

Why Kazakhstan is Changing Alphabets **<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ310om9JCY>** **Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/kazakhstan.pdf>**

This video is sponsored by Dashlane. Quickly, seamlessly fill your passwords free for 30 days with the link in the description.

As your plane descends, beginning its landing into Nur-Sultan, you see the beautiful green steppe which covers Kazakhstan.

Or, in winter, sprawling rows of snow as far as the eye can see, making Nur-Sultan the second-coldest capital in the world.

Before you even step foot on its soil, the view from your seat is a quite literal window into Kazakhstan as a whole.

The shining blue dome of the airport is a preview of the weird, futuristic architecture to come.

On both sides is the airport's name - written in Cyrillic on one side and Latin on the other, reflecting its ethnic and linguistic diversity.

The letters on the left, however, will soon be made obsolete.

On October 26th, 2017, Nazarbayev issued Presidential Decree 569, changing the entire Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to one based on Latin.

This letter, for example, will become this one. This, will become this, and so on.

By 2025, every letter in this 18-million person country - every sign, textbook, menu, street sign, website, and logo, will be rewritten, and teachers, retrained.

The government has budgeted \$600 million for this transition, about 90% of which will be spent teaching the public how to read and write this newly invented alphabet.

Officially the reason for this extraordinary project is simple: the 42-symbols of the Cyrillic alphabet make typing difficult.

Latin simplifies the language, making it easier to learn, write, and type. The truth is far more complicated. And, political.

Split between Europe and Asia, Kazakhstan is a lot of things... The 9th largest country measured by area, the largest landlocked country, and the 3rd most Russian speaking country in the world.

But its defining feature might be its lack of a single, unifying feature.

Kazakhstan is a nation of many - many languages, cultures, cuisines, even holidays.

Officially, it celebrates three different New Years: January 1st, then the 14th - a leftover from the Julian calendar of its Soviet days, and again in March.

Once entirely nomadic, Kazakhstan's land was invaded by the Mongol Empire and colonized by the Russian Empire, before establishing brief independence.

In 1920 it became a Soviet autonomous republic.

Russia encouraged its transformation from nomadic groups into settlements, but its collectivization efforts killed over a million and a half people, one-fifth of its population at the time, mostly due to starvation and disease.

During this time, many Kazakhs fled to neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China.

In 1936, Kazakhstan became a full, constituent republic of the Soviet Union.

Its northeastern town now called Semey was used by Moscow as the site of its first nuclear bomb test, followed by hundreds more, until the ecological and biological consequences were impossible to ignore.

To this day, the country pays dearly for its past.

In 2013, residents of a small village called Kalachi began falling asleep for days or even weeks at a time.

Before killing 152 people, doctors suspected counterfeit vodka was the culprit.

A global investigation eventually revealed the cause: a nearby abandoned Soviet-era Uranium mine.

On the 16th of December, 1991, Kazakhstan declared independence, 10 days before the Soviet Union, itself, dissolved.

Like its neighbors, the new state found its factories underperforming, economy failing, and the mouths of its people desperate to be fed.

But Kazakhstan was unique in one major respect: it was, by far, the most ethnically diverse.

In 1989, Armenia was 93% Armenian, Lithuania, 79% Lithuanian, and Georgia, 70% Georgian. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, just 39% Kazakh.

It is and long has been a giant blend of people - thanks, in large part, to Soviet migration.

Between 1907 and 12, newly built railways brought 2.4 million people from central Russia to North Kazakhstan.

Another 1.7 million migrants arrived between 54 and 62 in the Soviet Union's Virgin Lands campaign to boost agricultural output.

Migration within the Soviet Union wasn't especially political at the time, but after its fall, these mere details of history became a serious challenge to the sovereignty of Kazakhstan, who, lacking a unified ethnic group, had to fight extra hard to be seen as a viable state.

Kazakhs, at 40% of the population, were themselves a minority, despite being the name of the country. Slavs, with 44%, often felt displaced by the new political climate and threatened to form their own state.

In all, 2.6 million people left Kazakhstan in the 90s. Mostly, Russians returning to Russia.

In modern times, Putin has been known to make subtle threats which question the legitimacy of its southern neighbor, suggesting it may lack the unity necessary for statehood.

At the same time, Russia is its most important ally.

Kazakhstan has the 12th largest proven oil reserves in the world, on par with China or the U.S.

This alone is the single biggest factor responsible for its economic prosperity when compared to other Central Asian nations like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Unfortunately, as you may remember, it has no direct access to the sea.

This forces it to transport much of its oil through Russia, to ports in the Black Sea, for example.

This was and continues to be the central challenge of Kazakhstan.

At a time when Russia is eager to expand its borders, Kazakhstan must perform the delicate balancing act of actively asserting its sovereignty, while, at the same time, not angering its most important ally.

Because anything too aggressive might prompt a response from Russia, this usually manifests as soft, cultural and symbolic changes designed to prove its identity.

It's language, for example. In the late 30s, the Soviet Union feared its minority ethnic groups might develop a shared, non-Soviet identity.

To prevent this, it created almost 20 different varieties of the Cyrillic alphabet for each of their languages, including Kazakh.

During this time, Russian spread rapidly to Kazakhstan.

So, while Kazakh has long been its "state language", Russian is still more widely spoken.

Even more confusing - because Kazakh was written in Arabic script before Cyrillic, those who fled to China or elsewhere during Soviet times will return without knowing how to read or write their own language.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have changed their alphabets.

But, because of its diversity, Kazakhstan has been more careful to maintain stability, only now following their lead.

