming two antagonist agendas by reproducing dominant political discourses.

In this regard, Wiggins (2016, p. 480) has focused his study on Internet memes related to the Ukrainian crisis and has demonstrated that this online phenomenon has become “a conduit for meaningful criticism, discussion, and possibly debate.” Due to their viral character and an entertainment nature, memes have offered an opportunity for a bottom-up agency, such as a disagreement with the government. More broadly, the distribution of Internet memes, which are easily understandable for a wide range of individuals, has contributed to citizen engagement in the context of strict media and Internet regulations. Nonetheless, the symbolic and highly context-specific nature of Internet memes related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict might, once again, facilitate the division between those who feel a sense of belonging to the West and Putin’s Russia supporters. In addition, Internet memes can be employed by the political power itself to set its agenda. Finally, the massive spread of anti-regime funny pictures might also increase state censorship (cf. Wiggins, 2016).

Besides, as Snegovaya (2015) has discussed, the success of informational warfare depends on the popularity of Russian media services and the trust in their content. For example, in Ukraine, most of the population has mistrusted Russian news, even in Crimea. This determines the necessity to discover not only which media young Russians outside of Russia consume but also the evaluation of specific media content. As Jaitner and Mattsson (2015, p. 48) have formulated:

“The impact of IW [information warfare] at the grassroots aiming on the younger population in urban centers in post-Soviet countries appears to be a particularly

interesting subject to scrutinize in detail, possibly in the context of vulnerability of open societies in general.”

When discussing information warfare during the conflict in Ukraine, the technological aspect should be mentioned. Along with massive informational campaigns, cyberattacks, such as DDoS attacks, website defacement, and malware infections, were employed from both Pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainian hacker groups (Baezner, 2018). All these cyberattacks, as well as the state control over telecommunication infrastructure, can influence the Internet and the media landscape and support the spread of certain information by limiting access to specific web accounts or stealing the personal data of users. For example, East Ukraine and Crimea had technical access mostly to Russian broadcasting during the conflict, while later, the Russian social network *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki* were blocked in Ukraine (cf. Baezner, 2018, pp. 10-14; Luhn, 2017).

Jensen, Valeriano, and Maness (2019) have mentioned that the popularity of pro-Russian video content on social media during the Ukraine conflict was artificially distended. Using the *Bedep trojan*, hired cybercriminals have generated *ad revenue* and high deceitful traffic for pro-Russian content that could potentially make it more visible on social media (cf. Jensen et al., 2019, pp. 229-230). Therefore, while analyzing networked digital media of RuNet, the power of Facebook ads should be taken into account.

#### **2.4.5. Kazakhstan After Ukrainian Crises**

After the Crimea Peninsula was annexed, many post-Soviet countries became concerned regarding their territories and minority groups, which would become the next target of Russia’s expansionist policy. As a country bordering Russia with one of the largest Russian-speaking diasporas in the post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan has become one of them. According to Brletich (2015), the concerns about territorial integrity have driven Kazakhstan to enter into closer cooperation with Russia, for example, within the Eurasian Economic Union, at the cost of relationships with Western countries.

Today the economic ties between Kazakhstan and Russia also remain highly interdependent, e.g., 85% of Kazakhstani oil transits through Russia, which creates additional conditions for maintaining friendly relations with Russia on the part of Kazakhstan. Ironically, Kazakhstan is also related to Russia in the military sector – a large amount of

Kazakhstani officers finished Russian military academies, while the Russian military equipment and technologies have still prevailed in the country. At the same time, the Russian Federation has used Kazakhstan's territory to deploy its military bases. Finally, along with all of the abovementioned, close cooperation at the local government level and in the non-governmental sector has demonstrated an almost unavoidable linkage between Russia and Kazakhstan (cf. Brletich, 2015, p. 15-21). Also, for Russian, "economically successful Kazakhstan is Moscow's top priority" (wirtschaftlich erfolgreiche Kasachstan [hat] für Moskau höchste Priorität" among other Central Asian states (Matveeva & Pörzgen, 2007, p. 280). Since the Kazakhstani government is interested to maintain good relations with Russia, ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are treated better in comparison to other post-Soviet countries (cf. Matveeva & Pörzgen, 2007, p. 286).

Despite the closeness to Russia, Kazakhstan has stayed true to the multi-vector foreign policy<sup>36</sup>. As Omelicheva and Du (2018) have remarked, Kazakhstan's government has balanced the dependency from Russia through the development of foreign relations with China, the USA, and the European Union. For example, Kazakhstan has actively supported the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" initiative and "has remained the most reliable partner of the US and an acclaimed partner of the countries in Europe" (Omelicheva & Du, 2018, p. 106). Such a diversified foreign policy is directly linked to Kazakhstan's nation-branding, which, according to Insebayeva (2016), is a part of a state-promoted nation-building process directed at the Kazakhstani population. Since foreign investment is crucial for Kazakhstan, the country's positive international image can considerably improve the national welfare of the republic and, simultaneously, facilitate national pride and consolidation. For the ruling elite, a successful image of Kazakhstan worldwide also means the legitimization of the regime (cf. Insebayeva, 2016, pp. 9-12)

Similarly, Sengupta (2017, p. 64) has believed that foreign policies "intend to redefine public perceptions of the spatial and temporal dimensions of statehood to reinforce the domestic power of the incumbent regimes." The capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, has become in this regard, a symbol of openness to cooperation and a symbol of blending Eastern and Western cultures. This symbolic status was reinforced by President Nazarbayev's

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<sup>36</sup> This is notable that the multi-vectoring towards Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea was also reflected in the media landscape (Lehtisaari et.al., 2018) and cinema (Isaacs, 2018) of Kazakhstan.

proposal to hold talks on the Ukrainian crisis in Astana in 2015 (cf. Satubaldina, 2015). The general reaction to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has also been reflected in the multi-vector nature of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. On the one hand, Kazakhstan tried to deter the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and support the low international norm regarding territorial integrity. At the same time, the Crimean referendum was considered by Kazakhstan as a right for expression of the population's will, and even understanding towards Russia was articulated. Finally, Kazakhstan's officials have repeatedly offered the role of the republic as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to demonstrate supposed neutrality on this matter (cf. Weitz, 2014). Such a virtuous image of Kazakhstan was documented in both the Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020 and Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 ("Foreign Policy concept...", 2014; "Foreign Policy concept...", 2020). The hosting of the international exhibition EXPO 2017 in Nur-Sultan under the slogan "Future Energy", has proved again that Kazakhstan aims at international cooperation and, unlike Russia, looks toward the future rather than the past.

Several innovations have also happened after Euromaidan affected Kazakhstan's domestic policy. For instance, in 2014, President Nazarbayev presented a new national concept, '*Mangilik El*' (*Eternal State*), which proclaimed national unity, peace, and harmony in their civic sense. This concept, called the "Patriotic Act", has operated with terms such as "citizens of Kazakhstan", "Kazakhstanis" and "people of Kazakhstan" who were supposed to be consolidated across "simple truths", such as the well-being of families, hospitality, security, and confidence in the future (Patrioticheskii Akt – *Mangilik El*, 2016). The governmental promotion of civic nationalism and the statehood in Kazakhstan has also been evident in the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the formation of Kazakh khanate in the year 2015. However, although this celebration was *ex-post*, it has been oriented mostly towards ethnic Kazakhs (Hilding, 2018, p. 83).

Despite the "neighborliness" with Russia, in 2017, the plan for the transition of the Kazakh language from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet was finalized. Following Goble (2018), this change "represents a decisive move away from the 'Russian World'" and can potentially disintegrate the ethnic majority and minorities. Nonetheless, the government has regularly highlighted the importance of the trilingualism program in Kazakhstan. Citing President Nazarbayev, "The future of Kazakhstanis is based on fluency in Kazakh, Russian and

English [...]. As a result, all our graduates will speak three languages at a level necessary for living and working in the country and the global world” (“Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan...” 2018).

According to Laruelle and Royce (2019), Kazakhstanis, regardless of their ethnonational identity, have supported this political course. After the Ukraine crisis, there is no “exclusive dichotomy” between the pro-Russian vs. pro-US position (Laruelle & Royce, 2019, p. 16). However, even young Kazakhstanis would rather support Russia’s leadership if they had a choice (cf. Laruelle & Royce, 2019, p. 208-214). A survey among Kazakhstani youth by Umbetalieva et al. (2016) has provided a similar result: 48.9% of Kazakhstani youth suggested that Kazakhstan “should seek closer ties with the Eurasian Customs Union”, while 37.6% also spoke in favor of rapprochement with EU countries (Umbetaeva et al., 2016, p. 159).

All these examples demonstrate yet again that both foreign and domestic policy in Kazakhstan has still been following the contradictory, or in other words, multi-vector trend. As it is obvious from the current research mentioned above, such ambiguity of politics impacts the self-identification of the Kazakhstani population. Zhanalin (2011, p. 234-237) has argued the following: Kazakhstan’s multi-vector diplomacy supports the development of fragmented non-national identity, while, simultaneously, the Kazakh identity in its ethnic sense has experienced a rise. In the research of Jašina-Schäfer (2019), alternatively, young Russian speakers in Kazakhstan have expressed attachment to Kazakhstan and their sympathy to the current political elite, which aims to maintain ethnic diversity in the country and unite the Kazakhstani nation.

According to Laruelle (2019), studying the young generation in such ambiguous circumstances is crucial. As she has rightly noticed, 51% of the entire Kazakhstan population, or 9 million people, were born after Nazarbayev became the head of the country (cf. Laruelle, 2019, p. 2). This demographical situation gives a reason to assert that these young people who already grew up in a global world form, to a great extent, the character of modern Kazakhstani society. Although the young generation is often associated with political passivity and lack of interest in civic activism (e.g., Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019; Laruelle, 2019), young people of Kazakhstan can hardly be described in explicit terms.

Using modern technologies and consuming global culture, young Kazakhstanis have reflected the surrounding hybridity and the fast-changing circumstances of both their home country and the world as a whole (Mingisheva, 2019). Thus, according to Isaacs (2019, pp. p. 227-228) the young generation of Kazakhstanis represents a unique mixed identity, while “the ethnic-civic dichotomy does not adequately capture the complex global, traditional, and post-Soviet norms, values, and beliefs that contribute to the formation of new, ambiguous, and fluid constellations of identity.”

Although numerous studies regarding the nation-related identity of young people in Kazakhstan were published in the past years (e.g., Rees & Burkhanov, 2018; Senggirbay, 2019; Mingisheva, 2019; Kosnazarov, 2019; Isaacs, 2019; Jašina-Schäfer, 2019), there is still less attention paid to the link between technology usage and the sense of national belonging, specifically among minority youth. Therefore, I decided to investigate the case of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Being descendants of Soviet people, they experience the consequences of the previous epoch and its failure, especially in light of Russia’s current foreign politics. Such biographical background can become even more complicated because the global era is associated with uncertainty, requiring constant identity management. The new everyday routines, such as mobile social media usage, might become a useful tool for young ethnic Russians to confront their sense of nation-related belonging.

### **3. Empirical Research**

“Be a good craftsman: Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and to use the sociological imagination”  
(Mills, 1959, p. 224).

#### **3.1. General Perspective and Research Design**

In the current Chapter, I would like to introduce my research project in detail and describe the characteristics of the present study’s empirical approach. While most of the studies regarding national identity and belonging in post-Soviet space had traditionally focused on the top-down perspective (e.g., Laitin, 1998; Blum, 2007; Laruelle, 2014), I decided to take

a different approach in my research. Instead of studying the political elite's role in building national awareness among the general population, my interest lies in studying a particular social group in a bottom-up sense. Following the constructivist paradigm, I paid attention to ordinary people - specifically young people who live in Kazakhstan and identify themselves as Russians, to explore how they describe themselves in nation-related terms while addressing their social media usage. Using a formulation by Waller, Farquharson, and Dempsey (2015, p. 14), "giving voice to the research participants" became the starting point of my research.

Although in the last several years, bottom-up research of post-Soviet and, in particular, of Kazakhstani society began to appear (e.g., Pawłusz & Seliverstova, 2016; Sharipova et al., 2017; Isaacs, 2018; Blackburn, 2019), the role of ICT in national identity construction in the region has still been poorly studied. Meanwhile, the spread of social media has reached colossal proportions and has become a place of public discussions and contentions. For example, as described in Chapter 2.4.4, Russian-speaking social media users were actively discussing the Ukrainian crisis and Crimea's occupation that required an in-depth investigation from the perspective of active Internet users. The attitude of ethnic minorities of Russian origin outside of Russia can be of particular interest in this context.

Finally, the decision to analyze the nation-related identity and belonging of Kazakhstani Russians in the light of the Russian-Ukraine conflict was supported by my ethnic background. Growing up and living in Kazakhstan as a part of the Slavic minority opened the possibility for me to look at the subject from an insider perspective, having an in-depth understanding of the chosen population's socio-political context. Simultaneously, long-term residence outside of Kazakhstan allowed me to include some "outsider" elements, such as maintaining a conscious distance from the research topic and reconsidering my preconceptions and biases concerning the research topic critically (cf. Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 57). Ironically, as I will demonstrate below, both of these characteristics affected the subsequent recruiting and interviewing of research participants positively. Lastly, a personal connection to Kazakhstan also has some practical benefits: having Russian language proficiency and being able to contact my social network across the country could support me in accessing the target population and organizing my research process.

Thus, the current study's main purpose is to reach an in-depth comprehension of the self-definition of young ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan concerning their ethnonational affiliation and examine an interrelation between their social media usage and their sense of nation-related belonging. The objectives arising from that purpose are:

- To reveal the self-definition along ethnonational and civic lines of the target population.
- To gain personal interpretation related to ethnic origin and citizenship of young Kazakhstani Russians in the light of the *Russian world* concept.
- To identify social media usage patterns of young Kazakhstani Russians and their connection to civic and ethnonational belonging.

Consequently, the study aims to answer the following general research question: *How does the nation-related belonging relate to social media usage and vice versa among young Kazakhstani Russians?*

Since my focus was on people's personal experiences, and my goal included an in-depth exploration of the selected topic, I decided to apply a qualitative approach to my study. One can find various examples that provide compelling arguments for applying qualitative methods for studying a) everyday nationalism (e.g., Knott, 2015a), b) identity (e.g., Brekhus, 2008; Taylor, 2015), c) Internet usage (e.g., Wang, Hawk, & Tenopir, 2000; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and d) ethnic minorities in general (Laoire, 2016; Velazquez & Avila, 2017).

Moreover, I share the idea presented by Thompson and Fevre (2001), who have emphasized the necessity of using Weber's concept of interpretive sociology (*Verstehende Soziologie*) when analyzing the phenomenon of nationalism. Using the formulation provided by the authors, in this dissertation I have focused my attention on

“the ways, in which individuals, as practical agents make sense of what their culture means to them, as well as how they negotiate the differences between their culture and that of another nation and what this may mean in terms of how they locate themselves in relation to others” (Thompson & Fevre, 2001, p. 311).

Among many qualitative methods, as I will describe in Chapter 3.2.1, a semi-structured interview has been most appropriate for such a purpose.



Choosing an “emergent design” (Patton, 2014, p. 50), I have consciously avoided using concrete labels to describe the research type of this dissertation. The applied methodological approach was, to a certain extent, an evolving one, i.e., I defined its concrete form in the process of research itself. Designing my research, I oriented myself on an exploratory simple case study (Yin, 2014). While I defined the general purpose and its concrete objectives from the beginning of the research journey, the research design became its final form during the research process. For example, I did not initially know which social media usage trends will reveal themselves through interviews and might require additional research. During field research additional purposes for the study appeared:

- To analyze the most popular social media accounts among Kazakhstani Russians from a perspective of banal and everyday nationalism.
- To collate the results of both research pieces while considering the sense of nation-related belonging of young Kazakhstani Russians in the context of their social media usage patterns and content of urban Instagram accounts.

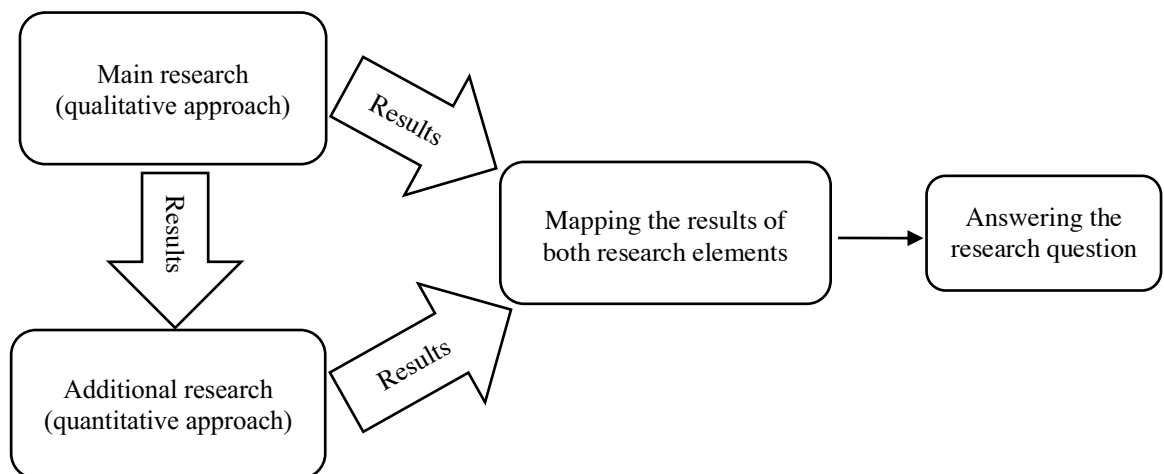
As a result, I decided to conduct additional research, which was supposed to illustrate a particular example of the most popular local social media accounts among my target population. This research supposed to provide an additional perspective on the national imagination beyond my respondents’ subjective descriptions. Since nation-related belongingness is complex and context-dependent, I decided to consider it from two perspectives – personal and medial, while identifying common trends in interviews and social media content. However, my social media analysis did not aim to identify media effects in the sense of media impact research.

While I provide a detailed description of this research in Chapter 3.8.1, it is important to highlight on this place that I resorted to using the quantitative approach. Even though using the qualitative approach allowed me to reach an in-depth understanding of the bottom-up national image, quantitative analysis was the most satisfying methodological tactic for drawing out general tendencies in the social media representation of the nation. As Lindgren (2017, p. 282) has noted, today, in the age of digital technologies, it is more productive to use a “methodological bricolage,” which “means placing your specific research task at the center of your considerations and allowing your particular combination and application of methods take shape in relation to the needs that characterize the given task.” I

will reflect upon the opportunities and limitations of this methodical approach in the following chapters.

Information-gathering throughout the research journey looked like the following: first, I employed a qualitative method, and afterward applied a quantitative follow-up, based on the obtained results. Because of the study's explorative character, I will present its results in chronological order. The response to 1) occurrences through the research process and 2) the interplay between literature review and information collection, resulting in the following research structure (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Structure of the Current Research



During the research process, it became clear that the research project will have an interdisciplinary character. Although my work involved some aspects of political science, regional studies, and international relations, it is, first of all, sociological research. Being inspired by (Schulze, 2019, p. 117), the leading academic interest of my investigation focused on the idea of the Reality of the collectives (“Wirklichkeit der Kollektive”) as “interpersonal patterns of action, worlds of meaning and dissemination” (“*interpersonale Handlungsmuster, Sinnwelten und Verteilungen*”). In this regard, I have shared the view of Schulze (2019, p. 21) about sociological research being “a process of making implicit social knowledge explicit and confronting it with social facts” (“*implizite gesellschaftliche Wissen explizit zu machen und mit den sozialen Tatsachen zu konfrontieren*”).

Basing this dissertation on the idea of interpretive sociology (Weber, 1978), my aim was not to determine the causal relationship between social media use and identity formation in the sense of positivistic sociology. Instead, I discovered nation-related belongingness from young Kazakhstani Russians' perspectives and an understanding of the role of social media in the social construction of reality for this particular group of Kazakhstani population. However, it is difficult to fit my research into a disciplinary framework of sociology only. Using theories and empirical results from social psychology, media studies, geography, political science, and history provided an interdisciplinary character for my research. In that respect, the interdisciplinarity supported a diverse view of the complex modern world and helped find appropriate research tools even outside of disciplinary borders. Next, I would like to point out two main features and challenges I faced first, in the context of deep mediatization, and second, in the post-Soviet region. Afterward, I will provide a detailed description of each research step, including research context, sampling, and analysis strategy of the collected information.

### **3.1.1. Social Research in the Time of Deep Mediatization**

Although the Internet is not a new phenomenon, there are still more inquiries than clear answers around how people use it. Moreover, even if researchers provide some explicable tendencies about Internet use, it usually remains open if and how these assumptions can be generalized, and how long they will be valid because the Internet has been continuously developing. Studying social media patterns can be particularly challenging in this regard (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). As a result, Internet-related research requires creativity and mental flexibility. According to Lindgren (2017), researchers should critically reflect on the reliability, validity, and generalizability of social research in these circumstances.

While automatized big data analysis is gaining popularity in Internet research and finds its followers in the academic field (e.g., Ghani et al. 2019), it is essential to be aware of their limitations, especially for Internet usage research. The Internet has become more fragmented today, and as Miller et al. (2016) have proven, people are often adapting technology to their personal needs, ignoring its factual appropriation given by software designers and developers. Unfortunately, social media such as Facebook or Instagram are still

often considered in academia as universal applications, while cultural or other social differences stay ignored (cf. Miller et al., 2016, pp. 9-10). However, to understand motivations for using the Internet and identify specific usage patterns, especially considering contextual factors, an explorative user-centered approach is required (e.g., Lindgren, 2017; Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, & Millette, 2017). Latzko-Toth et al. (2017, p. 210) have used the term *thick data* as “highly textured and contextualized sociological data,” which, despite their small sample size, aim to reach an in-depth understanding and oppose to the big data concept.

Moreover, the Internet and social media in particular, contain not only textual information but also other digital formats, such as audio, photos, and videos. Besides analyzing the online environment, the amount of ‘likes’ or geo-location data can be useful during the research process. This multimodality raises a further question of incorporating different content formats in a research project and which methods can be applied efficiently for different content types. Additionally, in comparison to classic research data, the information, which has been published online, from comments to personal profiles, can be edited or removed, making it unsteady and even controversial. It is often too difficult to identify the primary source of viral social media posts or hashtags because of constant sharing and reposting. The available massive Internet data also entails the question of its adequate delimitation according to the research field.

The fast changes in functionality, on the one hand, and rapidly evolving trends inside and across social media, on the other hand, require ambiguity tolerance from a scholar and the ability to create an appropriate abstraction level. The challenge is finding out what exactly one’s social media news feed includes regarding the research interest. Even if users follow a social media account, how often will they receive posts from these sources in their personal feed? Furthermore, even if this user has received the following content in the news feed, does it mean automatically that he or she will read this post? I will critically reflect upon these questions in the research results chapter.

Particular social media content and data access *per se* can be restricted and impact the whole research design. An example from the present study has shown that ethical issues, which have become a vital matter after the Cambridge Analytica scandal (e.g., Schneble, Elger, & Shaw, 2018) can result in unplanned design changes. Although initially, I planned to gather data from open Instagram accounts for additional research automatically, as of

April 2018, it was no longer possible to collect the necessary data through application programming interfaces (APIs) and analyze them with the programming language Python (e.g., Hill, 2018). As a result, I needed to review my methodological intentions and, instead of automatic analysis, I turned to a manual one, which entailed additional time resources. However, the change to manual coding allowed me, in the end, to analyze textual information (posts and comments) as well as images or videos of Instagram posts as a whole and filter out incorrect or deficient posts – this would hardly be possible with automatic coding.

Despite all these challenges, there are also some positive aspects of deep mediatization. Included digital perspective in the social research process opens numerous opportunities. For example, the digitalization of societies has provided access to various multimedia data, which can consist of both people's agency and official positions and improve the quality of research results. Due to social media, it is also easier to recruit research participants and build (online) academic communities. Finally, today, when *online* and *offline* are practically merged, and social media usage belongs to everyday rituals, it is nearly impossible to ignore a technological aspect in the analyses.

### **3.1.2. Studying Nation-Related Belonging in the Post-Soviet Context**

As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2.2, the concept of the nation, as well as the social order in general, in the ex-Soviet republics differ from those typical examples manifested in Western societies. Thus, Western-based models of nationalism and social structure should be applied to the study of post-Soviet nationalism in a critical reflexive manner, instead of being taken for granted. Using the example of Post-Soviet Russia, Kordonsky (2008) has asserted the uniqueness of the Russian social structure compared to modern capitalistic societies. Hence, it is necessary to consider the former USSR through a particular focus. In this regard, analyzing statistical numbers can only have limited use for social scientists in understanding this society because they depend on formal institutions. In contrast, in the post-Soviet context, informal institutions and practices are central. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 26) have also highlighted that in the East European context, formal official categorization and self-description should not be “taken as given” and require particular consideration. In addition, official statistics and mass public surveys in authoritarian and hybrid regimes cast doubt on their reliability (Goode, 2010). There is a case of many state-

sponsored “pseudo-sociological studies” conducted in the post-Soviet region (Goode, 2010, p. 1060). Moreover, as Pawłusz and Seliverstova (2016, p. 70) have formulated:

„The impact of informality in terms of the methodology is that existing official data and standardized ways of collecting data, such as surveys or structured interviews with elite political representatives, are not sufficient to grasp the complexity and changing aspects of the formation of national identity in the region.”

Explorative research, which I employed in the current study, can open opportunities to discover this complexity. However, one should consider that explorative research’ results, which concentrate on regions, or country-related characteristics, are highly specific. Therefore, they are inappropriate for generalization in the sense of quantitative research, yet provide first essential highlights and hypotheses for further studies.

Besides, discovering informal practices using qualitative fieldwork methods, such as interviewing, can be associated with certain difficulties in an authoritarian context. As Goode (2010) has noted, respondents in hybrid regimes can be aware of talking openly about politically sensitive topics and, in general, are not necessarily willing to establish contact with foreigners. There is often a reason for the potential respondents to see this as a threat to their personal well-being and those of their families, coming from the state in case of interactions with unknown researchers from abroad. As I will demonstrate later, I experienced that during the interviews.

Because of media control and Internet regulations in authoritarian regimes (e.g., Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Gunitsky, 2015), the non-reactive methods are hardly the better data source for studying national-related belongingness in the post-Soviet region. For example, while conducting a content analysis of social media comments, one should be aware that there is no guarantee for these being written willingly by ordinary people or whether they were government sponsored. Moreover, in the case of Internet ethnography, for example, the research process can be complicated by self-censorship inside local<sup>37</sup> online communities.

Studying nationalism and belongingness in the post-Soviet region was challenging because of the political confrontation between the East and the West, which resulted from

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<sup>37</sup> I use *local* to describe everything that relates to city, while *domestic/national* stands for Kazakhstan-related issues.

the Ukrainian crisis. Being surrounded by various and often biased information, e.g., regarding Crimea's "occupation" by, or "historical return" to Russia, such factors as "emotions, political preferences or personal convictions" suggested by Libman (2019, p. 14), should be reflected on during the research process. In such circumstances, it is crucial first, to evaluate available studies on this topic critically, and second, to distance the research project from personal beliefs, while respecting political neutrality in the sense of Weber's "absence from moral value judgments" ("*Werturteilsfreiheit*") (Libman, 2019, p. 10).

### **3.2. Main Research: Analysis of Interviews**

#### **3.2.1. Research Description**

Considering the contextual factors described above, a clear necessity for me to have personal contact with the target group – young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan in their familiar environment – was pronounced. Therefore, I decided to conduct personal interviews. In short, this method allowed me to reach the pursuit of an in-depth understanding of everyday practices; second, through a conversation, I could clarify ambiguous definitions and provide conditions for candor; finally, an interview offers openness and flexible setting for new and sudden inputs. Moreover, to study identity, the interview's narrative nature can be useful (cf. Abdelal et al., 2009, pp. 4-5).

Although modern technologies provide the opportunity to conduct interviews through the Internet, for example, using Skype (e.g., Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014)., it was crucial for me not only to ask questions but also to use some elements of participant observation. Due to limited time resources, a full-fledged, long-term participant observation, which is supposed to be conducted at least for one year (e.g., Jorgensen, 2015, p. 11), was not an option for my project. Nonetheless, studying social media usage as an everyday routine has required a research technique that could precisely follow how young people use technology *in practice* and how they *describe* their usage patterns. The everyday routine in general, and Internet usage in particular, can often include automatic actions. They can have become a habit and can be taken for granted by users while being of interest for the study. In addition, these observation elements helped minimize the social desirability

bias, which belongs to the concomitants of participatory methods such as interviews (e.g., Jo, 2000).

Thus, the Internet-based method could hardly satisfy the need to combine interviewing with the participant observation element. A semi-structured face-to-face interview, in turn, could provide a needed thematic format with a high level of flexibility and an opportunity for observation. Compared to structured and unstructured ones, it combines both types' advantages and becomes an optimal solution following the human-centred research. According to Waller et. al. (2015, p. 78) a semi-structured interview is also an appropriate tool in providing a voice for a specific group, which usually does not have an opportunity to express their opinion openly. As I will demonstrate below, my experience has also proven this need in Kazakhstani Russians' case.

Simultaneously, it was clear to me that interviewing is a time-consuming process and requires specific preparation such as recruiting participants, finding an appropriate space for conducting interviews, etc. Besides that, there is a risk that people would not be able to discuss their national belongingness openly with a stranger in the position of power over the talk and respond to my questions in an unbiased manner. Although my target population did not belong to a classic marginalized group, the issue of national belonging for an ethnic minority could potentially be a vulnerable topic. Therefore, I should take into account possible emotional reactions and create an environment of trust. Lastly, interviewing cannot provide dynamic representation, i.e., the interview's answers relate to the moment of the study's conduction.

Similarly, social media usage observation has its limitations. Despite my efforts to make the interview as close to a natural environment of my respondents as possible, the demonstration of social media usage in an interview setting cannot be equated to the use in a natural everyday environment.

According to the research goal, the main research included the following *specific questions*:

1. How do young Kazakhstani Russians describe themselves in terms of nation-related identity and belonging?
2. How do they interpret their ethnic origin and current citizenship in the context of spreading the *Russian World* idea?



3. How does the choice of social media platform relate to their nation-related sense of belonging?
4. Which social media usage patterns do young Kazakhstani Russians have, and how do these patterns relate to their nation-related belonging?

Based on theoretical and thematic frameworks described in the previous chapters, I formulated *general assumptions* for each of the specific research questions:

1. Young ethnic Russians describe themselves as ethnic Russians and citizens of Kazakhstan. Simultaneously, as a minority group, they are concerned about their ethnonational belonging, which, as a result, becomes more vivid in their self-description. The historically established antagonism between Russians and Kazakhs, which Ukrainian events might support, can also motivate these young people to rethink their ethnonational belonging and connection to both Kazakhstan and Russia.
2. The online spread of the *Russian World* idea during the Ukraine crisis can support young Kazakhstani Russians reconsidering their attitude towards the historical motherland. In addition, the uncertainty of the national paradigm in Kazakhstan can support their willingness to search for more stable and positively evaluated identities and groups of belonging. Rediscovering their belongingness to Russia can provide additional options for positive categorization, while their connection to Kazakhstan will remain formal.
3. If young Kazakhstani Russians use Russian social media (e.g., V Kontakte) and consume Russian social media content, they face banal and everyday forms of Russian nationalism and are involved in Russia's domestic events. At the same time, without confident Kazakh language proficiency, they have less contact with Kazakhstani domestic issues, which might transform their connection to the country of their birth and current residence.
4. Using social media platforms on an everyday basis, they create a Russian-speaking echo chamber, communicating with only those people and filtering only such information that supports their ingroup/outgroup bias. In the end, this echo chamber effect improves their feeling of being connected to the Russian Federation and the *Russian World* idea, while belonging to Kazakhstan might become secondary.

### 3.2.2. Research Participants and the Recruiting Strategy

While reviewing the literature on Russian minority groups in the near abroad, I noticed that describing this ethnic group is often based on the ‘passport nationality’ without questioning its social label. However, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 2.2, in the post-Soviet context, this official feature does not necessarily reflect people’s subjective sense of belonging. In the end, this idea formed the foundation for the research sample of my study. It was crucial to find young people who would not only have ascriptive characteristics or names known as Russian but would also identify themselves as Russians.

Moreover, to specify my target population, I limited my sample to young ethnic Russians who are citizens of Kazakhstan from big cities and are between 18 and 23 years of age. The age span was specified based on two reasons: firstly, in Kazakhstan, the age of maturity is 18, and the passport issuance procedure occurs at this age. Starting at age 18, a person officially becomes a citizen of Kazakhstan and assumes his or her rights and responsibilities as a full member of society. At the same time, the age between 18 and 23 relates to making fundamental decisions, such as choosing a future profession or emigration plans. Thus, it is accompanied by reflections upon social roles and belonging to different groups. After 22 years of age, when university education is completed for most young people in Kazakhstan, career life begins, while the adolescent era slowly ends. For me, though, the short period between reaching maturity and starting an ‘adult’ life as an employee was of the main interest.

Another factor, which was required for research purposes, was active social media usage. The potential respondents should be registered on at least one of the most popular Kazakhstan social media platforms (*Vkontakte*, *Facebook*, or *Instagram*) and use social media on a daily basis. The social conversation, the quantity of online ‘friends’, or the posting frequency was secondary for the research and was not considered while recruiting.

Furthermore, while recruiting participants, I realized that most of the Russians, who agreed to participate in my study, could be described as an intellectual elite – people who aspire to leadership positions in society. In this regard, they have already been or potentially become opinion-makers of the future, which usually relates to an active civic position. The general fact causes that circumstance that Kazakhstani Russians have high socio-economic statuses (see Chapter 2.3.2) and can gain a good education, which might allow them to

become part of the intellectual elite. Having economic and social privileges, on the one hand, and being an ethnic minority, on the other, have shaped a specific sample.

This sample situation also fits within the “homogeneous sampling strategy” (e.g., Patton, 2014, p. 429), a recognized approach to the in-depth description of a certain social group. This was also useful because socially active Kazakhstani Russians have been following world events, including the Ukraine crisis, and have already developed their personal positions towards the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. This fact has allowed me to collect information through enriched answers and increased the credibility of the delivered information during interviews.

However, having such a homogeneous group of respondents could make it impossible for me to compare and systemize different cases inside the sample. Therefore, to make comparisons inside the target group, I defined additional sample characteristics during the search of potential respondents (see Table 1). As I received participation consent mostly from very similar people, I intentionally searched for different participants to achieve variety in the sample.

1. Gender –at first, mostly women showed interest in participating in the study; hence, after the first three weeks of recruitment, I purposely switched the search focus on men.
2. The university program –humanities students agreed typically more often to participate in my research; thus, I tried to include students from social and natural sciences faculties.
3. Type of university – students from private universities were more motivated to participate in the study than those from the state ones. However, including a sufficient number of students from state universities was critical because private universities usually have a higher tuition fee and typically include mainly young people from a higher socio-economic background<sup>38</sup>.
4. Part of the country – traditionally Northern Kazakhstan has a higher ethnic Russian population and is geographically closer to Russia, while the Southern part of the

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<sup>38</sup> It does not mean that the state universities are completely unpopular among upper-class young people. Sometimes state universities are more renowned and provide more educational opportunities due to government subsidies. At the same time, this governmental support allows state universities to have lower fees and, hence, provide access also for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (OECD, 2017).

country is associated with traditional culture and Islam (see Chapter 2.2). To achieve diversity in this issue, I intentionally focused my acquisition of participants from big cities in the North and the South.

Nonetheless, it is essential to emphasize that the final sample was limited to 1) young people from big Kazakhstani cities, 2) who identify themselves as Russians, 3) were mostly students, and 4) belong to the intellectual elite. The young Russians from educationally deprived social strata as well as from rural regions were not included in the sample; that limits the generalization of the results to the Russian ethnic group of Kazakhstan as a whole.

Table 2: Final Research Sample

<b>Purposive/non-probability sampling</b>	
Age	18-23
Place of birth/place of growing up	Kazakhstan
Citizenship	Kazakhstan
Location	Big cities of Kazakhstan
Ethnic identity/Self-description	Russian
Social media usage	Active/on a daily basis
<b>Matched comparisons</b>	
Gender	Male/Female/Other
University programs	“Hard science” vs. “Soft science.”
Type of university	State vs. private
Part of the country	North vs. South

To reach a diversity of interviewees, I needed a combination of several recruitment strategies. The first approach I applied was the gatekeeper’s strategy. Although this strategy has its weaknesses, e.g., a gatekeeper can act according to personal interests and biases, it was a useful first step in recruiting potential participants, especially considering the high level of distrust typical for the post-Soviet area. I decided to contact associate professors and

university staff in general, who agreed to become gatekeepers and provided access to the students in some universities across the country.

Providing access included the following: gatekeepers assured their students that I was a legitimate researcher and allowed me to announce my search request for potential respondents and exchange contacts with interested students before the university lectures started. My experience has revealed that this practice has successfully removed doubts from potential respondents and supported their motivation to participate in interviews. However, as several respondents reported later, some of the gatekeepers promised them various bonuses, such as the best grade for an exam, if they would agree to participate in the study. That could influence the quality of the information offered by young Kazakhstani Russians in the data collecting process and promote social desirability.

After the first interviews, I added two additional recruitment strategies: snowball sampling and the social media announcement. I specifically asked respondents to recommend potential participants with different characteristics, trying to solve the problem of a cautious attitude towards researchers among the Kazakhstani population and, at the same time, to diversify the sample. In line with the gatekeeper approach, the snowball strategy proved to be effective, although personal biases could also influence the research results. Moreover, the snowball approach has shown that there are concerns regarding participation in a research interview. For example, some of the potential participants recommended by my respondents rejected meeting with me after voicing my research topic. There were cases when potential respondents met with me but refused to discuss the Ukrainian crisis or any political issues in general. Therefore, national belonging and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, seem to be sensitive topics for my target population and might activate reluctance to discuss them in a research setting.

Compared to the snowball strategy, the social media campaign was less useful for searching for potential respondents. This campaign included calling for participation in interviews posted on Facebook and V Kontakte by my Kazakhstan based network. Despite the low response numbers to this call for participants, it still helped me access a few study participants and increase the respondents' diversity to some degree. Also, similar to the gatekeeper strategy, the social media announcement provided the necessary security for my target group. The social media post with the call for participants was reposted by people

who were my online friends cushioned the mistrust of potential respondents. Some of them confessed that the possibility of seeing my social media profile aroused their interest in talking with me and having common social media friends dispelled their doubts that participation in my research could have negative consequences.

In sum, the combination of different recruitment strategies proved to be effective - it allowed me to receive 33 agreements to participate in an interview. In the end, 22 of them satisfied the required research criteria and were appropriate for further analysis (Appendix A).

### **3.2.3. Data Collection**

To conduct the interviews, I had three-month research stay in Kazakhstan from April to June 2017. Compared to online interviews, my physical presence provided more control over the interview setting, which is essential in sensitive identity-related topics. In addition, having a synchronous face-to-face conversation, I could apply body language and easily integrate some participant observation elements in the interview process.

Initially, I decided to limit the research geography to two main cities – Nur-Sultan – the country’s capital, and Almaty – known as the “southern” capital, financial and cultural center of Kazakhstan. During the data collection, some of the respondents recommended that I visit Karaganda as one of the “most Russian” cities. Since visiting Karaganda did not conflict with my research design and could enrich the results, I included this city in my research program.

As I have already mentioned above, the search for study participants went hand in hand with conducting and analysing the interviews. Since the interview location can influence the research quality (e.g., Elwood & Martin, 2000), finding an appropriate space for interviewing was one of my biggest challenges in Kazakhstan. In Almaty, I had the luck of conducting interviews in a separate conference room, which supported an intimate and safe environment, which positively impacted the trustworthiness of interviews. In Nur-Sultan and Karaganda, the interviews were conducted in public spaces, such as restaurants or coffee shops. When selecting public locations, I was guided by the respondents’ recommendations of suitable settings, e.g., low noise, the ability to sit at a separate table, and the distance to other tables. Participation in the interview did not involve any kind of financial

compensation; however, I provided drinks and snacks for my respondents. All interviews were in the Russian language. The average duration of interviews was 58 minutes.

The data collection (semi-structured interviewing) based itself upon an interview guide, which set the conversation's direction and strengthened the research's trustworthiness (e.g., Kallio et al., 2016). I developed the interview guide upon previous research results and theoretical knowledge (Appendix B). This guide's final version arose after the pre-test with one of my Kazakhstani colleagues and a pilot test with a potential participant. Although I had the interview guide, my interview setting included changes of the questions' sequence, if needed, and allowed the rise of new topics, as well as altered thematic directions.

Another critical aspect of the interviewing process was the ethical issue. My task as a researcher was to provide an appropriate level of confidentiality and privacy for the participants. As Kirk (2007) has noticed, power relations and informed consent should be considered while collecting qualitative data from young people. Therefore, before starting the interview, I informed every participant about the study's purposes and anonymizing data. I particularly explained that instead of real names, a specific code (e.g., AA1, where A stays for the city Almaty, the second A is the first letter of the respondent's name, and 1 is a sequential number) will be used in the dissertation. Using the code makes the identification of respondents' personalities hardly possible. Furthermore, I saved all the records and notes regarding the interviews on a password-protected laptop. The interviewees agreed with this anonymity strategy without having additional questions, confirmed their voluntary participation as well as gave me their verbal informed consent to record and use the provided information for research aims.

Although my respondents already reached the age of maturity, in some cases, the interview process was defined by power relations, e.g., few respondents treated me like an instructor, asking me to evaluate if what they were telling me was right or not. Because my goal was to create a neutral conversation and motivate young people to express their personal opinions and experiences, I emphasized our similarities. I also used humor, which proved to be effective. Becoming more familiar with me as a conversational partner, some of the respondents were genuinely surprised that their personal opinion could be interesting

for anyone; that supported their emotional involvement and personal disclosure during the interview.

While the first part of the interviews was devoted to nation-related belonging, I added the observational part to the second block conversation, which included questions about social media usage. During the talk, I asked my respondents for their consent to show me what they see in the most usable social media application and *how exactly* do they use it. After an intensive and often emotional discussion in the first section, most interviewees expressed trust and directly agreed to show their social media profiles. As I already mentioned above, instead of using the provided laptop, all the respondents preferred to use their mobile devices that brought the observational setting even closer to their factual everyday usage. Opening the most usable social media application on their smartphones, the young ethnic Russians demonstrated which functions they use first and what they do with the content they find in their newsfeeds.

The observation took in average 5 minutes. On the scale between having complete participation or having complete observation, I would describe my role as a participant-observer to be somewhere in the middle. I was actively observing my respondents while they were using their smartphones; that included some clarification questions from my side; however, with the opportunity to operate their devices without constant interruption. The observations were documented in the research journal and used, alongside the interview transcripts<sup>39</sup>, for the following analysis.

Combining different recruitment strategies allowed me to achieve a satisfactory amount of information for analysis after three months. Compared to quantitative research, the sample size in the qualitative one depends on multiple factors (Patton, 2014). Therefore, I based my sample on the general research purpose and the acquired information from interviews instead of defining a certain number of interviews right from the start. Following the principle of saturation (e.g., Mason, 2010), I stopped data collection when the respondents' insights and the already gathered information started repeating themselves, while any new thematic insights related to the research questions did not appear anymore.

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<sup>39</sup> Original transcripts are available and can be provided if needed.



### 3.2.4. Data Analysis

The preliminary analysis of the collected information begun right after conducting the first interviews. Such an approach helped me, firstly, to be open towards unexpected findings and allowed me, for example, to add an additional explanation for some terms in the following interviews; secondly, to optimize the observational part, e.g., changing from the planned desktop to the factually happening smartphone usage observation. Finally, the first basic analysis of interviews during the data collection was necessary to recognize the data saturation. Nonetheless, to limit imposing ideas from the first to subsequent interviews, the in-depth analyses took place after all interviews were completed.

When the data collection was completed, the 22 interview records were transcribed according to a preformulated transcription guideline. Since the level of transcription detail depends on the study's purposes and available resources, I decided to transcribe all the interviews, starting from 'warm-up' and ending with the last question of the interview. The full transcription was needed because the established interview structure was slightly different in every particular case, although every interview included the same questions and had a similar thematic direction. Some topics arose several times in different questions, and that again required a transcription of the whole content of interviews. However, this full transcription was concentrated foremost on ideas and meanings, which young Kazakhstani Russians provided during the conversations. At the same time, only the essential non-verbal expressions (e.g., significant pauses and laughter), as well as interruptions, were referenced in the textual version of the interviews.

Moreover, every interview was coded and received an ordinal number for a transparent outline. Because the interviews' language was Russian consequently, the transcription and further analysis also proceeded in Russian<sup>40</sup>. Only the most relevant text passages used as quotations in this dissertation were later translated into the English language. Original transcripts in Russian were saved and can be accessed if needed.

Translating from non-English into English in qualitative research can provide a serious challenge (van Nes et al., 2010). My study has confirmed that many context-dependent and culture-specific linguistic expressions can hardly be translated into the English language

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<sup>40</sup> Such strategy, namely "staying in the original language as long and as much as possible", is also suggested by van Nes et.al. (2010, p. 315) to increase the quality of data in a non-English qualitative research.

and may pose a potential threat of losing important meanings. According to van Nes et al. (2010), such difficulties with the understanding of translations' implications, in their turn, could negatively impact the validity of the whole research. Therefore, all of the translations I first made were discussed with and improved by an English native speaker with Russian translating experience.

A large amount of textual information demanded a systematic analysis approach. Simultaneously, such an approach should be flexible enough to provide the space for sudden empirical discoveries and already existing theoretical and empirical insights, allowing both inductive and deductive analysis elements. Being explorative, the current study primarily intended to provide a general description of the research subject and collate the results with previous findings in the light of a chosen theoretical framework. Considering all these requirements, my choice fell on qualitative content analysis (QCA) (e.g., Schreier, 2012; Mayring, 2014). Due to its systematic character, by using QCA, I was able to stay within the selected research direction and its specific aspects, despite the abundance of collected data, and, at the same time, pay sufficient attention to the everyday experiences of my respondents and general context-specific constructions from the field.

Since both the reliability<sup>41</sup> and the validity of qualitative studies depend on a systematic and transparent overview of obtained results, a detailed description of the analysis procedure was required (e.g., Schreier, 2012; Bengtsson, 2016). Following Schreier (2012), I divided the analysis into the following steps: 1. Building a coding frame; 2. Defining categories; 3. Splitting interview transcripts into units of coding; 4. Testing and revising the coding frame; 5. Analyzing and summarizing results. All these steps were completed using software MAXQDA.

Creating an acceptable coding frame consisted of two phases. Firstly, I generated concept-driven main categories according to the interview guide: *ethnic self-description*, *civic self-description*, and *social media usage*. Each of these dimensions included a general definition, indicators, and possible examples (see Appendix C). Since my main research

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<sup>41</sup> Although, according to the quantitative research tradition, the term reliability is often used as consistency and stability of measurements at different time points, I support the statement that the specific character of qualitative research claims a new perspective, which is based upon "checking the dependability of data and procedures" (Flick, 2014, p. 483). As Flick (2014, pp. 507-513) has noticed, repeated outcomes during interviews may indicate that some important aspects have been missed, instead of confirming the reliability of the results.

question was based upon concrete research sub-questions, these three dimensions, together with data-driven and concept-driven subcategories, should have shaped the basis for the coding system. However, while reading the interview transcripts, it became clear that an additional main category, *transnational self-description*, was needed. Moreover, two levels (main categories + subcategories) were not sufficient in light of the complicated meanings and diverse experiences of young Kazakhstani Russians from Kazakhstan. As a result, two additional hierarchical levels were added.

Moreover, at this stage, I defined coding units while finding all relevant text segments related to three main thematic dimensions. This step was beneficial for my analysis because the textual material's quantity was blurring the research focus. I intended the first version of the coding frame inductively to be as detailed as possible to identify unexpected aspects and consisted of 150 categories. Following that, a conceptual revision of the coding frame took place. In this phase, beyond the data analysis, studying academic literature was added to the research project, which made it possible to combine data-driven insights with some additional subcategories based upon existing results from previous studies and relevant theories.

Using MAXQDA at this step allowed me not only to merge, remove, and reorder subcategories easily but also search specific words and expressions within all collected data, which significantly expedited the revising process. In addition, capturing important changes in categories' memos ensured a necessary transparency level and consistency through coding. For example, the constant availability of categories' definitions was central to achieve mutual exclusiveness of categories. In the end, I considerably optimized the revised coding system and halved the number of categories.

