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A Nation's Holy Land: Kazakhstan's Large-Scale National Project to Map Its Sacred Geography

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Abstract

This article focuses on the project Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan, launched in 2017 in Kazakhstan as part of the nationwide program Ruqani Zhangyru (Modernization of Spirituality). The officially stated goal of the project is to cultivate a sense of patriotism in the country's residents related to places and geographic sites that are important for the historical memory of independent Kazakhstan. The authors assume that the real goal of the project is national territorialization, or recoding of the semantics of space, by selecting, codifying, and articulating some symbols and practices, while leveling and “forgetting” others. The analysis, which is based on expert interviews and official documents, shows that this postcolonial process fits into the tendency toward ethnonationalization of Kazakhstan, in which discourse on the civil nation continues to be reproduced at the official level, while real activity is more focused on reinforcing the idea of Kazakhstan as the state of the Kazakh nation. The institutionalization of organizing and recoding the sacred landscape involves a wide variety of groups and actors. These factors may explain the success of the project in comparison to other projects being implemented under the Ruqani Zhangyru program.

Keywords: sacred geography; Kazakhstan; nationalism; territory; national territorialization

In April 2017, Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of Kazakhstan at the time, published an article titled “A Look into the Future: Modernization of Spirituality,” (Akorda 2017) proposing a new national program, Ruqani Zhangyru (or, modernization of spirituality).¹ The program is aimed at preservation of Kazakhstan's cultural and spiritual values and their adaptation to contemporary conditions. Among other high-priority projects Nazarbayev proposed as part of Ruqani Zhangyru, he mentioned one designed to preserve and promote public awareness of geographic sites of regional and national significance – The Spiritual Shrines of Kazakhstan project – which later was renamed Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan. In his programmatic article, Nazarbayev called for binding the totality of geographic sites that were memorable for national history with the national identity of the country's citizens. For this project, the government allocated significant budgetary funds and created a specialized government institution – the National Research Center “Sacred Kazakhstan.”

The analysis of the project's basic documents and intermediate results suggests that its real objective is to cultivate the collective identity of Kazakhs through symbolic nationalization of Kazakhstan's territory, reactualizing and recoding the semantic field of geographical space in the paradigm of an ethnonational state. The discourse of Kazakhs' right to the territory they historically held occupies an important place in social consciousness in Kazakhstan today. The question of the historical right to territory is constantly raised by activists and politicians of a nationalist bent, who

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insist that ethnic Kazakhs have a right to privileged preservation and reproduction of their native culture and language, as well as to symbolic control over territory inside the republic (Oka 2002; Laruelle 2015).² This right is exercised in a procession of renaming initiatives for settlements and streets, which stir up consistent public debate.³ The prioritization of the country's titular nation's rights is based on notions of the "inherited state," primordial cohesion of the people and its homeland, bonds of the statehood and landscape, and the historical struggle of the Kazakhs for the right to own their territories. Meanwhile, the rights of non-Kazakh ethnic groups, based on the comparative duration of their presence in certain Kazakh lands and their use of them for agriculture, are cast into doubt (Diener 2002, 635).⁴ In this context, the Ruqani Zhangyru program's initiatives can be viewed as an attempt on the part of authorities to "settle the matter," gain control over this sensitive issue in domestic politics, and legitimize the regime in the eyes of Kazakh nationalists.

No less important a motivation for the authorities' interest in symbolic geography is Russia's vaguely articulated claims for sovereignty over some adjacent territories of Kazakhstan, where a significant portion of the Russian population is concentrated. Russian authorities have also stated their doubts about the existence of Kazakh state formations in the past.⁵ It makes sense that such disturbing international political signals could provoke authorities to bind the identity of the dominant ethnic group to a geographic area, thereby nationalizing its territory (Diener 2002, 635). These bonds can be achieved by revitalizing the memory of forgotten sites and practices of past generations, reconstructing pilgrimage routes, and creating new practices of honoring – as well as codifying – symbolically significant and historically important sacred sites and places.

In this article, we argue that the project Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan fits into the politics of national territorialization pursued in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and is aimed at strengthening the political dominance of the Kazakh majority. We will show this by analyzing the program documents of the project, the content of discussions that took place within the pool of experts involved in the project implementation process, and the views of other actors. We will show how the project involved a wide range of enthusiasts in its orbit, which, on the one hand, made it the most successful of the Ruqani Zhangyru program, and on the other hand, made it deal with disputes both within the expert community and between experts and regional activists.

The article is based on materials and anonymized interviews collected by the authors between 2018 and 2020. Unstructured interviews were conducted with an employee of the Sacred Kazakhstan Research Center (Expert 2), discussed in this article, and members of the expert committee at the center (Experts 1 and 3), who were involved in the development of the basic concepts and assumptions of the Sacred Geography project. One of the employees at a Nur-Sultan academic institution who spoke with us is referred to as Expert 4.

Nation and Territory

Theorists of nationalism have repeatedly emphasized the importance of national territory for nation-building (Smith 1999; Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm 1998).⁶ The transformation of the territory into the nation's property is initiated by authorities, but over time, it becomes part of collective consciousness (Shlomo Sand 2012). In the formation of national thinking, an important role is played not only by the idea of borders that outline the contours of national state (Winichakul 1994) but also by geographical landscape imbued with historical memory, which is often attributed to transcendental qualities (Azaryahu and Kellerman 1999; Koshar 2000; Connor 1978; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010; Hennayake 1992). In national states, the landscape often becomes an element of collective identity, and the national territory and place names acquire political and ideological dimensions. The process of asserting the political domination of a certain ethnonation often occurs in the form of toponymic cleansing, when the "alien" political semantics is replaced by its own.⁷ Azaryahu (2011, 31) identifies three ways in which ethnonational groups can move, achieving sovereignty over their territory: (1) complete rejection of the previous order, (2) its preservation,

and (3) selective decommemorialization. The material presented in this article speaks in favor of the fact that Kazakhstan, as a nationalizing state,⁸ has instead taken the third path.

