

# The Borders of Home: Questions of Homeland among Kazakhstan's Young "Returnees"

## Background:

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly-independent Republic of Kazakhstan sought to consolidate its sovereignty, in part, by establishing a program of "return" for the nearly 4 million ethnic Kazakhs living in countries such as China, Mongolia, and Russia. Since then, many have made the decision to migrate to Kazakhstan – a nation referred to as their ethnohistorical homeland. However, these "returnees" have often faced difficulties integrating into Kazakhstan, leading scholars to posit that as a result they maintain strong multi-stranded connections between both their country of origin and Kazakhstan. Thus, their sense of homeland often encapsulates not one, but two places – both their country of origin and Kazakhstan.

However, many of the children of these initial migrants have now reached adulthood. In addition, many young Kazakhs are choosing to move to Kazakhstan alone, in pursuit of higher education, economic opportunity, and greater freedom. How do their experiences differ from those of previous generations?

## Research Question:

Where do these young Kazakh migrants consider their homeland to be – their country of origin, Kazakhstan, someplace in between, or somewhere else entirely?



Nur-Sultan's Baiterek Tower, a symbol of a new stage of life for the Kazakh people in Kazakhstan. Photo: Elizabeth Woods

## Methodology:

- **Phase One** (Oct 2021 – March 2022): Conducted online life history and semi-structured interviews with young Kazakh migrants, as well as expert interviews with other researchers via Zoom, Telegram, and Instagram. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in-person fieldwork was not possible at this time.
- **Phase Two** (April 2022): Continuation of study project in a face-to-face format in the cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.

## Practical Reflections:

- Interviewees were much more receptive in a face-to-face format than they were online. However, social media was a very useful tool for finding participants, given the extent to which these young migrants maintain online social networks.

## Theoretical Reflections:

- I found that the term "returnee" was not applicable to many of the ethnic Kazakh migrants I interviewed, whose ancestors had never lived within the modern-day territory of Kazakhstan. Because of this, they often did not consider their migration to be a "return" in any sense. I will seek to critically engage with this term within my thesis.



A painting from the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, depicting the nation's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, surrounded by members of the different ethnic groups that make up Kazakhstan. However, Nazarbayev's program of "return" has sought to only increase the number of ethnic Kazakhs within the country. Photo: Elizabeth Woods

## Findings:

I found that these young migrants have constructed a wide range of unique conceptualizations of the homeland which often differ from that of previous generations. Within my master's thesis, I will explore four main homeland "types" which I have noticed during this study project:

- **No Homeland:** Some feel no attachment to any place. They often instead see homeland as something which they must go out and find.
- **Lost Homeland:** Due to an inability to return or maintain connections to their country of origin, some feel that they have lost the homeland which they once had.
- **One Homeland:** Many migrants feel a strong sense of attachment either to only their country of origin or Kazakhstan.
- **Two Homelands:** Those who still maintain strong connections to their country of origin after migrating to Kazakhstan (or those who face difficulties integrating) often feel that their homeland lies somewhere between both of these places.



Early evening in Almaty, a city which draws many ethnic Kazakh migrants from China and Mongolia. Photo: Elizabeth Woods