Before starting the coding process, I tested the coding frame in four interviews, which were different regarding gender, location, and university programs. Since I was the only coder, the coding trial took place in two stages, with ten-day break in between. This double coding trial allowed me to find overlaps between categories, make some formulations more precise, and in the end, improve the general quality of the coding frame. Since the difference between both coding trials was minimal, I decided to use the resulting coding system (see Appendix C) to analyze all collected data. I divided the process of general coding into three parts, according to the main categories. To increase the analysis's validity in

the absence of a coding team, I coded all data twice, having a monthly break between them. An adequate level of “intra-coder reliability” (Schreier, 2012, p. 191) was also supported by my familiarity with the research topic, including the local context<sup>42</sup>.

Although I concentrated my research on the manifest content, some hidden meanings were detected through the analyzing process and integrated into relevant categories. It was possible as QCA is, to a certain extent, appropriate for analyzing latent content (e.g., Schreier, 2012; Bengtsson, 2016). Comparing the subcategories between them and my observational notes, I identified specific social media patterns, particularly how my respondents use social media functions and how their social media newsfeeds look. Moreover, the results of QCA formed the basis for further analysis of local Instagram accounts (see Chapter 3.6.), which widened the understanding of the research subject and offered a more detailed answer to the research question.

While describing the method of analysis, its weaknesses and limitations should be mentioned. Except that QCA was a time-consuming process, it involved developing particular skills for me, such as abstract thinking and ambiguity tolerance. This method is also aimed to limit the whole collected data according to the research questions. Hence, it carries the risk of overlooking some topic-related but non-obvious symbolic meanings and contextual sensitivities (cf. Rahman, 2017, p. 105). In my particular case, this weakness was, at least partly, compensated by my personal attachment to the research topic, knowing the socio-cultural context, and the thematic background in general.

Although some authors (e.g., Kohlbacher, 2006; Flick, 2014) have emphasized that QCA is less appropriate for in-depth interpretative research, my experience demonstrated that the systematic approach of this method allows a striking balance between depth and breadth of the analysis in the light of limited time and financial resources. The definition of ‘in-depth’ can also be disparate, depending on the research paradigm (positivist vs. constructivist) and the research’s general purposes. Since my research purpose engaged a specific target population and its personal experiences connected to social media-related practices, the necessary depth could be reached by building a multi-level coding system as part of QCA. Using QCA allowed me to systemize all information provided during research

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<sup>42</sup> That was useful for recognizing specific linguistic expressions, ironic remarks, jokes and indirect statements, which often are culture-specific and require an insider understanding for further interpretation.

interviews and identify specific trends for answering my research questions. In the next chapter, I will present the results obtained with the QCA.

### **3.3. Being Russian: Formal Label vs. Personal Meaning**

Since self-perception is constantly changing, depending on various contextual factors, it was central for me, foremost, to understand exactly how young Kazakhstani Russians perceive their ethnic heritage and which place ethnonational belonging takes within their self-image. Being part of a minority group and living in a country considered a “historical accomplishment” of the Kazakh nation, young Russian Kazakhstanis might experience their Otherness in everyday life and intensely confront their ethnonational identity. Moreover, the minority status and political events, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the rising of Russian superiority, could stimulate personal confrontation with questions such as ‘What does it mean to be a Russian, and to which (ethno)nation do I belong?’

During the respondents’ recruitment, I realized that the term ‘Russians’, despite its broad usage in official and public discourses, might provide difficulties for its understanding among the young generation. By recruiting ‘Russians’, I often got responses from ‘linguistically Russified’ minorities like Ukrainians, Belarussians, or Poles. Only during the interview, it would become clear that they are *actually* not ethnic Russians but identify themselves with Russian culture<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, most<sup>44</sup> of my respondents had a mixed-ethnic origin or were descendants of multiple ethnic groups. Despite that, all of them speak Russian as a first language, and most of them were, in their passport’s ethnonational field (*nacional’nost’*), identified as Russians.

Such an outcome, which already appeared while selecting participants for interviews, reveals that identification as a Russian continues to be more complicated than it seems at first glance. The trend described by Laitin (1998) more than 20 years ago that the

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<sup>43</sup> Some of the authors have employed terms ‘Russian-speaking population’ (e.g., Laitin, 1998; Blackburn, 2019) or ‘Russophones’ (e.g., Kolstø, 2011) instead of using ‘Russians’. In my case, I prefer to use the term ‘Russian’ as it was used mainly by the participants themselves, i.e., corresponds to the linguistic expression of their formal identification. However, the difference between the formal identity and the subjective sense of belonging seems to be crucial in this regard.

<sup>44</sup> I use the category ‘most’/ ‘majority’ to describe more than 14 of all 22 respondents. In its turn, the category ‘some’ stands for a number of respondents between 6 and 14. The category ‘few’ is exemplified by less than 5 respondents.

term ‘Russians’ has been used in Kazakhstan for labeling all non-Muslims and non-titular, still seems to exist. Nonetheless, especially in the context of pluralization of social life forms and blurring of imagined borders, the part of the population that is usually defined in public and some academic discourse as Russians or Russian-speaking population, might include people with diverse ethnic backgrounds and different connections to the Russian ethno-nation. However, considering this group from a deductive perspective makes it impossible to detect the particularity of its members and delineates the group’s actual boundaries. As I will demonstrate in this Chapter, a bottom-up approach allows one to recognize the critical differences between the officially prescribed category of Russianness and its interpretation among young Kazakhstani Russians.

Hence, it is essential to distinguish between the formally given category and the subjective sense of belonging to a group associated with this category. As was already mentioned in Chapter 1.4.1 *identity* and *belongingness* do not necessarily match in their meaning, and the distinction between official identity and nation-related self-definition can be crucial in the post-Soviet context (e.g., Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). For example, being Russian as an *identity* can refer to the social category, which exists in the socio-political discourse of Kazakhstan and Russia. In its turn, the term *belonging*, which I use to avoid terminological confusion, serves to contrast the official categorial character of *identity*, i.e., to display a personal meaning of being a part of a particular (ethno)nation, as well as to indicate a nation-related attachment beyond a ‘rather/or’ mindset, or official labels.

My research provides clear proof for the following: although my respondents identify themselves as Russians (by passport), it is not necessarily equal to their subjectively defined connection to the Russian ethno-nation and culture. In accordance with previous research (e.g., Laitin, 1998; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Poppe & Hagendoorn, 2001), I argue that this differentiation between the formal prescribed identity and the personally recognized belongingness is still one of the central aspects, which is vital in understanding the construction of nation-related identity and belonging among ethnic Russians in post-Soviet context. With only two exceptions<sup>45</sup>, all research participants were officially registered as *Russians*, as they named themselves - “*Russians by passport*” (*russkij po pasportu*). In this

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<sup>45</sup> According to his passport, the respondent CN19 is a Belorussian, but he presented this fact as a bureaucratic formality. The passport category ‘nacional’nost’ of the respondent AA7 was left blank by the state service at his request.

sense, this categorial identification as Russian is the disclosure and acceptance of their formal identity- almost all of my respondents are part of 3.5 million officially registered ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan. Moreover, as I will present throughout the next chapters, being Russian ‘by passport’ is obviously one of many different components, which create their complete social portrait.

This formal identity of being Russian has a predetermined character for most of the respondents. Hence, being Russian ‘by passport’ presents itself as a given inherited status. However, this prescribed identity by passport can be considered and explained differently by young Kazakhstani Russians. On the one hand, being Russian is described in primordial terms. In this sense, formal Russianness is considered by them as an objective and statistical specification, which is acquired at birth and remains valid throughout the whole life. Even if this formal label is conflicting with their subjective feelings about their belongingness to the Russian (ethno)nation, some of the respondents (e.g., AV3; AE6; CD12) see it as something inalienable. As AV3 formulates:

*“In my ID card, I’m identified as Russian. But I didn’t decide that [...] Well, because my mother positions herself as a Russian, although she has no Russians [ancestors - Translator’s Note] at all. She has only Belarusians and Ukrainians. Father is 100% Russian. Well, of course, maybe there are some more (...) in the distant ancestors, but exactly the nearest five generations, [are] those who positioned themselves as Russians.”*

Another example CD12 provided: *“(...) Russian. Well, naciona’nost’ [ethno-national identity - Translator’s Note], theoretically, is not chosen. I think as you were born, that’s how it is.”*

On the other hand, the identity by passport can be recognized and be a circumstance happening by accident, as, for example, in the case of AE4, AM5, CK15. Sometimes this is accidentally connected with a bureaucratic mistake made in the past or with a survival strategy of past generations. The consequences of the Soviet regime’s policies (see Chapter 2.2) still impact the formal identity of the descendants of Soviet citizens. Essentially, they inherited the label of being formally Russian without actually having any Russian roots:

*“My naciona’nost’ is Russian according to the documents [ID or passport- Translator’s Note]. Ah... It was a mistake; actually, I’m Belarusian. [...] When my*

*grandmother gave birth to my dad, there were a lot of mistakes. People [civil servants - Translator's Note] didn't have the patience to write documents [correctly] and just put everyone as Russian [...]" (CK15).*

Finally, having a mixed-ethnic origin and, among others, Russian ancestors, being Russian 'by passport' can be a voluntary decision, which is based on pragmatic reasons, as in the case of AV9. Being half Russian half Tatar, AV9 has chosen to be Russian 'by passport' because this ethnonational definition is well-known worldwide, while Tatar "sounds odd" (AV9) and raises many questions. At the same time, CA16 decided to identify herself formally as Russian, despite being half Kazakh. Although official belonging to the titular nation can provide certain advantages, e.g., more chances to find a job in the public sector (see Chapter 2.3.1), it seems that for CA16, it has been easier to be a Russian than to meet the criteria of being a Kazakh.

Answering the question if she is registered in her ID as Russian, CA16 said: "*Yes, Kazakh [culture] is far from me, I don't even speak the [Kazakh] language.*" The formal identity here is closely interconnected with the external expectations and public demands – to be formal Kazakh, the closeness to the ethnic culture and language are required, while in the absence of it, one should be labeled as Russian. As a result, some of the respondents can once again consider this formal label as a taken-for-granted norm without an alternative and does not necessarily reflect a personally formulated self-image.

It is important to highlight that young ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan agree to have the formal status of being Russian 'by passport' in most interviews. Namely, they use the label to describe themselves along with other formal characteristics, such as place of residence or occupational status, and they do not try to waive it. Nonetheless, most of my respondents attach merely limited attention to this formal label. Only a few respondents (e.g., AE10, CD12) present their identity 'by passport' as an essential element of their personality and even a reason to be proud of it.

Consequently, being socially prescribed and recognized by young Kazakhstani Russians as a formal label, official Russianness is usually located on the periphery of personality. Although the reproduction of the Soviet primordial perspective on ethnonational identity (*nacional'nost'*) as a biological characteristic inherited from parents has still occurred, the meaning of being Russian 'by passport' obviously has changed. The example of young



ethnic Russians demonstrates that in comparison to their Soviet ancestors, the given ethnonational identity remains an integral but not particularly salient characteristic for their self-image. For example, during interviews, many of the respondents wondered why I was interested in their formal identity. They tended to switch my focus from a collective to a personal perspective and from a national to a global outlook. For example, AV9 expresses her perplexity during our interview in the following manner: “*For me, this [being Russian ‘by passport’ - Translator’s Note] is just like a discrete point. I am Russian, so what? I am a person like you.*”

Similarly, CR22 argues the following: “*I don’t think that nacional’nost’ is some kind of important [aspect - Translator’s Note].*” Correspondingly, the vast majority of interviewees, while answering the warmup-questions (Who you are? What are you doing? Where are you from?), prefer to describe themselves in more general terms, instead of paying immense attention to their ethnonational identity, which was just shortly mentioned. That can mean that identity ‘by passport’ is considered as an inescapable feature – one of many given characteristics, which is, however, hardly involved in the process of individual self-perception.

Compared to the well-established idea of the ethnonational identity (*nacional’nost’*) in the academic literature, the need to use a more flexible concept crystallized itself during the field research stage. My respondents have provided multiple self-descriptions and communicated personal interpretations, which go beyond the usual notion of *nacional’nost’*, but are connected to their nation-related self-image. Thus, employing the concept of nation-related belonging allows me to reconsider classic categories, such as Russian, Russophone, etc., and find new (ethno)nation-related meanings and individual interpretations taken-for-granted classifications.

Unlike the shared formal identity ‘by passport’, the nation-related sense of belonging of young ethnic Russians is, instead, a multifaceted issue. Discussing their feelings about ancestors and family backgrounds, everyday experiences, and plans in Kazakhstan’s multi-ethnic society, the young Kazakhstani Russians provide diverse stories, united by their creative interpretation of their group memberships and search for a sense of belonging. They clearly illustrate how limited it can be to operate only with the concept of ethnonational

identity (*nacional'nost'*), while ignoring a more in-depth personal view on the matter of belongingness to a specific nation.

The following example illustrates this issue. Compared to the question about ethnonational identity (*nacional'nost'*), which my respondents usually answered quickly and unambiguously, Kazakhstani Russians communicate certain difficulties when formulating their self-definition in the context of ethnonational belongingness. Obviously, the question of *where I actually belong* in the nation's context concerns many of the interviewees. Some of the respondents, such as AN11, shared with me their thoughts of self-discovery:

*"I do not even know. I was also thinking about my homeland [Rodina], and that is very weird. I don't know - is Kazakhstan my homeland or no? I cannot detect that for sure. Well, yes, I was born in Alma-Ata [old name of the city Almaty - Translator's Note]. I mean, I have lived here all my life. But, at the same time, I have been considered as Russian by nacional'nost'. I mean, maybe then my homeland is Russia? But, on the other hand, I have been there only a few times in my life. I mean, in fact, I did not even live there."*

This text passage is one of many examples, which characterizes that the nation-related self-definition of young ethnic Russians is in its active phase. It seems that just being Russian 'by passport' does not satisfy the need for national belonging, while a willingness to explore and evaluate their group memberships (nation-related ones in particular) occurs among young Kazakhstani Russians. For instance, discovering their origin and establishing a particular connection towards it is visibly important for my respondents. Vivid interest regarding their mixed-ethnic background and knowledge of the family's history was often communicated through the conversation (e.g., AE4; AV9; CK15; KA21). Thus, many of the interviewees try to find answers to the question of their belongingness in their ancestry, although it can yet again provide additional difficulties with numerous families' ethnic groups. For instance, AE4 shares the following:

*"I'm Russian 'by passport', but now it seems [to be wrong - Translator's Note] to me. Just looking at my roots, I realize that I'm not Russian at all. For example, my last name is Belarusian. When I look at the roots, there were Crimean Tatars and Cossacks, and on the one side, there were Jews; on the other side, there were Germans. So, everything is very mixed up."*

Due to their diverse ethnic background, young ethnic Russians receive a set of ethnic groups and cultures related to them; as a result, they face the necessity to confront their roots, define their personality, and estimate their potential group memberships in this regard, in comparison to their majority peers who have a definite ethnonational background. As in the case of ethnic minority youth in Europe described by Erentaite et al. (2018), identity and belongingness management of young ethnic Russians is intensive and sophisticated.

However, besides the difficulties that young ethnic Russians confront, defining their ethnonational membership, the uncertainty regarding their belongingness can allow them to create their unique self-images or choose ones from already existing and personally suitable social categories. Therefore, nation-related self-definition is a challenging yet simultaneously creative process distinctive for every person I interviewed and included some common characteristics. As I will present below, this process's outcome is that young people acquire versatile self-images, which are modular and can be re-evaluated by young ethnic Russians, depending on the context.

In summary, the identity 'by passport' is a stable but rather prescribed category in the subjective self-image among young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan regardless of their gender, residence, university program, or type of university. However, that does not mean that their connection to certain ethnic roots and Russian culture is ignored. The differentiation between identity 'by passport' and a sense of nation-related belonging allows us to see that being Russian and feeling Russian are not the same. What is essential in this regard is to be aware of the point that identity 'by passport' may correspond with the personally defined ethnonational attachment. It can also be a minor detail or prescribed inevitability, which is not directly connected to the ethnonational sense of the Self and can be activated only in a specific formal context. Thus, one's introduction as Russians (by passport) should not be considered a fixed explicit label but instead serves as an invitation to explore what is behind this banal definition. In the following section, I will start this discovery by considering how young ethnic Russians describe themselves concerning their ethnic roots and interpret Russianness and their relation to their historical homeland.

### 3.4. Personal Interpretation of Ethnic Heritage

#### 3.4.1. Russian Language and the Family-Associated Russian Culture

Since this dissertation focuses on personal sensations and experiences connected to nation-related belonging, I will subsequently concentrate my attention on the subjective sense of nation-related belonging described by young Kazakhstani Russians during the interviews. Although for most of my respondents, being Russian is associated, firstly, with their prescribed identity ‘by passport’, it would be wrong to assume that their connection to the ethnic origin is irrelevant for them.

Because of the interest in their ancestry, the willingness to discover their ethnic roots and use it in the creative process of their self-definition is apparent, mainly through their interpretation of Russianness – not a formal but personal one. Most of the respondents had Russian roots along with others or are descendants of people who were historically closely related to the Russian ethnic culture (e.g., Cossacks, Jews, Ukrainians, etc.), and that has motivated them to create their personal attitudes towards Russian culture and state.

Nonetheless, having Russian ancestors or being related to Russia in any other way is interpreted by my interviewees differently. Despite the general avoidance of converse in ethnonational terms, some respondents (e.g., AE4; AA7; CA18; KA21) expressed the remaining culture and traditions known as Russian as a vital ethnonational belonging element. These traditions were usually described in a very abstract way and generally included the ‘purity’ of the Russian language, which is supposed to be passed on to the next generations and included selected traditional practices. As AA1 formulated:

*“For me [being Russian], it’s just my [social] environment. I mean, the Russian language that I carry with me. I mean, nacional’nost’ and language are very closely related. Especially, studying [Russian] language [and literature] now. I think that Russian people, and the people who have lived in the Russian[speaking] environment, are able to speak Russian at the highest level, so to say.”*

The Russian language is considered an indicator of mutual understanding, which emphasizes cultural closeness, and overshadows other characteristics such as formal identity ‘by passport’, race, or residence region. “The Russian[speaking] environment” (AA1) is

associated with a particular set of cultural practices, which, in the opinion of some respondents, are supposed to be reproduced. For instance, talking about spousal choice, KA20 explained:

*“The most important thing is not one’s nacional’nost’, but a kind of mentality. For me personally, it does not matter if a person is Asian or dark-skinned. I won’t focus on it. What is most important to me is not a person’s appearance but rather a person’s upbringing and mentality. I mean, it doesn’t matter if she is a mix, Kazakh, Korean, as long as she speaks Russian like I do, if she thinks in Russian, if she has a Russian mentality, then I don’t feel any obstacles.”*

Similarly to Blackburn (2019), my research demonstrates that the idea of a ‘civilizing’ Russian culture still exists among the young Kazakhstani Russians. The Russian language, in particular, is presented by a few of my interviewees as a “prerogative” (AA8) and as an “opportunity for the Kazakh-speaking population to move on and grow” (AV9). At the same time, as I will demonstrate in detail below, a biased attitude towards the Kazakh language generally remains. The idea of saving the Russian language’s “cleanness” in its well-pronounced and grammatically correct usage also appears in this regard (e.g., CA14; CA18). In the words of CA18: *“For me to be a Russian is just to honor my traditions, not to forget my roots, also to respect my language not to slaughter it in any way, also I treat other languages the same way.”*

However, it is essential to highlight that emphasizing the ‘civilizing’ role of Russian culture is not a definite trend in my sample, but rather one among others. In addition, the Russian language serves as a demarcation line between the Russian-speaking urban and Kazakh-speaking rural Kazakhstan. Young ethnic Russians have also adopted this model. For example, AA8 described Almaty as a “Russian-speaking city”, where even the ethnic Kazakhs from Kazakh-speaking university programs speak Russian with him while taking this fact for granted.

Although the spread of the Kazakh language may cause concern and can relate to a gradual disappearance of the Russian language from public life (e.g., AV9; CR22), my respondents are barely concerned about the Russian language status in the country. In other words, the importance of the Russian language is not absolute for Kazakhstani Russians. The majority of the respondents have no difficulty using the Russian language in public

spaces and their social surroundings and fully accept official trilingualism (see Chapter 2.4.5), which equalizes the Russian, Kazakh, and English languages in the country. As in the case of AM5, this allows to develop and popularize Russian-speaking literature in Kazakhstan; this, in turn, provides an opportunity not only to stay in contact with the native language but also bring it to the public. While “in many other countries, let’s just say in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States – Translator’s note] there is only one state language, and they already forget Russian” (AV9), it seems that the current political agenda of Kazakhstan allows young Kazakhstani Russians to retain their linguistic identity as Russophones in the local context. As Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski (2019, p. 90) have noted, the Russian language and culture are “locally-rooted phenomenon” in Central Asia.

In other words, unlike Ukraine, where the Russian language was associated, in particular, with Russian neo-imperialism (e.g., Kulyk, 2018), speaking the Russian language, according to my respondents, has no direct connection to Russia. In contrast, the Russian language was often described as an element of the country’s common multilingual environment. Speaking Russian includes “an additive of some Kazakh words” (AA8) and is inseparable from the local context. This result has also been presented by Ehala (2015) and confirms that linguistic, imperial, and ethnic identities in the post-Soviet space can exist and develop themselves independently from each other.

Besides the Russian language, the so-called Russian culture and, in particular, specific religious traditions are associated with ethnonational belonging, as the conversations with interviewees show. The prominent example of a connection to ethnic ancestry throughout all interviews is the Easter celebration, which serves as one of the most important traditions and even “*causes thrill*” (CA17) among a few of my respondents (e.g., AE4; CA17; KA21). Easter was probably mentioned because the interviews took place one month after Easter, and a recent celebration could inspire such an example. Nevertheless, this fact does not diminish the importance of religious traditions *per se* for some young ethnic Russians, especially when one takes a look at the manner of *how* this tradition was described:

*“We were celebrating Easter – it is respected here too, and I think it is established as a Russian tradition. There are not so many [traditions], but still, there is this one. And these painted eggs, pasočki [Russian Easter bread – Translator Note], all that. It’s a little bit of a reminder that you are a Russian after all”* (CK15).

Therefore, some respondents closely linked Russian culture with the Russian Orthodox tradition. Even among non-religious young ethnic Russians, i.e., those who were not committed to a church, some orthodox rituals, such as baptizing and church marriage, were acceptable (e.g., CD12; CK15; CA17). Despite the fact that they occasionally went to church and might have a negative attitude towards the Russian Orthodox Church as a religious institution, these young people retained a connection to their particular culture through the church rituals and celebrations. As Vihalemm and Kaplan (2017, p. 203) have formulated, “Orthodox practices are understood as an ethnocultural unifying feature, while their religious meaning is weak.”

A similar situation may also exist for those involved in church life and describe themselves as believers, although it was only a particular case among my respondents (KA21). The local church parish provided an opportunity for religious practice and a community for remaining Russian ethnic traditions. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church participates in various cultural events related to Orthodox and more general Russian traditions. As KA21 explained:

*“We organize different [church-based] things, eating pancakes, tug-of-war, something else, we have skomorokhs (skomarohi) [a Russian traditional comic actor similar to Harlequin -Translator’s note] who change [to a specific cloth] and call people to participate in cooking competitions.”*

Although the devotion to this religious practice is more typical for the northern region of Kazakhstan (e.g., CD12; CA17; KA21), following a general cultural heritage and retaining a specific “Russian mentality” (KA20) is typical for some respondents from all of the selected regions. In particular, being connected to Russian cultural arts, such as Russian literature, cinema, and architecture (e.g., AM5; AA8; AE10), are essential elements of the ethnonational belonging for those young people who live in the southern city of Almaty and study humanities. Here are some examples:

*“Well, about whether I’m Russian or not (laughs) in terms of the soul. Well, I’ve been to Russia twice. And, I feel a connection to that, and I read a lot of Russian classics and so on. And some culture, for example, Soviet films, for example, of course, resonate with me. I’m watching some programs in Russian too. So, basically, all that makes up some basis for me” (AM5) .*

*“Pushkin, Lermontov. Where would we be without having them? Esenin. I love Russian classics a lot. Actually, Russians are cool”* (AE10).

Such admiration of Russian cultural heritage, at least partly, refers to the idea of the “Great culture of the Russian people” (Martin, 2001, p. 429), which formed the basis of the Soviet *Friendship of the Peoples*’ concept and was selectively used in the political discourses of both Kazakhstan and Russia. Comparable to the Stalin era’s interpretation, some of the respondents understood by Russian culture the whole Soviet heritage, which aimed at multicultural unity based upon the superior Russian language and related cultural traditions (see Chapter 2.4.2).

Nonetheless, it is more critical for young ethnic Russians to retain their personal contact with Russian culture and language rather than to actively promote it in a public space. It is important to note that my respondents considered the cultural and religious traditions, mostly as private issues. They are associated firstly with family and only secondly, if ever, with the Russianness of the Russian state. In general, it is peripheral, whether these traditions are Russian, Ukrainian, or Jewish; what is essential here is that they make it possible to maintain young Kazakhstani Russians’ authenticity. In the words of AE4: *“Well, this [being Russian] is just the ethnic group I belong to, and maybe some of the traditions and cultural features that are practiced in families are important.”* Similarly, CN13 formulated: *“I think being Russian here is like being more connected with your family, you feel that you are alone, and you belong to the same community, I can say that somehow.”*

The fact that the family context matters for the national identity construction of ethnic minorities has already been demonstrated by Sabatier (2008), and specifically in the case of Kazakhstani youth by Umbetalieva, Rakisheva, and Teschendorf (2016). Strong relation to the family was also apparent through many references to parents and other family members made by my respondents during our conversation. Although all of the interviewees have reached adulthood, for many of them, parental opinion regarding ethnonational identity and belonging remains important (e.g., AA2; AN11; CA17). For instance, answering the question of whether he would support Russia or Kazakhstan in case of military conflict, CA17 replied: *“Well, what the [my] family would follow, I would follow for that too.”* This result is comparable to the one presented by Eisikovits (2014), which has shown that second-generation young females of Russian descent in Israel referred more to their parents’



ethnic culture than the host society. In my sample, the tendency to have strong family ties was demonstrated by both genders.

According to Antonsich (2010), a connection to the family can become an autobiographical factor in developing a sense of belonging, which can provide for young ethnic Russians, a home-feeling and a link to a specific space or an environment where they feel comfortable and safe. It seems that a connection to a particular family-related culture provides a sense of stability for young ethnic Russians, as well as support them in coping with the internal and external uncertainty. Albeit the family relationships may arouse interest towards (superior) Russian and Soviet culture and provide “roots and rich history” (AE10) as a valuable resource for self-definition. The relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Tsarist era was considered as *“a manifestation of this colonialism, imperialism”*, which they *“cannot bear at all”* (AM5). In its turn, the Soviet epoch has been known through the stories of parents and has appeared in the eyes of some respondents in a different light:

*“If we talk about the Soviet Union, somehow, one managed to build such a society that was not anymore under the oppression of the Russians. And somehow everyone lived, at least according to the stories of my parents, or (smiles) our entire old generation, it was all very friendly. And in regard to the nation (...) Nobody remembered what happened [before]. I mean, did not focus on it”* (AM5).

However, it is also possible that parents impact the weakening of ethnic ties and promote a transnational perspective on the sense of belonging instead:

*“And she [mother – Translator’s note] says that it’s very strange to look for, well, such an identity, that we basically live on this earth (smiles), and that it’s very strange to separate everything [and everyone from each other - Translator’s note]”* (AN11).

This quote confirms that parental participation in constructing a nation-related belonging can play different roles and is not limited to promoting ethnic culture. In addition, as Sabatier (2008) has highlighted, parents’ role in the building of self-image regarding ethnic and national groups of belonging depends on many other factors, such as the emotional environment in the family, educational context, or relationship with peers.

### 3.4.2. Experiencing Ethnic Otherness

While most of my respondents preferred to describe themselves in non-national terms, they also provide examples, which demonstrate that in a specific context, their ethnic origin can be 1) associated with a sense of social exclusion and 2) improve a sense of superiority. Namely, the ethnic Otherness can be activated through social relationships and everyday experiences, even among those young people who attribute little importance to their ethnonational belonging. It manifests itself in the fact that some interviewees (e.g., AA2; AM5; AV9; KA20) experience a sense of being different in their daily lives. Thus, their ethnonational identity offers for young Kazakhstani Russians not only stability and home-feeling but also a disadvantaged position and an “*insidious prejudiced attitude*” (KA20) from the majority group. However, my respondents receive an opportunity to prove their excellence.

Since the categorical perception of ethnic origin in Kazakhstan was closely linked with primordiality on both state and grassroots levels, it appears that young Kazakhstani Russians were involved in the Russian-Kazakh dichotomy of the current socio-political discourse. In this sense, into the category of ‘Russians’ fall all non-Kazakhs and non-Muslims. In practice, that means, if a social interaction related to this dichotomy takes place, being Russian ceases to be just a passport category or a set of family-related cultural traditions and becomes a minority label.

In an intergroup context, young Kazakhstani Russians often emphasized the differences between them and the titular population. This was especially obvious among interviewees from Almaty. One example of how young Kazakhstani Russians experience intergroup bias reflects biological attributes, namely explicitly physical appearances. Innate facial features, hair, and eye color were often mentioned by most of the respondents as distinguishing features in the context of social interaction. The so-called Slavic appearance - “*blonde with blue eyes*” (AN11), is associated with Russianness attributes. Having such an appearance can sharpen the feeling of dissimilarity, or it might be recognized as social exclusion even among ‘accidental Russians’: “*I sometimes feel like a foreigner here, as if I was born not here, but I was born in another country and just came here. And everyone looks at you*” (AA2).

Therefore, Kazakhstani Russians have associated these specific looks from the titular group members in public spaces with ethnic origin. Interestingly, they stimulate young

ethnic Russians to reduce all possible causes of such looks to the visible distinctive features and activate their Russian non-titular identity. The considered differences in biological attributes confirm the unavoidable character of their Russianness again in the sense of being non-Kazakhs. The inability to modify or cancel these appearance-related attributes emphasizes the minority status, often coupled with negative evaluation. The Soviet consideration of national minorities as unwanted guests (Martin, 2001, p. 139) can still be found among those who were born in the post-Soviet era:

*“This [ethnic disparity - Translator’s Note] literally manifests itself even on the street. Someone may look at you in a weird way [...]. For example, you go on a bus, and there are all [ethnic] Kazakhs around [...] And you, if you’re the only one [non-Kazakh] standing there [...] sometimes, I think that I’m an unnecessary person here. That happens” (AM5).*

In other words, physical appearance becomes a distinctive feature, which continually emphasizes the differences between ethnic Russians and other ethnic groups, especially Asian-looking titulars. Such ascriptive Russianness, unlike the identity ‘by passport’, can hardly be ignored or depreciated within social interactions; thus, young Kazakhstani Russians are forced to embrace and cope with it. For instance, it was evident that some of the respondents (e.g., AA1; CN13; KA21) highlighted that their Russianness does not “*stick out*” (“*ne brosaetsja v glaza*”) (CN13). This likely allows them to adjust themselves to the positively evaluated social standards, at least with their appearance, while avoiding negative evaluation ‘at first sight’.

Nonetheless, the intergroup division between Russians and Kazakhs is based more on cultural rather than racial differences. Although physical appearance is the most obvious factor, it often serves as a facade for more subtle differences, such as urban vs. rural or modern vs. conservative values. Citing AA2: “*Because now this is true, I’m noticing that. Well, you can see, a person has moved here from the steppe or from a small town and is looking at you like that [...] I don’t know. Still, I think it’s because of my ethnicity.*” Since the rural regions of Kazakhstan are populated mostly by ethnic Kazakhs, a person “from the steppe” can be associated, in this case, with the stereotype-based archetype of villagers as “morally immature and professionally underqualified” people (Yessenova, 2005, p. 665).

That confirms the vitality of the Soviet center-periphery model, which continues to exist in young people's minds.

Another example, which confirms the regional separation between the North and the South of the country, CA18 provided. Living in the northern capital of Kazakhstan, she associated ethnic Kazakhs from the South with their traditional ritual, which she considered as something alien, and could pose group threats, i.e., might override the dominance of modern values. Her description also resembles the superior view of Russians on the Central Asian population in the late Tsarist era:

*“Kazakhs have an ancient tradition - stealing bride [bride kidnapping- Translator's note]. In the North, it is already considered not to be like that. [Here] it is closer to the Russian view that we do not take it for granted. But in the South, it still happens - stealing a bride - it is considered to be absolutely normal [...] I think it's a little freaky.”*

Thus, the intergroup context, which usually takes place through everyday experiences and social activities, may stimulate the feeling of Otherness and conserve the ethnonational element in the general self-image of young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan. Unlike identity 'by passport' and a personally defined sense of ethnonational belonging, this ethnonational element may include negative attributes, such as minority status and feelings of ethnic inequality. Describing their Kazakh language lessons in school, AA2 said, *“I remember being humiliated for being non-Kazakh, that I live here and can't say [anything in Kazakh] without an accent.”* This example demonstrates that belonging to a minority ethnic group can be connected with potential threats. Being non-Kazakh can hurt young ethnic Russians' self-esteem and, as a result, lead to the avoidance of social interactions with Kazakh-speaking populations.

In addition, negative social experiences, which involve ethnic Kazakhs, can support the reproduction of already existing categorical dualism (e.g., Kazakhs vs. Russians/Non-Kazakhs, rural vs. urban location, modern vs. conservative values). It is important to note, however, that these categories are not universal and are rather context specific. Depending on the social context, the meaning of each of the categories can drastically change itself and, as it will be evident from the following chapters, combine contradictory definitions and outcomes.

Finally, the experienced Otherness can improve a sense of superiority among Kazakhstani Russians. It was evident that having a minority status motivates my respondents to employ *social creativity* to achieve a better social evaluation. Perceiving the majority of the population as a traditionalist, and associating it with narrow-mindedness, provides my respondents an opportunity to be different in a positive manner. For instance, the definition of being Russian provided by CA17: “*To be a Russian ... Well, [it means] to be open to everything new, a little crazy, simple (laughs).*” In contrast, AV3 described ethnic Kazakhs as follows:

*“But usually they [ethnic Kazakhs] don’t want to communicate anymore. For example, they are looking obliquely. They can even say ‘ujat bolady’ [from Kazakh: it will be a shame – Translator’s note], you can’t do it.’ Here you go. I mean, they can’t accept the fact that people can see the world differently. Maybe they [people] want to present themselves in another way, that is to dress in a different way, maybe they want to color their hair interestingly, put on non-standard clothes.”*

Contrasting themselves to such an outgroup and its traditional values, the interviewees emphasize their strive for innovation and global openness. As Blackburn (2019, p. 231) has noticed, this attitude reminds the Soviet “cultural colonialism.” However, Kazakhstani Russians recognize and activate their positive Otherness from the titular group, not because of their ethnic background or any other form of (ethno)nation-related dissimilarity to ethnic Kazakhs. Instead, they counter not with the titular population as a whole but with traditionalist values, which, among other things, include primordialist ethnonational differentiation.

Being inspired by their ancestors, who had a supranational category of the Soviet people at their disposal, Kazakhstani Russians aspire to unity and consolidation between different ethnic groups. Unlike previous generations of ethnic Russians outside of Russia, the ethnonational differences (counting the concept of *nacional’nost’*) are losing their importance for my respondents. Although there was a tendency towards superiority, it was not directly linked neither with the identity ‘by passport’, nor with their ethnonational sense of belonging. In other words, in the context of the Kazakhs-Russian dichotomy, they gave a new meaning to the category ‘Russian.’ They connected it with innovation and globalization, rather than with the Russian cultural tradition of the Russian state. In an intergroup

context, my interviewees saw themselves as someone who aims to disrupt any ethnic boundaries in their primordialist sense instead of creating or embracing them.

### **3.4.3. The Janus-faced Russianness: Local vs. Foreign Perspective**

While analyzing the interviews, I confronted a curious pattern – when answering the question about something ‘typically Russian’, my respondents associated Russianness with their personal experiences (e.g., AM5; AA7; CK15; CA17), or they described it as something abstract and less personal (e.g., AE4; CN13; CA14; CR22). In this regard, Russianness can be considered a characteristic of both ingroups and outgroups; however, it is based upon different meanings depending on a specific context. Thereby, in both cases, one can find positive and negative associations with this concept in general.

As I have already demonstrated above, personal experiences of Russianness are mostly related to the Russian culture, language, and a sense of Otherness by my respondents. However, some other vivid examples emphasize that ethnic group membership can be used by young ethnic Russians (even among an ethnically mixed origin) to achieve a positive evaluation through social categorization. Some of my respondents from all three cities, but exclusively of male gender (e.g., AA7; AA8; CD12), expressed a positive attitude towards their (partly) Russian origin and were even proud of it. Russianness was linked in this case with “*people’s resilience*” (AA7) and “*winning people*” (“*narod pobeditelej*”) (AA8). Using a quote by CD12:

*“Well, I think I have pride that my nacional’nost’ [is Russian]. I think [this is] a great nation. The Russian nation has gone through great hardships, through war. It was proved that these people are strong in spirit. I am very proud that this [Russian] is my.”*

The past events are central for this interpretation of Russianness among my respondents. The Second World War, for instance, remains one of the symbols associated with the Russian nation (e.g., AA8; CA16; KA20). Although here I should highlight that the interviews took place shortly before and after ‘Victory day,’ which is celebrated in most post-Soviet republics on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May and is accompanied by massive celebrations in Kazakhstan.

Therefore, this circumstance might activate associations connected to the Russian/Soviet people's military exploits during the war.

At first glance, these descriptions remind one of current Russia's foreign policy and the *Russian World* concept, which promotes the Russian nation's superior position. The focus on Russians' past achievements and pride in the past victories of the Russian state has been traditionally linked with the ethnocentric image of Russianness (see Chapter 2.4.2), but my study disclaims an explicit relation between the Russian nation and the mythologization of the past.

In a closer examination, it became clear that my respondents considerably integrated the pride of the "*winning people*" ("*narod pobeditelej*") (AA8) into the local social setting and, in opposition to the entire *Russian World* idea, bound and mixed it with the socio-cultural context of Kazakhstan. A connection to the family background was also apparent in this context. For example, CA16 related the Second World War, first of all, to "great-grandfather's medals" [earned by him for participation in the WW2 - Translators' note] and not with the Great Russian state.

Moreover, it seems that local Russianness and Russianness related to the Russian state and society differ in my respondents' opinion. This particularly manifested itself within interviews when a comparison between Russians in Russia and Kazakhstan occurred. As AA7, who reproduced the idea of the Great Russian people, has clarified during our conversation:

*"So, I was talking to the Russians from Russia, and they do not know what is boursak [Kazakh traditional pastry- Translator's Note], they don't know what is samsa [Kazakh traditional pastry - Translator's Note]. They have some other names, but they do not know where it comes from [...]; they're not familiar with them. I know a lot of people, their customs, for example, what [animal- Translator's Note] should be sacrificed for Nauryz [the Turkic New Year celebration - Translator's Note], they do not know about it. We have more knowledge about other nationalities and their customs [...] We have got more topics to talk about. We are more interesting [than Russians in Russia]; they might envy us."*

The clear separation between Russianness related to the Kazakhstani context and to the Russian Federation was retraced in most of the interviews. These respondents, who

associate Russianness with their personal experiences, often contextualize them in the local environment. Although negative experiences can accompany it (see Chapter 3.4.2), being Russian in Kazakhstan may also provide certain advantages, such as contact with other cultures, the experience of social diversity, and an increase in the minority group's positive evaluation. In its turn, Russianness associated with Russia was described by my respondents as a general characteristic, which is based upon inner-looking and exclusive ideas. AE6 described that as following:

*“Actually, it is hard to explain. It is just; something is a little wrong, some little things. For instance, it seems as if we [Kazakhstani Russians - Translator's Note] are much more open with other people. Here (sighing). I mean, somehow less greedy. We have everything in common. There [in Russia], on the contrary, it is a little bit [different]. That is, everyone brings alcohol for himself [instead of sharing it with others - Translator's Note].”*

While social interactions with ethnic Kazakhs can instigate a sense of social exclusion, contacts with Russians from Russia can similarly support the recognition of Otherness. Most of my respondents, who have considered Russianness through the lens of personal experiences have connected it with Kazakhstan's multicultural environment. As I have already described above, considering ethnic Kazakhs as outgroup members provides an opportunity for young ethnic Russians to associate their Otherness with innovation and globalization. Facing a current version of Russianness, which is based upon ethnic exclusiveness and cultural supremacy, motivates young ethnic Russians to oppose it and even consider ethnic Kazakhs as a necessary part of their unique experiences. In the words of CN19:

*“[...] There were a lot of nationalists in Novosibirsk, and they called me Kazakh, honestly. I don't know if you met with it or not, but it was very often. [...] They see a man of Asian appearance, or in general everybody, they treat African Americans that way as well. And immediately, you know, hate fierce nationalism [appear]. We absolutely do not have it here. At least, among my acquaintances, in my [social] environment, because we are used to it when there are a lot of different ethnic groups. At least, in my childhood, it was like this. That is the first thing I can notice. For some reason, in Russia, you can see Russians who came from Kazakhstan.”*



In this regard, one can get an impression that being Russian in Kazakhstan provides an opportunity to select and adapt the concept of Russianness to personal needs and values. On the contrary, in my respondents' opinion, Russians in Russia lack this chance and must follow prescribed norms such as differentiating themselves from other ethnic groups and staying true to the primordialist understanding of ethnonational identity. Even though they share the same language and practice identical cultural traditions, young Kazakhstani Russians see Russians from Russia through the prism of majority-minority relationships. Therefore, the Russianness in Russia, similarly to Kazakhness in Kazakhstan, in particular, is related by them with ethnic dominance, emphasized differences in social experience, as well as missing cohesion between Russians in Russia and outside of it. According to KA20:

*"They [Russians in Russia] do not know what the Kazakh mentality is and do not know even a little bit what it is like to live in a country other than your own. It's our country, though, but by ethnic identity, it's not our country. It's Kazakhstan. They do not understand this neighborhood. They think, 'since I'm Russian, I live in my country. I'm in Russia, I'm in my country, so I'm the boss'. I think they are not able to concede."*

The question about 'typically Russian' can invoke negative connotations among people who perceive Russianness as an abstract concept and do not associate it directly with themselves. Associating Russianness with alcoholism and disorganization (e.g., CA14) or with hate, anger, and radical nationalism (e.g., AV3; AE4; KA20), some of these respondents support destructive stereotypes regarding Russians in Russia: *"I think about Russians that they are such fearless people for some reason, but still evil. For some reason I think that Russians [in Russia-Translator's note] are evil"* (KA20). Or, as CA14 has formulated:

*"If you read classic Russian literature, a description of the villages where people work to drink and drink to work, and that is. That is the meaning of life for them. I think that this stereotype that Russians are equivalent to vodka is not spun out of thin air."*

At the same time, there are also examples, which demonstrate that typical Russians can be associated with folkloristic activities – from traditional songs, dances, costumes, and established food traditions (e.g., AE4; AE10; CK15) to the Russian landscape and architecture

(e.g., AA8; AE10; CR22). Talking about his associations with typical Russianness, AE4 noticed: *“Probably a costume, a man’s or a woman’s [traditional] costume, red pants, the specific shirt and balalaika [Russian traditional music instrument- Translator’s Note]. Well, it’s kind of typical traditional Russian.”* For CR22, typical Russianness was associated with *“a guy in a [Russian traditional] shirt somewhere in the field, where there is a birch tree.”* These links to Russian folklore remind one of the official depoliticized perspective, which the government of Kazakhstan has used regarding ethnic minorities, for example, in the *Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan* (see Chapter 2.3.1).

Notably, associations with food often include Ukrainian cuisine. For example, CA17 mentioned *“salo [lard], gorilka, garlic”*, which are known as traditional symbols of Ukraine, describing his first thoughts about typical Russianness. Likewise, AV9 and AE10 discussed their associations with reference to *borsch* – a beetroot soup widely spread in the post-Soviet space. This example reiterates the idea that Russianness is uniting eastern Slavic peoples, which is reflected in the *Russian World* concept, while the factual differences in culture and traditions are ignored. While through titular populations of post-Soviet republics, such unification can be considered a group threat and domination by Russia, for young Kazakhstani Russians, such cultural blurring seems to testify affinity and cohesion. For KA21, the split between Ukrainians and Russians causes a feeling of loss:

*“I’m thinking - what is supposed to be, well, what you haven’t shared, what reasons you don’t give – all that is nonsense. You have a VERY long story, you went like this together, that as if Russians and Ukrainians are really, as one thing, all together and then because of some nonsense forget the whole story and trying to stick out - me, me, me.”*

Therefore, the ethnic distinctions serve in the view of my respondents as useless barriers, which impede intercultural consolidation. Nevertheless, like the Russian official discourse, the unity of Slavic people is an essential element of consolidation, according to my respondents. In the words of CA17: *“Well, I do not distinguish between Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians. I think they are all Slavic. Like, all are brothers. So, I don’t know, Russian, and that’s all.”* On the one hand, living in a multiethnic environment, being a minority group, and having a mixed-ethnic background (often of many different Slavic ethnic groups),

young ethnic Russians aim at ethnic equality and try to avoid privileges for only one ethnic group.

On the other hand, Slavic people's idea seems to provide, for interviewees with the mixed-ethnic origin, an opportunity to belong to a bigger and less rigid social group than categorical *naciol'nost'*. *Slavic* serves as a common category, which allows my respondents to designate all non-titular and non-Muslim populations in the sense of *Friendship of the Peoples'* concept, but without promoting a specific 'first among equals' ethnic group. Blurring the national differences in the view of my respondents is supposed to empower inter-ethnic harmony.

In addition, those respondents who do not relate to the Russian culture prefer to describe themselves in non-national terms or feel closer to other ethnic groups from their multiethnic background (e.g., CN19) and emphasize the importance of ethnocultural variety among Slavic people. Having both Belorussian and Russian roots, CN19 preferred to make a clear distinction between Slavs:

*"I'm very annoyed when they say that there are Belarusians, there are Russians, there are Ukrainians. They are all the same; they are all the same Slavs. I think it's not like that. At least there's the Belarusian language. It's different. At least there's another country, which has a different history – Belarus, it has a different history, it's different. Of course, maybe they are brotherly peoples, but still, we should separate [them]."*

In sum, typical Russianness is presented by my respondents in different manners and associated with a wide range of phenomena, including reflection upon personal relation to the Russian cultural heritage and a critical outside view on Russian society. The concept of Russianness remains controversial and polysemous among young Kazakhstani Russians. While the *Russian World* idea promotes the common cultural space (see Chapter 2.4.3), my respondents prove an opposite tendency and demonstrate that Russianness is not universal, i.e., being embedded in the local, social and personal circumstances is often depended on them.

#### 3.4.4. “Russians Are Not Russia”: An Alternative Definition of Russianness

While the idea of Russianness contains various elements and provides space for the construction of personal meaning and interpretations, discussion about the Russian state with my interviewees can be characterized as definite and unambiguous. Most of the respondents have a clear position about modern Russia. Some respondents associate typical Russianness, *inter alia*, with the Russian state and its politics (e.g., AV3; AE4; AE10; CN13). For example, AE4, besides his folkloristic association, also had a different perspective on typical Russianness:

*“Most likely a suit, well, men’s or women’s suit, red pants, well, special shirt and balalaika [Russian traditional music instrument – Translator’s note]. Well, it’s kind of typical, namely traditional Russian. And at the moment it is most likely a more reflective person who has a higher education (...) And (...) well, who still fights for Russia in the international arena, that means, supports the views of current Russia.”*

Besides that, during interviews, I noticed that the vast majority of my respondents are actively involved in the existing Russian agenda and political situation, despite the claimed lack of interest in politics as a whole<sup>46</sup>. Yet, evaluation of current Russian politics varies notably among the respondents. For example, similar to portraying Russian people in Russia, some of my interviewees often described the Russian state in terms of brutality and militarism (e.g., AV3; AA8; CN19). These respondents mentioned “*military build-up*” (AA8) and “*Spartan Russian propaganda*” (AV3) while sharing their views on modern Russia with me.

It is also interesting that some of the participants expressed understanding and empathy towards ethnic Kazakhs in the light of collective memory. While I was expecting to find support for the *Russian World* concept among young ethnic Russians, my respondents actively criticized Russia’s imperialism and supported the ethnic Kazakh population instead:

*“And, basically, this is a manifestation of this colonialism, imperialism, which I can’t lately bear to see at all because I think all the problems that we have now, they*

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<sup>46</sup> The interest in politics I will discuss in detail in following chapter.

