

EXPLORING URBANITY IN ALMATY & ASTANA: AN OVERVIEW OF A MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract. This paper showcases the logic, methodology, and findings features in Dmitrenko’s Major Research Project submitted to the University of Toronto for partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree. Dmitrenko’s research focused on exploring city development as an agent of political development in Kazakhstan. Exploring Almaty and Astana as her two case studies, Dmitrenko argues that the concurrent growth of both cities tells a story of Kazakhstan’s complicated relationship between the government and its citizens. In navigating these bottom-up or top-down relationships between the government and its citizens, Kazakhstan’s urban space seems to be organizing itself according to the principle of digitalization – the idea that digitalization can improve institutional trust and the quality of life. In doing so, Kazakhstan may be carving out a path for a new kind of political development.

Key words: urbanity, pandemic, city, daily life, digitalization

Introduction

What constitutes a democratic space? This question probes the nature of the interaction between physical and symbolic space, governance, and public life. The question was first brought to my attention by Professor Courtney Jung in 2016, who posed it to spark interest among her students in the shifting character of public spaces (such as shopping malls) in North America. Not long after, the phenomenon of shopping malls and their function as community spaces was examined by Josh Harmon and Exa Zim in *The Business Insider* as a story of their “rise and fall” [1]. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, shopping malls began to dwindle in their role as community spaces in North American suburbs, and while gradually becoming more vacant, reflected the changing habits of individuals and their cities. Ultimately, malls transformed from physical hubs designed according to capitalist values into empty spaces that no longer generate as much capital or community. Malls were designed for everyone – for all consumers, that is – creating a space according to capitalist principles, which de jure facilitated the creation of democratic space while remaining de facto exclusive to those who lacked purchasing power. As a result, one of the most iconic public spaces of the last 50 years was de facto *not* democratic.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interactions between cities, citizens, and political development by providing an overview of the research conducted for

my Master's thesis, submitted to the University of Toronto in August of 2022. In this abridged version, I will provide an overview of the conducted research, and highlight its main contributions to the study of cities in political science.

My thesis was concerned with “the relationship between cities, citizens, and political development” [2, 2 p.]. In particular, I wanted to contribute to the academic field by way of examining “how cities and their utilization of space can reflect the political dimensions of a state and inadvertently act as a political agent, driving development and shaping the identity of its citizens” [2, 2 p.]. For this, I chose to examine the development of two cities in Kazakhstan, Almaty and Nur-Sultan (now Astana). My major research paper argues, that Almaty and Nur-Sultan embody the dialogue between citizens who hold bottom-up ideas of development, and the government, which attends to top-down ideas of development. The concurrent growth of both cities tells a story of Kazakhstan's complicated relationship between the government and its citizens. While Nur-Sultan is the physical manifestation of an endowed political legacy which attempts to lock Kazakhstan to a particular track of development, Almaty remains a fluid organism that exemplifies the *byt* (“way of life” or “essence”) of Kazakh citizens. The two cities (individually and in conjunction) indicate that the dialogue between the state and its citizens - the supposed trust and transparency - are not in alignment but remain in an ebb and flow. This ebb and flow is characterized by the liberties observed in Nur-Sultan's planning and the restraints in Almaty's construction process. This leaves the communication channel between the citizens and state in different kinds of gridlock – much like aspects of each city's development [2, 8 p.].

Methodology

The discipline of political science is limited in its theorization of cities. Rather, theories of development and political evolution have remained contained to the state-level, while municipal governance and its development has been explored insofar as municipal budgeting is important to the state or region. While these are important and worthwhile studies, they lack inquisition into the city as a governing body which is just as dynamic as the political body of the state. I would be amiss to not mention the scholarly literature on American cities. Literature on American cities emerged at the forefront of the 1990s, as American cities began to evolve past their former economic designations (like Detroit) or beyond their former population (like New York). In recent years, cities have regained traction among scholars interested in city development and its political implications, unlocking a new, interdisciplinary approach to theorizing cities. This newfound interest in cities introduces influence from urban planners, engineers, political scientists, and architects, and focuses on the “developing world”; primarily Africa and East Asia. One notable example of this research is documented by the book, *The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China's Instant City* by Juan Du. In their book, Du ex-