The original, 2017 plan was to use a 32 letter Latin-based alphabet, but it was revised last year after public backlash over its nine letters with apostrophes, which made the language unnecessarily complicated.

Although not an official goal, the government also manages its ethnic blend through immigration.

A special returnee program offers incentives like one-time relocation payments, subsidized housing, and expedited citizenship for overseas Kazakhs to return home.

Almaty, its most populous city, has gone from 22% Kazakh at independence to 60% in 2018. 17 to 78% in Nur-Sultan.

Immigrants are specifically encouraged to settle in its northern towns bordering Russia, some of which are 60 or 80% Russian, under the veneer of offsetting labor shortages.

These Slavic areas are carefully monitored for separatists by the government, which doesn't hesitate to make arrests.

Towering above one town is a not-so-subtle reminder of its authority: "Kazakhstan" written in giant white letters.

One family dispute between ethnic groups in 2015 was quickly met with riot-gear wearing police, who shut down all internet within a 120-kilometer radius to prevent the spread of conflict.

Russian Nationalists, in turn, use incidents like these to argue the mistreatment of Slavs, and the need for intervention on their behalf.

Finally, if there was still any doubt of Kazakhstan's desire to assert control in its Slavic-North, in 1997, it made the drastic decision to move its capital from Almaty to a new planned city called Astana, later renamed Nur-Sultan in 2019.

Again, the change was made on the pretense that Almaty was too small and at risk of earthquakes.

Like other declarations made by cultish dictators, it was met with laughter from the foreign press.

In reality, it was a calculated step to exert political power in the more Russian North.

It's peculiar, futuristic architecture very intentionally paints a picture of a modern, prosperous city, not another ex-Soviet "something-stan".

All the while, it continues pleasing Russia. Its city Baikonur, for example, is leased to Russia until 2050 for use as the first and largest running spaceport.

Because of Soviet-era construction, some Kazakhstani rail routes even pass through Russian territory.

For the most part, Russia is satisfied with this arrangement.

Kazakhstan has ensured regional stability and acted as a buffer, protecting Moscow from less amicable states.

But the implied warning beneath Putin's occasional subtle threats is that its borders could easily be... embraced should the country ever stop being useful.

In recent years, China has emerged as a powerful new economic partner.

Today, a quarter of its oil is controlled by Chinese corporations, and the border town of Khorgos has been turned into a major trade hub where trains from Western Europe connect with Eastern China, saving weeks of travel by boat or millions of dollars, by air.

Although its profitability is in doubt, it has become the poster child for China's \$1 Trillion Dollar Belt and Road investment crusade.

The Kazakhstan government argues China is the key to decreasing its dependence on oil. And, so far, it's worked.

Kazakhstan is a model example of how to satisfy a diverse mix of people.

It's preserved Russia as its security ally, appeased its own ethnic Russians, and fostered a new relationship with China on its eastern border, all while outperforming the economies of its Central Asian neighbors.

It's managed all this by creating its own brutal flavor of authoritarianism.

As the nation's only president from 1991 until this year, the personality cult of Nursultan Nazarbayev rivaled that of Kim Jong-Un.

He once humbly declared, "I have categorically put a stop to all praise directed at me and proposals to especially glorify me personally... I have always tried to be above all kinds of praise and eulogies and I will continue to uphold this position."

The capital city, its airport, and university were then named in his honor.

After winning 97.7% of the vote in 2015 elections, Nazarbayev apologized, suggesting he could have intervened to lower his margin, but that would've looked undemocratic.

He also once said public servants ought to retire after 25 years, before continuing to serve for 29.

52% of the population was born during his rule, leading to extreme political stability, and a country which rarely receives international attention, despite being every bit as dictatorial as Russia or China.

This, however, is the inherent vulnerability of authoritarianism.

Its true fragility is never quite known - discontent is masked by fear of punishment for speaking out, until, all at once, it's let loose, and the previously restrained anger suddenly boils over.

A perfectly stable-appearing authoritarian state can rapidly descend into chaos, but it's impossible to know when or even if such a revolution is coming.

For Kazakhstan, there are already warning signs: China's detention of Uyghurs and Kazakhs within its borders has led to a rapid growth in anti-China sentiment in Kazakhstan, where China's involvement is seen as a liability, not an opportunity.

So, when the government announced a plan to auction farmland to Chinese investors, many citizens protested.

Russia's annexation of Crimea has also made the country wary, as the next largest Russian and energy-rich country on its border.

Domestically, some ethnic Slavs in Kazakhstan increasingly feel like second-class citizens, forced to abandon their own language and alienated from their own government.

Since its founding, Kazakhstan has been a nation defined by its central geographic position between two continents, two globally-powerful giants, and hundreds of cultural identities.

But it remains to be seen whether this fusion will be its biggest asset, or, it's undoing.

Now, whether you live in an authoritarian state like Kazakhstan or not, you should be using Dashlane to generate, encrypt, and fill your passwords.

Personally, I've used password managers for years simply because it's easy: with one click you have a new, safe password, and with another, you're logged in.

Unlike other systems like Keychain or Chrome, your private information is synced across all your browsers and devices.

Even better, Dashlane comes with a VPN so you can, for example, watch U.S. Netflix while traveling abroad.

For me, UI and convenience are really important, which is why I'm especially pleased with their mobile apps, which are updated regularly.

Use the link in the description to get a free 30-day trial of Dashlane Premium - credit card not required.

If you like it, use my code "polymatter" at checkout for 10% off and to support the channel.

Thanks to Dashlane and to you for watching this video.