*are precisely related to the fact that these are the more developed countries, the first world, I don't know how to call them. The core. The country of the core. They just invaded those countries which are more backward, and they took some benefit for themselves. And here, the same, because Russia was a more established power. It just saw some profit for itself there. And how many times did Kazakhs try to raise uprisings there and so on? It was all tightly suppressed. And it couldn't help but leave its imprint" (AM5).*

In this regard, my respondents often mentioned the Russian Orthodox Church. While Russian religious traditions were described highly sympathetically and connected to one's family, the Russian Orthodox Church can be associated with the Russian state and stimulate opposite feelings. According to some respondents (e.g., AA2; CA14; KA20), institutional religion, particularly Russian Orthodox Church, is closely related to financial enrichment. The church, which *"as politics uses an extra chance to divide people into groups and confront them against each other"* (AN11) and where *"everything is built on the money"* (AA2) is harshly criticized mostly among respondents from Almaty, who claim to be non-religious in general. But also, among some of my interviewees from two other cities, Russian Orthodox Church was associated with negative characteristics. Answering the question about his attitude towards the Russian Orthodox Church, KA20 stated:

*"[I have] nothing [to do with that]. Nothing at all. Because it's not like I'm an atheist, you know, I'm rather an agnostic. I mean, I only believe in what I see. If there's some kind of agitation, let's say when a person sits in front of you and is just blatantly agitating you [...] Well, like that "join our ranks, we're cool here, everything's cool." I don't take it very well [...], And that's how smart people earn money now, I think. Temples, even votive candles. That is money. Maybe that's what the pragmatist in me says, but still, don't deny the fact that this is money" (KA20).*

Instead of considering the Russian Orthodox Church as a consolidating factor, and compare it with family-related religious traditions, some of my respondents described Orthodoxy as a *"mass control method"* (CA14) and something that *"seriously limits people"* (CN19). Ironically, that refers to a Marxist definition of religion as the *opium of the people* widely spread in the Soviet times (McKinnon, 2005). Simultaneously, as if in contrast to the church,

which “tries to promote and inflict its own authority” (AV3), young Kazakhstani Russians articulated their openness and acceptance of people who follow Russian Orthodoxy and unity among any kind of social fragmentation:

*“And for me, religion doesn’t play such a big role in life. But still, while communicating, well, with friends, with relatives for whom religion matters. I share their opinion. I do not say if you are religious, then I do not communicate with you. I mean, if a person believes [in God], it’s his or her business, but I do not relate to religion”* (AV4).

At the same time, it is interesting that Russia’s politics as a whole can be considered from both a negative and a positive perspective among young Kazakhstani Russians. While some of the respondents openly expressed their disagreement with how Russia participates in international relationships (e.g., AV2; AM5; CN19), others (e.g., AE10; CN13; CR22) support the direction of Russian foreign politics today. The two following examples demonstrate the contrasting evaluation of the Russian political course:

*“That some opposing force [against the USA] appears to basically be a positive thing. That is how I’ve started thinking lately. But how they do it - this is the position, like our answer will be the same way. They did it in both cases. I think it doesn’t go well with such politics either”* (AM5).

*“Well, the economy is growing, a little bit, but people are suffering, well, there are always those who are right, who are guilty, happy, and dissatisfied. I mean now politics, well, totalitarian regime, yes, but they live better than before, I think, accordingly... Well, if we talk about status, the status of Russia has grown, not to compare what happened before, now at least it [the country] is taken into account”* (CR22).

Moreover, my interviewees often mentioned the current socio-economic situation while discussing the current position of the Russian state. Young Kazakhstani Russians described Russian internal politics either in a supportive or a criticizing manner. For instance, some of the respondents (e.g., AA1; AE6; CA14) described Russia in terms of socio-political inequalities and the political system’s inefficiency. Among the biggest critical points, e.g., corruption (e.g., AV9, CN19), lack of change in political power (e.g., AE6; AA7), low

quality of life (e.g., AM5; CA14), political repressions (e.g., AV3; AA8), were mentioned by my respondents. Such a view on domestic politics and the general socio-economic situation in Russia often restricts the willingness to ‘return’ to the kin state (e.g., AA1; AE10). Using the words of AE6:

*“I believe it should not be that a president stays for a long time at all. Something must always be changing. [...] I guess corruption is developed there. A lot of people steal, try to survive there somehow. Well, it seems to me that everybody is to blame, and the government in Russia is as the country deserves to have.”*

At the same time, some of my respondents considered Russia as a country of better opportunities. Comparing Russia to Kazakhstan, they emphasized that Russia could provide suitable conditions for their personal and professional development (e.g., AE4; CA17; KA20). Few of them (e.g., AN11; CD12) considered Russia a place where they have already studied or considered continuing their education in the future. As CA17 described:

*“The city [Moscow] itself is huge, so many people, so much energy. And I felt very comfortable there when you stand there, and everyone is walking around, in a hurry, doing something. We’re are like, we’re all sleepy, we just all wake up, slowly doing everything. And there I really liked the fact that people... To live there, you have to do something, constantly do something, to move. That’s what I really liked.”*

It is interesting that in this regard, Russia, similar to Kazakhstan, is divided in most of the interviews between the biggest cities, which are associated with innovation and opportunities, and the underdeveloped or destitute countryside (Soviet center-periphery model): *“Of course, Moscow, St. Petersburg are super. It’s very beautiful there; there’s some movement, some civilization, yes, everybody wants to go there, but what about for beyond these cities - it leaves a lot to be desired”* (CA14).

In addition, big Russian cities can be attractive for young Kazakhstani Russians, not because they are a part of Russia, but rather due to their nature of places of transnationalism and diversity. CK15 provided an example:

*“Then, I also looked at the option in Russia. But then again: because of some (...) some cultural shock, I can’t study there. I don’t know, maybe somewhere closer to the West, for instance, in St. Petersburg, it would be easier for me to adapt. Well,*

*it's (...) it's a volatile environment; there are a lot of tourists besides me there. And in Volgograd, there's mostly the Russian population. And there's no such mutual responsibility between several [ethnic groups]."*

That demonstrates that Russia appears, in the eyes of young Kazakhstani Russians, not as something homogenous but as a country with internal differences and individuality. Since most of my respondents have been traveling to Russia or have their relatives and friends there, their opinion about Russia was often based upon personal experiences. Besides difficulties in domestic politics, Russia can also provide practical benefits for young ethnic Russians, e.g., lack of necessity to learn another foreign language (e.g., CD12) or higher chances of passing entrance exams in Russian than in Kazakhstani universities (e.g., AN11).

However, an emotional connection to the Russian Federation proved to be limited. When describing Russia, my interviewees clearly distinguished themselves from the Russian state. Even those who perceive Russia and its politics positively did not report any national attachment to the country and often bracket Russia together with other states, such as the USA or the European countries. Since the research of Barrington et al. (2002), the attitude of Russians outside of Russia concerning the Russian state has not changed. Moreover, most of the respondents accentuated in their statements that neither the concept of Russianness nor ethnic Russians, in general, should be equated with Russia itself. According to CN13:

*"Well, the main thing is that Russians are not [equal to] Russia. I don't like to say that Russia is (...) yes, Putin is a great man. Somehow, I don't know, but I don't want to go there. I don't think that if I'm Russian, I should go to Russia and live in Russia."*

It seems that those young Kazakhstani Russians who associate Russianness with the Russian state and feel connected to it prefer to have a long-distance relationship with the Russian Federation. Living outside of Russia, they can still be in touch with selected facets of Russianness and Russia without being a part of Russia's "brutal" society or facing "nationalistic" Russians in Russia. AE10, who defined Russia as a "great power", outlined:

*"But I like the Russian anthem. I don't know, but these are different things. I mean, you know, the way they are, the way they behave. They're two different things. And*



*I don't like it. [...] I like bliny [Russian pancakes – Translator's note], I like borscht, but I don't like their [Russians in Russia] behavior."*

Therefore, even among those ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, who reproduce some elements of the *Russian World's* discourse, the closeness to Russia is relatively limited. Describing Russia as the motherland in emotional terms was an exception - only one respondent (KA21) considered Russia a place that "the soul strives for." Aside from that, alienation from Russia prevails, while the Russian language, Russian Orthodoxy, and Russian culture are being constructed separately from the unquestionable superiority of the Russian Federation. Although Russia can provide certain opportunities and benefits for some of my respondents, they do not demonstrate any emotional attachment to the country itself. Also, I did not identify a manifestation of long-distance nationalism within the interviews.

While the Russian Federation has promoted the importance of 'blood-based ties' and tried to enlist the support of Russians outside of Russia, young Kazakhstani Russians created their version of Russianness without taking for granted the ethnonational project promoting Russia. Besides the emphasized growing rank worldwide, Russia also faces various internal problems in my respondents' opinion. Nonetheless, Kazakhstani Russians demonstrate an interest in the Russian Federation and events connected to it. All of my respondents are, to a certain extent, involved in the socio-political life of Russia, following not only the international presentation of Russia but also maintaining their involvement in its domestic issues.

#### **3.4.5. "Crimea Is Theirs," but Common Issues Unite**

Since the Crimean Peninsula situation has awakened a seemingly solved 'national question' (*nacional'nyj vopros*) in the post-Soviet space and has been actively discussed on social media, it is important to consider the attitude of young Kazakhstani Russians towards this event. In the light of the *Russian World* idea, an opinion on the national status of Crimea, which is based upon an intergroup conflict between ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, can be a suitable indicator for tracing the ingroup favoritism as well as outgroup disparagement.

As I had expected, all of my respondents were well informed about the issue of Crimea and could provide a detailed description of Crimea's 'return' to Russia. Some of them (e.g., AA1; AE4; CD12; CA16) accentuated the historical character of this 'return' and even took it for granted. For them, the Crimean referendum unambiguously revealed the aspiration of Crimeans to become part of the Russian Federation, or even as a step towards regional integration led by powerful Russians, as it was in the Early Soviet era:

*"I mean, it was their choice. Also, nobody forced them. There was no such thing. They voted, and so they joined [Russia]. I think it's normal (phone rings), appropriate" (CD12).*

*"To be honest, it's some kind of idiocy that it all started to happen there. Like I said, I'm kind of trying not to distinguish a Russian, a Ukrainian, a Belarusian there. The fact is that we're all Slavs. We all grew up on the same Russian native land. [...] I think it's wrong again that it's because of a piece of land, of some scrap of an island to start such wars, incomprehensible, which are still going on, yes, shooting, drinking. Of course, it's terrible" (CA17).*

My respondents opposed the will of the Crimean population for unification regarding the striving of the Ukrainian side for separation from Russia. This general confrontation between intranational unity and strengthening national boundaries came to the fore during most of the interviews, while focusing on specific ethnic discrepancies (Russians vs. Ukrainians) were mentioned far less by my interviewees. Although an emphasized differentiation between Russians and Ukrainians appeared in some interviews (e.g., AA8; KA20; KA21), my respondents observed this conflict from a generally human perspective rather than a concrete (ethno)national one. As CA18 formulated:

*"I'm suspicious of all this; I don't understand how one could come to such a point in Ukraine, that such a war between themselves in Ukraine, in one state. I think smart people would always be able to reach a consensus to come to a common solution, which could be, let's say, CONCERNING for both sides. Why it didn't happen, of course, I don't know, but it caused the country to split up, and I don't think it gave something good, so they brought this [Crimea] back to Russia and what? They didn't benefit from it in any way. Russia may have benefited, though I don't*

*overthink. In the end, there are two different camps where people suffer, and all this turned out to be some kind of politicians game.”*

Simultaneously, most of the respondents consider Crimean events as something distant from them and their life in Kazakhstan, i.e., show no affiliation or emotional involvement neither with the Russian nor with the Ukrainian side. In other words, they do not support the expansion of the Russian Federation’s borders, do not stand in open solidarity neither with ethnic Russians in Ukraine, nor with ethnic Ukrainians. The fact that Crimea became part of Russia, e.g., KA20 considered the following: “It is all the same for me. Absolutely. So what?” Although my respondents communicated from a general human perspective and aimed at interpersonal cooperation, some of them, such as AN11, AA8, or KA20, demonstrated a tendency to construct clear national boundaries between Kazakhstan and Crimea:

*“When they announced that Crimea is supposed to be ours, but why Kazakhstan is so happy about it? We are citizens of Kazakhstan, and what does Crimea has to do with us? [...] It’s the same story as blaming [Donald] Trump for something. I don’t know. Let’s say it doesn’t make any difference to me, who is the president of America. I mean (...) I can’t influence it in any way” (AN11).*

Nonetheless, some of the respondents (e.g., AA1; AV9; CA14; CA17; KA21) shared general emotional thoughts about the situation in Crimea, distinguishing not between Russians and Ukrainians but between ordinary people and politicians. For most of my respondents, the new status of Crimea is a political issue, which, according to them, includes political power and ruling politicians presented as an outgroup, and the population of Ukraine, regardless of its ethnonational identity, as an ingroup. In the case of young Kazakhstani Russians, the Crimean Peninsula situation can strengthen their universalistic values and desire for global or, at least, regional consolidation, instead of intensifying a connection to the historical home country and rising long-distance nationalism.

In this regard, the government represented by politicians becomes an internal enemy and a source for social disintegration; in this context, ethnonational differences between Ukrainians and Russians lose their relevance, while transnational cohesion prevails. In the words of AV9:

*“Well, again, the poor people had suffered because of the ‘top’ people who had money to do something they wanted to. And then there are literally a couple of people who wanted to do something, and the rest of them got really bad. And from this point of view, these politicians, to be honest, I don’t know. I don’t like it very much, because a lot of people really suffered because of them, they lost their homes, they lost their loved ones and (...) it’s all because of these politicians, because of this division. I think that people would have lived there in peace, anyway, not starting with this whole thing.”*

Although most of my respondents consider the Crimean Peninsula annexation as a historical ‘return,’ the split into two camps – pro and against annexation, existing in Russia (e.g., Suslov, 2014), can also be noticed in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians. However, the split among my respondents compared to the definite ‘rather-or’ position includes various factors. The supporters of Russian Crimea (e.g., AA1; AA7; CD12; CA16) mentioned ‘historical fairness’ of the situation with Crimea, but more often focused on pragmatic issues of this event. Since Russia can provide more quality of life for the peninsula’s population, becoming a part of Russia is justified without mentioning its ethnonational identity. In the words of AA1:

*“I had a classmate who lived in the Crimea, and in eleventh grade, he came to us. It so happened suddenly (smiling) that he came from Feodosia [a town in Crimea – Translator’s note] in our village. And he told me that when Crimea was taken away, they immediately began to build roads, to put up streetlights. They had problems with water... It all has been fixed. In principle, people (...) people have an easier life. Well, I think if people have an easier life, then it’s right.”*

Likewise, the critics of Crimea’s annexation (e.g., AA2; AV3; CN19) avoided an ethnonational perspective, describing their attitude towards this event. Unlike widely promoted alienation between Russia as an aggressor and Ukraine as a victim among critics (see Chapter 2.4.4), they consider the actual situation from a broader perspective instead of using existing labels. For example, AV3 connected the annexation of Crimea with the following decline in cooperation between Russia and the international community:

*“This piece of territory has caused far more problems than it has benefited. It was possible to save [ethnic Russians in Crimea], as I said, in a different way, the problem is that now the international politicians treat [Russia] badly, then this hit the economy badly because I know, I’ve talked to some [people] from Russia, they say that prices jumped after that. Also, sanctions have been introduced. On all sides, it was very unprofitable (...) for Russia. I think so.”*

AA2 provided another example of an alternative interpretation of the Crimea annexation. In contradiction to the *Russian World* concept, she compared Russian actions in Crimea with China’s imperial ambitions towards the territory of modern Kazakhstan:

*“People, from whom they [Russia/Russians] took [the territory] away, I disagree. Also, China can take us, Kazakhstan itself, and we’ll be a colony of China. I’m so annoyed because when I worked in my shop all the directors were Ukrainians, they came here, to Kazakhstan and they say it got scary there [in Ukraine]” (AA2).*

An additional exciting aspect regarding Crimea, as a symbol of the expansion of the *Russian World*, can be found in comparing the Crimean Peninsula and the Northern regions of Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russian populations have historically prevailed. This question is especially current for the interviewees from the northern cities of Nur-Sultan and Karaganda, which are located territorially closer to Russia. What surprised me the most was that almost none of my respondents saw any similarities between Crimea and Northern Kazakhstan. Instead, they advocate territorial integrity and are against the idea that Kazakhstan might become an integral part of the Russian Federation. CA18, for instance, believed that:

*“Kazakhstan is Kazakhstan; it has its own culture, some of its own... Well, even its own religion. I think it is unacceptable to mix countries that have already established their borders with their laws. Still, there are differences somewhere; not everything is identical, there are many different things, so I would not want to join Russia.”*

Unlike Crimea, which, in the opinion of some of the respondents, “was given” (AE4) to Ukraine, Kazakhstan has an established state border. Therefore, such a situation as in Crimea is difficult to imagine for them. It is interesting, though, that the discussion about Crimea strengthens the affiliation more so to Kazakhstan than to Russia and supports the importance of national borders for my respondents. Despite their orientation towards global

solutions and regional, as well as international cooperation, the Crimean issue may activate their civic belongingness to Kazakhstan and their maintenance of the political status quo. However, the reasons for this can differ among my participants. While some of the respondents from the northern cities (e.g., AE4; CN13; CA16) consider northern Kazakhstan and even some southern Russia's towns as indigenous Kazakh territories, other interviewees, such as CA17, CA18, or KA21, have an opposite opinion. For example, CN13 assumed that:

*“Well, we Kazakhs have another opinion that Omsk [city in the South-East of Russia – Translator’s note] is also historically Kazakh. So, we could take it away from them too, purely theoretically, but our president is smart - he does not raise these questions. I think that territory was Kazakh, even next to Omsk; there were several cities there too. Well, this question of territory, it’s like (...) I don’t think it’s necessary to raise it, so there wouldn’t be any conflicts. We have friendly relations.”*

In turn, KA21 believed that the Northern regions of Kazakhstan historically belong to Russia but did not support their ‘return’ to Russia. Obviously, preserving a peaceful and stable relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia is more important than searching for the ‘historical truth’:

*“I know that there would be riots. I understand how society would react to it, that most of the population is indigenous, that they would be opposed, there would be protests and excitement, and I would be madly sad for our country. However, I can understand Russia - it is historically its territory; it would like to take its own. But still, we must not forget that for many years now we have been independent, that somehow these territories have already lived, something has already been done there, and then they just have been taken away” (KA21).*

In the case of Russia hypothetically annexing Northern Kazakhstan, the most problematic issue for my respondents is the degradation of the quality of life and instability. For the young Kazakhstani Russians, if Kazakhstan became a part of Russia or stayed an independent state, it does not consist of any symbolic meaning or emotional attachment. It is instead associated with their well-being. CK15 described her thoughts regarding the Kazakhstanis Northern regions, which Russia might annex:

*“I don’t know, it would work out, it would have consequences, and I wouldn’t have to choose. I mean, the situation would have made itself known. There’d be a change of attitude, and we’d just have to take a [certain] side. For example, if we were treated badly here, we would take Russia’s side; if we were treated well here, we would stay here. So, it would depend on many factors.”*

Nonetheless, I would like to highlight that this situation is unlikely to become a reality, according to my respondents. In this regard, some of the respondents (e.g., AE10; CN13; CA16) believed that Nursultan Nazarbayev (the former president of Kazakhstan) guaranteed that such actions would not happen in Kazakhstan. The future, however, seems to be controversial for them. In the words of AE10:

*“Well, I don’t think they’ll let [Russia] do that. They did it because of the situation in Ukraine; it all started destabilization. And so, they decided, let’s do it quickly - “Oop! That’s it.” We won’t have that, but maybe in five years, maybe more [...] Well, when our Yelbasy [head of the nation – Translator’s note] [will be gone].”*

The discussion about Crimea also revealed that this topic is closely related to media information and rumors on the Internet for most respondents. Some of the respondents (e.g., AA7; CN13; CA17; KA21) confessed that they dealt with contradictory or incomplete information because “in every country, media say what their senior government officials want” (AA7). Expressing mistrust towards the information they receive, my respondents admitted that it is difficult for them to determine their position on this issue. This result demonstrates the importance of studying the (social) media information in this context again. I will provide a detailed analysis of Kazakhstani Russians’ social media usage patterns and information consumption in Chapter 3.6.

#### **3.4.6. Ethnic Heritage and Belongingness: Closing Thoughts**

While my respondents are defined, according to their passports, as Russians and, hence, constitute a minority ethnic group, their ethnonational self-definition might contrast impressively with the prescribed identity. Although almost all of them introduced themselves as Russians (‘by passport’), even those who became Russian incidentally, their interpretation

of Russianness and relation to their historical home country is based upon various and often contradictory beliefs and experiences.

The Russian language's role is often discussed in the literature in the context of ethnic Russians outside of Russia and has been presented as one of the primary identification factors (e.g., Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007; Kosmarskaya, 2014; Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019). My research also confirms this assumption. While the "purity" of the Russian language and its civilizing role still seem to be present among young Kazakhstani Russians, they also support the trilingualism promoted by the Kazakhstani government.

Similarly, cultural and religious traditions remain an essential element in which family and relatives' connections are based. As in the case of second-generation females of Russian descent in Israel (cf. Eisikovits, 2014), the family also plays a vital role in ethnic heritage for young ethnic Russian in Kazakhstan of both female and male genders. In general, despite the politicization of the concept of Russianness during the Russian-Ukraine conflict, the language and cultural traditions are considered by young people as a private issue. Currently, they do not have any interest in forfeiting it.

Moreover, the interpretation of Russianness by young Kazakhstani Russians depends on a specific context and can considerably transform itself. Russianness is associated with innovation and global openness to provide a sense of Otherness and promote the Soviet center-periphery view. Simultaneously, in accordance with Russian foreign policy, Russianness can be linked with ethnic exclusiveness and cultural supremacy. It is also clear that Russianness can be connected to the Russian state. Still, it is also constructed in a specific local context, making it possible for my respondents to keep its 'best' elements (e.g., classic Russian literature or Russian cuisine) and avoid unacceptable aspects, such as the brutality and the inefficiency of the political system. Thus, social creativity as one of the strategies to reach a positive evaluation of their ingroup often comes into play among young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, it seems that even those who describe Russia as a country of opportunities would easily prefer another country, in case it could provide even more chances and demonstrate their willingness to social mobility. Compared to classic diasporic communities, my respondents do not display any specific emotional connections to the Russian Federation and show no signs of long-distance nationalism. Despite the importance of some



religious traditions, the young Kazakhstani Russians consider the Russian Orthodox Church not only as a place where these traditions can be practiced but also as a negatively evaluated political institution, which aims at financial enrichment. Considering all of that, young Kazakhstani Russians prefer to maintain the current status quo and do not consider emigration to their historical homeland as a necessary option.

The annexation of Crimea, which could potentially revive their “blood ties”, has an opposite effect on my target population. Being oriented towards unity in the Soviet concept of the *Friendship of the Peoples*, young Kazakhstani Russians argue for a pacific settlement of political disputes while advocating the people’s right to self-determination. Showing understanding towards ordinary people, regardless of their ethnonational identity, they criticize the political elites instead. In other words, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, my respondents construct the whole population of Crimea as an ingroup and government representatives as an outgroup without ethnic segregation (Russians vs. Ukrainians).

As my results reveal, Kazakhstani Russians equate neither Russian state policy and Russian population, nor Ukrainian state policy and the population of Ukraine. However, despite them being well informed about it, the whole situation with Crimea does not appear relevant to them. It is difficult for them to imagine that something comparable can happen to Northern Kazakhstan. However, talking about possible annexation made it evident that the territorial integrity and national borders of Kazakhstan seem to be essential for young Kazakhstani Russians, even if they aim at supranational and international cooperation.

### **3.5. Personal Interpretation of Citizenship and Civic Belonging**

#### **3.5.1. Citizenship as National Attachment to Kazakhstan**

Apart from the ethnonational identity and sense of belonging, it is crucial to recognize how young Kazakhstani Russians consider their citizenship and civic belonging to the country of their birth and current residence. During interviews, it came to my attention that many of the respondents mentioned Kazakhstan in different contexts, emphasizing their clear connection with the country. For example, as I have demonstrated above, when discussing Russianness, the local Kazakhstani perspective consistently accompanied our conversation. In addition, some of my respondents (e.g., AM5; AA8; KA20) described themselves as

*Kazakhstanis* and were emphasizing this category throughout our talk. In these cases, unexpectedly for me, questions regarding ethnonational identification could activate a civic sense of belonging and prove the importance of their connection to Kazakhstan among my interviewees. As KA20 explained:

*“You know, I do not have such a concept as Russian or Kazakh; I have a concept of Kazakhstani. I mean, a resident of Kazakhstan. And I do not care absolutely about nacional’nost’. There are, of course, differences. There are those moments in which, as though nacional’nost’ is crucial to me, but if to say for myself, I cannot say that I am Russian or Kazakh. According to all documents, I am Russian, but actually, I am simply a resident of Kazakhstan. I have such a mentality. I believe that is correct.”*

Using the terminology given by Poppe and Hagendoorn (2001), most of the young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan whom I interviewed described themselves as “republicans” – residents or citizens of Kazakhstan. While, according to the authors, being a “republican” is associated with successful assimilation or integration in the host society, my respondents, as I will prove below, do not entirely verify this claim. Their relation to Kazakhstan includes different facets, which form a controversial relationship with the country of their birth and residence. At the same time, this connection to Kazakhstan provides a certain sense of national belonging and numerous opportunities for self-image construction.

Being a citizen of Kazakhstan can have different meanings for my respondents. Some of the respondents associated their citizenship - analogous to ethnonational label as Russian ‘by passport’, only with the concept of current country residence (e.g., AV3; AA6; KA21), or with having certain legal obligations towards Kazakhstan (e.g., AA8; AE10; CK15). Most of the respondents demonstrated an emotional involvement towards their connection to Kazakhstan. For example, CD12 associated their Kazakhstani citizenship with patriotism and national pride:

*“For me, it is when you hear your anthem, your heart’s racing (phone rings). I think that’s patriotism. When you hear the anthem of your country, you have this feeling. You can’t even pass it on. You are just proud of your country. (background music). Let’s say when athletes win medals. Well, in any other industry, let’s say. I’m just an athlete. I link it to sports.”*

In general, patriotism as an act of positive evaluation was often mentioned or implied among respondents. Although being aware of some socio-political issues, most of them tried to emphasize the country's positive facets and present the state in a good light. However, in most cases, this patriotism had a constructive nature, i.e., it was based upon Kazakhstan's uniqueness and existing socio-economic challenges. Some of the respondents (e.g., AA2; CA16; CA18) considered promoting a positive image of the country of their birth and residence as a crucial assignment of a citizen. Perceiving Kazakhstan as a prosperous state on the world stage was a necessary element of patriotism for my respondents. As CA18 formulated:

*"I respect my state. I will never say anything that can (...) make it lower in the eyes of foreigners. Yes, I think it is unnecessary to say it - you can discuss problems with someone who knows these problems, and you should not take them out of the hut, as they say. These are not our problems, it's all solvable, so I don't think that I don't think it's necessary to tell foreigners what's wrong with us. It's not; it's always better to speak 'I'm a PATRIOT'. I'm a patriot; yes, you can call me a patriot."*

In this regard, being a citizen of Kazakhstan carried advantages in the context of the Ukrainian crisis for some of the respondents. As I have demonstrated above, Russia's militarism was criticized by some of the respondents. In comparison to that, Kazakhstan's position looked better in the eye of most of my interviewees, which could strengthen their civic and not ethnonational sense of belonging. According to my interviewees, compared to Russia, which has been sanctioned and criticized by the international community, Kazakhstan looks to be better positioned. The multi-vector policy of Kazakhstan, both the foreign and domestic one, is obviously able to find support among my respondents. To have peace and *"be friends with whomever you can"* (CA16) provides a better quality of life for them and leads to an appreciation of their country of birth and residence:

*"[Being a citizen of Kazakhstan] means, first of all, to be a part of such a post-Soviet state, a stable state, because we have the policy of our president. I like him very much; he is TOLERANT to all. We have a secular state with more than 130 ethnic groups, and we live together, in this territory, calmly, without any riots (...) (CN13).*

Here is another example, which AA8 provided:

*“Kazakhstan is not involved in any world problems. Well, sanctions [for Russia] have been imposed. [...] My brother says to me: ‘Yes, it is true’. And here, as we had Georgian wines, we still have them. As there was here jamón [Spanish ham – Translator’s note], so it is still and will be, this jamón. We have a completely different relationship. No one fights with anyone here. And all the money goes for the development of the country. Well, partly (laughs). (...) somehow.”*

At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that young ethnic Russians speak of Kazakhstan only in favorable terms or praise the country in the sense of blind patriotism. Their patriotism is based not exclusively upon admiration but also upon identifying specific problems, which they can recognize. Remarkably, more than half of them communicated a desire to eliminate these problematic issues. Although being a part of the intellectual elite, most of my respondents, especially those from Almaty, demonstrated their involvement in Kazakhstan’s socio-political life and their sensitivity towards social inequality and exercising fundamental rights and freedoms. Interestingly, young Kazakhstani Russians adopted a universal perspective instead of categorizing Kazakhstani society into ethnic groups (Kazakhs vs. Russians). In the words of AA1:

*“Well, in Kazakhstan, it is not so open at the moment, but I think that, in principle, the whole nation is somehow disadvantaged. I mean, everything depends on corruption, which is flourishing, both in Russia and in Kazakhstan. It’s a pity. Even though the people understand this, they don’t do anything, because they are just afraid and think that they can’t cope with that. Well, I think that this is a violation of people’s rights.”*

But do ethnic Russians ready to somehow change this situation? As my analysis proves, there are few examples (e.g., AA1; AV3; AE4) of the respondents from Almaty who are actively involved in the country’s socio-political life and support various grassroots initiatives. These initiatives aim to discuss topical issues of Kazakhstani society and popularize them among young people. Moving forward, social media appears to be an essential tool for spreading these initiatives. As AV3 described:

*“And there is a cinema club. And we’ve been doing it for many years, since the second year of studying, with our head of the basic faculty. I mean, the basic faculty*

*is history, social sciences. And we are conducting the film club with him, first of all, there were themes (...) before that, exactly national identification, that is, Kazakhstan. We watched Kazakh national cinema, a new wave, let's say, of the nineties. And now we, I said, have recently moved on to [the topic of] ecology, we have completed it. We organized it with the local ecological association 'Green rescue'."*

In this regard, some respondents (e.g., AA1; AA2; KA21) see potential in Kazakhstan to develop the civic sector and are motivated to contribute to it. Although they admitted the imperfection of the country's socio-political system, young Kazakhstani Russians often consider it as a challenge and try to use it as a starting line for further bottom-up transformations. These transformations are often based upon transnational values of global movements, such as human rights or ecological issues, and include rather non-governmental projects than state initiatives. AA2 shared the following:

*"I think this is important anyway. There's this expression - we can sit and cry that this is bad, [and] we can do something to make it better. But that all is breaking down. I just remembered we've got this girl Asja Tulesova; she's an activist. We have big problems with the air; she wanted to run an application to show people how polluted our air is [...] She did things that people really need, [but] she was not accepted [to be a candidate for Parliament - Translator's note]. And she appealed against this, but still [got] a no answer. We all sign petitions, really, it'd be great to do something on a government level. And you think, that's right, would be cool."*

Another tendency, which is evident for me in this context, is the growing local belonging role. As the previous quotation shows, belonging to Kazakhstan is often perceived among young Kazakhstani Russians through the lens of the city of their current residence. Describing themselves as "native of Astana" (CA18), "citizen of Almaty" (AE6), or "indigenous person of Karaganda" (CA21), some of the interviewees demonstrated the significance of the place of residence for their self-image. Even among those who did not describe themselves in local terms, their emotional attachment to the city was evident. Unlike Russia, Kazakhstan in general, and the local places in particular, are described in terms of 'love'. For example, AE4 said: *"Even though there are many problems and negativity, I love*

*Kazakhstan, and I love my city*” (AE4). Similarly, CK15 linked her citizenship with belonging to the city:

*“Yeah, I don’t want to move anywhere, and I hope it stays the same... In my head with my city, because I love this place after all. Things are changing. Things were different here when I was a kid, but still.”*

In addition, this sense of belonging to a local urban community can be extended to and associated with the whole country. Considering the home city as a crucial element of the entire country, some of the respondents (e.g., AN11; CA18; KA21) did not only express warm feelings towards their local place but also tried to propagate a positive image of their region widely as a part of Kazakhstan. As CA16 formulated:

*“Because this is the land where you were born, nacional’nost’ does not matter Kazakh, Russian or mixed. I think we should respect the city, the country where you come from. If let’s say I ever move to another place. I would like of course to move abroad, like everybody else, then I will talk about the place where I come from, from Karaganda and I will try to make people have a good impression of this city”* (CA16).

However, the important point is that this ‘love’ for the city and the country as a whole was often limited only to the local community of ordinary people, and this attachment is not necessarily related to the state in its political sense. It seems that the differentiation between the state, which is represented by the political elite, and society of ordinary people, as it was visible while discussing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, takes place in this context as well. Being a citizen of Kazakhstan meant being part of Kazakhstani society and a representative of a city of residence. This citizenship definition unites most of my respondents while belonging to Kazakhstan in its political sense proves to be more complex.

### **3.5.2. Politics and Everyday Life as Parallel Realities**

Despite the fact that some of my interviewees have been actively involved in Kazakhstan’s socio-political life and demonstrated elements of constructive patriotism, most of them argued that they are not interested in politics. As it has been already known from previous studies (e.g., Umbetalieva et al., 2016; Laruelle, 2019; Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019),

Kazakhstan's youth, in general, is politically apathetic. To a certain extent, my results confirm this assumption; when discussing political topics, my respondents argued their reluctance to face and be involved in political issues. In the words of AA7:

*"I think we should not ever touch on politics, we're not in politics, as long as we feel good - no one is talking [about politics]. It is always like that; someone starts screaming that the president is bad. And others seem to live well and have nothing to say. [The first ones] then say 'Why?' If they don't talk against [politics], it will be even worse[...] Well, there's always an opposition, if the majority supports it, they understand that something will follow, and deterioration will follow, because they kind of (....) attack the power. And so, it's better just not to touch that, [live] without touching them [politicians]."*

Nevertheless, during our discussion, it became clear that most of my respondents have been involved in politics in some respect and are aware of political developments in the country as well as in the world, even if they deny it. Politics seem as something "dirty" (AA7) or "distant" (CA18) for them, while the quality of life, social equality, and economic development of Kazakhstan remain central for young Kazakhstani Russians. Therefore, the claim not to be interested in politics did not necessarily indicate a complete disregard for political issues. For example, corruption (e.g., AV9; CN13; CN19) or low quality of state public services (e.g., AA2; CA14) has obviously concerned Kazakhstani Russians and motivated them to reflect upon state-people relationships. As a result, my respondents shared with me their ideas on how to improve the situation:

*"Yes, I have thoughts about what to do with that. You have to act from the top; that is, if the top will not do it, then the bottom will not do it, respectively. It is quite logical, in my opinion. Well, there is always someone 'above', so to speak, is the initiator, if the top will not do it, then the bottom will not do it; that is, if the top will not do it, then the bottom will not do it. It is necessary to do something with it, from the higher level, so to speak" (CA14).*

As this quote also demonstrates, any contact with state politics may be imminently related to frustration and acknowledgment of problematic domestic issues for the participants. Most of my respondents have somehow recognized these problems and expressed their skepticism

towards present methods of solving them. For example, CA18 provided the following example:

*“Well, they may be, legislation that we do not understand, some draft of laws, for example. In the field that is relevant to me personally - it’s in the field of education, I know some laws somehow, and I think it would not be worth doing that, for example. Or even the wrong distribution of the budget, for example, well, of course (smiling), from [my] amateur [perspective].”*

Simultaneously, most respondents were not ready to take a proactive position and openly opposed the current political course. Having limited opportunities to influence the political process constituted by the regime, most of my respondents have recognized this limitation. They have accepted it to avoid potential negative consequences, e.g., questioning by the National Security Committee (AE4). For instance, CR22 answered the question of whether he would be ready to participate in a political protest as follows:

*“I wouldn’t go. Well, first of all, you’ll get [problem]. Secondly, you’ll get it stupidly (laughing). Okay, if you were protecting your girlfriend there or something, and here just like that. For what the hell?”*

As my results show, the desire to insulate oneself from active participation in the socio-political life can be a consequence of their experiences and not a standalone characteristic. Most of my respondents do not believe in the effectiveness of the political protest and the overall potential for change, which might be a reason for them to consciously not be involved in politics. Thus, my target population’s political apathy can be a consequence of disappointment with the political system and the existing protest forms, rather than just a reason for avoiding politics. As AE6 formulated:

*“I wouldn’t go either [to a political protest – Translator’s note], I think it’s too useless, that is, they’re happening, and what has been changed? [...] I think it’s useless to say anything at all. [...] Just stand there with posters and scream... Everybody understands this situation in the country very well, and they only talk to each other, they talk to themselves and to people who already know them, who see them on the Internet, in other countries, that’s it.”*



At the same time, despite recognizing the local problems, most of my respondents tend to maintain the status quo. As I described in the previous chapter, political changes, in general, can be associated with violence and concern for personal well-being, while the current socio-political situation in Kazakhstan mostly suits young Kazakhstani Russians. Comparing the political situation in Kazakhstan with other post-Soviet countries, my respondents have identified positive aspects of unchanged political elite:

*“Well, some people [politicians – Translator’s note] are sharing money with each other. Well, they’ve shared [the money] and calmed down. And they’ve stopped sharing, right? And when new people have money all the time... They see the treasure, yeah, the treasure, they start to mmm! [be interested in that – Translator’s note]. And when one person goes there, takes it, sells it, buys it, and then let it lie down. I think it’s even good. And we have a khan’s system” (AA8).*

Even those respondents who support socio-political transformations do not actively oppose the regime, but rather *“just talk about human rights, sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, leadership, volunteering” (AV4)*. These grassroots initiatives aim to improve ordinary people’s lives but not to change the current political system. As a result, according to my respondents, state politics and everyday life do not exist together, but more so in parallel. Here it is essential to highlight that differentiation between the political elite and the grassroots level is crucial for my respondents. They support the idea of not relying on the state and create individual coping strategies with the issues mentioned above. KA21 provided an example:

*“Because of my job, when I had an internship, I had to communicate with people who have nothing to do with the state, but they do such a huge job. I want to see my role in that like there are such people, and they need help because they are not state organizations—for example, an art school. Since 1997 led by two women, they’re already over 50. And they did all this on their own; there was no help from the state. They were just two girls back then; they wanted to do something for children so that children had something to do. There were ‘hungry’ times, they said that sometimes children came to the lessons being hungry, I mean, there was nothing to eat, they fed them here, they did something, that’s all.”*

These non-state initiatives have included a wide spectrum of social activities but have not directly fought the regime. Creating an enabling environment within the regime seemed to intensify a sense of belonging to Kazakhstan among young ethnic Russians. Using social identity theory, that can be explained as the following: the political elite is considered an outgroup, while ordinary people are an ingroup. Criticizing the government obviously leads to a positive evaluation of the Kazakhstani population and its internal cohesion, while differences between ingroup members, such as ethnonational identity and belonging, lose their importance in this context.

Although my respondents claimed not to be interested in politics, they were not indifferent towards socio-political issues *per se* and demonstrated a certain degree of involvement in the domestic social life of Kazakhstan. This involvement varied considerably among the interviewees, but one thing remains clear – young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrated a strong connection to the country of birth and current residence. In addition, segregating between the governmental top-down and personal bottom-up imagination of Kazakhstan has provided them a chance to construct their version of the country and their belongingness to it.

### **3.5.3. Familiar Kazakhness**

Since the titular culture is actively promoted by the state and the Kazakh-speaking population is consistently growing, relation to the titular group tradition can be an important indicator when studying the sense of national belonging among minorities groups in Kazakhstan. Living in a multiethnic society, young Kazakhstani Russians are surrounded by Kazakhs and face regular interethnic differences. On the one hand, such an environment might sharpen the sense of Otherness or superiority (see Chapter 3.4.2). Yet, on the other hand, it can provide an additional opportunity for young Kazakhstani Russians to have a closer connection to the country of their birth and current residence.

As in the case of Russianness, there was no explicit or common interpretation of Kazakhness as a set of Kazakh-specific characteristics among my respondents. Depending on the context, it could include entirely different and often contradictory meanings. While some of the respondents associated typical Kazakhness with hospitality (e.g., AE4; CA17; CN19) and rich culture (e.g., AA2; AA8; CN13), some other interviewees linked it with

conservatism (e.g., AE6; CA14; CA18) and tribalism (e.g., AA1; AA8; CR22). The following quotes demonstrate these different views on that what typical Kazakhness includes:

*“Well, [typical] Kazakh is hospitality, first of all, because you just come to [one’s] home and then: “Let’s go to the table! If you’re hungry. If not hungry, let’s drink some tee.” This is what I like in Kazakhstan- everyone is open to each other, hospitable. Well, most of it, at least those whom I have met” (CA17).*

*“Well, typical Kazakh it’s probably, when, people are trying to find a job or... The connection between Kazakhs is closer because there’s a *bake* [A short version of some Kazakh names, which indicates a close relationship – Translator’s note] and so on. I mean, that’s very Kazakh, a kind of distinctive feature. I mean, I have an uncle there, I have a brother there, and so on. I mean, Kazakhs hold on to their social ties very firmly. And they use them in any place where they need to and where they don’t need to. It seems to me that this is what makes them different (laughs)” (AA1).*

As my analysis shows, most of the respondents expressed relatively warm feelings towards Kazakh traditions. Even though some of the interviewees, mostly from Almaty (e.g., AA1; AV3; AV9; CR22), described Kazakhness in negative terms, young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrate a close connection to the titular lifestyle. In accordance with Senggirbay’s (2019) results, my research shows that many Kazakh cultural elements are deeply rooted in the everyday routines of my respondents. For example, cooking dishes of Kazakh cuisine and celebrating traditional Kazakh feasts seems familiar for most of the respondents. In the words of CD12: *“Kazakhstan has its own national cuisine. Well, let’s say *beşbarmak* [traditional Kazakh dish from meat and dough - Translator’s note]. This year we even cooked *beşbarmak* for the New Year’s Eve.”* Similarly, CN13 explained:

*“Beşbarmak, food, yes, because a yurt [a traditional dwelling of ethnic Kazakhs - Translator’s note] it’s also, well, as a national, but no, food, this is definitely the food. Back to the food (laughing), it’s horsemeat [one of the main ingredients of the Kazakh cuisine- Translator’s note]. By the way, a lot of people do not eat it in Europe, for them, it’s terrible [...] Yes, the horse is a pity, but I love horsemeat (laughing).”*

In addition, some of the respondents (e.g., AM5; AA7; CA18; CN19) demonstrated a certain emotional connection to the titular group. Describing ethnic Kazakhs and Kazakhness, these interviewees highlighted their closeness to ethnic Kazakhs, which initially, I expected to see towards Russians in Russia. It seems that, among other things, Kazakh ethnic culture and its representatives provide a highly appreciated home-feeling for young ethnic Russians. As AM5 illustrated:

*“Well, Kazakh - for me, it’s some kind of something familiar, it’s already become. Traditional costumes, boursaki [Kazakh traditional fried dough - Translator’s note], I wouldn’t say. Of course, it’s here too, but as if it’s a bit in the background. Rather there are people. You can go there to the square to see them (laugh). And, for example, when you’re at the airport (...), and you’re going somewhere and in the waiting room when you’re sitting there, and it turns out, you see some people, (laughing) and you immediately realize that these are Kazakhstani people, or they are Kazakhs. And how it feels that these are our people there - finally. Well, this is how it feels, that you see something homeland-related” (AM5).*

Most of the respondents also claimed to have friendly relations with ethnic Kazakhs. Although, in some situations, being non-titular can be accompanied by the feeling of social exclusion (see Chapter 3.4.2), it seems that the existing ethnonational labels did not impede communication or close relationships. Besides the friendship, for both female and male respondents (e.g., AV9; KA20), an interethnic marriage with an ethnic Kazakh has been conceivable in case she or he is not overly conservative:

*“On the other hand, I have a friend who is Russian and had a Kazakh husband, but they have divorced already (laughs). He had a traditional family too, but he didn’t perceive these family traditions. Probably because he was expected to have a Kazakh wife, and he said no, I like a Russian. And they got married anyway. They probably split up for other reasons, but the mentality didn’t play such an important role anymore because he didn’t need her to sit at home all the time, to cook, and doing laundry. He said if you want to work, do some kind of career, feel free” (AV9).*

However, regional differences might play an essential role in the definition of Kazakhness. For example, unlike respondents from the Northern regions, Southern regions were

associated with a more outstanding commitment to traditions, which my respondents can interpret as a certain “*underdevelopment*” (CA14):

*“Typical Kazakh, they come late, but they are kind, friendly, but not all of them. The northern Kazakhs are different, the southern and central ones. The central ones are closer to the northern ones; they’re more Russified. The southern ones speak bad Russian, sometimes not well educated, personally for me”* (CA16).

Although young Kazakhstani Russians still use the typical differentiation between Russians and Kazakhs, and sometimes counter each other, for both of these ethnic groups, it does not automatically mean that ethnic Kazakhs and their culture are perceived only from the perspective of the intergroup bias. As I have already demonstrated, intergroup differences between Kazakhs and Russians can be used to improve the ingroup status in a context where ethnonational identity and belonging matter.

At the same time, my respondents can also consider these differences from a perspective of intercultural cooperation and social diversity. Being an ethnic minority and being surrounded by the titular population provide them the opportunity to be familiar with a different culture and creatively solve the so-called “acculturative tasks” (Erentaite et al., 2018, p. 334)- finding a balance between ethnic and titular cultures. Instead of being hostile toward the titular group, young Kazakhstani Russians have used Kazakhness as one of the resources that shape their Self. AE4 described it as follows:

*“Living in this environment, you kind of assimilate, and (...) Not that you immigrate but assimilate in this environment, and you become a Russian Kazakh. That means that we also actively and vigorously celebrate Nauryz, Kurban Ajt [national holidays – Translator’s note], and so on. Well, all the traditions that Kazakhs or are Turkic peoples have, we have them as well.”*

#### **3.5.4. “Rough,” But Useful Kazakh Language and “Peaceful” Islam**

Despite their closeness to Kazakh traditional culture, only a few of the respondents (AE4; CK15; CA17) have spoken the Kazakh language fluently. Most of the respondents argued that they have the knowledge of the Kazakh language at a basic level and did not have any motivation to improve this knowledge. Unlike Kazakh traditions, the Kazakh language

aroused more negative emotions among most of the respondents. Some young Kazakhstani Russians (e.g., AA1; AV9; KA21) shared with me that the Kazakh language is too complicated and “rough” (AV9) for them:

*“Well, in general, as a language, let’s say, I don’t like Kazakh very much, it is not really close to me, because it is so rough, there are so many words and endings. I don’t like the sound of it. And even if I understand it, when people talk, I understand texts, something like that, but as usual, there are conversations, they start to cut something short, something very quickly, then I don’t understand it anymore, and I can’t speak anymore. But of course, I can say something, but it will be said with an accent” (AV9).*

Negative emotions towards the official language can also be connected with their experiences when learning the Kazakh language, which is considered to be coercive (e.g., AA1; AA2; CA16). Since Kazakh is a part of all educational programs, the obligation to learn the language applies to all students. However, as the following example demonstrates, it may be perceived as only a required formality and not as a real necessity:

*“Well, yeah, in schools, basically, they try [to force to learn]. They say: ‘If you don’t learn the language, you can’t be successful, you can’t get a job somewhere’. For me, it’s clear that I’ll get a job even without Kazakh [knowledge](laughs). It’s not that important, I think” (AA1).*

At the same time, some other respondents (e.g., AV3; AA8; CN19; KA21) speak positively about the knowledge of the Kazakh language. According to them, speaking Kazakh can provide specific benefits for both everyday life and career and can make communication with the Kazakh-speaking population easier. It seems that knowledge of the Kazakh language might even eradicate a feeling of social exclusion and promote rapprochement with the titular group:

*“You can be Russian, but if you speak Kazakh, you can already say that it cancels your nacional’nost’ completely” (AV3).*

*“Yeah, I feel it. It’s necessary, it’s important. It’s the language of statehood. Well, (...) if you want a lot of glories because not many Russians speak Kazakh. If you want much glory and a political career, you have to learn [it]” (AA8).*

Additionally, those few interviewees who speak Kazakh confirmed the advantages of using this language in everyday life. As AE4 described:

*“Either I enter a shop, and I ask something in Kazakh, and I’m literally immediately getting an answer. There are such very urgent situations where I just instantly speak Kazakh, and I immediately [get] response. In Russian is not always [the case]. By the way, that also happens if I’m going by taxi and speak Kazakh [there], I may not be charged at all.”*

Similarly, CA17 provided an example of a positive outcome regarding social contacts:

*“At first [I had] a small fear [to speak Kazakh with ethnic Kazakhs], but later everything become normal. On the contrary, it’s nice, and you are proud that you are understood, that you understand, that you have found a common language.”*

However, in practical terms, most of my respondents were not motivated to speak the Kazakh language daily and did not plan to improve their language level. Even those respondents who were sympathetic to Kazakh linked their inability to speak this language with objective factors, such as ineffective teaching methods or inadequate school programs. The Kazakh language, which, according to these respondents, has been taught by “*native speakers who don’t know how to teach it in a right way, because they already know it*” (KA21), or with “*terrible textbooks*” (CN19) seemed impossible for them to learn and use.

