Renaming to remain the same? Presidential tribute and public protest in Kazakhstan

As an aspect of nationalist political mobilization after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many governments of the former republics undertook large-scale projects to actively shift the landscapes of Soviet cities and towns, towards a newly national identity (e.g., Diener & Hagen, 2014). As a part of these projects, there was widespread renaming of streets, buildings, and landmarks in accordance with the linguistic and cultural identity of the titular ethnic majority of each former republic, and much iconic Soviet statuary was removed and replaced with that of 'national' figures. The power of such projects was to invert the symbolic potency of Soviet urban planning which had invested ideological energy in the creation of a new political identity; however, in that way the projects simply repeated the geographic logic of Soviet monumental power itself, rather than coming up with a true alternative. In recent years, there have again been a wave of renaming projects in the former Soviet space (e.g., Dadabaev, 2015; Foster, 2011; Ilyin, 2013; Saparov, 2003). This is rightly seen as the broader socio-political and historical context.

After 30 years of rule as independent Kazakhstan's only President, Nursultan Nazarbayev has as of March 2019 formally resigned that position, and appointed Kassym-Jomart Tokaev as his temporary successor. Tokaev's first move as acting President, was to rename the capital city of Astana, to become Nur-Sultan, a modification of the former President's first name, and central streets in towns across the country will also be renamed. This move was unanimously approved by parliament, but caused widespread reactions and protest, particularly in the city of Astana itself, where citizens were angered at the lack of public input in this decision-making process.

The public reaction was visible throughout press and social media outlets and citizens have been arrested across the country, for assembling to protest these changes. Online petitions protesting the name change have garnered 30,000 signatures and videos of protests have gone viral. What angers people about these changes is their symbolic quality: the renaming seems to repeat a Soviet model of monumental power, and not a newly modernizing future repeatedly promised to the citizens of Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev's rule. Yet, there have also appeared 'counter'-'counter' protests fueled by the government in which youths are called upon to block other youth protesters. In the midst of the complexity of events resides the role of the media as both a disseminator of information and opinions as well as a recorder of the changes.

This presentation aims to use media coverage as a way to investigate linguistic landscapes of the Kazakhstan capital and subsequent protests. Through the media analysis of the changes themselves and of the public reaction to the changes, the struggle between competing identity discourses (top-down, bottom-up) may be brought to the forefront. Here we seek to include the materiality of everyday life in our consideration of a linguistic landscape (cf Shohamy and Gorter 2009): what is the texture of change and political commentary in this contemporary post-Soviet urban environment?

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