Re-interpreting National Ideology
in the Contemporary Urban Space of Astana.

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This article analyses the way in which the Soviet legacy has been combined with practices of public representation of national ideology in the space of the new capital city of Kazakhstan, Astana. It examines how cultural and political elites exploit various archaic elements of the traditional imagery of the nation in the context of modern state-building. Referring to various examples in cityscape the article aims to show how the national ideology handles tradition not as a coherent corpus of 'inheritance', but as a reservoir of potential symbols, which can be used creatively for the fashioning of a national image of the capital city both in the international and in the domestic arena.
Keywords: Ideology, urban space, symbols, capital city.

Introduction

With the advent of the post-socialist transformation in newly established post-socialist countries, cities became essential 'arenas' for socio-political and economic change. At the same time, their changing landscapes have played an important role in modifying people's living environment, as regards both the ideological management of symbolic space and the shifting patterns of daily routine. We shall analyse the way in which the Soviet legacy has been combined with practices of public representation of the national ideology in the space of the new capital city of Kazakhstan, Astana. We shall explore how the various elements of the symbolic landscape of the capital city have been affected by the process of re-invention of national tradition, providing visual and materialised support of the nation-state

We aim to describe various changes occurring in the city space of Astana, since it was designated as the country's capital. We look at these changes in terms of a specific performative logic informed by the nationalizing aspirations of ruling elites that may be said to reflect the general trends characteristic of the capitals of newly independent states. At the same time, the discussion reveals how specific elements and procedures of nationalization were involved in the urban planning of Astana, the purpose being to create a visual image of the city that transmitted an implicit nationalizing message. The analysis addresses a wide range of physical evidence, such as architectural features (both individual buildings and urban areas), monuments and other places of memory, toponymics and, finally, specific elements of urban design including façades, sculptures, arches and other decorative features. All these aspects of the urban fabric are examined here in view of the role they have been ascribed in the formation of the national image of the capital city. We read the cityscape and architecture of Astana as a major field of representation for the society of Kazakhstan in the process of national mythmaking. The dynamics of change in the cityscape reveal both uncertainty and a readiness to experiment conceptually by those responsible for choosing or designing the icons

used to represent tradition, for offering interpretations and for adjusting them to fit the context of national ideology.

In the Kazakh language, Astana means 'capital'. It became the official city name in 1998.[1] Historically, the city had not just had different names, but had also been part of different strategies of economic and political development, such as Stolypin's reforms under the Tsarist Russian empire, Stalin's purges, in the USSR, and later Khruschev's Virgin Land campaign, which gave the city one of its names — *The Linograd*, which can be translated as 'city of virgin land'. No sooner had Astana been designated as the capital than it became the object of study by practitioners in a wide range of disciplines; among them, urbanists, social anthropologists, sociologists, political geographers and historians of architecture. The new capital city has been variously viewed as the result of a radical rethinking of the nation-state by the political elites, as a product of post-Soviet cultural formation and as one of the prominent components of the country's modernisation (Bissenova 2014, Talamini 2011, Alexander et al. 2007, Medeuova 2008, Fauve 2015, Laszczkowski 2011, Koch 2013, Meuser 2010).

Many of the studies in question ascribe particular importance to the role of President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Koch 2013, Schatz 2004, Fauve 2015). Many authors have thus shown a tendency to establish a strong correlation, in various contexts, between specific kinds of urban design and authoritarianism (Adams 2008, Agnew 1994, Wagenaar 2000). In his analysis of the social and political conditions under which capital cities can or cannot be refurbished so as to become showcases for the nation, Michel Wagenaar concludes that authoritarian power plays a crucial role in transforming the urban fabric (Wagenaar 2000: 12). Furthermore, any transfer of a capital city necessarily requires strong political will and highlights expressly the political and administrative function of the capital in the state (Rapoport 1993).

The political environment of Kazakhstan and the explicit involvement of president Nursultan Nazarbayev in the whole process of inventing the new capital city — from making decisions about relocation to deciding upon a name for the capital and promoting it in national and international official discourse — speaks volumes about the importance of the personal relationship between the president and Astana. However, focusing on this aspect of city development makes the process of capital-building tantamount to the ineluctable unfolding of the dictatorial will of an authoritarian leader, as if such a project were simply a part of a 'patronage strategy' (Schatz 2003). This approach imposes a viewpoint that obscures the overall complexity of urban transformation and of the symbolic inventions that accompany urban transformation.