According to Brubaker, as a result of the collapse of the USSR and the processes of territorial reorganization, nominally independent states came into existence, but they still had to be “filled with national content bringing population, territory, culture and polity into the close congruence that defines a fully realized nation-state” (Brubaker 2011, 1786). Scholars have often noted that the past three decades of Kazakhstan’s independence have been characterized by regular shifts between two nation-building paradigms – the civil and the ethnonational (Karin and Chebotarev 2002; Diener 2002; Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2011).⁹ In practice, a multiethnic state such as Kazakhstan rarely embodies either paradigm in its purest form and often develops as a hybrid of the two (Brubaker 1999). Nur-Sultan’s current policies provide convincing evidence of this.¹⁰ At the highest levels, Kazakhstan’s authorities insist that all citizens are equal regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, and the People’s Assembly, founded in 1995, remains a functioning institution that exerts a certain amount of influence on government policies.¹¹ However, the discourse of Kazakhstan as the traditional homeland of the Kazakh people, to which they finally gained full sovereign rights in 1991, remains important in domestic politics. Kazakhification of Kazakhstan is carried out through the elevation of the status of the Kazakh language, the policy of resettlement of Kazakhs from abroad, the relocation of the Kazakh population to the northern regions of Kazakhstan, and the renaming of toponyms (Diener 2002; Kolstø 1998; Davé 2007; Brubaker 2011; Volkan 2019). We believe that the project Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan is a continuation of these efforts of the official authorities to assert the political dominance of the titular Kazakh nation and its sovereign rights over the entire territory of Kazakhstan.

Earlier, we mentioned that Kazakhstan approaches the issue of territorial nationalization through semantic decoding of the landscape by selective decommemorialization, in which a certain degree of continuity with the previous era is preserved. Volkan (2019) agrees with this, having investigated the nature of the renaming of streets in Almaty, and he came to the conclusion that it is erroneous to consider this process as having an unambiguously anti-Soviet orientation. Other researchers note that the process of national territorialization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is rooted in Soviet times and is based on Soviet practices (Dadabayeva and Sharipova 2016; Kudaibergenova 2016; Bustanov 2014). Without disputing these conclusions, we nevertheless observe a deeper degree of decommemorialization of the colonial and Soviet past within the framework of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project. Despite its official name, the project is less focused on religious sites than on commemoration of the history of Kazakh national statehood.¹²

The project’s focus on the sacredness of the national statehood leads its participants to contradictions with regard to the sites that can be interpreted as having a purely local and tribal significance. If we consider this project within the framework of the Kazakhification process, these episodes confirm the observation of this process as a complex phenomenon, in which lines of contradiction can also run within the Kazakh ethnonation (Schatz 2000; Brubaker 2011, 1808). Below, we will show how experts consistently resist attempts to enter into the canonized register of sacred sites of Kazakhstan that they qualify as having sacred significance only for certain tribal groups and not for the entire ethnonation.

The Ideological Platform of the Project

As noted earlier, the ideological basis of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project stems from the efforts of the official authorities to tie the country’s territory to the ethnonational identity of the Kazakh majority. Below, we will show how, within the framework of the project, steps were taken to define the national space through the creation of government-approved lists of sacred sites. This work involved the development of the project’s general ideology, elaboration of the concept of sacred geography, and establishment of the infrastructure that facilitated vertical communication

between regional communities and the decision-making center in Nur-Sultan. All these actions were taken during the second half of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

In Kazakhstan, authorities' interest in sacred geography began long before Ruqani Zhangyru started. From 2004 to 2011, the Mädeni Mūra (Cultural Heritage)¹³ program funded archeological research (specifically, the excavation of the Berel and Shilikty burial mounds, or *kurgans*) and the restoration of buildings of national cultural and historical importance. As a result of these projects, several historical, archeological, and natural sites were declared UNESCO World Heritage sites.¹⁴ Mädeni Mūra focused on a wide range of material and cultural heritage, but it can be considered a forerunner of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project.¹⁵

Systematic, institutional action in the area of sacred geography began with the Ruqani Zhangyru program, more precisely as part of the Ruqani Qazyna (Spiritual Heritage) subprogram. The main role in promoting this sacred geography initiative appears to have been played by notable government official Marat Tazhin.¹⁶ Tazhin holds a doctorate in sociology and has at various times acted as chair of the National Security Committee, secretary of the Security Council, and minister of foreign affairs. As the First Deputy Head of the Executive Office of the President, Tazhin chaired a meeting of the Security Council on May 11, 2017, when the council resolved to grant oversight of the project to the Ministry of Culture and Sport and resolved to establish an expert council to develop the main conceptual foundations of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project. Project coordination was entrusted at the regional level to regions' deputy governors (NITsSKNM, Minutes # 1).

Several days later, the head of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan working group, the minister of culture and sport Arystanbek Mukhamediuly, announced the formation of working groups within each region's administration (akimat) tasked with proposing sacred sites from each province to be included in a unified registry. These groups were to include scholars of regional culture and history (Russian, *kraevedy*) and representatives from local historical museums, libraries, and archives. These groups would do more than make expert recommendations, however. They were also supposed to give support to film crews and specially organized expeditions from the republic's academic institutions (NITsSKNM, Minutes # 1).

That same May, a new unit was established within the Ministry of Culture and Sport, the Sacred Kazakhstan Research Center (Qassietti Qazaqstan). The Center's main functions included overseeing interactions between regional and national organizations involved in the Sacred Kazakhstan project. Berik Abdugaliuly, a well-known historian and civil servant, was appointed director of the Center (Kazakhstan Today 2017). The Center's first priority was to establish an expert council made up of 25 scholars and 15 public activists.¹⁷ In the very short span between May and August 2016, the council was supposed to develop a general plan, basic concepts, and criteria for defining sacred sites that would guide the project moving forward.¹⁸ And remarkably, by August 21 of that same year, Arystanbek Mukhamediuly reported at a meeting of the National Presidential Commission for Implementing the Ruqani Zhangyru Program that the basic preparation for the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project had been completed (NITsSKNM, Tezisy). Meanwhile, a project master plan was created, as were methodological recommendations for the regional akimat-based working groups. These recommendations were to guide selection of the geographical sites to be included in a unified registry. The time frame for the project was 2017 to the end of 2023.