Although the majority of my respondents claimed to “understand” the colloquial language, and some of them recognized the advantage of speaking the Kazakh language, they have actively avoided the usage of Kazakh in their daily life. This trend covered even those few interviewees (AE4; CK15; CA17) who were able to speak the Kazakh language fluently. Besides personal dislike of the language, there are alternative reasons for not using Kazakh and their reluctance to improve their knowledge of it. Firstly, most of the respondents have not recognized a current necessity to use this language. Living in big cities where the Russian language is widely spread, speaking the Kazakh language is a bonus for young Kazakhstani Russians rather than an urgent need. Secondly, the practical benefits of speaking Kazakh still remain limited. Compared to English, or other foreign languages, Kazakh is an “*unpromising language*” (KA20), which can only be used in specific local contexts.

Hence, in the opinion of young Kazakhstani Russians, learning this language does not justify any effort. Since they claim that the necessary information is available in Russian or English, and “*Kazakh [can be used] only at the marketplace (...) [or] on the bus*” (AE10), it seems that the status of the Kazakh language has also remained low in the perception of some of my respondents (e.g., AE10; CA14; KA20). While the Russian language was considered as a “prerogative” (see Chapter 3.4.1), the Kazakh language was, in particular, associated with a lack of education (CA16). Simultaneously, the universality of Russian opposes the particularity of Kazakh, which was usually conjoined with ethnonational identity and belonging. An intergroup context, which includes both languages, notably intensifies the linguistic identity and supports the conviction that Kazakh is the language of ethnic Kazakhs and the Russian language is for everyone else:

*“When Kazakhs start speaking to me in Kazakh, even though it’s obvious that I’m not Kazakh. I don’t do it on principle; I don’t answer in Kazakh, I say - I don’t understand, speak to me in Russian, as if we have two state languages, I think they should respect my language too”* (CA14).

It seems that this conviction has also been supported by everyday experiences encountered by young Kazakhstani Russians. In the words of CN13:

*“No, I don’t speak Kazakh. I understand, in school - yes, I took part in various Olympiads [school competitions – Translator’s note], but now I don’t use it in everyday life. Sometimes I think that if you use Kazakh and somehow make a mistake, people will look at you with mockery and perceive you differently from many people in Europe. They will admit that - oh, you said something in French or Italian and how great it is, you appreciate our culture. Here I think it’s a little bit like (...) They are skeptical about that.”*

Besides language, my respondents’ relation to Islam, which most ethnic Kazakhs preach, showed interesting results. Although many Kazakh traditions are closely connected to religion, most interviewees barely expressed warm feelings towards it and treated Islam either neutrally or negatively. As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 3.4.4, institutionalized religion *per se* is often openly criticized by young Kazakhstani Russians. In this regard, Islam was not an exception. Like the Russian Orthodox Church, institutionalized Islam was



associated with gaining financial profit and using religion to achieve particular interests (e.g., AA2; AA3; KA20). AA2 described her attitude towards Islam:

*“Same thing [as the Russian Orthodoxy]. We have a mosque downtown, and next to it is. How do you call it when you bet? [...] A bookmaker’s office, that means you lost, sold everything, but went and prayed, paid. I see it like that.”*

In general, discussing Muslims’ religion, most of the respondents distinguished between ‘peaceful’ Islam and terrorism. The negative evaluation of this religion is mostly related to its radical forms, which were associated with violence and religious recruiting and were strongly condemned. However, it is important to emphasize that Kazakhstan represents ‘peaceful’ Islam, according to the vast majority of my interviewees. Usually, they described it in terms of acceptance and even supported:

*“[They are] Just some incomprehensible bunch of people who have schizophrenia. I don’t think that normal people would organize terrorist attacks and then say right away that we did it, so well, look at us. How can it be connected with religion at all? I honestly feel sorry for those Muslims who suffer because of it. How could they want to practice religion, but they have to hide because of it because here, some crazy people do it?” (KA21).*

As has already been stated in Chapter 3.4.4, young Kazakhstani Russians stand for religious freedom and their attitude towards Islam in Kazakhstan confirmed that yet again. A desire for unity and respect for diversity comes to the foreground in the context of Islam. In the words of CA14:

*“If it’s peaceful Islam, then you are welcome. Everyone is free to believe in what he or she wants. Tomorrow I can put a pot on my head, wear it to say that this is a part of my religion, who cares if anyone - please, if you believe in Allah - please believe in Allah, it’s none of my business. Again, I will never judge any person because we have another God and so on and so forth.”*

At the same time, even ‘peaceful’ Islam can be linked with traditionalism and conservatism among some of the respondents (e.g., AA1; CA16; KA20). Similar to the Kazakh language, practicing Islam can be associated with a certain ‘backwardness’, which was often described as something opposite to the innovation and openness of a modern lifestyle. According to

this viewpoint, being religious, in a broad sense, and being Muslim in particular, might reinforce intergroup differences. As KA20 described:

*“I’m this kind of person who is far from religion, let’s say. I’m somehow skeptical about it. And the first thing that catches my eye, personally, in the Kazakhs’ mentality is exactly their religiosity. I think it’s excessive. But again, it’s purely subjective. Moreover, because I’m a guy, I guess, the behavior of girls. I guess it’s also related to a religious something. Because I hear Kazakh families don’t allow a girl to smile at a guy, it’s considered wrong in terms of religion again.”*

The critical point is that this negative attitude relates more toward dogmatism and conservatism rather than against practicing Islam, or Muslims in general. As in the case with conservative Russianness, young Kazakhstani Russians expressed their disagreements regarding one-sidedness and prejudgment in the context of Islam as well:

*“Recently, I had a conversation with a classmate. He’s Muslim, but he also smokes and drinks, but he still thinks he’s so true [was originally expressed in English], I don’t know, a believer. And so, he said to me like: ‘You probably think that the Orthodoxy is the first, the truth at first instance’. I say, ‘No, I don’t. I’m not attracted to Buddhism either’. And he says to me: ‘Well, that’s right! You know, that’s because the Muslim religion is the most correct’. And I was so hurt by that, and I wanted to fight about that” (AN11).*

### **3.5.5. Being Kazakhstani: Citizenship vs. Belonging**

When analyzing the link between citizenship and civic belonging, it is essential to consider which meaning young Kazakhstani Russians associate with citizenship *per se*. Talking to my respondents, it became apparent to me, already in the early research stages, that having a Kazakhstani passport can hardly be called a key element of their belonging to Kazakhstan. Similar to being Russian ‘by passport,’ for some of the interviewees (e.g., AE6; CA14; CR22), being a citizen of Kazakhstan is considered a coincidence, a particular predetermination and, therefore, might become a nonsignificant category for their self-image. In the words of AE6:

*“It was not my decision to become a citizen of Kazakhstan. And the Republic didn’t want me to become a citizen either. But it just happened. How can I feel something? I don’t think there’s anything in those words. A citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan is just that I live here, that’s all.”*

The majority of my respondents did not consider citizenship as something sacred; they had a more pragmatic view of it, and as AV3 formulated, a “dry attitude” towards citizenship. According to my respondents, Kazakhstan’s socio-economic situation has left a lot to be desired, and changing citizenship was connected with the possibility of a better life. The answers to the question of whether they would change their citizenship or not, if there was a chance, illustrated this attitude. Changing citizenship was linked by most of the respondents with better career opportunities and socio-economic conditions in general (e.g., AA1; AV9; CA17). Other reasons, such as political freedom (e.g., AA2; AV3), visa-free traveling (AN1,1), or interest in and closeness to a certain national culture (KA20), were also mentioned.

In general, if given the opportunity, my respondents would acquire citizenship of Western countries. The US and Western European countries, such as Norway, England, and Spain, were mentioned mostly, along with others. According to some of the respondents (e.g., AN11; CN13; CA16), one of the countries listed above provides social benefits and obviates the necessity to face existing problems in Kazakhstan. In addition, having specific citizenship can be connected with blurring national borders:

*“I guess I would accept it [an offer to change citizenship- Translator’s note] because, well, it makes life so much easier. For example, if you go to Europe, you have to, like, plan the trip first, then go to the (...) embassy and wait a long time. And, like, stay in such ignorance and think about, uh, whether you get a visa or not. On the other hand, the citizenship of any country in Europe gives a lot of advantages. Well, here is the fact that citizens of the European union can study for free in any country of Europe. Although, for example, in Germany citizens of Kazakhstan can also study for free (laughs)” (AN11).*

Moreover, considering the hypothetical possibility of changing citizenships, the US and other Western European countries are associated by some of the respondents (e.g., AA1;

AV2; AV3) with freedom and diversity, which can be provided for them as citizens of these states. As AA1 discussed:

*“It’s probably the USA because it’s a free and a diverse country. There’s a lot of things there. Basically, cities are very different. And I can find something quiet there or go to a big city. And some opportunities there are also at the highest level, I think. Nature. Basically, I like that the country itself is very different.”*

Despite my expectation, only a few of my interviewees from the northern cities (KA20; KA21; CR22) mentioned Russian citizenship as a possible one, but not as a first choice. As KA20 explained: *“If there’s a choice between Great Britain or Russia, I’ll be more inclined, of course, to Great Britain. But still, I won’t be upset if I get into Russia.”* In addition, Russian citizenship was often connected to a particular necessity, rather than as a volitional act; in case the socio-political situation in Kazakhstan will alter and changing of citizenship will be forced: *“[If] it will be bad, the Kazakh language will become higher and higher [in] priority so that Russians will be gradually displaced, so we will have to leave for Russia”* (CR22).

The pragmatic meaning of citizenship was also apparent in the attitude towards current citizenship. Although Kazakhstan has not provided many social benefits for them, being a Kazakhstan citizen has allowed Russians to avoid responsibility for and association with Russia’s actions (see Chapter 3.4.5). Secondly, compared to other countries, Kazakhstan’s multi-vector policy has provided social stability for my interviewees. While Russia participates in military conflicts and Western countries face terrorism, Kazakhstan has remained a safe harbor. On the one hand, the country *“is developing super slowly”* (AA2) and, to a certain extent, has been below other states. On the other hand, this circumstance also offered advantages for my respondents. As AA8 explained:

*“Ok, the subway in Almaty will explode, for example, well (...) And what? What will that change? There is no conflict with anybody. Kazakhstan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. There is nothing to conflict over with China. With Kyrgyzstan, who is there? Why do they need to conflict with us (smiling) – kenty [Russian slang: dudes – Translator’s note] they are. With Russia, there is no conflict. And that’s it. The rest of countries do not have a border with us, [they] do not affect us.”*

Finally, Kazakhstani Russians considered general instability in the country as motivation. They connected it “*with mobility, with the ability to improvise on the move*” (KA20) of Kazakhstani people and positively evaluate it. In this regard, being a Kazakhstani citizen opens, for some of my respondents, (e.g., AE2; AE4; CN19), opportunities for civic engagement and development of different country sectors. As AE4 described:

*“There is really a big spectrum of what is possible to develop. And that is exactly what I like in Kazakhstan, that not all is so perfectly developed as in the West. And it is possible to find your niche and develop it.”*

Although having a Kazakhstani passport can be considered a formal civic identity or a pragmatic fact among young Kazakhstani Russians, it is not equal to a personal sense of belonging to the country. In other words, those young Russians who do not associated citizenship with a specific symbolic meaning or even claim to be cosmopolites (e.g., AA1; AV3; CR22) demonstrated that they have a strong affiliation with Kazakhstan. This emotional attachment towards Kazakhstan was linked to everyday personal imagination of the country, and not to rights and duties stipulated by the idea of citizenship. This example demonstrates once again that young Kazakhstani Russians create their version of civic identity and belonging, which allows them to maintain a positive evaluation, as well as bring into accordance their numerous ethnocultural backgrounds.

One of the central elements of this idea is directly linked with the multicultural diversity of Kazakhstani society, which, among other ideas, is promoted by the government and defined by Laruell (2014) as the *Kazakhstaness* paradigm. However, unlike state politics, the *Kazakhstaness* paradigm is an essential characteristic of Kazakhstan for young Kazakhstani Russians. Almost every respondent mentioned cultural diversity and peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups as one of the main features of their country of birth and current residence. While other countries, including those in the post-Soviet space, have revived the importance of national borders and argue for exclusivist nationalism, Kazakhstan, according to my interviewees, has remained an example of unity and tolerance. In the words of CN13:

*“It’s interesting. For some reason, everything is so typical. Well, if you’re there, born somewhere in Europe - you live in Europe farther, farther, farther. And we*

*have interesting changes; I think there are few countries where people of so many nacional'nost' can live together without any misunderstanding."*

In this sense, being Kazakhstani means, first of all, being part of a multicultural society, where all ethnic groups live in harmony and invent a diverse social environment. This imagined environment allows my respondents to combine different social memberships without having to choose between just being Russian or only a Kazakhstan citizen. Using social creativity, many respondents associated belonging to Kazakhstan with a beautiful facade of multiethnic togetherness while often ignoring the experienced sense of social exclusion and socio-economic issues of the country. Despite the growing importance of Kazakhness and the increase in the Kazakh speaking population, an imagined Kazakhstan has provided my respondents an opportunity to keep family traditions, and borrow some components of the titular culture, while being open towards the global community.

A territorial attachment also characterizes such belonging to Kazakhstan. Although my respondents denied the importance of any boundaries, they communicated the essentiality of the local city. I have already mentioned in Chapter 3.5.2, a connection to a specific territory of the cities of residence comes to the fore while discussing national belonging with my respondents. Being Kazakhstani, thus, seems to be linked with a specific space or a native landscape. AV9 provided an example:

*"Because I was born in Almaty, I immediately remember the mountains because I love these mountains. And always, when I see or hear somewhere [something about Almaty] at once I, see a picture of the mountains [in my mind]."*

Considering belongingness to Kazakhstan, one crucial point should be mentioned. Although being Kazakhstani seems to be an important element of young Kazakhstani Russians' self-image, it is evidently attached to the current socio-political and socio-economic situation in the country. As long as *"there are opportunities to work in my country, and as long as I'm not disadvantaged"* (AA7), Kazakhstan remains a country that provides a sense of belongingness to them. As Jašina-Schäfer (2019, p. 115 has discovered, *Rodina* (homeland) means for the Russian-speaking population, among other aspects, "a place of material security."

However, when discussing the future, the way how my respondents see Kazakhstan has been visibly transformed. Regardless of their openness towards innovation and the country's development, most of my interviewees expressed concern about their future

position and perspectives. The vision of Kazakhstan described above by young Kazakhstan Russians is, therefore, highly situational and might change in the case of a new status quo.

Criticizing conservatism and traditionalism, my respondents demonstrated conservative traits themselves, expressing hope that the current socio-political situation will be retained in Kazakhstan. The “*turning point*” (AA1) is mostly associated with the further spread of the Kazakh language (e.g., AV9; CA14; CN13) and with the change of political elite (e.g., AA1; AE10; CR22). These transformations are linked with disempowerment, difficulties in professional implementation, and the socio-economic situation in general. As AV9 formulated:

*“Well as I have already told it is crucial to me when people from different nationalities, different cultures are constantly together, learn something new (...) I was born in Kazakhstan, as though Kazakhstan is my native land and I always will like it in some aspects, here I grew up and let’s say I don’t want to leave Almaty forever and never to come back here. It won’t be like that. And for me, it’s kind of my homeland, it’s important. But if conditions will be made here in which I say I can’t survive like this, then I’ll probably have to move somewhere, where I’ll have opportunities to realize my potential, where I can do something, achieve something.”*

Young Kazakhstani Russians have coped with this insecurity regarding Kazakhstan’s future differently. Some of the respondents (e.g., AA2; CA16; KA20) considered immigration as a strategy to avoid future instability or even potential worsening of their personal situation and general socio-economic situation in Kazakhstan:

*“It’s the same in the field of music where I’m working right now. Even if I talk about the field of music that I’m spinning in right now, it’s (...). Honestly, there’s no competition at all, and only so I can stick out. That’s all. I think staying here is hopeless”* (KA20).

Some other respondents (e.g., AM5; AV9; CD12; CK15) tried to avoid far-reaching plans and decided to live *ad hoc*. The imagined uncertainty toward the future could confuse, but was also able to motivate my respondents to develop suitable coping strategies:

*“Well, I’ll be honest with you right now; I don’t know what I’m going to do anymore. I mean, even as I said, it’s in this area, and even more so where I’m going to do it,*

*in Kazakhstan, or so on. At least for the near future, I see myself here. And then I don't know how it's going to go. Because I've got some irritation in my head about it. Before, I wanted to move somewhere to Europe or English-speaking countries. But then somehow it went away"* (AM5).

*"If I rely purely on my personal experience, it's most likely the ability to improvise, to make some decisions quickly, because everything here is not very stable"* (KA20).

Ironically, since their plans depend on how the situation will develop in the country, their belonging to Kazakhstan might even intensify itself through that. Continually evaluating the general situation in the country – whether it is still acceptable for them or not, has promoted involvement in domestic and international affairs. Individual factors, such as the amount of local social relationships and familiarity with the domestic bureaucratic system, have been growing among my respondents. Likewise, socio-political factors, such as the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups of Kazakhstan, government-established tri-lingualism, and promotion of Kazakhstan's positive image on the world stage, have notably been able to support a sense of belonging to Kazakhstan among young Kazakhstani Russians.

Although most of my respondents consider emigration as a possible option for the future, they are not ready to refuse their belongingness to Kazakhstan. Considering studying abroad or immigration in general, some of the respondents (e.g., AA2; AV9; CD12; CA18) highlighted their need to 'return' back to their home city:

*"I think I'm going to leave here, and I'm not going to study here. But I think I'm going to come back; maybe I'll start shooting a movie, maybe I'll promote this culture somehow because it's very lame too"* (AA2).

Hence, as mentioned above, immigration was often considered a necessity in case of changing circumstances rather than a concrete decision. The hope that everything will remain the same is now accompanied by thoughts regarding the future of most respondents:

*"Yeah, I don't want to move somewhere, and I hope it stays the same... In my head, with my city, because I love this place after all. Things are changing; things were different here when I was a kid, but (...)"* (CK15).



Simultaneously, young Kazakhstani Russians were concerned about difficulties, which accompany life in a new cultural environment. Although most of my respondents would like to “*stay a little bit abroad*” (AV9), some of them (e.g., AV3; AE6; CD12; CA18) emphasized their unwillingness “*to start from scratch: to get to know another country, other customs*” (AE6). These respondents associated their future with Kazakhstan and were motivated to contribute to the development of the country. For example, CA18 saw her contribution in the improvement of the educational system:

*“I still have such a dream, you can say from my first thoughts about becoming a teacher, I want to open a school for particularly handicap children, for not quite normal children who may have some physical disabilities, I would like VERY MUCH to open such a school.”*

While for Saunders (2006), young Russians outside of Russia have imagined themselves beyond any national borders, my result is not the same. In accordance with Spehr and Kasenova (2012), my study has demonstrated that Kazakhstani Russians have developed a clear sense of belonging to the country of their birth and current residence during the last decade. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate below, their sympathy for transnationalism, particularly cosmopolitanism, has still been noticeably present.

### **3.5.6. Back in the USSR? Transnationalism and Friendship of the Peoples**

While discussing civic identity and belonging with my respondents, I noticed that our discussion often went beyond national boundaries. Some of my respondents (AV1; AN11; CR22) already expressed their sympathy towards cosmopolitanism and cross-border activities at the beginning of our conversations. Along with ethnonational and civic affiliations, most respondents considered the world as a coherent whole. They criticized any borders that somehow violate global cooperation or threaten international security (see Chapter 3.4.5). Since most of my respondents described themselves specifically in transnational terms, the cosmopolite universalism seems to be a relevant element of their self-image. As AA1 described:

*“When I came to Alma-Ata, I (...) became even more tolerant. I always had a certain tolerance for all nations. I talked to everyone totally equally. I don’t divide people*

*into nations. I rather divide people into good and bad (smiling). So, in principle, I think that people should be like citizens of the whole world or something like that. Cosmopolitanism is present in my thoughts.”*

In addition, being a citizen of the world allowed my respondents to avoid prescribed identities, which have a repeatedly primordialist character, and might prevent them from constructing suitable identities and choosing non-territorial membership groups. Therefore, going beyond the prescribed identities and current citizenship, they were able to not only learn about different nations and cultures but also to recognize common non-national issues. Facing global cultural heterogeneity has encouraged my respondents to construct social reality from a borderless transnational perspective and base their worldview upon superordinate non-territorial values. For example, AA7 stated: *“I want to help the world, and if I will be hurt and I cannot somehow fight it, I probably need to change my location and continue working.”* Or, in words of CN19:

*“Globalization is good. I think it’s necessary to think about some of these global issues. For example, climate change; they’re ignoring it now, but it’s actually a very serious thing. You can feel it already here.”*

Likewise, the English language as *lingua franca* is attractive for my respondents. Most of my respondents have already spoken English fluently or were actively improving their level. Being oriented towards globality and international cooperation, English has become a necessary tool for information consumption and cross-border communication, according to my respondents. It seems that in comparison to both Russian and Kazakh, the knowledge of this language provides a chance for young Kazakhstani Russians in Kazakhstan to feel and be recognized as a member of a global non-national community. For instance, CA16 explained why she has prioritized learning English over Kazakh as following:

*“English is an international language, you can find a tandem, [write] a Facebook comment in English, and you’ll be understood. It [Kazakh language] is only local, in Kazakhstan. If I move somewhere, I don’t need it there. I’d rather spend time to learn a language to be understood.”*

Being interested in various nations and cultures and applying a cross-border perspective for constructing social reality, my respondents also received a chance to reevaluate their current

national membership. Integrating some elements of foreign culture into their everyday life, it seems that my respondents have tried to find suitable social memberships and develop a new sense of belonging beyond their ethnic heritage or citizenship. However, these new memberships do not supplement an existing sense of belonging but rather complement them by forming multiple and mixed identities. As AM5 explained:

*“So basically, it’s all together and makes up some kind of basis for me. And I grew up being surrounded by Western culture. Because, about 14 years old, I realized that I like English very much. So, I started reading and watching everything in English. And that’s why, uh, British, so American culture has impacted me too. So, I’m in some kind of mixed state right now. And that’s why Kazakhstan (...) Some three of these are backward; everything is mixed. And that’s it; I wouldn’t say I’m Russian, Kazakhstani. Well, somehow, it all goes together.”*

It is central here that my interviewees’ sympathy towards the general world often referred to the so-called Western countries. My respondents positively evaluated such countries as the US, Great Britain, or European Union countries. Since *“there’ll be flying machines somewhere in the West, we’ll just think that we could do it”* (AA2), the Western, and not the *Russian World*, is becoming an important reference point for young Kazakhstani Russians. While Laruelle and Royce (2019, p. 208) have argued that ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan have been more supportive of Russia and do not consider the US as a “primary model for their country’s development”, my target population demonstrated an opposite trend. For example, AE4, when considering compulsory military service in Kazakhstan, highlighted the advantages of the Western military model:

*“On the other hand, now is more modern time. If you look at the West, it’s just a contract, that is. Just whoever wants to [to army] goes, who doesn’t want to go, is engaged in civil affairs.”*

Some of the respondents (e.g., AM5; CA14; KA20) also emphasized a vital role of a particular Western culture and its value system. In general, sympathy for the West exists along with support for Russia among Kazakhstani youth (Umbetalieva et al., 2016). Despite the Anti-Western position of Russia, young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrated an emotional connection with the Western countries. As KA20 formulated:

*“I like this country [England] very much. I like their culture; I like their history. It’s the first country, whose history I really like, whose history I’m interested in. That’s how they put me since I was a kid, you know. I went to high school in general, and there was a focus on English. Very strong focus. (...) I’m very attracted to this country. I’m attracted to its music, culture, art, cinema. Cinema is fantastic.”*

Although talking about the world as a whole, my respondents simultaneously set their own cultural, national, and even territorial boundaries, whereby national borders are still an essential part of their world view. While experiencing the ethnic Otherness, my respondents reproduced the idea of disparity between different ethnonational groups, both inside Kazakhstan and worldwide. Despite their global openness, some of my respondents used popular stereotypes in their judgments and underscored intergroup differences. While the local urban-rural differences have been described in Chapter 3.4.2, a transnational example CK15 provided:

*“About five years ago, I’d say [I would like to move to] Germany. Not anymore. I don’t even know what has changed, but at least then I planned, and now I can’t. Maybe the fact that in Germany too (...) We’ve heard about a lot of migrants; I don’t even know how to call them. From... From the East and so on.”*

Similarly, despite the general admiration for Western culture among my interviewees, some of my respondents (e.g., AE10; KA21; CR22) contrasted the Western society against the post-Soviet one. Although young Kazakhstani Russians often considered Western countries as more attractive culturally and more developed economically than Kazakhstan, they also communicated great importance of local social relationships and their particularity. As I have described in Chapter 3.5.2, the state and society typically existed separately in the respondents’ minds. The importance of local social ties and Kazakhstani society as a whole is also noticeable in the context of Western values:

*“Western people, they are quite different. European people, too, already with more western values. Accordingly, they communicate differently. My friend left for the Czech Republic to study, for example. He hasn’t been here for five years. He hasn’t come here at all during these five years, not only once. When in March this year, we met, he is absolutely another person. You can immediately see that he already has*

*other values, other views on life, on people, on everything else [...] Let's just say, when they don't smile at you sincerely, and they are often, well, let's just say, it's traceable. I don't like that; I don't like insincerity very much."*

At the same time, similarly to the results of Umbetalieva et al. (2016), the vast majority of the respondents evaluated the supranational Eurasian integration in a positive manner. Young Kazakhstani Russians provided a pragmatic view on the supranational union and associated potential benefits for its all members with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In the words of KA20:

*"I think it's rather positive because any union is a win-win situation. Somewhere, something, but it exists. As long as a union is created, it's created for something. I think it's cool from the point of view of elementary mutually beneficial conditions."*

Nonetheless, the EAEU itself was considered exclusively as an instrument of economic co-operation and not as a societal union for its member countries. Following the division between the political state and society, most of the respondents have considered the EAEU and its further development as a product of the political elite, which can hardly affect ordinary people's lives. Thus, in accordance with previous studies (e.g., Roberts & Moshes, 2016; Linde, 2016), I can confirm, based on the example of young Kazakhstani Russians, that this institution is currently not able to convey identity or an emotional attachment:

*"It seems to me that, in principle, we are not enemies anyway, so to speak. This friendly relationship seems to me in principle not to change anything. At least for the people. For politics, it may be a change, but not for those who live the simple life. For the people, it's almost the same" (CA18).*

However, the establishment of the EAEU might support the involvement in regional issues among my respondents. Communicating the necessity of friendly relationships with the post-Soviet countries, some of the respondents (e.g., AV9; CK15; CN19) raised concerns about the supremacy of certain union members towards others. Ironically, being informed about Eurasian Union, my respondents pay attention to different member countries, and their observations do not necessarily match with the official idea of the Eurasian Union. Since most of my respondents considered the Russian Federation politics critically, the Eurasian Union was also seen by them through the prism of Russian regional superiority and

was criticized. In this regard, young Kazakhstani Russians gave preference to the interests of Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries, and especially to their ordinary people. As CK15 explained:

*“And regarding political [aspect], I think, is the same, even if we have very similar laws with the Russian and Belarusian ones, it does not mean that some system from above should manage them - these laws. Still, every region should have some individuality in this respect.”*

Or, in words of AV9:

*“And now, as if, economists and politicians are thinking about it, how it will be profitable. If they come to some kind of consensus, it will be good. Not so that one country would benefit from it, and others lose. Let’s take Tadžikistan, which has nothing essentially now. And people do not live there very well.”*

In its turn, the concept of Eurasianism *per se*, which both Kazakhstan and Russia actively promote, seems to resonate with the hearts and minds of young Kazakhstani Russians. Appreciating Kazakhstani multiethnic society’s model, my respondents welcomed the further spread of this idea beyond Kazakhstan’s national borders. As mentioned in Chapter 3.2.5, my interviewees drew parallels between post-Soviet countries and often referred to the (post)Soviet space, where different societies are closely connected in the cross-border sense (e.g., AV3; CD12; CN19; CR22). While Russia has promoted the Russo-centric version of Eurasianism, young Kazakhstani Russians create their own regional integration version. This version prompts an idealized Soviet concept of *Friendship of the Peoples* (*družba narodov*), proclaiming unity and intercultural harmony, which my respondents would like to revitalize in the modern context:

*“I think it’s right that people unite. That’s how the Soviet Union was. Yes. Even though there was such a strict, rigid system, but people were still all in peace, shoulder to shoulder, different nations, different worldviews. And I think that in today’s world it’s also one of the most important: unity. That’s the power. When people unite, regardless of gender, age, race, and I think it’s the right thing to do, to cooperate, (...) to live in peace, harmony” (CA17).*

In general, this version of the Eurasian integration, but also the aspiration for global cooperation as a whole, connected to the Soviet past among my respondents. Similar to Blackburn (2019), my results show the vividness of idealistic Soviet concepts in the minds of young Kazakhstani Russians. However, that does not mean that my respondents would easily agree to the restoration of the Soviet Union. Their mostly fragmented view of the Soviet system only includes some aspects of this era, learned from regime-confirmed Soviet movies and nostalgic stories of their parents living in the Soviet Union.

I can assume that my respondents try to find attractive solutions, such as the concept of *Friendship of the Peoples* to avoid the potential of disadvantaged minority status and to maintain general social stability in the country. Such focus on the past instead of the future was characteristic of my respondents but can also be seen as a general global trend (*retropia*) (see Chapter 2.4.2).

While Russia's public discourse on the resurrection of former glory has been actively spread, young Kazakhstani Russians who were born and grew up in Kazakhstan, oppose imperialism and other forms of interethnic and interstate disparity. The revival of old national traditions inside Kazakhstan and abroad is considered by them as a step back on the road to progress. Obviously, young Kazakhstani Russians are ready to become 'elder brothers' to everyone who resists social diversity, innovation, and peaceful coexistence, independently from their ethnonational identity and belonging.

Supporting universal values and categorizing themselves on the superordinate level, they do not search for concrete external enemies to define themselves. Instead, they try to find uniting elements between the West and the East, between Russians and Kazakhs in a bottom-up manner, opposing the disappointing official state to the society of ordinary people. At the same time, most of my interviewees reproduced and supported official rhetoric, such as paradigm of *Transnationalism* and *Kazakhstaness* paradigms. Paradoxically, it seems that their openness and orientation towards transnationalism brought young Kazakhstani Russians closer to Kazakhstan while alienating them from the historical home country.

### **3.6. Social Media Usage Patterns of Young Kazakhstani Russians**

As described in Chapter 1.5.4, information consumption and social media usage have occupied a large part of people's everyday routines today. Simultaneously, new media

formats and social media offers have been continuously evolving and expanding their functionality. In this chapter, I will concentrate my attention specifically on social media as a flexible online environment, which provides 1) a personalized newsfeed, 2) an opportunity to create a personal profile and establish social connections, as well as 3) produce and share multimedia content.

The current vivid examples of social media are *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Vkontakte* (commonly known as VK). *YouTube* also falls into this category. Although some authors, such as Miller et al. (2016), consider instant messaging services such as WhatsApp to fit under social media, I have consciously maintained the differentiation between both digital products in my analysis. Despite their similar social character, I found significant differences in design and publicity level communicated by respondents during my research, which required a terminological distinction. However, it is essential to highlight that the terminology regarding ICTs is often nominal; social media has been continually evolving and has been complemented by additional functions. As a result, it is necessary to consider the possible design and functionality changes, especially while comparing previous research results.

Therefore, it was vital for me to understand what social media is and how exactly young Kazakhstani Russians use them in relation to their nation-related identity and belonging. Taking into account the general media complexity caused by *media convergence* and fast-changing media consumption attitudes, direct contact with users has allowed me to identify general trends in social media usage and relate them with nation-related self-definition. In the following chapters, I will present the results from the interviews with the participant observation element. Firstly, I will focus on the social media choices of young Kazakhstani Russians and the differences between concrete platforms in the light of national identity and belonging. Secondly, I will consider precisely how my respondents use social media regarding their national belonging. Since social media can be used actively and passively (see Chapter 1.5.3), I will describe my results separately, starting with the topic of self-presentation and content production on social media. Subsequently, I will discuss which content young Kazakhstani Russians consume on social media and how this content relates to the country of their birth and current residence.



### 3.6.1. Social Media Platforms: Selection and Usage Reasons

#### *Popular social media platforms among young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan*

According to the Kemp (2020), the number of social media users in Kazakhstan increased by 26 percent throughout 2019. In line with global trends, social media has been at the peak of its popularity in Kazakhstan for the last few years, especially among young people. During respondents' recruitment, my question about social media use was often taken with perplexity because for my respondents, using social media was not a question. As one of the potential respondents argued - all young people use social media in Kazakhstan, it is more difficult to find those who do not.

Moreover, all of my respondents have been using more than one social media platform. Answering the question of which social media they use, young Kazakhstani Russians most commonly mentioned *Vkontakte*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*, as well as instant messengers *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*. Although my initial focus remains on social media, it is important to remark that many respondents (e.g., AE4; AA8; CD12; CN19) proclaimed instant messengers' popularity. Because of their similarity in some functionality, my respondents ranked them alongside social media. For example, like social media, instant messenger services were used by my respondents for the development of online groups and news distribution. At the same time, *Facebook* and *Twitter* remain less popular among my target population, although these social media platforms have been well known in Kazakhstan. Besides *YouTube*, all of the above-mentioned social media platforms have usually been used by my respondents on mobile devices. As a result, social media usage became a ubiquitous character and started to fit into the daily routine. These results correspond to general social media use in Kazakhstan (e.g., Kemp, 2020).

Despite various reasons for selecting a particular social media platform for regular usage among my respondents, none of them are directly linked with the platform's origin *per se*. There is no evidence that my respondents would strictly prefer, or in contrast, avoid the use of *Vkontakte* only because it is a social media platform made in Russia. As CK15 formulated:

*"[The fact that Vkontakte is the Russian social media I consider] Neutral, I do not know how it concerns Ukraine, but it is neutral for us. It was banned there a couple*

*of days ago. And here... In principle, in Kazakhstan, it is considered the most popular [social media platform].”*

While platform origin is irrelevant, this platform’s status in the local context has played an important role for young Kazakhstani Russians. The presence of other users has also mattered for my respondents in the social media choices. Local social media users were especially taken into consideration by the respondents when selecting a social media platform. For instance, some respondents considered using both *Vkontakte* and *Instagram* (e.g., CD12; CK15; CA17) as common in Kazakhstan, while *Facebook* and *Twitter* were sometimes associated with abroad countries among young Kazakhstani Russian capital residents (e.g., CK15; CA16; CR22). For young people in Almaty, however, such a division is not characteristic. For them, *Facebook* and *Twitter* were also linked with Kazakhstan (e.g., AE4; AM5; AV9), especially with their city of residence. The following examples demonstrate the contrast:

*“I know only one person who uses Twitter. I don’t even know what it’s for, but I know it’s popular somewhere abroad. Facebook too” (CA16).*

*“Well, we have a Facebook culture... People, our Kazakhstanis, I don’t know, Almaty residents love to write some long posts there. There’s some event there - they all have to write their opinions on it there” (AM5).*

Consequently, by selecting a specific social media platform for usage, young Kazakhstani Russians have been guided by existing local trends linked with the popularity of a certain platform in their surroundings. However, these trends are not explicit and can substantially differ and even be contradictory. For some respondents (e.g., AE10; CD12; KA21), the most important social media platform in Kazakhstan was *Vkontakte*, while some other respondents (e.g., AE4; AA8; CN19) noted its decreasing popularity and preferred the usage of *Instagram* as a “fashionable” (CD12) social media platform:

*“Instagram... Well, it has been gaining momentum lately. You also see how the modern youth lives, your environment, and news can be found there too. Well, not so often, but it is more of an entertainment” (AE4).*

Finally, *Facebook* can also be considered as a popular social media platform in Kazakhstan, although to a lesser extent, and mostly among respondents from Almaty (e.g., AE4; AM5; AV9):

*“From social networks in Kazakhstan, I think people use Vkontakte, Facebook, and Instagram. I chose Facebook and Instagram because Vkontakte, to be honest, regarding the news, there is some nonsense collected there” (AV9).*

However, when discussing the popularity of certain social media, the ambiguity of this concept should be emphasized, which became apparent in the interview process. Since social media provides various services, its usage was usually connected to its functionality, and the popularity often referred to specific functions. The clearest example was *Vkontakte*, which my respondents used as an online music player and as an online cinema<sup>47</sup>. Although the platform’s content was often described negatively by some respondents (e.g., AE4; AV9; CN19), they have continued using some of its functionality. As stated by AV9: *“Vkontakte, to be honest, there is some nonsense from the news, there are like blogs, something else, to be honest, not so popular content. I use Vkontakte just for [listening] music.”*

Therefore, the category of social media usage frequency, which is employed in social media reports, cannot be understood as popularity. It also does not help answer the question of which functions of a particular social media platform are factually used. As the quote above demonstrates, using *Vkontakte* on an everyday basis does not guarantee that a concrete social media service is used for information consumption or social interaction.

In addition, being registered on a social media platform or, in other words, having a profile there does not automatically mean that this social media is factually used. Many of my respondents claim to be registered on numerous social media platforms while factually using only one or two of them: *“Well, I have, accounts there, on Facebook, even on Twitter. But I don’t use them. I have just created accounts there” (CD12).*

Likewise, the absence of a profile did not yet indicate that a person does not confront information from this particular platform. In words of AV3: *“I don’t use Instagram (...) [But] when we had protests here last year, in Almaty, there were several accounts, I went to Instagram to see what was going on there.”*

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<sup>47</sup> The interface of *Vkontakte* has provided an opportunity to listen music and create personal playlists. *Vkontakte* also serves as a free store of (pirated) films (Roesen & Zvereva, 2014, pp. 78–79).

Similarly, some of my respondents found content from one social media platform in a different one. For example, AA8 explained that “*most of the time, they take screenshots from Twitter and mostly discuss them in Vkontakte.*” Thus, if someone does not have a *Twitter* profile, that does not automatically mean that they do not confront Twitter content. Therefore, the content found on a specific social media platform is not limited to its boundaries and can be used outside of it as well.

Finally, some of the community’s accounts spread their content on different social media platforms, which results in the fact that a user can face the same information across multiple platforms. During this observation, I could notice that, for example, the content of duplicate city-related accounts, e.g., social media account *Davaj shodim [Let’s go out]*<sup>48</sup>, can be found on both *Vkontakte* and *Instagram* news feeds of my respondents. These examples demonstrate the complexity of social media usage, which should be considered when analyzing social media usage patterns among a specific social group. Analyzing one platform can only provide a limited idea of which information is being encountered by those registered on it. In its turn, a cross-platform view suggested by Miller et al. (2016) could provide a broader perspective and was especially useful in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians.

*“There is no point in a social network where there is nobody I know” (CA16)*

Besides the local trends and popularity of particular platforms, social media selection is influenced by the common causes among Kazakhstani Russians. As have been demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Chiu et al., 2008), the main motivations for social media usage are social interaction and information search/consumption. My respondents have confirmed this result. According to these reasons, all the mentioned social media platforms and instant messengers were selected and used by my respondents. Moreover, as my interviewees proved, social interaction and information consumption on social media are interconnected with each other.

Focusing on social interaction in the (ethno)national context, it became clear that social media platforms can serve different purposes. In this sense, *Vkontakte*, *Instagram*,

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<sup>48</sup> <https://vk.com/sxodim>, <https://www.instagram.com/sxodim/>

and *WhatsApp* were considered spaces where the local social environment is mostly concentrated, while *Twitter* and *Facebook* often included international contacts. As my respondents formulated:

*“Most probably, [the reason for using a social media is] the popularity of the network, to have my friends there. There’s only one person I know who uses Twitter. I don’t even know what it’s for, but I know that it’s popular somewhere abroad, Facebook too. We all use Vkontakte, Instagram, so I’m there because there’s no point in a social network where there’s nobody I know” (CA16).*

*“[I don’t use Facebook, because] Somehow, I don’t really have any friends abroad and (...) I mean, sure, I do have, but they’re all in Vkontakte and, why not?” (CR22).*

*“On Facebook, I have friends from America, Canada, Germany - these are the people I mostly communicate with [there]” (CK15).*

Even if direct interaction with friends, e.g., through private messages, did not occur on these platforms, the opportunity to follow their profiles and stay informed about their lives motivated my respondents to choose these social media types for everyday usage. As CA18 mentioned: *“On Instagram, there I follow my friends, my classmates, some of the artists I’m just waiting for, till they’ll show up in our city, so I don’t miss their concert.”*

Moreover, an example of young Kazakhstani Russians from Almaty (e.g., AV3; AE4; AM5; AV9) demonstrated that using *Facebook* can provide contact with the local network. In particular, the Kazakhstani bloggers were added as friends and followed on Facebook, especially among those respondents who were actively involved in the social and political life of Kazakhstan: *“I can tell you, let’s say, I have posts...This is a member of the [Kazakhstani] ecological society Green Salvation [Zelenoe spasenie], Sergej Kuratov. Here you go” (AV3).*

As a result, all the mentioned platforms provided a space for my respondents, where young Kazakhstani Russians could concentrate on their already-existing local social ties. As Antonsich (2010) has described (see Chapter 1.4.1), both close friends and social “week ties” are participating in the creation of a home-feeling and might improve a sense of belonging to a concrete place. Besides personal messaging, which, according to my respondents, was one of the most used functions on social media and instant messengers, keeping

track of information posted by local social media ‘friends’ is an important motivation to use these platforms. A certain social media platform’s role is relatively minor; evidently, all the considered platforms, and even social media messengers, are capable of providing the necessary functionality to activate local social ties.

At the same time, the social media usage of young Kazakhstani Russians was not limited by local social ties only. Although almost every respondent mentioned contacts to local ‘friends’, social media, particularly *Facebook*, can become a place for having foreign connections, as already mentioned above. For example, to improve the English language, my respondents can choose to use Facebook and build or keep a cross-border social network (e.g., CK15; CA16). In addition, *Vkontakte* can be used for staying in contact with friends from near abroad, such as Russia or Ukraine (e.g., AA8; CA17):

*“Before, there was ‘Vkontakte’ for adding both photos and video recordings. Now what is left is a profile from the times when I was engaged. And just for communication only, in principle. There are many different contacts [there], friends from all over Kazakhstan, from Russia” (CA17).*

Nonetheless, the local social environment was dominant on all social media platforms used by my respondents. Since *“absolutely everyone [in Kazakhstan] probably has a profile on Vkontakte”* (CD12), and *Instagram* has become very trendy, the choice of these platforms allowed my respondents not only to enhance communication with their local community but also feel closer to Kazakhstanis as a whole. Many of my respondents associated the choice and usage of *Instagram* with their local circle, which manifested their belongingness to their residence cities. The local community might be considerably different - while for some respondents, their social (media) environment includes famous personalities of Kazakhstan (e.g., AV2; AV4; AV9), other respondents (e.g., AN11; CN13; CA18) reported about their university classmates, or even Kazakhstani religious communities (e.g., KA21). These social (media) networks of young Kazakhstani Russians had a substantial similarity – they were a part of my respondents’ everyday life, which has happened in the Kazakhstani context.

Supporting the suggestion by Szulc (2017, p. 69) to study “where, when and using which Internet devices or online platforms they [users] routinely reproduce national symbols and meanings or more actively flag their nationality,” I also believe this is not enough.

As my research process proved, it is crucial to realize that many social media activities, in particular, regarding national identity and belonging, might not be limited only to one platform or one device. As Lindgren (2017, p. 231) has noticed, “doing digital social research, therefore, often entails discovering and experimenting with challenges and possibilities of ever-new types and combinations of information.”

### **3.6.2. Social Media Usage Patterns: General Observations**

After discussing the social media selection and main usage reasons, I will concentrate my attention on *how exactly* young Kazakhstani Russians use social media regarding their nation-related identity and belonging in a cross-platform manner. I observed that my respondents usually use social media on their smartphones. Although I prepared a laptop for the planned observation, none of my interviewees used it to demonstrate their media use, preferring, instead, a personal mobile device. As already mentioned above, my respondents consider social media platforms to be mobile applications, which are ubiquitous and deeply integrated into their everyday routine. As revealed during the informal talks with respondents after the interview, the relatively affordable price<sup>49</sup> of mobile internet services, as well as the widespread Wi-Fi hotspots in public places in Kazakhstan, also contributed to the trend of being continuously online.

Since the most usable social media platforms were *Vkontakte* and *Instagram*, most of the respondents demonstrated their usage on one of these platforms<sup>50</sup>, using original Android or Apple mobile applications. Opening the social media application, my respondents initially paid attention to their newsfeed, particularly its visual content. If they aimed for information consumption, they usually scrolled the feed and obviously preferred reading content in the newsfeed without switching to a particular social media account. Similarly, tapping on ‘More’ to reveal the full version of the content was more so an exception, rather than usual practice among my respondents. In other cases, if my respondents saw any notification inside social media, they directly went to the desired function, such as personal messages, comments, etc.

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<sup>49</sup> 4 Gb of the high-speed mobile Internet cost around 3 EUR per month in the year 2017.

<sup>50</sup> The main condition for the choice of application for the demonstration was that my respondents use this application regularly. If they used many social media platforms, they could choose one of these applications.

Generally, it was noticeable that my respondents were surrounded by large amounts of varied information, which came through the personalized newsfeed, directly linked to a particular social media account/group, or social interactions, such as comments or private messages. This information had different formats – textual, audial and visual. According to my observation, all of the respondents had visual content (pictures, memes and photos) prevailing in their newsfeeds, even those who mostly used *Vkontakte*, not visual content-oriented *Instagram* (e.g., AE6; CD12; CK15; CR22).

Nonetheless, the newsfeeds of my respondents looked entirely different, particularly concerning the nation-related content. Except that they prefer different social media platforms, my glance in their social media applications could not identify any similarities in what they find in their newsfeeds. In contrast, every newsfeed provided a unique set of various and mostly visual content, which was hardly possible to categorize. It is also interesting that sometimes my respondents were themselves surprised by what they saw in their newsfeeds and did not remember following the social media account or group, which content they found in their newsfeed (e.g., AA8).

There are also cases when my respondents claimed to follow certain social media accounts or see specific posts, which they could hardly find at my request in their social media profiles (e.g., AV3; KA20). These examples demonstrated that social media as an information space could be highly volatile and changeable. The newsfeed content might be unpredictable even for the users, while the newsfeed was one of the mainly used social media functionalities. As demonstrated in Chapter 1.5.6, a non-transparent newsfeed algorithm, following a particular social media account or group does not guarantee that a user will find its content in the personal newsfeed. At the same time, advertisement and social media recommendations, which were visible on the social media newsfeed of my respondents, could co-shape the general information environment.

