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## Identity Lost and Found

I like to joke with my foreign friends and colleagues that Kazakhstan is the 9th biggest country in the world which nobody could find on the map. Wherever I go I'm always asked where I am from and what my nationality is; and I always tell my usual story about a Russian-looking girl born in a Central Asian country. My story includes Stalin's deportations in 1930s, massive evacuations in 1940s during The Great Patriotic War (World War II), and migrations in 1950s triggered by Khrushchev's *Virgin Lands* campaign.

During the Soviet times Kazakhstan ended up with just **30% of ethnic Kazakh population**. On the one hand, this era brought up a new well-educated generation and established a number of cultural institutions. Through the Russian language the local population was introduced to the world's art and culture. On the other hand, there was a rejection of Kazakh original culture and traditions, and repressions of Kazakh intelligentsia. As the population spoke Russian and kept forgetting Kazakh, the nation started to lose its roots and ethnic identity.

Kazakhstan was a periphery of the Soviet Union and one way destination for Soviet intelligentsia and all kinds of artists – Stalin's political prisoners – sent to concentration camps or exile. Then in 1950 - 60<sup>th</sup> Soviet avant-garde has started to appear in Almaty to exhibit their works. We were just so far from Moscow, nobody really paid attention what was happening in our country. But under this influence Kazakhstani contemporary arts has started its development.

In 1991 Kazakhstan became an independent country. I witnessed the rebirth of Kazakh patriotism, culture and traditions, and the rise of the state model with one body of citizens – Kazakhstanis, one principle ethnic group – Kazakhs, and one state language – Kazakh (Russian being an official language). The state's aim was to create a **new national identity** that could be shared by 130 ethnic groups living in

today's Kazakhstan. They saw it as a safeguard against ethnic conflicts and a foundation for social and economic stability.

Stability-wise, this has worked: for the past 20-something years we have been living together without any deep national conflict. Unfortunately, the so-called “**guided democracy**” approach led Kazakhstani culture to a deep stagnation in the artistic field, to conformism, self-censorship, traditionalism and academic “souvenir” art, to the deterioration of the cultural infrastructure and to the decline of the artistic new avant-garde heritage born in 1980s in Almaty.

Almaty had been a capital of Kazakhstan during 70 years. It was a city with a wide network of the major cultural institutions. In 1997 it was decided to move the capital to Astana. Nowadays Astana is a brand new city build from the scratch with a huge of technically equipped palaces of culture. But with no audience to fill thousands seats concert halls, insufficient or absent in-house technical and artistic capacity in many of the new state-of-the-art performance venues.

As there are insufficient professional resources to exploit this new infrastructure and lack of the arts objects to be displayed at the museums and galleries, the Ministry of Culture has been relocating people and collections from Almaty, thereby causing substantial damage to Almaty's cultural resources.

According the new cultural policy introduced for the first time ever in Kazakhstan last year, Astana should became a new cultural capital, a brand city of Kazakhstan with a series of high level, image-building events.

### **What's going to happen to Almaty?**

It's an open question. It even looks like we are losing our official status of the cultural capital.

This might be not a bad thing after all. There is a vast layer of academic and traditional culture in Almaty. It's a significant and very important part of the cultural heritage. Nevertheless, to the rich cultural heritage of our city we can apply the

economical term "**resource curse**", also known as the paradox of plenty. It refers to the paradox that countries and regions rich with the natural resources tend to have less growth of innovations and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer natural resources. Just the same way, the presence of this layer of classical, traditional culture prevents the development of contemporary arts and culture.

In one of her articles in 2008, a well-known Kazakhstani curator and art manager Yuliya Sorokina said: "To be a contemporary artist/curator here means to be an enthusiastic person with no institutional support, no sustainable salary and no local recognition. From time to time we try to organise exhibitions, workshops and seminars in Central Asian countries but they have never captured the attention of businesses or government bodies. They do not want to open up their minds to contemporary art".

This statement has mostly been true until five years ago. It was almost impossible to organise an independent film, music or theatre festival in Kazakhstan. But today, there are lots of fabulous artistic start-ups in Almaty. A new generation of arts managers in their mid-twenties are taking over the artistic scene. They are strong and active, they have a new mind-set and mentality, but they do need support to move forward and make exciting work.

### **Periphery is OK**

Although, Almaty is losing its status as cultural capital of Kazakhstan, there are more and more independent arts activities all around the city. It looks like this process cause certain revitalization of the Almaty and made artists to start re-thinking themselves.

As an example of successful initiative and a big interest from the audience to arts and culture could serve open public cultural space Artpoint. Which is centrally located open air venue used to be a waste ground until this summer. Now it's an equipped platform hosting all kinds of activities: concerts, exhibitions, lectures, meetings, workshops etc. There's an everyday programme and it will last till the end of September until raining season.

Upcoming in 2016 exhibition of emerging Kazakhstani artists “City\_Nomad” is raising questions of the identity of the new generation of artists.

“Have those, who live in the lands of the ancient nomads, inherited the spirit of their forefathers? Are they retracing the well-worn pathways of their ancestors, or have their tracks been completely erased by just a few decades of Soviet propaganda? Is the question of nomadic identity a matter of consciousness, or is it irrelevant now? Has their culture become homogenised by communism and now globalisation? Could the word “cosmopolitan” be a term for total nomadism? Are our cities now the new pastures for the modern nomad?”

After 300 years of colonisation and subsequent Soviet control, a new generation of Kazakhstani has been searching for the answer to these questions in an era of regained independence.

In recent years many people have left the country hoping to find themselves abroad and become welcome members of a global society. Some have since returned. Like exotic treasures brought from the Silk Road, they bring their experience and new found skills back from their travel adventures, with the intention of applying this knowledge to develop new industries and reviving old dreams of Kazakhstan. The symbiosis of Kazakh culture and global experience is developing striking and unique results in fashion, music, design, film and art.”