plores the misconception around Shenzhen's construction and grapples with questions of governance. Similarly, in a recent conference on Chartered Cities hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, scholars like Siqi Zheng discussed the concept of planned cities as economic engines, focusing primarily on China's cities. A chartered City is one with new rules; a city which has "the authority to implement [its] own laws and govern through their own administration which is distinct (but not sovereign) from their host country" [3]. Elaborating on this concept, the Charter Cities Institute emphasizes that "it is crucial to get governance 'right' before new urban spaces are filled, after which point change becomes not only more difficult but also much more costly" [3]. If governance is an essential component of these kinds of cities to "get right", and current academic research is mostly confined to the United States, East Asia, and some African cities, it seems that the case of post-Soviet cities (where governance models are muddy and distinct) presents a particularly fascinating case for study.

Discussion

My thesis asked the following questions: what can Almaty's and Nur-Sultan's city development teach us about the political direction of the Kazakh state? How does each city differ in what it has to say? Are the narratives told by each city in conflict? What role does each city take on and play for the state narrative?

By design, these questions were created to explore trending global urbanization (the rise of so-called "mega-cities") and framed to help situate the findings "within the context of politically evolving regimes" [2, 2 p.]. I began the research by discussing the historical importance of capital cities, making note that capital cities served as symbols of modernity, economic hubs, congregation spaces, and identifying markers of a nation-state. As I identify in my research, the concept of "modernity", "is often used to propel a vision of grandeur and is typically framed by global trends and the governments that seek to implement them" [2, 5 p.]. My research also leans on Natalie Koch's use of Foucault's "regimes of governmentality" [4, 14 p.]. I write in my paper:

As Koch describes in their book, Foucault's conceptualization of "regimes of governmentality" "[represents] a loose confluence of various political tactics that may target individuals, spaces, materials, ideas, or some combination thereof, as well as the broader structures of thought about how to define the relationship between governors and the governed" promoting the typification of regimes as liberal or illiberal [4, 14 p.]. But what Koch points out (and what I draw on) is that "the looseness of these technologies – and their propensity forgoing out of date and being replaced by new political inventions – implies that they are always in flux" concluding that "an authoritarian regime shifts its tactics over time, perhaps softening or perhaps hardening, depending on circumstances" [4, 14 p.] The author

sets out to study illiberal governmentality without spatially fixing it or succumbing to its exceptionalization [2, 8 p.].

I also draw on Koch's reasoning that Kazakh leadership, in breaking from its Soviet past, 'Others' its Sovietism. While

Koch notes that "in their infinite variations, spectacle's Others are ultimately about how people imagine space and their place in it" [4, 44 p.]. The concept of 'Othering' is discussed by Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and Timothy Mitchell, specifically in relation to colonialism. In those cases, the authors affirm that characterizing indigenous people as the 'Other' bolstered European notions of modernity. Creating the Other went so far as to produce the "Islamic City Paradigm" which became a dominant way to view cities of the Muslim world in scholarly literature [5]. The paradigm "reduced cities in the Muslim world to the "physical manifestations of sacred laws," "governed by a single religious reference system" [5]. Hanssen argues that this reduction reinforces Western assertions of power and instead, pledges that "Muslim cities need to be understood as material manifestations of social change and political power in their particular settings" [5]. Drawing from Hanssen's logic, I develop a new concept which I will employ in my study, the "Post-Soviet City Paradigm" [2, 14 p.].

Following this logic, I propose the "Post-Soviet City Paradigm".

The "Post-Soviet City Paradigm" aims to situate each post-Soviet city and its development in its inherited history and highlight the Soviet-imposed aspects of development in conjunction with the "material manifestations of social change and political power" in each republic (as advocated for by Hanssen) [2, 14 p.].