Experts who took part in the commission¹⁹ and who agreed to be interviewed by the authors of this article noted that one of the most debated issues on the council was the very term "sacred site." The experts had divergent views in regards to not only its defining characteristics and criteria but also the translation of the term into Kazakh.²⁰ Three Kazakh terms were proposed: *kieli*, *qassietti*, and *qasterli* – each of which has its own etymology and nuance. The first term implies a taboo site or one inhabited by gods or spirits. It is primarily religious in character and partly overlaps with the term *auliye* (Kazakh, *äulie*) discussed below. The adjective *qassietti* (Kazakh, *qassietti*) comes from the word *qassiet*, which means "positive quality," "nobility," "honor." The last of the three terms stems from the word *qaster*, meaning "precious," "valuable," "respected," "awe-inspiring." These

words can and are used to mean “sacred,” depending on the context, although with different connotations. After several debates, the Council resolved to use *qassietti* – a term that was more neutral and less connected with religious beliefs – to define a broader spectrum of sacred sites.²¹ As one of the experts confirmed, the breadth and universality of the term allowed for the registry to include not just religious sites but also memorial sites that are believed to be connected to the history of the Kazakh nationhood – from the Bronze Age to the era of modern, independent Kazakhstan.²²

This question of terminology was closely connected to the discussion of what was required to qualify a site as sacred. This discussion reveals the focus of the project as a whole. The experts admitted that it was important for them to come up with a definition of a sacred object that would allow them to include a wide selection of objects in this category, including those devoid of any religious content. This task turned out to be nontrivial. Consequently, one area of consensus was the requirement that was included in the methodological recommendations sent to regional administrations: “one unchanging condition that makes sites and historically significant places sacred is the living practice of worship and pilgrimage.” (NITsSKNM, Rekomendatsii) Expert 3 indicated that locals usually refer to this type of site as *auliye*.²³ He argued that although Kazakhs traditionally used this term to describe holy and prophetic people, the word could also apply to places and natural sites. In an interview, he noted, “If local Kazakhs traditionally called some monument or landmark *auliye*, that place was considered sacred” (Interview, Expert 3).²⁴ Once a place was declared sacred, a living tradition of respect and worship had to surround it. When we brought up that many archeological sites included in the Unified Registry did not have this tradition of worship, the expert responded, “It’s just that archeologists don’t pay much attention to folklore and oral history. They should talk to people more, not just dig. Not far from the aul of Shilikty, for example, there’s a huge royal burial mound. I would be surprised to learn that the locals have no legends connected to that place. Archeologists are all about excavations and don’t bother to ask the locals. That’s the problem” (Interview, Expert 3).

Regardless, the perspective of Expert 3 was accepted into the wording given above and incorporated into the project’s methodological recommendations.²⁵ Other experts had other opinions. Zainolla Samashev, a well-known archeologist in Kazakhstan, is said to insist that a sacred site needs to have some evidence of past or present sacrificial ceremonial use (Interview, Expert 1). This criterion relates most clearly to archeological sites and assumes that if excavations at a certain site uncover elements suggesting an altar, sacrificial vessels, or traces of ritual fires, the site could be considered sacred (Interview, Expert 1).

A debate also unfolded regarding the broad conceptual notion of sacred geography. The majority of experts held that a sacred place was a defined, individual site and that sacred geography was the simple collective total of these sites. An alternative approach suggested by Expert 1 stemmed from a perspective that was fundamentally different. As a unit of measure for scholars, Expert 1 suggested a notion of cultural landscape – a historical and cultural ecosystem that evolves over time and that may not coincide with the country’s contemporary administrative divisions: “If we take Berel, we need to look at Berel as a corridor valley, through which giant streams of people passed. If we take Saryarka, we have to look at the whole. Even if we look at Bayanaul. Even if we just look at a few places here and there. So, there’s this little area of the Bayanaul National Park, but historically the territory of Bayanaul was much larger, so we need to look more broadly” (Interview, Expert 1).

The site-by-site approach, according to Expert 1, is too formal and not systematic enough. In essence, it overlooks and misses the stable ties between separate sacralized places, which historically arose and functioned as complex, wholistic phenomena.²⁶ Ignoring this principle leads to anecdotal situations such as the one when, for simplicity’s sake, the regional expert council recommended a town’s oldest building, which at some point functioned as a brewery. Expert 1 wryly summarized this situation, commenting, “then it turns out you’ve declared a beer factory sacred” (Interview, Expert 1).²⁷ A particular quality of the landscape-centered approach is that it takes into specific account the historic paths and routes of herder migration, which forged bonds between different elements that make up those territories, as well as between the larger zones within cultural

landscapes (Medeuova and Sandybaeva 2018, 443–444). At the same time, one structurally important site becomes the central element of the cultural landscape around which other sites are grouped. Expert 1 believes that this concept of sacred geography based on integrated cultural zones that take into account herding and caravan routes was gradually accepted by the council. But it had one weakness: in the country's northern regions, cultural landscape zones extended beyond the state borders and included areas in the Russian Federation.

Most likely, this was the reason the final version of instructions for defining sacred sites took a more site-based approach: “For this project, the term ‘sacred site’ is defined as a particularly honored natural or historic landmark, secular or religious building, or mausoleum, as well as other places connected with historical or political events that are of particular significance to the history and memory of the people of Kazakhstan and act as symbols of national unity and revival” (NITsSKNM, Kontsepsiia). Sacred sites were categorized as follows: natural and geological sites, archeological and architectural landmarks, religious sites of worship, and sacred places connected with historical figures or political events (NITsSKNM, Rekomendatsii). Additionally, sacred sites that were selected were given the status of national or regional landmarks, depending on their cultural and historical significance.

The project's foundational ideological principles can be discerned by analyzing the Master Plan itself. The goal of the Sacred Sites of Kazakhstan project is stated as “strengthening national identity and overall patriotism” (NITsSKNM, Kontsepsiia). Among the project's tasks were discovering and protecting sacred sites, and to accomplish this, compiling a unified registry was suggested, as well as focusing the efforts of experts and specialists on systematizing and mapping these sites. The project lays out additional priorities, including developing cultural tourism and popularizing sacred sites via the education system, fiction and nonfiction books, and feature films. The primary direction of the project, however, is “preservation of the nation's cultural code,” which means “the structures that define a nation's genotype and consist of seven key links, with each presenting itself as an independent cultural phenomenon: heritage, tradition, customs, language, family, lifeways, and holidays and celebrations” (NITsSKNM, Kontsepsiia). The report notes that this cultural code provides “national immunity,” which helps protect the country's sovereignty from foreign ideological influence and cultural symbols (NITsSKNM, Proekt). What exactly these influences and symbols might be, however, remains unexplained,²⁸ leaving plenty of freedom for interpretation. Some authors insist that symbols of the Soviet past can also be considered “alien” and “imported from outside” (Medeuova et al. 2016, 30).²⁹

The project's plan emphasizes two central ideas that underpin the notion of sacred geography: land, as “the foundation of the state,” and spirit, which runs through the landscape and acts as a mystical carrier of “the cultural experience of generations” (NITsSKNM, Proekt). The linkage between land and spirit is seen as the basis of Kazakhstan's national identity.³⁰ This interpretation unambiguously suggests the autochthonic nature of the nation – the result of historical continuity and a centuries-long continuum of peoples and traditional states, not merely the project of recent times. This interpretation of the nation, steeped in Romantic nationalism,³¹ naturally cannot ignore the significance of national territory, which is interpreted as more than the landmass defined by current administrative borders. It is a holy landscape, the body of the nation, imbued with its ancient spirit.