Except for the algorithmic ‘black box’ itself, the newsfeed’s random content was also caused by a large amount of varied followed accounts and groups among my respondents. Following hundreds of social media accounts, my respondents always found some new content while refreshing the newsfeed. Some of my interviewees (e.g., AA1; AV3; AN11; CK15) perceived this large quantity of information negatively and tried to avoid it, for instance, through a) willingly stopping their reading of the personal newsfeed, b) disabling



automatic notifications or c) unfollowing accounts and groups, while preferring direct access to a particular social media account or group, if needed. In the words of the respondents:

*“I see a lot of things there [in the newsfeed], a lot of unnecessary, a lot of advertising, so, the newsfeed I recently haven’t scroll at all. There used to be a lot of useful things. I run a blog myself there [Vkontakte] about school education here in Kazakhstan. And I am more interested in something that is useful to me” (CK15).*

*“In Facebook, I completely cleaned the newsfeed. I mean, I don’t have anything there because I don’t want to (...) I just realized that I don’t control myself very well, being on social networks. I mean, I don’t have a sense of proportion. I spend a lot of time there. That’s why I completely cleaned Facebook myself, so I go there from time to time to check who wrote there or any notifications on Open Mind that I manage in the community” (AV3).*

While expecting to find any common social media accounts or communities among my respondents, I noticed only a complicated variety of different content, including Russian- and English-speaking social media offers. I often did not allow the identification of an exact geographical location. Despite the fact that the Russian-language content prevailed, I could find neither explicitly Russian patriotic nor Kazakhstani accounts, which evidently include nation-related symbols<sup>51</sup>, at least at first glance. However, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians, social media has become a space where nation-related belonging is in attendance. Direct questions to my respondents were useful to shed more light on the issue.

### **3.6.3. Active Social Media Usage and Nation-Related Self-Presentation**

#### *Posting, reposting, and commenting on social media*

My analysis has shown that most of my respondents use social media primarily in a passive way, namely for content consumption, which confirms the “90-9-1 rule” by Nielsen (2006). However, it would be wrong to assume that they ignored the active features of social media.

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<sup>51</sup> Here I mean national symbols, such as national flags, national emblem, and other state-related symbols.

Active usage includes social interactions, such as posting, reposting, and commenting on social media content, as well as sending private messages. Self-presentation is also an important element in using social media for my respondents, especially on image-based *Instagram*. Creating visual social media content, such as *stories*<sup>52</sup> and *live videos*, becomes a standard tool for self-expression<sup>53</sup> and reflection on Kazakhstan's everyday life. As AA2 said, *"I'm not trying to express myself with words, but with photos."* Sometimes this self-expression was linked to a specific place or local event, which might be able to support the (re)imagining of the home-feeling for my respondents: *"I don't like to put myself out there [on Instagram]. I like the surroundings. I went to the national museum yesterday and took a picture [of it]"* (CN13).

*"And Instagram, well, I like to take photos, and I also like to make videos. I like to take pictures from traveling, of my own events. And, as if, it's very convenient, as, in my opinion, an album of memories (...) We live there in the concrete jungle, we can't see the world. There's so much beauty around us. So, basically, different (...) We went on tour somewhere [in Kazakhstan], I made a little video and wrote: 'It was great! I got it. Come here'"* (CA17).

The visual self-presentation supported by *Instagram* has allowed my respondents not only to transfer everyday events into online space but also try to present them in a better light. As AN11 formulated: *"I want to show how good I am, how beautiful I am. Look at this! Well, I think, in fact, this is a goal of this social network [Instagram]."* Such idealized self-presentation is a common phenomenon on Instagram (e.g., Harris & Bardey, 2019). Most of my interviewees, driven by the need to maintain positive self-esteem, transferred this logic to the space they live in. As a result, my respondents have posted mainly 'beautiful' images and videos from their usual surroundings that might foster a new view on the local spaces, particularly their cities of residence and the country as a whole. For example, CA16

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<sup>52</sup> Visual content inside one's social media personal profile or a group, which disappears after 24 hours, is currently one of the features of *Instagram* and *Vkontakte*.

<sup>53</sup> Unlike posts, the importance of social media profiles seems to be secondary for my respondents. Although all mentioned social media platforms provide an opportunity to create social media information, such as personal description and personal profile picture, none of my respondents mentioned this functionality during the interview. It seems that today the self-performance takes place mostly through the dynamic and interactive functions (e.g., stories) provided by social media platforms.

posted on her Instagram about local nature: *“I usually have some pictures or something with flowers [...] I had a post of spring in flowers. I just took pictures of some beautiful flowers that I found in the city. Nature.”*

At the same time, posting or sharing live videos on Instagram has made it possible to go beyond local boundaries and reflect upon different spaces, as well as discover foreign countries being surrounded by the familiar social environment. As the following example demonstrates, through active Instagram usage, contact with the local community can be maintained even outside of Kazakhstan and participation in the imagination of foreign, and in particular, Western states:

*“When these live videos came... I mean, you do something, you’re a star, yeah. I’m really excited to see what you do. That’s great [...] When I was in Spain, yes [I shared live videos] [...] I was sharing with friends because not everyone can be in Spain. I was like, ‘Guys, look, I’m gonna show you that and that’. And they were looking, ‘Shit, that’s cool!’” (AA8).*

Moreover, social media has made it possible to express support for global initiatives and movements. Although self-presentation through their social media profiles does not play a central role for most of my respondents, AM5 provided an example, demonstrating that user pictures may receive a symbolic transnational meaning. Moreover, they have become a tool for the identification of like-minded people in the local context:

*“Well, when there’s an event there, Facebook can offer you to change your user pic or somehow to paint it. Ah! Well, that’s when the U.S. Congress adopted same-sex marriages. I mean, I painted [my user picture] there too. Well, I think it shows your position (...) There, on Facebook, the ruckus was raised because a lot of people started to write [me]. I immediately realized who of my friends supports it, cleaned up my friends. I immediately sifted them out’. Somebody started to protect or rather to say that you have to show it, yes. I think this is correct and allows me to show my position, and I do this” (AM5).*

In this regard, the issue of privacy should be mentioned. As I have already depicted in previous chapter, communication with social media’s (local) ‘friends’ played one of the central roles in the social media usage of young Kazakhstani Russians. Most of my respondents

avoided posting in public social media spaces and aimed to reach their closest social circles primarily. As a result, social media has become a private space where local communication has prevailed, while virtual online and physical offline worlds has blended. As KA20 - one of few active Twitter users among my respondents illustrated:

*“The first [function of Twitter] is an informative function, which is [to get] the most compressed information. And the second is more personal, like a diary [...] You know, it’s just something that I have gotten tired of it during the day. And it’s just blowing up [inside]. Have you ever read ‘The Catcher in the Rye’? My Twitter is a modern version of ‘The Catcher in the Rye’. It’s really the same.”*

Besides posting content, which has been typically visible for social media ‘friends’ only, private messages were one of the most actively usable social media features. According to my respondents, private messaging became the usual and fast way to communicate with friends and, to some extent, has replaced the repost function:

*“Well, it’s personal [message], of course. And commenting, this is if you want attention, of course, to your own person. There you go. [...] Now (with laughter) it’s very fashionable to share a post and send it to the “direct” [message]. I mean, you like a picture, I share the same picture with you and write [you], discuss this picture” (AA8).*

*“Usually, if I want to share something, I just copy a link and send it to the person who needs to see it [though a personal message]” (CA16).*

Similarly, instant messengers, such as *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*, which have provided the necessary privacy for my respondents, were often mentioned as a new substitute for social media by my interviewees. Instant messengers provided a quick and easy way to stay connected with local social and professional circles:

*“Well, your contacts on the phone, they’re tied to WhatsApp [...] [And there are] I mean, similar student groups. Here at the university, we have a group, groups, whole communities. [...] Well, now we have graduation soon and a group [about that]. They’re sending a lot of things. One of my classmates is sending a lot of things, when, where to come, what time, all that stuff. What time to pass that. Well, basically, [study]-working relationships there” (CD12).*

While posting personal everyday content was widely spread as a social media activity, posting, reposting of, as well as commenting on, socially and politically significant content was less common among Kazakhstani Russians. While some respondents (e.g., AM5; AV9; CK15) avoided discussing “certain” topics beyond their personal profile, e.g., social media accounts and groups, some other interviewees (e.g., AE10; CN13; CA18) even considered their personal accounts as a place, which was supposed to be free from politics and ‘hot’ social issues. Usually, by “certain” topics, my respondents meant any issues related to the first president of Kazakhstan (e.g., AA1; AE10), local ethnonational differences, and religion (e.g., AA8). In this regard, it is interesting that some of my respondents (e.g., AM5; CK15; CN19) associated ‘hot’ topics not only with Kazakhstan but also with linked social media activities of Russian internal affairs and Internet regulations. That may indicate that the Russian-speaking social media segment can be associated with the Russian state legacy. For example, AM5 mentioned posting LGBT symbols, such as a rainbow flag, which can be officially prosecuted under the Russian ‘gay propaganda law’<sup>54</sup>:

*“Well, I think we’ve got [secret] services, of course, they’re all checking there [on social media] and so on. But I don’t think we should be afraid because even in V Kontakte, I’m signed to all these LGBT accounts and so on. And, basically, I’m not hiding anything. And there, I can even post the picture on Instagram. When we were in Germany, we went to Amsterdam. There was a [gay] pride parade. And I mean, I took a picture there in the back with the [rainbow] flags.”*

Similarly, CK15 linked using *Vkontakte* with the Russian legacy. Although responsibility for users’ comments exists in Kazakhstan (e.g., Freedom House, 2020), CK15 was wary primarily of the Russian law:

*“If it [a topic] touches [me], then it touches politics too. But it’s better not to do that [not to comment]. There have been situations where people have been judged for some comments, and so on. So, I lead my community - I can write something there, of course, but it never concerns politics. And we had an agreement there, an agreement, that is, that we are not responsible for comments from our users. Because the*

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<sup>54</sup> About “homosexual propaganda” in Russia see Persson (2015).

*community administrator should be responsible for comments from visitors, I'm not sure, [but this is how it is] by Russian laws."*

Thus, it became apparent that self-censorship can take place among Kazakhstani Russians while using social media. Some interviewees (e.g., AA1; AE10; CN13; CK15) openly expressed their concern for possible negative consequences because of posting or reposting the regime's non-confirmed information. According to these respondents, the consequences might vary from university expulsion (e.g., CN13) to monetary penalties and incarceration (e.g., AE10; CK15). In the words of AE10:

*"I think everybody has been listened to. Everybody has been browsed, everybody's posts have been read. And there were many cases when someone was fined for a post on Facebook or something like that. So, I try not to write on the Internet something related to politics, where someone has access. Or, there, for example, I don't write: 'Oh, I don't like Nazarbayev', I know that if I say this, that's it, I'll be gone next day."*

This concern has also explained, at least partly, the popularity of private messages instead of using posting or reposting functions. As told by KA21: *"I try not to post, I can see some interesting news, send it to my friends [...] through a personal message, but I try not to share it [in my profile], of course."*

While posting and reposting specific content on social media could be linked with state repressions by my respondents, the reason for not commenting in a public social media space was their reluctance to engage in conflict-related discussions. According to most of my respondents, social media discussions usually appear as shitstorms or could become open conflicts, mainly while debating current local topics. Following social media discussions related to the Kazakhstani issues, young Kazakhstani Russians often associated commenting with defending personal positions and facing oppositional opinions. In other words, online discussions connected to Kazakhstan could improve intergroup bias, which obviously activated a sense of negative Otherness among my respondents. Facing alternative viewpoints on domestic issues can potentially break their echo chambers and impact their imagination of Kazakhstan. The following citations illustrate this assumption:

*“Yes, sometimes I see some comments and think - what did a person think when he wrote it? Well, it’s not always nice to read it. They write a lot about Kazakhstan, all bad, and I want to write - what do you think? Who do you say this to? [...] I want [to comment on it], but then you know what will start in response to, the insults, and then it will be overdoing everything, because there are too few [people] who accept criticism and too few [people] who respond adequately to such comments” (CA18).*

*“Lately, I’ve been silent [on social media] because there’s such content that people are always just harassing and arguing with each other. I mean there, for example, on Instagram and on Facebook, if they expressed a position, for example, showed a video or a picture of some events. For example, recently, there’s an EXPO [trade exposition, which took place in Kazakhstan in 2017 – Translator’s note], [and they are] showing that half-ruined houses are standing near Astana and [on the other hand] there’s an EXPO. And you read the comments, and all the people, almost all, are just outraged by our government, our authorities. Like, how it is possible, that they [politicians] do not provide [wealth] for people but create such [event]” (AV4).*

Simultaneously, my respondents linked participating in public online discussions with involvement in ‘dirty’ politics. The opposition between official politics and the grassroots, described in Chapter 3.5.2. also took place on social media. For example, avoiding participation in topical online discussions could support the differentiation between politics made by politicians and the ‘real’ consolidation of ordinary people. In the words of CA16: *“No, I don’t speak out about politics at all [on social media], I don’t want to quarrel with someone over politics, nothing will change if we all quarrel.”*

In addition, willingness to participate in an online discussion might depend on the social media account or group *per se*. Obviously, social media has provided a space for serious online discussions regarding local and domestic politics in a small social circle. Such a small circle of ‘friends’ allows them to contact like-minded people, supporting the echo chamber effect and the fragmented perception of Kazakhstani society. As AV3 formulated:

*“Usually in comments, if I see the audience in a community is vast, most probably it will be inadequate (laughs). I see such a parallel. And if there is not enough audience, I will be more willing to comment. I already have my serious opinion. Because*

*I know that in commenting [in groups with a vast audience], it will be a real clash just 'I know, I am right' and the second 'I know, I am right'. And that's it; there will be no normal discussion. And already in such, I say, such a more interesting public, let's say, a small audience, you can see that it is adequate, with those you can try to talk because you can get something out of it."*

Therefore, self-censorship regarding political topics and oppositional opinions avoidance coexists with a search for civic dialogue and the desire to create a local community of like-minded people using social media. Besides their personal social media profiles, some of my respondents (e.g., AA1; AV3; CK15; KA20) mentioned that they have experience creating and/or managing local social media accounts and groups. Such accounts and groups can potentially become an additional tool and a safe place for fostering public debate inside a specific local group of mostly well-educated and financially secure city dwellers. As AV3 explained:

*"VKontakte. Here, it [is the social media group] is called 'True Stories of KBTU' [Kazakh-British Technical University], there are just different stories, it's the most visited one among KBTUs students. All KBTUers are visiting it. I posted various news there; well, not news, they were posts – provocations. Provocative, in fact, quite rude, I was very ashamed of what I wrote. But I understood the purpose for which I was doing it. I could hurt someone, and I did. But without me, seriously, there was no such discussion."*

Likewise, social media might provide a space for some grassroots activism elements to react to governmental actions. Contrasting top-down and bottom-up actions, some of my respondents expressed their need to participate as local ordinary people. Similar to those respondents who *"don't want to quarrel"* (CA16) and isolate themselves from political topics (e.g., AA7; AE10; CA16), they (e.g., AA2; AA3; AA4; CN19) have actively tried to express a critical view on official politics and denote their civic position through social media. AE4 presented an example:

*"Well, most likely [I would comment, if] this is the position of the authorities on some issues, or the organization there. Well, for example, there was flooding in the West of Kazakhstan. It turns out that the Red Cross [International Red Cross and*



*Red Crescent Movement – Translator’s note] began to collect donations to help and so on. And the most interesting thing is that the Red Cross reacted immediately, and our authorities reacted only after a couple of days, that we need help there, and so on and so forth. That is, there is no clear position of the Kazakhstani authorities on some events at once. And yes, it turns out that we will need to express our opinion. At once, you try to write something about that.”*

Nonetheless, direct political discussions were usually avoided by most of the respondents. In its turn, some local Kazakhstani issues, which are not directly related to political actions, but have a connection to everyday experiences and local surroundings of my respondents, motivated young Kazakhstani Russians to participate in social media discussions. Using the terminology by Lonkila et al. (2021, p. 146), these can support the “non-contentious forms of online activism” among Kazakhstani Russians. The involvement in these local issues might also support a sense of belonging to cities and the country as a whole. As stated by AA2:

*“[I would comment on something, if] probably something has to do with our problems definitely, with my city necessarily. If it would be something heartbreaking and it would be in America, I won’t write anything. If it would be something here and about some situation and the person in this [social media] post would tell his story true. It would be clear what he was looking for; either he asks for your help or something else, I would be touched, and I wrote - yes, yes, we will contact you, you are good, something like that, optimistic.”*

As a result, active social media usage can become an essential element for constructing nation-related belonging among young Kazakhstani Russians. Using visual tools, my respondents presented themselves and their daily reality, mostly associated with their city of residence, in the best light. Social media interaction allowed my interviewees to bond foreign experiences and global movements with the local Kazakhstani context. Despite self-censorship and evasion of certain political topics in public social media accounts and groups, young Kazakhstani Russians remain immersed in Kazakhstan’s events and build small local communities of ordinary Kazakhstani people. In some cases, these communities can be different; they may include only immediate surroundings and university friends, who tend to ignore official politics. In other cases, they remind communities of young civic

activists who try to establish a political dialogue with the Kazakhstani government. Despite their differences, these communities are similar in their willingness to reinforce the bottom up-understanding of belonging to Kazakhstan passively or actively. It seems that the (visual) functionality of social media can support them in their intent.

Using the terminology of Ratto and Boler (2014), the “DIY citizenship” of young Kazakhstani Russians on social media precludes the presence of prescribed formal differences between Kazakhstanis. It is based upon civic unity, supporting them in the context of the missing trust in the government. However, these communities include only those who share this worldview on Kazakhstan, while those who hold a different view remain outside their echo chambers. Facing contrasting opinions and alternative versions of Kazakhstani society can obviously evoke concerns among young Kazakhstani Russians in Kazakhstan, leading to the decision to avoid these versions.

It is essential to highlight that my respondents did not actively emphasize their ethnonational identity or Russianness on social media compared to their country of birth and current residence. While Kazakhstan is a given background of their everyday lives, the local self-presentation remains central on social media. Despite actively promoting the *Russian World* idea by the Russian state online, young Kazakhstani Russians tend not to pay tribute to their historical home country or seek convergence through posting, reposting, or commenting. Although *Vkontakte* might be considered a Russian social media platform and linked with the Russian legacy space, my respondents did not demonstrate any personal connection to this. Instead, it appeared to have a negative attitude towards Russian Internet regulations. The content consumption on social media, which I will present in the next chapter, provides additional insights.

#### **3.6.4. Social Media Content Consumption**

Since it is not always clear which content personal social media newsfeeds suggest to social media users, the question of which social media accounts and groups my respondents follow on social media provided me a clearer insight into their content consumption. It was obvious that even a large amount of personalized information motivated my respondents to pay more attention to specific content while ignoring others. As I have already depicted in Chapter

3.6.2, there is a trend among my respondents to access certain social media accounts directly, without using the newsfeed.

In accordance with my observation, analyzing the interviews revealed that social media accounts and groups, followed by my respondents, have been highly diverse in their thematical and geographical classification. I observed this diversity in both cases - within one specific social media profile, but also between different social media profiles of the respondents. For example, AE4 has followed mostly serious English-speaking groups and accounts on *Facebook*, while on *Vkontakte*, he mainly had Russian-speaking entertainment content.

Similarly, the type of content varied between different social media platforms. While young Kazakhstani Russians used *Vkontakte* mostly for entertainment content, *Facebook* and, surprisingly for me, *Instagram* became sources for (local) news and educational content for them. In the words of my respondents:

*“I’ve been using Vkontakte for a long time, probably since I was 12 years old. And there I mostly have all kinds of jokes, some funny pictures with cats and stuff [like that]” (CA14).*

*“Well, and communication, mainly [takes place] Vkontakte, I do not read anything [there]. Well, on Instagram, I’m right active, and information, and news as well, I mostly get from there” (CA17).*

In addition, among respondents from Almaty only (e.g., AA2; AE4; AV9), *Facebook* was likewise a platform where “you can also read some of the opinions of the opposition and read what is going on in the country” (AE4).

Nevertheless, this platform differentiation regarding the content type should not be considered as an absolute one. There were also examples, which demonstrated that some of my respondents could use *Vkontakte* for following international and local news (e.g., AA1; CA16; KA21) and *Instagram* for entertainment content only (e.g., AE4; CA14): “Well, it [Instagram] has been gaining momentum lately. You also see there what modern youth lives, your environment, and well, there are news too. Well, not so often. This is more of an entertainment” (AE4).

My results also showed that the platform’s origin could not be automatically equated to its content, as I had initially anticipated, defining *Vkontakte* as the Russian social media

platform. According to the example of young Kazakhstani Russians, it became clear that social media usage is a highly complex phenomenon, and the differentiation between Russian and Western social media platforms might be misleading. Although this differentiation has been used in academic literature related to the post-Soviet space (e.g., Roesen & Zvereva, 2014; Mingisheva, 2019; Senggirbay, 2019), it may limit the variety of possible social media usage patterns. Even though *Vkontakte* was established in Russia and included mostly Russian-speaking users and content, my results demonstrate that using *Vkontakte* cannot be automatically equated to the consumption of Russia-related content.

Observing some of my respondents (e.g., AM5; AN11; CN13; CR22) proved that, among others, in their newsfeed, they see English-speaking content and groups, as well as Russian-speaking content related to international issues and so-called Western culture. As CR22 explained: *“I have [groups on Vkontakte related to Western movies and music] ‘Cinemaholics’, ‘Musicoholics’], I have very few groups, to be honest. I’m like a German, let’s say, [stay for] perfectionism, music, movies, books, Bukowski.”* Similarly, my respondents followed and could find the local Kazakhstani content in their *Vkontakte* newsfeeds: *“Well, for example, I have our Karaganda Orthodox newspaper, newspaper ‘Zautrenja’ [on Vkontakte] (KA21).”*

Simultaneously, there were few overall trends regarding information consumption on social media among my respondents. Firstly, the prevalence of visual content can be found in all social media accounts and groups, which were mentioned throughout the interviews, regardless of the social media platform. While for some of my respondents (e.g., AA2; CN19; CR22), visual content had a primarily aesthetic purpose, they follow, for example, *“photographers who just do something beautiful, some galleries”* (AA2). For some of the others (e.g., AE6; CN13; KA20), pictures served as an (international) news and information source. In the words of AE6: *“Well, that’s what I learn from memes in general. That the President became Trump, in particular.”*

Secondly, among the followed social media and accounts, (visual) entertainment such as memes and *“funny short videos”* (CA16) known as *vines*<sup>55</sup> were dominant. Humor has been an essential part of the social media content of most respondents. It proves that, in

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<sup>55</sup> Relates to *Vine.co* - American social networking short-form video hosting service.

accordance with the previous studies (e.g., Sheldon, 2008), entertainment has remained to be an essential part of social media usage for young Kazakhstani Russians. For example, answering the question of what she follows on social media, AA1 replied accordingly:

*“Different funny pictures or some humorous poems. Well, something with a sense of humor. Because when one comes [home] after school, one wants to rest and you just flip through [the newsfeed], to send [something] your friends, just rest that way.”*

Third, similarly to social media platform choices, the country of content origin is, in most cases, irrelevant for my respondents. For some interviewees (e.g., AA7; AN11; CA14; KA20), it was difficult to identify the origin of social media accounts and groups whose content they regularly read. For example, AN11 stated: *“I don’t even know [origin of this social media account]. I mean, it is not interesting for me. But I like what the person does so much.”* That was similar for CN19: *“It [origin of this social media group] doesn’t matter to me, absolutely. It was actually following [this social media account] for a long time, and then I found out it was Ukrainian. Nothing changed.”*

While my respondents did not differentiate social media content geographically, the content itself – *“what they write and how they write”* (AE4) became central for my respondents. In this regard, language remained crucial. Despite the fact that most of my respondents have basic knowledge of the Kazakh language, they did not exclusively follow Kazakh-speaking accounts and social media groups. Being guided by personal interests, my respondents selected content in their preferred language - mostly in Russian. In the words of KA20:

*“It [the origin] does not matter. The only thing is the language. I mean, if it’s a Chinese account, I don’t understand it. I’m not interested in it. But it [the origin] does not matter for a [social media] account. Just the language should be understood.”*

Although most of the social media accounts and groups followed by my respondents were Russian speaking, it does not mean automatically that their content has related to Russia or the post-Soviet region as a whole. The Russian language can simply be a more comfortable medium for my respondents to follow specific content from far abroad. As AE6 noticed:

*“Most of the content is, yes, rather Russian. And yet, as a Russian, mostly it is just a translation from English sites. From English [social] networks.”*

Besides, the importance of language was closely linked with a content type. For example, when visual content prevails in a social media account or group, the language might no longer matter. Such visual content has blurred online national boundaries for young Kazakhstani Russians and opened access to illustrations from all over the world: *“Yes, because there [in a social media account on Vkontakte] is often [information] in the Ukrainian [language] and guys posted the photos from Kyiv and somewhere else. I don’t care what it is, Ukrainian or Chinese”* (CN19).

Besides, most of the respondents mentioned following English-speaking accounts, even on the ‘Russian’ platform *Vkontakte*. Hence, the general sympathy towards the English language among my respondent (see Chapter 3.5.6) was also reflected in their social media usage. Some of the respondents (e.g., CN13; CK15; CN19) used social media to improve their English language skills. As stated by CK15: *“Basically, it’s probably all from entertainment [which I follow]. Maybe some American channels, without translation. Again, for myself, to improve the language and so on.”*

In addition to content posted on official social media accounts and groups, my respondents often consumed content posted by their social media ‘friends’. Within this content can be found Instagram stories, posts, and reposts made and spread by ‘friends’ inside their personal account or private messages. This demonstrated the power of social interaction for both active and passive social media use. In the words of CA14:

*“Well, of course, it will be interesting for me to read; I read everything that my friends post. I have a very narrow circle of friends; in principle, there are literally 3-4 people, and I always read that they are posting [or] reposting.”*

As described in Chapter 1.5.2, the social environment can determine which content social media users select for their regular consumption. Besides accounts and groups, which, according to my respondents, were the main sources of social media content, social media friends were considered as information sources among my respondents (e.g., AE4; AV9; CR22). Taking into account the prevalence of local friends, I suggest that the content which these friends create might relate, at least to a certain extent, to local city-related issues and Kazakhstan as a whole:

*“And my [social media] friends, they write their opinions very often. Let’s say, as I say, let’s say based on some book. Let’s say not a review, but something like this (...) Some advice, some I don’t know, weeks from their life. What they figured out there. Well, that’s what I like to read. Well, let’s say I have a friend, he writes, ah, every week, once a week there he writes a pretty long [Facebook] post and some pictures of his life and what he has learned at this stage. And so, he makes some references to books. And I mean, it’s very interesting for me to read this, a real experience from life” (AV9).*

In addition, according to most of the respondents, private social media content is more trustworthy than social media accounts of state-related media. Most of my respondents communicated that in comparison to official sources, which were *“edited by THEM [politicians], they decide what information to give us and how to give it to us”* (CA18), bloggers are considered ordinary people who present *“the real life of real people”* (CA14). Moreover, these bloggers are from all over the world, which once again blurs online national boundaries and inter-state differences. Bloggers can provide an insider’s perspective and an opportunity to approach Western lifestyle and culture for my respondents:

*“You see, I’ve organized this in my networks; it’s hard not to trust when you see a man, he’s filming his life, and you’re learning something. I was watching all these videos to learn English at first, it helped me a lot. I found purely American, English, and Australian [people] to get know every accent. Then you find really interesting people. It’s better than watching some show that’s scripted. So, what I watch, I trust, but some TV, this show, I don’t” (AA2).*

While discussing passive social media usage, I cannot ignore *YouTube*, which, as mentioned in Chapter 2.2.7, is one of my respondents’ central informational sources. Unlike *Vkontakte*, *Instagram* or *Facebook*, *YouTube* exclusively serves as a space for content consumption for my respondents, which makes it more similar to classic television than to social media platforms. Some of the respondents (e.g., AA2; AE6; KA21) also considered *YouTube* as a substitute for television:

*“Well, so you search [for something] for the first time, and then something comes up in your recommendation, and then you come in and look for something about it, intentionally something about it. At one time, I searched for some intellectual*

*channels because somehow, I was ashamed, [before] I have been watching all kinds of humorous programs. Sometimes I watch music videos just for fun. It's like TV; it's absolutely the same. So, people who don't watch TV but spend their time on YouTube, I don't know what they're bragging about because it's the same thing"* (AE6).

In this regard, the importance of the algorithm-based recommendation engine of *YouTube* should be mentioned. It seems that besides active searching, my respondents have often followed *YouTube* content recommendations, which they would not necessarily actively search themselves.

For example, similarly to AE6, CN19 paid his attention to *YouTube* content recommendations:

*"YouTube, yes. I'm signed to channels there, a lot of channels. You know, sometimes I just sign up, and that's it. You can find everything there. There are no political channels [which I follow], but yes, I get a lot of videos [suggested] in the newsfeed. For instance, Anti-Corruption Foundation [a Russian NGO established by an oppositional politician Aleksey Naval'nyj – Translator's note]."*

Although most of my respondents have not actively watched television or consider it an informational source, *YouTube* opened an opportunity for them to see official content, particularly of Russian TV channels. While some of the respondents searched proactively for specific Russian TV shows on the official social media accounts of the Russian TV channels (e.g., CK15; CA16; KA20), others (e.g., AA8; CA17; KA21) watched episodes of official content from Russia on unofficial *YouTube* channels: *"Mostly, people talk about everything. I mean, something is coming up, video bloggers are waking up, journalists are waking up, let's suck it all up. And there are clips from [official] news. And even the news is on YouTube"* (AA8).

All of my interviewees can be split into two categories regarding their content consumption. The first category – the news seekers (e.g., AV3; AM5; CN13; CA16), who use social media to follow current socio-political events. The second category is the news avoiders (e.g., AE6; AN11; CA14; CA18), who try to avoid contact with socio-political information inside their social media accounts. These categories are independent of the region and their demographical characteristics, such as university programs. Furthermore, I



observed, across both categories, involvement in the socio-political events related to Russia, Kazakhstan, and the world as a whole. I will consider each geographical unit separately below.

### *Involvement in the socio-political life of Russia*

Although my respondents did not pay specific attention to content origin, my results proved that young Kazakhstani Russians come into contact with content produced in Russia through their social media usage. Throughout interviews, most of my respondents demonstrated involvement in Russian socio-political agendas and mentioned social media as a source for this knowledge. Since (social) media participates in the construction of social reality and supports obtaining a positive social identity (social identity gratification), it was crucial for me to understand which role Russian (social) media content plays for young Russians from Kazakhstan.

My respondents regularly confronted Russia-related information through social media in both cases – when searching for it intentionally or accidentally. Some of my respondents (e.g., AM5; AE10; CA16) purposely followed various Russian state and oppositional media through their social media accounts. International news agency *Russia today* (AE10; CK15), news agency *Ria Novosti* (CN13), TV channel *Rossija24* (CA16), and official V Kontakte-account of *Russian Foreign Ministry* (AE10), TV channel *Dožd'* (AM5), TV channel *RBK* (AV9) were explicitly mentioned. The presented variety of the aforementioned Russian media suggests that Kazakhstani Russians did not have a common Russia-related information source and received diverse and likely controversial information about their historical home country. Both Russian state-sponsored and oppositional content was present in the social media content of Kazakhstani Russians.

Nonetheless, following Russian media on social media was not necessarily connected with interest towards Russia. Most of my respondents decided to follow Russian media because of their competitive advantages among other Russian-speaking sources, including Kazakhstani official media offers. The variety of Russian media offers, which have been widely spread in the Russian-speaking segment of social media, provided a good option for news seekers to be informed not only about the post-Soviet region but also about

world events. Ironically, following Russian media on social media might even support involvement in the Kazakhstani socio-political events. As CA16 formulated:

*“We are closer to Russia; we’re on the same side somehow, our policy is similar, so I watch Russian news. Although, of course, I think any news is cheating, presented in a favorable way for them [...] I think Kazakhstan news do not fully provide information. They usually show problems, that a water pipe has burst, or something else, and when there is a problem, they usually don’t write anything. For example, even when there were events in Aktjubinsk [shooting attack, which happened in Aktobe in 2016 - Translators’ note], I learned it from the Russian news.”*

Moreover, following Russian media can open an additional perspective on world events for my interviewees. As I will demonstrate later, young Kazakhstani Russians have sought to shape their information space to contain different views on current global and local events. In this sense, the Russian state and oppositional media became one of many informational sources, which allowed my respondents to follow a variety of different national reporting. As said by CK15:

*“[I follow Russia Today] to compare points of view and for myself (...) I don’t like to give in to some (laughs) influence from outside, although it happens often. If I am already interested in something, I will compare different [sources].”*

In particular, the intentional consumption of Russian official information was associated by my respondents with facing Russian domestic issues. Most of the interviewed news seekers considered these issues from a critical point of view. Some of the respondents (e.g., AV3; AA8; KA21) even questioned the objectivity of Russian news. That especially manifested itself in the content of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Instead of taking the side of their historical home country, my respondents cast doubt on the information provided through Russian channels. As KA21 explained:

*“I don’t know how to react. I used to be like - yes, like this - white, this is black, but now I understand that there are halftones, that one channel covers it this way, another channel covers it that way. Even if you take Russian, Ukrainian channels, for some reason. Why in Ukraine do they say that way, but in Russia, they say it this*

*way? Somewhere there should be a middle. It can't be that in Ukraine, everyone is wrong; they all lie. That in Russia they all tell the truth, that is impossible."*

However, in comparison to Russian professional media, following the user-generated content on social media was a common trend among both news seekers and news avoiders. Unlike the news seekers, most news avoiders were accidentally involved in Russian events through Russian user-generated content. For example, news avoider AA7 explained how he learned about a Russian opposition politician:

*"I saw it somewhere, but I don't remember if I have [still] this account or if I left it (laughing) [...] there was a thunderous slogan, it attracted me, I think, 'You're no Dimon to us' ['He's no Dimon to you' (On vam ne Dimon)- an oppositional film, which the Anti-Corruption Foundation produced – Translator's note] or something like that and there was painted Medvedev [Dmitry Medvedev - former Prime Minister of Russia – Translator's note], and I was interested in who would allow them such a treatment? A person declared bravely [himself]. Well, I wanted to look at this courage. I saw it, quite a big statement."*

In addition, my results showed that the news avoiders came across Russian oppositional content more often than state-sponsored information. While the official media have aimed to retrieve ethnonational Russian glory and demonization of the 'enemies' of the *Russian World* (see Chapter 2.4.4), Russian oppositional (online) discourse is based on universal values. As demonstrated in Chapter 2.4.4, such topics as anti-corruption initiatives, democratic freedom, and liberal values have, in general, been emphasized by the Russian opposition. Evidently, this type of content resonates with young Kazakhstani Russians who face the same Soviet heritage and similar socio-political problems as in Russia. These common issues distributed by the Russian opposition could also provide a certain sense of supranational post-Soviet community for my respondents. News avoider AE6 provided an example of this:

*"The situation turned out to be like that because of the adults, that means they're mostly to blame. Because of the youth, when they came, many of them when they were born, I think Putin was already the President. [...] I mean, I think people are always able to get together and change things. For example, right now, we have not*

*a really better situation as well. It seems that in the future, my peers will correct something in some time. Now we have too few resources for that.”*

As a result, regime-criticizing content from Russia has obviously activated a critical view not only on the Russian socio-political situation but also on official politicians in Kazakhstan. As CN19 explained:

*“I have a very negative attitude to the Russian government in general because it is insane. In principle, I have the same attitude to our [Kazakhstani] government. They are worth each other [...] I remember there was a story [on social media] about a [Russian] girl who was raped in Germany. First of all, why does a country with so many problems of its own need that? It is clear why it needs this: “Oh no. That’s what a terrible ‘Gayrope’ they say. All this is necessary for smart people to leave the country and for fools to stay and pay taxes.”*

The division between ‘us’ – ‘ordinary people’ and ‘them’- ‘corrupt politicians’, which can be supported through social media content, could erase the importance of ethnonational belonging and foster supranational unity among my respondents as globalized Kazakhstanis. In this regard, strengthening their idealistic interpretation of the *Friendship of the Peoples*’ concept and support of Eurasianism occurred without losing their affiliation to Kazakhstan. Facing in their social media feeds various Russian-speaking user-generated content - even if it is not directly related to politics - can foster support of ordinary people within the post-Soviet space and stimulate interest in state-people relationships:

*“There’s [a blogger] Ruslan Usačev [and] Danila Poperečnyj. It turns out that they’re doing stand-ups [comedy]. But they don’t just have some household humor, but more political humor. They joke a lot [...] make fun of that what’s going on now. Nobody keeps quiet about it either; they talk about it [as well]. Well, there’s Ruslan Sokolovskij - he basically wanted to show that ‘you [the regime] won’t do anything to me’. It turns out that they did. I really felt sorry for him. I mean, they passed this law that you can’t play Pokémon in church”<sup>56</sup> (AA1).*

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<sup>56</sup> See Cresci (2017).

As a result, being involved in current Russian affairs does not automatically mean that young Kazakhstani Russians get closer to the Russian Federation. Through their passive social media usage, they were well informed not only about the ‘great achievements’ of the Russian Federation, which they usually consider skeptically but also about ‘the backside’ of the Russian regime. Comparing Russia and Kazakhstan in the light of current news, young non-titular Russians recognize the benefits of living in Kazakhstan. This recognition can activate their sense of nation-related belonging to the country of their birth and current residence. As AM5 described:

*“I mean, the situation in Russia, for example, that you can be arrested for a repost [on social media], that one would play Pokemon [Go] in the church - it certainly feels like a delirium. But, thanks to God, we do not have such a thing yet and, I think, it will not be [the case] soon.”*

Similarly, despite their ability to support the importance of the Eurasian idea and transnational grassroots unity, social media has become a place where the differences between Russians in Russia and Russians abroad become visible. The user-generated content allowed my respondents to identify some aspects of Russianness, such as blind patriotism or anti-Western sentiments, which can contradict the general values of globalized Kazakhstanis and can be considered by them to be a negative factor. Such context can obviously intensify the aspiration to maintain positive self-esteem, which is possible to achieve for my respondents, through the usage of a separate category - Kazakhstani Russians (see Chapter 3.2.4.). In the words of AV3 and AA8: *“I also judge by those who write on the Internet, Russians who position themselves as such [real] Russians. They keep saying that we should burn America or something like that”* (AV3).

*“Well, there’s support. Russians [in Russia] have much nationalist stuff there. And V Kontakte, well, groups in V Kontakte. They are all huge patriots. Well, [the border] from patriotism to nationalism... You want to write ‘patriotism,’ you want to write it, but there’s damned nationalism going on, and that’s it. Well, (...) that’s bad”* (AA8).

### *Global agenda on social media*

Besides the Russia-related social media content, my interviewees regularly confronted information about events occurring outside the post-Soviet region. As in the case of social media accounts of Russian professional media, some news seekers (e.g., AE4; AM5; CK15; CA16) have intentionally followed official social media of Western media. British broadcaster *BBC* (e.g., AE4), American TV channel *CNN* (e.g., CA16), American broadcaster *NBC* (e.g., CN19) were most commonly mentioned. As already stated above, the motivation for following different social media content was linked, by my respondents, with the need to create an informational space included various perspectives. For the news seekers among my respondents, it was crucial to compare positions of different countries concerning global events; they could form their actual attitude towards these events on such a basis. As CR22 formulated: “*Well, in English I can watch BBC on social media and Russian Channel One (Pervyj kanal), one can compare [then].*”

However, compared to Russia’s official and oppositional sources, Western professional media in the personal social media accounts of my respondents appeared common. My respondents primarily connected following Western official media to improve their English language knowledge and not gain information. Social media has provided an appropriate space for Kazakhstani Russians to find original English-speaking sources, which resulted in them being involved in European and American agendas. In words of CN19: “*I think I’m signed on to NBC. American news. But I’m not watching it [regularly]. I signed when I was watching American [presidential] debates. I was just interested in English.*” Similarly, CK15 formulated:

*“Maybe [I follow also] some American channels without translation. Again, for myself, to develop the language, and so on. That’s all [...] I mean, I have to (...) somehow find a language environment, so that I don’t leave the country and that I don’t lose my language.”*

Moreover, the tendency to use social media content to improve the English language went beyond the social media accounts of professional media. Many of my respondents have been following user-generated content produced by Western celebrities and bloggers for the same reason. Therefore, the desire to improve a language can lead to involvement in both top-

down and bottom-up agendas of Western countries and global events as a whole: *“I mean, we can also see what the Jared Leto [American actor and songwriter – Translator’s note] does there [on social media], Barack Obama in his Instagram, for example. We already know all that. Yeah. We can see”* (AA8).

*“I subscribe to this woman - Laura Vandervoort, she’s an actress and I like what kind of speeches she writes sometimes, pictures [...] she [posts] in English. I like the way she writes, well, she’s a very nice person, she goes to help kids in Africa, that’s she draws too, and I watch her posts sometimes”* (CN13).

Another tendency in passive social media usage among my respondents reflected the combination of closeness to the Russian language with global openness. Some respondents (e.g., AE10; AN11; CN13; CA18) have regularly followed Russian-speaking bloggers who are living outside of the post-Soviet space, mostly in Europe:

*“I’m following one couple on YouTube. They’re about twenty-five, thirty years old. They live in Spain, they tell [about their] life, how they walk around, where they go - I like it very much. In general, I like Spain [...] They’re from Barcelona, they live in Barcelona, but she used to live in Ukraine, and he lived in Russia. When they were little, they moved there, suddenly met, I think, through social networks. They met, and now they live there together”* (AE10).

*“[I follow a blogger] Dameoz. He tells interesting facts about everything [...] It’s his channel, he’s somewhere from Lithuania or Estonia from somewhere there, and he just talks about everything. About different facts, maybe analyze some countries, to tell something [about them]. I even talked to him once, I wrote him in V Kontakte, found him (laughing), well, I liked him as a person”* (CN13).

Such examples of social media content can, firstly, support the importance of global boundlessness and interconnectivity for my respondents. Secondly, their belief that Russians and the Russian state are not the same can be confirmed while observing the lives of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking compatriots in Europe. Finally, the everyday information provided by Russian-speaking bloggers (who can be considered as their ingroup members by Kazakhstani Russians) can reinforce sympathy towards the Western world. As demonstrated in Chapter 3.5.6, unlike the *Russian World*, which is often associated with brutality

and conservatism, my respondents widely supported Europe and liberal values, such as striving for social diversity and international cooperation.

Moreover, involvement in international events has motivated my respondents to compare socio-political situations around the world with local ones. As in the case of Russia-related social media content, international events can contribute to the self-reflection of my respondents' sense of belonging. It is noteworthy that this self-reflection might result in different conclusions. While some respondents (e.g., AA1; AE4; CN19) have noticed Kazakhstan's weak points, others (e.g., AA7; AA8; CK15) tried to find negative aspects of other countries and bolster their positive self-esteem as Kazakhstanis. However, in both cases, global issues become a part of the local everyday life of my respondents:

*“Even in America is Trump now. And my acquaintances, whom I deleted [from social media friends] later, wrote - Is it so good to make America good again. And I am - well, goodbye. I will not enter into a discussion with them [...] I think, all right, so they elected a president who doesn't like the majority of the population. And they do something; it's allowed to say that I hate him. It's allowed, even artists protest through their works, etc. We have the same [President] all our lives. Even if someone doesn't like him, most of us don't like him, i.e., they have it better even in this respect. You don't like something; you have the right to say it. Whether it changes or not, you have the right to say it always” (AA1).*

*“America itself is a turbulent country because it's over us, it's a BIG BROTHER (...), and it thinks it should (...) Why go there? But all the possibilities are real, but as if the Internet has expanded them now and it doesn't have to be where they are, you can contact them [online]” (AA7).*

It is important to emphasize that the global agenda and Western trends can be received not only by original sources but also by following social media content made in Russia. Information related to world affairs is presented differently depending on a specific Russian social media account or community. For example, confronting international events through Russia's official sources, which represent, in particular, an anti-Western position (see Chapter 2.4.2), might potentially contribute to a negative perception of the West. It seems that my respondents have faced such content, but the degree of trust toward such information



can vary. As already mentioned above, most of my respondents were critical regarding official discourse based on insularity and alienation from the international community.

Both the news seekers and news avoiders aimed at obtaining different information on social media and were aware of fake information. Being skeptical about professional media, which in the opinion of my respondents, is controlled by politicians in both post-Soviet and Western context, young Kazakhstani Russians try to surround themselves with private views of ordinary people from all over the world. Thus, even social media content from Russia can ensure contact with the everyday routines of Western countries. The following examples illustrate this idea:

*“No. I don’t believe them [official media]. I think they give the news so that their country is in a better light, that they’re good and all the others are the bad people and hurt them. I think that in Russia, anyway, there is news like that. And CNN [reports] that America is beautiful, and all the other people are bad” (CA16).*

*“MBN [a Russian amateur social media account]. Yes, they get interesting news from all over the world, not necessarily about politics. For example, there was some interesting artist in Spain who draws with coffee. They made a short video link to it; you can go to see a short description of it, they also have a lot to learn there” (CN13).*

#### *Local social media content and belongingness*

While Russian and Western social media content, followed by my respondents, was highly diverse, local Kazakhstani content did not prove to have a wide variety. This allowed me to reveal a definite trend in social media use of young Kazakhstani Russians. Most of my interviewees demonstrated explicit involvement in the Kazakhstani socio-political situation, as has already been demonstrated in previous chapters, and social media has been an important source of official and non-official news agendas in the country. As in the case with Russian and Western ones, Kazakhstani professional media were usually met with skepticism among the news-seeking respondents. This especially concerned official news sources, which, according to my respondents, do not publish any useful information. Similar to

Russia's official sources, social media content produced by Kazakhstani professional media lacked trust among Kazakhstani Russians. In the words of AE4 and CA16:

*"On Facebook, for example, [I follow] Tengri News and then Zakon.kz. Usually, I read Tengri News in the morning. I mean, for example, if I'm going to the university, I go there, look at what's going on, and everything like that. Well, Nur.kz, I must have used it in the tenth or the eleventh [school] grade, but lately, they've been doing something so messy that it's like, yuk [disgusting] (laughs)" (AE4).*

*"There's nothing to read [there]. They [official Kazakhstani media] don't write anything; it's always fine. It can't be fine. You open the Kazakhstani news. It's always fine, it's fine. Only like an old woman's apartment pipes broke, and that's all" (CA16).*

Simultaneously, my interviewees evaluated the non-professional user-generated social media content related to Kazakhstan differently. For example, for some news seekers (e.g., AE4; AV9; CA18), user-generated content has become an alternative information source for local socio-political events and the local civic community core. At the same time, some other respondents (e.g., AV3; AA7; CN19) shared critical opinions on Kazakhstani bloggers who, in their opinion, can compete neither with Russian nor with colleagues from other countries. Although most of my respondents knew or followed local Kazakhstani bloggers, the social media content produced by these bloggers was not particularly interesting for my respondents. It seems that unlike bloggers from Russia and Western countries, Kazakhstan-based bloggers are not able to satisfy the social identity gratification of young Kazakhstani Russians. As AV3 formulated:

*"They were just regular Kazakhstani bloggers. They [are] not really serious. I unsubscribed from everyone [of them], just realized at one moment - why am I reading this? Because it's a waste of time, just, say, the elite [is] on Facebook in Kazakhstan. They're just popular, that's all. And their popularity was only justified because they could put together a hype there, where it was needed. Then, the popularity is that they certainly touch on important topics, but all this was so similar, superficial, not interesting, in essence."*

This rejection of Kazakhstani content generators applies not only to Facebook or Instagram text bloggers but also to YouTube video bloggers. CN19 described it as following:

*“I don’t know anybody from Kazakhstan at all. Kazakhstani YouTube is not for me at all. I just haven’t seen it. Maybe there’s someone interesting, and I just don’t know. We have a problem with it. In general, we have a problem with the culture in Kazakhstan specifically (...) You know, I don’t like pop [mainstream] methods of improving something, at all. But we have a problem with it, of course.”*

At the same time, my respondents reported that social media has catered to them as a channel for communication with the local government. Being skeptical towards Kazakhstani media information, some of my respondents (e.g., AA2; AA8; CA17) preferred to get information firsthand – through social media accounts of Kazakhstani state institutions. Obviously, the strong connection to the city of residence motivated the respondents to get involved in local events and political actions. As CA17 explained:

*“I follow also akimat [city administration – Translator’s note] [of Astana] [...] Yes, they have an Instagram account [...] Well, that’s interesting. [They post there] different, so to speak, innovations, some events as well. [...] They used to add one picture (...), and they did it both in Russian and in Kazakh. Then they changed their mind [...] Now [they] just post one in Russian, one in Kazakh (laughs).”*

Besides that, the most apparent trend among both news seekers and news avoiders on *Vkontakte* and *Instagram* was following city-related infotainment accounts, such as @*almaty.today* or @*sxodim.astana*. Among others, these accounts have focused on spreading official and non-official information related to the city, region, and country as a whole. In comparison to the highly personalized Russian and international social media content, local city-related accounts were mentioned by the vast majority of my respondents. As I will demonstrate specifically in Chapter 3.8, these Russian-speaking social media accounts made in Kazakhstan have included various information related to Kazakhstan’s big cities, which was obviously attractive for most of my interviewees regardless of their city of residence, gender, or university program. Following the city-related social media accounts seems to be similar to the selection of social media platforms themselves and is connected to their popularity among Kazakhstanis. Because of their popularity, local urban social media accounts

became an integral part of social media activity for the young Kazakhstani Russians that I have interviewed. The following examples can provide a confirmation: *“I often see something about Kazakhstan on Instagram. I subscribe to accounts about Almaty. And there is often news about what is happening in Almaty now”* (AA1).

