

Kazakstan Sings a New Song

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The adoption of a populist national anthem is part of a wider nation-building project. Kazakstan's new national anthem is part of a broader effort by the authorities to make people feel good about their country.

In a move timed to coincide with his inauguration for a further seven years in office, President Nursultan Nazarbaev replaced the rather lacklustre national anthem adopted after Kazakstan became independent with a popular song dating back to the Fifties.

The lyrics of the old anthem were difficult to remember, and the tune was simply lifted from the official anthem used when Kazakstan was a republic within the Soviet Union.

The new one, "My Kazakstan", is an upbeat song that many people are already familiar with, although the president has altered some of the words to update it. Both old and new sets of words are in the Kazak language.

"My Kazakstan" seems to have been a good choice, and has been welcomed by sportsmen who will have to hear it whenever they compete abroad.

"The new anthem arouses a feeling of patriotism and responsibility in me," said Olympic boxing champion Ermakhan Ibraimov.

"Every time that I hear it, I feel such a thrill," said Darmen Sadvakasov, a world chess champion.

Azat Bayarlin, sculptor and member of the Kazakstan Artists' Union, suggested the anthem change was an inspired move, "It is important, because people should be proud of their anthem and their homeland. 'My Kazakstan' is just what's needed – a song that is national, familiar and loved. To use a modern term, it's a hit which has remained popular for decades now."

"My Kazakstan" got its first major outing at the January 11 inauguration ceremony to mark the start of Nazarbaev's next seven-year term in office following his election victory last month, while children across the country began the new school term by singing the new anthem.

The president made alterations to the song to include references to the centuries-old struggle to create an independent and united Kazak state, strengthened by the wealth of this vast country.

This reflects a broader project by the authorities to encourage people in Kazakstan to feel proud of their country. "Nomad", a government-funded, no-expenses-spared blockbuster that came out last year was ostensibly a historical epic, but clearly conveyed the same kind of messages about national pride and unity.

The feel-good campaign is based on some solid facts – a country which many external observers virtually wrote off after it became independent, arguing it was just too big and too ethnically diverse to develop a viable identity, has now become Central Asia's most successful state, its economy far outstripping those of its southern neighbours and untroubled by the sort of tensions that might threaten its stability.

But as last autumn's election campaign showed, nation-building is also a way of identifying Nazarbayev with the country's success, particularly with a degree of stability unseen in the rest of Central Asia and its steady economic growth.

Some people remain unimpressed by the president's attempt to build public support.

Bakhytkul Makimbai, deputy editor of the opposition newspaper Juma Times, which the authorities recently closed, told IWPR, "Nazarbaev only added one line to [the new] anthem, and calls himself the co-author. This is done with one goal – to immortalise his name. The people's money shouldn't be spent on satisfying such vanity."

The preoccupation with Kazak national themes, meanwhile, has left some members of other ethnic groups feeling rather alienated.

"It would have been politically correct to mention the other peoples who live in Kazakstan in the [new] anthem. But [now] about half the population of the country are deprived of an opportunity to identify themselves with the state for which they live and work," said Piotr Kuzmenko, deputy head of the Slavic community group Istoki.

Kazakstan has large Russian and Ukrainian minorities, while the Kazaks only became the majority population in the mid-Nineties.

Some artists believe that however popular "My Kazakstan" may be, it lacks the necessary gravitas to make a proper national anthem.

"It's a song of the masses, a good patriotic song. But it doesn't meet the requirements for a national anthem," said Bekbolat Tleukhan, a composer.

"The only advantage is that it's a national song. Everyone knows it and everyone can sing it."

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