The Project's Implementation and Reception

As noted above, by August 2017, the minister of culture and sport, who was charged with the majority of the responsibility for implementing the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project, announced that work on drafting its foundational principles and general master plan was completed. For 2017 to 2020, the Sacred Kazakhstan Research Center was to receive a budget of approximately 3.5 billion tenge.³² The overwhelming majority of these funds were earmarked for a project digitizing Kazakhstan's historical and cultural heritage, which included the creation of an

interactive map and a 3D panorama of sites of national significance from the Unified Registry.³³ The remaining budget was spent on hosting a large-scale conference that took place in Nur-Sultan in 2019 and organizing expeditions in the country's regions whose results formed the basis for a range of guidebooks and reference materials, also published as part of the project. (*Sakral'nye ob'ekty Kazakhstana obshchenatsional'nogo znacheniiia*, 2017; *Sakral'nye ob'ekty Kazakhstana regional'nogo znacheniiia*, 2017; *Sakral'nyi Kazakhstan*, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020) The funds also support the Center's 12-person staff based in the National Museum building. Center staff coordinate closely with the regional working groups and expert councils that gather every three to six months and operate on a volunteer basis.

After the expert council in Nur-Sultan developed the definition of a sacred site and the criteria for selecting those of national and regional significance, the regional working groups began their practical work. As noted above, these groups included representatives from cultural institutions, regional history museums, history organizations, and interested local history buffs. Expert 2 believed that the project was initially conceived as scholarly and research-oriented in nature,³⁴ but it very quickly became truly grassroots as it elicited an unusual amount of interest in the regions. Expert 3, for example, viewed regional pride as an important factor in the popularity of the project. Consequently, in his opinion, local enthusiasts – former local officials, retired civil servants, and schoolteachers – were the most active force pushing for inclusion of regional sacred sites. Other significant players in the process were local history organizations, who sent delegates to the regional groups.³⁵ The Priirtysh'ye local lore society (*kraevedcheskoe obshchestvo*), for example, which is based in the town of Semei in Eastern Kazakhstan Region, has engaged in extensive research on the area's natural and historical landmarks. The director of the society, Marat Sasanov, stated with pride that Priirtysh'ye's main goal was to discover sites that had never been studied. By comparing antique maps from the 17th to 18th centuries, Priirtysh'ye's members are trying to find unknown burial mounds and geoglyphs. "Our goal," Sasanov explained, "is to find these places and then bring them to scholars' and officials' attention." (Interview, Marat Sasanov)

This level of activism from local history buffs, amateurs, and respected traditional local authorities such as *aqsaqals* (local elders) sometimes provokes skepticism or even anxiety among academics and officials. One of our anonymous interviewees, an archeology scholar, stated that some local historians were partial to chaotic excavations and barbaric destruction of archeological sites. (Interview, Expert 4) Expert 2 admitted that the information received from the regions was painstakingly reviewed in case it was based on the unsubstantiated assumptions of local amateur historians. During our interview, Expert 3 offered examples of clear-cut fakery, one of which was connected, he believed, to the purported site of the famous Battle of Orbulak in 1643.³⁶ He stated, "one of the writers spotted a ditch out in the steppe somewhere. Maybe back in ancient times, people used to chase wild donkeys into it, but he was absolutely convinced that that was the very spot where the battle happened, even though he didn't present any evidence; there was zero proof. Now it's a "sacred" site, there's a plaque, and they hold memorial ceremonies there. There are lots of other examples like this." (Interview, Expert 3)

Another serious problem with which the experts and Sacred Kazakhstan Center staff grapple is whether to include sites in the Registry that are significant to individual Kazakh clans. Clan identity remains strong to this day among Kazakhs,³⁷ and many sacred sites – including those as significant as Beket-Ata, the mausoleum of Isabek-Ishan, or Otpantau – are connected in some way with the veneration of clan saints or warriors. At the same time, interviewees involved in the Center's expert councils reported that they consciously blocked any attempts to include clan sites in national or provincial registries. Expert 2 attributed this to the desire of officials and experts to tamp down tribalism in the context of the project, which aims to reinforce national identity.³⁸ He recounts that refusals on this basis often lead to offense being taken and even conflict. Expert 3 added that local activists often enlist fellow clan members among civil servants to apply pressure on Center staff members making the decisions.³⁹

Pressure from regional activists is only part of the problem, however. The Center considers it important to include an equal number of sacred sites from each region of Kazakhstan. In reality, the number of sites recommended by the administrations (akimats) in a few regions far exceed the number of sites that other regional authorities could propose. Almaty, Karaganda, Eastern Kazakhstan, and Turkestan Provinces predictably landed among the leaders, given that they are home to the majority of historically significant mosques, mausoleums, and medieval settlements, many of which have already been declared UNESCO Heritage Sites. The main issues arise in connection with the northern regions,⁴⁰ where, according to Expert 2, one can still see the consequences of the “virgin steppe” (Russian, *tselina*) agricultural campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. As the steppe was dug up, many ancient graveyards, shrines, and archeological sites were destroyed.⁴¹ Because, as we argue, one of the crucial stimuli for initiating the reterritorialization process in Kazakhstan is external challenges and the need to meet them by shoring up Kazakhstan’s national identity in the regions that border Russia, these territories were given special attention. The experts and staff at the Sacred Kazakhstan Center, local akimats, researchers, and local historians were forced to work hard to ensure that the northern provinces could suggest an equal number of sites for the registry, although their cultural and historical significance was not obvious in comparison to sites located in other regions.

The Kazakh Nation’s Sacred Geography

In early 2018, Berik Abdugaliuly, the director of the Sacred Kazakhstan Center at the time, announced at the public presentation of the two reference guides – *Sacred Sites of Kazakhstan’s Regions* and *National Sacred Sites of Kazakhstan (Sakral’nye ob’ekty Kazakhstana obshchenatsional’nogo znacheniiia, 2017; Sakral’nye ob’ekty Kazakhstana regional’nogo znacheniiia, 2017)* – that the unified registry had been approved by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. (Qazmaps) At the time, the registry included 685 sacred sites, of which 185 were considered of national significance.⁴² The registry currently includes 780 sites, and the national list has grown to 205, making 575 of regional importance. According to our information, the Center has no plans to expand the registry further (Interview, Expert 2). As discussed above, the list was assembled from regional lists that were created as part of the work of regional groups associated with the local akimats and in accordance with the recommended methodology put together by the Center’s expert council. Regional lists were then reviewed by the expert council.