*“I have all sorts of photographs there; I’m always looking for some inspiration. If one post comes out [it will be from @almaty.today]. I’m signed to @almaty.today, [to see] what’s going on in Almaty; there are more neutral things there”* (AA2).

*“It’s an information portal [@ekaraganda.kz], it’s on V Kontakte, but mostly on Instagram. Although they have a lot of advertising there, because, well, it’s their source of income, so one needs to humbly accept it and understand. They have such, mostly the life of the city. The followers themselves post mostly on [this social media account]. They saw someone somewhere, and they wrote. They saw that something happened there - they sent it, like in our place, the road was not built, and then the editorial staff tried to find out why the road was not built there. Well, it’s like this, that life in the city and it is interesting to know”* (KA21).

Therefore, the decision to following local city-related social media accounts may indicate a manifestation of belonging to a local urban community. Since my interviewees are closely connected to their residence cities (see Chapter 3.5.5), it seems that following what happens in their cities through these social media accounts is one of the key social media activities for them. It is remarkable that through these urban social media accounts, news seekers, as well as news avoiders, are able to confront news information related to the city, region, and to Kazakhstan as a whole. In the words of AN11 and CA14:

*“The only news on social media I read is probably “Typical Alma-Ata” [https://vk.com/almalife]. And I don’t like it very much, because (...) such unpleasant topics for me sometimes come up. Again, the politics. I just don’t understand why people waste their time, well, on reading this information, on commenting, on some arguments. But it is so important, because, well, you can learn quite interesting information about what is currently happening in the city. I mean, what could affect my daily life”* (AN11).

*“Here is the news. I’m talking about this source, or maybe on Instagram appears something popular. Well, the account I have is @v\_astane\_official; there are many things, there are events in Astana, and it shows me everything. Everything, I mean, I think if there’s a war somewhere - I’ll find out about it” (CA14).*

While I initially expected that young Kazakhstani Russians would be relatively ignorant towards Kazakhstani events, my results demonstrated the opposite tendency. Although my respondents were deeply involved in the Russian socio-political agenda and had a critical attitude towards Kazakhstani official news content, almost all of them have regularly confronted Kazakhstan-related information through urban social media accounts related to their cities of residence. While following various social media accounts from all over the world, most of the young Kazakhstani Russians decided to select the same local accounts related to the place of their residence.

At this stage of my analysis, an additional question has appeared – what type of content do the local urban social media accounts include, and how exactly is the nation imagined in this content? Since most of my respondents communicated that the local social environment and local socio-political information are important during social media use, I decided to take a closer look at the urban social media accounts and analyze the most popular ones from the perspective of nation-related discursive paradigms existing in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the additional research step offers a different perspective on social media use of young Kazakhstani Russians and complements the personal interpretation of my respondents provided in interviews. After summarizing QCA results, in Chapter 3.8 I will examine in detail which textual and visual information city-related social media accounts spread and why are they, unlike Kazakhstani bloggers, attractive for young Kazakhstani Russians.

### **3.7. Interim Conclusion: Globalized Kazakhstanis**

Since the nature of identity and belonging is continually evolving, one of the basic objectives of this dissertation was to explore self-description and identification among young Kazakhstani Russians connected with different dimensions of their ethnonational and civic attachment. These results have formed the basis for further analysis of nation-related

belonging in connection to social media use (see Chapter 3.8). Direct contact with the target population in their usual environment made it possible for me to detect current national identity trends and belonging among the target population, which I will summarize below by means of previous research in this field and general theoretical background.

It would be difficult to imagine ‘ethnic’ Russians in Kazakhstan as a concrete group with clear boundaries and an established general worldview. Even though they are often referred to as such in political and public discourses; this representation of them is also encountered as the primary purpose of Russia’s diaspora politics. In my investigation of young non-titular Russians born and raised in independent Kazakhstan, I found them to be a group displaying various and even contradictory features being united by their heterogeneity of their self-definitions. Consequently, it is hardly possible to provide an explicit and short answer to the question of *how do young Kazakhstani Russians describe themselves in terms of nation-related identity and belonging?* The self-definition of young Kazakhstani Russians is manifested through a mixed patchwork of characteristics. Each of the elements in their identity and belonging, including the nation-related ones, are crossed with each other and build a general formation of their miscellaneous Self.

Although most of my respondents prefer to describe themselves in non-national terms, their attachments to their ethnic heritage, current place of residence, as well as to the globalized world are clearly recognizable. In this regard, one of the central outputs arrived by my research is that the official ethnonational identity ‘by passport’ (*nacional’nost’*) and the subjective sense of belonging in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians can notably vary. When introducing themselves as Russian (by passport), my respondents usually explained that this is just a formal label for them.

While most of the respondents tried to avoid their formal categorization as Russians, they simultaneously demonstrated a close connection to Russian cultural traditions, which usually related to their family context and the Russian language. On the one hand, preserving their traditions and their native language allows them to remain in contact with their ethnic heritage, even beyond Russia’s borders, and maintain some stable sense of belongingness. Having mixed-ethnic roots and being an ethnic minority in a country with a fairly controversial national agenda, my respondents, unlike the titular majority, are

compelled to face numerous belonging options and have a bigger need for suitable memberships.

On the other hand, this can also lead to negative consequences, such as experiencing ethnic Otherness in the multiethnic landscape of Kazakhstan. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 27) have reasonably noticed, official categories can have an impact on “the lived experience of the persons so categorized.” My research has confirmed this assertion. Some of my respondents described certain situations where they felt excluded due to being different from the majority population. However, the ethnic factor, *per se*, does not play a key role here. Instead, urban-rural and ideological issues come to the fore. Although the experienced Otherness potentially enables the intergroup bias to exist, it simultaneously contributes to a growing attachment to Kazakhstan. A focus on innovation and global cooperation, which is strongly communicated by the Kazakhstani government (*Transnational paradigm*), clearly resonates in tune with the worldview of young Kazakhstani Russians.

Despite growing Russian neo-imperialism, ethnonational belonging did not prove to be the main component of the interviewees’ self-image. Answering the question of *how young Kazakhstani Russians interpret their ethnic origin and current citizenship in the context of spreading the ‘Russian World’ idea*, my analysis shows that closeness to their family-related traditions and the Russian language are not equivalent to the glorification of the historical ‘home’ country. In this regard, my results support previous studies (e.g. by Barrington et al., 2002; Saunders, 2006; Kolstø, 2011; Senggirbay, 2019). Although the spread of the *Russian World* idea has gained traction in the last decade, the young generation of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan has not reacted to it in a mobilizing form but rather interpreted the call of the historical ‘motherland’ in their own manner. Paradoxically, the blood-ties-based nationalism used in Russian official rhetoric has notably repulsed my respondents from rapprochement with the Russian state instead of strengthening their ethnonational connection with that particular country in the form of long-distance nationalism. Even more, Russianness, in the view of my respondents, is not a universal Russia-related phenomenon but a private issue, which is inseparable from the local context.

Yet, as I expected, the Ukrainian crisis has certainly motivated young Kazakhstani Russians to rethink their nation-related belonging and connection to both Russia and

Kazakhstan. While Russian official discourse has aimed to unite the so-called compatriots (*sootečestvenniki*) beyond Russia, in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians, “the imagery of ‘Russian civilization’ as a territorial monolith with irredentist cravings” (Suslov, 2014, p. 604) has had the opposite effect. Despite the fact that my respondents might consider the Russian Federation as 1) a more developed and promising state compared to Kazakhstan, or 2) as an important strategic partner, the strengthening of ethnonational attachment towards Russia among my respondents has not been confirmed in the analysis. On the contrary, the civic attachment to Kazakhstan has become more salient in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Moreover, my respondents have demonstrated sympathy towards transnationalism, which is typical for the post-Soviet space in general (e.g., Schueth & O’Loughlin, 2008). International cooperation and chances provided by the modern global order, such as the opportunity to travel around the world, attract these young people. They learn the English language and consider citizenship a pragmatic issue while criticizing socio-political movements based on primordialism and ethnic exclusiveness. While the importance of national borders rises worldwide, and their historical home country propagates a primordialist perspective about national belonging, young Kazakhstani Russians stand by the idea of global interconnection and the formality of existing borders. In this sense, they retain the characteristics of “denationalized digerati” (Saunders, 2006, p. 45). However, this openness is directed mostly towards positively evaluated Western trends, which coexists with the Soviet center-periphery model and the importance of national borders. At first glance, both of these mismatching concepts successfully fit in the minds of young Kazakhstani Russians from big cities.

In particular, clear belongingness to Kazakhstan has been red threading through all the interviews, particularly while discussing transnationalism. The openness towards a borderless world is synchronized with the high value given to local belonging, namely to the city of residence. As mentioned in Chapter 1.4.5, today, cities are often linked with transnational environment and diversity. The three big cities of Kazakhstan: Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Karaganda, confirm, to a certain extent, this description. Kazakhstani big cities obviously support both transnational and local belongingness, in other words, glocalization for young Kazakhstani Russians.



Despite the uncertainty of the national paradigm in Kazakhstan and the growing Kazakh-speaking population, young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrate strong emotional ties to the country of their birth and current place of residence. Although having a Kazakhstani passport does not provide any symbolic meaning for my respondents and Kazakhstan's socio-economic development leaves them wishing for more, their "*soul strives here*" (CA18), demonstrating an emotional connection to Kazakhstan and not to Russia.

Nonetheless, young Kazakhstan Russians have limited intentions to use the Kazakh language. The state-promoted idea of trilingualism (conferring an equal status to the Kazakh, Russian and English languages) allows them to feel comfortable and secure in the country without having to speak Kazakh. Therefore, maintaining the status quo is the desired scenario for young Kazakhstani Russians. They prefer to live here now and without having long-term plans. The future, which may potentially bring changes in the established social order, causes concerns and prods my respondents to consider alternative life scenarios, such as immigration.

Supporting both the civic paradigm of *Kazakhstaness* and the *transnational* paradigm, they try to dismiss the exclusively primordialist concept of *Kazakhness* and form a selective image of Kazakhstan as a country with interethnic harmony and global cooperation focus. This image corresponds partly to Kazakhstan's national brand, spread by the government, and provides a strong foundation for Kazakhstani Russians' national imagination.

From the viewpoint of young Kazakhstani Russians, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) remains a formal institution that has little impact on ordinary people's lives. In its turn, the idea of Eurasianism, which establishes Kazakhstan in a central crossing of European and Asian cultures, uncovers support from some of my respondents. Although the view of young Kazakhstani Russians on regional integration resembles the Soviet rhetoric, namely of the *Friendship of the Peoples*, they do not define Russia as a regional leader and communicate the need for maintaining independence among the Eurasian union members. Idealizing the Soviet past, young Kazakhstani Russians appreciate multiethnic diversity, social equality, and modernization but disclaim Russia's superiority. Being Kazakhstanis, in this sense, is similar to being "cosmopolitan patriots" (Clark, 2011, p. 30) in the USSR

of the 1930s - faith in the success of Soviet concepts is linked with openness to cross-border cooperation and innovation.

In sum, I can argue that subjective belonging to Kazakhstan enhances the importance of this country for the target population. However, this civic belonging does not cancel the multiplicity of nation-related self-images among young Kazakhstani Russians, including the ethnonational one. I agree with Isaacs (2019, p. 240) that national identity and belonging among young people in Kazakhstan are “hybrid and paradoxical” and go far beyond the usual ethnic-civic dichotomy. Being Kazakhstani, for my respondents, eliminates the need to choose only one concrete group membership and allows them to maintain multiple and sometimes controversial identities and belonging, serving as an umbrella-definition. It is important to emphasize that young Kazakhstani Russians associate this belonging to Kazakhstan primarily with Kazakhstani society, with ordinary people living in cities and shaping their everyday lives themselves, often independently from the government. In its turn, the political elite, and politics in general, were perceived skeptically by my respondents. This exact political detachment motivates young Kazakhstani Russians to construct a particular version of Kazakhstan. Being surrounded by authoritarian ‘stability’, young Kazakhstani Russians create their own “third way” categories (Erentaite et al., 2018, p. 330) and successfully manage their multimodal nation-related identity and belonging.

Moving into the social media usage discussion, many different usage patterns can be found. In trying to find certain similarities in social media use among young Kazakhstani Russians, social media proved to be highly personalized. My respondents follow memes on *Vkontakte* and international bloggers on *YouTube*, read local news on *Facebook* and post their selfies on *Instagram*. Most of my respondents use several social media platforms simultaneously on an everyday basis and almost exclusively on a mobile device. Nonetheless, I cannot confirm a clear distinction between social media platforms - all of the mentioned social media activities can also exist inside only one social media platform. In accordance with Miller et al. (2016), I can assume that a social media platform *per se* can be adjusted to certain users’ needs instead of defining concrete users’ activities.

While I was expecting that in the light of the *Russian World* idea spreading, young Kazakhstani Russians would prefer using *Vkontakte* because of the abundance of Russian content. My results show that local usage trends are more important for them. Since

*Vkontakte* and *Instagram* are popular among Kazakhstani young people, this is one of the central reasons for using these platforms among my target population. Therefore, answering *how the social media platform choice relates to their nation-related sense of belonging*, I can suggest that the social media platform selection among young Kazakhstani Russians depends mostly on their social environment and existing local usage trends.

The origin of social media platforms, and social media content, in particular, do not determine the choices of my respondents. Even if some of my respondents associate *Vkontakte* with the Russian state, they do not link their usage of this platform with an attachment to Russia. Instead, they use social media functionality according to their multiple Self elements, and by using different platforms, they shape diverse social and informational landscapes. In this regard, the questions of *which social media usage patterns young ethnic Russians have* and *how these patterns relate to their nation-related belonging* becomes essential.

Contacting people from all over the world, mostly from the post-Soviet space, and having access to content from different international sources, vividly demonstrates the potential for cross-border connectivity and the formality of state borders in Cyberspace. However, using social media, whether *Vkontakte*, *Instagram*, or *Facebook*, is inextricably connected to the Kazakhstani context in the case of Kazakhstani Russians. Social media allows them to not only have close contact with their local friends through direct messaging but also to follow the daily routine of these friends, which is often embedded in the surrounding local places. ‘Friend’s’ content can include eloquent photos and videos, which present domestic life under the best light.

Although most of my respondents use social media passively, social media activities, such as posting, reposting, and commenting, should not be ignored. Creating *Instagram* stories or posting content related to personal life events can contribute to reflection upon one’s relation to Kazakhstan. Since young Kazakhstani Russians tend to focus on positive aspects, together with the social media content of their friends, this activity can contribute to the formation of segmented social reality construction, where only beautiful nature and happy everyday life exist.

The existing self-censorship also supports such a segmented image of the country among young Kazakhstani Russians. My respondents prefer private messages instead of

open posts or reposts and are aware of negative consequences that may follow in response to online criticism against the existing regime. However, avoiding political topics does not indicate a lack of interest in the socio-political situation of the country and the world as a whole. Some of the respondents create small social media communities where they can practice online activism while comparing Kazakhstan to other countries. Other respondents prefer to ignore top-down political topics and center their interest around local everyday routines, including certain politically-related topics, such as the ecological situation or the socio-economic living standards. Simultaneously, young Kazakhstani Russians prefer to avoid facing opposing views, representing a different version of Kazakhstan, or encountering social discrepancies and can derail their image of Kazakhstan. As a result, social media offers young Kazakhstani Russians a space for their own national vision and provides an opportunity to maintain their positive social identity.

As Nedelcu (2018) has demonstrated, national borders remain important for ethnic minorities, and this is also visible in the case of my target population. Although being involved in global events and supporting universal values, young Kazakhstani Russians remain closely connected to their country of birth and current residence. While Saunders (2006, p. 61) has suggested that “Internet use is having an impact on societal relations by stimulating Russians to seek global rather than national/ethnic paths to personal development,” the evidence from my respondents proves that national, ethnic, and global paths are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases are interconnected.

Following numerous social media accounts from Kazakhstan, Russia, and the whole world on different platforms reflects young Kazakhstani Russians’ personality. My respondents demonstrate that it is possible to have multiple identities and belongingness and, instead of limiting their Self to official labels, they create a patchwork Self from their social diversity. It seems that social media can help them to maintain their various social memberships and manage their multiple identities and belonging.

### **3.8. Additional Research: Analysis of Urban Instagram Accounts**

#### **3.8.1. Research Description**

In the main research, I discovered which social media platforms my respondents use, and which usage patterns dominate their social media activities. Although active social media usage, such as posting, reposting, or commenting, can serve as a powerful instrument for self-reflection in the light of nation-related belonging and should not be underestimated, information consumption is a more regular and stable practice for most of my respondents (see Chapter 3.6.4). As I have demonstrated above, news seekers concentrate their attention, in particular, on professional news information. However, as news avoiders, they consider social media as a place of entertainment as well. In this regard, the so-called *infotainment* social media accounts, which combine news information and entertainment, are able to bring both user groups together.

The main analysis proved that young Kazakhstani Russians, who demonstrate a strong local attachment, regularly follow the urban infotainment accounts. Among numerous social media accounts, followed by my respondents, only city-related accounts were regularly mentioned during interviews and/or could be found in *Instagram* feeds during observations. It looks that the information related to urban centers of Kazakhstan, presented on urban social media accounts, is an essential part of the daily content consumption of young non-titular Kazakhstanis.

This result has aroused my interest to consider closely which textual and visual information, from a perspective of banal and everyday nationalism, these social media accounts produce, and how this information relates to the sense of belonging to a certain Kazakhstani city and/or Kazakhstan as a whole. Since these social media accounts are used mostly passively among my respondents, it was reasonable for me to perceive these accounts as information sources. As described in Chapter 1.5.4, media content plays an important role in national identity contraction and belonging among ethnic minorities, and urban social media accounts could provide a valuable example for the current study. In addition to social media usage patterns presented in Chapter 3.6.4, an analysis of popular social media accounts among my respondents opened an additional media perspective on social media usage and its connection to the nation-related belonging.

It became possible to shed light on Kazakhstani Russian-speaking social media content and identify how exactly are local and domestic issues presented online, while a systematic investigation of these particular accounts has still been lacking. Specifically, the purposes of additional analyses were 1) to describe selected social media accounts in terms of their textual and visual content forms and ‘genres’, in order to gain a general overview of these information sources; 2) to identify images of Kazakhstani society and Kazakhstan as a whole, which are reproduced on these accounts in textual and visual forms, to deepen the results obtained in the main study. Analyzing Kazakhstan-related national ideas on the local Instagram accounts has allowed to consider the Kazakhstan’s national construction not only from the perspective of my respondents, but also through the existing media representations. This two-dimension approach made it possible to demonstrate how personal interpretation of the belonging to Kazakhstan on a personal level relate to the media images of the country appearing on local Instagram accounts. Since the additional research had, in accordance with the main one, an explorative character, the formulation of hypotheses was not provided as part of the research process but should have, instead, been the result of the study. While my core research had a qualitative character, the additional quantitative analyses were supposed to supplement the general research outcome to support further answer the main research question<sup>57</sup>.

I had developed a concrete research scope for the additional research, where the additional analysis had served to provide a sample case of urban Instagram accounts popular among young Kazakhstani Russians. However, it was not supposed to depict the whole variety of their information consumption and limited my analysis on a specific city-related aspect of nation-related belonging. Since it was additional research, this analysis was primarily focused on differences in specific indicator frequencies, which have been a part of certain national paradigms described in the academic literature. In this regard, I did not strive to draw direct parallels of medial thematization and personal opinions; finding media impacts or causal relationships between media use and activation of the sense of belonging was outside of my research scope.

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<sup>57</sup> Such combination of different approaches is a common strategy in a social media research, which allows to “deal with the complex and rich data generated via social media” (Zeller, 2017, p. 395).

Instead, my analysis intended to provide, a general description of urban Instagram accounts and the presentation of Kazakhstan on them. For the additional analysis, I decided to use a quantitative content analysis (QnCA). My decision to use QnCA was based on the following reasons. Firstly, QnCA as qualitative content analysis (QCA), is a highly flexible method, which can be applied not only to a large volume of textual content but also to visual data, such as pictures or videos (cf. Krippendorff, 2004, p. XVII), which is especially important for analyzing Instagram content. Secondly, QnCA, in comparison to QCA, is less time-consuming and allows big amounts of data to be analyzed in a short period of time, which is essential for the dynamic nature of the Internet and social media in particular. Finally, QnCA allows for a reduction of the complexity of social media content, while supporting the description of existing trends and even hidden communication patterns on social media accounts (cf. Rössler, 2017, pp. 90–93).

Being based upon theoretical and thematical frameworks, as well as upon the interviews' results, the additional research is expected to answer the following *specific questions*:

1. Which forms of textual and visual content do selected local social media accounts used by young ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan contain?
2. Which national paradigms (*Kazakhness*, *Kazakhstanness*, or *Transnationalism*) are visible in different content elements (textual description, comments, and image/video) of these local social media accounts, and how often do they appear?
3. How does the manifestation of national paradigms differ depending on cities (Almaty vs. Nur-Sultan), content source (original vs. external), and the number of posts' 'likes'?
4. Which indicators of national ideas occur on Instagram accounts used by ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan most commonly in each national paradigm?
5. Which image of Kazakhstan (positive, negative, or neutral) is mostly presented on selected Instagram accounts, and how does it differ according to the city and thematic orientation (news-oriented and event announcement-oriented)?

### 3.8.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The analysis sample was defined on the basis of the main research; during interviews and observations, I identified four Kazakhstani social media accounts, which were regularly mentioned among most of my respondents: *@almaty.today*, *@v\_astane\_official*, *@sxodim (Almaty)*, and *@sxodim.astana*<sup>58</sup>. These accounts publish textual and visual content related to a particular city – Almaty or Nur-Sultan and can be characterized as infotainment social media accounts (see Table 2).

Table 3: General Characteristics of the Kazakhstani Urban Instagram Accounts

Name	<i>@almaty.today</i>	<i>@v_astane_official</i>	<i>@sxodim (Almaty)</i>	<i>@sxodim.astana</i>
The general description provided in the account	The most current information for today in Almaty city.	The capital citizens are with us. Follow us 🙌	Events in Almaty: concerts exhibitions establishments theater movie	Plan your leisure time with us! Useful articles Online workshops Food delivery Online concerts
URL address	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/almaty.today">https://www.instagram.com/almaty.today</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/v_astane_official/">https://www.instagram.com/v_astane_official /</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/sxodim">https://www.instagram.com/sxodim</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/sxodim.astana">https://www.instagram.com/sxodim.astana</a>
The current number of followers (December 2020)	766000	700000	394000	355000

*@sxodim (Almaty)* and *@sxodim.astana* are commercial projects by *Davaj shodim! LLP*. At first glance, it seems that these accounts create content and post information in conjunction with their advertising revenue. According to the Website of *Almaty.today* (<https://almaty.today>), this social media account is also part of *Davaj shodim! LLP*<sup>59</sup>. Among the available public information, I could not find any indication of a direct connection between the project and the Kazakhstani government. The *Instagram* account *@v\_astane\_official*

<sup>58</sup> Although social media account, which relates to Karaganda (*@ekaraganda.kz*) was mentioned by respondents living in Karaganda, I decided to concentrate my attention on the two biggest cities of Kazakhstan since the majority of my respondents have lived in these cities.

<sup>59</sup> <https://almaty.today/privacy-policy/>



has not provided any information about its legal status or its affiliation with a company or project.

Another important feature of these accounts is their cross-platform distribution – all of the accounts could be found on both *Vkontakte* and *Instagram*. Since the usage intensity of Instagram was higher than that of *Vkontakte* among my respondents, and these accounts' content was identical on both platforms after a random manual comparison<sup>60</sup>, I decided to limit my analysis to only *Instagram*.

Although originally Instagram has been considered a visual social media platform, my results demonstrated that it could also be used to follow textual content. Therefore, it was important to analyze both types of content, which led to the need to collect a large amount of multimedia data. As already mentioned in Chapter 3.1.1, my original intention of a big data content analysis was not possible to implement at the moment of the research execution. Therefore, I created an alternative research design based on manual data collection following QnCA.

After a short overview of the selected *Instagram* accounts, it was clear that on some days, accounts created numerous posts, while on other days, there were no posts at all. To adjust the amount of information for the manually implemented analysis, an adequate sample was needed. Since it was unclear for me which posts had regularly appeared in the news feeds of my respondents, I decided to limit my sample to a maximum of five most popular posts per day of every urban Instagram account, being guided by a suggestion that the most popular posts might appear more often in users' Instagram feeds (cf. Rader & Gray, 2015, pp. 177–180)<sup>61</sup>. Since some of the posts included more than one visual element, the analysis was limited only to the first one appearing in the Instagram feeds.

The popularity of posts with images and videos was measured differently on Instagram<sup>62</sup> at the time of analysis. Therefore, I differentiated between posts with videos and posts with images for further analysis at that stage. In addition, I limited the analyzing time

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<sup>60</sup> I compared four social media accounts in *Vkontakte* and on *Instagram* in five days in July 2018 and could identify 95% compliance between the posted content.

<sup>61</sup> It is important to emphasize that popularity is not the only criteria, which is used by social media algorithms. In addition, the social media algorithms are regularly adjusted and often not transparent (see Chapter 1.5.6).

<sup>62</sup> Instagram provided the number of views in case of posts' videos and number of so-called 'likes'/hearts in case of posts' images at the moment of analysis.

period of the Instagram posts created to one month (15.04.2017 to 15.05.2017). The following reasons supported my decision: firstly, the selected period coincided partially with the phase of interview conductions. This is important because of the fast-changing Instagram design and technical functionalities. Moreover, the topics discussed during the interviews could also appear on selected Instagram accounts, which might help map results from both main and additional research. It should be mentioned, though, that in this time period, there were several official holidays, such as the Day of the unity of the peoples of Kazakhstan (1<sup>st</sup> of May), Defender of the Fatherland Day (7<sup>th</sup> of May), and Victory Day (9<sup>th</sup> of May). In addition, International Exposition EXPO 2017 was located in Nur-Sultan (Astana) from 10<sup>th</sup> of June to 10<sup>th</sup> of September. All these events were usually reflected in (social) media.

To analyze different elements of Instagram posts, which Instagram users eventually confronted, I indicated the following unities of analysis 1) textual description (post); 2) visual element (first image, in case of many, or video) and 3) maximum of three first user comments, if existing. Although the number of comments differed greatly between urban *Instagram* accounts, usually only the first few comments were visible in the *Instagram* feed without any additional actions, such as scrolling or tapping on 'More' to reveal the full version of the content. Since my respondents avoided additional actions, such as tapping on the 'More' while reading their *Instagram*, first comments have come regularly into their spotlight together with a textual description and visual elements.

As a result, 586 Instagram posts from selected Instagram accounts (148 -@*almaty.today*, 155- @*v\_astane\_official*, 137 – @*sxodim (Almaty)*, 146- @*sxodim.astana*), containing a textual description, visual elements, and user comments, were manually collected and saved on a personal PC. Textual information from posts and comments, including emojis, was copied in a *txt* file; visual information was saved in *jpeg* format in case of pictures or as *mg4* format in case of videos. Besides, to provide the ability to reproduce an analysis in a rapidly changing media environment, a screenshot of every *Instagram* post was saved separately. Since *Instagram* stories of the selected accounts usually duplicated the information of published posts, they were not included in the sample.

### 3.8.3. Coding and Analyzing the Instagram Data

After the data were collected, every post received a name, and each unit of analysis was manually coded in MS Excel, according to a codebook (see Appendix D). The codebook contained an inductive and a deductive part. While the inductive part was supposed to describe general content characteristics on each of the urban Instagram accounts, the deductive part was formulated based on the concept of state paradigms (*Kazakhness*, *Kazakhstaness*, and *Transnationalism*). This concept has been described by Laruelle (2014) (see Chapter 2.3.1) and was useful for classifying certain nation-related indicators in every element of an Instagram post. In addition, following Knippendorff (2004, p. 128), my personal familiarity with the studied topic was beneficial for identifying “subtle aspects such as cultural characteristics” and hence, increased reliability. To improve my familiarity with the technology, following Laestadius’s (2017) recommendation, I created a personal Instagram account. I also started following selected Instagram accounts to achieve “an in-deep and up-to-date understanding of the platform’s affordances and common usage patterns” (Laestadius, 2017, p. 577).

For each of the three paradigms, I have selected the five most vivid indicators mentioned by Laruelle (2014), which I have adapted to the textual and visual formats. While most categories for the analysis of visual content have coincided with the categories for textual-based data – it was necessary to implement a further comparison of both types of data. For images and videos, I used a separate description and typical examples for these categories (see Appendix D). By analyzing the posts and comments, not only text but also smileys and emojis were taken into account. Hashtags, though, were not taken into consideration since the same recurring hashtags were used in most of the posts (e.g., #almatytoday, #almatynews, #almatyvideo, #astana\_city, #astanatoday, #astanainsta).

Limiting the number of indicators to five was necessary since the QnCA was performed manually. I decided to focus my attention on those indicators, which were primarily important in accordance with my research purposes. As a result, I specified 5 Indicators for the following 3 paradigms:

Indicators of the paradigm *Transnationalism*

- 1) International cooperation
- 2) Usage of the English language;
- 3) International events;
- 4) Global brands;
- 5) Innovation and modern technologies.

Indicators of the paradigm *Kazakhstanness*

- 1) Images of the Soviet past;
- 2) the Multiethnic character of Kazakhstan;
- 3) Usage of the term Kazakhstani;
- 4) Eurasian integration through cooperation with Russia;
- 5) The Russian Orthodoxy.

Indicators of the paradigm *Kazakhness*

- 1) Kazakh ethnic culture;
- 2) Political independence of Kazakhstan;
- 3) Usage of the term Kazakh;
- 4) Usage of the Kazakh language;
- 5) Muslim traditions.

In addition to the national paradigms, every post's element should be evaluated according to its sentiment (positive, negative, or neutral). If one of the indicators was identified in a coding unit, I marked it with 1, if absent with 0.

To improve the semantic validity (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 323-330), a detailed description was provided for every indicator and sentiment (see Appendix D). As national paradigms themselves, their indicators have been mutually exclusive, i.e., every indicator had a special description, which did not concur with others. However, different indicators could appear in every post's element simultaneously and repeatedly. For example, the indicator *Usage of the Kazakh language* could appear both in the textual description and in an *Instagram* post's comments. Similarly, the indicators inside each paradigm, being mutually exclusive, showed the intensity of the paradigms' appearance (from *low* with only one

indicator in one content element to *high* with max. five indicators, which appear in the content element simultaneously).

Before its final version, the codebook was tested on five random posts from each of the selected *Instagram* accounts and was optimized: additional examples have been added, and, in some cases, the formulations were refined. As in the case of QCA, the data for QnCA were coded twice, with a monthly break in between to increase reliability without having a coder team. When the second coding round was finished, both datasets were exported to the software SPSS for further statistical analysis. Intra-coder reliability was proved through the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) (cf. Neuendorf, 2011, p. 251), which reached 0,98 and confirmed the appropriate correspondence between both codings.

### **3.9. General Description Of the Selected Urban Instagram Accounts**

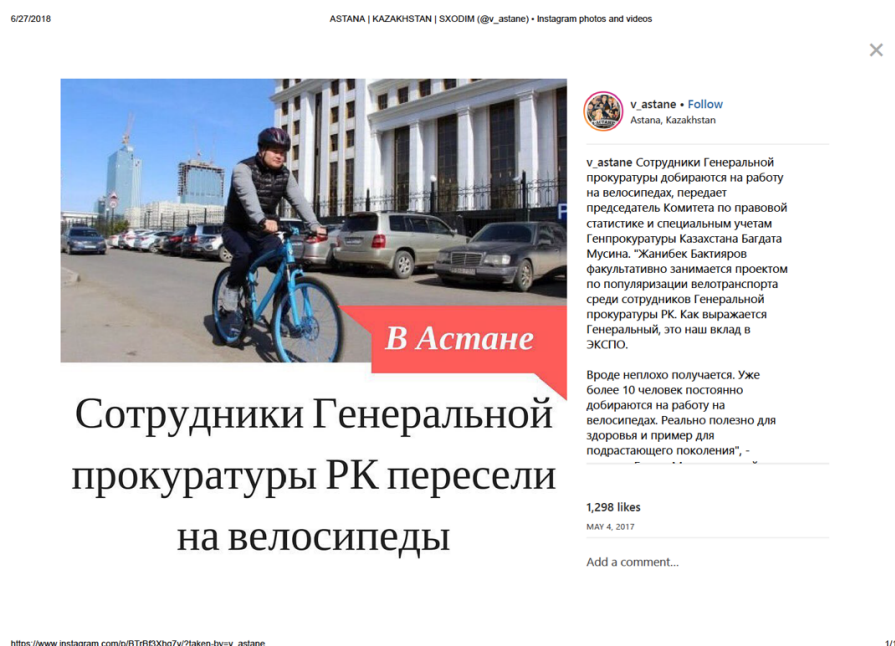
Since the Kazakhstani section of Instagram, in general, and urban social media accounts, in particular, have still been poorly studied, it was important for me to trace the overall forms of selected content, such as 1) a number of words in a post's textual description; 2) visual content forms; 3) overall popularity; 4) content 'genres'<sup>63</sup> and 5) content origin. This information has allowed me to build a general impression about which content urban Instagram accounts spread.

After the first short overview of urban Instagram accounts, I noticed that textual descriptions could appear in different forms. While textual information is usually located at the right of the visual content unit, a short version of it can also be part of the visual content (see Figure 2).

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<sup>63</sup> I define 'genres' as a thematic direction of content, similar to sections in newspapers or TV programs.

Figure 2: Text in the Visual Element on @v\_astane\_official



Considering the tendency among young Kazakhstani Russians to quickly look through their *Instagram* feeds (see Chapter 3.6.2), this content approach can be obviously more efficient in attracting *Instagram* users' attention while delivering information. Similarly, the length of the textual content itself can be crucial. Being oriented towards visual content, the platform *Instagram* is hardly appropriate for long reads, at least in the case of local Kazakhstani accounts. The length of text descriptions varies between 3 and 549 words, and the number of words in the textual descriptions differ greatly, both within and between *Instagram* accounts (see Table 4).

Table 4: Average Amount of Words in Textual Descriptions

Amount of words without comments	@almaty. today	@v_Astane_official	@sxodim (Almaty)	@sxodim. astana
Amount of posts*	148	155	137	146
Mean	65,91	180,30	112,96	95,47
Median	25,50	172,00	92,00	53,50
Std. Deviation	69,72	90,98	84,38	102,84
Minimum	4	3	5	5

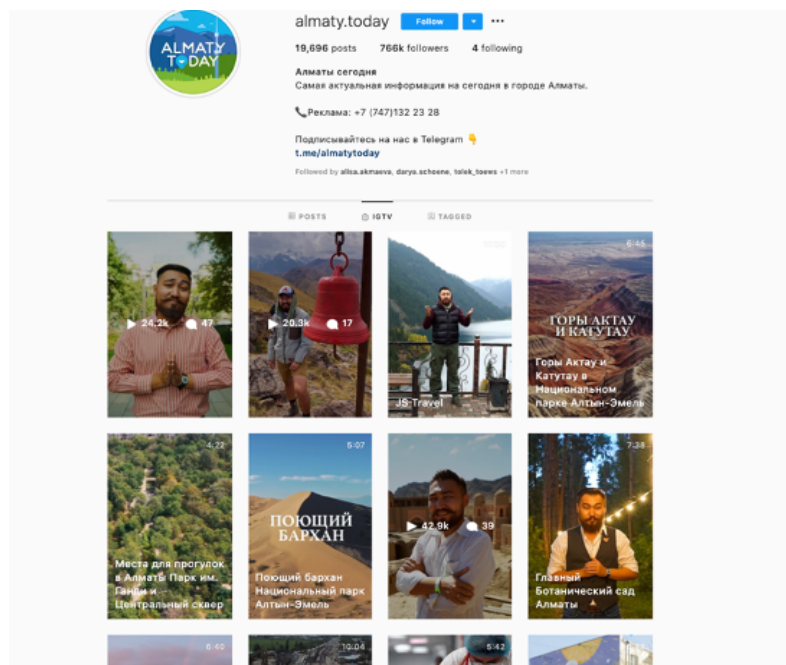
Maximum	288	549	475	355
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\*different amount of posts is because some of the selected accounts published less posts per day than others, or did not publish any posts on certain days.

However, comparing medians of four accounts, it became clear that textual descriptions in urban *Instagram* accounts are rather short and range from 26 words per post on *@almaty.today* and 172 on *@v\_astane\_official*. This length of the text resembles, to a certain extent, *Twitter* messages, which have a maximum of 280 characters. Such a number of words in urban *Instagram* accounts make it possible to see most of the textual information on the Instagram feed without revealing the full version of the content. Hence, the short-form text in the form of a description, or as a part of a visual element, surround *Instagram* users with city-related information in a short time.

Describing the posts' visual elements, mostly images were used on urban Instagram accounts (87%) in comparison to videos (13%). However, this number varied between the accounts. While the amount of video content on *@almaty.today* reaches 21%, *@v\_astane\_official* only 2% of all posts include a video element. It seems that the selected Instagram accounts have provided textual information and pictures for their followers. Nonetheless, the importance of video content on urban Instagram accounts should not be underestimated today. Since the new feature Instagram TV (IGTV) was presented in 2018 (e.g., McCue, 2018), *@almaty.today*, *@sxodim (Almaty)*, and *@sxodim.astana* have started to actively employ this function (Figure 3).

Figure 3: IGTV of the Account *@almaty.today* (December 2020)



The overall popularity of posts from selected Instagram accounts might also motivate my respondents to pay special attention to the local content. As social media platforms themselves, which my respondents have often used because of the general local popularity, the four Instagram accounts followed by young Kazakhstani Russians seem to be considered trendy in the Russian-speaking section of Kazakhstani Instagram. Among the selected accounts, the most popular urban Instagram account is *@almaty.today*, where a post with an image collects, on average, approximately 5000 ‘likes’, and a post with a video - approx. 45000 views. Tables 5 and 6 demonstrate that all of the selected Instagram accounts with thousands of ‘likes’ and tens of thousands of views are obviously popular among Kazakhstan’s wider population. However, these local accounts can hardly compete with millions of ‘likes’ and views of Russian Instagram accounts, which were also mentioned during the interviews with my respondents (see Chapter 3.6.4).

Table 5: Number of ‘Likes’ in Images on Urban Instagram Accounts

Amount of ‘likes’ in posts with images	<i>@almaty.today</i>	<i>@v_astane_official</i>	<i>@sxodim (Almaty)</i>	<i>@sxodim.astana</i>
Amount of valid posts	117	151	116	125
Mean	5507,00	1790,00	851,00	953,00
Median	4968,00	1438,00	597,00	693,00
Std. Deviation	2473,00	924,00	868,00	950,00
Minimum	1001	769	271	208
Maximum	78630	5677	7816	5677

Table 6: Number of Views in Videos on Urban Instagram Accounts

Amount of views in posts with videos	<i>@almaty.today</i>	<i>@v_astane_official</i>	<i>@sxodim (Almaty)</i>	<i>@sxodim.astana</i>
Amount of valid posts	31	3	17	17
Mean	51077,00	15153,00	13964,00	14106,00
Median	46442,00	17291,00	13019,00	11636,00
Std. Deviation	32885,00	8408,00	10769,00	8460,00
Minimum	1877	5911	489	5677
Maximum	130374	22348	37122	43572

As already mentioned above, the first overview demonstrated that the selected Instagram accounts could be described as *infotainment* accounts, i.e., these local accounts intend to both inform and entertain their followers. Since many of my respondents have been actively



using social media and *Instagram* in particular for entertainment purposes, this format meets the needs of young Kazakhstani Russians and may promote their involvement in local urban affairs. The ‘genre’ review helps explicate which thematic forms of local-related content Kazakhstani Instagram users regularly face. Through analysis, I have inductively discovered eight ‘genres’, which can be found in textual or visual forms on selected Instagram accounts:

- *Advertisement* – content aimed at promoting various goods or services related to the city, region<sup>64</sup>, or country as a whole, e.g., restaurants, travel agencies, or language school advertising.
- *Local event announcement* – content, which includes the announcing of events and activities in a city, region, or country as a whole, e.g., an announcement of concerts by local and international artists.
- *Domestic news* – content that includes issues happening in the city, region, or country as a whole, e.g., information on urban accidents, legislative changes, or national holidays.
- *Global news* – content, which includes issues happening outside of the country, but is presented in connection to the city, region, or country as a whole, e.g., oil price decline and its consequences for Kazakhstan.
- *Opinion poll* - questions on themes related to the city, region, or the country as a whole, which stimulate comments discussion, e.g., What are you going to do this weekend?
- *Weather forecast* - any forms of the weather forecast in the city or country as a whole, e.g., The weather will change across the country.
- *History* – content, which relates to the city, region, or country as a whole and includes a link to the past, e.g., memories, historical facts, or comparisons between current and past events and issues.
- *Other*- any other content related to the city, region, or country as a whole in a different form, e.g., general greetings and farewells or holiday greetings.

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<sup>64</sup>In this context I define ‘region’ as territories located close to the urban centers and associated with them. For example, Charyn Canyon near Almaty. This definition of ‘region’ does not correspond to the official administrative division into regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

During my analysis of the social media content, it became obvious that, as expected, the content of all the selected Instagram accounts has a strong link to a target city, surrounding regions, or the country as a whole. It is noteworthy that these three locality elements (city, region, country), which I found on the analyzed Instagram accounts, were at first glance quite intertwined, i.e., no clear boundaries between them were apparent. For example, posts with the local weather forecast were followed by posts about country-related news and afterward by ads about tourism in the region. Cities and regions were presented as integral parts of the whole country.

The link to a local space manifested itself in various forms and at varying intensities. The most frequently used ‘genres’ across selected Instagram accounts were local news (30%) and event announcements (25%), demonstrating the thematic orientation of the Instagram accounts. While *@almaty.today* and *@v\_astane\_official* have been rather focused on news content – 33% and 73%, the most common content on *@sxodim (Almaty)* (58%) and *@sxodim.astana* (36%) has included local event announcements. Similarly, advertisement has appeared more often on *@sxodim (Almaty)* (18%) and *@sxodim.astana* (12%) than on *@almaty.today* and *@v\_astane\_official* – 5 % and 2% accordingly. Simultaneously, the global news was much less reflected on *@almaty.today* (1%) but amounted to 15% of all *@v\_astane\_official* content.

Finally, 16% of all analyzed content included certain city or region-specific historical facts, mostly accompanied by a photo of the Soviet past. Being labeled as *History*, this ‘genre’ could be especially found on *@almaty.today*, accounting for 12% of all analyzed content. *Weather forecasts* and *Opinion polls* look similar to the ‘genre’ of *History* – a photo of a city or region has been accompanied by weather information or a question about weekend plans. They gained 6% and 10% of the whole sample. *@almaty.today* was also the leader in the number of *weather forecast* posts (29%), while on *@sxodim.astana*, this ‘genre’ was not represented. The “Opinion pools” were mostly found on *@sxodim.astana* (23%) and *@sxodim (Almaty)* (10%) (see Table 7).

Table 7: Thematic ‘Genres’ on Urban Instagram Accounts

Thematic ‘genres’	@almaty.today		@v Astane_official		@sxodim (Almaty)		@sxodim.astana	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Advertisement	3	2%	3	2%	26	19%	21	14%
Local event announcement	14	10%	1	1%	<b>79</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>36%</b>
Local news	<b>50</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>73%</b>	4	3%	8	6%
Global news	1	1%	23	14%	1	1%	3	2%
Opinion poll	9	6%	6	4%	14	10%	33	24%
Weather forecast	27	18%	6	4%	3	2%	0	0%
History	12	8%	1	1%	0	0%	2	1%
Other	32	21%	2	1%	10	7%	25	17%
Total	148	100%	155	100%	137	100%	145	100%

Considering the content ‘genres’ also raised a question of the origin of this content, especially regarding news information. In general, 80% of all textual descriptions from all four Instagram accounts can be labeled as ‘unique’, i.e., produced by the *Instagram* account itself. On @sxodim.astana and @sxodim (Almaty), the number of unique content has gone beyond 95%. At the same time, on the more news-oriented @almaty.today and @v\_astane\_official, one can regularly face content from various external sources, which amount to 34% and 40% correspondingly. The *Instagram* account @almaty.today has mostly referred to popular news websites in Kazakhstan such as *tengrinews.kz* (11%), *zakon.kz* (4%) and *informburo.kz* (3%); however, the list of one-time references includes a large variety of different local sources (see Appendix E).

Similarly, the most common external source for @v\_astane\_official has been *tengrinews.kz*, *informburo.kz*, and *today.kz*. On @v\_astane\_official could be found external sources, which are different from those on @almaty.today, such as regime-nonconform Azattyq.org (Radio Liberty) or ratel.kz (cf. Keller, 2019). The state-sponsored *Tengrinews.kz*, *today.kz* and *zakon.kz* (cf. Nussipov, 2019) could also be found on @sxodim (Almaty) and @sxodim.astana. Since the authorship of photos and videos was indicated only in a few cases, I assume that most of the posts’ visual elements can also be attributed to the unique content of the *Instagram* accounts.

In summary, urban *Instagram* accounts deliver city, region, and country-specific information in various forms and eventually support the reproduction of banal and everyday nationalism online. The relatively short textual description has allowed *Instagram* users to receive information without additional actions, such as scrolling down or revealing the full version of the content. The posts' visual element can also play an important role in this regard, depicting not only regional landscapes and city panoramas but also including textual information, as was already previously mentioned (see Figure 2). All the selected *Instagram* accounts make it possible for their followers to stay connected to city life, informing about current local, national, or upcoming events.

At the same time, an entertaining atmosphere is maintained through the wishes for a good day, historical facts about the cities, and various opinion polls. Following the amount of 'likes' and comments, this format has been appreciated by the Russian-speaking *Instagram* users in Kazakhstan. Although most of the content published on the selected *Instagram* accounts was produced by the accounts themselves, news content is often published with reference to an external source. The news-oriented *Instagram* accounts @almaty.today and @v\_astane\_official have proven to use different, mostly state-sponsored, but also some critic-oriented Kazakhstani informational websites and news agencies. Since my respondents usually had less contact with traditional media, following urban *Instagram* pages can provide for them an opportunity to confront existing media discourses in the country.

### **3.10. Kazakhstan's Representation on Urban Instagram Accounts**

#### **3.10.1. Manifestation of National Paradigms**

After reaching a general understanding of what type of information exists and what form it is presented in on urban *Instagram* accounts followed by young Kazakhstani Russians, the question regarding the nation's representation arises. The concept of three discursive paradigms of state identity in Kazakhstan described by Laruelle (2014) allowed me to analyze selected content systematically, in reference to the current political discourse in the country, and collate the results obtained with the nation-related self-description of young Kazakhstani Russians.

It has become clear from my analysis that all three paradigms (*Kazakhness*, *Kazakhstaness*, and *Transnationalism*) were present in all content elements (textual description, picture/video, and comments) on the selected urban Instagram accounts (see Table 8). Only 6% of all analyzed posts included content that does not explicitly reflect any national paradigms.

Table 8: General Presence of National Paradigms in Content Elements

Post element (all accounts)	Transnationalism		Kazakhstaness		Kazakhness		Total	
	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%
Textual description	251	43%	186	32%	152	26%	586	100%
Comments	96	17%	201	36%	73	13%	565	100%
Visual element	221	38%	142	25%	130	22%	579	100%

\* At least one of the indicators was identified in a post.

The distribution of the paradigms, though, was different depending on a post's component and the *Instagram* account itself. For example, a post's textual description generally contained more indicators of *Transnationalism* (43%) in comparison to comments (17%) and visual elements (38%). At the same time, the largest number of *Kazakhstaness*' indicators were found in comments (36%), while only 13% of them included a link to the paradigm of *Kazakhness*. The difference between the content elements can be interesting regarding social media usage patterns described in Chapter 3.6.2, such as preferring visual over textual content.