This new concept was created to situate the post-Soviet city in the broader scholarly discussions on cities and add a lens of study which may help close the gap in research on post-Soviet cities.

My research relied on interviews with local public persons. As I state in my paper:

To permit a degree of flexibility in the interview process, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews while adhering to a general plan for discussion (see Appendix B) [6]. This method allows the interviewees flexibility in their answers as well as opens space for the exploration of adjacent topics or questions. While this method was advantageous in its inherent flexibility, I am acutely aware of its drawbacks. The flexibility, which yields a more holistic picture of the subject matter is also the flexibility that increases the variety of questions asked, making it harder to standardize the discussion and its results. Although this is a drawback, for this study, it can also function as a strength. Standardizing discussions can make it simpler to generalize findings while working with more varied results limits their generalizability. I hope this method helps me construct the best possible picture of this subject matter [2, 15 p.].

Findings

The Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy for development seems to be visionary as opposed to directional. Several individuals with whom I conducted interviews mentioned that the strategy was “irrelevant to their day-to-day life, or commented that it was “too general” and should not be “taken at face value” [2, 16 p.]. More tangible milestones are left to the regions or municipalities.

The old school of urban planners who lean more towards Soviet-style planning are at odds with the newer school of urban planners which adhere to non-Soviet style urban planning. This creates a tension between professionals and their visions for Almaty (not so much Astana), which stagnates the development process. While Almaty was planned by Soviet planners and now experiences a slightly more collaborative style of planning, Astana was a tabula rasa, for which a draft plan was easily curated by Kazakh government officials in the post-Soviet period.

Questions of decentralization linger in both cities, however, they are more active in Almaty. Junussova points out in her book that “the changing roles of the city governments are advised to be important to consider for a possible correction of the decentralisation course. Modern cities have started to change the course of global economic development (Sassen, 1991)” [7, 6 p.]. “Or in other words, urbanization has changed cities, and begs for different approaches to decentralization” [2, 20 p.]. While Almaty and Nur-Sultan are “cities of regional importance” under the Kazakh Constitution, their status as such is based on population size. The status promotes access to municipal finances and services, and hence sparked the development of “pro-urbanization policy-making such as the “Development of Regions until 2020 programme” established in 2014” [7, 7 p.] This policy aims to create additional agglomerations in cities, adding population and space to the city-centre. However, these additions are seldom well equipped to join the city centre, and rather, place strain on the central service system. In Almaty, agglomeration additions are a function of bottom-up expansion caused by internal migration waves, while in Astana, there is a “more intentional and ‘organized’ style of agglomeration” [2, 21 p.]

Akimats continue to face low trust levels from citizens. However Almaty has reinstated its *gradsovet* in August 2022, and Astana continues to function with its existing *gradsovet* to foster greater citizen participation in each respective city’s development. Activists have explored various models for improving the function of the Akimat and its *gradsovet*, but until there is an established history of trust between citizens and the municipal government, these models might just remain visionary.

The concept of a “Smart City” served to create a digital space unique from its physical urban counterpart. Akimat’s have begun digitalizing communication between their citizens and the local government, using it as a tool to foster trust and increase the quality of life. And while this approach is forward thinking, it can also present a number of challenges which accompany all digital proceedings regardless of who is running them and where they take place.

Conclusion

While all spaces are organized according to some principles, it is possible that Kazakh spaces are being encouraged to organize according to digitalization, presenting a new kind of modernity. My research identifies the following: Kazakhstan has a vision for its modernity, that vision is interpreted and actualized differently depending on an individuals' sympathy to Soviet-style planning, questions of decentralization are important in both Almaty and Astana, local Akimats are in need of a trust-based relationship with their citizens, and local Akimats are committed to creating "smart cities" while simultaneously hoping they will foster greater trust in their institution.

I make the following analogy in my research paper: akin to the argument made by Faith Woon which tracks the leapfrog development of certain countries, referring to the jump made from non-existent telecommunication infrastructure straight to the use of mobile phones (foregoing the landline), an argument can be made that Kazakhstan jumped straight to creating a digital space, without chiselling out a suitable physical space [8]. Whilst some things still lack in terms of developing Kazakhstan's public spaces, (i.e. public participation and interest, mechanisms for implementation, public trust in institutions, and effective and efficient communication), Kazakhstan's two largest cities are continuing to develop rapidly.