The national list’s sites clearly reflect the idea and spirit of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project as a whole (see Figure 1). The main inclusion criterion was the site’s significance and familiarity among the plethora of other sites. As one of our interviewees put it, these sites are well known even to Kazakhstani citizens who have never visited them. (Interview, Expert 2.) A simple analysis of national sites reveals that more than half (109) are mausoleums, tombs, graveyards, and memorial shrines of Muslim saints, military heroes, poets, and bards (Kazakh, *aqyn*), and other historical figures. One-fifth of all sites are archeological landmarks, primarily from the Bronze and early Iron Age (petroglyphs, geoglyphs, settlements, and mounds), as well as the ruins of medieval towns. Approximately 12% are sites connected with historical figures and events from Kazakhstan’s history, beginning with the Golden Horde period and the Kazakh Khanate right up to the independent era. Around 9% are natural areas that are the focus of worship traditions. Surprisingly, only slightly more than 5% of sites on the list are purely religious structures, with the overwhelming majority being mosques and madrasas.⁴³ Of approximately 250 Orthodox Christian churches and cathedrals in Kazakhstan, only two made the national list – the Church of Our Lady of Kazan (Christ Redeemer Church) in Kyzylorda and Ascension Cathedral in Almaty.⁴⁴ These data speak to the compilers’ aim to position Kazakhstan as a secular state.

Even a passing glance at the national sacred site list reveals less about the popularity of these sites and more about the clear ideological focus of the list. For example, 26 shrines we assigned to the mausoleum and historical site categories are connected to legendary military leaders and warriors

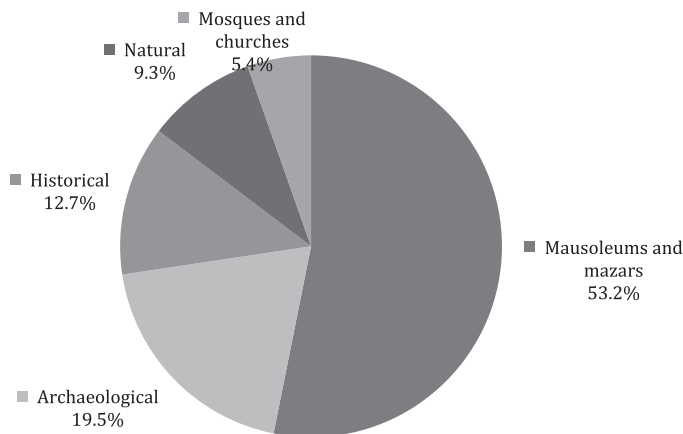


Figure 1. Percentage share of sacred site types in Kazakhstan's national register.

who fought various Oirat groups (Khoshuts, Jungars, and Kalmyks) from the 16th to the 18th centuries and to the epic poets who glorified their deeds. Another 17 sacred sites, mostly mausoleums and graves, are related to historical figures (military leaders, warriors, and religious authorities) who took part in the anticolonial movements led by Kenesary Kasymov and Aman-geldy Imanov, which were primarily opposing the Russian Empire as well as the Central Asian city states of Khiva and Khoqand.⁴⁵ The majority of these sites are concentrated in the northern and western regions of Kazakhstan, along the border with the Russian Federation. The descriptions of these shrines on the official Ruqani Zhangyru website (*Ruh*. Ruqani Zhangyru Project News) emphasize the significance of these individuals in defending the Kazakh people from foreign aggressors and colonizers.⁴⁶ Consequently, the list includes the memorial established at the site of the Battle of Orbulak,⁴⁷ whose authenticity elicited skepticism from one of our interviewees.⁴⁸

Other sacred sites on the list are also tied to important episodes of Kazakh history, and their very presence on the list seems designed to demonstrate the unbroken historical continuity of the Kazakh state and the earlier peoples of the Dasht-i-Qypchaq on the one hand, and the historical process and the geographical landscape on the other. Surveying the list, we see the Saka burial mounds of Shilikty and Berel side by side with the ancient Turkic landmarks of Eki-dyn and Merke. We see how the trade oasis city of Otrar and Suzak intertwine in the ideological narrative with Golden Horde-era geography and the toponyms of the early Kazakh Khanate. Mausoleums of military leaders who gloriously battled the Jungars⁴⁹ are placed on par with the burial sites of heroes who resisted Russian colonization, and the graves of the martyrs of Alash Orda are part of the same uninterrupted whole as the memorials to those who perished in the KarLag and ALZHIR Soviet prison camps and to the victims of the Semipalatinsk (Polygon) bomb tests. In the national list, particular attention is paid to the history of Islamic conversion of the Kazakh steppe, embodied in the ancient mausoleums of Qozha Akhmet Yasawi and Aisha Bibi, who connected Kazakhstan with the global history and culture of Islam, tying them with a thread of continuity to the later clan mosques of Beket Ata and Appaq Ishan. The apogee of the historical process comes in the independent era, symbolized by the Dawn of Independence Memorial, which was dedicated to the victims of the December 1986 uprising, the Independence Monument in Almaty, the Qazaq Eli Monuments in Nur-Sultan, as well as the Mängilik Eli Triumphal Arch. The inclusion of the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation (Nur-Sultan) likely points to what some see as Kazakhstan's global mission.

The history of the Kazakh steppe as part of the Russian Empire is mainly represented in the list via motifs of Kazakh resistance to invasion and colonialism. The empire itself is symbolized, we argue, by the two Orthodox cathedrals in Kyzylorda and Almaty mentioned earlier. This conclusion

stems from the fact that both churches are related to the stages of Russian colonization of Central Asia. In addition, the imperial era is connected to periods that two classic literary figures – one Russian (Fedor Dostoevsky) and the other Ukrainian (Taras Shevchenko) – spent in the Kazakh steppe, given that their house museums are included in the national list.⁵⁰

It is also intriguing that the list does not contain any positive symbols of the Soviet era. The Soviet period, judging by the landmarks and memorials included in the national sacred site list, is presented as the most tragic era for Kazakhstan: the monument to the victims of the Asharshylyq famine in the 1920s and 1930s caused by collectivization; the ALZhIR Museum-Memorial Complex⁵¹ honoring the victims of political repression and totalitarianism; the KarLag Museum, which is dedicated to the victims of political repression;⁵² the Otan Ana Monument in honor of the fighters and defenders of the Fatherland who died in WWII; the memorial to the victims of repression located in the village of Zhanalyq; and the Stronger Than Death Memorial honoring the victims of the Semipalatinsk Test Site. The project shoves aside former positive narratives of Soviet Kazakhstan as a republic within the “friendly family of Soviet peoples,”⁵³ replacing them with symbols of the hardship, loss, and sacrifice Kazakhstan brought to the altar of Communist utopia. By erasing the Soviet sacred landscape, the project’s participants are filling the freed up space with symbols that have new content, foregrounding tropes of the Kazakhs’ battle for their land, culture, religion, and freedom.