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[1] The name of the city changed several times. At the time of its foundation, in 1863, the city was called Akmolinsk; between 1961 and 1992 it was known as Tselinograd and between 1992 and 1998 as Akmola.

National Representation

The symbolism of the capital of a newly independent state can be decoded not only as a materialized 'quest for national identity' (Vale 1992: 48), but also as a complex product influenced by various actors and agencies. Firstly, it reflects the preferences of the ruling regime and the official articulation of a national idea. To a considerable extent, it can also indirectly display interpretations of the national idea which had been suppressed and excluded from the official narrative. Secondly, it reflects the government's concern to cultivate an international identity through modern architecture, new patterns of planning and so on. The international identity of a capital city carries a twofold symbolic weight. On the one hand, it helps to position the *city* within the international arena. On the other hand, it promotes its role as a symbolic representation of the nation. The international identity of a city is developed partly as a result of the creation of a 'convincing and effective city brand, as one of the most powerful tools in interurban competition' (Lisiak 2010: 79). It is expected to boost that city's chances of attracting international and state investment. At the same time, the production of an urban image for 'external' purposes has also 'internal' political and social significance, helping to counter the sense of alienation that Georg Simmel long ago identified as a troubling aspect of modern urban life. As David Harvey writes, 'The orchestrated production of an urban image can, if successful, also help to create a sense of social solidarity, civic pride and loyalty to place…' (Harvey 1989: 14).

To judge by the case of Astana, these two aspects of urban image formation are closely interrelated: the international identity of a city and the 'geopolitical branding' of newly independent nations help to promote the national vision, which was chosen by the governing elite as the foundation of their strategy of state- and nation-building.

The Meaning of Transferring a Capital

On the one hand, all post-Soviet states, once they had gained their independence, were initially in a similar situation as they needed the attributes of national independence and sovereignty. Newly achieved statehood had to be not only 'performed' but also 'proved' by a corresponding historical narrative of the nation, and it needed to be ideologically sustained by the spatial and symbolic development of their capital cities. On the other hand, Kazakhstan is the only post-Soviet country where independence resulted in the transfer of the capital city to a new site. The peculiarity of Astana, a post-Soviet capital created 'from scratch', can be viewed as a manifestation of radical change occurring in Kazakhstani nationhood.

The idea of relocating the capital was first mooted in 1993. One year later the project was approved by the Kazakhstani Parliament. In 1997 the capital finally moved from Alma-Ata to Astana. In support of the intention of building a new capital, a number of 'official' reasons were given, most of them relating to the problems linked to the geographical location of the previous capital, Almaty. Seismological activity, natural geographical barriers (mountains) that prevented the further expansion of the city, the ecological situation due to airborne contamination were spelled out. Scholars, both at home and abroad, searched for more sophisticated explanations, casting the transfer of the capital as an attractive way of addressing some state- and nation-building dilemmas (Schatz 2004, Bekus and Medeuova

2011). The problems that were most often discussed in this context were related to the ethnopolitical re-mapping of the country and to the need for a fresh start in state-building, at least in symbolic terms.

An important issue addressed by the transfer of the capital is the division between the 'Kazakh south' and 'the Russian north'. In 1991, Slavic groups, including Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, represented between 70 and 80 percent of the population in the seven northern regions of the country.[2] The 'North' was viewed by the authorities of the new state as an obstacle to constructing a unitary Kazakh state (Bremmer 1994: 620). From this perspective, Astana became a symbol of the process of ethnic Kazakhization of the region (Peyrouse 2008: 115). In addition to a state policy of 'directed migration' of Kazakhs from the south to northern cities, and particularly to the new capital (Savin and Alekseenko 1998: 113), there was also a natural flow of labour migrants that followed the investment boom in the construction of the new city.

The previous capital of Kazakhstan — Alma-Ata (Almaty) — was established by the Bolshevik government in 1927. It was developed on the site of a small provincial town which had formerly served as an outpost for Russian settlers (*krepost' Vernoye*). Almaty was a typical Soviet capital city, built in accordance with the linear city model that was reproduced in numerous Soviet cities and became almost a synonym for the 'socialist city'.[3] At the same time, in spite of following Soviet uniformity in its strategy of development, during its seven decades as a Kazakh capital, Almaty acquired its own national colour and multi-ethnic flavour, which was associated with the prestige earned during the Soviet period. The ambitious project of national development, economic reform and transition formulated by the Kazakhstani government at a time of uncertainty created a demand for a new symbolic centre, a new capital.