If we are in-fact witnessing the creating of a new modernity through digitalization, it is imperative we urge it to grapple with its 'democracy'. And while Almaty and Astana tell us differing stories of conversations between the citizens and their local governments, their aspiration to create a new modernity is the same, generating a plethora of research questions waiting to be explored. Moving forward, my research and the term "Post-Soviet City Paradigm" can be used as a cornerstone and lens to explore these questions and the questions that I have missed. The following are my recommendations for Kazakhstan's policy development:

1. To improve the transparency and accountability between local government and its citizens, social media channels could list individuals who are responsible for communication using that channel. This would ensure that citizens who contact that channel know who they are communicating with.

2. Each Akimat could create a database of communication logs (which would contain communication held through social media channels), and preserve it in a system that continues to function throughout changes of power (i.e. the appointment of new Akims or any other change in personnel). This would elevate institutional memory.

3. A more pronounced effort could be focused on the development and realization of essential services beyond the city core into the urban periphery by the Akimat. Essential services consist of sewage systems, water systems, energy systems, and telecommunication systems. This would minimize the disparity between city cores and their growing peripheries.

4. Each city could establish an independent organ whose function is solely to facilitate public engagement in local government and facilitate dialogue between citizens and municipal objects. This would ensure a more congruent vision of each city and its development.

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5 Jens Hanssen, “History, heritage and modernity: cities in the Muslim world between destruction and reconstruction,” page 523.

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Дмитренко А.

Алматы мен Астана қалаларын зерттеу: ірі ғылыми жобаға шолу

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада Дмитренконың Торонто университетіне өнертану магистрі дәрежесіне қойылатын талаптарды ішінара қанағаттандыру үшін ұсынған ірі зерттеу жобасының логикасы, әдістемесі және нәтижелері берілген. Дмитренконың зерттеулері Қазақстанның саяси даму факторы ретінде қаланың дамуын зерттеуге арналды. Алматы мен Астананы екі мысал ретінде қарастыра отырып, Дмитренко екі қаланың бір мезгілде өсуі Қазақстандағы билік пен азаматтар арасындағы күрделі қарым-қатынасты көрсетеді деп санайды. Үкімет пен оның азаматтары арасындағы төменнен жоғарыға немесе жоғарыдан төменге бағытталған осы қарым-қатынастарды басқаруда Қазақстанның қалалық кеңістігі цифрландыру принципі — цифрландыру институционалдық сенім мен өмір сапасын жақсарту алады деген идея бойынша өздігінен ұйымдастырылатын сияқты. Осы арқылы Қазақстан саяси дамудың жаңа түріне жол аша алады.

Түйін сөздер: урбанистика, пандемия, мегаполис, тұрмыс, цифрландыру.

Дмитренко А.

Изучение городского города Алматы и Астана: обзор крупного исследовательского проекта

Аннотация. В этой статье представлены логика, методология и результаты крупного исследовательского проекта Дмитренко, представленного в Университет Торонто для частичного выполнения требований для получения степени магистра гуманитарных наук. Исследование Дмитренко было сосредоточено на изучении развития города как фактора политического развития в Казахстане. Рассматривая Алматы и Астану в качестве двух своих тематических исследований, Дмитренко утверждает, что одновременный рост обоих городов свидетельствует о сложных отношениях между правительством и гражданами в Казахстане. При управлении этими восходящими или нисходящими отношениями между правительством и его гражданами городское пространство Казахстана, похоже, самоорганизуется в соответствии с принципом цифровизации — идеей о том, что цифровизация может улучшить институциональное доверие и качество жизни. Поступая таким образом, Казахстан может прокладывать путь для нового типа политического развития.

Ключевые слова: урбанистика, пандемия, мегаполис, быт, цифровизация.