The remaining sites that were not honored with a place on the national list but considered regionally significant landmarks were included in the regional registry.⁵⁴ The compilation of this list seems to reflect the need for the central expert council to find a compromise with the regional councils. The regional list includes the sites that have obvious cultural and historical value and that could not be completely ignored by the government. This does not mean that these sites have only tribal or local significance. It only means that, in the policymakers’ and experts’ view, they do not deserve national status. Mausoleums, tombs, grave sites, and cemeteries make up an even larger portion – almost 60% – of the regional list. The next categories lag far behind and include archeological, natural, and historical landmarks in roughly similar proportion (12%, 11%, and 10%, respectively). Houses of worship made up only 8% of the sites on the list and included only mosques and Orthodox churches. Of those, churches make up a mere 17% of that category (7 of 42).

Our research shows that, much as with the national list, the majority of mausoleums are built over the graves of military leaders and warriors of the 17th–19th centuries, who are honored in local tradition as defenders of the Kazakhs from Jungar, Khoqand, Khiva, and Russian invasions, and as valiant fighters and artful negotiators. Worship of these legendary heroes can be found in every region of Kazakhstan without exception. In the regional list, however, their numbers are greater in the western, northern, and eastern regions, whereas in the Turkestan and Kyzylorda regions, the tombs of Muslim saints abound. Landmarks reflecting the Imperial and Soviet eras are even less represented on the regional list than on the national one. These make up a small handful of sites such as local monuments to those lost to Stalin-era repressions, famine, and WWII, as well as monuments at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

There can be little doubt that the character of Kazakhstan’s sacred geography presented in both lists only partially reflects the real picture of current pilgrimage and worship practice in different parts of the country.⁵⁵ It might be more correct to say that these lists reflect the experts of the Sacred Kazakhstan Center’s perspective on sacred geography, given that they had the final word in selecting the sites proposed by the regional committees. Whether the worship of military heroes from the 17th to 19th centuries is an actual living tradition or merely owes its existence to support from state ideology remains an open question. But the hundreds of mausoleums, busts, and monuments to heroes who fought the Jungars and other historical rivals of the Kazakhs that have sprung up over the last three decades of Kazakhstan’s independence is a phenomenon yet to be fully explored by scholars. The large share of mausoleums, tombs, ancient mosques, and kurgans, and the insignificant percentage of monuments related to the Imperial or Soviet periods, suggest that contemporary Kazakhstan is attempting to “forget” the past connected to subjugation and external

rule, and “reinvent” one based on idealized heroic episodes from distant, poorly documented history.

Conclusion

This article has considered the recently energized process to establish the sacred geography of Kazakhstan through the lens of reterritorialization, or the re-encoding of the semantics of physical space via the selection, codification, and articulation of certain symbols and practices, while neglecting or “forgetting” others. Our analysis shows that in Kazakhstan’s case, this postcolonial process conforms to the tendency toward ethnic nationalism, as noted by a range of scholars. Meanwhile, authorities at the highest levels continue to promote the discourse of Kazakhstan as a civic state while, to large extent, acting to reinforce the idea of Kazakhstan as the state belonging to the Kazakh people. It would be misleading to state that this process was orchestrated from above from the very start – as it would be to begin its timeline right at the collapse of the USSR. It would be more accurate to suggest that Kazakhstan’s ideologists are riding a trend that had been brewing locally since the early days of Soviet rule but that had long stayed local. The Sacred Kazakhstan Center experts’ “antitribal” position discussed by our interviewees may actually prove counterproductive, given that the incomplete process of Kazakh national formation is nurtured by clan awareness embodied in mausoleums and tombs. This applies even to sites as important as the mausoleum of Qozha Akhmet Yasawi, the Beket Ata mosque, or the mausoleum of Qabanbai batyr. These sites have always been the focal points of local and clan narratives that have gained new meaning in our time. At the local level of contemporary society in Kazakhstan, grassroots forces are establishing or restoring sacred places that have no connection to government policy and remain independent of it (Schwab and Bigozhin 2016; Bigozhin 2019). The national government’s sacred geography project with its country-wide unifying mission, embodied in published guides to sacred sites, may indirectly support certain local, clan-based identities. On the other hand, state interference may also give local history enthusiasts’ efforts new meaning. Now, building a mausoleum to a clan hero who, according to local legend, battled the Jungars has become a matter of state significance.

The institutionalization of classifying and re-encoding the sacred landscape has involved very diverse groups – including the National Museum, the National Geographic Society, national broadcasters, university scholars, local history societies, akimats, local religious organizations, middle schoolers, clan societies, and individual history buffs. These factors, we believe, are what made the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project so successful relative to other Ruqani Zhangyru projects.⁵⁶ The project, however, was primarily focused on the Kazakh population, and the unified registry included only a small number of sites prized as sacred in the eyes of other ethnic groups. The limited focus of the project could not help but alienate non-Kazakhs and fuel their disappointment in the potential of creating a single Kazakhstan-based national identity. This tendency is far from accidental. More likely, it points to the conclusion that Kazakhstan’s national authorities have made a conscious choice in favor of an ethnonational version of the state.

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Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 In his book *The Era of Independence*, Nazarbayev calls this the third modernization project, with the first and second being the waves of social and cultural modernization reforms of 1991–1995 and 2000–2010. The book itself is structured in sections dedicated to these reform stages. See Nazarbayev 2017.