Located in the south of the country, close to the border with China, Almaty seemed to lack the appropriate geopolitical meaning. It was well located 'to link the Central Asian states to each other than to connect the regions of Kazakhstan itself' (Schatz 2004: 123). However, according to the new vision of Kazakhstan articulated in the official discourse, the country has a larger geopolitical context: the strategic location of Astana at the 'Heart of Eurasia' was a way of manifesting and promoting a Eurasian identity project for the new state that transcended the outdated frameworks of 'Central Asia' and 'post-Soviet space' (Koch 2010:

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[2] In 1991, Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet republic where the titular nation did not constitute the majority. In the last Soviet census in 1989, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan represented 39.7 percent, while Russians living in Kazakhstan represented 37.4 percent, Ukrainians and Belarusians 6.5 percent. In the northern parts of the republic bordering on Russia some 80 percent of the population is non-Kazakh, and many Russians hold that the northern Kazakh steppe and eastern Kazakhstan are by rights part of Russia (Olcott 1997: 554-5).

[3] A 'linear city' model was first developed in the nineteenth century by Arturo Sroia for Madrid. It called for elongated zones of uniform rows of superblock neighbourhood units running parallel to the river or industrial zone in order to minimize transportation to and from work. They were protected by a green belt wedged between the living and production zones. In the U.S.S.R. this idea was promoted by Nikolai Miliutin in the late 1920s.

770). Astana became one of the most significant elements of this ideological nation- and state-building project, which was anti-Soviet in its national orientation, but was also anti-nationalist, because the national idea, which the Kazakhstani government chose to endorse, was in many respects very different from what Kazakh ethno-nationalists wanted. Instead of an enforced nationalizing policy aimed at the consolidation of a monolingual Kazakh ethnic community, purportedly the sole legitimate 'owner' of the state of Kazakhstan, the new national policy combined the promotion of Kazakh ethnic culture and language with the idea of Kazakhstani multiculturalism.

The choice of Astana was determined by its geographical location in the middle of the country, where important arterial highways and trunk roads meet. Located in the North of the Kazakh Uplands (Saryarka), there were almost no geographical limits to the future growth of the new capital city. In addition, it already possessed the required infrastructure — water, electricity, and a transport system, and, not less important, it enjoyed secure seismological conditions.

A Capital City as a Strategy of Self-narration
The transfer of the capital served to symbolize the disruption of a past that had been centred on the old capital city, and the creation of a new order in the geopolitical landscape. These two aspects of the transfer — the completion of an earlier epoch and the inauguration of a new one — provided a conceptual underpinning to the project of creating a new capital.

In its past, Astana had gone through several reincarnations. A former provincial town of the Russian empire located on the traditional trade routes, it grew into a trading centre typical of a region that had assimilated a very mixed population and, with it, certain elements of a nomadic culture. Later, it became a Soviet provincial city that went through socialist modernisation and that, during the Virgin land campaign, attracted settlers from across the USSR. In more recent years, it became a city built on oil revenues, where luxury and the reach of new technologies have been combined with the reappraisal of the nomadic tradition, and where modern urban solutions exist side by side with the bizarre and almost Baroque tastes of private investors. As a result, the city has been transformed into a melting pot in which global processes have been fused with diverse local practices and national aspirations.

The master plan for Astana was designed by the architect Kisho Kurokawa, winner of the international competition for the master plan and design of the new city of Astana in 1998. Kurokawa was a founding member of Japan's Metabolist movement, which advocated an organic, renewable architecture and claimed that cities should not be seen as eternal structures but rather as living organisms that can evolve and expand over time. He devised a system of linear zoning rather than a radial urban core, and it was his idea to move the new city centre to the left bank of the river. The city's past and its Soviet legacy were thus not within the purview of the new centre.

Moreover, an alternative historical 'justification' was bought on the foreground; it was embodied by a nearby site connected with ancient Kazakh national history. In 1998, an archaeological expedition discovered an ancient settlement named Bosok, tracing back to the 10th-13th Century A.D. Located about three miles from Astana, Bosok is now included in the

list of the historical cultural heritage of Astana and has been officially recognized as a precursor of the modern capital of Kazakhstan (Akishev and Khabdulina 2011). Thus, if the history of the city on the right bank of the river dates back to 1832, when Fiodor Shubin established a steppe fortress called Akmola, and, therefore, implies certain 'Russian roots', the left bank of Astana has pure Kazakh origins and belongs to a centuries-long history of nomadic tradition.