Single Instagram accounts such as @sxodim (Almaty), @sxodim.astana, and @v\_astane\_official have markedly distinguished themselves from @almaty.today by the regular appearance of Transnationalism in almost half of all textual descriptions of their posts. @sxodim.astana has the same tendency in visual content – 51% of its pictures and videos have demonstrated a link to Transnationalism, while on @sxodim (Almaty) and @v\_astane\_official, this percentage is slightly lower – 38% and 32%.

In its turn, @almaty.today has demonstrated an almost equal distribution of all three paradigms in the posts' textual descriptions and their visual elements (see Appendix F). It is also remarkable that 57% of all analyzed comments on @almaty.today reflected, to

varying degrees, the concept of Kazakhstaness, while 19% of all comments on this account included manifestations of Kazakhness and 30% of Transnationalism. Comparatively, only 7% of all analyzed comments on @sxodim (Almaty) and @sxodim.astana indicated the presence of the Kazakhness paradigm.

While the general appearance of indicators (at least one indicator or more) demonstrated an overall tendency in the spread of national paradigms, the number of present indicators was able to provide information about the intensity of a paradigm's manifestation. Since the current research reveals that every national paradigm has consisted of five indicators, the presence of only one versus all of the indicators in each of the content elements could impact the post's general appearance. For instance, observing three national paradigms, I proved that usually only one of the paradigms' indicators manifested themselves in a content element (see Appendix G). There were no content elements, which would include all five indicators at once and navigate an Instagram post in a specific discursive direction.

The simultaneous appearance of several indicators of one paradigm, in both textual description and visual content, can be found in the case of *Transnationalism*. Among the comments, the intensity of all paradigms' manifestations was at the lowest level. Another notable result in this regard demonstrated the following: although the paradigm of *Kazakhness* appeared less frequently on urban Instagram accounts in comparison to both of the other paradigms, the intensity of its manifestation is slightly higher than that of the paradigm of *Kazakhstaness* in textual descriptions (mean *Kazakhness* =1.40 vs. mean *Kazakhstaness*=1.34) and visual elements (mean *Kazakhness*=1.35 vs. mean *Kazakhstaness*=1.20). However, as I will demonstrate below, not only can the number of indicators play an important role in this case, but also the semantics of the content.

Considering the cities' differences regarding the indicators' appearance (see Appendix H), two main distinctions between Almaty and Nur-Sultan became obvious. Firstly, Almaty-related Instagram accounts (@almaty.today and @sxodim (Almaty)) contained significantly more indicators of *Transnationalism* in their visual content than on Nur-Sultan-related Instagram accounts ( $U = 4581.50$ ,  $z = -3.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>65</sup>. Secondly, on

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<sup>65</sup> According to Kolmogoroff-Smirnov test the following variables, which were used for the test, were not normally distributed:

Almaty-related *Instagram* accounts, one can find significantly more indicators of *Kazakhstanness* in the comments than on Nur-Sultan-related accounts. Finally, comments on *@v\_astane\_official* and *@sxodim.astana* have notably included more *Kazakhness* indicators ( $U = 572.00, z = -2.03, p = 0.042$ ) in comparison to *@almaty.today* and *@sxodim (Almaty)*. In all other posts' elements, the average numbers between both cities did not prove to have statistically significant differences:

- Transnationalism in textual description:  $U = 7688.50, z = -0.71, p = 0.943$ ;
- Transnationalism in comments:  $U = 1036.50, z = -0.446, p = 0.656$ ;
- Kazakhstaness in textual description:  $U = 4215.00, z = -0.355, p = 0.723$ ;
- Kazakhstaness in image/video:  $U = 2320.00, z = -0.03, p = 0.997$ ;
- Kazakhness in textual description:  $U = 2699.50, z = -0.763, p = 0.446$ ;
- Kazakhness in image/video:  $U = 2030.50, z = -0.481, p = 0.631$ .

Another crucial question for the analysis of urban Instagram accounts, in regard to Kazakhstan's national paradigms, is whether different paradigms can appear simultaneously or if every post includes only one of them. According to my results, in 15% of the posts, indicators of all three national paradigms were found at the same time. Moreover, the paradigms of *Transnationalism* and *Kazakhstanness* have appeared together in 34% of posts, *Transnationalism* and *Kazakhness* in 24%, and *Kazakhstanness* and *Kazakhness* in 28% of all content on urban Instagram accounts.

However, indicators of more than one paradigm appeared rather seldomly in one content element, e.g., all three paradigms, which manifest themselves with at least one indicator, can be found in only 3% of textual descriptions, less than 1% of comments, and

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Transnationalism's indicators in textual description–  $W=0.40, p < 0.001$ ;

Transnationalism's indicators in comments –  $W=0.54, p < 0.001$ ;

Transnationalism's indicators in visual content -  $W=0.40, p < 0.001$ ;

Kazakhstaness' indicators in textual description -  $W=0.44, p < 0.001$ ;

Kazakhstaness' indicators in comments –  $W=0.53, p < 0.001$ ;

Kazakhstaness' indicators in in visual content -  $W=0.49, p < 0.001$ ;

Kazakhstness' indicators in textual description -  $W=0.43, p < 0.001$ ,

Kazakhstness' indicators in comments-  $W=0.52, p < 0.001$ ;

Kazakhstaness' indicators in visual content -  $W=0.44, p < 0.001$ .

Therefore, the most appreciated test for my sample was the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test.

2% of images and videos. Hence, it appears that a post on an urban Instagram account can simultaneously contain different national paradigms in the post's elements. For example, when a textual description of a post contains indicators of Transnationalism, other paradigms in the comments and/or in visual content have also been present in that post (see Table 9).

Table 9: Coexistence of National Paradigms in Textual Description

National paradigms in different post elements	N	%
Transnationalism in textual description + one another national paradigm in comments or image/video	95	16%
Transnationalism in textual description + at least one another national paradigm in comments or image/video, or more	31	5%
Transnationalism in textual description + two other national paradigms in comments and image/video	13	2%
Total	139	23%

Considering single accounts, some questions about the differences between specific variables emerged. For example, whether Almaty and Nur-Sultan differ in how Kazakhstan has been represented on their urban Instagram accounts? Is there a difference between original and referred content? Can the number of 'likes' be associated with different images of Kazakhstani society? Since three national paradigms can appear in many posts' elements simultaneously, I decided to concentrate my attention on images as the most common visual aspect in my sample and central content type for the Instagram platform. Moreover, according to my observations (see Chapter 3.6.2), most of my respondents concentrated their attention on visual content, while scrolling their social media feeds. Eye-tracking studies have also confirmed this characteristic of social media usage (e.g., Keib et. al., 2016).

When comparing the presence of paradigms in both cities (see Appendix I), it became obvious that on the Nur-Sultan-related Instagram accounts, the paradigm of Transnationalism has appeared in images significantly more often (34%) than on Almaty-related Instagram accounts (22%):  $X^2(1, N = 445) = 7,95, p = .005$ . At the same time, manifestations of Kazakhstaness were found more in the visual content of @*almaty.today*



and @sxodim (Almaty) than of @v\_astane\_official and @sxodim.astana. A significant association between Almaty-related Instagram accounts and the presence of the paradigm of Kazakhstanness in the posts' images has also been proven:  $X^2(1, N = 445) = 17,36, p < 0.001$ ). This may indicate that those Instagram users who follow Almaty-related Instagram accounts, such as my respondents, encounter the visual manifestation of the paradigm of Kazakhstanness more often than the followers of Astana-related Instagram accounts.

Taking into account that social media content can differ from state-sponsored media content (see Chapter 2.3.3), I also decided to inspect if there are any differences in the manifestations of national paradigms between original content and content cited from external sources. For this purpose, I selected only mutually exclusive textual descriptions, i.e., with only one presented national paradigm (N=437). Comparing these two content types, it became clear that both original textual descriptions, and descriptions that included external content, were fairly similar in the presentation of national paradigms (see Table 10). A Chi-Square Test of independence did not confirm any association between the content source (original vs. external) and the transnational paradigm in textual description -  $X^2(1, N = 437) = 1,682, p = 0.195$ . Similarly, no association between the content source and the number of indicators of Kazakhstanness was confirmed -  $X^2(1, N = 437) = 0,115, p = 0.734$ . However, there was strong evidence that the presence of Kazakhness in textual descriptions with original content can be observed significantly more often than in textual descriptions, which refer to external sources -  $X^2(1, N = 437) = 9.93, p = 0,002$ .

Table 10: Differences Between Original Content And Content with External Reference

Content type	Transnationalism in textual description			Kazakhstaness in textual description			Kazakhness in textual description		
	Not found	Found at least once	Significance	Not found	Found at least once	Significance	Not found	Found at least once	Significance
Original content	66%	34%		83%	17%		90%	10%	**
External source	73%	27%		84%	16%		78%	22%	

\*\* p = 0.002

It is also important to test an association between the amount of ‘likes’<sup>66</sup> as an indicator of popularity and the manifestation of national paradigms in the posts’ images. Considering the selected Instagram accounts, I have suggested that these accounts provide, among other things, space where members of the local urban community can meet and express certain beliefs. When ‘liking’ an Instagram image by tapping on the heart symbol under the visual element, members of urban communities, including young Kazakhstani Russians, might also express sympathy towards a certain national paradigm. Since the posts’ popularity varies considerably between urban Instagram accounts, I created a separate popularity factor for each of the selected Instagram accounts by dividing the general ‘likes’ number’ median by the number of ‘likes’ of every post. Based on each of these factors, the following two categories were created and subsequently summarized: *less popular* for the posts with the number of ‘likes’ in the smallest third of the factor range and *very popular* for the number of ‘likes’ in the largest third. As in the comparison mentioned above, images with only one paradigm (N=445) were analyzed in this case as well.

Testing an association between the presence of national paradigms in images and the amount of ‘likes’ could not confirm any significant differences between both variables: Transnationalism and the post’s popularity -  $X^2 (2, N = 445) = 0.724, p = 0.395$ ; Kazakhstaness and the post’s popularity -  $X^2 (2, N = 445) = 1.65, p = 0.199$ ; Kazakhness and the post’s popularity -  $X^2 (2, N = 445) = 0.259, p = 0.611$ . It seems that the presence of certain paradigms is not central to the popularity of a post on urban Instagram accounts (see Table 11).

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<sup>66</sup> Since Instagram does not provide the number of ‘likes’ for posts with videos, I included only posts with images in the final analysis.

Table 11: Differences Between More Popular and Less Popular Instagram Posts

Amount of likes (popularity)	Transnationalism in images			Kazakhstaness in images			Kazakhness in images		
	Not found	Found at least once	Significance	Not found	Found at least once	Significance	Not found	Found at least once	Significance
Less popular*	72%	28%		87%	13%		83%	17%	
Very popular**	66%	34%		81%	19%		85%	15%	

\* The popularity factor is in the lower third of the factor rank.

\*\*The popularity factor is in the largest third of the factor rank.

### 3.10.2. Indicators of National Paradigms

After a general examination of a national paradigms' presence and absence on urban Instagram accounts, I will focus my attention on concrete indicators of each paradigm in the following section. I do this to provide an in-depth understanding of which form national paradigms appear in different content elements. As described in Chapter 3.8.3, every paradigm has been represented by five indicators, which can manifest themselves in textual, as well as visual content and comments, and can appear simultaneously across and inside the content elements.

In my sample, I began with the most common paradigm of *Transnationalism*; it is obvious that in all the posts' elements, *Transnationalism* manifests itself regularly through the usage of the English language (see Appendix I). Considering news-oriented and event announcement-oriented Instagram accounts separately, it was evident that English words and expressions appeared in the event announcement-oriented @sxodim (Almaty) and @sxodim.astana in a significantly more regular way than on news-oriented @almaty.today and @v\_astane\_official. This can be seen in both textual descriptions (33% vs. 17%) and visual content (20% vs. 10%):  $X^2(1, N = 586) = 19.50, p < 0.001$  and  $X^2(1, N = 579) = 12.25, p < 0.001$ .

However, the usage of the English language in user-generated content (comments) manifested itself on news-oriented Instagram accounts in significantly more posts (17% vs. 10%):  $X^2(1, N = 565) = 5.91, p = 0.015$ . The English language is, among Kazakhs and Russians, a part of the state-supported trilingual program. The importance of its study and use was repeatedly emphasized by the first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev

(“Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan...”, 2017). Also, my respondents demonstrated interests in improving and using the English language in their everyday life (see Chapter 3.5.6). The presence of English words and expressions in 13% of analyzed comments can, to a certain extent, confirm that the followers of urban Instagram accounts have adopted English. However, other *Transnationalism* indicators have hardly found any place in the comments (see Appendix I). It is noteworthy that English language terms and titles have also appeared in 15% of my sample’s visual content.

Presenting international cooperation is the second most often appearing indicator (13%) of *Transnationalism* in textual descriptions on urban Instagram accounts. On the news-oriented accounts, Kazakhstan has been presented as an active member of the international community in 17% of all textual descriptions. Instead, on @sxodim (Almaty) and @sxodim.astana, this indicator has been found in only 10% of textual descriptions.

In the visual content in general, international cooperation could be found only in 8% of all images and videos. In contrast, innovation and modern technology have manifested themselves more often through visual content than through textual description (14% vs. 9%). This indicator appeared more common in the textual description and visual content on Nur-Sultan-related Instagram accounts. At the same time, international brands, which are traditionally associated with globalization, such as Coca-Cola or McDonald’s, have appeared in 10% of all visual content and only in 6% of all textual descriptions. Similarly, international events have received less reflection in both textual description (8%) and images/videos (7%), although, on event-oriented @sxodim (Almaty) and @sxodim.astana, the mentioning of international events in textual description reached 17%.

Being the most common national paradigm in comments, *Kazakhstanness* has manifested itself almost exclusively in presenting a multiethnic character of Kazakhstani society. This result might indicate that urban *Instagram* account followers, especially those from Almaty, confront - willfully or unconsciously- the ethnic diversity of Kazakhstani society. In comparison to other indicators, the indicator of the multiethnic character of Kazakhstan has also been mostly found in textual descriptions and the posts’ visual elements of Almaty-related *Instagram* accounts. However, the term Kazakhstani has been used by Instagram users rather rarely and could be found in 5% of textual descriptions. Its

appearance could still motivate followers of urban Instagram accounts to think if they felt addressed or not when encountering the term Kazakhstani.

In addition, the *Kazakhstaness*-related indicator of Soviet images occurred relatively often in textual descriptions (14%) and visual elements (11%). While comparing the Almaty and Nur-Sultan Instagram accounts, it became obvious that on *@almaty.today* and *@sxodim (Almaty)*, significantly more images of the Soviet past could be found -  $X^2(1, N = 579) = 11,57, p = 0.001$ . Compared to Soviet images, the current rapprochement with Russia through the Eurasian integration process has appeared less often (5%), though it still had a presence on the urban *Instagram* accounts. Despite my expectations, in light of the growing Russian Orthodox Church involvement on the Russian-speaking Internet, Russian Orthodoxy has regularly appeared in approximately only 1% of all content elements.

Finally, when considered in detail, *Kazakhness* has manifested itself mostly through the usage of Kazakh words and expressions on all selected Instagram accounts. Along with the English language, Kazakh was used in comments (11%) as well as in the posts' textual descriptions (16%) and images/videos (8%). An implicit presentation of Kazakh ethnic culture was part of images or videos in 14% of all posts and 7% of the posts' textual descriptions. While event-oriented *Instagram* accounts included more indicators of Kazakh ethnic cultures in their textual descriptions (11% vs. 4%), news-oriented *@almaty.today* and *@v\_astane\_official* emphasized significantly more often the independence of Kazakhstan in both textual descriptions (11% vs. 6%) and visual content (9% vs. 4%). In addition, representing Kazakhstan as the 'historical accomplishment' of the Kazakh ethno-nation found reflection in 9% of visual content and 7% of textual descriptions. The term *Kazakh* (4%) was used alongside the term Kazakhstani in the textual description and was almost absent in the comments (see Appendix I). As with the term *Kazakhstani*, encountering the term *Kazakh* can activate, in a banal way, the process of one's personal evaluation of being or not being a part of a national community. Equally to the Orthodox tradition, the Muslim tradition rarely appeared among textual descriptions and comments of selected Instagram posts. However, its visual expression could be noticed slightly more often (2% vs. 0%).

### 3.10.3. General Sentiment of Urban Instagram Accounts

In line with national paradigms, which represented specific society-related aspects of the image of Kazakhstan, the general sentiment of selected posts and their particular elements provided useful information regarding the presentation of the locality. When consuming Instagram content from urban *Instagram* accounts, their followers can encounter different media frames related to the city, region, and country of their residence. Being an important source of information, Instagram can become a space where young people construct and adopt a certain symbolic reality. For example, positive images of local communities and places can maintain one's positive self-esteem (social identity gratification). In contrast, their negative image may motivate one to reconsider existing identities and group memberships (self-categorization) (see Chapter 1.4.2).

In my analysis, I used positive, negative, and neutral indicators to define the general sentiment of each content element. As described in Appendix D, a content element was marked as positive if it represented positive events that happened in Kazakhstan, as well as demonstrated the successful development and welfare of the country or support for these. Negative indicators included any kind of textual and visual information, which related to harmful incidents, destructive news, or a critical evaluation of Kazakhstan. Neutral content contained information without any clear positive or negative sentiment.

Analyzing selected posts regarding their general sentiment, positive sentiment was a part of Instagram posts more often than negative or neutral ones: 57% of textual descriptions, 45% of comments, and 67% of images/videos included information, which is connected to pleasant news, events or other issues. In turn, negative sentiment could be found in 10% of textual descriptions, 11% of visual content, and 17% of comments. Obviously, in comparison to content produced or cited by Instagram accounts, user-generated content in the form of comments was slightly less positive (see Table 12). Moreover, in 22% of all Instagram posts, positive sentiment could be found in three content elements simultaneously, while this was only the case for 4% of posts with negative sentiments and 3% of neutral posts.

Considering two cities separately, I found significantly more of the posts' textual descriptions (14%) and comments (22%) with a negative sentiment on Nur-Sultan-related Instagram accounts (@sxodim.astana and @v\_astane\_official):  $X^2(1, N = 586) =$

10.318,  $p = 0.001$  and  $X^2(1, N = 565) = 9.920$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . On Almaty-related accounts, the percentages were almost half as much.

Simultaneously, Almaty-related accounts contained significantly more neutral textual descriptions (37% vs 28%):  $X^2(1, N = 586) = 6.198$ ,  $p = 0.013$ . In its turn, the visual presentation looked similar on accounts from both cities (see Appendix J). It seems that Nur-Sultan's urban community is more critical-oriented than that of Almaty. As a result, together with more negative textual descriptions, Nur-Sultan's Instagram account followers confront negative information more often than followers of *@almaty.today* and *@sxodim (Almaty)*.

Table 12: General Sentiment in Posts on Urban Instagram Accounts

Sentiment in posts	Textual description	Comments	Visual content
Positiv	57%	45%	67%
Negativ	10%	17%	11%
Neutral	33%	38%	22%

At the same time, I found more positive sentiments in textual descriptions on event announcement-oriented Instagram accounts (69% vs. 47%): ( $X^2(1, N = 586) = 28.813$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while news-oriented accounts provided significantly more negative sentiments in all content elements (see Appendix J):

- Textual description:  $X^2(1, N = 586) = 52.975$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;
- Comments:  $X^2(1, N = 565) = 53.355$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;
- Visual element:  $X^2(1, N = 579) = 6.757$ ,  $p = 0.009$ .

It is also noteworthy to mention that on news-oriented Instagram accounts, neutral pictures were presented in 27% of posts, and on the event-oriented Instagram accounts, this was the case for only 16%; this demonstrates a significant difference:  $X^2(1, N = 579) = 10.037$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . In turn, more than half of all comments on the event-oriented accounts were neutral, while on the news-oriented accounts, this was the case for only more than a quarter of comments (51% vs. 27%):  $X^2(1, N = 561) = 32.164$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . These results can indicate that both news avoiders and news seekers face mostly positive or neutral sentiments regarding Kazakhstan, while news seekers still have a chance to confront some negative

information and critical views of their cities, regions, and Kazakhstan as a whole in all content elements.

### **3.11. Urban Instagram as a Space for Global Openness and Cultural Diversity**

As the main part of the research has shown, despite overall, various content preferences, there was a clear trend in the social media usage of young Kazakhstani Russians – most of whom follow urban infotainment social media accounts related to their city of residence. Even the fact that these accounts were chosen among most of my respondents demonstrates that young Kazakhstani Russians have been interested in the events of their city of residence and have a certain connection with urban communities. According to the Reinforcing Spirals' concept (Slater, 2007), following urban social media accounts might help young Kazakhstani Russians maintain a sense of belonging to a particular version of Kazakhstan by surrounding themselves with appropriate textual and visual information. The QnCA of urban Instagram accounts has allowed me to complement self-reported information from interviews with an additional perspective based on media content and to prepare the foundation for future more detailed research on the Kazakhstani Russian-speaking social media.

Although according to the analysis, the selected Instagram accounts can be distinguished by the form of content presentation ('genres') and popularity, they were all similar in the fact that they mirrored the everyday life that surrounded my target population. Despite their thematic specialization of a particular city, news-oriented urban Instagram accounts have also included information about the region, the country as a whole, and, albeit to a much lesser extent, the whole world. Nonetheless, the dominance of nation-related information, which refers to city, region, or country as nation-related entities, was an essential characteristic of the selected Instagram accounts. Since a detailed comparison between cities, regions, and the state was beyond the scope of the current analysis, this issue undoubtedly requires further research. The question of how different levels of belonging (urban, regional, and national) relate to each other deserves explicit attention.

The content presentation form of all four Instagram accounts was also rather similar. Taking into account the fact that *Instagram* is primarily known as a photo and video sharing platform, the textual information of a post has often served as a short description of visual content. On @v\_astane\_official, @sxodim.astana, and @sxodim (Almaty), headers from



textual descriptions have even been integrated into the post's image. Such a visual form of presenting textual information can eventually attract more attention among account followers compared to other forms of social media content (Keib et al., 2016).

This outcome might be interesting in the light of the results provided by Arceneaux and Dinu (2018), which have proven that social media platforms, where visual content dominated, such as *Instagram*, can be more effective for information recall in comparison to text-based social media platforms. However, it would be wrong to ignore the textual element of posts and comments, which can serve as an information source, especially for news-seekers. Outside of images and videos, selected *Instagram* accounts provided brief textual descriptions; this has made it possible to check *Instagram* account updates on the go, on the road, or in a queue, which fits with the dynamic lifestyles of modern Kazakhstani youth.

While the news-oriented accounts (@*almaty.today* and @*v\_astane\_official*) helped their followers stay informed about local incidents, socio-political changes, and developments, event announcement-oriented @*sxodim (Almaty)* and @*sxodim.astana* also shared information about local places and events. In addition to this, selected *Instagram* accounts made it possible for young Kazakhstani Russians to stay in contact with their city, region, and country; this was also possible through an advertisement for local goods and services, weather forecasts, and city-related historical facts. All these 'genres' included classic expressions of banal top-down nationalism mentioned by Billig (1995) and the bottom-up "performing the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 538); the result is that these 'genres' may embrace a sense of nation-related belonging.

This is particularly noticeable on the news-oriented accounts @*almaty.today* and @*v\_astane\_official*, which regularly referred to external media sources; this took place in a media landscape in Kazakhstan, which has remained state-controlled (see Chapter 2.3.3). Although having limited contact with traditional media, young Kazakhstani Russians might encounter the Kazakhstani media agenda and state-sponsored media frames by following urban social media accounts. However, the nation brand of Kazakhstan created by the government has many different faces. Due to the ambiguity of this national brand, in combination with a massive offer of local social media content, young Kazakhstani

Russians can choose only those elements of the national image, which are suitable for them to maintain a positive identity.

In this regard, the top-down-oriented concept of banal nationalism is not enough to explain the multifaced nation-building process manifested in the urban Instagram accounts. The active participation by city residents in developing the selected accounts through 'likes', views, and comments should not be underestimated. Active discussions in comments, motivated by the interactive information posted on these Instagram accounts, made urban Instagram accounts a meeting place for the urban community and created, thus, a space for bottom-up-based everyday nationalism.

More specifically, an investigation of the most popular urban Instagram accounts among young Kazakhstani Russians has thrown the light on the textual and visual representations of Kazakhstan's national paradigms that my respondents face on an everyday basis. As the analysis has shown, national paradigms can coexist simultaneously in different content elements of one post. This coexistence might create mixed national images of the country and its society, but such a concurrent presence of all three paradigms corresponds to the multi-vector national policy of the country and might reinforce it. However, the intensity level of connectedness with the paradigms' appearance is rather weak; that might indicate that nationalism, at least in its existing official forms, is not necessarily an essential component on these urban Instagram accounts.

In addition, the extension of the paradigms in textual descriptions, comments, and visual content is not equivalent. For example, *Transnationalism* dominates in the textual description and visual content compared to the paradigms of *Kazakhstanness* and *Kazakhness*. This means that the followers of urban Instagram accounts, and especially those from Nur-Sultan, confront, through their use of Instagram, not only English words and expressions, but also Kazakhstan-related information regarding international cooperation and events, global brands, and modern technologies. Based on the intensity of their appearance in each content element, all these indicators might reinforce the idea that Kazakhstan is not a developing country that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union, but a successful modern state - a fully participating member of the international relations system. While being actively promoted by the government, according to the overall

presence of its indicators in the posts' comments, it seems that the big cities' population has happily adopted this image.

Even more, among the Kazakhstani city residents, the paradigm of *Kazakhstanness* has been acknowledged. While Kazakhstan's world openness and beneficial cooperation with other countries matter, more important for the Kazakhstani population seem to be the daily domestic issues. For example, presenting Kazakhstan as the "common home" for all ethnic groups, which reminds one of the Soviet concept *Friendship of the Peoples* - is a usual trend inside all content elements and the comments section. By contrast, the concepts of Eurasianism and regional integration with neighboring countries, especially with Russia, appeared rather infrequently. That was not the case regarding the Soviet past, which is reflected in the urban *Instagram* accounts much more often, especially on Almaty-related *Instagram* accounts. All of that suggests that Kazakhstan looks towards the future within the paradigm of *Transnationalism* but also the Soviet nostalgia is still present in the online public discourse and even supported among those who were born after the Soviet Union collapsed.

The situation with the paradigm of *Kazakhness* looked slightly different. Although *Kazakhness* found its place in all the content elements of the selected *Instagram* accounts, its general appearance in posts is slightly smaller, while its level of intensity (number of different indicators) in textual descriptions and visual content was close to the indicators for *Transnationalism*. The usage of the Kazakh language, albeit to a lesser extent than English, is common on urban *Instagram* accounts. Together with the Kazakh language, the visual presentation of Kazakh ethnocultural symbols, found regular reflection on *Instagram*; this is something that, against the existing hypothesis in some older academic literature (e.g., Chinn & Kaiser, 1996; Laitin, 1998; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007), does not make the Kazakh-language something hostile for the Russian-speaking residents of big cities. The paradigm of *Kazakhness* was presented almost on par with other paradigms; in particular, *Instagram* posts that included this paradigm's indicators were among the most popular posts.

However, it would be an overconfident remark to suggest that the Russian-speaking urban communities have adopted *Kazakhness's* paradigm. Many of the textual elements, which manifested *Kazakhness*, referred to an external, usually state-regulated media source, while in the comments, its indicators were found far less often than those of *Kazakhstanness*.

In accordance with that, the Kazakh language usage among non-Kazakhs has still been more of an exception than a rule (Ivanov, 2019). This tendency was also confirmed in interviews. The presence of the paradigm of *Kazakhness* on urban *Instagram* accounts, though, might be the first step on the path to bringing these two discourses together.

Despite the fact that urban *Instagram* accounts included all official national paradigms, their manifestation was obviously different from what is found in the country's official discourse. While, according to Laruelle (2014), the three national paradigms usually do not intersect and aim at different target groups of Kazakhstani society, the urban *Instagram* accounts demonstrated the simultaneous appearance of all three paradigms in different content elements. Unlike the suggestion that *Kazakhness* will remain relevant over time (Laruelle, 2014), the urban online discourse, in any case, has continued to depict Kazakhstani global openness and ethnocultural diversity. Along with other urban communities, the city dwellers from Almaty and Nur-Sultan, following urban *Instagram* accounts, confirmed that they are a part of transnationalism and diversity. As a result, Kazakhstan might be imagined by *Instagram* users to be a country that aims at international cooperation and which is grounded on its society's inter-ethnic harmony. In this case, the Kazakh language's moderate presence and the Kazakh ethnocultural tradition simultaneously exclude domination by only the titular ethnic group.

In addition, since most of the textual descriptions and visual elements of urban *Instagram* posts demonstrated an overwhelming dominance of positive sentiments, a "fragmented sense of reality" (Gamson et al., 1992) might take place among followers of selected *Instagram* accounts and improve national pride. Presenting a certain city, region, and Kazakhstan as a whole in a positive light, socio-economic problems, and negative events are mostly left out beyond the urban *Instagram* accounts, which aim, in part, at establishing a national brand. In this regard, content on urban *Instagram* accounts is hardly different from the state-sponsored media, which has usually avoided critical information and has aimed at glorifying the country.

Nonetheless, *Instagram* comments have, to a certain extent, become a space for the expression of critical views and negative remarks by *Instagram* users, primarily on news-oriented accounts. Considering the authoritarian context of the country, negative user comments amidst positive textual descriptions and visual content may indicate that

comments are the place where people are trying to build a dialog with other citizens and the government. This suggests, as previous studies have also proposed (Kosnazarov, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2019), that social media in general, and Instagram in particular, may support the development of an alternative national image and activate civic awareness among the Kazakhstani population.

Before turning to the mapping of the main, as well as the additional research results, it is necessary to enumerate the limitations of the current quantitative research of this dissertation. Since this study has a preliminary character, i.e., supposes to arrive at a set of initial insights into the organization and content orientation of urban Instagram accounts of Kazakhstan mentioned by young Kazakhstani Russians, the achieved results cannot be generalized to the whole Kazakhstani segment of social media. Similarly, the fast-changing design of Instagram has also limited the results obtained. Since the study was conducted in 2018, social media's functionality has been upgraded, and new features were introduced in the *Instagram* application. As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 3.9, the video content has received new forms and functions (IGTV) and has started to be used more often in recent years.

Secondly, the research sample of the selected *Instagram* accounts was intentionally limited to two big cities since most of the respondents were residents of these cities. As I found, later on, three of the four Instagram accounts have been part of the same commercial project, *Davaj shodim!* LLP; this also narrowed the possibilities for generalization. It could be useful to further research and analyze the *Instagram* accounts of urban Russian speakers in other Kazakhstani cities, such as *@ekaraganda.kz* or *Shymkent.online*, and compare them with the results of the current study. Not only the comparisons between cities but also identifications of possible similarities and differences between the presented urban, regional, and national images can be of relevance, as I have already mentioned above.

Finally, although QnCA was useful in reducing the problem of the social desirability bias existing in self-reported data (cf. Insch, Moore, & Murphy, 1997, pp. 18-20), the coding process as part of QnCA was also based upon interpretations. It might, therefore, include the researcher's bias (e.g., Bergen & Labonté, 2020). This issue has been partly controlled by developing a codebook. Nonetheless, in the case of visual content, it may not be possible

for it to be understood universally since its interpretations are closely connected to the social and cultural context of an interpreter (Lobinger, 2012, pp. 63–65).

Moreover, QnCA only provides a reduced opportunity for taking contextual information, latent and hidden content into consideration. As a result, five deductive indicators for each national paradigm used in the current analysis can imply the paradigm's presence in *Instagram* content only to a certain extent and do not exclude the possibility of additional indicators. Likewise, the analysis of a large number of comments, which is possible, e.g., thanks to computer-supported sentiment analysis (Alrumaih et al., 2020) can provide more detailed information in comparison to the analysis of the first three comments applied in the present study.

### **3.12. Social Media as a Tool for Supporting an Imagined Kazakhstan**

As previous studies have demonstrated (e.g., Kneidinger, 2013; Nedelcu, 2018; Kozachenko, 2019), networked digital media, in general, and social media, in particular, can play an important role in national identity construction and the activation of a sense of belonging to a nation. Mediating social reality, social media usage opens new opportunities for people to define themselves, especially for young ethnic minorities who are members of different nation-related groups and are at risk of experiencing social exclusion. The example of young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrates the potential of social media usage in finding and establishing personal interpretations of national belonging.

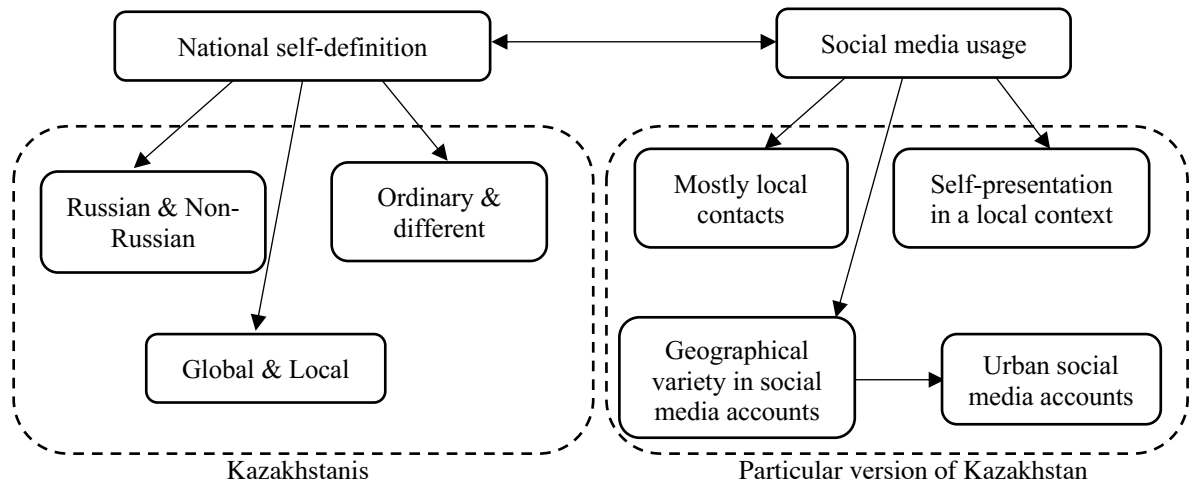
By mapping the results of qualitative interviews and quantitative social media analyses, I could answer the main research question: *How does the nation-related belonging relate to social media usage and vice versa among young Kazakhstani Russians?* The interviews conducted with young Kazakhstani Russians from big cities demonstrated that they hardly fit into the usual definitions found in the current post-Soviet public discourse. The multiple character of identity and belonging of Kazakhstani Russians was also reflected in their social media usage patterns. Their social media accounts were highly personalized and combined both local and foreign contacts, as well as Kazakhstan-related content and information, which transcends national boundaries. However, for young Kazakhstani Russians, the geographical location of the social media content and the origin of their social media contacts was rather irrelevant. Common interests, lifestyles, but also similar everyday

problems and difficulties came to the foreground for them. Having international contacts or following social media content in different languages from all over the world had not only a denationalizing effect for Russians who reside in the near abroad (e.g., Saunders, 2006). Paradoxically, these social media activities were also able to reinforce a connection to the country of their birth and current residence.

Defining themselves as Kazakhstanis and emphasizing their belongingness to Kazakhstan may allow Kazakhstani Russians to maintain different nation-related Selves, avoid uncertainty, and obtain a positively evaluated social membership. A combination of various, sometimes contradictory categories, such as being Russian and Non-Russian, global and local, as well as belonging to the ordinary Kazakhstani people, while still being different from them, is possible due to the umbrella category 'Kazakhstani' (Figure 4). Social media opens opportunities for Kazakhstani Russians to maintain and reinforce this category.

In particular, social media have become a useful instrument for young Kazakhstani Russians to surround themselves – at least in their smartphones- with people and information, which support for them an appropriate, and mostly positive image of the country of their birth and current residence. The link between social media usage and their local everyday life has been obvious in different ways. It starts with the social media choice itself, based on Kazakhstani trends and local friends' preferences. The desire to choose the same platforms as most Kazakhstanis might reflect on the importance of belonging to a local urban community of social media users and the local social network as a whole (e.g., Harwood, 1999; Slater, 2007).

Figure 4: Interconnection Between Nation-Related Belonging and Social Media Use



As previous research has shown (e.g., Rees & Burkhsnov, 2018), the territorial belonging to a place of birth and residence is central for Kazakhstanis. The results that I arrived at, by studying the example of young Kazakhstani Russians, can, to a certain extent, support this conclusion and simultaneously highlight the importance of social media. Despite a personalized social media landscape and different social media usage patterns among Kazakhstani Russians, the presence of everyday life in a big city in their social media accounts is characteristic to these young people. The reference to local social circles and daily place-related events evidently unites Kazakhstani Russians. They post ‘beautiful’ selfies or photos of their everyday activities, taking place in the background of the cities of their residence, follow close local friends, and have selected urban content in their social media feeds.

All these social media activities allow young people to stay connected to their place of residence and to imagine it as a place of belonging in an appropriate manner for their self-esteem. Following urban social media accounts makes it possible for young Kazakhstani Russians to create and support a selective image of Kazakhstan, which includes a harmonic coexistence of different ethnic groups as in the idealistic version of the Soviet *Friendship of the Peoples*’ concept, economic prosperity, and global cooperation. The experience of Otherness, which Kazakhstani Russians still negatively confront in their everyday life, does not occur in such a selective context.



Being surrounded and reproducing the regime-sponsored multi-vector politics of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstani Russians are fairly skeptical about official politics. Although avoiding online political discussions can be a common social media pattern among Kazakhstani Russians, it does not make them politically apathetic on the whole. Following social media infotainment accounts and facing user-generated content allows them to confront politics-related issues from ordinary people's perspective. This supports a constructed division between the popular grassroots and the political elite.

Such a division encourages some Russians to shield themselves from the official political agenda and handle political issues individually. However, for others, especially Russians in Almaty, this is a reason to practice so-called "non-contentious forms of online activism" (Lonkila et al. 2021, p. 146). Young Kazakhstani Russians tend to connect all relevant problems to the mistakes of official politicians and enforce unity among ordinary Kazakhstani people. Paradoxically, both civic activism and alienation from politics can help strengthen ties with Kazakhstan as a place of belonging since both of these strategies aim at an alternative vision of the country.

Nevertheless, while comparing social media usage regarding the country of their birth and current residence to other countries, particularly to post-Soviet republics, young Kazakhstani Russians find advantages in their belonging to Kazakhstan. These advantages are mostly linked to the existing ethnocultural diversity in Kazakhstani society and to the lack of political confrontations and socio-economic stability in general. Communicating with people from abroad has a similar effect; in this context, belongingness to Kazakhstan becomes more salient and motivates Kazakhstani Russians to notice and present positive aspects of the country in which they were born and live today.

At the same time, social media usage supports Kazakhstani Russians in identifying similarities to ordinary people from the whole world, as well as reinforces cross-border social unity. This sympathy towards supranational cohesion, though, is not primarily based upon cosmopolitanism per se. Instead, it is perceived through a local prism - as something characteristic for Kazakhstanis. Unlike Ariely (2012), my sample has shown that openness towards globalization does not necessarily lower the level of patriotism. Being open-minded, cooperative, and global-oriented is associated by Kazakhstani Russians with belongingness to Kazakhstan. The coexistence of the tendency towards international

cooperation with the tendency to assert the importance of national borders proves that glocalization is characteristic, not only for the official multi-vector politics of Kazakhstan but also for the young Kazakhstanis.

Yet, the Russian cultural tradition, including the Russian language, literature, and customs, is still present in their daily lives and is familiar for young Kazakhstani Russians. My results show that these young people have regular contact with the Russian Federation while communicating through social media with friends and relatives living there, as well as while consuming Russia-related social media content. Therefore, most of them – purposely or accidentally – are well informed about the Russian agenda through both the official media accounts and user-generated content from Russia. This could be interpreted as an attempt to stay connected with the historical home country. The usage of Russian-speaking social media, though, has not activated long-distance nationalism towards the Russian Federation. Instead, social media has become, *inter alia*, a space for intergroup comparisons and nation-related self-reflection for Kazakhstani Russians.

While Russian policy has tried to develop the primordialist character of the Russian (ethno)nation within and beyond its territorial borders, the Russianness of Kazakhstani Russians has been clearly linked to the domestic context. The uniqueness of local Russian-ness was actively supported by the young people I interviewed. In this regard, young Kazakhstani Russians from big cities are similar to “critical moderates” – Russophones from Riga in Latvia (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019, p. 42). Not only have young Kazakhstani Russians emphasized that there is a big difference between themselves and Russians in Russia, but they have also strongly dissociated themselves from the Russian government and institutions, such as the Russian Orthodox Church. Contacting people from all over the world and accessing critical information about Russia through social media may motivate Kazakhstani Russians to re-evaluate their connection to Kazakhstan instead of supporting the rapprochement with the historical ‘home’ country.

Nonetheless, through the discussions of common issues existing in the post-Soviet space, such as corruption, lack of both political dialogue and confidence in governmental decisions, or the common past, the perspective on nation-related identity and belonging among Kazakhstani Russians was different. In light of the issues mentioned above, these young people have developed support for supranational cross-border connectivity between

ordinary people in the post-Soviet republics, including Russia, while becoming alienated from their formal politics, and the top-down, often primordialist, ‘We’ vs. ‘They’ definitions. Since official politics are often considered to represent a threat, it seems that this motivates ordinary people inside and beyond the country to unite. In accordance with Dovidio et al. (2004), this result demonstrates that (ethno)national differences recede into the background when a common ingroup identity is developed. It appears that social media usage, which makes common issues and shared memory more visible, can support the process of supranational grassroots unity.

As previous studies have been already demonstrated (e.g., Fabrykant, 2019), the *Russian World* concept can have the opposite consequence for its target population, and in some context, is able to strengthen the anti-Russian position. Instead of identifying with Russia, becoming opponents to Western countries, and emphasizing their “civilisational uniqueness” (Feklyunina, 2016, p. 785), the young Kazakhstani Russians demonstrated an opposite trend. A desire for supranational cooperation, openness to global innovation, and first steps towards consolidation ‘from below’ characterize these young people today.

Despite the expectations that being Russian in Kazakhstan, especially in the light of growing Kazakhization and the spread of the *Russian World* concept, can become a serious indicator of Otherness, this does not seem to be the case. Various factors that Kazakhstani Russians share with other population groups, such as urban-rural contradictions and ideological as well as lifestyle-related differences, are still more relevant to the feelings of Otherness than ethnic belonging *per se*. Similarly, Islam is not considered by Kazakhstani Russians as an outgroup characteristic but is rather accepted by them to support religious freedom. Moreover, despite the factors mentioned above, being different does not destroy the emotional attachment to Kazakhstan, and supports belongingness to the country. While these differences have been noticeable in the everyday offline context, urban social media accounts emphasize the importance of Kazakhstani diversity and normalize the perceived Otherness.

However, it would be wrong to equal the belongingness to Kazakhstan with citizenship in the case of young Kazakhstani Russians. When being Russian ‘by passport’, formal belonging to Kazakhstan is only one of the many categories which these young people possess. Having the passport of the Republic of Kazakhstan is not symbolic of their

connection to the country, since young Kazakhstani Russians would easily change their citizenship in the case of obvious socio-economic benefits for them. However, for them, this does not express a refusal to be Kazakhstani. As Brubaker (1996, p. 13-22) has noted, nation-related belonging in post-Soviet societies does not necessarily coincide with the legal categories of nationality. After 25 years, the case of Kazakhstani Russians shows that belongingness can take many various forms. However, it can still be hardly limited to the existing categories of ethnonationalism (*nacional'nost'*) and citizenship.

Although the selective image of Kazakhstan can activate a sense of belonging to Kazakhstan among young Kazakhstani Russians, it can also complicate for them the access to the 'bigger picture' existing in the country. While imagining Kazakhstan as a modern, open-minded state with ethnocultural diversity, young Kazakhstani Russians may overlook the fact that Kazakhstan can be imagined differently among other population groups. For example, the exclusively Kazakh-speaking population and their agenda might go beyond the created image of Kazakhstan in the minds of Kazakhstani Russians; this can support and magnify existing divisions of the Russian and Kazakh language discourses.

Likewise, urban communities can heighten the urban-rural or center-periphery differences. Associating Kazakhstan with the life of big cities, not only because of living there but also following urban social media accounts, there is a risk that the country's rural areas will remain something unknown and distant for young Kazakhstani Russian. As a result, the Soviet center-periphery concept and the stereotyping of rural-specific culture can be further reinforced among Kazakhstani Russians.

While KazNet can be described in (ethno) nationalistic terms (Shklovski & Struthers, 2010), my research has demonstrated that also an opposite tendency cannot be ignored. The Kazakhstani social media segment of Instagram promotes ethnocultural diversity and the global openness of Kazakhstani society, at least for the big city dwellers of Russian origin. The urban social media accounts become a place where the cultivating of common myths and memories takes place, and a certain public culture appears, based upon national civic community, global openness, and modernization. While according to Laruelle (2014), the national paradigm of Kazakhness is supposed to dominate above others, the Internet, and the social media in particular, could apparently become a space where the paradigms of *Transnationalism* and *Kazakhstaness* could be cultivated.

Discussing the links between social media usage and the construction of national belonging, it is important to remember that the Internet and social media are not the only resources for social reality and identity construction. Even as an everyday routine, social media use does not exclude familial and educational factors from ethnonational self-defining. In particular, as my results have shown, parents who have experienced the Soviet era remain important guides in the search for national belonging by young Kazakhstani Russians. As Silova et al. (2014) have demonstrated, the state-confirming idea of a homeland has also been actively disseminated through early literacy textbooks in the post-Soviet space; this may affect one's (ethno)national Self.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Fast-changing digital technologies provide new opportunities for social interaction and self-discovery; these are particularly important for young ethnic minorities who may experience difficulties in their sense of national belonging to a certain place (Marino, 2015; Gonzales, 2017; Nedelcu 2018). While the link between the ethnic minority experience in Western countries and social media usage has been actively studied in the last decade (see Chapter 1.5.5), this linkage has still been scarcely investigated for ethnic minorities and diaspora groups in the post-Soviet space.

The events that have occurred in the recent past in the post-Soviet space, such as in Euromaidan, the Russia-Ukrainian conflict, anti-government protests in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, have clearly demonstrated that this region is in a state of active transformation despite almost 30 years passing since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the light of these events, the 'national question' [*nacional'nyj vopros*] in the former Soviet republics is obviously still relevant, with the added factor of the Internet and social media use having drastically increased during the last decade (Kemp, 2020). The construction of national belonging among ethnic minorities, particularly in its interconnectedness with digital technologies, poses new challenges for contemporary sociological research.

Thus, the current research focus has been on the young Kazakhstani Russians, who were born and grew up in independent Kazakhstan. This study has taken into consideration

their self-reported sense of nation-related belonging and social media usage patterns in the context of the spreading *Russian World* concept. While existing studies have provided contradictory results regarding the situation among ethnic Russians in the near abroad (see Chapter 2.3.2), they have rarely considered the role of digital technologies in this context. Meanwhile, the use of networked digital media has become one of the main everyday rituals across the world, especially among young people (e.g., Kemp, 2020). Although some studies (e.g., Shakrai, 2015; Suslov, 2016a) have demonstrated the growing role of the Internet and networked digital media in the development of Russian nationalism, there has been a lack of in-depth empirical focus on Russians outside of Russia and their nation-related belongingness in that respect. Therefore, my purpose was to consider the link between nation-related identity and belonging among the new generation of Kazakhstani Russians through the prism of their regular social media use.

While most of the studies of the last 20 years about national identity construction in post-Soviet space have traditionally used a top-down perspective (e.g., Laitin, 1998; Blum, 2007; Laruelle 2014), my work adds to a shortlist of bottom-up studies (e.g., Pawłusz & Seliverstova, 2016; Sharipova et al., 2017; Isaaks, 2018). The bottom-up approach has aimed to demonstrate how ordinary citizens construct their sense of belonging to an (ethno)nation. Today, when digital and communication technologies provide various opportunities for both transnational and local civic networking, as well as support grassroots movements, even in an authoritarian context (e.g., Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012; Poell, 2014), the nation-related image ‘from below’ has become even more noticeable. This has required a detailed sociological examination in the sense of “making implicit social knowledge explicit” ( das “*implizite gesellschaftliche Wissen explizit zu machen*”) (Schulze, 2019, p. 21).