- 2 This type of demand is an invariable part of postcolonial narratives, and it frequently takes the form of anti-Russia and anti-China rhetoric.
- 3 Over the entire period of Kazakhstan's independence, more than 1,500 settlements were renamed. The range of opinions held by various groups in Kazakhstan about these changes is well documented in Oka 2002. Debate broke out anew recently due to the proposal from local activists to rename the city of Pavlodar. See, for example, Zadorozhneva 2014.
- 4 Some researchers indicated that the Russophone minority of Kazakhstan tend to recognize the Kazakhs' priority rights for the territory of Kazakhstan. See, for example, Laitin 1998, 98–99.
- 5 Vladimir Putin's comments at the Seliger Youth Forum in 2014 caused a major stir in Kazakhstan. Putin stated that Kazakhs had never had their own state and that President Nazarbayev more or less invented one. See Oshanov 2014. Even earlier, Kazakhstan's rights for its northern territories were questioned by Nobel Prize Laureate writer Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. (Wolfel 2002, 496) On the relocation of Kazakhstan's capital to Astana as a response for these challenges, see Wolfel 2002.
- 6 We share the main ideas of Smith, who underlines a significant role of territorial consciousness in his theory of nationalism, introducing, for example, the concept of "territorialization of memory" as a mechanism for establishing the connection of the landscape with the collective identity (Smith 1999, 151).
- 7 A radical example of toponymic cleansing is analyzed in Saparov's article (2017) on the policy pursued in recent years in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- 8 We are using this term understanding how problematic it is and being aware of the discussions that took place around it in the past (Kuzio 2001). We do share the modified understanding of the term by Brubaker as a complex phenomenon that allows "capturing certain social, cultural and political dynamics in Soviet successor states" (Brubaker 2011, 1809). It should be understood not only as an alternative trend to civil nation-building but also as a process that can stir up intraethnic competition, which is well illustrated in this article.
- 9 Marlene Laruelle (2016, 155–156) defines three discourse paradigms that dominate contemporary domestic politics in Kazakhstan based on the nation-building role of the Kazakhs, the inclusiveness of the Kazakh nation, and the transnational identity of Kazakhstan.
- 10 The scholarly literature on nationalism and nation-building in Kazakhstan is vast. Scholars have examined the process of nation-building in Kazakhstan from various positions: comparing ethnic and civil identities (Sharipova, Burkhanov, Alpeissova 2017); focusing on the shifting ethnic makeup of the elite (Kudaibergenova 2016); researching grassroots processes, everyday nationalism, and hybridity (Isaacs 2015); paying particular attention to "Kazakhization," (Kadyrzhanov 2014; Fierman 2000); and chronicling the revival of the Kazakh language (Laruelle 2015).
- 11 The Assembly is an advisory organ to Kazakhstan's Presidential Administration. During the February 2020 outbreak of interethnic conflict in the village of Masanchi, Zhambyl Region, the Assembly proved ineffective. See, for example, Moldabekov 2020.
- 12 The concept of "sacred geography" has a wide semantic connotations, and it is used mainly in religious and cultural studies in the sense of an imaginary set of objects and sites distributed in space that have a sacred meaning in the eyes of a certain ethnoreligious community. See, for example, Park 2003, 250. Cultural geographers Jackson and Henrie (1983) identify as sacred not only mystical and religious sites but also sites associated with the concept of homeland.
- 13 For more details about the Mädeni mūra government program, see Gosudarstvennaia programma Mädeni mūra – Kul'turnoe nasledie.
- 14 For a list of these sites, see UNESCO. *Kazakhstan: Properties Inscribed on the World Heritage List*.
- 15 In addition to the Mädeni mūra and Ruqani Zhangyru programs, it is worth mentioning that N. A. Nazarbayev in his presidential terms initiated and implemented several other ideological programs and national addresses, including Tarikh Tolqynynda (2013), Mängilik Elī (2016),

- and *The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe* (2018), which emphasized the study and publication of historical sources, modernization of the economy, and popularization of historical heritage.
- 16 In the Kazakhstan media, Marat Tazhin is often called the ideologist of contemporary Kazakhstan. See, for example, Aisberg 2019.
 - 17 Experts' role in implementing this project can, to a certain extent, be compared to the mission of imperial geographers and archeologists employed by the Bolsheviks. See Hirsch 2005, 21–24.
 - 18 According to one of the council members, the rushed pace is characteristic of officials' working style, and it had nothing in common with expert preferences. As a result, "we ended up with some half-baked, limited result" (Interview, Expert 3).
 - 19 Although the commission was made up of 40 members, our interviewees relayed that, in reality, most of the work was conducted by a narrow group of the most active and concerned experts and staff from the Sacred Kazakhstan Center (Interview, Expert 1).
 - 20 Interview, Expert 2. Expert 3 argued that the term "sacred" could not be translated into Kazakh at all and suggested using the Latin word *sacral* while adding the Kazakh suffix *-dī – sakraldī*, given that word was already used in many of the world's languages (Interview, Expert 3).
 - 21 This word comes from the Arabic word *kassiya*, meaning "characteristic," "feature," or "quality," with no religious connotations. In Kazakh, the term can be used in a religious sense, meaning "holy" or "sacred."
 - 22 Apparently, this predated the start of the expert council's work and stemmed from the original perspective of the project initiators.
 - 23 From the Arabic *al awlia*, the plural of *wali* (Muslim saint or prophet; in Sufism, one who has achieved perfection in religious practice). The universal quality of this term stems from the extensive spread of Sufi Islam in Kazakhstan and the popularity of pilgrimage to these places (Bigozhin 2018). It is worth noting that the approach centered on the concept of *auliye* gives priority, on the one hand, to Islam or Islamified monuments, and on the other hand, to sites sacred first and foremost to Kazakhs. Likely for these reasons, the term was excluded from methodological recommendations and plans.
 - 24 Interview, Expert 3. The term *auliye* usually applies to the graves of saints, mosques, tombs, mausoleums, and cemeteries, as well as the land belonging to them. See Medeuova and Sandybaeva 2018, 438.
 - 25 According to Expert 1, the concept of a sacred site as a place of active worship practice existed among officials – including, to some extent, the director of the Sacred Kazakhstan Center, Berik Abdugaliuly – from the very beginning of the project. He believed that was the initial idea (Interview, Expert 1).
 - 26 By way of example of these cultural landscape zones, Expert 1 proposed, for example, Ulytau, a historical area in Karaganda Region, which – according to historical records – was the center of the Kazakh Khanate; the memorial complex Adai-Ata in Mangystau; the memorial complex of Qarasai batyr and Arghyntai batyr in the Northern Kazakhstan Region. The particularities of the last two zones are examined in Medeuova and Sandybaeva's work (Medeuova and Sandybaeva 2018).
 - 27 The discussion relates to a building in Kostanai Region.
 - 28 This idea was explained in more detail, although still without concrete examples, in the 2017 version of the Vision Document for Cultural Policy, which stated, "Identity can be disrupted when the values of one's culture hold little appeal and it can be replaced by another, capable of moving one away from the sources of spiritual and moral values of one's original culture." See *Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan*.
 - 29 Some authors insist that symbols of the Soviet past can also be considered "alien" and "imported from outside." (Medeuova et al. 2016, 30).
 - 30 Abdugaliuly, the former director of the Sacred Kazakhstan Center, emphasized the project's ideological orientation: "The problem is that this isn't a purely scholarly or religious project. It's a social and cultural one to a great extent, and also includes political goals. By this I mean national

identity; these sacred sites should serve to unite people as symbols of our shared homeland, our shared history, in all that it is, beginning from ancient times.” See KazInform. 2018.