One of the most vexed issues relating to Kazakh discourse on Astana is the possibility of fashioning a national appearance for Astana through the most advanced contemporary architectural means. The use of decorated tiles as ornament in buildings such as the National Academic Library and the New Mosque should be mentioned as one of the various techniques employed in the process of building the capital. One of the central features of the Astana cityscape — the *Baiterek* tower (2002) — was designed as a fusion of modernization and nationhood. The word *Baiterek* is meant to evoke the legend of the 'Tree of Life', a central symbol of Turkic mythology. As this legend features a golden egg, the building is surmounted by a golden orb.[4] The monumental architecture of the 'left bank' provides numerous examples of extravagant high-tech buildings, among them various skyscrapers with glass surfaces and simple geometric forms, exemplifying a wide range of architectural styles. Their architectural originality, their prominence in the Astana skyline and their height became material expressions of various actors producing competing representations and thus vying for status on the symbolic market of Astana.

The main construction work on the left bank of the Ishim started in 2001, for before that date most efforts were focused on the reconstruction of the old cityscape on the right bank. These included changes in the facades of the buildings, alterations to external decorations or additions to them, the renaming of urban locations, and so on. The construction of a new housing settlement on the right bank of the Ishim was among the first strategic projects in the shaping of a new image for the city. It was supposed to represent a new generation of elitist housing, built in the former 'recreation zone'; that is, the area formerly intended for public recreation. This new settlement, the 'micro district Samal', was designed not only to 'visualise' a new order in the capital cityscape; located alongside the right riverbank, it also created a kind of screen that made the old socialist cityscape of Tselinograd practically invisible from the new city centre.

The uniformity of the cityscape and the absence of any reference to a 'national' tradition of construction were among the most challenging characteristics of the socialist city that had to be addressed in the post-Soviet era. While the new capital city Astana on the left bank was being planned and imagined, numerous efforts were made by local architects to 'introduce' a national dimension to the design of the old socialist city. The reconstruction of the one of the central thoroughfares — the Republic Avenue — demonstrates this ideological contradiction between the old and new visions of the city, as well as between the 'non-

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[4] According to a legend, the magical bird of happiness *Samruk* laid its egg between the branches of the tree of life. It is by reference to this aspect of the legend that the *Baiterek* tower is surmounted by a golden orb.

national' and the 'national'. This street is mostly built up with five-storey panel houses (so called *khruschevka*) and some single nine-storey blockhouses from the later socialist period. As it plays a crucial role in the city's communications infrastructure, it could not be closed for the long period of time required for its reconstruction. But it could not preserve its socialist outlook either. The first attempt at a re-design was the 'masking' of the socialist essence of the buildings; the facades of all the blocks on the street were covered in plastic siding panels, which proved ineffectual from both a practical and an aesthetic point of view. The second attempt at reconstruction was aimed not only at concealing the Sovietness behind the meaningless plastic panels, but also at adding 'national' substance to the decorations. The facades of the buildings were covered in curtain walls decorated drawing and fretwork that clearly referred to an unspecified 'ethnic' art; they included a variety of arches, volumetric profiles, relief sculptures, ornamental patterns, columns, cornices, and so on. Sovietness however, did not disappear from these buildings; the original architectural patterns remain 'readable', and the new covers show not so much a new image of the city as the efforts made to conceal its past. All things considered, the avenue can be described 'as an expression of characteristic postcolonial trauma' (Bekus and Medeuova 2011: 145-7). The new appearance of parts of Astana's old city seems to be 'illusory', because many of these colourful facades are literally just facades: the back of the buildings has kept the old Soviet exterior.

Perceiving post-Soviet as 'post-colonial' implies an urgent need for the symbolic emancipation of the capital's cityscape; that is, removing, replacing or redesigning (changing the meaning) old places of memory that used to be the social capital of the colonizer's presence. One of the first official decisions taken by the Kazakh authorities when reconstructing Akmola/Astana was to remove Soviet monuments in the public spaces of the new capital. Together with Soviet monuments such as the Lenin monument (1970) and the memorial dedicated to the fighters for Soviet power (1972), many statues of Russian steppe settlers were also dismantled (Medeuova 2004). The de-Sovietization of the symbolic urban landscape was identified as an important instrument for the nationalization of the capital city. Russian and Soviet monuments, as well as Soviet toponyms and city names, were considered to be not simply the legacy of the Soviet past but also instruments for the promotion of an alien ideological project (Russian or Soviet). Before Astana became the capital, only 180 street names in the city were related to the history of Kazakhstan. The rest of the streets had politically and ideologically loaded names, or names without any cultural or historical meaning (like *Sveltlaya* (Light), *Novaya* (New), *Letnyaya* (Summer), and so on (Mukanova 2008).

