

# Emergence within Emergency: Kazakhstan's Higher Education System

Douglas L. Robertson and Nazgul Bayetova

This article discusses Kazakhstan's emerging higher education system. To be clear, we are not sure whether this commentary addresses a trajectory that continues, or one that changes.

The independent Republic of Kazakhstan was born in 1991. Its first president was Nursultan Nazarbayev (April 24, 1990 to March 20, 2019). He was succeeded by his close ally, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Many think that Nazarbayev still rules. On January 2, 2022, "Bloody January" erupted in Kazakhstan, taking the form of massive protests and violent demonstrations connected specifically to a dramatic increase in liquified gas prices the day before, and more generally to growing unease with the government and economic inequality. Ten days later, on January 11, 2022, after 227 people had died and nearly 10,000 had been arrested, Tokayev declared that order prevailed. Russian troops were in the streets restoring that order by force as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization between Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Shortly after, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The war continues as we write this article. Nineteen percent of Kazakhstan's population is ethnic Russian and is concentrated near the border with Russia. Protecting ethnic Russians is one of the Russian government's justifications for invading Ukraine. Many Kazakhs are on edge.

Within this context, this article is a reflection on the higher education system that Nazarbayev built in Kazakhstan while serving as president. A rigorous qualitative analysis of Nazarbayev's official speeches and policy texts suggests five paradoxes that describe Kazakh higher education as we navigate this uncertain period.

## Nationalistic Globalism

Nazarbayev wanted to strengthen inward-facing national pride by "looking outward," toward international relations. Nazarbayev's vision of Kazakhstan's developing higher education system was integral to this dynamic. Kazakhstan's leadership chose to use its resource advantages, such as abundant oil and natural gas, to finance the transition from a centrally planned, resource-based economy to a market-driven knowledge economy. A key element in this strategy was the development of a high-quality higher education system, influenced by Western standards and practices. The crown jewel of this system was Nazarbayev University, founded in 2010, the envisioned national flagship university. Nazarbayev spoke of its significance in his 2009 presidential address, "[The c]reation of the new university is the most important national project... [This project] will have a significant impact on many Kazakhstanis and the development of a backbone for our state. I believe that the new university... should be created as a national brand, harmoniously combining Kazakhstani identity with the best international educational and scientific practice." Kazakhstan's globalized higher education system would promote national identity and nationalistic pride, particularly among the younger generation who participated in the system and directly benefited from it.

## Regulated Nonregulation

Globalism is promoted by the neoliberal paradigm that is predominant in many high-income nations and explicitly informs the lending policy of the international entities that help finance Kazakhstan's development, such as the World Bank and the Central Asian Development Bank. The neoliberal view holds that the world should be one big, unregulated system of market and supply chains. Western high-income countries are models

## Abstract

This article frames a description of Kazakhstan's emerging higher education system in five paradoxes: nationalistic globalism; regulated nonregulation; "give to get"; communal individualism; and developmental demise. To enrich the analysis, we have made a rigorous qualitative study of major speeches and policy documents by Nursultan Nazarbayev (President, 1990–2019) and his government. The commentary occurs within the context of recent uprisings in Kazakhstan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

*Nazarbayev wanted to strengthen inward-facing national pride by "looking outward," toward international relations.*

of neoliberal success. Low-income countries tend to adopt successful policies, and so it made sense for Nazarbayev to look to the US higher education model in particular. A neoliberal tenet is privatization, which is expressed in many forms in American higher education, perhaps most fundamentally as private colleges or universities. In Kazakhstan, 60 new private universities were established in major urban markets following the implementation of the 1993 Law of Higher Education. Required of each new institution was a license issued by the ministry of education and science. Despite the appearance of a deregulated higher education market, de facto regulation still exists through licensing and kleptocratic mechanisms.

### **“Give to Get”**

In his 2005 presidential address, Nazarbayev highlighted the need to support excellent students financially, stating, “We have many talented boys and girls who are willing and able to become engineers or technologists. Through education grants and credits, the government will help them in a very real way. I urge the private sector to join actively in this initiative.” As in Western neoliberal higher education, a student loan industry quickly developed. In the Soviet era, higher education was free. In the familiar pattern of privatization, freedom of choice came at a cost. The government could not pay completely for individuals’ educational costs. Private, for-profit loan companies filled the gap. In 2005, Nazarbayev introduced student loans offered by all Kazakhstani banks except the National Bank. These loans were guaranteed by the state. Students gained greater freedom of choice while paradoxically acquiring greater constraints of debt.

### **Communal Individualism**

Neoliberalism emphasizes individualism, competition, and meritocracy. From antiquity, Kazakh culture was organized around the family and the community. The Soviet period (1936–1991) reinforced this cultural predisposition to collectivism. Under Nazarbayev, the transition to a market economy led to a shift to individualism, as evidenced by his 1997 and 1998 presidential addresses. In 1997, the president said that “[the] state-and-collective world outlook was replaced by a private-and-individual one and the event reversed each and every aspect of our life.” In 1998, he stated that “[c]ollective responsibility equals no responsibility. Collective responsibility is the enemy of accountability.” In higher education, for example, instead of cohorts of students attending the same courses each semester, policy makers created the possibility for students to follow “individual course pathways.” This change allowed students to complete courses based on their particular choice and desired degree, with the aim to serve the nation’s (collective) prosperity.

### **Developmental Demise**

Nazarbayev’s vision was of sophisticated, Western-influenced, market-oriented Kazakhstanis who would become the foundation of the country’s emerging knowledge economy. As part of building this human capital, Kazakhstan’s authoritarian-leaning government established the Bolashak Scholars Program, which sends talented young students to top Western universities. But this effort may actually be counterproductive. Western universities emphasize critical thinking, which can turn against Kazakhstan’s government and bolster opposition to corruption and oppression. The paradoxical message to Bolashak Scholars and university students is to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills to create wealth and elevate Kazakhstan, but not to apply those same skills to the sociopolitical system that distributes power and wealth.

Major events, such as wars, pivot trajectories in nations and regions. The systemic ripples of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing hot war may alter the path and patterns of the emerging higher education system in Kazakhstan that we have discussed in this article. It is hard to imagine that such a major perturbation would not. How, and to what end, evolves as we speak. ▲

*Douglas L. Robertson is professor of higher education, Florida International University, US.  
Email: drobert@fiu.edu.*

*Nazgul Bayetova is a distinguished postdoctoral scholar at Florida International University.  
Email: nbaye001@fiu.edu.*