- 31 The connection between national character and the land, climate, and geography of a nation was first postulated by German philosopher Johann Herder and was later developed by Hegel. In Europe and Russia in the early 20th century, Romantic nationalism led to increased interest in epic poetry, folklore, and other expressions of folk culture, which were seen as manifestations of a mystical national spirit. For more, see, for example, Leerssen 2018.
- 32 Interview, Expert 2. Experts 1 and 3 noted that after work was completed on the foundational principles and documents in 2017, they got the impression that higher authorities had lost interest in the project. In fact, the project’s funding in the following years was reduced, but in reality, the reduction was minor. For 2020, the budget was around 800 million tenge (without considering inflation). From 2017 through 2020, the project received a total of approximately 10 million US dollars. It is also worth taking into account that the project was funded not only via the Sacred Kazakhstan Center but also via grants given directly to scholarly projects by the Ministry of Education and Science.
- 33 The first fruits of these efforts can be seen at Qazmaps. *Qasietti Qazaqstan*. The website, created as a result of digitization efforts, should be complete by the end of 2020 (NITsSKNM, Proekt).
- 34 Naturally, the project was first and foremost an ideological one, but its implementation was perceived by government officials as a research initiative.
- 35 The most organized and active local lore societies (*kraevedcheskie obshchestva*) in Kazakhstan are in Pavlodar, Karaganda, and Eastern Kazakhstan Regions. The Sacred Kazakhstan Center tried to convince regional akimats to channel the work of local enthusiasts via a newly created regional history bureau as part of their administrations, but the idea never took root. Interview, Expert 2.
- 36 The Battle of Orbulak is mentioned in both Oirat and Russian sources. In the current interpretation of the national history of Kazakhstan, this battle is extremely important because it is connected to one of the earliest instances of Kazakh armies successfully beating back an invasion by the Oirats. See Galiev 1998; Tsyrempilov 2020, 33.
- 37 Many scholars believe that the Kazakhs did not consider themselves a consolidated ethnic group until as late as the 1930s (see Masanov 2002, 6). Clan identity was not wiped out in the process of nation-building in the Soviet period (Schatz 2007, 490), and remains an important layer in the multilayered ethnic identity of contemporary Kazakhs.
- 38 It is possible that by promoting these clan sites, activists are trying to enhance the prestige of their fellow clan members. Paradoxically, many of the mausoleums of saints and warriors on the national list, designed to strengthen national identity, are affiliated with a particular clan in the eyes of locals.
- 39 Interview, Expert 3. Here it is necessary to note that it is not always possible to draw a clear line between sites based on a tradition of worshiping a clan ancestor and other sacred sites. Medeuova and Sandybaeva (2018, 443) argue that a memorial complex like Adai-Ata, built by Adai clan members to honor their “founding father,” is a site where the collective memory of the clan “engages in symbolic exchange with the state.”
- 40 This mostly concerns Kostanai, Northern Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar Regions.
- 41 Interview, Expert 2. Bigozhin (2018) also discusses the profound impact of collectivization and “virgin steppe” campaigns. Many holy places were abandoned or destroyed in connection as communities were forced to migrate, and permanent auls were established in the 1930s and 1950s.
- 42 Initially, the idea was to find 100 sites of national significance, which would have echoed other lists that played a part in Ruqani Zhangyru (such as 100 new names, 100 new textbooks). Experts believed the inclination to seek a nice even number as typical of M. Tazhin’s style. As work on the registry progressed, however, the list constantly expanded (Interview, Expert 1).

- 43 It should be mentioned that it was not always possible to determine the category of a particular site. Many are, for example, natural landmarks that are closely associated with a particular historical figure or event. For this reason, the classification of sacred sites in this article is of a conditional nature.
- 44 These churches were built in 1896 and 1907, respectively.
- 45 See, for example, *Ruh. Mavzolei Eseta Kotibaruly*.
- 46 See, for example, the article on the 18th-century hero Kulsary Kudaiberdiuly, which reflects the typical style of the site: *Ruh. Mavzolei Kulsary Kudaiberdyuly*
- 47 The list also includes memorials to Kazakh-Jungar battles of the 18th century, the battles of Angraqai and Bulanty. Some natural landmarks in the list are closely associated with Kazakh-Jungar relations (the cave of Konyr Auliye in Eastern Kazakhstan Region, the cliffs of Okzhetspes, the glade of Abylai Khan) or with the Kenesary uprising (the Kenesary cave).
- 48 See discussion above. The inclusion of this site in the list, despite the objections of a very authoritative expert, points to the limits of expert council members' power.
- 49 Regarding the mythologization of the Kazakh-Jungar conflict in Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan, see Hancock-Parmer 2015. He argues that in post-Soviet times, certain tragic events of the conflict with the Jungars was used by government authorities as a cautionary tale of clan separatism and the necessity for national consolidation.
- 50 However, these two sites also underscore the repressive nature of Russian Imperial rule. Volkan (2019, 8) also argues that the renaming of Almaty streets never concerned the streets that bear the names of non-Kazakh nonpolitical figures.
- 51 The museum and memorial dedicated to the women and children imprisoned at the Akmola Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Homeland, located not far from the town of Nur-Sultan.
- 52 The museum, dedicated to the victims of political repression imprisoned at the Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp, which was one of the largest in the gulag system.
- 53 Such historical sites as the house of Amangeldy Imanov, the active Kazakh supporter of the Soviet power in Kazakhstan, or the Monument to the Conquerors of Virgin Land in Kostanai were never included in both registers.
- 54 One may assume that this in fact was the list from which national sites were chosen.
- 55 It is also likely that the project itself may influence real-life practice. Sites on both lists are already receiving informational support and starting to attract more tourists and pilgrims. In 2018, for example, domestic tourism increased by 5.8% from 5.6 to 5.9 million travelers. See Forbes kz. 2019. It is hard to say what impact the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project had on this statistic. But without a doubt, the information about sightseeing in various regions of Kazakhstan has increased substantially in the years since the project began.
- 56 One of our interviewees from Sacred Kazakhstan Institute claimed that during meetings arranged by the National Council, it was repeatedly noted that the project demonstrated increased dynamics of implementation compared to other Ruqani Zhangyru projects (Interview, Expert 2).

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