Considering the dearth of academic literature on this subject regarding Kazakhstani society, the current explorative research considered nation-related identity through the example of social media use by young Kazakhstani Russians, who live in big cities and are active social media users. The chosen research focus opened an additional perspective on Kazakhstani society, representing the nation-related identity and belonging of a particular group of Kazakhstanis, instead of using existing national categories, such as Russians (‘by passport’), or studying the entirety of the young Russian-speaking population. This

dissertation has called attention to the heterogeneity of post-Soviet societies. In particular, it has emphasized the need for rethinking regular, often prescribed nation-related identities and belongingness in the light of total dissemination of ICTs, which can support the national image ‘from below’ even while being state-controlled.

Likewise, while existing studies often consider social media users as a homogeneous group (e.g., Kosnazarov, 2019; Kemp, 2020), I demonstrated the need to consider the social media usage of different social groups, individually, through an interpretive approach, and take into account the highly personalized social media landscapes. In accordance with Miller et al. (2016), my results suggest that one must highlight the importance of the user’s social characteristics in studying social media. Therefore, social media platforms cannot be considered as something universal, even inside the Russian-speaking Internet.

As one of my results reveals, the so-called ‘Russian’ platform *Vkontakte* does not necessarily serve as a space for Russia-related banal nationalism and spreading of the *Russian World* concept in the Russian-speaking post-Soviet space. In this context, the “Russian Cyber Empire” (Uffelman, 2014, p. 266) reaches its limits unexpectedly quickly. However, the power of state Internet regulations, in this regard, also cannot be fully ignored since such power can even impact the ability to access certain digital services. The idea of the Russian ‘sovereign Internet’, which has been gaining momentum in the last years (e.g., Zlobina, 2020), opens new questions regarding social media selection and usage patterns of Russian-speaking users.

Reflecting upon the applied methodology, the research design of a simple case study (Yin, 2014) and “methodological bricolage” (Lindgren (2017, p. 282) provided not only a certain structure but also a flexible framework for the current explorative study. Despite some weaknesses of self-reported data (see Chapter 3.2.1), conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to get a detailed ‘firsthand’ interpretation of nation-related belonging and expand the boundaries of existing categories in public and academic discourses. Moreover, having direct access to my target population made it possible for me to integrate some participant observation elements into the interviews. Although my short observation cannot be equated to long-term observation used in ethnographical research (e.g., Hine, 2015), it provided the first step to understanding social media usage patterns of Kazakhstani Russians and can serve as a basis for future comparative research. An approach such as this,

combining self-reported information with short time observation, can be generally useful in the context of rapidly changing digital products and the need for quick qualitative results.

Moreover, using the information collected during interviews, I could identify a certain social media trend and add an additional media perspective to the research due to analysis of local Instagram accounts. Analysing social media content posted on urban Instagram accounts followed by young Kazakhstani Russians, made it possible for me 1) to provide their general description, and 2) to supplement personal views on belonging to Kazakhstan from interviews with the current social media representations of national paradigms existing in the country.

When studying social media, sooner or later, one runs into the problem of the algorithm power. Although social media platforms allow their users to shape personalized social and media landscapes, the role of advertising and recommendations engines is often just as important. Using interviews and observation could partly weaken these problematic issues; nonetheless, suggested content (Southern, 2019) was sometimes mixed with a personally chosen one, and not all of my respondents could promptly distinguish between these two content types. Finally, the fast-changing nature of Internet products requires one to update and supplement existing knowledge. During the research and writing of this dissertation, Instagram introduced new features and functions, such as IGTV, which can affect the outcomes of the study.

Turning to the research results, as I have expected, young Kazakhstani Russians actively rethink their ethnonational belonging and connection to both Kazakhstan and Russia. However, it does not happen at the expense of the historically established antagonism between ‘Russians’ and ‘Kazakhs’, or ethnonational identity in general. The Ukrainian conflict and the *Russian World* rhetoric have, firstly, strengthened their feeling of belongingness to Kazakhstan; secondly, they activated a sense of supranational solidarity with the post-Soviet ordinary people while alienating young Kazakhstani Russians from the political elite. This strategy to handle governmental failures through identification with transnational entities or with the world as a whole, however, is not new and is obviously still typical for the post-Soviet region (e.g., Schueth & O’Loughlin, 2008).

Simultaneously, the Russian cultural tradition, including the Russian language, remains essential elements of Kazakhstani Russians’ belongingness. Unlike second-



generation migrants of Russian origin in Israel (e.g., Eisikovits, 2014), an activation of ethnonational belonging towards the Russian Federation among Kazakhstani Russians was not supported. Long-distance nationalism, which is often characteristic of ethnic minorities and diaspora members, was not proved to emerge among young Kazakhstani Russians, even in light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and spread of the *Russian World* idea.

Despite experienced Otherness, young Kazakhstani Russians do not position themselves as an ethnic minority group. As in the Soviet past, Russianness in the Kazakhstani context is something opposite to rigid primordialism, which is associated with contributing to the multi-ethnic landscape of Kazakhstani society in the sense of the *Friendship of the Peoples*' concept. On the one hand, this gives them an advantage over Russians in Russia, who Kazakhstani Russians associate with ethnic homogeneity and dominance; on the other hand, it makes them an integral and valuable part of Kazakhstan. Thus, the uncertainty of the national paradigm in Kazakhstan does not seem to confuse Kazakhstani Russians. Still, it obviously opens an opportunity for them to imagine the country of their birth and current residence in accordance with their needs and desires. Social media are also able to support a sense of agency and civic awareness among my target population.

Although young Kazakhstani Russians are actively involved in the internal and external affairs of the Russian Federation through social media use, their closeness to Kazakhstan draws a clear dividing line between them and Russia. Since their Russianness is not salient in this context, the spread of Russian banal and everyday nationalism on social media can hardly boost their rapprochement with the historical 'home' country. Even if Kazakhstani Russians find Russia, or to be more precise, big cities in Russia, as an attractive place, this is mostly motivated pragmatically and not because of a feeling of belongingness to Russia.

Nonetheless, it heightens their supranational belongingness and calls their attention towards common issues and a shared past, which are left to them by the Soviet system. This supranational perception, though, does not replace their connection to Kazakhstan but increases it. The state-sponsored global openness and Eurasian cooperation are associated with Kazakhstan and may ironically support a critical view about internal political actions in the form of constructive patriotism. The differentiation between the grassroots, and the

political elite at a supranational level, allows Kazakhstani Russians to find mostly like-minded Russian-speaking people, not only in Kazakhstan but also beyond its national borders. The idea of post-Soviet cooperation, not in the sense of the formal Eurasian Union, but as a community of ordinary people in former Soviet republics (FSR) attuned to the ideal of the *Soviet People*, is obviously sympathetic to these young people.

Paradoxically, in line with Blackburn (2019), my research has demonstrated that the young generation of Kazakhstani Russians has supported Soviet ideology; however, they adjusted it to the modern global context. In comparison to Soviet glorification, the superiority of Russia and Russians was replaced by an alternative model of equal supranational cooperation and political transparency, which even resembles the Western supranational model such as that of the European Union. It seems that old Soviet concepts have been intermixed by Kazakhstani Russians with liberal concepts of the Western world, just as the varied information is mixed in their social media feeds.

Similarly, these young people deny someone's superiority over someone else on the national level. While Kazakhstani Russians associate local Russianness with innovation, which might remind one of the Soviet rhetoric, it is not ethnic identity per se, but rather a critique of emphasizing ethnic differences instead of searching for civic similarities, which comes to the forefront. Such a Western-oriented concept expands ethnic boundaries and allows Kazakhstani Russians, firstly, to avoid the negative status of being an ethnic minority and secondly, to converge with other like-minded groups of Kazakhstani citizens. As Laitin (1998, p. 363) wrote more than two decades ago, "there should remain in Kazakhstan, however, a cosmopolitan community of Russian-speaking (mostly Kazakhs) seeking to recapture power in the name of the civic or Western-oriented state." In this community, ethnonational differences recede into the background, giving way to the idea of interethnic pluralism and international cooperation and challenging existing conservative and primordial values in society. Similarly to Rees and Williams (2017), I can also argue that the example of Kazakhstani Russians testifies to the liberalization of identity in the country. In sum, searching for more stable and positively evaluated identities and groups of belonging, young Kazakhstani Russians have addressed their relationship to their country of birth and current residence.

As Jašina-Schäfer (2019, p. 115) has mentioned, “a certain discomfort in the environment (such as material instability or feelings of exclusion)” can motivate the Russian-speaking population in Kazakhstan to imagine new forms of identity and belongingness. My research has shown that today social media can widely support this vision. Due to their social media use, Kazakhstani Russians have recognized Kazakhstan as a place where they belong and received an opportunity to recognize a diverse urban community as their ingroup while distancing themselves from the primordiality-oriented, mostly titular rural population.

As I have suspected, social media are obviously able to support the transformation of their connection to Kazakhstan. However, this transformation aims to converge with (an imagined version) of Kazakhstan, rather than alienate from it and move in the direction of rapprochement with Russia instead. So long as the created image of Kazakhstan corresponds to the state’s national policy and the variety of social media offers is available for them, young Kazakhstani Russians can successfully use the chosen strategy. Otherwise, if Kazakhstan’s political course will change, and the *Kazakhness* paradigm will strongly dominate and spread itself inside the public discourse, these people would most probably need to search for alternative strategies. Being globally oriented, they might emigrate and try to find their place in different countries worldwide, retaining their multiple identities, and at the same time staying Kazakhstani – if not in their passports, then in their souls.

The importance of the media in the process of national identity construction and searching for nation-related senses of belonging are repeatedly emphasized in both theoretical and empirical studies (see Chapter 1.5). Today, when information consumption and sharing through networked digital media have reached incredible proportions, a link between fast-evolving ICTs usages and the imagining of the nation is especially acute. This is particularly manifested in the post-Soviet region, which is undergoing an active geopolitical transformation today. The role of the Internet and social media should not be underestimated in this regard.

Moreover, the highly personalized and fragmented nature of modern social media makes it difficult to establish universal trends for the whole population while requiring a detailed analysis of specific social and ethnocultural groups. The example of young Kazakhstani Russians has clearly demonstrated that the Internet opens various opportunities

for a national bottom-up vision, which may not be evident from a top-down perspective. While the RuNet calls for an ethnonational reunification of the Russian people and glorification of the Russian state, it can also support ethnocultural diversity, supra-national grassroots unity, as well as strengthen a connection between Kazakhstanis of Russian origin and their (imagined) country of birth and current residence.

While my research provides an in-depth understanding of nation-related identity and belonging in connection to the social media usage among young Kazakhstani Russians, it also has limitations. Firstly, this dissertation focuses on young Kazakhstani Russians from three big cities, mostly students who belong to the intellectual elite. Young people from small towns and rural areas, as well as uneducated population, were not enclosed in the sample. Since the Soviet center-periphery rhetoric was characteristic for the young city dwellers of Russian origin, the question arises, whether there is a difference between Kazakhstani Russians from urban and rural spaces in relation to their nation-related identity and belonging. In this respect, the Northern regions of Kazakhstan that border Russia and have the highest percentage of ethnic Russians in the country can become an important research area. Thus, as I have already mentioned above, studying the interrelationship between different levels of territorial belonging to Kazakhstan, such as local, regional, and national, may provide important insights for further studies.

Similarly, most of the people I interviewed were university students with a relatively stable financial situation. Other groups of Russians from low-educated and low-income backgrounds might potentially differ from my respondents in their nation-related self-description and have different social media preferences. Therefore, it is important to study these other social groups of Kazakhstani Russians or an even broader Russian-speaking population for further comparative researches.

Furthermore, as already mentioned above, the preliminary analysis of urban Instagram accounts presents only one example of the variety of social media content, which young Kazakhstani Russian confront in their Instagram feeds. Analyzing other domestic and international social media accounts, in both the official media as well as via popular bloggers, in a cross-platform manner, can provide an additional puzzle piece in presenting the overall picture of passive social media use. While concentrating on *Instagram*, networked digital media such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, and *YouTube*, which were mentioned

in the conducted interviews, remained outside the content analysis. Nonetheless, according to young Kazakhstani Russians, both *WhatsApp* and *Telegram* are important channels for informal information, providing additional data regarding the dissemination of information in an authoritarian context. Specifically, a memes and vines analysis can shed more light on the national image ‘from below’.

Finally, the self-reported data presented in this dissertation regarding active social media use, such as posting, reposting, and commenting, can be supplemented by experimental design studies and long-term online observation. This is particularly visible in creating *stories* and live videos, which takes place throughout almost all social media platforms today, and requires further analysis. Since many of the Kazakhstani Russians prefer private messages instead of posting openly, it can also be useful to find ethical ways to investigate such social media activities and analyze the role of self-censorship in forming nation-related identity and belongingness.

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## Appendix

### A. List of Interview Participants

Date	ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	City	Place of birth
27.04.17	AA1	female	18	Student at the Kazakh national university. Subject: Russian philology	Almaty	East Kazakhstan
29.04.17	AA2	female	19	Does not study, unemployed	Almaty	Almaty
29.04.17	AV3	male	20	Student at the Kazakh-British technical university. Subject: Energy and Oil Industry	Almaty	Nord Kazakhstan
01.05.17	AE4	male	20	Student at the Kazakh-German university. Subject: International Relations	Almaty	Almaty
06.05.17	AM5	female	20	Student at the Kazakh-German university. Subject: International Relations	Almaty	Almaty
06.05.17	AE6	male	20	Student at the Kazakh-German university. Subject: Transport Logistic	Almaty	Almaty
08.05.17	AA7	male	19	Student at the Central Asian Technical and Economic College. Subject: Information Technologies	Almaty	Almaty
08.05.17	AA8	male	20	Student at the University of International Business. Subject: Journalism	Almaty	Almaty
09.05.17	AV9	female	20	Student at the Kazakh university of Management, Economics and Strategic Research. Subject: Finance	Almaty	Almaty
09.05.17	AE10	female	22	Student at the Kazakh-American University. Subject: International Relationships	Almaty	Almaty
14.05.17	AN11	female	19	Student at the Almaty Medical College. Subject: General Medicine (paramedic)	Almaty	Almaty
18.05.17	CD12	male	21	Student at the Kazakh Agrotechnical University. Subject: Radio, electricity and communication	Astana	Astana
19.05.17	CN13	female	21	Student at the Kazakh Agrotechnical University.	Astana	Nord Kazakhstan

				Subject: Radio, electricity and communication		
19.05.17	CA14	female	20	Student at the The Eurasian Humanities Institute. Subject: Foreign languages. Entrepreneur, owner of a language school	Astana	Astana
20.05.17	CK15	female	21	Student at the The Eurasian Humanities Institute. Subject: Foreign languages	Astana	Astana
20.05.17	CA16	female	21	Student at the Kazakh Agrotechnical University. Subject: Agronomy	Astana	Karaganda
22.05.17	CA17	male	20	Student at the National University of Arts. Subject: Art-management	Astana	Astana
22.05.17	CA18	female	20	Student at the The Eurasian Humanities Institute. Subject: Foreign languages	Astana	Astana
01.06.17	CN19	male	22	Studed in Russia, unemployed	Astana	Astana
08.06.17	CA20	male	22	Student at the Privat Academy "Bolaşak." Subject: Foreign languages	Karaganda	Balkhash
08.06.17	CA21	female	21	Student at the State University of Karadanga. Subject: Journalism	Karaganda	Karaganda
19.05.17	CR22	male	21	Student at the Eurasian National University. Subject: Translation	Astana	Astana

## **B. Interview Guide**

### **Introduction**

- Anonymity
- Social Media definition
- Your personal view – true and false not exist here

Warm-Up – Tell me about yourself: who you are? What are you doing? Where are you from? (*Purpose – spotting primary identities*)

### **Block 1: National and ethnic belonging**

#### *Cultural/ethnic aspects:*

- What does it mean for you to be Russian? How proud are you to be Russian?
- What is typically Russian for you? What is typically Kazakh for you?
- Which differences are between Russians in Russia and Russians in Kazakhstan?
- Do you speak the Kazakh language?
  - If yes – which reasons did you have to learn the Kazakh language? What opportunities do you get by having this language skill?
  - If not – which obstacles did you face?
- What does Orthodoxy mean for you? And Islam?

#### *Political/civic aspects:*

- What does it mean for you to be a citizen of Kazakhstan?
- *Future:* Which role have you personally played in the building of modern Kazakhstan?
- If you could get citizenship of any country, would you do it?
  - If yes - What country? Which reasons do you have?
  - If not – which motivation do you have for remaining a citizen of Kazakhstan?
- What do you think about The Eurasian Union? How do you see the future of The Eurasian union?
- How do you appraise President Putin's policies?
- How are you appreciate the situation in Crimea?

### **Block 2: Social media and identification with Kazakhstan and Russia**

#### *Content consumption on Social media*

- Which media are you using? Newspapers, TV, Internet, others?

- What social media do you use? Which characteristics of social media are important for you? (Language, location, topic, etc.) What are you guided by when choosing social media? Eventual - Could you show me an example?
- What kind of content – what are you finding in your news feed? How do you choose content in Social Media? *Russian vs. Kazakhstani content, state vs. private media*
- Do you read the news on Social Media?
  - If yes – Which forms: Language, location, topic, opposite views? Could you show me these social media sites?
  - If not – Do you read the news in the print press or watch news on TV? What is keeping you from this?
- Which information do you trust in social media in general? What are the criteria for your trust? *Example*
- How are you appraise information posted by your social media friends?
- How do you join the online-community and groups? What is important for you in this case?
- How important is it for you to know an alternative point of view? Are you looking for alternative points of view in social media? How are you reacting when you read an alternative point of view?

#### *Social Media Content production and self-representations*

- Are you posting something on social media on your personal page/profile?
- If yes: What are you posting? Where are you posting? Which motivation do you have to post? What are you expecting after posting? Whom do you address these posts?
- If not: What keeps you from posting?
- What are you repost usually? Why is it important for you to post this on your page? Could you give me an example? Could you show me this?
- Are you commenting the other people`s posts?
  - If yes: which posts are you reposting? What is your motivation? Do you have an example for me?
  - If now: What keeps you from commenting? What could be posted on social media so that you definitely react to this

#### **End**

Thank you for the participation in this interview. Could you recommend to me other people from your surroundings, who could give me an interview?

### C. Code System for Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

1 Transnational self-description	Belonging beyond national borders, including its supranational and transnational forms
1.1 English as an attractive language	Motivation to learn and improve English, to consider English as a prestigious language
1.2 Eurasian integration as a positive idea	No difference between Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians. Considering all these groups as whole Slavic people and belonging to all of them. Pan-Russian nation. The positive perception of integrational/supranational initiatives like, e.g., Eurasian Union Supranationalism as a strategy for dealing with multiple identities
1.3 Mix or hyphenated identity	A mix of both ethnic and civic identities: Kazakhstani and Russian. Hybridity and hyphenated forms of identity
1.4 Sympathy towards Western values	Supporting Western values such as liberalism, human rights, media freedom, etc.
1.5 Cosmopolitanism as a positive idea	Sympathy towards global citizenship and open boundaries; globalization as a positive idea, national identity does not matter
2 Self-description in ethnonational terms	Belonging and identification in ethnocultural terms. Indicators: language, traditions, religion
2.1 Cultural traditions matter	Traditions associated with Russianness play an important role in the self-description of Kazakhstani Russians
2.2 Ethnic Otherness	The feeling of being different from the titular ethnic group, which might include a negative sense of social exclusion, but also a feeling of being superior
2.3 Russian as a formal identity	‘Russian’ as a prescribed formal category (russkij po-pasportu)
2.3.1 Difficulties with national identification	Facing difficulties with finding suitable explicit categories regarding national belonging
2.4 Biological attributes and ethnic belonging	The external manifestation of ethnicity/ ascriptive characteristics, e.g., race, eye shape and color, hair color plays an important role for self-identification
2.5 The role of religion	The role of religion/Russian orthodox church in the construction of national belonging
2.5.1 Religious tradition is important	
2.5.2 Religious tradition is NOT important	



2.5.3 Russian orthodox church	An attitude toward the Russian Orthodox Church as a religious institution
2.5.3.1 Neutral	
2.5.3.2 Positive perception	
2.5.3.3 Negative perception	
3 Associations with Russianness	What does Russianness mean for young Kazakhstani Russians?
3.1 Russians in Kazakhstan vs. Russians in Russia	Differences between Russians in Russia and Russians in Kazakhstan
3.2 Russianness as a concept of brutality	To be Russian implies to be powerful, but at the same time brutal, right-wing national and war-like
3.3 Nature/countryside	Associating Russianness with a particular natural landscape
3.4 People	People's behavior and characteristics associated with Russianness
3.4.1 Negative	
3.4.2 Positive	
3.5 Culture and language	Associating Russianness with urban culture in Russia, history of Russia, literature, language, art, sport, etc. However, not politics
3.6 Political perspective- Russia as a state	Associating Russianness with the Russian political state and political elite
4 Perception of Russia	Perception of the Russian Federation from a perspective of Kazakhstani Russians
4.1 Connection with Russia as the historical homeland	Considering the modern Russian state as a homeland
4.1.1 No	
4.1.2 Yes	
4.2 Positive view of modern Russia	A positive view of the modern internal and international policy of Russia
4.3 Critical view of modern Russia	A critical view of the modern internal and international policy of Russia

4.4 Situation with Crimea	Perception of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and political events in Crimea
4.4.1 Crimea vs. Northern regions of Kazakhstan	Northern regions of Kazakhstan, which are on the border with Russia
4.4.2 Negative evaluation	Crimea should stay Ukrainian, and occupation of the peninsula is illegal
4.4.3 Positive evaluation	It is right that Crimea becomes Russian again
5 The role of the Russian language	The role of the Russian language in the construction of nation-related belonging
5.1 Russian as a privilege	Russian language opens better opportunities and should continue to be spoken in Kazakhstan
5.2 Not Russians, but Russophones	Describing themselves primarily as Russian speakers
6 Civic self-description	Political and legal aspects of national belonging, such as civic awareness, citizenship, political rights  Indicators: civil activities, patriotism, being proud of Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani citizenship, rights and obligations
6.1 Being a citizen of Kazakhstan	What does it mean to be a citizen of Kazakhstan for Kazakhstani Russians?
6.2 Citizenship is only a programmatic issue	A pragmatic view on citizenship - citizenship as a service. E.g., passport and visa issues, job opportunities, etc.
6.2.1 Formal belonging	Belonging to Kazakhstan as an inevitable formality and as a coincidence
6.3 Personal vs. national characteristics	The dominance of personal achievements over nation-related success
6.4 Politics have nothing to do with everyday life	Politics and everyday life are two different worlds; politics as something 'sordid'
6.5 Perception of Kazakhness	Perception of the titular population (ethnic Kazakhs) and their culture
6.5.1 Perception of Islam	An attitude towards the religion of Islam and its principals
6.5.1.1 Neutral	
6.5.1.2 Positive	
6.5.1.3 Negative	

6.5.2 Rejection of Kazakh language usage	A negative perception of Kazakh language; feelings of pressure to have to learn the Kazakh language
6.5.3 Kazakh language as an opportunity	Kazakh language proficiency opens a lot of opportunities in Kazakhstan
6.5.4 Russians vs. Kazakhs antagonism	Kazakhs are seen as ‘they’; a distinction between urban Russians and Russian-speakers and rural Kazakh-speakers
6.5.5 Conservatism and traditionalism	Kazakh people are considered as conservative and traditional
6.5.6 Food tradition	Associating Kazakhness with certain food traditions, such as horse meat, Beşbarmak, etc.
6.5.7 Hospitality	Associating Kazakhness with hospitality
6.5.8 Kazakh ethnic culture	Associating Kazakhness with traditional clothes, cultural traditions, language, etc.; folklorization and creolization of Kazakh culture
6.5.9 Tribalism and strong contacts	Tribalism and strong contacts as a negative trait of Kazakh people
6.6 Perception of belonging to Kazakhstan	How do young Kazakhstani Russians perceive their citizenship? Indicators: civic engagement and political commitment, participation in political and public life
6.6.1 Identification as Kazakhstani	Being Kazakhstani as a salient self-description
6.6.2 Kazakhstan as a familiar place	Kazakhstan is a place where there are family, friends, relatives; this is a comfortable place to live in the current moment
6.6.2.1 Advantages of a multicultural state	People in Kazakhstan are living together with different cultures => are more open to other cultures; residing in a multi-ethnic society as an advantage; comparing Kazakhstani society with Western societies; Soviet Friendship of the Peoples’ concept (družba narodov) as a myth, which is still current, even for young people
6.6.2.2 Being proud of Kazakhstan	Being proud of Kazakhstan and of being a citizen of Kazakhstan
6.6.3 Kazakhstan as an unfamiliar place	Kazakhstan is considered as an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place regarding political or socio-economic issues
6.6.3.1 Disappointment with the current policy	Feeling disappointed regarding Kazakhstan’s current policy and its consequences like, e.g., social passivity, inequality, etc.
6.6.4 Regional issues	Regional identity like, e.g., North, South, East, West of Kazakhstan is more important than civic national identity; manifestation

	of urban/city identity like, e.g., Nur-Sultan vs. Almaty
6.6.5 Civic engagement as patriotism	Supporting the development of Kazakhstan, in both economic and political senses; trying to improve the country itself and the living standards as a manifestation of patriotism
6.6.6 State programs	Direct and indirect citation of different state ideological programs, like, e.g., Kazakhstan 2050, State Trilingualism program, etc.
6.7 Perception of Kazakhstan	How is Kazakhstan imagined among young Kazakhstani Russians?
6.7.1 Positive view of modern Kazakhstan	Supporting the country's course and being proud of it
6.7.2 Negative view of modern Kazakhstan	A critical view of the political development and the Kazakhstani society
6.7.3 The future of Kazakhstan vs. personal future	Personal end in connection to Kazakhstan's future
6.7.3.1 Insecurity regarding the future	The future in Kazakhstan is uncertain and requires preparations for changes
6.7.3.2 Immigration plans	The intent to leave Kazakhstan and move to other places around the world; temporariness of living in Kazakhstan
7 Social media user patterns	How do Kazakhstani Russians select and use social media?
7.1 Reasons for social media usage	Main reasons for social media usage and their relation to the national identity.
7.1.1 Work or business	Usage of social media is connected with the current job or business of respondents
7.1.2 Social factors/friends	'If my friends use this platform, I also will be there'; recommendations from friends as a reason to follow certain accounts
7.1.3 Additional services	Specific social media functionality, such as music and video for free
7.1.4 Content	Specific content as a reason for social media usage
7.1.5 Technical reasons/functionality	The role of design and usability
7.2 Platforms	Differences between social media platforms. Which platforms are regularly used and why?

7.2.1 Cross-platform usage	Creation of universal social media landscapes - users, create their media landscape by themselves based on their needs/demands on all platforms
7.2.2 Vkontakte	Usage patterns on Vkontakte
7.2.3 Mobile instant messaging	Instant messaging as an alternative for social media use. Usage patterns on Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.
7.2.4 Facebook	Usage patterns on Facebook
7.2.5 Twitter	Usage patterns on Twitter
7.2.6 Instagram	Usage patterns on Instagram
7.2.7 YouTube	Usage patterns on YouTube
7.3 Content consumption	Which content do young Kazakhstani Russians consume on social media?
7.3.1 Local social media offers	Kazakhstani Russian-language bloggers, friends, official media, city-related accounts
7.2.1.1 Official accounts of the government	Contact with the government and following official political accounts on social media
7.2.1.2 Grassroots regional communities	Creating online-based communities of local people
7.2.1.3 News about Kazakhstan is not interesting	Official news by state-sponsored media is boring and not trustworthy
7.3.2 Western sources of information	Western bloggers, friends, user-generated accounts, official media; West-related mass culture like, e.g., films, music, which reproduces Western values
7.2.2.1 Involvement in global events	Following events from all over the world, besides Russia and the post-Soviet space
7.3.3 Russian sources of information	Russian bloggers, friends, user-generated accounts, official media on social media
7.2.3.1 Involvement in Russian socio-political life	Whether state- or oppositional position, young Kazakhstani Russians are following the socio-political events in Russia
7.3.4 Visual content & memes	Interest in pictures, videos, and memes
7.3.5 Personalities/bloggers	Russia-based personalities/bloggers who are followed by young Kazakhstanis

7.3.6 News in Social Media	Political and social international and local news spreading on social media
7.3.7 Friends posts	The importance of the posts shared by friends
7.3.8 Automatically generated content	Content recommendations on social media; technical aspect of Social Media; proactive vs. reactive usage
7.3.9 Alternative imagination/ 'echo chamber'	Trying to create their own online world. The 'bubble-effect' – social media serves as a source for an alternative national imagining for young Kazakhstani Russians
7.3.10 The problem of information overload	Difficulties with handling a large quantity of information; more trust in services than systematic information, e.g., pictures, infographics, and short videos.
7.3.11 Geography of an account does not matter	The country of content origin is not important; cultural, but not geographical space
7.3.12 Entertainment in social media	Consuming interesting information, sensations, and humor to get more impressions
7.3.13 Confidence/trust and an alternative point of view	Why do they trust information and which role do alternative sources play in this process?
7.4 Content production	How do young Kazakhstani Russians produce social media content – on personal profiles and in public accounts?
7.4.1 Online-activism	Trying to change the political system online; helping local communities online
7.4.2 Posting personal content	Posting private information (e.g., about socio-political views, everyday activities, achievements) in private profiles
7.4.3 Repost	Reposting information to a personal profile from different social media accounts
7.4.4 Comments	Comments as an opportunity to express opinions?
7.4.4.1 Sharing with close friends	Sharing information only with a small circle of close friends
7.4.4.2 Private message vs. public comment/post	Preferring to write a private message instead of posting a public comment or post
7.4.5 Self-censorship	Avoiding certain socio-political topics on social media
7.4.5.1 Conflict avoidance	Not posting and commenting in public accounts helps to avoid conflicts and shitstorms

7.4.5.2 Missing freedom of the Internet	Issues related to the general freedom of the Internet in Kazakhstan
7.4.5.3 Fear of repressions	Political repressions and other consequences due to public posting and commenting
8 Miscellaneous	Aspects that were mentioned only once throughout the material and were not central to the research

## D. Codebook for Quantitative content analysis (QnCA)

Instagram posts from:

@almaty.today  
@v\_astane\_official  
@sxodim  
@sxodim.astana

Time span: 15.04.2017-15.05.2017

Indicators: 1=yes, 0=no, n=not given/missing values

### I General description (created inductively)

Content “genre” – which thematic direction of the content can, by analogy with genres in the newspaper or on TV, be identified?

Content presentation – which visual elements are used? What is the average amount of words in textual content?

Content sources – unique content or external source?

Popularity – how many ‘likes’ does every post with an image receive? How many views does every post with a video receive?

### II Indicators of national paradigms

#### 1. Transnational paradigm

##### 1.1. Presenting international cooperation

Presenting international partners of Kazakhstan, and international companies, which are working in Kazakhstan, foreign politics, and all information, presenting Kazakhstan and their regions as active members of the international community. Russian and partners/companies from states of the Eurasian Union are excluded.

*E.g., “Kazakhstan is organizing international public exhibition EXPO2017”, “In Kazakhstan has arrived German chancellor Angela Merkel”, “A new MBA Program was introduced in a university of Astana”*

*E.g., Images of flags or any state symbols, state representatives, international organizations like UN, OSCE, international companies, like EXPO, global corporations, etc.*

##### 1.2. Usage of the English language

All possible English words are written in the Latin or Cyrillic alphabets in different contexts as part of posts, hashtags, or nicknames in case of comments, but not as names of accounts, like, e.g., @almaty.today, brands, goods, and personal names

*E.g. Astana Consulting Service/Астана консалтинг сервис*



### 1.3. Advertising international events for Kazakhstanis

All possible services and events, which are connected with international trends and/or international artists; ads of tourism, education abroad, except Russia

*E.g., “On 14th of May will be a concert by Italian opera singer”, “A new film with Jonny Depp starts in all Almaty’s cinemas next week”, “We offer to you to spend one week in Prague for 1500 Dollar all included”*

*E.g., Images of international artists, different places abroad, trailers of foreign films, tour of foreign artists, excepting Russian ones*

### 1.4. Presenting global brands

All mentioned international brands and goods, besides Russian, and new technological ones

*E.g., “In the accident the driver of Toyota Supra was bruised”, advertisement of Adidas, “I usually drink Coca-Cola”*

*E.g., Images of the international brands and goods and their symbols.*

### 1.5. Presenting of innovation and modern technologies

All mentioned modern technologies in IT, medicine, transport, etc., which are connected with modernity and international standards in the Kazakhstani context

*E.g., “A fleet of public buses in Almaty was upgraded with new sustainable buses”, “A new center for scientific and engineering research is looking for new fellows.”*

*E.g., Images of modern technologies, of people working with modern technologies, results from modern technologies like, e.g., Skyscrapers, E-cars or similar.”*

## 2. **Kazakhstani paradigm**

### 2.1. Presenting images of the Soviet past

All information, which is connected to the Soviet past or directly represents Soviet Kazakhstan.

*E.g., Soviet/Russian names of streets, parks – Gorky park, Pushkin street, “In the 1930s in Almaty the Opera house was opened”, “A celebration of Victory’s day was organized by the state administration”*

*E.g., Images of Soviet buildings, symbols of Soviet time such as monuments, etc.*

### 2.2. Presenting the multiethnic character of Kazakhstan

Presenting a multiethnic and multicultural structure of Kazakhstani society, Eurasianism, Kazakhstan as a “common home” related to the soviet concept of Friendship of the Peoples, not including religious issues

*E.g., In Kazakhstan, there is peaceful cohabitation, “Maria Sharygina and Karlygash Umay won the Olympiad in Mathematics”*

*E.g., images of ethnically different people*

### 2.3. Usage of the term *Kazakhstani*

Presence or absence of the word, particularly in images

*E.g., “Dear Kazakhstanis”, “Kazakhstani people”, “Kazakhstani universities”*

### 2.4. Presenting the Eurasian integration through cooperation with Russia

Representation of regional integration and common interests with Russia and country-members of the Eurasian Union, Russia as the closest political and economic partner

*E.g., “Today was concluded an agreement between Russia and Kazakhstan”, “New Russian film is starting in cinemas”, “Armenian restaurants opened in Astana.” E.g., Images of Nazarbayev and Putin close to each other, Russian goods and services in Kazakhstan, services from countries-members of the Eurasian Union, Russian artists and artists from countries-members of Eurasian Union, etc.*

### 2.5. Presenting the Russian Orthodoxy

Representation of Christian religious traditions, especially Russian Orthodox Church traditions

*E.g. “President Nazarbayev has congratulated on Easter all peoples of Kazakhstan”, mention of Jesus Christ, God, etc.*

*E.g., Images of churches, icons, crosses, and other Christian symbols.*

## 3. **Kazakh paradigm**

### 3.1. Presenting Kazakh ethnic culture

Representation of all possible information related directly or implicitly to Kazakh ethnic culture and tradition

*E.g., “Tomorrow we are celebrating Nauryz holiday”, “On Tuesday the expedition about Kazakh traditional costumes will be opened in Almaty”*

*E.g., Images of Kazakh traditional costumes, traditional food, ornaments, traditional celebrations, Kazakh traditional music instruments, etc.*

### 3.2. Political independence of Kazakhstan

Representing Kazakhstan as a “historical accomplishment” of the Kazakh nation, excluding other ethnic groups and emphasizing the independence from Russia or other countries.

*E.g., “The 500th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate will be celebrated next year”, “The independence of our country is our biggest achievement” E.g., Photos of national symbols, monuments related to Kazakhstan’s independence, photos, which are emphasizing Kazakh ethnic homogeneity, photos of Army and state institutions*

### 3.3. Usage of the term *Kazakh*

Presence or absence of the word, particularly in images

*E.g., “Kazakh nation”, “Kazakh state university”, “All Kazakhs”*

### 3.4. Usage of the Kazakh language

All possible usages of the Kazakh language, except personal names and official titles

### 3.5. Presenting Muslim traditions

Representation of Muslim traditions in an official and everyday context

*E.g., “Today Ramadan has started”, “Oh Allah”*

*E.g., Images of a mosque, of Muslim people praying, of Muslim clothes such as hijab*

## 4. Negative sentiment

The general negative sentiment expressed through negative incidents in or related to Kazakhstan, criticism regarding Kazakhstan, including emojis and smilies

*E.g., “There were five traffic accidents in Astana tonight”, “The construction of EXPO exhibition complex is too slow”*

*E.g., Images of accidents, crying people, criminals, damaged buildings, etc.*

## 5. Positive sentiment

The general positive sentiment expressed through positive events happening in Kazakhstan and demonstrating the development of the country, successful projects regarding Kazakhstan, including emojis and smilies

*E.g., “Many visitors from the whole world are going to visit EXPO in Kazakhstan”, “The average salary in Kazakhstan was increased”*

*E.g., sunny pictures, presenting local region or Kazakhstan in the best light, inducing positive emotions of people - facial expressions such as smile, upright posture*

## 6. Neutral sentiment

Neither positive nor negative

*E.g., “The weather in Almaty will be warmer tomorrow than today”, “How are you going to spend your weekend- opinion polls”*

*E.g., Pictures of irrelevant objects*

## E. List of External Media Sources on Urban Instagram Accounts

Sources of posts' textual description	@almaty.today		@v_astane_official		@sxodim (Almaty)		@sxodim.astana		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
almaty.tv	1	0,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
azattyq.org	0	0,0	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
bnews.kz	1	0,7	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	2	0,3
CDM.kz	1	0,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
Elorda.info	0	0,0	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
inform.kz	1	0,7	3	1,9	0	0,0	0	0,0	4	0,7
informburo.kz	<b>5</b>	<b>3,4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6,7</b>	0	0,0	0	0,0	15	<b>2,4</b>
kazinform.kz	0	0,0	5	3,2	0	0,0	0	0,0	5	0,9
kolesa.kz	2	1,4	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	2	0,3
krisha.kz	1	0,7	0	0,0	1	0,7	0	0,0	2	0,3
motor.kz	1	0,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
newtimes.kz	0	0,0	5	3,2	0	0,0	0	0,0	5	0,9
nur.kz	4	2,7	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	5	0,9
ratel.kz	0	0,0	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
sputniknews.kz	3	2,0	1	0,6	1	0,7	0	0,0	5	0,9
tengrinews.kz	<b>18</b>	<b>12,1</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>14,8</b>	1	0,7	2	1,4	44	<b>7,5</b>
today.kz	4	2,7	8	5,4	1	0,7	0	0,0	13	<b>2,2</b>
vesti.kz	1	0,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
zakon.kz	6	4,1	0	0,0	1	0,7	0	0,0	7	1,2
vechastana.kz	0	0,0	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
Instagram: @sxodim Almaty	1	0,7	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
Instagram: Armenot Stories	0	0,0	1	0,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	1	0,2
Original content	97	66,0	93	60,0	132	96,5	144	98,6	466	<b>79,5</b>

## F. Presence of Three National Paradigms in Instagram Content Elements

Post element (all pages)	Transnationalism	Kazakhstaness	Kazakhness
Testual description	43%	32%	26%
Comments	17%	36%	13%
Visual element	38%	25%	22%

Transnationalism	@almaty.today	@shodim (Almaty)	@shodim.astana	@v_astane_official	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages
Testual description	21%	<b>56%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>46%</b>	38%	48%
Comments	30%	14%	13%	11%	23%	12%
Visual element	32%	38%	51%	32%	35%	41%

Kazakhstaness	@almaty.today	@shodim (Almaty)	@shodim.astana	@v_astane_official	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages
Testual description	26%	37%	30%	34%	32%	32%
Comments	<b>57%</b>	36%	17%	31%	48%	25%
Visual element	32%	32%	20%	14%	32%	17%

Kazakhness	@almaty.today	@shodim (Almaty)	@shodim.astana	@v_astane_official	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages
Testual description	22%	27%	26%	29%	25%	28%
Comments	19%	7%	7%	17%	14%	12%
Visual element	26%	19%	26%	19%	23%	22%

## G. Number of National Paradigms' Indicators in Instagram Content Elements

Textual description	Transnationalism		Mean*	Median	Kazakhstaness		Mean*	Median	Kazakhness		Mean*	Median
	N*	%			N*	%			N*	%		
1 indicator	168	29%	<b>1,41</b>	1,00	135	23%	1,34	1,00	108	19%	<b>1,40</b>	1,00
2 indicators	67	11%			38	7%			30	5%		
3 indicators	11	2%			13	2%			12	2%		
4 indicators	5	1%			0	0%			2	0%		
All indicators	0	0%			0	0%			0	0%		
Not mentioned	335	57%			400	68%			434	74%		

\* for posts with at least one indicator

Comments	Transnationalism		Mean*	Median	Kazakhstaness		Mean*	Median	Kazakhness		Mean*	Median
	N*	%			N*	%			N*	%		
1 indicator	86	15%	1,10	1,00	180	32%	1,10	1,00	66	12%	1,12	1,00
2 indicators	10	2%			21	4%			5	1%		
3 indicators	0	0			0	0%			2	0%		
4 indicators	0	0			0	0%			0	0%		
All indicators	0	0			0	0%			0	0%		
Not mentioned	469	83%			364	64%			492	87%		

Images/videos	Transnationalism		Mean*	Median	Kazakhstaness		Mean*	Median	Kazakhness		Mean*	Median
	N*	%			N*	%			N*	%		
1 indicator	147	25%	<b>1,41</b>	1,00	117	20%	1,20	1,00	93	16%	<b>1,35</b>	1,00
2 indicators	61	11%			22	4%			28	5%		
3 indicators	8	1%			3	1%			9	2%		
4 indicators	5	1%			0	0%			0	0%		
All indicators	0	0%			0	0%			0	0%		
Not mentioned	358	62%			434	76%			449	77%		

## H. City Differences Regarding the Indicators' Appearance

Indicators of Transnationalism	Almaty-related Instagram accounts		Nur Sultan-related Instagram accounts		Significance
	Mean	Mean rank	Mean	Mean rank	
Textual description	1,43	125,7	1,41	126,2	
Comments	1,11	49,0	1,09	47,6	
Images/videos	1,60	<b>125,7</b>	1,27	<b>99,1</b>	***

Indicators of Kazakhstaness	Almaty-related Instagram accounts		Nur Sultan-related Instagram accounts		Significance
	Mean	Mean rank	Mean	Mean rank	
Textual description	1,34	92,4	1,35	94,6	
Comments	1,14	<b>104,5</b>	1,04	<b>94,7</b>	**
Images/videos	1,20	71,5	1,20	71,5	

Indicators of Kazakhness	Almaty-related Instagram accounts		Nur Sultan-related Instagram accounts		Significance
	Mean	Mean rank	Mean	Mean rank	
Textual description	1,35	74,1	1,43	78,5	
Comments	1,03	<b>34,5</b>	1,22	<b>39,6</b>	**
Images/videos	1,36	66,8	1,35	64,3	

\*\*\* p < 0.001

\*\*p = 0.030 and 0.042



## I. National Paradigms' Indicators in Instagram Content Elements

Indicators of Transnationalism	Textual description		Comments		Visual content	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
International cooperation	78	13%	11	2%	48	8%
Usage of the English language	143	<b>24%</b>	75	<b>13%</b>	84	<b>15%</b>
International events	50	8%	6	1%	43	7%
Global brands	33	6%	13	2%	55	10%
Innovation and modern technologies	51	9%	1	0%	83	14%
Total	355	60%	106	18%	313	54%

Indicators of Kazakhstaness	Textual description		Comments		Visual content	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Images of the Soviet past	84	14%	22	4%	64	11%
The multiethnic character of Kazakhstan	100	<b>17%</b>	191	<b>34%</b>	87	<b>15%</b>
Usage of the term Kazakhstani	31	5%	3	0%	2	0%
Eurasian integration through cooperation with Russia	30	5%	1	0%	15	3%
The Russian Orthodoxy	5	1%	5	1%	2	0%
Total	250	42%	222	39%	170	29%

Indicators of Kazakhsness	Textual description		Comments		Visual content	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Kazakh ethnic culture	42	7%	3	0%	79	<b>14%</b>
Political independence of Kazakhstan	50	9%	4	1%	39	7%
Usage of the term Kazakh	22	4%	8	1%	2	0%
Usage of the Kazakh language	93	<b>16%</b>	62	<b>11%</b>	45	8%
Muslim traditions	5	1%	5	1%	11	2%
Total	212	37%	82	14%	176	31%

Indicators of Transnationalism in textual description	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
International cooperation	8%	18%	**	17%	10%	**
Usage of English language	24%	25%		17%	33%	***
International events for Kazakhstanis	10%	7%		3%	15%	***
International brands	5%	6%		5%	7%	
Innovation and modern technologies	6%	11%	**	11%	6%	**

Indicators of Kazakhstaness in textual description	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Images of Soviet past	16%	13%		15%	13%	
Multiethnic character of Kazakhstan	17%	17%		15%	19%	
Using term Kazakhstani	5%	6%		7%	4%	
Eurasian integration	3%	7%	**	3%	7%	**
Russian Orthodox religion traditions	0%	1%		1%	1%	

Indicators of Kazakhness in textual description	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Kazakh ethnic culture	6%	8%		4%	11%	***
Emphasizing independency of Kazakhstan	9%	8%		11%	6%	**
Using term Kazakh	4%	3%		1%	6%	***
Using Kazakh language	13%	19%		16%	16%	
Muslim tradition	0%	1%		0%	1%	

Indicators of Transnationalism in comments	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
International cooperation	2%	2%		3%	1%	
Usage of English language	19%	8%	***	17%	10%	**
International events for Kazakhstanis	1%	1%		0%	2%	**
International brands	3%	2%		7%	2%	
Innovation and modern technologies	0%	0%		0%	0%	

Indicators of Kazakhstaness in comments	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Images of Soviet past	7%	1%	***	5%	3%	
Multiethnic character of Kazakhstan	46%	23%	***	42%	24%	***
Using term Kazakhstani	0%	1%		1%	0%	

Eurasian integration	0%	0%		0%	0%	
Russian Orthodox religion traditions	2%	0%	**	2%	0%	**

Indicators of Kazakhness in comments	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Kazakh ethnic culture	1%	0%		0%	1%	
Emphasizing independency of Kazakhstan	1%	0%		1%	1%	
Using term Kazakh	1%	1%		2%	0%	
Using Kazakh language	11%	11%		15%	6%	***
Muslim tradition	0%	2%	**	1%	1%	

Indicators of Transnationalism in visual content	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
International cooperation	10%	7%		12%	4%	***
Usage of English language	17%	12%		10%	20%	***
International events for Kazakhstanis	9%	6%		2%	14%	***
International brands	10%	9%		11%	8%	
Innovation and modern technologies	11%	18%	**	16%	13%	

Indicators of Kazakhstaness in visual content	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Images of Soviet past	16%	7%	***	13%	9%	
Multiethnic character of Kazakhstan	20%	11%	**	14%	16%	
Using term Kazakhstani	0%	0%		0%	1%	
Eurasian integration	3%	3%		2%	3%	
Russian Orthodox religion traditions	1%	0%		1%	0%	

Indicators of Kazakhness in visual content	Almaty-related Instagram pages	Nur Sultan-related Instagram pages	Significance	News-oriented Instagram pages	Event announcement oriented Instagram pages	Significance
Kazakh ethnic culture	12%	16%		11%	16%	

Emphasizing independency of Kazakhstan	8%	5%		9%	4%	**
Using term Kazakh	1%	0%		0%	1%	
Using Kazakh language	9%	7%		8%	8%	
Muslim tradition	2%	2%		1%	3%	

## J. Differences in General Sentiment Between Instagram Content Elements

General sentiment in textual description	Almaty Instagram accounts		Nur-Sultan Instagram accounts		Significance	News oriented Instagram accounts		Event announcement oriented Instagram accounts		Significance
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%	
Positiv	160	57%	174	58%		140	47%	194	69%	***
Negativ	17	6%	42	14%	**	57	19%	2	1%	***
Neutral	106	37%	83	28%	**	104	34%	85	30%	

General sentiment in comments	Almaty Instagram accounts		Nur-Sultan Instagram accounts		Significance	News oriented Instagram accounts		Event announcement oriented Instagram accounts		Significance
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%	
Positiv	137	51%	114	39%	**	138	45%	113	44%	
Negativ	32	12%	64	22%	**	84	28%	12	5%	***
Neutral	99	37%	114	39%		81	27%	132	51%	***

General sentiment in visual content	Almaty Instagram accounts		Nur-Sultan Instagram accounts		Significance	News oriented Instagram accounts		Event announcement oriented Instagram accounts		Significance
	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%	
Positiv	193	68%	193	65%		175	59%	212	77%	**
Negativ	29	11%	33	12%		42	14%	20	7%	**
Neutral	59	21%	68	23%		82	27%	61	16%	**