For the Kazakh national elite the renaming of streets and the erasure of old places of memory were effective tools for nationalizing the urban space. For example, the new street names in the administrative city centre on the left river bank originated in historical toponyms related to various khanates and autonomous regions that existed in Kazakh history or were part of the lands currently inhabited by Kazakhs. In this way, the contemporary administrative centre of Astana became a true manifestation of the glorious path travelled by the Kazakh people to state independence.

Most recently, Levon Mirzoyan street — originally named after the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan — was renamed Kanysh Satpayev street, after the first President of the Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences. This action was taken after recently discovered and published archives revealed Mirzoyan's involvement in extinguishing 'the enemies of the people'; that is, representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia.

At the same time, the ideological confrontation between Soviet and post-Soviet elements in Astana has not become absolute. On the city map, as across the country, many names referring to the Soviet or pre-Soviet past — as, for example, in the case of cities like Pavlodar or Petropavlovsk — were left undisturbed. Many streets kept their original names in the old parts of Astana, as did some old symbols of Soviet history. Moreover, in 2008 a new street named after Pushkin appeared on the city map of Astana; the naming is linked to the monument to Pushkin erected in the street, a gift from the Russian Federation. In this area around Gumilyov Eurasian National University many streets have kept their Soviet names; for example, A. Yanushkevich, E. Brusilovski, M. Dubinin, and so on.

On the one hand, the meaning of existing non-Kazakh names and their place in the local cultural and historical memory has been implicitly changed. Instead of being viewed as 'agents' of external influence, they came to be seen as contributions to the formation of Kazakhstani multiculturalism. On the other hand, the macro-strategy of making a radical break with the Soviet legacy that lay at the heart of the ideological premise for the establishment of Astana does allow some degree of tolerance at the micro-level towards the remnants of Sovietness of single elements in the cityscape (Bekus and Medeuova 2011).

Cityscape and Archetypes of National Culture

Among the instruments employed to nationalize the nascent cityscape of Astana there was the idea of filling the urban space with symbolic sculptures that referred to the archetypes of traditional culture. One of the most enduring archetypes of the traditional town is the 'gate'. In Kazakh nomadic culture a similar function was performed by the emblem of the temporary camp: the 'crossed spears'. These two symbols, the gate and the crossed spears, were combined in the sculptural composition *Ush-Naiza* ('Three spears'). In 2002, this composition was installed on the right bank of the river where the old city of Tselinograd used to end. Later, in 2007, this symbol was removed because, due to a new city centre development, 'the gate' was to be located in the heart of the city. Another symbol of a gate was constructed, this time based on the mythological story of the 'divine chariot'; it fulfils the function of an actual entrance to the city park 'Arai'. This park, however, is located some distance away from the city's walking routes and has not become a popular public space. Instead, it has become an experimental zone for the visualization of various traditional folkloristic stories of the Kazakh people. Subsequently, the idea of using folkloristic decoration was extended to the whole city, and major public squares in Astana were decorated with sculptures referring to the folk tradition, such as figures dressed in the national costume and wearing traditional jewellery (rings, bracelets).

A third type of 'gate' exists in Astana: a triumphal arch called *Mangilik Yel*. It was designed in 2011 and inaugurated at the ceremony marking the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstani independence. The design of Astana's *Arc de Triomphe* was intended to symbolize Kazakh traditional values. The arch is shaped as a 20-metre-high cube with an observation platform on the top. Sculptures installed in niches on the sides carry its main symbolic message. Those entering the city see two traditional figures in these niches: *Aqsaqal*,[5] a symbol of wisdom and spiritual succour, and the sculpture of a mother, a keeper of the hearth. Those leaving the city see two figures of warriors: a warrior nomad and a soldier of the modern Kazakhstani army. These juxtaposed warriors not only symbolise the historical unity of Kazakh's past and present but serve also as symbolic 'border guards' of Kazakhstani independence. In 2014 the idea of *Mangilik Yel* (which translates as 'the eternal people') was declared to be a new patriotic concept intended to symbolise the modern national idea of Kazakhstan and to represent the triumph of Kazakh people's strive for sovereign statehood (Junussova 2014: 1).

