

With big changes, Kazakhstan tries to chart a new path

By L. Todd Wood

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I started writing this column to help educate Americans on the former Soviet Union and its successor states. There is a dearth of understanding of these parts of the world in the West, a lack of knowledge about emerging trends that at times may cause the U.S. to miss important opportunities.

Central Asia is rapidly changing and is moving decisively away its tragic past. [Kazakhstan](#) is leading that change.

As the Astana EXPO 2017 opened in the heart of Central Asia, dedicated to energy innovation with its futuristic architecture, anyone who considers themselves educated about the world should pay attention to what is happening in this energy-rich state.

[Kazakhstan](#) has had one leader since the fall of the Soviet Union. President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the 76-year-old onetime head of the Kazakh Communist Party, seems to be thinking of succession and how the country will fare in future decades, internally and on the world stage. This may be the impetus behind a major overhaul of the constitution that he oversaw earlier this year.

The changes signed into law on March 10 attempt to shift the balance of power from the presidency to the legislature. While critics say it falls short on promoting political pluralism, the law is an attempt “at seriously redistributing powers and democratizing the political system as a whole,” Mr Nazarbayev has said.

Having held commanding powers since the fall of the USSR, Mr. Nazarbayev subscribed to the “special way” theory to nation-building — develop the country economically and then talk about democratization. ConstitutionNet.org writes that the law is intended to enshrine a more precise separation of powers between branches of government; strengthen the supervisory powers of the Parliament; improve the system of checks and balances, and stabilize the overall political system.

The law also strengthens the Kazakh judicial system, which is still a work in progress just 25 years ago removed from the Soviet rule-by-writ.

Optimists are hoping this rebalancing of power between the executive, the parliament, and the judiciary will lay the groundwork for an eventual transition to a more durable democratic system in [Kazakhstan](#).

[Kazakhstan](#) is taking other steps to carve out a unique national identity, moving past its Soviet legacy and curbing the Russian influence — an influence mandated under Stalin’s dream of a unified “Soviet People” — all speaking one language (Russian) and thriving in one culture.

Mr. Nazarbayev in April ordered the authorities to come up with a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by the end of 2017 and shift over to the Latin alphabet entirely by 2025, after nearly 80 years with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. The government would put in place plans to expand the Kazakh language, which is a member of the Turkic language group, among the people, increasing from 60 percent to 95 percent use among the population.

[Kazakhstan](#) would keep its Russian language use at approximately 90 percent, fostering, in short, a bilingual society, with Kazakh as the official tongue, while also teaching English from an early age.

Of course, this is generating an unhappiness in some quarters in Moscow. Mr. Nazarbayev argues that the move would help [Kazakhstan](#) more easily integrate into the world economy. But with a quarter of its citizens of ethnic Russian origin, again due to Stalin’s policy of Russification of the ethnic Soviet republics, [Kazakhstan](#) must walk a fine line in this matter.

The native Kazakh language was infiltrated with Russian syntax and structure as it slowly faded from use over the decades. However, Cyrillic was a newcomer installed under Soviet leaders; Kazakh was originally written in runic, then Arabic, and finally Latin in 1929-1940. So, going back to Latin will not be new, as Nazarbayev wants the native language modernized.

However, none of the political and cultural changes can move forward unless the economy is humming. The 2017 Expo exhibition, has attracted more than 110 nations and 22 international organizations, and Kazakh officials are hoping it will prove a powerful “Open for business” sign, especially for global energy giants..

It’s part of a larger push by the government to make [Kazakhstan](#) a leader in Central Asian affairs, a push that includes privatization of major sectors of the economy and banking, investment and legal reforms designed to make Astana a financial hub for the region.

[Kazakhstan](#) has also stepped up its role as a regional diplomatic player, hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit earlier this month. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the gathering during which India and Pakistan were formally inducted into the China- and Russia-led bloc. Astana is also hosting peace talks aimed at ending the bloody Syrian civil war, with another round now set for early July, cement this perception.

As the U.S. seeks to forge a new strategy for Afghanistan and Central Asia, it's about time Washington pay a little more attention to what's happening in [Kazakhstan](#).

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