In spite of the fact that the introduction of new national symbols has been widely discussed in the media and has indeed been a significant feature in the development of the capital city, some symbols have been dismantled, sometimes without much attention paid to this fact and without plausible explanation or expressions of regret. One of the most popular zoomorphic symbols of Kazakhstan had been the snow leopard, native to Kazakhstan and widely employed in the urban iconography of Astana. It was included in the Astana coat of arms from 1998 to 2008, and was actively exploited by those responsible for the urban design of Astana. In the context of contemporary national imagery snow leopards have a double symbolic connotation. One the one hand, they refer to the ancient mythology of Scythians, perceived as precursors of the Kazakhs. On the other hand, they suggest a positive parallel between Kazakhstan and 'Asian tigers', those countries whose massive economic growth had been fuelled by exports and rapid industrialization. Such an association promised the transformation of Kazakhstan into a 'Central Asian Snow Leopard' that would provide a model for other developing countries.[6]

In Astana, however, the symbolic role of the snow leopard has gradually decreased. The snow leopard sculptures designed by Dosmagambetov in 1998 disappeared from the river bridge after its reconstruction in 2007, despite the fact that emblematic function of snow leopards as 'guards' in the city space was likened to the role played by the famous lions of Saint Petersburg (Uvarov 2011). In 2008, the snow leopard was replaced in the Astana coat of arms by the emblematic image of *Baiterek*, the new architectural icon of the capital. A sculptural ensemble consisting of snow leopards and a wolf, symbols of the Kazakh ancestors, had been erected in 1999 in the Central Square in the old part of Astana but was dismantled in 2011. It is worth noting that while snow leopards and other zoomorphic emblems of tradition disappeared from the official symbolic landscape, replicas the sculptures representing them

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[5] In Turkic cultures *Aqsaqal* literally means 'white beard', metaphorically referring to the male elders, the old and wise of the community in Central Asia and the Caucasus.
[6] See President Nazarbayev's address to the People of Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev 2014).

are located in various peripheral spaces of the city, such as the inner courtyards of office buildings, at the entrance to restaurants, and so on.

The fluctuating dynamics of re-interpretations of the Kazakhstani symbolic landscape in the Astana cityscape is not only related to archaic forms and traditional icons. It applies also to memorial sites dedicated to more recent events. Consider, for example, the Monument to the Victims of Political Repression, which was located at the south-eastern edge of the City Park, at the corner of *Kabanbai Batyr* Avenue and the *Korgalzhyn* Highway. It stood on a rounded hillock, symbolising an ancient burial mound. The hillock was ringed by a wall decorated with symbolic images: a tree withering in a drought-afflicted land, oppressed people with their heads bowed, a list of the Stalinist camps on Kazakhstan's territory and metal birds struggling to free themselves from their traps. A tall metal obelisk rose from the top of the mound. This Monument was inaugurated in 1997; president Nazarbayev took part in the official ceremony. In 2008, the monument vanished from the memorial landscape of Astana, while the meaning of the mound was recast in a new spirit, now surmounted by the national flag.

Conclusion

There is a specific logic behind the described seemingly chaotic dynamics of various national symbols in a cityscape. It reveals how the cultural and political elites explore various archaic elements in the traditional imagery of the nation, seeking to deploy them in the context of modern state-building.

The re-interpretation of various symbols and icons of tradition in the Astana cityscape can be seen as the formation of the specific 'symbolic alphabet' of a national capital where individual symbols have been constructed, deconstructed and re-combined in the search for a viable representation of the national tradition that meets modern conditions. This fuzzy process of nationalistic city-making, as Fauve (2015) called it, reveals the lack of a clear established strategy behind the decision-making. To some extent, the process of exploration of past imagery that we have examined appears to be no less important than the 'outcome' it is designed to produce. It reflects the specific conditions of a capital city created 'from scratch', one intended to evoke in visual form the fresh start of a newly established state (Kazakhstani Way, 50 years).[7] While referring to ancient history and to the past in the visual imagery of Astana, the national ideology handles tradition not so much as a coherent corpus of 'inheritance' and legacy but as a reservoir of potential symbols that can be used creatively for the fashioning of a national image of the capital city both in the international arena and in the domestic one. This approach implicitly produces and confirms the legitimacy of present-day elites, bestowing upon them the authority to reshuffle and re-interpret the icons of the past. As a result, Astana becomes not only an invented city; being at once spectacular and monumental, the city itself becomes an 'added value' of tradition and a massive symbolic investment in the national imaginary of Kazakh society.

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[7] See http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page_215750_poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-n-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana-17-yanvaraya-2014-g

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